

Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

The Clinton-Kalamazoo Canal

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In the early 19th century, pioneers moving westward from the Eastern seaboard were hampered by rugged terrain and the absence of roads and navigable rivers. The State of New York completed the **Erie Canal** in 1825, and touched off a "canal fever" that saw numerous other projects launched in an effort to aid westward expansion.

One of these canal projects began at Mount Clemens, Michigan, when construction of the **Clinton-Kalamazoo Canal** commenced on July 20, 1838. The planners envisioned a canal that would link **Lake St. Clair** to **Lake Michigan**, beginning at Mount Clemens and ending 216 miles westward at **Singapore, Michigan**, at the mouth of the **Kalamazoo River** where it emptied into Lake Michigan.

The canal was the first large public works undertaking by the new state of Michigan. The legislature approved a five million dollar loan bill to sell bonds to finance the canal construction, and the first shovelful of dirt was turned by **Governor Stevens T. Mason** during a grand celebration in Mount Clemens.

As the months passed, the canal slowly wended its way from Mount Clemens along the path of the Clinton River to **Utica**, then on to **Rochester**. Progress was slowed by dense forests, swamps, and the difficult construction of locks. Meanwhile, economic chaos erupted after the Panic of 1837; the finance company from which Michigan had been borrowing money went bankrupt, and so did the State Treasury.

The state withdrew its support for the canal project about 1843, because lenders could not be found. Contractors already at work on the project had not been paid, and the project was abandoned. The 12-mile portion of the canal which had been completed quickly fell into disrepair. The emergence of railroads as a better and faster means of transportation sounded the death knell of the canal era.

Despite the passage of more than a century and a half, traces of the Clinton-Kalamazoo Canal

can still be found. At **Yates Park** in Rochester Hills, the keen observer can still see several sections of the channel and ruins of an old aqueduct which carried the canal over the Clinton River.

For more information about the canal, we recommend:

- *The Ill-Fated Clinton-Kalamazoo Canal*. Rochester, Mich. : Rochester Historical Commission, 1983.
- Crissman Gower, Susan. "Canal Dreams." *Michigan History Magazine*, 81:4 (July/August 1997), pp.40-44.
- Van Meer, Leo. "Clinton-Kalamazoo Canal." *Michigan History Magazine*, 16:2 (Spring 1932), pp. 225-231.
- Eldredge, Robert F. "The Internal Improvements Furor," in *Past and Present of Macomb County, Michigan*. S.J. Clarke, 1905, pp.586-592.
- Use this link to read a [history of the canal](#) from the Shelby Township Historical Committee.
- Use this link to view the [Clinton-Kalamazoo canal historical marker](#) on Jim Brennan's Michigan Historical Markers page.