

The Chicago Portage

And Environs



The Chicago Portage
National Historic Site
Illinois

Forest Preserve District of
Cook County



IN COOPERATION WITH THE
ILLINOIS
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE AND COMMUNITY AFFAIRS
BUREAU OF TOURISM
5/9/50M

GENERAL INFORMATION

For maps and information on trails, summer or winter sports, outdoor recreation and nature programs contact the General Headquarters:
Telephones
(312) 261-8400 (city)
(708) 366-9420 (suburban)

Persons believing that they have been discriminated against by the Forest Preserve District on the basis of race, color, national origin, or handicap may file a complaint alleging discrimination with either the Forest Preserve District of Cook County or the Office of Equal Opportunity U.S. Department of Interior, Washington D.C.

FOREST PRESERVE COMMISSIONERS

RICHARD J. PHELAN, *PRESIDENT*

JERRY BUTLER	IRENE C. HERNANDEZ
ALLAN C. CARR	TED LECHOWICZ
JOHN P. DALEY	MARY M. McDONALD
FRANK A. DAMATO	MARIA PAPPAS
DANNY K. DAVIS	HERBERT T. SCHUMANN, JR.
MARCO DOMICO	RICHARD A. SIEBEL
ROBERT P. GOOLEY	BOBBIE L. STEELE
CARL R. HANSEN	JOHN H. STROGER, JR.

JOSEPH N. NEVIUS
General Superintendent

The Chicago Portage

The Chicago Portage, a short, low divide between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River system, has been called one of "the five keys to the continent". Here, following the lead of generations of American Indians, explorers Marquette and Jolliet first crossed the Chicago Portage in 1673. One of the most important travel routes of the mid-continent, the portage has been a major factor in the development of the United States interior. With the opening of the Illinois and Michigan Canal in 1848 the portage became the transportation link that spurred development of the city of Chicago.

In recognition of its historical and cultural importance the Chicago Portage was dedicated a National Historic Site in 1952, making it a unit of the National Park System in non-federal ownership.

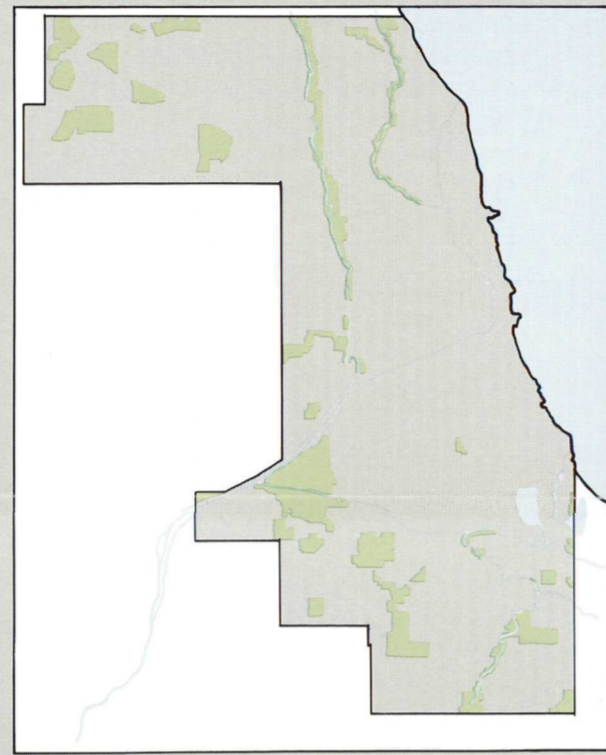
It is nearly impossible to imagine the Chicago of the Indians, explorers and fur traders. Yet within the heart of this urban giant lie fragments of that bygone world. Forests, prairies and marshes, set aside in the Cook County forest preserves, provide a revealing glimpse of the the land, plants and animals of an earlier time.

Near Harlem Avenue and 47th Street in Lyons the Des Plaines River turns away from Lake Michigan to flow instead toward the Mississippi River. Here, at the west end of the Chicago Portage in Chicago Portage Woods and Ottawa Trail Woods are 300 acres of forest preserve. This is the last remnant of that route that still appears much as it did when Indians, explorers and traders traveled it.

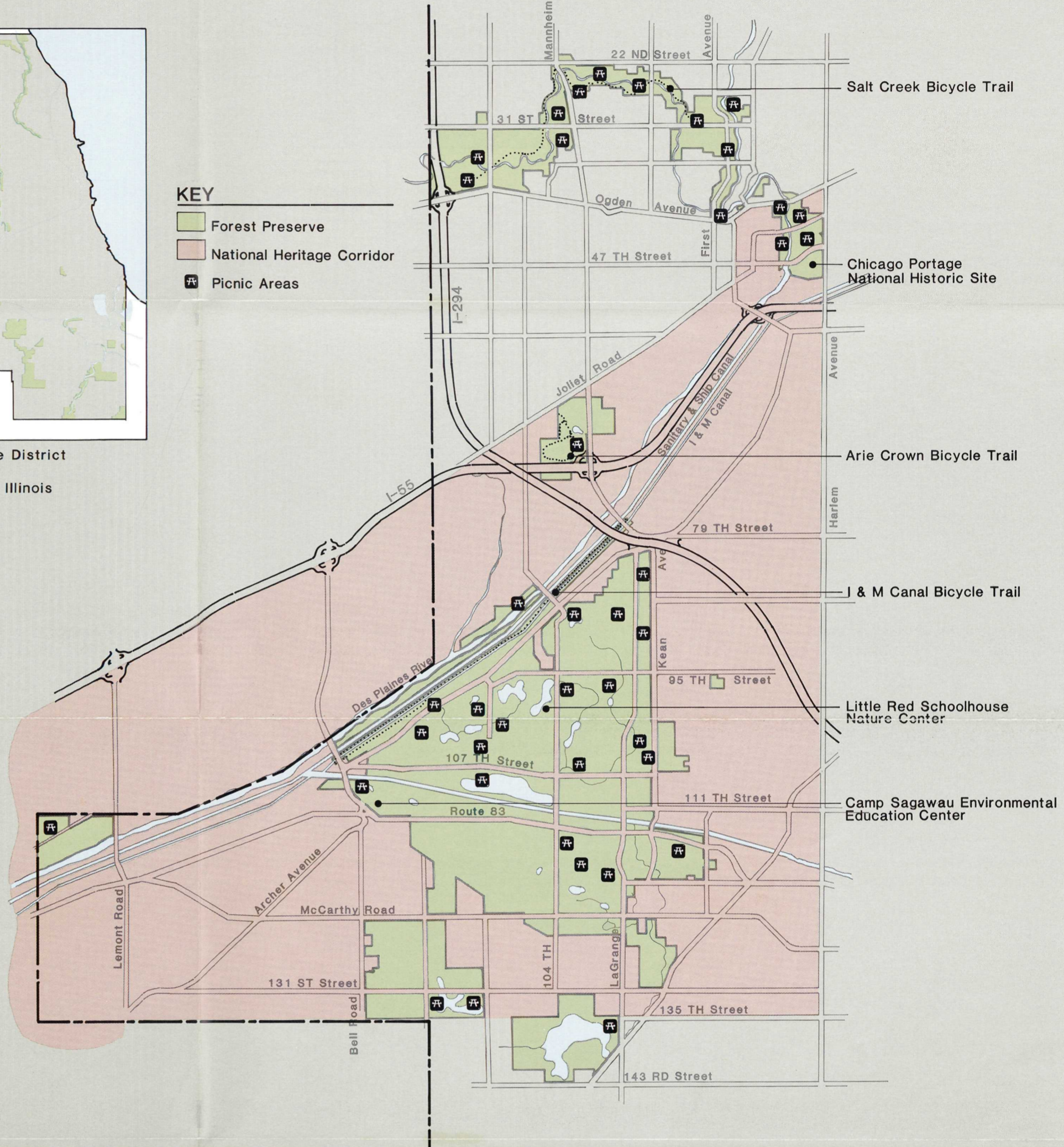
Today, though hardly recognizable, the old portage route is as important as ever. The Sanitary and Ship Canal, two major railroads, the Stevenson Expressway, and the industrial and commercial development associated with such transportation systems all line the portage route. The Illinois and Michigan Canal has become the focus of the nation's first National Heritage Corridor, and the Chicago Portage is an integral part of this unique historical, recreational and economic entity.

Long ago before the highways, railroads and airways we take for granted were even a dream, natural waterways were the easiest way through the wilderness. Barriers to water travel — rapids, waterfalls, or divides between river or lake systems — were of critical importance. At those places canoes and goods had to be carried overland, or portaged, for some distance.

Forest Preserve District Recreational Opportunities within The I & M Canal National Heritage Corridor



Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois



KEY

- Forest Preserve
- National Heritage Corridor
- Picnic Areas

Forest Preserve District

The Chicago Portage and Ottawa Trail Woods are only a fraction of the 67,000 acres within the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. Established in 1915 to preserve and protect natural lands for the enjoyment and education of the public, the District now includes not only forests but ponds and marshes, prairies and other natural communities. Recreational facilities include fishing and boating lakes, bicycle, hiking and equestrian trails, youth group camps, golf courses, swimming pools, while nature centers offer interpretive and educational services.

Scenic Cook County Forest Preserves



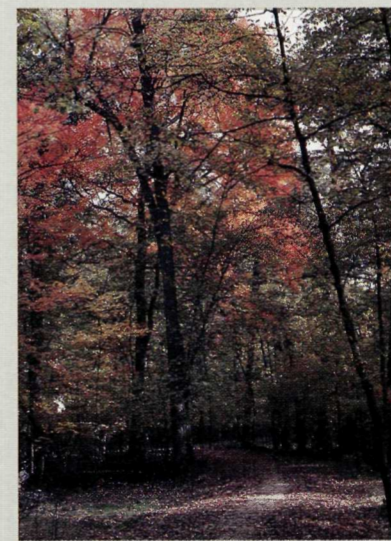
Canoeing on the Des Plaines River



Cross Country Skiing



Prairie Remnants



Nature Trails



One of Eight District Bicycle Trails

Regional Geology

Four hundred million years ago the entire Chicago area was at the bottom of a shallow tropical sea full of living things, many of which had shells of calcium carbonate. As those shells accumulated at the bottom of the sea, they eventually formed thick layers of dolomite bedrock.

Where dolomite bedrock is visible at the surface, it is often quarried. More important for the story of the Chicago Portage are the places where the Des Plaines River has cut down to expose the rock. Two of those places are in the river at Ottawa Trail Woods.

About 50,000 years ago a great glacier swept down from the north, scouring the land. This giant sheet of ice gouged the basin that would become Lake Michigan and left behind debris called till that forms most of our land surface. About 14,000 years ago (only a moment in earth's history!) the melting ice paused longer depositing higher hills of till, called moraines, around the southern end of the Lake Michigan basin. As the glacier melted, the floodwaters rose up behind the moraines to form Lake Chicago, 60 feet higher than present Lake Michigan. When the water

found low gaps over the moraines it flowed southwest, carving two deep wide valleys which today we call the Cal-Sag and Des Plaines River valleys.

Left behind after the glacial lake receded, surrounded by a ring of hills, was a marshy lowland called the Chicago lake plain. At about Kedzie Avenue there was a natural continental divide separating the waters of the Great Lakes, which flow to the Atlantic Ocean through the St. Lawrence River, from those of the Mississippi River system, which drain to the Gulf of Mexico. Between the towns of Riverside and Summit the Des Plaines River bent sharply east to within a few miles of the south branch of the Chicago River, and only about ten feet of elevation prevented the Des Plaines from joining that stream. In fact in flood the Des Plaines flowed in both directions, filling a large marsh called Mud Lake that lay between Harlem and Kedzie Avenues.

The potential of this water route across the continent must have soon become apparent to the people who followed the retreating glacier into the region.



Pre-History

The people who followed the glaciers were not following the ice but the plant and animal communities that developed after its passage. Changes were fast at first, although by four or five thousand years ago conditions had stabilized to what the first Europeans found: marshlands on much of the Chicago lake plain, deciduous forests in stream valleys and ravines, and prairie or savanna dominating much of the land.

All these different natural communities were probably found in the immediate area of the portage. A forest of bottomland hardwoods grew along the Des Plaines River, Mud Lake was more a prairie marsh than a lake, and prairie and savanna grew along the dry ridges. Wildlife was incredibly abundant here, as many early travelers' accounts attest. Many different people have followed the rivers across the middle of North America. Hunters and gatherers came first, followed by tribes with more settled lives. The American Indians who met the first Europeans in the mid 1600's lived in semi-permanent villages and supplemented traditional hunting with farming.

Illinois bands occupied most of the Illinois River valley, while Miamis were in the Chicago area. However, Potawatomis, Sacs, Foxes, Ottawas, and many others traveled throughout the region making frequent use of the portage. These Indian tribes carried on extensive trade, though the tribes had many differences and occasionally fought one another. Before European contact, native Americans had neither wheeled vehicles nor pack animals.

Therefore, trade items and possessions had to be carried or dragged by the people themselves, thus the importance of the water routes. If you had a choice of carrying a heavy load on your back or in a canoe, which would you choose? So did they!

The Portages

Though easier than carrying heavy loads, canoeing had its own difficulties and hazards. In flood small streams could be treacherous and larger rivers became raging torrents. In dry spells there might be long stretches without enough water to float a canoe, and then travelers would have to carry, or portage, not only their goods but the canoe too! Even in the relatively flat Illinois country there were rocky rapids to be portaged around, and always the problem of portaging from one stream to another.

The most important of the portages were those that linked major routes. Around the southern Great Lakes were several different portages that allowed relatively easy passage from the Great Lakes into the Mississippi River system: from Lake Erie into tributaries of the Ohio, from Green Bay into the Wisconsin River, and two at the southern end of Lake Michigan, both leading into the Illinois. One was from the headwaters of the St. Joseph River to the Kankakee, near South Bend, Indiana, and the other was at Chicago.

