

CANAL	Indiana Central Canal	STATUS	Abandoned Unfinished	ACS
STATE/PROVINCE:	Indiana			HAER
COUNTIES:	See below			
LOCATION (Endpoints of Canal):	Peru to Worthington and branch to Muncie.			
		REGIMENTS		
		1	1839-present 11	1/?
		2	ab.1839	70 ?
		3		

For anyone who didn't twig to it, the Rosewater Inter-State Ship Canal, described in American Canals #7 is a figment of ACS Patron Kurt Vonnegut's fertile imagination, and is a parody of the ill-fated Central Canal which bisects Indianapolis. Although not quite as fantastic as the Rosewater, it includes both excellent material for an urban canal park, and some 70 rare miles of unfinished canal works, abandoned in the midst of construction. Professor Paul Fatout, in *Indiana Canals*, called that last day in the late summer of 1839. "Quitting time: the shovel left thrust into the bank of an unfinished ditch, the wheelbarrow on the plank, half-hewn timber lying helter-skelter, rock and earth piled in fields, fences torn down, the terrain cluttered with the raw confusion of construction jobs, as if tomorrow were another workday." Hopefully this brief note will interest someone in making or revealing a careful reconnaissance of the Central Canal to discover what remains today of the canal workings, and what this can tell us of the process of canal construction during the canal mania.

The Central Canal was part of Indiana's "Mammoth Internal Improvement Bill" of 1836, and was intended to satisfy the central part of the state, linking with the Wabash and Erie Canal at both ends. From Peru at its northern end, there was to be a summit level canal through Marion, Summitville, and Alexandria to Anderson, and from there it was to follow the North Fork of the White River down through Noblesville, Indianapolis and Martinsville, to join the Wabash and Erie extension or "cross-cut" at Worthington. There was also to be a branch from Anderson up to Muncie.

Unfortunately for the canal, however, the state went bankrupt in 1839, as a direct result of its too-Mammoth Internal Improvement program and although the Wabash and Erie Canal was completed, more or less, the Central Canal was abandoned unfinished, leaving scattered bits of canal in progress for 80 miles from Anderson to Martinsville.

The local joke was that the Central Canal was in good condition, "as far as it went". Most of the 80 miles was at least 1/4 complete but the only stretch ever finished and watered was the 11 miles from Broad Ripple Dam down through the center of Indianapolis, of which 8 miles still flows and carries 2/3 of the city's water supply. In 1971, on the centennial anniversary of this function, the Indiana Central Canal was declared an American Water Landmark, with a plaque overlooking the canal at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, by the American Water Works Association.

The Indianapolis Water Company, which has owned the canal since 1881, has offered part of the canal to the city for use as a park. Much of it has a fine towpath which has been used by cyclists since

the turn of the century, and there are scenic stretches not surpassed anywhere. Other parts are not as accessible as they should be, where open space is at a premium. I am not sure if the Broad Ripple Dam abutment is original; the aqueduct over Fall Creek certainly is not, having been washed away and rebuilt 4 times since 1839, the latest in 1904, but still with three arches as in the original. At its lower end, near the State Office Building, the canal turns underground to the river, where mills once used it for water power. At one time the canal continued about 3 miles further south through the city, largely along Mission Street, to debouche into Pleasant Run, over which an aqueduct was planned. There was a stone lock at Market Street, uncovered briefly in 1958 while adjusting the canal to landscape the State Office Building. This was a wise use of the canal by the architects, but it is unfortunate, if the reported lock was really that and not a spillway or less dramatic structure, that it was not also retained and used to spice the downtown area. There were several arms of the canal in the center of the city, including a loop around two city blocks, and two boat basins, and there were two wooden locks further south at Kansas Street. But these signs have long since vanished. The canal through the city did have some use in its day, for in addition to furnishing water-power it was navigated by boats carrying wood, and was used for swimming, ice-skating, Sunday excursions, baptisms, and other water activities.

When work stopped on the Indiana Central in 1839, the 11-mile section through Indianapolis was the only part completed, with water. But usually ignored are the other 70 miles of partially finished canal between Alexandria and Martinsville, which desperately need exploration and interpretation. According to an 1840 report, on the 10 miles from Alexandria to Anderson, the work was 1/2 done; below Anderson for 8 miles, 1/3 done; from there to Noblesville, 15 miles, 1/4 done; from there to Broad Ripple, 13 miles, nothing done; from there through Indianapolis, 9 miles, complete, with water; from there to Waverley, 16 miles, complete except for locks; and from there to 4 miles above Martinsville, 11 miles, 1/3 done. Except for part of the works at Anderson, revived in 1868 as a private project (the banks caved in and it was a failure), this was the extent of work on the Indiana Central Canal. A section of the canal below Indianapolis was so level that it was used as a race course. The canal dam at Waverley is said to have been used to supply water to a section of canal through that town, and used for water power. Otherwise the canal workings have been undisturbed since 1839 except by urban sprawl, gravel pits, farming and flooding..

I have looked at all of the route below Indianapolis, but above, only between Alexandria and Anderson. Below Alexandria there is in fact a ditch some 4 miles long, paralleling Route 9 on the east, which is called "old canal" on the topographic map. There was apparently to be an aqueduct over Little Killbuck Creek, because there is a good stretch of canal bed for about a mile along the opposite (east) escarpment of the creek, crossed by "Road 400 North" near College Corner School. Few other signs were found down to Anderson.

Below Indianapolis there are signs here and there of canal construction all the way to Martinsville, lying between White River and Route 37, which roughly paralleled each other. Nothing was found in the city itself, below the present end of the canal, but elsewhere there several excellent stretches practically unchanged since 1839. One of these is north of Thompson Road, west of the Illinois Central tracks. Perhaps the most dramatic section is crossed by Wicker Road, near the town of Glenns Valley. Many stretches, however, are best seen on aerial photos. The signs stop about 5 miles above Martinsville, just as mentioned in the 1840 report. No definite signs of locks, culverts or aqueducts were found although there surely should be timbers preserved underground.

What should be done with the Central Canal? The Indianapolis section should surely be taken full advantage of as a valuable urban canal park. The rest of the works should be carefully explored and mapped, in conjunction with the canal records, to find out what they tell us and demonstrate of canal construction during the height of the canal era. Are the signs of canal bed in bits and pieces, like a dashed line, because of the system of contracting in sections? The remains seem to demonstrate, in miniature, Indiana's system of "Simultaneous concentrated scatteration" described in an article ("Indiana canals") in the Indianapolis *Sentinel*, where the idea was "instead of selecting one or two works, to dig a hole, here and there, in every one of them, and to concentrate all the energies of the State upon the several holes, until they were all dug!" There were many holes on the Central Canal, but unfortunately only a few were ever finished. I would be glad to discuss these holes — and any other unfinished ones elsewhere — with anyone interested in pursuing the subject.

(With acknowledgements to the Indianapolis Water Company, the American Water Works Association, Professor Paul Fatout, and to Iro Gawo, Mansour Zarfshan, Gontran Philippe and Abdulahi Sarki who took a trip up the canal with me in 1962.)

Submitted by Bill Trout

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