

The Historical Relationship  
Between  
The Des Plaines River  
And  
The Community of Wheeling, Illinois

From The 17th Century to The Present Time

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Growing up on the banks of the Des Plaines River has touched my life in many ways. It has furnished a place to meander and explore as well as a place where I could just sit and muse. As a young child, I would sit on the river bank and ponder the past. I would gaze up and down the river and wonder if it ever served any useful purpose. I would wonder if the Des Plaines River was ever important to the community of Wheeling.

Rivers have always been important to man. They have provided rich farm land along their banks and a route for transportation. They have provided water for farming and for drinking.<sup>1</sup> Rivers have been important to man for a long time.

Seeing the historical significance of rivers in general, lead me to wonder if the Des Plaines River followed the rule. In this paper, I will trace the history of the Des Plaines River from the 17th Century to the present, examine the establishments that were located on or near the river, and determine the magnitude of the influence that the river had on the development of the community of Wheeling as well as its' influence today.

I will begin by defining the Des Plaines River Valley. It lies a few miles west of Lake Michigan in the northeast corner of Illinois. The Des Plaines River is ninety miles long, stretches from northern Kenosha County in Wisconsin and travels through Lake, Cook, Du Page, and Will counties in Illinois. It eventually unites with the Kankakee River to form the Illinois River.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>. World Book Encyclopedia, Vol. 16, Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, 1973, pp. 328.

<sup>2</sup>. Saunders, Manley F., The Des Plaines River Valley, 1835-1860, pp.6.

The Des Plaines River Valley was originally inhabited by the Pottawatomi, Ottawa, and Chippewa Indians. The languages, manners, and customs of these Indians were similar as were their warlike natures. They were hunters and fishers.<sup>3</sup> Their presence was noted in 1825 by Henry R. Schoolcraft in his work entitled "Travels in the Central Portions of the Mississippi Valley." He writes:

"On crossing the Des Plaines, we found the opposite shore thronged with Indians..... We found, on reaching the port, that between two and three thousand Indians were assembled - chiefly Pottawatomies, Ottawas, and Chippewas."

In the 1670's, the French Explorers became active in the Des Plaines River Valley. In 1673, Father Jacques Marquette, a Jesuit missionary and Louis Jolliet, an explorer, set out to explore the Mississippi River. On July 17th, they learned of an alternate route which would shorten their trip home. They crossed what is now the Chicago Portage between the Chicago and Des Plaines Rivers,<sup>4, 5</sup> and traveled up the Des Plaines River. Jolliet was greatly inspired by the river and referred to it as the "Riviere La Divine."<sup>6</sup>

Robert Cavelier Sieur de La Salle, another French explorer, probably used the same route as Father Marquette and Jolliet. He crossed the Chicago Portage in the late summer of 1681.<sup>7</sup> LaSalle also stated that the Divine River (Des Plaines River) would never

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3. Andreas, A. T., History of Cook County, Illinois, pp.34.
  4. Pierce, Bessie Louise, A History of Chicago, 1673-1848, pp.6.
  5. Stanek, Muriel, Living in Chicago, pp.16-17.
  6. Andreas, A.T., History of Cook County, Illinois, pp.37.
  7. Stanek, Muriel, Living in Chicago, pp. 18.

be practical for the transportation of goods. He was proven wrong as history progressed.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, the Pottawami Indians prevented white settlements in the Des Plaines River Valley. They were reluctant to relinquish the river which provided transportation for trade with other tribes, food, especially fish, and water for drinking and other necessities. The Des Plaines River was the backbone of their settlement.

However, the Des Plaines River also attracted the fur traders. It became an important artery of transportation for such fur traders as Pierre Moreau.<sup>9</sup> It could be said that the Des Plaines River was also the backbone of the fur trading industry in northern Illinois.

The Des Plaines River was of such importance to the fur traders that they gave it the name that it has today. Jolliet originally called it "La Divine," but the fur traders called it "Plaine," the Canadian word for maple, because of its abundance of maple trees. "The Plaine River" was modified with history and soon changed to "The Des Plaines River." One should note that the name of the river changed as its role changed from exploration territory to hunting territory.<sup>10</sup>

In September of 1833, a meeting of chiefs and head men was called in Chicago in order to negotiate a treaty whereby the Pottawatomi Indians would peaceably cede their land to the already swelling group of white settlers. The outcome of the meeting was the formation of the 1833 Pottawatomi Indian Treaty. This treaty was much more than a good deal; it was a fraud. The unfairness is seen in a quote from Fernando Jones.

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<sup>8</sup>. Saunders, Hanley P., The Des Plaines River Valley, pp. 7.

<sup>9</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>. Smith, Hermon Dunlap, The Des Plaines River, 1673-1940, pp. 13.

While upon the subject of the Indians, I recall the fact, that, by a treaty of the United States, the Pottawatomies were to receive amongst many other things, as payment for their land, \$16,000 annually forever--payable at Chicago; 50 barrels of salt annually, forever, delivered at Chicago; and a black-smith ship for the tribe at Chicago. Did the good Doctor Wolcott, the Indian agent who manipulated this treaty really believe this was to be carried out, or did he know that it was a fraud upon the poor Indian? 11

As soon as the treaty was signed, white settlers began pouring into the Des Plaines River Valley. During the two years of 1833-1834 there was somewhat of a land rush.<sup>12</sup> White settlers began to settle along the Des Plaines River.<sup>13</sup> The settlement of that period of time seemed to support the principle that progress follows rivers.<sup>14</sup>

In 1834, Daniel Wright built a house west of the Des Plaines River about one mile south of the site of Half Day. In a short time, a small colony of several families developed.<sup>15</sup>

Just a few miles south of this colony, a small settlement began at relatively the same time. The first settler in this southern settlement was a Mr. Sweet. Mr. Sweet's area grew up to be what is now Wheeling, Illinois.<sup>16</sup>

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11. Jones, Fernando, Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois, Vol. 1 1 pp. 648.

12. Balling, Marshall, Personal Interview with, Dec. 31, 1981.

13. Saunders, Hanley P., The Des Plaines River Valley, 1835-1860, pp. 70

14. Balling, Marshall, Personal Interview with, Dec. 31, 1981.

15. Smith, Hermon Dunlap, The Des Plaines River, 1673-1940, p. 23.

16. Andreas, A. T., History of Cook County, Illinois, pp. 501.

Wheeling became important to northbound settlers as a place of rest on their long journey. In the 1830's, settlers would usually hire a horse-pulled rig to take them North. Since most of the settlers started in Chicago, they would usually begin their journey at about six in the morning. A horse-pulled rig coming from Chicago would usually pass through Wheeling at around noon. Therefore, Wheeling became a place where settlers could rest and eat their noon meal.

The community capitalized on its location and began opening up hotels, restaurants, and taverns. In 1837, Wheeling had its own store and hotel. Four more hotels were opened up in 1840, 1856, 1874, and 1877.<sup>17</sup>

This small community benefited from its location in two major ways. First, it was a major stopping point for settlers, but it was also nestled on the bank of the Des Plaines River. The river served the growing community of Wheeling by providing ice for the ice houses of the community taverns and hotels. The taverns and hotels flourished partly because they took advantage of the natural ice making process.

During the winter months, ice making kept the community busy. When the ice was about a foot thick, six or eight farmers would be hired to acquire ice blocks for the taverns and hotels. The farmers would take their wagons, with runners, onto the ice. They would plow long lines on the frozen river, and then saw out blocks. They would lift and load them onto wagons with tongs.

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<sup>17</sup>. Balling, Marshall, Personal Interview with, December 31, 1981.

When the wagons or "box-sleds" became full, they would be pulled up to one of the many ice-houses in Wheeling. These ice-houses would provide cold storage for the taverns and hotels of the small but growing community.<sup>18</sup>

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Wheeling grew as a farming community also. Because Wheeling was situated on the Des Plaines River, the land was rich for farming. The area naturally developed agriculturally, but it also developed as an area of cattle and dairy farms. Ironically enough, the river played an important part in these industries too. The river provided a place where the cattle and dairy cows could graze and drink from the clear, spring-fed water.<sup>19</sup>

The Cook County Forest Preserve District also began to show interest in the Des Plaines River. Early in the 20th century the District decided to dam the river in order to promote its recreational possibilities.<sup>20</sup>

The first dam, located in Wheeling, was known as Dam No. 1. It backed up water for about six miles to facilitate recreation and included a foot bridge and a novel ford for automobiles. It was completed in 1918, and was soon followed by four similar dams.<sup>21</sup>

"Probably the most important ... (improvement) ... was the beginning of construction work on a series of combined dams and roadways in the Des Plaines River. One of these dams has been completed and the value of the improvement has been proved. These

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18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Mann, Roberts, Origin of Names and Histories of Places, pp 18-19.

21. Ibid.

dams raise the water for a distance of five and six miles above them, making it suitable for boating, fishing and swimming..." 22

Another important program set up by the Forest Preserve District dealt with canoe races. Part of the Forest Preserves of Cook County read, "The two dams...(No. 1 and No. 2) ... constructed in the Des Plaines River have proved so successful and have added so greatly to the attractiveness of the District that it has been proposed to add to their number until they are distributed across the chain of Preserves, making possible a canoe course from one end of the county to the other." 23

As was expected, after the river was dammed, the Des Plaines River developed as an area of recreation. During the winter, especially on Sundays, people from the community would go down to the river to ice skate. Ice skating became so popular that the town put up lights along the river so that the people could skate after dark. 24

During the summer months, the Des Plaines River became a fascinating place. People began to swim and boat in the river because of the increased depth. It became a place of exciting recreation. There was even a home made steamboat that gave rides to the attracted crowds. 25

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22. Ibid.

23. Kennicott, Ranson E., Forest Preserves of Cook County.

24. Balling, Marshall, Personal Interview with. December 31, 1981.

25. Ibid.

A third use of the river was the development of a carnival atmosphere at Dam No. 1. There were pony rides, and merry-go-round, concession stands, a bath-house, boating and swimming.<sup>26, 27</sup> People would even drive their cars across the ford. It was a fascinating event for all those who saw it.

Soon after the damming was completed, people began to see that the river was becoming a muddy, unclean waterway. (1923) The Forest Preserve District failed to anticipate the gross pollution of the Des Plaines River that soon caused the prohibition of swimming and the destruction of the fishlife.<sup>28</sup> Analyses later concluded that the Des Plaines River actually was polluted.<sup>29</sup>

Because of the polluted waters of the Des Plaines River, the influence of the river has greatly declined since the early 1920's. No longer does the Des Plaines River support Indian tribes nor does it transport explorers or fur traders. Its ice does not supply any ice houses, and its banks are not important to the farming industry. It serves no significant recreational purpose except the annual canoe race in the spring and the Maple Festival in the fall. The Wheeling Police are the only segment of the Wheeling community who are attentive to the area due to heavy drug traffic at Dam No. 1.

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26. Ibid.

27. Mann, Robert, Origin of Names and Histories of Places, pp. 20.

28. Ibid pp.19.

29. Reilly, Richard P., Biological Survey of the Des Plaines River.

Nowadays, when I sit on the river bank, I realize that the Des Plaines River was important in the past. I also realize that the damming of the river assisted in its pollution and loss of its influence.

After making those two realizations, two possible applications seem to emerge in my mind. Primarily, I sense that man needs to think ahead more often, especially when he is dealing with environmental control. Secondly, when I look at our world's problems, I perceive that there could be an association between the river and the nature of man. I can only hope that this association is not valid and that our world is not following the pattern of deterioration that can be seen in the Des Plaines River.

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