American Canal Society Canal Index

CANAL Wabash and Erie

STATUS Abandoned/Ruined

STATE/PROVINCE Indiana & Ohio

COUNTIES (See supplemental Sheet)

DATES IN USE	LENGTH: CANAL	SLACKWATER	TOTAL	LIFT LOCKS
1835-mid 1870s		6½ miles (Indiana only)	452mi	73 in Indiana
LOCK SIZE 1				90ft. x 15 ft
2				
3				
4				

TERMINI Toledo, Ohio; Evansville, Indiana

TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS (See supplemental sheet)

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Begun at Fort Wayne in 1832, the Wabash and Erie was originally intended to connect the waters of the Wabash River with Lake Erie at Toledo, Ohio. It reached Lafayette in 1841, and was then extended to Terre Haute, which it reached in 1849. Construction was then continued along the line of the uncompleted Cross Cut Canal to Worthington in Greene County where it joined the uncompleted Southern Division of the Central Canal, following that route to Evansville.

The Wabash & Erie Canal was completed to Evansville in 1853. With its 452 miles between Toledo and Evansville, it was the longest canal in America. The Southern Division (South of Terre Haute) was never a financial success and was closed in 1860 after only seven years of fitful operation. The northern sections continued in operation until neglect and decay won out in the mid-1870s.

Although the Wabash & Erie Canal failed to show a profit to its investors, and was a financial embarrassment to the State of Indiana, its contribution to the economic growth of the Northern third of the State cannot be underestimated. The canal provided an outlet for the produce of one of the largest and richest agricultural regions of Indiana, thereby opening up that region to settlement. The canal spurred the growth of many communities along its route, which served as market and shipping points for goods coming into and leaving the state. Many immigrants came to Indiana via the Wabash & Erie, its peak years corresponding with the peak years of German immigration to the United States, thus accounting for much of Northern Indiana's heavily German heritage.

In the years before 1845 (when the canal was open to Toledo and the East), much of the commerce of Northern Indiana was shipped, via the Wabash, Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans for market, giving Indiana some very strong ties to the South. However, by the time of the Civil War, the Wabash-Erie Canal and the railroads which followed it had reversed the flow of traffic and goods so that Indiana looked to Eastern markets, rather than Southern. The significance of these circumstances to the eventual outcome of the War will never be known, but it is interesting to note that in Southern Indiana, agricultural and with strong ties to the South via the New Orleans markets, pro-Confederation feeling was relatively high, while Northern Indiana was strongly pro-Union and contributed heavily to the Northern war effort.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

"...Agreeably to a decision heretofore made by your board, the canal, when completed, will be 40 feet wide at the surface, and 4 feet deep, and the locks will be 90 feet long and 15 feet wide in the chamber, corresponding with the canals of New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. But while these dimensions are maintained as the minimum size of the canal, it is believed to be good policy to increase both its width and depth wherever this can be done without adding materially to the cost ..." Jesse Lynch Williams Chief Engineer for State of Indiana Dec. 6, 1833

There were 73 locks, 19 aqueducts, 16 dams, 239 culverts, 178 road bridges, and 15 waste weirs. Lockage from Fort Wayne eastward to the Ohio State Line was 20.5 feet; from Fort Wayne to Terre Haute, 206 feet; Terre Haute up to the Eel River summit, 79 feet; and from the Eel River summit in Clay County to Evansville, the lockage was 163 feet.

[illegible]e 73 locks, 14 were built of cut stone, 6 were "composite" locks, with dry stone walls waterproofed with oak planks; 39 were built on the [illegible]alled "timber crib plan" and the other 14 were built on the "timber frame plan".

Dams were built of timber, rough stone, and earth. Very little survives of any of these dams.

Most of the culverts were built of timber, although several were built of cut stone. Only four of these stone-arch culverts survive.

Aqueducts were also largely built of timber. Stone abutments survive at the sites of several of the aqueducts in the Northern part of the state, but those in the South were almost entirely of timber. A notable exception is the White River Aqueduct, whose abutments and piers, built of stone, now carry a railroad across the river at a point just North of Petersburgh.

Timber was used extensively because of a lack of good building stone in the Wabash valley, and because of the added expense of stone work when the canal company could ill afford it.

NAMES & ADDRESSES OF GROUPS CONCERNED WITH CANAL PRESERVATION [illegible]

CANAL SOCIETY OF INDIANA 302 East Berry Street, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46802
CARROLL COUNTY WABASH & ERIE CANAL, INC. P.O Box 255, Delphi, Indiana 46923

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Published REPORTS OF THE CANAL COMMISSIONERS 1828-1871 State of Indiana
INDIANA CANALS Paul Fatout -- Purdue University Press West Lafayette, Indiana 1972
FORT WAYNE DURING THE CANAL ERA 1828-1855 Charles R. Poinsatte Indianapolis, 1965
OLD TOWPATHS --Alvin F. Harlow New York, 1926
County and local histories from the latter portion of the nineteenth century are often quite helpful on local matters, but are not necessarily accurate.
For an article on FOUR TYPES OF LOCKS USED ON THE WABASH & ERIE CANAL, see INDIANA WATERWAYS Vol. 1, Issue 3, February, 1982 (pub. by Canal Soc. of Ind. Fort Wayne)
For a survey of culverts on the Whitewater and Wabash & Erie canals, see WATER OVER WATER in the Indiana Magazine of History, March, 1983

[illegible] DRAWINGS (CEHP, HAER, HABS, Local or Regional Historical [illegible], Libraries, etc.)

Toll Book for years 1845-1846 is in collections of Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Society, Fort Wayne, also some photos.

EXISTING OR PROPOSED LANDMARK STATUS (CEHP, National Register, etc.)

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