



Draining Chicago: The Early City and the North Area

Richard Lanyon

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The Complicated, Ever-Changing, and Surprising Story of Draining Chicago

To reverse the flow of a river wouldn't be possible today, but to Chicago near the end of the nineteenth century, it became a matter of survival. In the largest municipal earth-moving project ever at that point, an engineering marvel, and a monumental public works success, the flow of the Chicago River was turned away from Lake Michigan in 1900 to remove river sewage from the lake and prevent the spread of deadly, waterborne diseases. The time had come to re-direct the sewers that had been discharging directly to the lake in Lake View, Edgewater, Rogers Park, Evanston, and Wilmette, and the municipalities and the Sanitary District of Chicago worked together on the massive undertaking.

The district improved the sluggish North Branch and constructed the North Shore Channel as an alternative outlet for sewage. But population would eventually zoom beyond expectations, and sewage and industrial waste would overwhelm the natural rivers and constructed canals. It was time to implement new treatment technology, and build a network of collecting sewers and a treatment plant. In time, even those proved insufficient as population continued to grow and spread through the suburbs. Then post-WWII growth and environmental awareness brought its own demands to the existing infrastructure. As the urban landscape was paved over, flooding became the new and growing problem. The value of floodplains wasn't known until they were gone, and now the housing on former floodplains and marshes needed to be relieved of inundation. Deep tunnels and surface reservoirs became integral to the drainage responsibilities of the district.

Let retired executive director of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago Dick Lanyon take you on a heavily illustrated tour of the nitty-gritty details of water engineering and project planning for early Chicago and its North Side.

Draining Chicago is the second in a four-book series. The first is *Building the Canal to Save Chicago* (2012), which received the 2013 Abel Wolman Award from the Chicago Metro Chapter of the American Public Works Association for the best new book on public works history.

Author **Richard Lanyon** has had a life-long association with the waterways in and around Chicago. He retired as executive director of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago in 2010 after a 48-year career there.

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