

■ ILLINOIS ■

Illinois & Michigan Canal Origins Park

PROJECT GOAL

Restore an important historic landmark, facilitate cultural and environmental education programs, and provide public open space for underserved neighborhoods.

About The Project

The Chicago neighborhood of Bridgeport and the Canal Origins Site are historically significant for many reasons. Bridgeport, one of the city's oldest neighborhoods, was an important trading center prior to the 1830's. It was also the starting point (where the first lock was constructed) of the Illinois and Michigan (I&M) Canal, which greatly enhanced industry and business in both Bridgeport and Chicago. This area was also near the famous Chicago slaughterhouses, steel mills, and lumber yards which provided important commerce to the region and employment for residents. The site now contains the city's last remnants of the historic canal era.

I&M Canal Origins Park is a 1.8-acre triangular area located in the midst of a busy industrial district on Chicago's near south side. It is also one of the largest pieces of undeveloped land available to local residents. For many years, the site had been filled with rubble and building debris providing an area



The Origins Site was the location of the control lock between the South Branch of the Chicago River (foreground) and the Illinois & Michigan Canal. Courtesy of Louis University Canal Collection



The Secretary of the Interior assists CYC Fellowship House youth with restoration activities at the Canal Origins site. Courtesy of Canal Corridor Association.

for small businesses. After abandonment of a gas station, a locally-owned seafood restaurant remained the site's sole occupant. Views of Chicago River's South Fork (known locally as "Bubbly Creek") were blocked by a dense thicket of vegetation and access hampered by precipitous slopes down to the river.

For many years the Canal Corridor Association has promoted the transfer of this property to a public land managing agency for public use and long-term protection. In addition, the Association has facilitated

PROJECT RESULTS

- ▶ Initiated actions to commemorate and interpret an important historic landmark.
- ▶ Stabilized steep and highly erodable riverbanks.
- ▶ Enhanced open space for public use.
- ▶ Reduced soil erosion resulting from stormwater runoff.
- ▶ Developed recreational and educational facilities.

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RTCA CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORY

Conservation works today at the local level. Citizens in thousands of grassroots groups are protecting places that are important to them: nearby rivers, open space for the community, and trails linking town and country. The Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program (RTCA) supports this grassroots movement as an important part of the National Park Service mission to protect America's natural and cultural resources. The Service increasingly is being called on to support the conservation efforts of state and local governments and citizens' organizations.

RTCA becomes involved when formally asked by the landowners, local officials, and citizens who share the desire to protect—or to improve—their communities. All projects are founded on cost sharing, cooperation, and community initiative. In these partnerships, the Service's role is to help achieve goals set collectively by the partners.



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educational programs explaining the historic aspects of the canal and its origins in Bridgeport. Through these efforts, the site has been designated by the City of Chicago as a historic landmark of cultural and historical significance. The site is also significant as one of the few remaining features of the I&M Canal within the City of Chicago.

In response to the lack of green space in their Bridgeport neighborhood, the Chicago Youth Center's (CYC) Fellowship House began developing community gardens. The group then began looking for vacant land on which to do environmental enhancement activities. The canal origins site, an area nicknamed by the youth as "the Amazon," was chosen. The Fellowship House was awarded a grant from the Urban Resources Partnership of Chicago to clean up the site and initiate a variety of restoration activities. Since then, the youth center has removed the large accumulation of debris and invasive plants, stabilized portions of the river bank by building terraces and planting grasses, and developed informal trails to encourage public use. Through these valuable experiences, Fellowship House staff have established an environmental program for all interested youth—a "first" for the Chicago Youth Centers.

As recipient of the first Urban Resource Partnership river initiative grant, Fellowship House continued its activities at the site. Site tours conducted by the youth have explained the area's rich history and recovering natural environment. A local contractor working with Fellowship House has completed



An area resident and her daughter helped remove years of debris and litter from the site during an annual River Rescue Day event. Courtesy of Friends of the Chicago River.

extensive riverbank grading in preparation for the many facilities planned for the Canal Origins Park.

Future collaborative efforts of the Chicago Park District, Canal Corridor Association and CYC Fellowship House will include planting of native prairie and wetland plants to reduce surface run-off and catch pollutants; building walkways and benches; installing historic interpretation signs; constructing a non-motorized boat launch for canoes and kayaks; and developing various educational programs for local school students and residents, as well as visitors to the National Heritage Corridor.



A local contractor, working with CYC Fellowship House, completed an extensive re-grading of the riverbank, successfully stabilizing the highly erodable soils. Courtesy of dr/Balti Contracting Co., Inc.

LIST OF PARTNERS

- **Applied Ecological Services, Inc.** provided ecological restoration expertise and native vegetation to stabilize riverbanks.
- **Canal Corridor Association** continues to promote site preservation and improvement through educational programs and public art.
- **Chicago Park District** acquired the property from the State of Illinois, and will complete site development and public use programming.
- **Chicago Youth Centers Fellowship House** cleared the site, stabilized riverbanks, planted native species, and built informal trails.
- **Friends of the Chicago River** provided river education, conducted clean-up days, and lead canoe tours.
- **Illinois Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects** conducted a design charette with Fellowship House for local residents to discuss ideas for site restoration.
- **Illinois Department of Natural Resources** removed site contaminants and funded construction of the non-motorized boat launch.
- **National Park Service** facilitated the involvement of CYC Fellowship House and local residents, and coordinated site improvement activities.
- **Urban Resources Partnership in Chicago** provided technical assistance through partner organizations.

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