
Location, Location, Location

From
"The Chicago
River"

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As a place of business, its situation at the central head of the Mississippi Valley will make it the New Orleans of the North; and its easy and close intercourse with the most flourishing eastern cities will give it the advantage, as its capital increases, of all their improvements in the mode of living.

—Charles Fenno Hoffman
Early settler, January 10, 1834

If you were an early visitor, standing on a raised dune on the shore of what is now downtown Chicago, it would have been easy to describe the river scene: one stem, two tributaries, trees scattered in groves along the South Branch, denser forest to the north, marshland everywhere, and to the west, vast endless prairie until the eye spotted the distant line of trees on the east bank of the Des Plaines River.

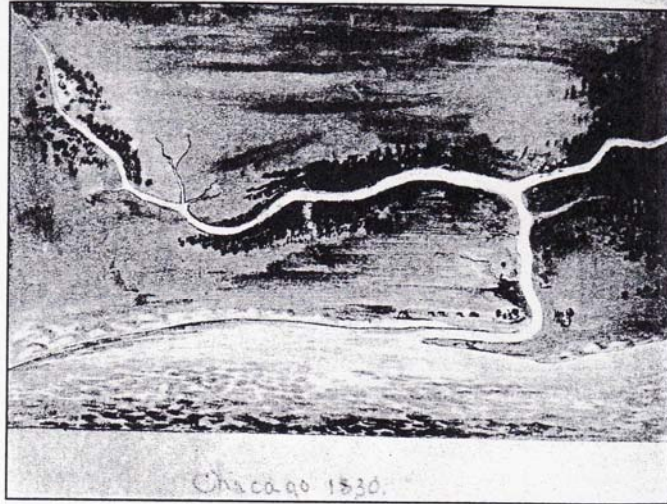
Anyone delving into the real estate market learns that there are three major characteristics to consider about property: location, location, and location. Combining the advantages of transportation and rich natural history, Chicago's location at the head of the Great Lakes was, and is, unsurpassed. That the marshy land might be a problematic site for a great city with a population in excess of three million was far from the minds of the natives and early settlers who plied its waters with their primitive trade and vessels.

The Riddle of the Divide

If you were a westbound traveler or trader in any typical dry season, you boated five or six miles upstream from Lake Michigan along the South Branch of the river until you could boat no further. At this place, you would be at a sub-continental divide. This divide separates the Mississippi River/Gulf of Mexico drainage to the west and the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence River/Atlantic Ocean drainage to the east.

Geologically speaking, a divide is usually thought of as high land that separates two watersheds. For example, the major North American continental divide, which separates the Atlantic and the Pacific drainages, runs along the Rocky Mountains. But here, at what was to become Chicago, the divide was low, very low. During times of high water levels in the rivers, it was barely visible, and at other times, non-existent. Even so, it is still among the most important drainage divides in North America.

For a traveler in a boat, the importance of a divide is that there is usually dry land between watersheds. To get from one to the other, you have to portage. If you were an early native or fur trader on your way west to the vast, rich interior of the continent along Lake Michigan, you would boat your goods



Courtesy of Chicago Historical Society ICHI-26982, annotations removed.

Bird's eye view of yesterday's Chicago, looking to the west. Low sand dunes line the lakeshore. A sandbar diverts the route of the Main Branch of the Chicago River to the south before it empties into Lake Michigan. Sloughs drain the lowland into the river. The slough coming from the north is under today's Merchandise Mart. The North and South Branches meet at Wolf Point and flow into the Main Branch. The South Branch flows from the west from the direction of the Des Plaines River. The South and West Forks of the South Branch are not pictured but are just beyond the illustration's northwest border.

as far as you could, following the Main Stem of the Chicago River, the South Branch, then called the Portage River, and continue up what was later named the West Fork. If you were lucky and the season was wet, the low divide would be completely covered by water and you could sail right along and soon find yourself in the Des Plaines River, on your way to the Illinois River and then the Mississippi.

But if it were a dry season, usually in summer, you could only go so far up-river before your boat would run aground, probably around present-day Leavitt Street. There, you would be forced to lift your craft and cargo out of the water and carry, or portage, them over a slight rise of land in order to reach the Des Plaines watershed where you could again float your boat. Usually you would follow the Portage Road for some distance around a marsh known as Mud Lake.

Alternatively, a traveler could get his boat back in the water sooner by dragging it through Mud Lake, a large, leech-infested puddle filled with dense grasses. Gurdon Hubbard, a young fur trader making his first trip through

Chicago in 1818, described this "shortcut" in graphic detail:

Our empty boats were pulled up the channel, and in many places, where there was no water and a hard clay bottom, they were placed on short rollers, and in this way moved along until the [Mud] lake was reached, where we found mud thick and deep, but only at rare intervals was there water. Forked tree branches were tied upon the ends of the boat poles, and these afforded a bearing on the tussocks of grass and roots, which enabled the men in the boat to push to some purpose. Four men only remained in a boat and pushed with these poles, while six or eight others waded in the mud alongside, and by united efforts constantly jerking it along, so that from dawn to dark we succeeded only in passing a part of our boats through to the Aux Plaines [Des Plaines] outlet. . . . While a part of our crew were thus employed, others busied themselves in transporting our goods on their backs to the river; it was a laborious day for all.

Those who waded through the mud frequently sank to their waist, and at times were forced to cling to the side of the boat to prevent going over their heads; after reaching the end and camping for the night came the task of ridding themselves from the blood suckers.

The lake was full of these abominable black plagues, and they stuck so tight to the skin that they broke in pieces if force was used to remove them; experience had taught the use of a decoction of tobacco to remove them, and this was resorted to with good success.

Having rid ourselves of the blood suckers, we were assailed by myriads of mosquitoes, that rendered sleep hopeless. . . . Those who had waded the lake suffered great agony, their limbs becoming swollen and inflamed, and their sufferings were not ended for two or three days.

It took us three consecutive days of toil to pass all our boats through this miserable lake. . . .¹

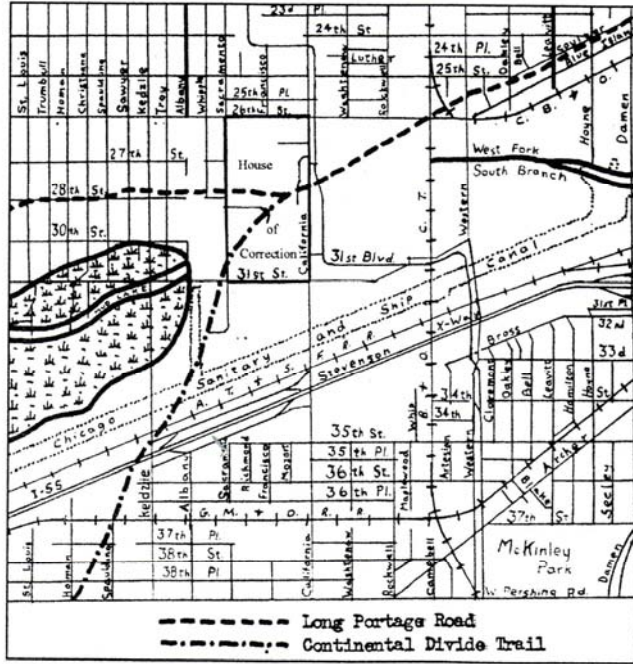
The Chicago portage route of the natives, at the short, low divide between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River system, has been called one of the "five keys to the continent."² Chicago is located where it is today because native tribesmen introduced the French explorers Marquette and Jolliet to this portage route. They took the path around, not through, the marsh. Jolliet, a Frenchman born in New France but knowledgeable about hydrology, immediately envisioned a little canal to breach this portage, eliminating the need to get out of your canoe even in dry times. He reported that, with just a little work, a canal would end the need for a portage and open up an easy route to the Mississippi. To Jolliet, the watersheds of the Des Plaines and Chicago Rivers were tantalizingly close, separated by but "half a league" (one and one-half miles).

Jolliet estimated his distance in September, 1673, the only time he crossed the portage. It must have been a very wet summer, judging by what two travelers, R. Graham and Joseph Phillips, subsequently wrote:

The route by Chicago as followed by the French since their discovery of the Illinois presents at one season of the year an uninterrupted water communication for boats of six to eight tons burthen [*sic*] between the Mississippi and the Michigan lake; at another season a portage of two miles; at another, a portage of seven miles, from the bend of the Plein [Des Plaines] to the arm of the lake; at another a portage of fifty miles, from the mouth of

the Plein to the lake; over which there is a well beaten wagon road, and boats and their loads are hauled by oxen and vehicles kept for that purpose by French settlers at the Chicago.³

Fifty miles! Fifty miles of carrying your boat and supplies to the west, or 50 miles of dragging your boat and your precious cargo of furs east. Even though this longest of detours was probably the exception, the more usual seven-plus miles is a great deal of carrying. If, in 1673, crossing the portage had required that much walking, Jolliet might not have imagined that digging a canal would be so simple. Hubbard, whose experience in Mud Lake was so disagreeable, was employed by the American Fur Company, which moved large heavy boats and trade goods across the portage. It should not come as a surprise to learn that he became a leading proponent of a canal.



Courtesy of Philip E. Vierling.

"The Old Continental Divide and the Modern City." Albany Avenue and Leavitt Street have been darkened to show the location of Knight and Zeuch's mysterious rise of land that created the divide. Vierling based his map on Knight and Zeuch's "Map of the Old Chicago Portage," which did not show the "original" West Fork. Vierling has added it, showing it rising at the railroad tracks on the eastern slope of the "divide."