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MURTAGH COLUMN: June 30 a key date for canal

Someone from another time said, "The historian is a prophet in reverse." A prophet I am not. The hat of a historian I wear uneasily sometimes. And yet today I wonder if the date June 30, 2006 will have an importance, by coincidence, in the history of the Portage Canal.

It was 140 years ago, on June 30, 1876, that the U.S. steamer Boscobel passed through the completed Portage Canal, the first boat to do so. The canal, which was the passage between the north-flowing Fox River and the south-flowing Wisconsin River, allowed entrance into the St. Lawrence Seaway and the Gulf of Mexico. The manmade waterway had been a dream for many years before its realization. It was as early as 1828 when the Army's 5th Infantry floated its boats over the flooded portage between the two rivers, a street that is now called Wauona Trail, here in Portage.

A man-dug passageway would more easily facilitate the passage of materials and men than the long-trodden foot path. Several years later, the state Legislature hired several private contractors to dig a canal along that portage. As described in one paper, "All that came of their work was a ditch dug across the prairie."

After 1828, the history of what finally became a canal extends to many attempts, to many private contractors. The project limped along until 1872 when the Army Corps of Engineers took charge.

When completed in 1876, it was about two and a half miles long, 75 feet wide, and seven feet from the top of the revetment that lined the sides of the canal to the bottom of the canal. There was six feet of water that was steadily maintained by the Army Corps and included twice-a-year canal flushing. The Fox River was eight feet below the Wisconsin River, providing a natural flow of water. Locks were necessary to accommodate the large boats, some of which were 300 tons, and to control the water during times of flooding.

The Wisconsin River lock had a lift of nine feet, and the Fox River lock (referred to at that time as the Fort Winnebago lock) had a lift of six feet. Between the gates, the locks were

45 feet wide and 180 feet long.

A newspaper account contained the information that "a party of gentlemen accepted an invitation from the officers in charge to take passage on the first trip of inspection of the Portage Canal." The date of the passage was June 30, 1876. J.E. Jones writes of the incident in his 1914 Columbia County History: "One who was there" remarked: "As the steamer coursed its way down the Fox, trains passed by on the several divisions of the railroad. For some distance, the theme of conversation was the change wrought in the line of trade and commerce by the introduction of steam power, and we wondered how Louis Joliet regarded it, if his spirit was floating about in this vicinity, where 203 years before, on the 14th of June he had hauled his bateau across the portage on his voyage of discovery, where steamboats and railroads now hold sway."

It was in 2000 that funding was received from the state and federal governments to restore the Portage Canal into a state of respectability and source of economic return to the community. Mayor Jeff Grothman appointed a citizen ad hoc committee of diverse interests to work its way through the labyrinth of stringent rules and requirements of the state and federal departments under which the waterway falls. It was a contrast to the statement made in 1830 at the time that the construction of the waterway was being considered, "the expense of (establishing) the canal across the portage could not exceed \$5,000."

Grothman assured me, earlier today, that all the easements and right-of-ways for the restoration project have been obtained, that Gov. Jim Doyle and the Department of Natural Resources have expressed their approval of, and have signed, the contracts with the companies that will do the work. The fully signed contracts are expected to be received by the end of this month.

Will it be on June 30, adding another important event to the history of the Portage Canal for that date?

Blanche Murtagh is a longtime Portage resident and activist who has had many of her stories published.

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