UNIT ONE:
Place and Memory

INTRODUCTION FOR THE TEACHER

Key Topics
Chicago Portage, exploration, primary sources

Objectives
Students will
a. analyze a primary source document
b. identify features on maps
c. compare and contrast contemporary and historical maps
d. find directions using contemporary navigation tools
e. produce map from own memories
f. locate the Chicago Portage and define its historic importance
g. develop a understanding of the importance of “place”

Summary
The Chicago Portage is introduced to students from the eyes of one of its first European explorers, Louis Jolliet. Use of primary source documents from the seventeenth century—a map and report—help students witness Jolliet’s vision of a canal for the region. Because most of the Portage Site is buried by the built environment, students will need to consider the importance of remembering places and thinking about how memory can be kept alive. The last exercise addresses this objective by specifically connecting to students’ own special “memory places.” This introductory unit acts as a thematic preface for the entire curriculum. Some teachers may want to begin with a more traditional approach which may be found in Unit 2.

State Goals and Standards Met by Unit One

State Goal 1: A, C
State Goal 5: A, B
State Goal 14: D, F
State Goal 15: A
State Goal 16: A, B, C, D, E
State Goal 17: A, C, D
State Goal 18: A, B, C
UNIT ONE: Place and Memory

Introduction

The story of Chicago begins in the 17th century at a place called the Chicago Portage. Located about ten miles west of Lake Michigan, this swampy area provided a crucial link in a transcontinental system of travel. When flooded in the springtime, a “Mud Lake” connected Lake Michigan and the Chicago River with the Des Plaines, Illinois, and Mississippi rivers so that a complete waterway existed. In other seasons, when the swamp had dried out, travelers would portage, that is, carry or drag, their boats through muck until they reached the next river where they rejoined the water system.

The Portage Site is Chicago’s “Plymouth Rock.” The French, who first began exploring North America in the 16th century, were introduced to the Portage by Native Americans in 1673. These Europeans quickly saw the commercial potential of being able to travel from New France (Canada), into the interior of the land, and all the way down the Mississippi River. First they thought the route would provide a shortcut to China, but instead a vision of potential trade, settlement and empire in North America opened before their eyes. At the same time, the Dutch, English, and Spanish were expanding their empires and establishing colonies elsewhere on the continent, each usurping the First Peoples inhabiting the land. By the mid-19th century, these territories belonged to a new nation—the United States of America, and Chicago was a booming city with hundreds of thousands of people.

While the history of Chicago can be explored in many different ways, this book is the history of Chicago as told by the rivers, lakes, and swamps that surround it. It is a history of the way human beings used and changed these bodies of water to fit the needs and dreams of people.

In today’s era of airplanes, cars, trucks, and trains the Chicago Portage has no commercial use or importance. In fact, only traces of the original place exist. The site, however, now has historical use—as Chicago’s “Plymouth Rock,” its significance can be remembered and commemorated. People can actually stand on the site at Harlem Ave. near I-55, look east to the towering Chicago skyline and remember: from this swampy piece of land, a great city grew.
LESSON 1

Jolliet’s "Memory Map" and Description of the Chicago Portage

Chicago’s modern origins began in 1673 simply as a place marked on a map and a report written by French geographer/adventurer Louis Jolliet. He and the missionary/adventurer Father Jacques Marquette had been introduced to the Chicago Portage by friendly Native Americans who knew it provided a shortcut to New France (Canada). Rather than returning from Illinois by way of the Mississippi River, Jolliet, Marquette and their crew of voyageurs were able to take internal rivers and a portage which linked directly to Lake Michigan. On Jolliet’s return trip to New France, his boat capsized and his drawings and journals were lost. Jolliet barely survived the ordeal himself. Excited about the new land he and Marquette had explored and the shortcut they had been introduced to, Jolliet reported the region’s potential to Father Claudon Dablon, an official of New France’s government. He also drew a map from his memory of their travels. Jolliet’s account and "memory map," and a few casual remarks made by Father Marquette in his journal, constitute Europe’s first knowledge of the Chicago Portage. Jolliet’s "memory map" is unlike the maps used today, and is worth studying closely for what it shows about the nature of map-making in the seventeenth century. His account of the Illinois country and the Chicago Portage gives readers a chance to see this region through another person’s perspective, in an entirely different time period. Both works are primary sources because they were produced at the time, by the participants. Primary sources make history come alive.

Become a witness to history in the making! Study Jolliet’s work closely and then use the "Analyzing a Primary Source" worksheet to analyze them as a historian would do.
“...The fourth remark concerns a very important advantage, and which some will perhaps, find it hard to credit; it is, that we can quit easily go to Florida in boats, and by a very good navigation. There would be but one canal to make, by cutting only one-half a league of prairie, to pass from the Lake of the Illinois into St. Louis river. The route to be taken is this: the bark should be built on Lake Erie, which is near Lake Ontario; it would pass easily from Lake Erie to Lake Huron, from which it would enter the lake of the Illinois. At the extremity of this lake would be the cut or canal of which I have spoken, to have a passage to St. Louis river which empties into the Mississippi, the bark, having entered this river, would easily sail to the Gulf of Mexico. ...Hear what Sieur Joliet says: 'when they first spoke to us of these lands without trees, I figured to myself a burned up country, where the soil was so wretched that it would produce nothing. But we have seen the reverse, and no better can be found either for wheat, or the vines, or any fruit whatever. The river to which we have given the name of St. Louis, and which has its source not far from the extremity of the Lake of the Illinois, seemed to me to offer on its banks very fine lands well suited to receive settlements. The place, by which after leaving the river you enter the lake, is a very convenient bay to hold vessels and protect them from the wind.”
PRIMARY SOURCE

Jolliet’s Map (full image)

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Jolliet thought he would find one thing but found another. What did he change his mind about?

2. Make a list of the features on Jolliet’s map and identify as many words as you can—you may need to consult other reference books.

3. Trace Jolliet’s journey on his map. Where does he suggest making a canal?

4. Pretend you are Father Dablon or the King of France. Summarize and evaluate Jolliet’s report and map. How would you respond to Jolliet?

5. Compare the features on Jolliet’s map to a current map. How do these maps differ? How do you explain the difference? Some of Jolliet’s place names differ from what is used today. Why would this be the case?

6. Jolliet proposed a canal in 1673 but the canal was not completed until 1848. Why do you think it took over 150 years for a canal to be built?
LESSON 3

Portage: Place and Memory in History

Places are important for different reasons. Sometimes they are significant because a historian, archeologist, or engineer tells us so. But some places are important because personal or communal meanings connected to them. Such sites could be as official as the Lincoln Memorial or as personal as a park, an alley, or your grandmother's kitchen. As long as we find meaning in a place—something special that makes it stick in our memory—it is important.

Today, there is not much physical evidence of the Chicago Portage, especially to the untrained eye, but it is still a place that people find worth remembering and telling others about. The land itself whispers its story to visitors and its slopes and swamps are signs of its previous life. Its history lives in the primary sources left behind, in a monument created to honor its early travelers, and in the small museums and park that speckle the region. In discovering the historical significance of the Chicago Portage for yourself, perhaps it will some day become a place of memory for you too.
ACTIVITY

Draw a Memory Map

Materials:
- sheet of paper 11 x17 (or 8 1/2 x 11)
- color markers or pencils
- notebook paper

Think of a place in the past that has a lot of meaning for you. It could be as close as a room in your house or as far as another state or country. It may be in a public space like a rally or ball field or a private place like a fort in your grandparent’s backyard or the rooftop of your building. Try to imagine as many details as possible of this special place.

- Draw a picture of this place. Start at the very specific spot and give detail to it, then branch out to its surroundings, and then further out. (Think of what a camera might do in a movie when the focus is very tight but then widens to include the whole scene.)

- Once your map is completed, write a description of the place and why it is an important memory for you.

- Share your “memory map” and description in small groups or as a whole classroom. Keep a list of all the special memory sites shared by the class. Do any patterns emerge in the types of sites selected? What observations might be made about the places chosen?

- Develop a thesis based on the question, “What makes a ‘place’ important and worth remembering?”
LESSON 4

Locating the Chicago Portage Route Today

The detailed map at the end of this unit was produced in the 1970s by a firm hired by the National Park Service. The map superimposes the historic waterways and trails on top of the contemporary land.

1. Find Mud Lake. Then determine how you would get there by car if you started from downtown Chicago, at State and Madison streets.

2. Use “MapQuest” and compare with your proposed route.

3. Find this area on a current map of the Chicago Metro area. Approximate the percentage of city this area contains.
UNIT EXTENSIONS

1. Bring in as many different kinds of maps, that is, maps with different purposes, as you can find. Think broadly!

2. Visit the Chicago Portage National Historic Site in Portage and Ottawa Trail Woods of the Cook County Forest Preserves, 48th Street and Harlem Avenue. Contact the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor Civic Center Authority at www.civiccenterauthority.org to arrange for a special tour guide. Write a reflective essay after your visit on what being at the actual site meant to you.

3. Brainstorm about “memory sites” that exist in your own community. These sites have special importance for your community, even if they aren’t officially marked with a plaque or a statue. They may be central social or political meeting places or where an important event took place. You may need to do some investigating to determine your list. Consider interviewing long-time residents or the local historian to find places that might qualify as memory sites. Or find historic photographs of your area which might provide clues of important sites worth remembering.

Go one step farther: Take cameras into your community. Photograph “memory sites” exist. Explain the history and meaning of the place. Create a “Power Point” presentation or produce a map based on your discoveries.