UNIT SEVEN: New Uses for Old Sites

INTRODUCTION FOR THE TEACHER

Key Topics
Progressive era, environmentalism, historic preservation, heritage tourism

Objectives:
Students will:

a. trace the process by which the Portage Site has come to have meaning in the 20th century
b. explore the Progressive Era reformers’ approach to the environment
c. analyze criteria for establishing historic significance
d. develop a plan for heritage tourism
e. analyze primary sources such as photographs, government letters, brochures and sculpture

Summary
As transportation became less dependent on waterways, the role of the Portage Site and I & M Canal were diminished. This change coincided with the Progressive era commitment to the establishment of recreation, green space, and historic preservation. Students will have the opportunity to involve themselves in historic preservation and heritage tourism, and investigate the ways these movements affect the cultural and economic life of the city.

State Goals and Standards Met in Unit 7
State Goal 1: A, C
State Goal 5: A, B
State Goal 14: D
State Goal 16: A, D, E
State Goal 17: A, C, D
State Goal 18: A, B, C
Based on where you live, list the costs and benefits (good and bad points) involved in living in the city, suburbs or country. Then discuss what type of area you would live in if you had the choice.

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<th>Type of Setting:</th>
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LESSON 1

Finding Nature in a Forest of Smokestacks

By the 1890’s Chicago was well on the way to becoming a full-fledged industrial metropolis as were other smaller cities in Illinois. In this period, often called the Progressive Era, people began to recognize some of the worst aspects of urban industrial capitalism and tried to improve the conditions for the city’s poor and working people. Those who tried to make improvements were called Progressives and reformers. They believed that by investigating conditions and working in community organizations and agitating for governmental action they could improve life for everyone. For example, Jane Addams and Edith Abbott took on the plight of the city’s immigrant poor crowded into the city’s neighborhoods. Progressive era reformers directed their efforts toward improving working conditions, public health, education and the justice system.

Some reformers, such as city planner Daniel Burnham and landscape architect Jens Jensen attempted to restore natural beauty to this dirty industrial city, thinking that this would help to improve the quality of life for its people. Not only did they focus on such grand plans as preserving the Chicago lakefront, but they encouraged the preservation of parks and open land that promoted the restorative affects of nature. Sometimes they had to do this against the opposition that wanted development of a different kind.

Therefore, the uses of space—and what constitutes public space—became political agenda items. The Cook County Forest Preserves District that surrounds the city of Chicago is a product of the reformers’ efforts. But it was not created without a major political battle that took over a decade to resolve. Proponents of the district offered numerous reasons to the public to gain their support.
7.

New Uses for Old Sites For

Jane Addams Memorial Collection (JAMC neg. 296), Special Collections Department, The University Library, University of Illinois at Chicago.

From: The website www.uic.edu/jaddams/hull/urbanexp/. In "Urban Experience in Chicago" go to Recreational and Public Space/Small Parks Movement/Image Essay

PRIMARY SOURCE

Look at these photographs of Chicago neighborhoods at the turn of the century. What urban problems might be found there and which of them might be addressed by parks and green space? Use the photographs worksheet (in appendix) to analyze these primary sources.
To the Honorable, the Board of Commissioners of Cook County:

GENTLEMEN:—Since the time is approaching when the present Chicago system of parks and boulevards, including additions recently authorized, will be inadequate to the population, necessitating a still larger recreation area in Cook County, outside the limits of the city, I am persuaded that it would be proper for the Board of Commissioners of Cook County to take steps now looking to the creation of a system of breathing places for a metropolis of upward of five millions souls.

Chicago had a population of about 350,000 in 1869, when the present system was mapped out. The city then in populations fifth among the cities of the United States, and its park acreage as planned placed Chicago on a practical level with Philadelphia, which had the largest area of parks and boulevards of any city in the United States.

In 1902 Chicago’s population had grown to more than two million, and for years this city had stood second only to New York in the number of inhabitants, but in the acre area of its parks it had fallen back to sixth place among the large cities of the United States, and to the eighth place among all American cities…..

TIME RIPE FOR OUTER BELT SYSTEM

The time has come when steps should be taken to create an outer belt line of parks and boulevards. Such a system should embrace the east side of the present inner belt line, extended northward, say to Winnetka, and southward to near the mouth of the Calumet River. Thence the outer belt line could extend up the valley of the Calumet to Blue Island; thence northward to the Desplaines River, and onward, following the valley of that stream, to a point northwest of Chicago; and thence eastward, embracing the Skokie Valley, and finally forming a junction with the Sheridan Road at or near Winnetka. This would make an outer belt line about one hundred and twenty miles.

Land along this line now, and within a few years, could be purchased cheaply. Soon it will be expensive. There are natural forest, especially in the valley of the Desplaines, which could be secured at a low figure and preserved in their natural condition. It would be impossible to re-create these health-giving forests, if they were once obliterated by the extension of city life into them.

Considering all these things, I therefore recommend that your honorable body authorize the selection of a Commission for the Creation of an Outer Belt Line of Parks and Boulevards for the County of Cook and the City of Chicago, and Commission to be composed of committees of the Board of Commissioners of Cook County, of the mayor and members of the City Council of Chicago, of the Park Boards in the City of Chicago, and of ten representative citizens residing in Cook County and so selected as to represent the city and that part of the county lying outside the city.

Inasmuch as the proposed outer belt line of parks and boulevards, as stated in the foregoing, would lie almost wholly within Cook County, outside the limits of the City of Chicago, I feel that the Board of Commissioners of Cook County should properly take the initiative in the creation of such outer belt line of parks and boulevards.

Respectfully submitted,
HENRY G. FOREMAN, President
1. What is the “Outer Belt” system of parks proposed by Foreman called today? Why did they use the term “outer belt?”

2. What was the change in the relationship of population to park acreage in 1869 to 1902? What is that ratio today?

3. Do you think parks and Forest Preserves are “quality of life” issues? State your reasons.

4. It took over a decade of political struggle for the Forest Preserves District to be created. Why would people or groups oppose or support the creation of the district?
**ACTIVITIES**

1. Identify the Forest Preserve system on a current map of the Chicago metro area. Conduct a class survey of the places your families have visited and what activities you did there. Make a list of other “natural” places you have visited (both in the Chicago area and beyond).

2. Identify the part of the Chicago Portage located within the Cook County Forest Preserve system.

3. Investigate what modes of transportation and transfer were available to the city that would determine whether the Portage was still needed as a transportation gateway or completely outdated and a candidate for new uses.
The transformation of the Chicago Portage and its heir, the Illinois and Michigan Canal—
took place over the course of the 20th century. Portage Creek, at 48th and Harlem, once
the link to the west fell into obscurity with the creation of the I & M Canal located just
south of there. The canal was eventually replaced by the railroads, the Sanitary and Ship
Canal, and finally buried in the city by the Stevenson Expressway which runs down the
same “corridor” as the old Chicago Portage Route (see Rose map in Unit 1). The routes
and contours of the old waterways were changed by several industrial projects until signs
of the original route can be seen only in the Portage Woods. These places and ways of
seeing become our only evidence of our past as a city and its people.

If the old transportation systems are no longer economically useful and have been
replaced by newer, more efficient means, the questions arises, “What do we do with the
old sites?” Many politicians, historians—and most important, every day citizens—have
participated in figuring out how and what to preserve of the Portage Site. Indeed, efforts
to protect and commemorate the site continue to this very day.

The Portage Site is part of a larger effort over the years of citizens trying to preserve
natural and historical landscapes in the United States. The act of preserving and
commemorating important places has been around since the mid-19th century and still
involves political, economic, social, and cultural struggles. The progressive era reformers
believed that “knowing your past” was as valuable as safe working conditions, clean air,
and recreational space.

When citizens try to get a site designated and protected as a “landmark”, they need to
make three arguments in order to qualify for favorable action under the Historic Sites Act
of 1935.

1. the site is important in American History;
2. the remains at the site establish the authoritative identity of the site; and
3. the site is accessible, adaptable to historic development, and should be available for
designation.

Was a good a case was made for the Portage Site?
ACTIVITY 1

Situating in the Historical Context

Timelines are very helpful in showing the sequence and scope of history, but they don’t necessarily communicate the connections, significance, or meaning of history. That’s where the historian comes in!

As a class, construct your own timeline. You may need to look farther back in this curriculum to find some dates, such as the Treaty of Greenville when the Indians “gave” the site to the United States (see Unit 5). You might need to consult other sources to make sense of some of the events. Keep track of your research journey. Select as many dates as you need. Take a large sheet of paper and draw a vertical line down the center. On the right hand side, in chronological order, place the dates associated with local history. On the left hand side, place the national dates. You may want to add the larger historical periods in brackets or larger print size.

Once you have constructed your timeline, explain to your class what dates you chose and how you organized it.

Selection and organization is only the first step. Look at the completed timeline and begin to ask questions of it—try to tease out the connections between local, national and world history. What are some of the best questions you developed? How can those questions help you figure out the larger historical meaning?

Even dates which occur after the portage was no longer economically viable teach us something about American History, the struggle for public green space and the Progressive Era. Here are some more dates and events for your timeline.

TIMELINE

1833 End of portage use—roads used instead and I&M Canal after 1848.
1869 John Rauch presents a/the plan that creates the first large urban parks in Chicago
1872 Yellowstone organized as first national park
1890 U.S. census counts 1 million residents in Chicago
1893 World’s Columbian Exposition held in Chicago
1893 Nature clubs begin to form: Municipal Science Club, Friends of Native Landscape, Saturday Afternoon Walking Club, Prairie Club. Many members begin agitation to save the forest lands in existence
1899 Special Commission on Parks organized
1900 Mud Lake becomes permanently dry with the construction of the Sanitary and Ship Canal. Opening of Sanitary and Ship Canal
1903 County Commissioner Henry Foreman recommends extension of parks
1905 First Forest Preserves Act deemed unconstitutional
1906 Antiquities Act recognizes need to preserve national treasures
1908 I&M Canal ceases commercial use between Chicago and Joliet
1909 Burnham Plan calls for outer ring of parks and forests
1910 Chicago population doubles from 20 years ago
1911 State law authorizing a Forest Preserves District is declared unconstitutional

1913 Forest Preserve District Association citizen group formed to continue struggle for a law which will be found constitutional

1914 Voters endorse the creation of the Forest Preserve

1916 Illinois Supreme Court declares 1913 law and 1914 vote constitutional

1923 Knight and Zeuch present their study on the location of the Portage Site to the Chicago Historical Society

1928 Beginning of Great Depression

1929 Chicago Historical Society places plaque at Portage Woods—first formal historic recognition of this site

1933 End of I & M Canal’s commercial use between Joliet and LaSalle

1930s Civil Conservation Corps begins restoration of I&M Canal as a natural and recreational space

1949 Study by Olaf Hagen of the National Park Service that recommends the Portage Site as a National Historic Site

1952 Portage Site is named a National Historic Site

1960s Kennedy era and Johnson’s Great Society

1916 National Parks Service established in Dept. of Interior 1916

1935 Historic Sites Act of 1935

1966 Historic Preservation Act passed by Congress

1973 Dr. Margaret Brown, State of Illinois, CK-150 of the Illinois Archeological Survey begins archeological digs

1975 Interpretive Center design for Forest Preserves and the National Park Service

1976 Bicentennial of the United States of America

1983 National Heritage Corridor Act established. The Illinois-Michigan Canal becomes the first heritage corridor in the nation

1989 Monument placed at the Portage Site
ACTIVITY 2
Establishing Authority, Accessibility and Development Potential

Here are three reports by historians trying to establish the site’s candidacy for official historic recognition. Since the first part of the 20th century historians have been trying to establish the Portage as an important historical site.

1. In the Foreword to the seminal study published in 1923, Location of the Portage Site, by Zeuch and Knight, the Chicago Historical Society’s librarian, Caroline McIlvaine wrote:

   “Portage Creek, the ‘birthplace of Chicago,’ the place where Joliet and Father Marquette turned from the Des Plaines into Mud Lake, still in its natural condition, is threatened with destruction by the march of public improvements. It should by all means be included in the Forest Preserves and a determined effort by patriotic Chicagoleans should be made at once to save it, for all it will be a deplorable thing if this historic site, so important in the annals of the ‘Old Northwest,’ is not preserved.”

2. The 1949 report by the Regional Historian of the National Park Service, Olaf Hagen officially confirmed the historic importance of the Portage Site. He noted:

   “Mention has been made of possible additional commemorative development at the mouth of Portage Creek. It probably would require an undertaking of the proportions of the Statue of Liberty, Mount Rushmore, or the Washington Monument to give this historic area drawing power sufficient to compete with Chicago’s other attractions for out-of-town visitors. Nevertheless, a considerable visitation could be expected because of the easy accessibility of the historic area to the huge metropolitan population, especially if historical associations are more dramatically interpreted by dignified commemorative treatment as proposed…..

   “The expanding urban developments have obliterated most of the evidences of the Chicago Portage. The original condition of its controlling eastern terminus at the mouth of the Chicago River, Fort Dearborn, and related historic sites, including the short portage made possible by the proximity of sources of the Great lakes and Mississippi drainages at this point generally, has been lost. Study which re-established the route of the portage and its variants in the region revealed in the important portage area at the bend of the Des Plaines retained some of its natural characteristics, particularly because of its proximity to Chicago.”

3. The Rose report of 1975 also emphasizes this combination of historical and natural features to create a new recreational use:

   “Further, it is the purpose of the development to restore evidence of the past, and to preserve natural amenities through sound planning principles.”
QUESTIONS

1. What are the main concerns articulated by McIlvaine, Hagen, and Rose? What suggestions do you have to address those concerns?

2. Identify where Hagen addresses criteria two and three. What difficulties does he find? What kind of physical presence remains at the site to help make history “come alive”? 
By an act of Congress, in 1983 the I&M Canal became the first National Heritage Corridor established in the nation. The next year, the Illinois legislature approved the creation of the Illinois-Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor Civic Center Authority. One of its major activities is to promote the economic development of the area in which the Chicago Portage Site rests. In pursuing that mission the organization created a “Grand Vision” of the natural and historic importance of the area. This kind of development is often referred to as “heritage tourism” and is common throughout the United States. In 1989, the Civic Authority received money to pay for a sculpture for the Portage Site as part of a Build Illinois grant. It hopes that one day an interpretive center will be constructed at the site.
New Uses for Old Sites

ACTIVITIES

1. Using the artifacts worksheet (in Appendix), analyze the sculpture as a primary source.

2. Create your own monument to any of the people, events, or places that you have encountered in this curriculum. Sketch it on this sheet, but consider making actual models in clay or mixed media.
The I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor Civic Center Authority was created in 1984 by state legislation. The Civic Center Authority’s territory is the twelve towns from Lyons to Lemont, located in the eastern portion of our National Heritage Corridor. The Civic Center Authority is committed to the cultural, historic, recreational and economic development of the Heritage Corridor in this area.
New Uses for Old Sites

Preserving our heritage — into the future...

The Grand Vision, circa 2000
New Uses for Old Sites

The Grand Vision, circa 2000

Chicago Portage National Historic Site

Interpretative Center

Chicago owes its very existence as a city to the location of this site. The very first European explorers recognized the importance of this short land connection between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi. Today, many Chicagoans are unaware of its location and significance. In 1988, the Civic Center Authority developed funding to place a monumental statue of Joliet and Marquette and their Native American guide on the site and develop a plan for an Interpretive Center. Completion of the Center would provide interpretation of this complex site and could serve as a tourist attraction and the gateway from the city to the Corridor.

Trail Extensions

The Civic Center Authority is promoting the development of recreational trails in the 12 towns of IL territory. Two of these projects are currently underway:

Justice to Summit

The I&M Canal Bike Path currently runs from Rt. 65 in Willow Springs to Rt. 83 in Lemont. Volunteers recruited and supervised by the Civic Center Authority have worked to clear and extend the trail east through Justice and Bedford Park to the end of the canal in Summit.

Rt. 83 to the Confluence

On its west end the I&M Bike Path crosses over the canal at Rt. 83. A short extension running west from Rt. 83 would take riders out to the spectacular view at the point of land at the confluence of the Sanitary and Ship Canal and the Cal-Sag Channel. The dual waterfalls of an NPDES water treatment facility landscaped as a public park at the point provides another unique attraction.

I&M Canal Rejuvenation

The opening of the I&M Canal in 1848 made Chicago the major city in the Midwest. Long years of abuse and neglect have resulted in its present deteriorated condition. The Civic Center Authority has promoted restoration of the canal to support its full potential for recreational use, as a historic site, to help eliminate flooding in the area and as a tourist attraction. These efforts have recently begun to pay off by working with Congressman William Lipinski to provide funding for the Army Corps of Engineers to begin work on the Canal's rejuvenation for habitat restoration.
The Chicago Portage National Historic Site is one of only two National Historic Sites in Illinois. Chicago owes its very existence as a city to the location of this site. The first European explorers recognized the importance of this short land connection between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River. Today most Chicago area residents are unaware of its location, significance and long history in the development of our region.

The Civic Center Authority has worked, in cooperation with the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, to raise public awareness of the importance of this site by:

- Funding the placement of a monumental statue of Jolliet, Marquette and their Native American guide at the site in 1989.
- Creating a Plan for the development of a major museum that would interpret the site for local visitors, tourists and schoolchildren.

The 1990 Plan estimated that the museum would create ten full-time jobs and would attract one million visitors annually. The expansion of nearby hotel, restaurant and other service facilities will create jobs and increase local tax revenues.

The Chicago Portage Museum will also serve as a gateway to introduce the visitor to the recreational, historical and other cultural facilities to be found throughout the I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor.

The Confluence Conference Center

Located at the junction of two major man-made waterways: the Sanitary and Ship Canal (the extension of the South Branch of the Chicago River) and the Cal-Sag Channel on the west side of Route 85. The development of a mid-size conference center/lodge in this unique location could be the highest and best use of this site. Surrounded by the natural beauty of the Sag Valley and the constellation of recreational opportunities, cultural events and historic sites, a conference center could attract corporate, recreational and tourist business year round.

A small transportation museum developed in cooperation with the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Chicago (MWRD) could interpret the waterways they’ve created and the I&M Canal which passes through the site.

An extension of the existing Forest Preserve District of Cook County, I&M Canal Bike Path could bring trail users out to the point of the confluence to enjoy the spectacular view and discover the landscaped park around the lighthouse and waterfalls of the MWRD’s SEPA (aeration) station.
ACTIVITY

Analyze the Grand Vision brochure as you would any primary source document (see worksheet in Appendix). Also consider:

• What is the main message of the organization?

• Who is its audience? If there is more than one, name as many as you can.

• Who comprises the Civic Center Authority? How does its mission differ from the earlier organizations that created the Forest Preserve? How is it similar?

• Why would its member towns be interested in promoting a “Grand Vision”?

• List the kind of sites and activities that comprise the “Grand Vision.” Which activities most interest you? Do you have more ideas for the Grand Vision?
QUESTIONS

1. Why would a sculpture be considered a contribution to building Illinois?

2. List three ways the Illinois-Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor Civic Center Authority combines historical and natural preservation in “recreational use.”

3. What challenges might be encountered by the organization in fulfilling its vision?
UNIT EXTENSIONS

Today’s Parks and Forest Preserves
Conduct research and do a presentation on a Chicago park or Forest Preserve. Here are some ideas:

- write a brochure about its history and its current use
- draw a picture of a scene there
- create a slide or PowerPoint presentation
- construct a diorama or model

Clean and Restore the Portage Site
Join the monthly clean-ups and restoration at the Portage Site or other Forest Preserve sites. For more information, go to http://www.civiccenterauthority.org/

New Uses for Old Water
Research the Chicago River’s transformation from the Inland Seaport to Industrial Dumping Ground to Tourist and Residency attraction of today.

An Interpretive Center for the Portage Site—Your Ideas
In 1972, consultants William Rose & Associates presented its idea for a visitor’s center at the Portage Site. A copy of this report is at the Chicago Historical Society.

Submit your design for an interpretive center for the Portage Site.

- What would it look like?
- What exhibits would be included?
- What activities would you create for visitors?

You might want to compare your plans to those offered by the consultants. What other issues does the report discuss?

Living History, Oral History
Go to the annual I &M Canal Rendezvous. Interview re-enactors: why did they decide to do this? How did they learn about the past? Or meet with citizens who have dedicated much of their time to protecting the Portage Site. Find out what kind of meaning the Portage Site has for them, how they have been involved in its protection and restoration, and what kind of visions they have for the site. For more information, go to http://www.civiccenterauthority.org/

Create a Tour Guide
Visit any of the sites described in “The Grand Vision” and create a tour guide for it or do an oral/visual presentation.