



Clinton-Kalamazoo Canal

In 1837, Michigan officially became a state. At that time, plank roads, corduroy roads, and Indian trails were the only ways to reach the interior part of the state. As Michigan's first governor, Stevens T. Mason actively encouraged projects that would develop wilderness areas and create jobs. Around the same time, the Erie Canal was enjoying great financial success prompting Governor Mason to attempt the construction of a canal in Michigan by connecting the eastern part of the state (Mt. Clemens) with the western (Kalamazoo); in total, about 216 miles. It was hoped the Clinton-Kalamazoo Canal would provide jobs and would also help Michigan's transportation needs. The measure passed in the state senate and a fund for the canal was set up, involving over one dozen companies.

On July 20, 1838, Governor Mason broke ground in Frederick (now present-day Mt. Clemens), officially beginning the construction project. Shantytowns quickly sprang up around the digging, leading to a lot of drinking and rowdiness. Only two short years later, the firm doing the contracting went bankrupt. Contractors and workers went unpaid leading many to steal supplies. Eventually, many workers began destroying portions of the canal that had just been built. "No money, no work" ultimatums were leveled against the company. By that time (1842), the canal stretched only sixteen miles reaching Rochester. In 1843, the State Board of Internal Improvement reported that the canal was of little or no use.

In 1844, Asa Brown built a barge to travel down the ill-fated canal. The canal was made only twenty feet wide and four feet deep, causing Brown's barge to get stuck where it rotted in the basin. Ironically, Governor Mason believed the canal would make Michigan rich but it was a victim of the nation-wide financial panic of 1837-1841. Many reasons contributed to the canal's demise including the improvement of the railroad, which proved to be a more inexpensive mode of transportation than the troubled canal. When the funds were available to improve the canal, the railroad had already proven its worth.



By 1848, the project was abandoned. The locks were "pillaged and burned, the iron stolen." Afterwards, "Mason's Folly," as the canal came to be known, was used not for transportation but for waterpower. The canal was the first internal improvement project for the state of Michigan, and it failed. Portions of the canal have recently been reconstructed in Clinton Township and can also still be seen around Yates Cider Mill.