

# WHITEWATER CANAL



State Memorial

# THE MEMORIAL

The Whitewater Canal State Memorial preserves representative features of Indiana's early transportation and industrial developments. Although the Memorial includes approximately 14 miles of canal running from the Laurel Feeder Dam to Brookville, most of its principal attractions are located in and around Metamora, Indiana.

The Memorial's activities center around the restored brick gristmill located at Lock No 25 in Metamora. Built in 1845, the mill was one of several in the area which diverted water from the canal to turn "tub" water wheels. By the 1860's the canal was no longer used for transportation, and the mill owners installed a new, more powerful turbine water wheel in the canal lock. The mill burned in the latter part of the nineteenth century and was rebuilt in 1900.

Today the mill has a "breast" water wheel, located in the canal lock. The wheel revolves counter-clockwise approximately 18 times per minute and generates almost 50 horsepower. A restored set of 42 inch French buhrstones grind cornmeal, and a set of 24 inch buhrstones grind wheat into grits and whole-wheat flour. Visitors can see actual milling operations, purchase products ground at the mill, and visit the museum on the second floor.

Also in Metamora is the restored Duck Creek aqueduct, built in 1848 to carry the canal 16 feet above Duck Creek. Once featured in Ripley's "Believe It or Not," it is eighty feet long and believed to be the only such structure still in existence.

Just east of Metamora along U.S. 52 is the Millville lock, built in 1842. It is the only lock on the canal which is still in operating condition.

The Memorial's motorized launch "Valley Belle" offers visitors a forty-minute cruise along the canal. The trip begins in Metamora, taking visitors along the canal, over Duck Creek aqueduct, through the Millville lock, and back to Metamora.

Near Laurel, Indiana is the Laurel Feeder Dam, where water from the Whitewater River is diverted into the canal. Tent sites, fishing, and picnic areas are available at the feeder dam. There are also picnic facilities near the gristmill and the Millville lock.

The mill is open daily from 9 to 5 year-round. The "Valley Belle" operates on weekends and holidays from May 1 through October 31. Weekday appointments may also be made for 20 or more persons during the summer season. There is an admission charge for the mill and boat ride.

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The Whitewater Valley might be called the "cradle of civilization" for Indiana. As the tide of settlement moved westward, the Whitewater River served as a major waterway into Indiana from the Ohio River. By 1830, the valley was the most populous area in the state, and its citizens were anxious to have better means of transporting their produce to market.

The citizens of the Whitewater Valley were influential in pushing an Internal Improvements Act through the legislature in 1836. The Whitewater Canal was built between 1836 and 1847 as part of this ambitious, state-wide program of simultaneous canal, railroad, and highway building. This program eventually bankrupted the state and led to a law which still prohibits Indiana from contracting debt. In all, Indiana built four canals running 472 miles at a cost of 10 million dollars.

The Whitewater Canal stretched for 76 miles from Hagerstown to Lawrenceburg. The water in the canal was four feet deep, 26 feet wide at the bottom and 40 feet wide at the surface. The tow-path was ten feet wide, and the top of the opposite bank was five



feet wide. Boats were lowered 490 feet by 56 locks, and seven feeder dams supplied water from the west fork of the Whitewater River. The final cost of the Whitewater project was \$664,665.

While the canal was still fully operational, water-powered mills were built along its banks. These mills diverted water, by means of flumes, to provide power for "tub" water wheels.

From the beginning the canal was plagued by costly floods, washouts, and traffic tie-ups. For example, soon after the Brookville to Laurel section of the canal was completed, a saturated embankment gave way, draining the canal of water. Although comparatively minor in scope, this washout did substantial damage to the canal's public image when a party of dignitaries, out for a pleasure cruise, were left stranded in several feet of mud.

The high cost of maintaining and repairing the canal, coupled with increasing competition from the encroaching railroads, led to the canal's financial ruin. Sections of the closed canal were converted into a millrace by the Brookville Hydraulic Co. New water-powered mills were built along the millrace, and existing mills installed newer and more powerful turbine water wheels in the old locks of the canal.

In 1866 most of the canal was acquired by a railroad company, which later became part of the Penn-Central system. The old tow-path, where mules once pulled the barges, became a railbed; and the canal fell into disrepair for almost a century.



**Division of Museums & Memorials**

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