

# Dutch Gap Canal project turns marshes into cornfields

*Early in 1850, the village of Southport was transformed into a city called Kenosha. At almost the same moment, the Legislature split off the southern half of old Racine County to form a new Kenosha County. This year, both city and county mark their sesquicentennial birthdays. This bi-weekly series looks back over those 150 years to recount events, big and small, which illuminate our local history.*

BY DON JENSEN

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As canals go, Dutch Gap isn't much. No Panama or Suez, this rural drainage ditch flows sluggishly, barely a yard wide and a foot deep in dry weather.

Less than seven miles long, the Dutch Gap Canal is one of about 15 such drainage channels dug during the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For nearly 85 years, it has drained thousands of acres of Kenosha County agricultural

land, allowing farmers to grow corn, rather than reeds and cattails.

Nothing fancy, the Dutch Gap does its job, and well. But in the beginning, the canal was highly contro-

versial. Early farmers battled it out in court - to ditch or not to ditch. The outcome teetered back and fourth - yes, no, then yes again - until the canal finally was dug in 1916.

Dutch Gap Canal begins near Highway C in Bristol, due north of George Lake, whose overflow waters it drains. The canal runs southeast, crossing highways V, CJ and WG, the stateline road, continuing into Illinois. The

canal ends at Mill Creek, which flows east to join the Des Plaines River near Wadsworth, Ill. By way of the Des Plaines, then the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers, Dutch Gap's waters eventually reach the Gulf of Mexico below New Orleans, a thousand miles away.

Dutch Gap's early history is lost in the past, as is the origin of the name. One theory is that pioneer farmers saw their task as similar to the Dutch draining

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and reclaiming polders from the sea in Holland. But it might also be a reference to a few Dutch or German farm families in the Bristol area in the early days. Maps from the 1860s and 1870s show a wander-

ing but nameless watercourse, apparently a natural stream. It seems likely that individual farmers, laboriously digging by hand, straightened and deepened the drainage route. An 1887 plat map labels it the Dutch Gap Canal for the first time.

George A. Shields, a Bristol farmer who owned 180 of the marshiest acres south of Wilmot Road (Highway C), apparently began the formal

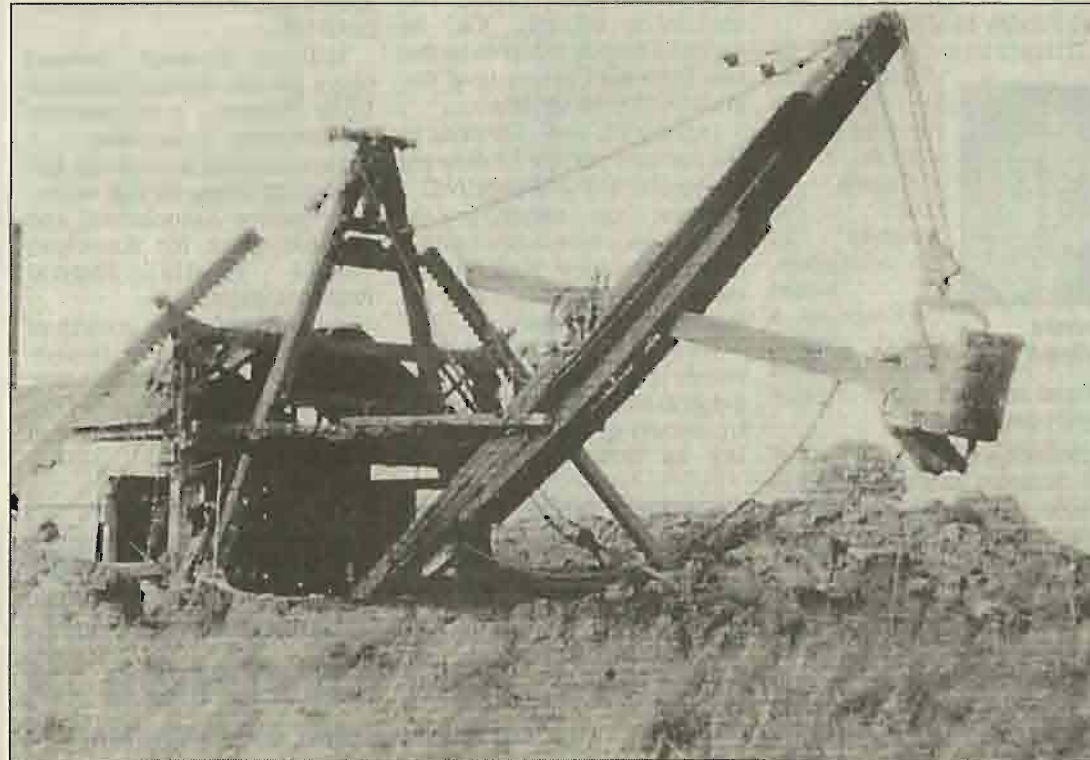


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE KENOSHA HISTORY CENTER  
A steam-powered "dipper" on a floating barge works its way across Kenosha County fields, digging the Dutch Gap Canal in 1916.

effort to dig a proper canal shortly before the turn of the century. He was joined by a handful of neighbors and a survey was conducted in 1903. But those living further to the west, who had less of a water problem, were reluctant to share the cost of dredging and maintaining a canal. In the face of opposition, the Bristol Town Board scrapped the proposal.

In 1909, Shields persuaded 30 property owners to sign a petition seeking a drainage district. The issue went to Circuit Court,

and it seemed the earlier opposition had dwindled. Anticipating a favorable ruling, Shields lined up a dredging firm to dig the canal. But opponents gathered strength and some key proponents backed off. The court rejected the plan and more years went by.

Finally, in 1916, a smaller drainage district, with 77 property owners willing to foot the bill, was formed. On March 2, Stephen A. Knoblock arrived from Indiana with several railroad cars of dredging equip-

ment. The dredge was a large barge with a huge steam shovel mounted at its head. Behind was a second scow where the eight-man crew ate, slept and lived while the work was in progress.

Digging began April 20. The dredge dug its way across the fields, floating on the waters that filled the ditch as it moved slowly ahead. The canal was 22 feet wide at the top and six feet deep, though the banks built up at either side made it seem deeper. The dredge dug its way

south, its crew working around the clock, seven-days-a-week, during the rainiest, muddiest spring Bristol had known in years. It crossed the Crawford and Benedict farms, through Brandt's and Firchow's, and crossed Horton Road.

On John White's land, just north of the stateline, the owner's son, Clarence, snapped photos of the monster machine, whose "dipper" scooped up one cubic yard of earth at a time.

Though it was outside the boundaries of the district, the dredge continued into Illinois, apparently with the consent of most of the farmers along its route. One, however, flatly refused to let the diggers pass. Late on a Saturday night, however, the dredgers got up a full head of steam and began gobbling up dirt as they worked across his fields.

Furiously, he hitched his team to the buggy and headed to Waukegan to get a court-ordered injunction to halt the digging. Unable to find a judge on Sunday, the farmer didn't get back home with his restraining order until Monday morning. By that time, the dredge had passed through his land and was on the next farm.

Snow was flying when, on Dec. 6, 1916, the Dutch Gap Canal reached Mill Creek, and, as the Kenosha Evening News reported, "waters from Kenosha County started on their long trip to the Gulf of Mexico." The cost was \$14,622, just about a dime for each of the approximately 150,000 cubic yards of earth moved during the eight-month project.