

Strolling Through the Past Menasha Lock

As told by
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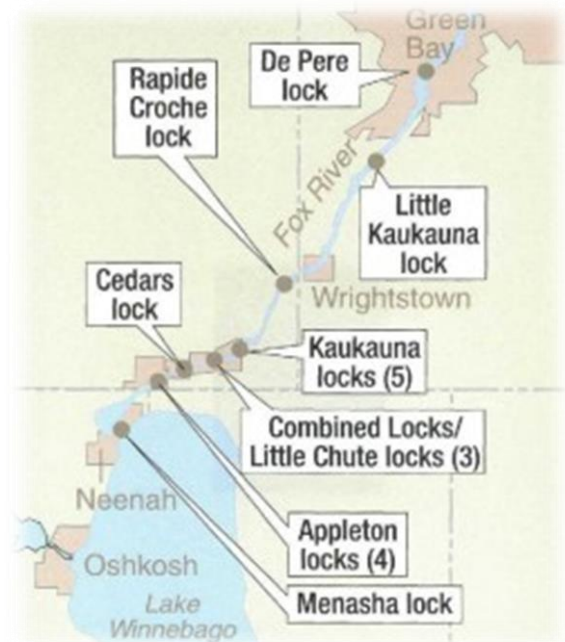
The Fox River is a large part of Fox Crossing and surrounding area. Not only does it literally divide the village in half, it has provided a source of revenue, travel, and entertainment for several centuries.

The Fox and Wisconsin rivers are two major rivers in the state. Early settlers saw them as a link between the Mississippi River and the Great Lakes. The rivers consisted of varying heights, which created falls and rapids, particularly in the surrounding area of the Lower Fox. This created a major obstacle in the fact that they were impassable by boat traffic. To navigate these areas, they would have to portage their boats which was very time consuming and ultimately costly to those shipping goods and materials.



These settlers thought that if they could “tame” the river, it could be another Erie Canal and be a boon to the economy along the Upper and Lower Fox River.

They soon came up with a plan of constructing a series of locks, dams, and canals to make the river acceptable to boat traffic. This work, known as the Fox & Wisconsin Improvement Project was funded by Congress in 1846. Work began along the river in 1848 which brought many immigrants to the area that ended up settling in the communities along the river. In our area, it was the Irish who settled on the west side of Fox Crossing.



The decision of where to construct these locks and canals proved a major and controversial one for Neenah and Menasha. Both communities saw the benefits of having this constructed in their community and actively lobbied for the construction. The cost was set to be

\$24,000 at either location. The State Board of Public Works inspected both areas by boat. It is said that the boat hit rocks and bottom in the Neenah channel, yet sailed smoothly in the Menasha channel. It was determined that Menasha would be the location of this development.

The work on the Menasha Lock began in 1852 and was completed in 1856. Shortly after that, the first boat, a steamer named *Aquila* passed the entire distance from the Mississippi River, up the Wisconsin River, through the upper and lower Fox River to Green Bay. This was a celebrated event with people getting on board at each stop until it reached a large ceremony in Green Bay.



The Menasha Lock is one of 17 locks in the Lower Fox River, which is defined as the part of the river north of Lake Winnebago. The Upper Fox River, that area south of Lake Winnebago, has 7 locks.

Over the years the locks served a vital need in not only commerce but also recreational travel. The US Army Corps of Engineers was responsible for maintaining the locks and the river travel and routinely made sure the river was navigable for these ships.

The federal government also provided the employees to operate the locks. The

lockmaster and his family actually lived in homes that were within a few steps of the locks. These lock masters and tenders would be on duty 24 hours a day/7 days a week to tend to any boats travelling the river.

In 1922 the dredging for commercial boat traffic stopped however recreational traffic continued. The last boat to travel the entire length of the Fox River, from Portage to the Bay of Green Bay, was in 1959.



In the early 1980's the government recommended that the locks be closed and dismantled due to the lack of commercial traffic. The government also stopped repairing and reduced the funding of the locks. Leaders, both local and federal, met over the next 20 years regarding the locks and what to do with them. In 2004, the ownership was finally transferred to the State of Wisconsin.

The Fox River Lock System is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and there has been an effort to restore and rebuild not only the locks but also the locktender houses, since 2005. Sixteen of the seventeen locks are now in working order, however only seven are operational – still done by hand for over 150 years!