THE CANAL AT THE FALLS OF THE OHIO
AND THE THREE CORNERED RIVALRY

by Stuart Seely Sprague*

Land speculation and urban rivalry were both present in the schemes for the construction of a canal at the Falls of the Ohio. No other factors explain so well why it took some twenty-seven years to construct a ditch less than two miles in length. The concept of a canal in the vicinity of Louisville was conceived in the eighteenth century. It was not until 1804, however, that an Indiana Canal Company was chartered. The motivation was land speculation. It was believed that the proposed waterway would lead to rising land values.

The people of Louisville feared that a canal would write a finis to her lucrative carting trade. The citizenry did their best to sabotage the project. The Kentucky legislature instituted a rival Ohio Canal Company as a means of deflating the Indiana corporation's claims upon the pursestrings of potential investors. Jared Brooks ["persistent and indefatigable promoter of the canal," philosopher, essayist, "skillful and intelligent engineer"] surveyor for the Kentucky based company, declared the Louisville side of the river more suitable for the canal and lambasted his Indiana counterpart, General Benjamin Hovey, for favoring the other bank. Both Brooks and Hovey were interested in actually building a canal. The General left for his upstate New York home when it became clear nothing would

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come of the project. Brooks petitioned both the United States Congress and a number of state legislatures in a last ditch effort to win support for a canal his sponsors did not want built. 3

Jared Brooks’ proposed route extended from just south of the limestone shoal on which Corn Island stood to an egress just south of Shippingsport. The canal’s dimensions were to be: Length, sixty-nine yards less than a mile and seven-eighths; Average Depth, twenty feet; Width at the bottom of the prism, twenty-four feet. 4 With public interest at low ebb, General William Lytle of Cincinnati purchased much of the canal land. The speculator was introduced to an Englishman, John Wheeler, who was “well versed in the subject of water works, canals &c.” 5 What transpired is not known, but by 1814 the idea of a canal was ready to come out of its long hibernation.

The Battle of New Orleans, the Treaty of Ghent, victories over Indians and other factors gave birth to an unprecedented spirit of optimism in America. Land booming and town promoting were two economic ramifications of the nation’s exuberant mood. Along the Ohio, this buoyancy came a year early as the Battle of the Thames made the area safe for the first time since Hull’s surrender of Detroit. William Lytle tried two strategies to turn a quick profit on his canal lands. He offered “the land between the road leading from Louisville to Portland and the Ohio river,” to Edward Livingston of New Orleans for between $100,000 and $200,000. But the former New Yorker was in debt and in no position to accept Lytle’s offer. 6 The second strategy was to sell town and out lots in Lytle’s town of Portland. One of his correspondents suggested that if “a liberal price” could be obtained from the states, it would be in Lytle’s “interest to close with them—in preference to a com-

3 Jared Brooks, Printed Letter to the Governments of the United States, the States of Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Kentucky, and of the Territory of Indiana (Louisville, 1810).

4 Map labelled “Document One” and sent with Printed Letter. Original is MS769C2 (1810) at the Virginia State Library, Richmond.


pany.”  

In any event, Lytle held onto his canal property and purchased two shares of the old Ohio Canal Company. Lytle’s nephew, Robert Todd, was one of the company’s three agents. The other two were Thomas D. Carneal (one of the three proprietors of the newly promoted town of Covington) and John Gwathmey [nephew of George Rogers Clark] (the man who had laid out the town of Jeffers0nville). Clearly land speculation was at the heart of the resurrected Ohio Canal Company. The corporation placed an advertisement for “100 NEGRO FELLOWS” who would be paid “twelve dollars in cash, per month, until Christmas,” for “clearing and fencing in” company land near Louisville.

Though improvements would tend to increase the value of the land, it would not appreciate at the rate it might if the canal scheme were resurrected. Consequently Loammi Baldwin, “a first rate engineer and scholar,” in the employ of the federal government, was hired “to examine the falls of Ohio and make the needful surveys.” The Massachusetts engineer demanded and received “ten dollars per day and all charges paid.” Field work was completed by mid-January and James Prentiss, [boat builder and navigationist] was well satisfied at the $1323.26 expenditure. Prentiss believed that on the basis of Baldwin’s report, eastern capitalists would buy the land “at a much higher price . . . if a company can be formed of the right description.” The remainder of 1815 and all of 1816 were spent by Lytle and his confederates in obtaining shares of the old Ohio

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7 (Lexington) Reporter April 23, 1814; R. Steele to William Lytle, March 1, 1814, William Lytle Papers, Cincinnati Historical Society.

8 Louisville Correspondent August 24, 1814 for advertisement; Fatout, “Canal Agitation,” 286n. for Gwathmey; for shares see Robert Todd to William Lytle, December 4, 1814, William Lytle Papers, Cincinnati Historical Society; Carneal later sold out, see Ibid., James Prentiss to William Lytle, January 19, 1815.

9 Louisville Correspondent August 24, 1814.

Canal Company.11 While Lytle was gaining control of the Kentucky company, the opening gun of a barrage of counter-proposals was fired. According to the Lexington Reporter, a channel on the Indiana side of the river could be opened at a fraction of the cost of the “canal project.” Spearheaded by residents of Clark County, the Indiana Legislature chartered an Ohio Canal Company, capitalized at $1,000,000.12

Reaction in Louisville was swift and predictable. Speaking of the across the river challenge, the Louisville Correspondent called for action: “A very considerable portion of the stock is said to be engaged at Cincinnati and Pittsburgh. Does it not now, more than ever, behoove the Legislature of Kentucky, and particularly the capitalists of Louisville, to be up and doing in this more than momentous subject?” Not long afterwards, the Louisville paper returned to the subject, emphasizing the quality of Baldwin’s work (he “bored through the various strata along the route, and minutely examined the ground, in company with Mr. J. Brooks,”) and making Jared Brooks who had conveniently died the year before, “a martyr to his desire for a canal.”13 Robert Todd suggested to his uncle, William Lytle, that Baldwin’s report be made public as a move “in opposition

11 Ibid., (first letter of that date); Ibid., William Lytle to James Prentiss, August 5, 1815; Ibid., James Prentiss to William Lytle, October 20, 1815; Ibid., William Lytle to James Prentiss, May 17, 1816; Ibid., Robert Todd to William Lytle, August 11, November 12, December 15, 1816.

12 (Lexington) Reporter December 11, 1816, reprinted in (Cincinnati) Western Spy December 20, 1816. For response to “Retaliator” in the (Lexington) Kentucky Gazette, the Louisville Correspondent August 26, 1816, declared: “When it is attempted to estimate the amount of each others paving, and to survey the extent of the various puddles and premises, we must leave such abstruse and sublime calculations to the Gazette—the subject becomes too immense, and its scope utterly too grand, for our humble pretensions. On less difficult grounds of comparison, we thus contrast the two towns: Lexington is in the interior of the state 60 or 70 miles from the principal navigable stream of this part of the western country; Louisville is on its bank, and at the very point where nature has arrested trade. . . . Lexington is, from the concurring reports of all, and the removal of her mechanics, either at the summit of her prosperity or most deeply shocked throughout all her business. Louisville is just fairly and proudly entering upon her career of grandeur. . . . Louisville is rapidly approximating the distinguished improvements of Lexington, and her foundations of prosperity are deep seated in natural causes. Lexington is to Louisville, comparatively in prospect, what Lancaster, Pa. is to Philadelphia. Fatout, “Canal Agitation,” 291.

13 Louisville Correspondent January 6, 13, 1817.
to the projected canal at the opposite side of the river." The advice was followed and the area newspapers carried the report. This information, coupled with the Indiana legislature's insistence that tolls be low, made the Indiana canal unattractive to investors. Kentucky's lieutenant governor [Gabriel Slaughter, Lieutenant and Acting Governor] suggested to the Legislature that a commission be appointed to cost out the canal and to communicate the results to other states. Such action might throw additional doubts upon the feasibility of an Indiana canal.

With his Portland land threatened by an Indiana canal, William Lytle attempted to defuse [discourage] interest by complaining of a:16

Feeble and insidious attempt, to bias the citizens of Cincinnati in favor of the canal on the Indiana side—not only to prevent Louisville declining, but to render it a place of great trade and importance in future, at the expense and injury of other places especially Cincinnati—does then the prosperity of Cincinnati depend upon the destruction of Louisville? I presume not a single inhabitant of this city would form such a ridiculous answer.

As had been the case in 1814, Lytle reacted to an uncertain financial future both by selling Portland lots (some $100,000 worth) and by attempting to sell the canal parcel (asking price $500,000).17 Legislatures met during December 1817-January 1818, and both canal companies attempted to improve their competitive position through new legislation. Lytle, himself, "handed in a Petition to the upper house" of Kentucky. His motive was "to prevent the People of Indiana and the State of Ohio going into the measure, as they are making great exer-

14 Robert Todd to William Lytle, January 5, April 22, 1817, William Lytle Papers, Cincinnati Historical Society; (Cincinnati) Western Spy May 9, 1817; see also June 6, 1817 issue.

15 Fatout, "Canal Agitation," 292-293; for another claim see James Wier to Thomas Smith, January 11, 1820, 6CC98-99, Kentucky Papers, Draper Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

16 (Cincinnati) Western Spy May 30, 1817.

tions.” Lytle returned to the Queen City, but was kept informed through James Simrall’s letters. New legislation was passed. Indiana’s proponents were equally successful as the Jeffersonville Ohio Canal Company was chartered January 28, 1818. One ingenious article allowed the company to raise $100,000 by means of a lottery, half of which would be used to buy stock on behalf of the state.

The chartering of two new companies led to a new round of urban name calling. BACON claimed in the Cincinnati Advertiser that the lack of a canal gave Louisville unnatural advantages. As he put it:

If the obstruction continues, Louisville will be the place of deposit, and will undoubtedly become rich and populous; but it will be at the expense of all the country above it. The prosperity of Cincinnati, which has increased in wealth and population beyond example, will be checked; its capital transferred to Louisville; its population diverted to the same place.

The Cincinnati paper concluded that “the increasing importance of a canal round the Falls of Ohio, is rendered more evident by every day’s experience.” Louisville’s Public Advertiser turned the tables on her tormentors who had claimed that the Falls City was not interested in a canal, by suggesting that neither was Cincinnati:

If the people of Cincinnati really want a canal around the falls, they may convince the public of their sincerity, by assisting ... in the construction of it. But if they withhold such assistance, all the hustle they have heretofore made, will be viewed as the offspring of jealousy.

18 Ibid., William Lytle to John Rowan, December 10, 1817; Ibid., James Simrall to William Lytle, December 20, 22, 1817, January 27, 1818. This was not the only tack taken by the Portland speculators. See Ibid., John Rowan to William Lytle, January 10, 1818 and John Gwathmey to William Lytle, January 24, 1818, for the Portland & Shippingsport Turnpike Company. Twelve years later, when the canal was all but completed, another transportation gimmick was used, a proposed railroad to Louisville. See Louisville Public Advertiser December 2, 8, 14, 21, 1830.


20 Cincinnati Advertiser June 30, 1818.

21 Louisville Public Advertiser quoted in (Cincinnati) Western Spy August 15, 1818.
Urban rivalry was made explicit in October. "New boats are building from one end of the river to the other," declared the Cincinnati Inquisitor, and are "threatened with no obstruction, but the comparatively small bed of rocks at Louisville." The article continued:22

It is not the business of this state any longer to enquire what the citizens of Louisville will do. They have shown us conclusively, that they will do nothing. It is the people above the falls, whose interest it is to cut a canal, and it is vain and absurd for them to expect assistance from those whose interests are diametrically opposed. We are not disposed to censure the people of Louisville for consulting their own private advantages."

The pot and the kettle continued to call each other black. "This is a subject already worn out by scribbling," declared the Western Spy, but the Cincinnati paper refused to refrain from adding to the feud:23

The Louisville Editors are constantly trumpeting the great exertions that the citizens of that place have made . . . But what have they done? They have done nothing: every measure which they have adopted is in direct opposition to the execution of the Canal. Their interests, their habits of thinking, and their prejudices, are all set against it. For evidence of this, we need look no further than to their own conduct. . . . The people of Louisville, although as wide awake, and enterprising on other subjects, as any people whatever, rested in perfect indifference and silence on every thing that regarded the canal, until the subject was agitated in Cincinnati . . . [Louisville's interest is only] to neutralize the strength, that was about to be offered from Cincinnati to the Jeffersonville Company. . . . In short, it is clear . . . that it is not in the interest of Louisville to remove the obstacles to navigation. . . .

Eighteen hundred and nineteen began well for the Jeffersonville Canal Company. The Board of Directors reported that lottery tickets were "selling rapidly." Two months later, in March, James Flint, company engineer, reported the canal feasible and the company announced itself "ready to receive proposals . . . to contract for executing any part of the work."

22 Louisville Public Advertiser, October 27, 1818, reprinted in Cincinnati Advertiser November 10, 1818. See also National Intelligencer, October 27, 1818, dateline Cincinnati, October 10.
23 (Cincinnati) Western Spy October 31, 1818.
Groundbreaking was targeted for early May. The big day arrived and accounts of it were published far and wide. At noon the directors:

Each taking a spade, commenced the excavation. The example of the directors was immediately followed with cheers and huzzas by a large number of citizens assembled to witness the interesting spectacle. The regular laborers to a large number employed for the purpose, animated by a great glow of feeling and interest that pervaded the scene, then commenced their operations, and the work progressed with a spirit never surpassed.

Two new directors, both of Cincinnati, made speeches and at two, the guests sat down for a repast. Though optimism, spurred on by $50,000 subscribed in Cincinnati, encouraging words from DeWitt Clinton, and a toast by the Cincinnati guards, continued through July, this was the high water mark for the Jeffersonville Canal Company. The remainder of the year was to prove as dismal as the first half had been bright.

The first history of Louisville was but a ploy by the Kentucky Ohio Canal Company to check its adversary. Dr. Henry McMurtrie wrote William Lytle the following:

Louisville 26th March 1819

Sir

At the instigation of Messrs. [William C.] Galt & [Robert] Todd, I have taken the liberty of enclosing to your care a proposal paper for the Sketches of Louisville, hoping that in addition to your very generous & liberal patronage of it, you will endeavour to procure that of your friends & the public in Cincinnati. The value of such a work to this Place & its neighbourhood may readily be conceived & as it is dedicated to the President of the U. States, may be the means of drawing the attention of the Executive to the spot, not only as regards a canal, but as a proper & eligible site for a Great Military Depot, a National Foundery & armoury.

24 Ibid., January 23, 1819; Cincinnati Advertiser March 23, 1819; Louisville Public Advertiser March 24, 1819; see also Cincinnati Advertiser April 6, 1819.

25 Louisville Public Advertiser May 15, 1819 from Jeffersonville Indiana. For new directors (Cincinnati) Western Spy January 23, 1819. For wide coverage Pittsburgh Gazette May 28, 1819, Nashville Clarion May 25, 1819, (Corydon) Indiana Gazette May 15, 1819, Cincinnati Advertiser May 18, 1819. See also Fatout, "Canal Agitation," 299-300.

26 Lebanon (Ohio) Western Star, June 6, 1819, quoting (Lexington) Reporter; Cincinnati Advertiser May 25, July 13, 1819.
I am induced to solicit your aid in the advancement of the subscription list, on account of the little notice taken of it by the inhabitants of this place, who seem blind to their best interests, their being but 300 Copies subscribed for in toto including the large number held by yourself. Printing, Engraving, &c are costly, & as I am not one of Fortune’s favored minions, I dare not risk the Publication without having the Expenses at least secured.

The manuscript & the printer are ready, the paper is bought, & every preparation made to have the work out in a few weeks. I am only waiting, for an increase of subscribers, which I am assured your kindness will procure. for although a stranger

Your obliged humble &c

Henry McMurtrie

P.S. The importance of having the work out early, So as to arrive at 'the Seat of Government as soon as possible, you are no doubt perfectly aware of. So that I would be much indebted to your politeness to forward me the enclosed, as soon as all the subscribers names are obtained that you can procure.

Respectfully

HMcM

The Doctor reported in early May that the 105 pages of text was complete. But no one in Louisville was capable of making 1250 impressions of the engraved map which was based on one by Jared Brooks. Consequently the work dragged on. Dr. McMurtrie was interested in setting up a hospital at Portland, and when that scheme failed, the doctor skipped town, leaving the printer and his landlord in the lurch.

More damaging to the Jeffersonville Canal Company than the Sketches of Louisville was the report of a commission representing Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio and Pennsylvania. The commissioners spent five weeks surveying the Ohio from Pittsburgh to Portland, Kentucky. At Louisville they were furnished with the detailed reports of Brooks and Baldwin and were assured that talk to the effect that Louisville was not really interested in constructing a canal was “founded on local and rival interests and feelings.” There was joy in Louisville when


28 Ibid., May 8, 1819; Thomas and Conner “McMurtrie,” 318.
it was learned that the commissioners unanimously favored the Kentucky route.\textsuperscript{29} The Panic of 1819, which made money for any purpose scarce, was the third body blow of the year for the Jeffersonville corporation.

By October the Cincinnati and Jeffersonville press began denouncing Louisville in the strongest language. "Louisville declines the moment that the canal is completed," the \textit{Western Spy} predicted. "Louisville is little else than a point of deposit; Cincinnati is a great commercial city." To put a coffin nail in the Falls City's reputation, the Cincinnati paper touched Louisville's rawest nerve, its fame as the Graveyard of the Ohio. "Louisville rises from the bosom of an extensive marsh, whose pestiferous exhalations sicken and destroy one-third of its inhabitants yearly. Cincinnati on her hills is the abode of health." Though the \textit{Public Advertiser} responded to these attacks, it only evoked an encore.\textsuperscript{30}

The unhealthiness of that place is a universally received opinion. . . . We must be permitted to say, however, that we do not perceive a falsehood in speaking of Louisville as a small trading town at the falls of Ohio. . . . And if Louisville really is a small town now, with the profits of trade of the Upper Ohio flowing into her hands, what must she become when the route of this trade shall be changed? Will not her epitaph be written?

Even more perturbed than the public prints of Cincinnati was the Jeffersonville \textit{Indianian}. "Louisville with all her display," it charged, "is a town to let, and if exposed to public auction and the whole world for bidders, would not fetch enough to pay the debts of its inhabitants." This elicited a sharp retort: "It is better to have a town for let than no town at all." The \textit{Public Advertiser} [Shadrack Penn, Jr., editor] then slurred the Jeffer-

\textsuperscript{29} Louisville \textit{Public Advertiser} August 25, October 13, 1819. General Blackburn (Va.), Walter Lowrie (Pa.), General Edward W. Tupper (O.), General John Adair (Ky.) were the commissioners. Indiana did not appoint one. Cincinnati \textit{Advertiser} January 11, 1820 carries the report signed by all four dated Gallipolis, November 2, 1819. Previously it has been supposed Adair did not attend. Louisville \textit{Public Advertiser} October 13, 1819, reprinted in \textit{Cincinnati Advertiser} November 2, 1819; Louisville \textit{Public Advertiser} November 19, 1819.

\textsuperscript{30} Louisville \textit{Public Advertiser} October 16, 1819, quoting (Cincinnati) \textit{Western Spy}; (Cincinnati) \textit{Western Spy}, November 6, 1819.
sonville Canal as "a contemptible ditch, which a respectable Dutch farmer would not consider a respectable mill-race."  

The Jeffersonville paper was convinced that the Public Advertiser was attempting "to injure the progress of the Canal and to destroy the sale of lottery tickets." Shadrack Penn did not respond directly to the charge, stating only that "we still believe that if the Lottery progresses the public are to be swindled in proportion to the extent of the sale of the tickets." The Indianian fumed declaring that Penn was diseased with "sub phobia canalis villae Jeffersoniensis" and declared it was "really at once amusing and edifying to observe how industriously he labors like the famous prototype, the Knight of La Mancha." Penn's paper continued its attacks. Not only did he use excerpts from the Sketches to prove the advisability of a Louisville canal, but also published James Flint's calculations. Though an employee of the Jeffersonville Company, Flint now favored the Kentucky route. "If the estimates furnished . . . by Mr. Baldwin and Mr. Flint are correct," concluded the Cincinnati Liberty Hall, "the idea of making a canal at Jeffersonville . . . must be abandoned."  

With support for an Indiana canal declining, Kentuckians won a new charter, one that allowed the Legislature to subscribe for 1,000 shares. In order to combat the contention that Louisville was uninterested, a lengthy list of Falls City sub-

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31 Louisville Public Advertiser November 24, 1819.
33 Jeffersonville Indianian January 23, 1820; Louisville Public Advertiser January 1, 1820.
34 Cincinnati Advertiser January 25, 1820; Liberty Hall & Cincinnati Gazette quoted in the Louisville Public Advertiser January 26, 1820.
scribes was published. William Henry Harrison, in an effort to fight off the Kentucky challenge, appealed to the Ohio Legislature, declaring that freshlets endangered such a canal and that the “greater part of the board of directors for superintending the work, are by no means anxious to accomplish it.”

The Jeffersonville company was on its last legs. The lottery produced less than the anticipated revenue and this forced the directors to issue a call upon all stockholders. The Public Advertiser poked fun at the financially strapped corporation: “For some time we have omitted to take notice of our friends on the opposite side of the river. The Jeffersonville Ohio Canal Company and the Jeffersonville Ohio Canal, are both progressing. Six men are employed at the one, as many in the other.” The Cincinnati press remained convinced that Louisville opposed a canal. There was general depression, therefore, when “the ill-timed and injudicious essays of Mr. Flint” appeared and which may have turned the Ohio Legislature away from appropriating funds for the project.


36 Louisville Public Advertiser March 22, 1820.

37 Fatout, “Canal Agitation,” 296, 303; Jeffersonville Indianaian March 10, 1820. Some had already paid in $2, others $5. This call was to increase the paid in amount to a total of $7; Louisville Public Advertiser April 1, 1820.

38 (Cincinnati) Liberty Hall as quoted in the Louisville Public Advertiser, April 12, 1820.
With the disappearance of the last possible revenue source for the Jeffersonville company, the Public Advertiser could gleefully attack Cincinnati and her anti-Falls City attitude. The day subscription books were opened at the Queen City, the Louisville paper reminded its rival that for years it had been said that “the people of Ohio and particularly of Cincinnati, are more interested in the proposed canal than the citizens of Louisville.” Then came the barb that went home: “Their own sincerity will soon be tested.” Risk capital was unavailable as the three cornered rivalry among Cincinnati, Jeffersonville and Louisville had hindered the sale of whatever stock might have otherwise been sold. Hard times and “clashing interests” had killed the canal project. True the Ohio Legislature authorized the governor to engage an engineer to survey the falls and William H. Harrison did make a report relative to Jeffersonville, but these were ineffectual moves. But towards the end of 1823 there was a reawakening, caused more by the financial success of the partially completed Erie Canal than by the return of prosperity.

Perhaps the first sign of renewed interest was an advertisement for a Draft of the Falls and the Canal on the Indiana side by Mr. Flint, to sell for 50c and to be engraved by Mr. Gridley. Before the work was completed, Alfred Kelley and David S. Bates, representing Ohio would inspect the ground and “Bates Route for a Canal” would appear. An Ohio proposal to unite with either Kentucky or Indiana excited interest in both states.

The profitability of the Erie led a Montgomery County grand jury to declare a private company was “utterly hostile to the true interests of the State, as well as its Treasury,” and a Greenup County grand jury agreed with that analysis. Even the Public Advertiser favored the canal declaring that

39 Louisville Public Advertiser, April 15, 1820.
40 Cincinnati Advertiser October 30, 1821; Fatout, “Canal Agitation,” 305, Cincinnati Advertiser March 7, 1822.
41 Cincinnati Advertiser December 3, 1823, April 17, 1824; The map appears in Samuel W. Thomas (ed.), Views of Louisville Since 1766 (Louisville, 1971), 50-51.
42 Louisville Public Advertiser September 22, October 27, 1824.
“The speedy completion of the proposed canal, is not only essential to the welfare of Louisville, but to the inhabitants of the whole upper country.” New York proved, that “TIME IS TO STATES, what it is to individuals—MONEY.” Delay meant lost tolls. The Kentucky Legislature passed a new charter and Shadrack Penn, Jr., the man who opposed such a project for so long printed the Charter, By-Laws, etc. of the Louisville & Portland Canal Company.43

The united stand of Kentucky caused an Indianapolis paper to exclaim: “Why should we compete with Kentucky! The advantages will be mutual to both.” Stock was sold readily and the project received another boost when DeWitt Clinton traveled from Cincinnati to view the falls and allegedly remarked “that the route itself had been pointed out by the finger of nature.”44 In October the company advertised for bids and in late December, the lowest of some 25-30 bids, one for $370,000 was accepted. The bidders were Messrs. Chapman, Culver, Lathrop, Collins, Perrine & Co.45

The bid was unrealistic. Canal mania swept the country and this caused a shortage of skilled engineers and unskilled laborers. A single canal in the Cleveland area accounted for “upwards of 2000 laborers and 300 teams.”46 Located far from ports of entry, Louisville’s contractors felt the pinch. The workforce during 1826 ranged from 610 to 1062. In both

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44 Indianapolis Gazette quoted in Louisville Public Advertiser May 18, 1825; Louisville Public Advertiser March 30, October 15, 1825; Maysville Eagle, May 11, 1825; Louisville Public Advertiser July 20, 1825. Clinton had been asked in a letter dated July 1, 1825, sent by F.W.S. Grayson, James Guthrie, William H. Neilson, S. S. Nicholas, J. P. Oldham, Alexander Pope and John Rowan.

45 Louisville Public Advertiser October 19, December 28, 1825.

1827 and 1828, Blacks were also hired. But work progressed slowly. During 1826-1827 only 15% of the rock had been excavated, none of the embankments or sloping walls had been constructed and although about 75% of the 630,000 cubic yards of dirt had been removed, this was the easy part of the job. By the end of 1827 more than $200,000 had been expended and the end was not in sight. John Rowan described the progress during the summer of 1827 succinctly: “The canal proceeds languidly—times are dull.” Freshlets, floods and miscalculations plagued the company. Stockholders defaulted and only by means of federal stock purchases amounting to $233,500 and loans of $154,000, was the work completed. Part of the problem lay in the fact that the contractors failed in 1828. There were also disputes between contractors and the company that had to be settled by arbitration. “The work of the canal was progressing so slowly,” wrote Increase Allen Lapham in his journal, “that Mr. Henry was induced to accept the offer of Mr. Ives to superintend it.” This was but one of many signs of setbacks in the goal of an early completion. By the end of 1829 more than $575,000 had been expended.

At first 1830 appeared as if it might be a repeat of earlier years. A flood raised two gates “from their pivots.” In January and in March the river was twenty-six feet above low water mark with steamboats anchored on Water Street. The tenth and final $10 call on stock was issued in September and in order to attract capital A Few Statements Showing the Utility and Importance of the Louisville & Portland Canal, Around the Falls of Ohio River was published in Philadelphia.

Bids were requested “for executing the work remaining . . . chiefly of rock excavations.” No longer did the company put “the whole work into the hands of one set of contractors.” By mid-July 600 men were at work and it was expected that the canal would be completed within the year. The canal had its Cassandras who predicted the decline and fall of the Falls City. The canal would “effect a powerful and injurious revolution in the business of our draymen and hackmen,” was but one statement among many in that vein.

The climax came in December, 1830. On the morning after the night when the first water was let into the works, the water stood some six or seven feet deep. A boat was expected to pass through within two days, but a mitre sill was found to be “imperfectly secured.” This and an earth slide prevented the scheduled event. However, probably on December 21, the first vessel, either the Uncas or Vesta slipped through the locks, thus turning a dream of more than a quarter century into a reality.

The Louisville & Portland Canal was the offspring of the rivalry between real estate speculators of Jeffersonville and Portland. The strongest support for an actual canal came from Cincinnati’s merchant community that bore the transshipment

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51 “G” in the Western Tiller quoted in Louisville Public Advertiser, July 16, 1830.
52 Louisville Public Advertiser, June 29, 1830; Paris Western Citizen December 18, 1830; Louisville Public Advertiser December 8, 1830.
53 Louisville Public Advertiser, December 2, 1830; Louisville Daily Journal December 10, 1830.
54 History of the Ohio Falls Cities and Their Counties (Cleveland, 1882), I, 48 mentions either the Uncas or Vesta as the first ship through and gives the date as December 21, 1829; William Elsey Connelley and Ellis Merton Coulter, History of Kentucky, 5 vols., (New York, 1922) II, 72, also uses the 1829 date, crediting the Uncas; Frederick A. Wallis and Hambleton Tapp, A Sesquicentennial History of Kentucky (Louisville, 1945) II, 532, uses the date December 5, 1830, and this is the date Richard C. Wade, The Urban Frontier: Pioneer Life in Early Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Lexington, Louisville, and St. Louis (1959, Chicago, 1964), 200, uses. This may be based on The Louisville Directory for the Year 1832 (Louisville, 1832), 110. But see Thomas, View of Louisville, 59-61 for E. D. Hobbs, “A Plan of the City of Louisville and Its Environs in 1831,” making December 21, 1830, as the date of the Uncas.
costs occasioned by the break in navigation.\textsuperscript{55} The $750,000 canal was completed only after Louisville changed her mind about the project and after the federal government put up almost one-third of the cost.\textsuperscript{56}

Editorial note. With the advent of steam powered craft on the Ohio between Pittsburgh and the Mississippi, a canal at the "Falls" was virtually imperative. Wrote Dr. Clark: "The project of constructing the falls canal was revived in 1811 when Nicholas Roosevelt piloted the City of New Orleans (the first successful river steamboat over the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers) southward. This trip marked the beginning of the steamboat industry [on the Ohio], and in 1815 the Enterprise made the first upstream journey by a steamboat from New Orleans to Louisville, reducing the traveling time between these cities to less than half the former period. Where it had taken twenty-eight days for the broadhorns and keelboats to make the journey, steamboats required only twelve days." Thomas D. Clark, A History of Kentucky (Lexington: The John Bradford Press, 1960), 175.

\textsuperscript{55} Louisville & Portland Canal Company, Few Statements, 19, lists four firms whose transshipment bills totalled $14,500.

\textsuperscript{56} Collins, History II, 552 declares the cost on oath January 2, 1832, was $742,869.94. The canal has been enlarged since that time.