



**O**n June 18, 1855, the steamer *Illinois* became the first boat to pass through the Soo Locks. The trip past the rapids of the St. Marys River took less than an hour. Although the Soo Locks were difficult to build, they soon played an important role in America's industrial growth.

For years, Michigan had urged the U.S. government to support building a canal and locks at Sault Ste. Marie. Michiganians argued it would benefit both Michigan and the nation. Not everyone agreed. During one congressional debate, a southern senator said that the Upper Peninsula was "beyond the remotest settlement of the United States" and digging a canal there would be like placing one on "the moon."

This attitude changed in the mid-1840s with the discovery of copper and iron ore in the western Upper Peninsula. The minerals had to be shipped to

# Soo Locks

Cleveland and Detroit for processing. Because of the rapids, all goods had to be removed from the boats and **portaged** around the rapids. This process took time and cost money.

In August 1852, the federal government gave Michigan 750,000 acres of land to **finance** the building of the canal.

Digging began during the summer of 1853. At the height of operations almost 1,700 men were working on the canal. The men worked 12-hour days and were paid \$20 a month.

The work was hard, especially during the winter. On some wintry mornings, workers had to look for tools that were covered by the previous night's heavy snowfall. A cholera epidemic also killed many workers.

The Soo Locks were completed in May 1855. To bypass the rapids, boats went through two locks. Each lock was 350 feet long, 70 feet wide, and had a lift of 9 feet. The locks were connected to a 1-mile canal.

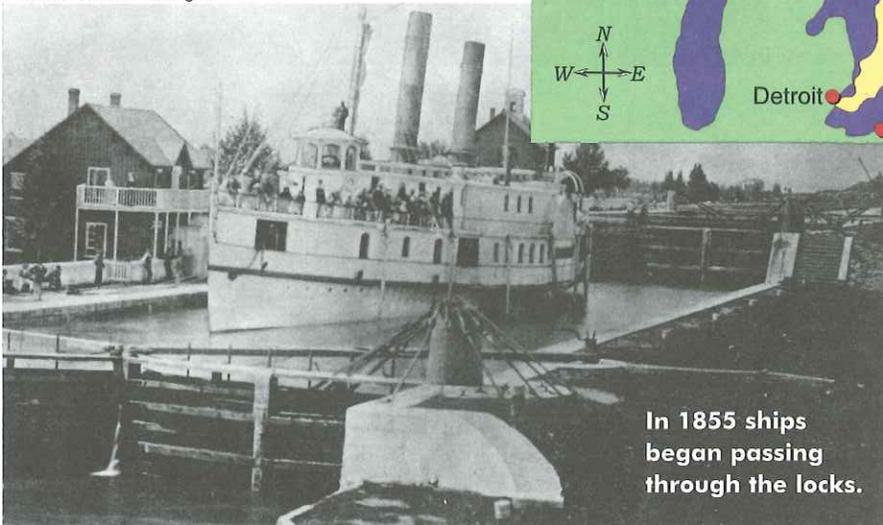
During the first summer, boats carried almost 1,500 tons of iron ore through the locks. Five years later, that figure was 120,000 tons.

When boats got larger, bigger locks were built. The newest lock opened in 1968. It is 1,200 feet long, 110 feet wide and 50 feet deep. Today, the Soo Locks remain among the world's busiest locks.

Carolyn Damstra



State Archives of Michigan



In 1855 ships began passing through the locks.

Lake Superior State University/John Shibley



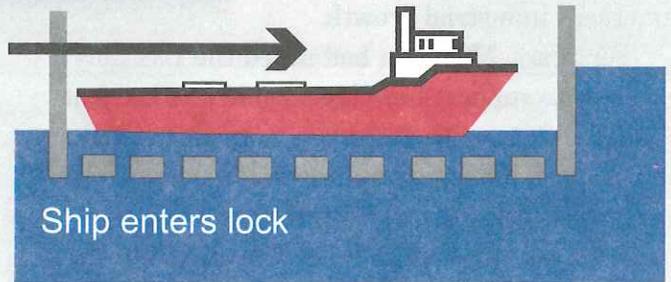
# HOW THE SOO LOCKS WORK

**L**ake Superior is about 20 feet higher than Lake Huron. The Soo Locks raise and lower

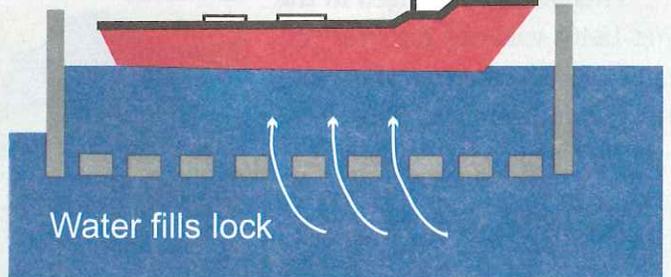
boats as they travel between the lakes. Boats headed into Lake Superior (upbound) must be raised and boats headed into Lake Huron (downbound) must be lowered.

As a ship enters a lock, gates shut behind it, "locking" it in. Next, a valve is opened to allow water to flow either in or out of the lock to raise or lower the ship. Finally, the gate in front of the ship is opened and the ship moves on.

gate open                      gate shut

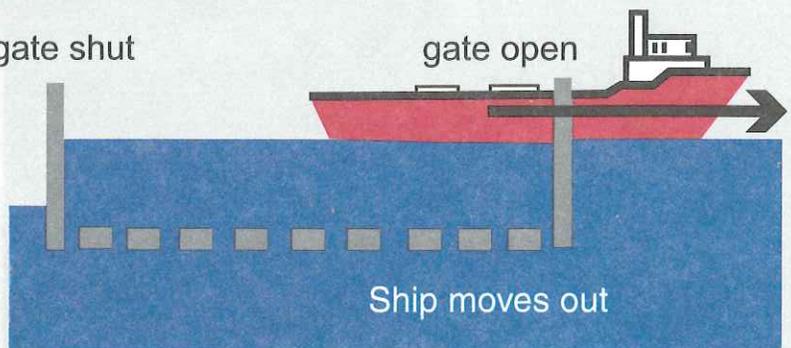


gate shut                      gate shut



gate shut

gate open



# Where to Take Your Family

**BRADY PARK** is situated on the grounds of the original Fort Brady, near the corner of Ashmun Street and Portage Avenue. Informational displays tell the history of Michigan's oldest settlement. During the evening hours, visitors can enjoy the beautiful musical fountain that lights up at night (right). For more information on Brady Park and other things to see and do while at Sault Ste. Marie, contact the Sault Convention and Visitors Bureau, 536 Ashmun Street, Sault Ste. Marie, MI 49783 or call (800) 647-2858 or visit them on the Web at [www.saultstemarie.com](http://www.saultstemarie.com).



Lake Superior State University/John Shibley

## The Gathering Place

**T**oday, Sault Ste. Marie is a pretty town located along the St. Marys River. It has many restaurants, boat tours, and gift shops. As Michigan's oldest settlement, it has a long history.

More than 2,000 years ago, Native Americans settled at Sault Ste. Marie because it was a good place to gather fish and furs. In the mid-1600s, French missionaries explored the area. In 1668, Father Jacques Marquette built a **mission** near the river and named it

*Sainte Marie du Sault*. The name is French and means "St. Mary of the Rapids." Today, we often just call it, "The Sault" (pronounced "Soo").

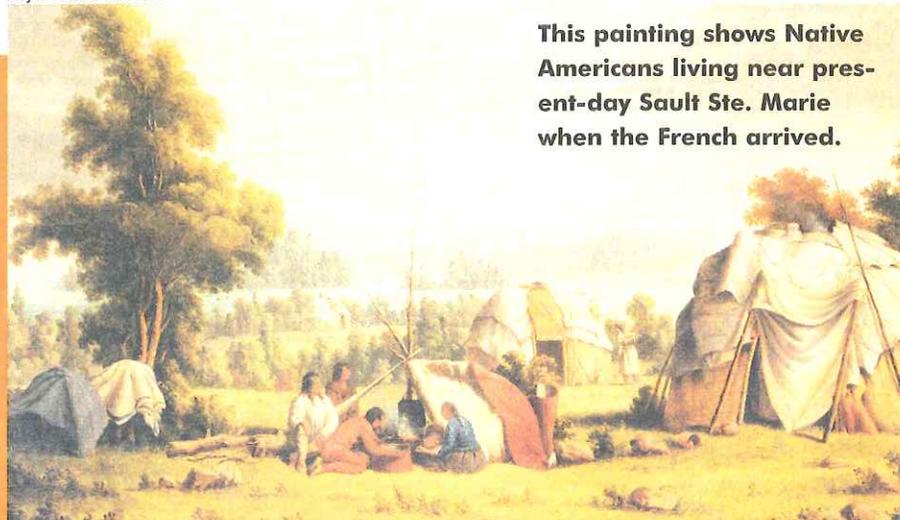
In 1783 the St. Marys River became part of the international boundary between British Canada and the United States.

In 1820, Michigan territorial governor Lewis Cass obtained land from the Ojibway Indians along the St. Marys River. Fort Brady was built so that the Americans could keep watch over the river. Today, Lake Superior

State University sits on the same grounds overlooking the St. Marys River.

The importance of Sault Ste. Marie changed with the opening of the Soo Locks in 1855. Today, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers operates and maintains this important waterway. The locks have been expanded over the years and are a popular tourist destination.

Royal Ontario Museum



**This painting shows Native Americans living near present-day Sault Ste. Marie when the French arrived.**

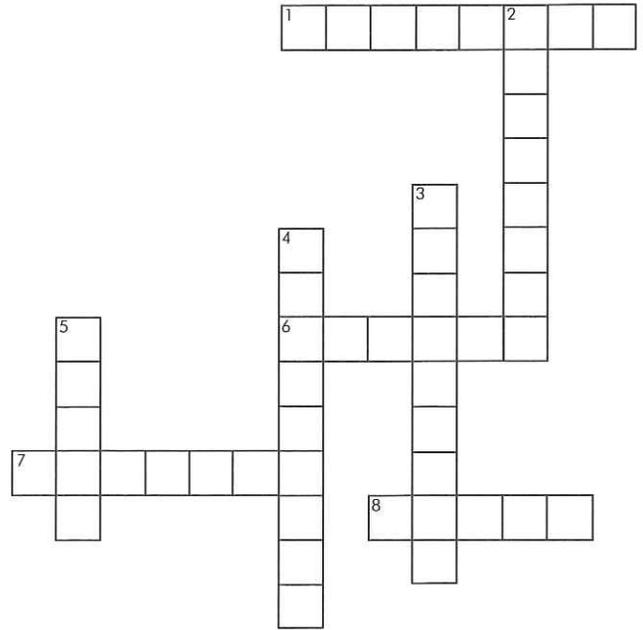
# What Did You Learn?

## ACROSS

- Boats headed into Lake \_\_\_\_\_ must be raised.
- A fast-moving part of a river.
- Carrying boats and supplies overland between two waterways or around a barrier.
- Name of the fort that was built along St. Marys River.

**Word List**  
(in random order)

RAPIDS  
PORTAGE  
MARQUETTE  
BRADY  
ENGINEERS  
ILLINOIS  
SUPERIOR  
HURON



## DOWN

- This steamer was the first boat to pass through the Soo Locks.
- The U.S. Army Corps of \_\_\_\_\_ operates and maintains the locks today.
- Father \_\_\_\_\_ built a mission near St. Marys River.
- Boats headed into Lake \_\_\_\_\_ must be lowered.

**Vocabulary WORDS**

**Mission:** a place where missionaries teach their religion

**Rapids:** a fast-moving part of a river

**Portage:** carrying boats and supplies overland between two waterways or around barriers

**Epidemic:** disease that spreads quickly

**Finance:** to raise or provide money