

The Chicago Road and the State Road

~ Traffic ~

In the Great Lakes Region, the most important Indian trail was the Great Sauk Trail. Indians had marked it and traveled it for centuries before the coming of the white man.

In the early 1800s, the military saw the Great Sauk Trail might be the best route between Detroit and Fort Dearborn (Chicago).

The 1821 Chicago Treaty with the Indians stipulated that the United States had the privilege of making and using a road through Indian country from Detroit to Chicago. 3000 Indians were present at this conference when the Potawatomes ceded away all of the land in southwestern Michigan east of the St. Joseph River.

The Chicago Road became one of the great routes for pioneers coming west. By the 1830s, pioneer families by the thousands were moving over this road in their wagons each year.

Much of the Chicago Road was little more than an unimproved trail. Traveling over it was an unforgettable and an uncomfortable experience.

The road proved to be important in opening southern Michigan to settlement. As a westward land route, it enabled travelers to avoid a long voyage by boat around lower Michigan.

By 1835 the Western Stage Company of Detroit was running two stages daily to Chicago.

The State Road took travelers on from Chicago to present-day Rockford and Galena.

The Mississippi Valley beckoned pioneers. Discovery of lead both at Galena and south of St., Louis was one of the draws. Farmland was another.

In 1822, the first mining lease was granted by the federal government to Col. James Johnson, who brought 20 white miners and perhaps 50 slaves from Kentucky to work his claim at Galena.

The "Lead Rush" preceded the California "Gold Rush" by 20 years. At about the time the surface lead was giving out, the lure of gold took many of Galena's miners farther west.

Traffic on the State Road in the 1840s was heavily that of wagons carrying farm produce into Chicago, where steamships could carry it on to Eastern cities. In 1854, the Illinois Central Railroad arrived in Galena, and farmers chose the railroad over the State Road to ship their farm produce.

~ Features ~

In the early 1800s, a military road was needed to connect Detroit with Fort Dearborn (Chicago). Leading supporters for the selection of the old Great Sauk Trail were Territorial Governor Lewis Cass and Father Gabriel Richard, an influential legislator.

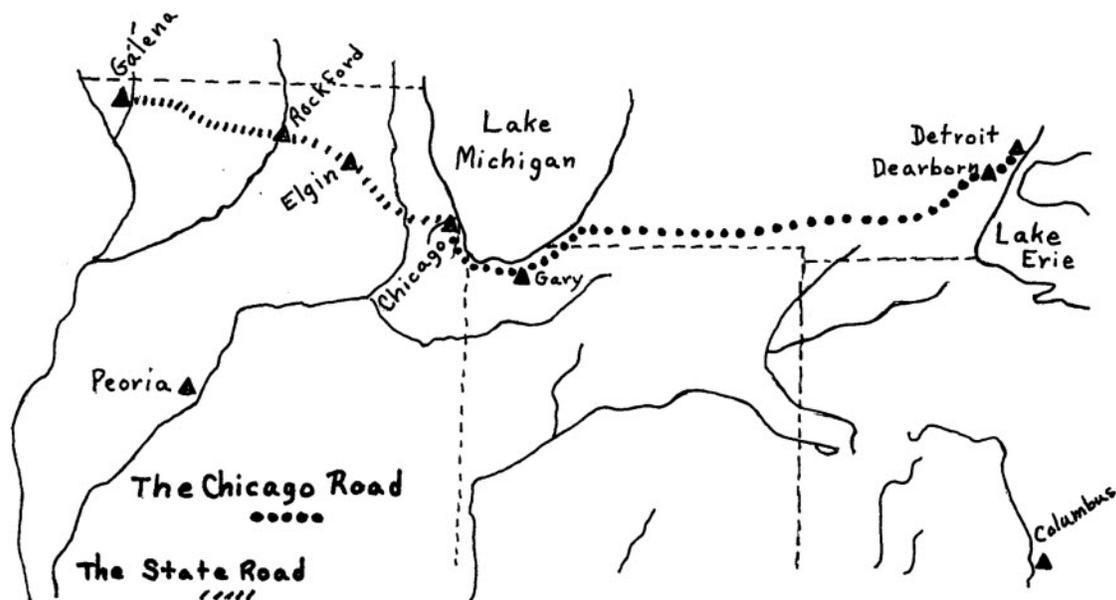
The road was surveyed with federal backing in 1825 and built in 1829-36. Because of its many curves the road was likened to "A huge serpent, lazily pursuing its onward course, utterly unconcerned as to its destination." Initially, the road was paved with huge oak logs, covered with a layer of dirt. Even before the road was improved, land-hungry settlers moved west from Detroit by way of the Chicago Road.

Buildings from the 1830s era still stand along US-12, the Chicago Road's descendant. In Chicago itself, the old Chicago Road is now called Michigan Avenue.

The State Road ended at Galena, Illinois. The town of Galena was laid out in 1826 and given that name because Galena was Latin for sulphide of lead. The Black Hawk War in 1832 ended with the suppression of the Indians and cleared the way for unrestricted white settlement. Galena became a thriving city while Chicago was still a swamp village. Contributing to the city's growth was access to shipping along the Mississippi River from the Fever River, later to be known as the Galena River. In 1845 Galena shipped a record 54,494,850 pounds of lead. In the 1840s, residents lavished money on elaborate houses, many of which still stand today. By the 1850's Galena was the busiest port between St. Paul and St. Louis often boasting as many as fifteen steamboats at a time docked along Water Street. But by the 1850s, surface lead deposits were depleted, and the railroads started to take the Galena River commerce and also lessened the importance of the old State Road.

Rockford was founded in 1834 by Germanicus Kent, a land speculator, as the village of Midway because it was approximately midway between his home of Galena and the city of Chicago.

Chicago's strategic position at the nearly southernmost end of Lake Michigan made it the natural hub at which rail lines moving outward from the East should meet those already serving the West. As early as 1848, the first westward-moving locomotive chugged out of Chicago on rails which would eventually reach Galena and thereby end the glorious wagoning days on the State Road.



**~ Timeline ~
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**Route of the
Chicago Road**

- 1700s The Great Sauk Trail had been the most important Indian trail in the Great Lakes region. Next, it was used by French explorers, fur traders, missionaries, and soldiers. But after the 1760s, this old trail becomes a major road for British and American travelers.
- 1800s In the early 1800s, the old Great Sauk Trail is chosen as the best route for a military road to connect Detroit with Fort Dearborn (Chicago).
- 1825 The federal government surveys the Chicago Road.
- 1830s Chicago in the 1830s has the most dramatic population surge ever experienced by a major American city.
- 1833 Stagecoaches transport passengers from Detroit to Chicago.
- 1835-37 By 1837, an estimated 500 new farm towns are laid out among the Illinois grasslands.
- 1838 In this one year, approximately 4,000 persons arrive in Chicago, either over the stormy Great Lakes route or the Chicago Road.
- 1840s More than 200 wagons a day or more make the State Road one of the most-traveled highways in the West. It carried farm harvest to Chicago where there was Great Lakes steamer connection to the Eastern market.

The Chicago Road went from Detroit to Chicago, from Lake Erie to and around the tip of Lake Michigan. Along the way, the road passed through Dearborn, Cambridge Junction, White Pigeon, Niles, New Buffalo, and the future site of Gary, Indiana.

**Route of the
State Road**

The State Road went west from Chicago, then through Elgin, Rockford, and Freeport to Galena, an Illinois town near the Mississippi River.