How a canal made a major Ohio port city

The dominant port city on the mouth of the Maumee River was the city of Maumee up until ~1850. Maumee was the Lucas county seat up to 1853. Perrysburg on the opposite bank also was large until 1840 and was the Wood County seat up to 1868. Both cities prospered due to the lake freighters from NYC, which got their freight from the canal boats which came from New York City (i.e. up the Hudson River & up the 1825 Erie Canal. Land speculators formed the towns of Port Lawrence, Vistula and Manhattan further down the river and close to the mouth. When Vistula and Port Lawrence merged in 1833 to form Toledo, there were less than 2000 people living there.

Due to the Panic of 1837, the speculation money dried up. Thus, only the ports of Perrysburg, Maumee, Toledo, and Manhattan remained thereafter. So, the question of the time was: Which city would prevail to become the port city of the Maumee?

The Wabash & Erie Canal was completed in 1843 to Manhattan. But, because of the merger 10 years earlier, Toledo had a much larger population than Manhattan. So, the canal boats instead of moving cargo at Manhattan, they just were pulled upstream to the Toledo docks, where the warehouses were and better facilities.

The canal ran right along the northern & western edge of the city itself. So, any packet boats with passengers would disembark at Toledo, since the passengers could just walk the few blocks to the lake ships.

The canal was only ~20 feet higher than the river and it traversed a tributary of it, called Swan Creek. This creek was 60-80 feet wide and the city's only road bridges constructed over it was a swing metal bridge. (see figure 1 of the map of 1872). The only reason to have an expensive swing bridge would be to accommodate the passage of a tall lake freighter that could use Swan Creek to dock in this creek on the upstream side of Erie street close to the canal. So, there is little doubt that a large amount of freight transfer was done by the canal boats to warehouses near Swan Creek and docks along the lower Swan Creek. Cargo was probably lowered or transported the short distance by wagons to the docked lake freighters in Swan Creek. Thus, this saved the time for the canal boats to travel through the last two locks between Toledo and the final terminus at Manhattan. Figure 2 shows a photograph taken in 1888 that is probably a view down Swan creek from the Ottawa St. bridge. This shows that Swan Creek a place to harbor and dock lake freighters.

Any cargo not lowered to Swan Creek docked freighters could have been hauled by wagon to the nearby Maumee River just a few blocks away. So, many canal boats probably never made it to Manhattan to the north, thus depriving that town of revenue. It is not a coincidence that the "warehouse district" in Toledo today is centered around the lower Swan Creek. You put warehouses close to the freight transfer point.

The growth of Toledo commerce was exponential. In 1845, a few thousand dollars in grain shipments occurred. By 1853, 8 years later, the canal business was $10 million/year - the equivalent of ~$400 million/year in today's dollars. By 1858 (5 years later), the commerce was

$70 million/yr, and by 1875 (another 17 years) the commerce was $400 million/yr. Due to the better dredged harbor of Toledo, most traffic went to Toledo, so due to lack of trade, the side-cut of the city of Maumee was closed in 1850. Thus, Maumee ceased being a port city.

By 1858, there were over 400 canal boats moving at ~5 miles an hour at any given time and, so, roughly one canal boat every mile. This means roughly 5 canal boats needed to transfer cargo every hour. That is a lot of cargo to move to & from lake freighter to canal boat and most of the transfer was in Toledo. Each canal boat could haul up to ~50 tons of freight, so that is 100's of tons per hour to load and upload. As the lake freighters got larger in draft, Toledo paid to dredge the Maumee River deeper. So, Toledo ensured that it got the canal business and, thus, explains the exponential growth back then.

In 1861, the Civil War briefly closed the Mississippi, so even more freight moved up to Toledo (& back down) via the canal boats. This need for a detour for the goods of the Mississippi Valley, also had the deleterious canal effect of spurring investment in railways between Toledo and the Mississippi River.

Toledo added the side-cut to Swan Creek in 1864 (see figures 1 & 3), which reduced the canal boat's travel cost to the Maumee river, since travel to Manhattan & back to Toledo was avoided for freight, and the handling of freight down to Swan Creek was avoided. More importantly, Manhattan died quickly when Toledo bought the canal through town from the state of Ohio. Toledo now owned the extension down to Manhattan, so they were entitled to blow up the wood aqueduct over Swan Creek that same year. This emptied the canal extension halfway up to Manhattan (i.e. A waterfall of water flowed into Swan Creek & drained the canal though Toledo. Toledo's borders & population had by now expanded past the canal and so the canal north of the aqueduct was an encumbrance & hazard to them), so this stopped all canal traffic to Manhattan. So, Toledo got all of the canal trade.

This removal of the aqueduct also enabled more dockage further upstream in Swan Creek. For example, the docks of the Lenk's brewery (see fig. 1) are still in existence today along Swan Creek, as are the brewery buildings. The sailing vessel drawing of figure 1 on the far left also illustrates that the length of Swan Creek for these ~2 miles was used to transfer freight from/to canal and lake. The creek was more than deep and wide enough for most lake freighters, and tugs or mule teams could pull these vessels. The creek had a further advantage of being protected from the severe Spring ice flows of the Maumee river and of Lake Erie.

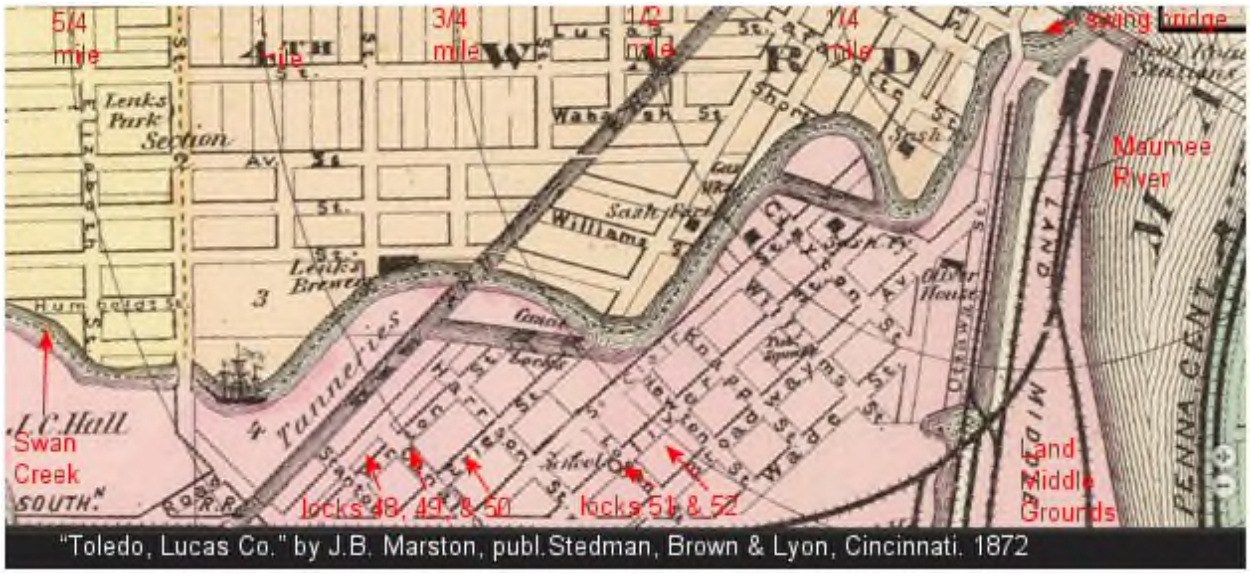

Figure 1[1] – Map of Toledo of 1872 (8 years after Toledo side-cut was built) showing ~2 miles of Swan Creek, the canal and the side-cut with 5 locks 48-52. Note that Swan Creek had only 2 bridges at that time: 1. the swing bridge near Summit St. and Monroe St. at the mouth of Swan Creek, and 2. a bridge further upstream at what is today City Park. So, the entire length shown was accessible by lake freighters by tugboat. The canal aqueduct over the creek shown on the map was a map error, since the aqueduct had been removed 8 years earlier than the date of this map. Note also that there was no Erie St. Bridge in 1872. The circle lines are at 1/4th mile intervals from downtown, so this entire length (~2 miles) of creek was used for dockage.

[1] Copied from the book: "Toledo, Lucas Co." by J.B. Marston, C.E., Toledo O. (Published by Stedman, Brown & Lyon, Cincinnati. 1872. Entered ... 1872, by H.F. Walling, and O.W. Gray, and H.H. Lloyd & Co. ... Washington)

SCENE FROM BRIDGE STREET.

Figure 2[2] Probably a view of Swan Creek near the entry point to the Maumee River at the Ottawa St. swing-bridge. Note that the location of "Bridge St." in the caption above has not been found yet on any map for the west side of the Maumee, so the Bridge St. reference here is actually a reference to the Summit St to Ottawa St.. swing bridge still there today. Note also that the whole creek was docks for loading & unloading, with warehouses close to the docks. Small lake sailing vessels are shown on the left docked.

[2]Photo is from the book: "Toledo Illustrated 1888", scanned by the Toledo LC Public library and available on-line; https://encore.toledolibrary.org/iii/encore/record/C__Rb1211811, Published before 1923, so no longer copyright protected

Figure 3[3] The Toledo canal side-cut on the left and note the Erie St. center swing bridge over Swan Creek on the right looking upstream (northwest view from St. Clair St.). This swing bridge was added after 1872 and before 1888 when the photograph was taken. Two tugs are also shown parked in Swan creek. They could bring canal boats down to the Maumee River or lake freighters up past the swing bridge. Prior to 1872, there were no bridges here at all, so one can see that small lake freighters could be easily pulled up Swan Creek - the creek was ~100' wide. Note that lock 52 is easily seen on the left, and lock 51 is further up the side-cut & partially obscured by the 2nd Erie St. bridge over the side-cut. None of these man-made structures exist today, except for the faint image of Lenk's brewery in the distance above the swing bridge..

By 1865, railroad lines were constructed & consolidated to form the Toledo, Wabash and Western Railway Company (see "Land Middle Grounds" in fig. 1). This connected Toledo to Quincy, Illinois on the Mississippi. This killed passenger traffic to/from the west on the canal (i.e. packet boats), since rail travel was much quicker. It also, was the start of the demise of the use of the canal for freight.

[3] Photo is from the book: "Toledo Illustrated 1888", scanned by the Toledo LC Public library and available on-line; https://encore.toledolibrary.org/iii/encore/record/C__Rb1211811, Published before 1923, so no longer copyright protected

Railroad commerce took off from then on. There were railroad lines installed between Chicago and Toledo, so that the lake freighter traffic of up lake Michigan, and down the eastern lakes of the state of Michigan was avoided - saving time and money. This means that canal boats from the Ohio interior not only unloaded and loaded freight from lake freighters, Toledo got freight brought in from Chicago and from the Mississippi commerce by rail - thus rail-to-lake freighter transfers at Toledo accelerated. This transfer created a hub of most east-west and north-south rail lines leading to Toledo. Toledo had become a rail hub.

Only 5 years after the Swan Creek side-cut was built, the transcontinental railroad connected freight by rail between the Pacific Ocean and the Mississippi River watershed at Omaha, Nebraska. This accelerated the freight on the canal at first, because of the commerce added by the west coast. But, soon thereafter, the railroad took over. The canal heavy freight was still economical, but the faster railroad carried passengers and perishable items, and a train didn't stop when the canal water froze. Thus, Toledo transitioned (i.e. ramped up) to a rail-to-freighter terminus. The canal operated up to the early 1900's (see fig.2), but the canal had created Toledo, and made Toledo the rail hub and port city it is today.

Thus, the Wabash & Erie canal made Toledo the metropolis it is today by making it a hub of commerce, that just grew exponentially in the early 1800's. The city eventually transitioned to various manufacturing (e.g. lumber, tannery, wheels, glass, automotive), but the canal started the economy going.

We at the Maumee valley heritage Corridor (MVHC)[4] are attempting to restore the sites of the aqueduct over the Swan Creek and the terminus lock 52 at the Toledo side-cut. Both are now gone, and the locks were either buried or disassembled, but we want to create a park and scenic overviews with educational boards to teach about the history of the Wabash & Erie and the Miami & Erie canal at this terminus. We would appreciate any tax-deductable donations/endowments and/or local volunteers. Please contact Dave Weber if you have an interest in this project. [dweber@bex.net] or Kurt Harris [kurtharris53@yahoo.com] , both members of the Maumee Valley Heritage Corridor.

Also, we are collecting narrative and photographs of the history of the canal at or near the City of Toledo, so we would appreciate any help in collecting this information and we would appreciate your scrutiny & feedback of the above narrative about inaccuracies, etc.

[4] https://maumeevalleyheritagecorridor.org/