

Transcribed Excerpts from "The Des Moines Rapids of the Mississippi River, and Its Improvements" Essay from *The Annals of Iowa, 1870*

THE DES MOINES RAPIDS OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER, AND ITS IMPROVEMENTS.

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The Des Moines, or Lower Rapids, are situated near the mouth of the Des Moines river, and extend from Keokuk to Montrose, a distance of eleven miles ...

"The river bottom is a broad, smooth rock, seamed by a narrow, crooked channel, or, in some places, several of them, alternately widening and narrowing, shoaling and deepening ; nowhere good navigation. The rapids, therefore, are not broken and noisy, but, the descent being gradual, the water flows over its bed in a broad, smooth, unbroken sheet, with nothing but the faintest ripple on its surface to indicate the dangerous places. The casual observer would not suspect the presence of the rapids, were he not informed beforehand ..."

The fall in eleven miles is twenty-two feet ...

The tortuous, uncertain channel over these rapids precludes the possibility of any craft navigating them in low water. Even if the channel itself was wide and deep, no pilot would dare to undertake to pass them at night ...

As early as 1830 the general government took steps to survey the locality, and made preparations for the improvement. The actual annual cost to river navigation on account of these rapids ... has varied from \$200,000 to \$600,000. No one can, therefore, deny the expediency of the great work required at this point. As the entire Mississippi Valley is directly interested in this matter, the people of the north-west have ever had an earnest desire to have the Father of Waters freed from all obstructions to commerce and travel. The will of these people has been repeatedly expressed by their representatives in commercial conventions, and elsewhere, and by that powerful exponent of popular thought, the press. The only question ever has been, how to make this improvement to best subserve the general interest ...

In 1837, Lieut, (since General C. S. A.) Robert E. Lee made a survey and map of the rapids, submitting at the same time various plans of improvements. Subsequently Lieut, (since Maj. Gen. U. S. A.) G. K. Warren extended the investigation, and made more professional researches into the practicability of making the rapids navigable ...

The carrying out of the details is the work of time, of much labor, and requiring patience to battle the elements. The cost of the entire work, inclusive of the Montrose work, was estimated by General Wilson, in 1866, to be \$2,710,000. Of this amount \$1,380,000 has already been appropriated by

Congress ... This amount will be expended before the 1st of July, 1870. The time required to construct the work will depend to a great extent upon the will of Congress. If suitable appropriations are made, it can be completed in one and one-half years. If not, it is impossible to tell when a boat can go through the canal. It is poor economy on the part of the general government to make small appropriations for this improvement ...

During the past year an average daily force of one thousand men have been employed. Payments are made soon after each monthly estimate is taken. Wages have been higher than upon any other work in this portion of the country. From one-third to two-thirds of the employees are Swedes. The river bank is dotted with the rustic abodes of these workmen. Shanties built by the contractors are rented to the men at low figures. This offers inducements for permanent location, and drives away, to a certain extent, the ordinary river roustabouts ...