THE SOO LOCKS

Near the city of Sault Ste. Marie, people traveling between Lake Superior and Lake Huron had a big problem. Lake Superior is twenty feet higher than Lake Huron. The St. Marys River that connects these two lakes was shallow, full of rocks, and fast moving. Boats could not go from one lake to another without risk of being damaged or destroyed. When a boat came to Sault Ste. Marie, goods had to be removed and carried around the falls. To continue the journey, these goods had to be put into another boat. This process took time, money, and much effort.

For years, Michigan had urged the U.S. government to support building a canal and locks at Sault Ste. Marie. Michiganians argued that it would benefit both the state and the nation. Not everyone agreed. During one argument, a southern senator said Sault Ste. Marie was so remote that digging a canal there would be like placing one "on the moon."

That attitude changed in the mid-1840s with the discovery of copper and iron ore west of Sault Ste. Marie. The minerals had to be shipped to Detroit and Cleveland for processing. In August 1852, the U.S. government gave Michigan 750,000 acres of public land to build the canal and locks. The land was sold to raise money for the project.

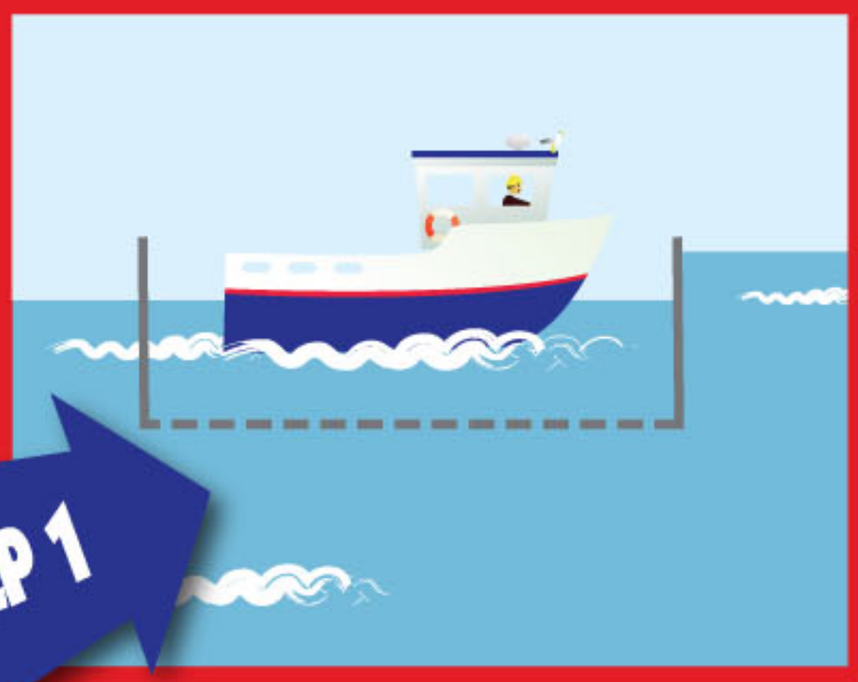
Digging began in the summer of 1853. Hundreds of men worked on the project. The work was hard. During the winter, men worked in snow, freezing rain, and in below-zero temperatures.

The Soo Locks were completed in May 1855. Each lock was 350 feet long, 70 feet wide, and lifted a boat 9 feet. The locks were connected to a one-mile canal. On June 18, 1855, the steamer *Illinois* became the first boat to pass through the locks.

During that first summer, boats carried almost 1,500 tons of iron ore through the locks. Five years later, that figure was 120,000 tons. In 1905, an iron ore businessman boasted, "the opening of the Sault Canal has been the largest benefit to the whole of the U.S. of any single happening in its commercial or industrial history. Every state has benefited from it."

When larger boats were built, larger locks were also built. Today, the Soo Locks are among the busiest locks in the world, with boats "locking through" about eighty times a day.

How the Soo Locks Work



As a ship enters a lock, the gates shut behind it, locking it in.

THEN

Soo Locks Visitors Center provides displays that explain how the locks work, along with a 30-minute video about the history of the locks. An observation platform allows visitors a bird's-eye view of the lock system in operation. For more, visit *www.soolocksvisitorscenter.com*

The first lock was completed in 1855. Larger locks, including the MacArthur (shown above in 1943 and at right in 2001) were built for larger ships.

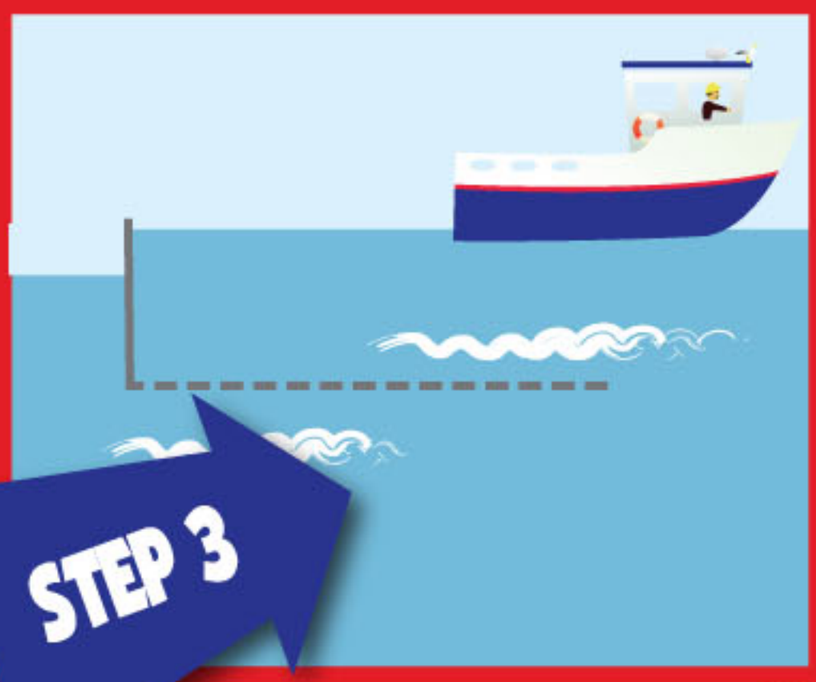
Associated Press

NOW

Teachers! This will assist you in teaching GLCEs 3-G4.0.3, 3-G5.0.2 and 3-E1.0.3

STEP 2

A valve is opened to allow water to flow into the lock (to raise the ship) or out of the lock (to lower the ship).



STEP 3

The gate in front of the ship is opened and the ship sails on.