

A Brief History of the Davenport Levee Improvement Commission
Davenport, Iowa
(1952)

The ordinance creating the Davenport Levee Improvement Commission was originally adopted on May 17, 1911.

The first Commission was appointed in June 1911 by Mayor A.C. Mueller, who, by ordinance, was the Chairman of the Commission. The first members of the Commission were: W.D. Petersen, merchant and philanthropist, W.H. Kimball, consulting engineer, R.J. Clausen, architect, and A.M. Compton, City Engineer.

Later, members of the Commission have all been responsible businessmen who serve without pay. They have been appointed on a staggered basis which has resulted in a smooth working organization which has always had members experienced in the work of the Commission in its roster.

At one of the early meetings of the Commission, the following statement, made by Mr. W.H. Kimball, typifies the feeling of responsibility and the vision which existed in the Commission's membership from the very beginning and which has guided all of the actions of the members ever since.

"The first Levee Improvement Commission has a great responsibility. We are, so to speak, pioneers in this new civic undertaking, and the path which we will blaze must be such that all future Commissions can carry the work of developing Davenport's riverfront to a successful conclusion. I suggest that we develop a comprehensive plan for our ultimate riverfront improvements so that this work can be carried on by this and all future Commissions in an efficient and economical way with the ultimate goal of an economically useful and a beautiful riverfront."

An interesting commentary on the work of the Commission is found in the fact that Major General Lansing H. Beach, Chief of Engineers, U.S. Engineer Corps. On his first trip to this area in the late fall of 1923, was particularly impressed by the seawall construction and other riverfront development work which had been done at Davenport. He was astonished to find that this work was being done without Government aid and asked the Secretary of the Levee Improvement Commission to send him a report on how this project was being done. He stated that it was refreshing to find one city that was willing to embark on a riverfront development program entirely on its own, and was also very much interested in knowing that a method had been devised to carry on this project without local tax assessment.

The jurisdiction of the original Commission included that part of the riverfront from approximately Federal Street to Howell Street, a distance of 2.12 miles. In 1936, the jurisdiction was extended from East to West city limits, or a distance of approximately 6.17 miles.

Davenport is unique among cities on the Mississippi River in that it has control of practically its entire waterfront which had its inception at the time that Antoine LeClaire originally laid out the

City of Davenport. At this time, Mr. LeClaire dedicated the entire riverfront to the City of Davenport.

The area between the normal river shore and the north line of the jurisdiction of the Commission included certain land suitable for industrial and railroad yard development. The income obtained as rents from these areas formed means which made possible the financing of the cost of riverfront improvement. This rentable area, small at first, has been greatly increased due to the reclaiming of land as will be described later.

Harbor lines, as created by the Congress of the United States, were designated along the riverfront at Davenport by the Rock Island district office of the U.S. Engineer Corps. The first retaining walls were constructed along the established harbor lines from Renwick Pier (that is approximately Federal Street) downstream to the Government Bridge. The area between the seawall and the river bank was filled, thus creating a highly desirable industrial area with both river frontage and railroad facilities.

This initial construction program was followed by succeeding ones so that by the year 1930 a rubble stone seawall had been completed from the east end of the Commission's jurisdiction to Perry Street and from Main Street to Western Avenue, or a total length of 4,400 feet. All the intervening area from the seawall landward was filled, and industrial sites and a riverfront park west of Main Street were created.

The Levee Improvement Commission realized many years ago that off-street parking would be an absolute necessity for the City of Davenport. Therefore, the area from Perry Street to Main Street was developed as a paved "sloping levee." This area will take care of the parking of approximately 850 cars. The "sloping levee" also forms a landing place for large excursion boats and passenger boats of various types which are used during the summertime.

During this time, continual filling work was in progress along the riverfront. Most of it by the land-fill method of garbage and refuse disposal. Thus, the City of Davenport has been able for many years to avail itself of a low cost method of disposal and at the same time to work toward the reclaiming of great areas of future valuable riverfront property.

After the riverfront park west of Main Street, known as LeClaire Park, had been developed and turned over to the Park Board for jurisdiction, a vast area west of this park was shaping itself for civic use. Various civic groups suggested to the Commission that they give consideration toward the building of a Municipal Stadium in the area from the west line of LeClaire Park to Gaines Street. This stadium was built and financed in 1931 by the Commission and is presently being used for professional, high school, and industrial league baseball games, boxing and wrestling exhibitions, St. Ambrose College and High School football games, and various other civic gatherings. The concrete and steel stands have a seating capacity of about 8,000 and the field is equipped with one of the best floodlighting systems in the Middle West. The total cost of the Municipal Stadium, not including the land, was approximately \$230,000.

Following the completion of the stadium, the stone seawall was extended in a sweeping curve from the west end of LeClaire Park to Gaines Street, and connecting paved highways from Gaines Street through LeClaire Park were constructed to facilitate the handling of crowds attending stadium events. An automobile parking area just west of the stadium was built, which has space for 1,000 cars.

In the early summer of 1950, a contract was entered into by the Levee Improvement Commission for construction of the continuation of the seawall from Gaines Street to the Crescent Bridge. This seawall extension was built of reinforced concrete and was approximately 4,300 feet long, and the cost was in the neighborhood of \$175,000. Here, as in other projects completed by the Levee Improvement Commission, the entire cost was financed and is going to be paid for by the Commission. The construction of this wall is the first step in the final development of the riverfront area from Gaines Street to the Crescent Bridge. This area has approximately 92.5 acres and when completed will have a riverfront park and playground of 28 acres, industrial area of 57 acres, and also the automobile parking area of 7.5 acres for 1,000 cars adjacent to the Municipal Stadium.

This comprehensive program of riverfront development is unique because of the fact that the Levee Improvement Commission has financed all of the improvements it has undertaken, including the cost of the Municipal Stadium, out of the rental income from property under its jurisdiction. The Commission has never received income derived from taxes to carry on any of its work.

The total money expended by the Commission from its inception in 1911 to March 31, 1950 is in the neighborhood of \$1,369,790. A large part of this expenditure was financed through bond issues, interest and principal of which have been paid by the Commission. The following tabulation of total bonds issued, amount paid to January 1, 1951, and balance outstanding, gives ample testimony of the scope of the Commission's activities:

Total bonds issued \$508,000

Bonds paid as of 1-1-51 353,000

Amount of bonds outstanding 155,000

The outstanding bonds represent an issue of \$125,000 for the current construction of the seawall from Gaines Street to the Crescent Bridge, and \$30,000 for the Municipal Stadium.

The following figures give a brief summary of interesting facts in connection with the development of the Davenport riverfront under the supervision of the Levee Improvement Commission:

Total length of seawall constructed 9,400 feet

Total area of land under the
Jurisdiction of the Levee Commission 211.44 acres

Area which has been reclaimed, or will
be reclaimed in completion of program 125 acres

Land use of total area:

Riverfront Parks 69.88 acres

Industrial Areas 94.01 acres
Railroad Use 22.48 acres
Municipal Stadium 7.12 acres
Off-street Parking 17.95 acres
Total 211.44 acres

The Davenport Levee Improvement Commission has been fortunate during its existence to have had a succession of members, all serving without pay, who have given unselfishly of their time in the carrying out of their duties. There are two regular meetings held each month, as well as many special meetings during the course of a year to take care of items which cannot wait for the regular meetings. It is interesting to note that the Commission has practically 100% attendance at all of their meetings, which shows the interest of the individual members in the work of the Commission. The present members of the Commission are as follows: Mayor A.R. Kroppach, Chairman; W.A. Priester, Secretary; James Lytle, Thomas O. Nobis, A.F. Uchtorff, and Robert B. Jones, Executive Secretary.

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The City of Davenport has benefited extensively from its location on the Mississippi River. At the original platting in 1839, Antoine LeClaire donated a 200' wide by 2,643' long tract of land from Harrison to Warren Streets. Later, the Levee Improvement Commission was first created, primarily under the sponsorship of Mayor Alfred Mueller, with five members. The Commission was established under authority of an act adopted by the 34th General Assembly of the State of Iowa which authorized such commissions in cities having special charters. In 1937, the State relinquished its title to all land between the high-water mark and the center of the river inside the corporate limits of Davenport. These actions gave the City complete control over its waterfront and also ownership on any land provided by filling.

The Commission's original mission was to develop public improvements along the riverfront and to pursue economic development. It accomplished this work by extending storm sewers riverward, constructing seawalls along the harbor line, placing constructed fill behind these improvements, and then either improving public parks or leasing properties to industries. The riverfront has also evolved through time by accommodating different modes of transportation and integrating these into its primary missions. Photographs and maps show improvements made in the past for packet boats, rail yards, highway transportation, local roads, and off-street parking. The Commission's objectives were aided by the Corps of Engineers which constructed lock and dam #15 in 1932 and the associated seawall and storm system which created a hard edge and relatively stable water pool above the dam. Both recreation and industry benefited by this civil work.

The riverfront has been shaped by nature, its forces, and different catastrophes. The 1901 fire in East Davenport removed several saw mills and associated industries. The International Multi-Foods explosion in 1976 changed an area just above the Government Bridge. Floods, drought, ice jams, siltation, wind storms, and other perils (which are too numerous to mention in this summary) have and continue to impact the riverfront.

Economic forces have also shaped the riverfront. Commercial navigation has evolved from canoes and ferries, to log rafts, to fifteen barge tows. Bridges have spanned the river since 1856, and their impacts have been felt near the land falls. We have gone from a craft and homemade economy, past the industrial revolution, into the information age. Finally, the seat of commerce has changed from the core of the City to its edges, and the core has changed to be largely occupied by government, institutional, and gaming interests.

Finally, the City has used the riverfront for sanitary sewer extensions and treatment facilities, dumps, public works and storage areas, parking lots, and varied recreational uses. At times, questions have arisen about the Levee Improvement Commission's autonomy, its control, the best use(s), how to pay for improvements and maintenance, and who has authority to decide what should happen on the riverfront. Political, jurisdictional, and managerial conflicts have been dealt with, and adjustments have been made as changes occur.