

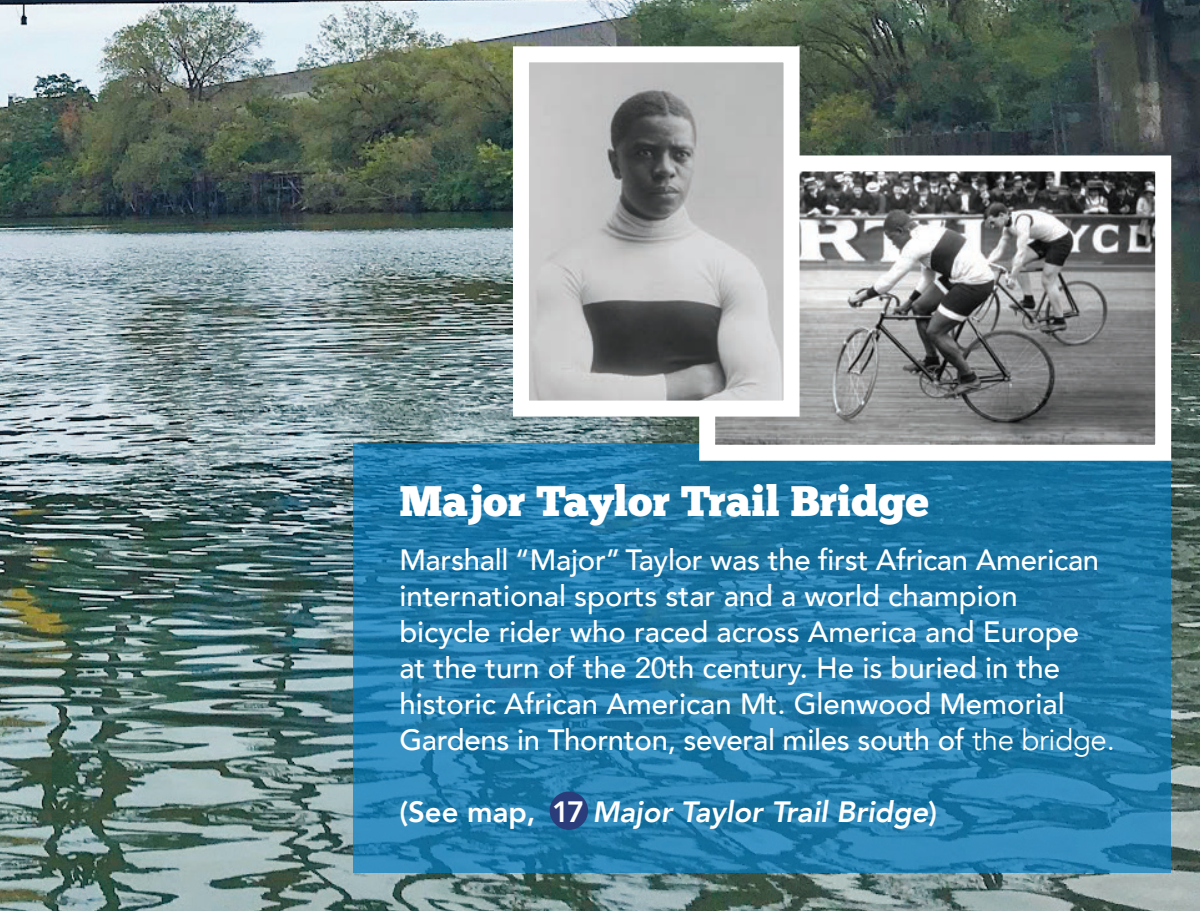


African American Heritage Water Trail: from Beaubien Woods to Robbins



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conserving nature for life





Major Taylor Trail Bridge

Marshall "Major" Taylor was the first African American international sports star and a world champion bicycle rider who raced across America and Europe at the turn of the 20th century. He is buried in the historic African American Mt. Glenwood Memorial Gardens in Thornton, several miles south of the bridge.

(See map, [17 Major Taylor Trail Bridge](#))



A historic photograph of the Ton Farmhouse (left) taken by Henry Ralph Koopman (1860–1943), a friend of the Ton family and Roseland's first photographer. From the Ton family, courtesy of Paul Petraitis.

A ferry (above) from 1900. The Dolton ferry may have looked something like this.

Padding the Trail

Some of the sites highlighted in this brochure can be seen from the Calumet River; others are further inland. But the river traces nearly two centuries worth of stories about African Americans who fought for freedom and equality. To experience this history from the perspective of the river, visit paddleillinoiswatertrails.org for information about how and where to paddle the trail.

The African American Heritage Water Trail

Few people realize that Lake Michigan is connected to the Mississippi River by a series of waterways, including The Little Calumet River. The river flows through several south-side Chicago neighborhoods and 180 years of African American history—sites and figures whose impact remains with us today.

The Heritage Water Trail honors this history by memorializing the remarkable stories of African Americans who settled along the river: freedom seekers who traveled the Underground Railroad, trailblazers who defied discrimination, learned to fly, and became Tuskegee Airmen, and pioneers in the struggle for civil rights and environmental justice. These stories of courage and fortitude have shaped our nation.

Underground Railroad

Before the Civil War, thousands of people fleeing slavery passed through Chicago or its south suburbs where they found a supportive community willing to hide, feed and help them on their way.

- 10 TON FARM:** The farm of Dutch immigrants Jon and Antje Ton (which they purchased in 1853) was a stop on the Underground Railroad for freedom seekers on their journey to Canada. Although the farmhouse no longer exists, the site was designated a part of the National Park Service's "Network to Freedom" in 2019.
- 13 DOLTON FERRY AND BRIDGE:** Hundreds of freedom seekers crossed the river on their way to Chicago or Detroit. Abolitionists George Dolton and his sons built the ferry in 1836, followed a few years later by the bridge.

Civil Rights

Many important pioneers in the struggle for civil rights left marks here and across the nation.

- 4 **BISHOP LOUIS HENRY FORD:** With a lifetime of ministry in the Chicago area and strong ties to the local community, Bishop Ford was a strong advocate for jobs, housing, and education. In 1955, he preached at the funeral of Emmett Till. He was the fourth leader of the Church of God in Christ, the world's largest African American Pentecostal denomination with over 8.5 million members. (See map, *Bishop Ford Freeway*)
- 5 **DR. LARRY HAWKINS:** A tireless advocate who worked for years in Altgeld Gardens, Larry Hawkins was a teacher, mentor, state champion basketball coach, and the director of a University of Chicago outreach program that guided low income minority students to higher education. Carol Mosely Braun, the first African American woman to become a United States senator, is a graduate of his program. (See map, *Larry Hawkins School*)
- 11 **"CHICAGO'S FINEST MARINA":** The oldest black-owned marina in the Chicago region was built in the 1950s for African American boaters who experienced discrimination at other marinas. The current owner continues to honor the unique history of the property which sits on part of the former Ton Farm Underground Railroad site.
- 17 **MAJOR TAYLOR TRAIL BRIDGE:** Marshall "Major" Taylor was the first African American international sports star and a world champion bicycle rider who raced across America and Europe at the turn of the 20th century. He is buried in the historic African American Mt. Glenwood Memorial Gardens in Thornton, several miles south of the bridge.

The Birth of Environmental Justice

Environmental justice is a civil rights movement that arose to demand reforms to protect people of color who were disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards where they live and work. Altgeld Gardens is where it all began, under the leadership of local resident Hazel M. Johnson.

- 7 **ALTGELD GARDENS HOMES:** This public housing development was one of the first in the U.S. It was built in 1943–44 by the Department of Housing and Urban Development for African American veterans returning from World War II, many of whom worked in the steel mills. The area was surrounded by industry, landfills and a sewage treatment plant, and at one time had the highest concentration of hazardous waste sites in the country.
- 6 **HAZEL M. JOHNSON:** In the 1960s and 70s, Johnson watched her family members and neighbors struggle with serious environmental related health issues and began documenting hundreds of incidents of cancer and respiratory disease. Labelling the area a "toxic donut," she set about holding the perpetrators responsible and demanding enforcement of pollution laws. In the 1980s, future President Barack Obama worked with her as a community organizer. Johnson received a presidential award for her work in 1992, and in 1994, President Clinton signed Executive Order 12898 "Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations." (See map, *Hazel Johnson EJ Way*)

PEOPLE FOR COMMUNITY RECOVERY (PCR): Johnson founded this non-profit in 1979. One of PCR's first acts—lobbying the City of Chicago to test visibly contaminated well water—resulted in the construction of a new water line and partial sewer. Today PCR is run by Johnson's daughter, Cheryl Johnson, and the work for environmental and economic justice continues.



Bishop Louis Henry Ford (top right) with civil rights activist Rev. Jesse Jackson; Dr. Larry Hawkins (right) Hazel M. Johnson (top left, in yellow) with President Clinton; A We Keep You Rollin' (Bike & Wellness Group) tour in Golden Gate (left)

The Neighborhoods 7 8 9

While Chicago did not always live up to its famous motto, *Urbs in Horto* (City in a Garden), the neighborhoods along the Little Calumet River did.

Altgeld Gardens was originally designed as a model “Garden City”—a self-contained community of residences and green space. In the segregated landscape of Chicago, it attracted the settlement of other black families into surrounding neighborhoods like Golden Gate, Riverside Village, Pangea Lakes and Concordia Place. Some of the land along the river is still being farmed by community members who grow lettuce, tomatoes and other crops.

This history with the land has been so important to the neighborhoods’ identity that several community institutions have been named after the African American agricultural scientist George Washington Carver, who is quite revered here. The sites include Carver Elementary School, Carver Military Academy, and Carver Park.

Today communities like Golden Gate maintain their small town feel. The local non-profit We Keep You Rollin’ (Bike & Wellness Group), run by Golden Gate’s Deloris Lucas, provides bicycles for use on the quiet, tree-lined streets and offers neighborhood tours. Neighbors help each other and create services for the community. For example, long term Altgeld residents recall home operated candy stores, set up after the large Sims Candy near the Little Calumet River closed. This strong community culture exists to this day.



26 The Challenger Aero Club (left) at Robbins Airport, 1933. In 1935, Robinson (center) went to Africa to help create an air force for Ethiopia to fight against occupation by fascist Italy. Willa Brown (right) was the first African American woman to earn a pilot's license in the United States and the first African American officer in the U.S. Civil Air Patrol. She trained pilots for the United States Air Force. The first Village of Robbins Mayor and trustees (below).

The Village of Robbins **21**



A bit further down the river is the Village of Robbins, one of the very few towns in the United States that was governed at its incorporation (in 1917) by African Americans. During the Great Migration, Robbins offered a welcoming suburban setting to some of the thousands of African Americans moving to the Chicago area. There they were able to start businesses and build homes in ways that were impossible elsewhere. The town offered great latitude in how people used their land. Flexible building codes, for example, allowed for individualized houses more typical of rural settings with large lots and setbacks that residents used for large kitchen gardens and small home businesses to supplement their income. Thomas J. Keller, Robbins' first mayor, noted, "Our people in Robbins are mostly people who get tired of the white fights and the crowded city. They come out here to raise chickens, make gardens, and be a little more free."

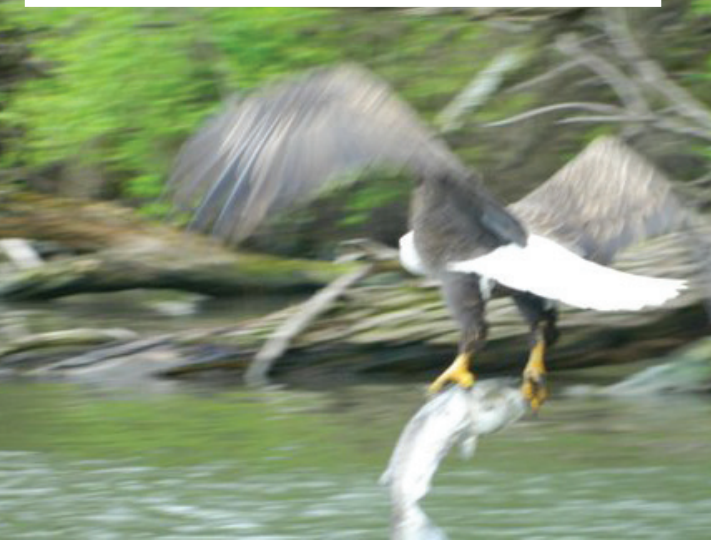
Robbins Airport and the Tuskegee Airmen **26**

The Robbins Airport was only open from 1931–33, but it played an important role in U.S. aviation history as the first airport built, owned and operated by and for African Americans.

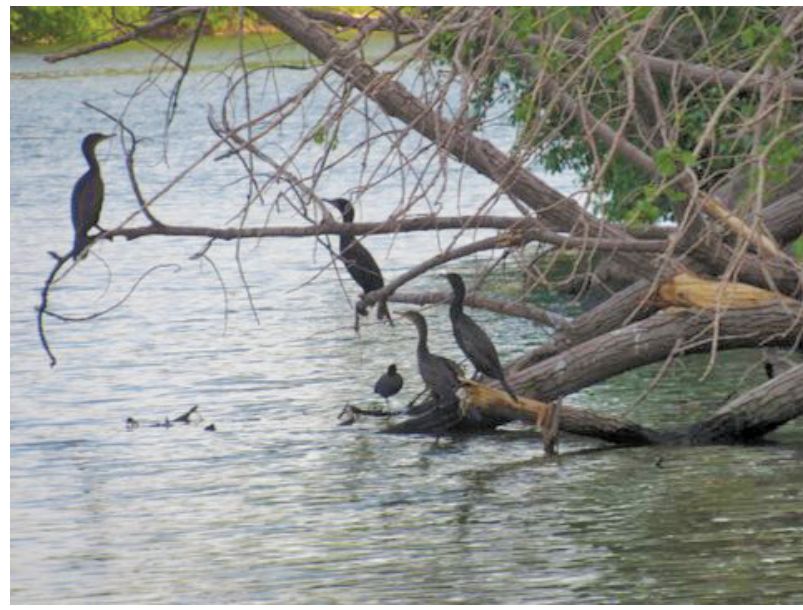
Cornelius Coffey and John Robinson were auto mechanics who moved from Detroit in the 1920s to attend Chicago's Curtiss-Wright Aeronautical University; but the all-white school denied them entry. Unwilling to give up, Robinson got a job as a janitor at the school, listened in on classes, read discarded notes, and, along with Coffey, constructed a working airplane which was then tested by one of the University instructors. After this accomplishment, a night class was established to teach the two men to fly.

Airports, however, were still closed to them, so the Village of Robbins gave them approval to create an airport and flight school. Their students included some of the first female aviators. The airport was destroyed in a storm in 1933, but the flight school that began there trained many African American pilots, some of whom became Tuskegee Airmen, helping to secure Allied victory in World War II. Ten Tuskegee Airmen came from the Village of Robbins.

Wildlife and Views from the Trail



Bald Eagle



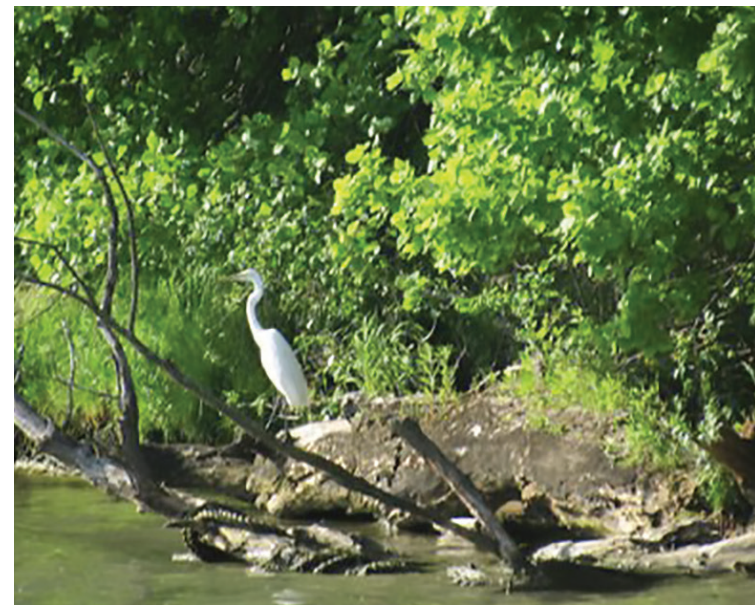
Cormorants



Natural River Bank



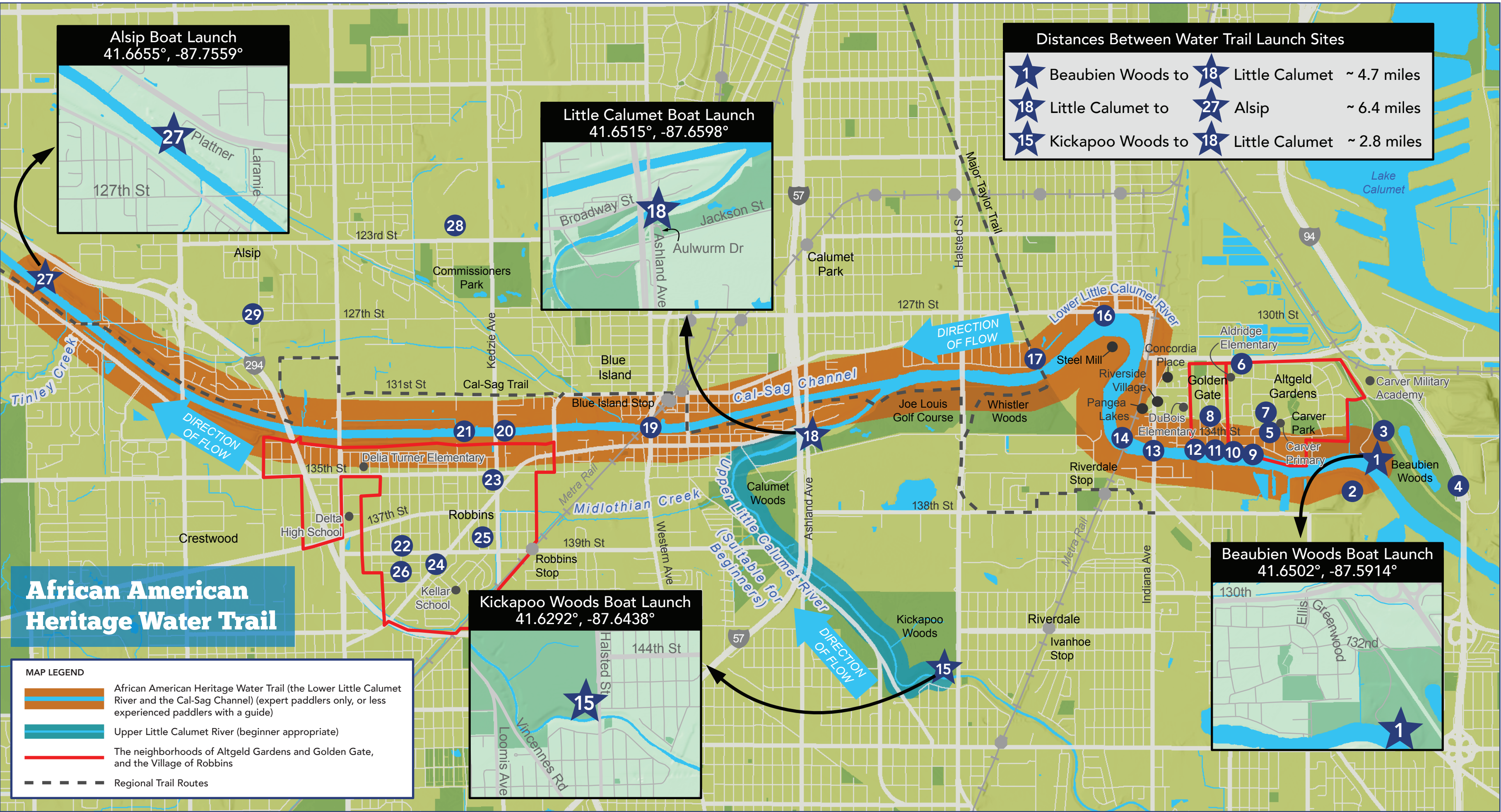
River divides into Little Calumet and Cal Sag Channel



Egret



Coyote



Map key

- ★ 1 Beaubien Woods Boat Ramp
- 2 Land and Lakes Landfill
- 3 Michigan Central and Michigan Southern Railroads
- 4 Bishop Ford Freeway
- 5 Larry Hawkins School
- 6 Hazel Johnson EJ Way
- 7 Altgeld Gardens Homes
- 8 Golden Gate
- 9 Row Cropping and Farming
- 10 Site of Ton Farm
- 11 Chicago's Finest Marina
- 12 Changing Landscapes
- 13 Dolton Ferry and Bridge
- 14 Historic Illinois Central Railroad
- 15 Kickapoo Woods Boat Launch
- 16 SEPA 2 Water Quality Structure
- 17 Major Taylor Trail Bridge
- 18 Little Calumet Boat Launch Preserve
- 19 Western Avenue Bridge/Dixie Highway and the Green Book
- 20 Planned Boat Launch at Kedzie Avenue Bridge
- 21 Village of Robbins
- 22 Robbins Historical Society Museum
- 23 Fuller House
- 24 Women Owned Groceries and the Growth of the Business District
- 25 Home of Richard Flowers
- 26 Site of Robbins Airport
- 27 Alsip Boat Launch
- 28 Lincoln Cemetery
- 29 Burr Oak Cemetery

Visit paddleillinoiswatertrails.org for detailed information about all of the sites on the map and for information about how and where to paddle the trail.

Select Heritage Sites Visible from the Trail



10 Ton Farm Site



11 Chicago's Finest Marina



13 14 Indiana St. bridge/Site of Dolton ferry and bridge (foreground), Historic IC (background)



16 SEPA 2 water quality station



17 Major Taylor Bridge



18 Little Calumet River Boat Launch Preserve



The African American Heritage Water Trail

is a part of the Calumet Heritage Area. To learn more about the nationally significant region, including places to see and things to do, visit www.calumetheritagearea.org.

This brochure was created by Openlands with support from Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust. Partners include:

The Little Calumet River
Underground Railroad Project
Robbins Historical Society
The Village of Robbins
We Keep You Rollin' (Bike & Wellness Group)
Golden Gate Homeowners Association
People for Community Recovery
FRESH
The Forest Preserves of Cook County
The Field Museum
The Metropolitan Planning Council

paddleillinoiswatertrails.org

DISCOVER THE UNEXPECTED.

Photo credits: Altgeld Gardens on cover by Eric Allix Rogers; Ton Farm by Henry Ralph Koopman, from the Ton family courtesy of Paul Petraitis; Robbins Airport and John Robbins with plane from the Smithsonian Institution; Major Taylor Trail Bridge courtesy of Linda Bailey; Willa Brown, U.S. National Archives; Robbins First Village Officials courtesy of Robbins Historical Society; Hazel M. Johnson with Bill Clinton courtesy People for Community Recovery.