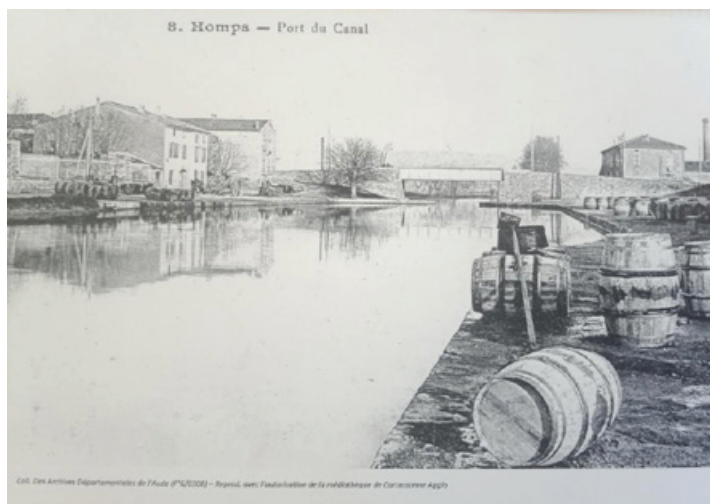


THE CANAL DU MIDI





TIMELINE

1662, 15 November: Riquet writes to King Louis XIV's powerful minister Colbert to propose his project: The Royal Languedoc Canal.

1662: Work begins on marking out the route.

1666, October: King Louis XIV signs the edict creating the Royal Languedoc Canal.

1680, 1 October: Pierre-Paul de Riquet dies.

1681: 15 May, the canal is inaugurated.

1789: Revolutionaries give the canal a more democratic name: the Canal du Midi.

1996, 7 December: The Canal du Midi is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

This waterway, designed by genius entrepreneur Pierre-Paul de Riquet, was dug between 1666 and 1681. It is France's second canal, following the Briare Canal (between the Loire and the Seine). built during the reign of Henry IV. The Canal du Midi is some six times longer than its predecessor and features remarkable heritage works.

The canal stretches 240 kilometres (150 miles) between the Étang de Thau near Sète and Toulouse.

In Toulouse, it joins the Canal de Garonne which runs 193 kilometres (120 miles) to the Garonne river, which then runs out into the Atlantic Ocean. Together, these two canals, plus their branches and ramifications, are known as the Canal des Deux Mers (Canal of the Two Seas) because they allow boats to travel between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

KEY FIGURES

14 years to build (1666 – 1680)

12,000 male and female workers helped build it

240 kilometres long (150 miles)

2 metres deep (about 6 feet and 6 inches)

20-24 metres wide at the surface (approximately 65-79 feet)

11 metres wide at the canal bed (36 feet)

328 architectural wonders (including 63 locks, 130 bridges, 55 aqueducts, 7 canal bridges and 6 dams)

45,000 plane, cypress and other types of tree are planted along the banks



The History of the Canal du Midi

Pierre Paul de Riquet was born in Béziers. He became the Tax-Farmer General of Languedoc, the man responsible for collecting the salt tax on behalf of the king. Supported by his friend, the Bishop of Toulouse, Charles-François d'Anglure de Bourlement (who was also, usefully, the President of the Estates of Languedoc,) 53-year old Pierre wrote to Louis XIV's powerful First Minister of State: Jean-Baptiste Colbert, to pitch his canal project. Building a Canal from coast to coast across the south of France wasn't a new idea. Charlemagne, Francis I and Henry IV had all been interested in one. In 1618, Bernard Arribat, supported by the Duke of Montmorency (then governor of Languedoc,) even proposed a similar project to the Consuls of Béziers, but they turned it down.

Riquet made Arribat's project feasible by solving the issue of how to supply the canal with water. He found inspiration in a study by Thomas de Scorbiac. This protestant from Castres was the first person to think of using water from the many rivers of the Montagne Noire to feed a canal connecting the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, (although his plan was located a little further north). Because this summit-level canal needed to connect two river valleys flowing in opposite directions (into the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea), it needed to go over the summit level, which Riquet situated at 189 metres altitude (620 feet) in Naurouze. Assisted by Pierre Campmas, a water flow expert from Revel, Riquet finalised a system that collected water from Black Mountain rivers and streams and carried it to Naurouze through a system of channels and reservoirs.



Colbert liked Riquet's canal project, because it would guarantee France's economic power, particularly in the face of competition from Spain. So he convinced Louis XIV to name a committee of experts to study its feasibility. The transport network between the two major annual fairs of Bordeaux and Beaucaire was also then in great disrepair, so Riquet's proposal arrived at the right time.

Riquet decided to pay for a trial channel to Naurouze, in the Montagne Noire, to prove his canal would have enough water.



Colbert was convinced. In October 1666, a royal edict ordered the construction of the canal. Work began in 1667 and was finally completed, after many trials and tribulations, in 1681.

Pierre Paul de Riquet died in 1680: he never saw his masterpiece in operation. Modifications have been made over the years, partly during its completion by Vauban, who added modernizations such as the Cesse Aqueduct, and the Cammazes Tunnel. A century later, a whole new La Nouvelle branch was even added. Comprising the Canal de la Robine and the Canal de Jonction, this extension allows boats to turn out of the Canal du Midi near Port La Robine, to travel to Narbonne and Port La Nouvelle.

The Canal du Midi Today

After the 19th century, the Canal du Midi had to compete with the railways. Oddly, in 1838, the Compagnie des Chemins de Fer du Midi (Southern Railway company) decided to build the Canal Latéral à la Garonne connecting Toulouse to the Atlantic, with a view to it being open to traffic in 1856. Because he wanted a single point of contact, Emperor Napoleon III entrusted the management of the Canal to Midi to the Pereire brothers' Southern Railway company in 1858 and for a 40-year period. Gradually, merchant shipping activity gave way to tourism.

While Riquet's dream of connecting the Atlantic to the Mediterranean finally became a reality, trains were soon faster and cheaper. And as a result, canal traffic was in a state of constant

The Canal du Midi Brings Renewed Prosperity to Languedoc

As of the early 1930s, horse-powered towing was replaced by motored barges. The English were the first to think of re-using the canal as a home for pleasure boats. It's now enjoyed by around 50,000 people on board the 450 boats available to rent each year.

Commercial traffic was rare on the canal by 1990. But now tourism is flourishing.

The Canal du Midi and its banks belong to the French government, and they are managed by Voies Navigables de France (VNF - Navigable Waterways of France). The Canal du Midi's historic importance is internationally recognized. On 7 December 1996 UNESCO decided to classify this canal as one of its 469 World Heritage Sites, in order to ensure its conservation.



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