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Canal false start left old bridge piers

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OCALA --- Motorists traveling the four-lane U.S. 301-27-441 between here and Belleview see an unusual "monument" in the divider strip. There are a couple of tall masonry bridge piers just standing there with nothing to do. Vines climb the structures and beneath the undergrowth threatens to hide this landmark from the depression days.

The piers, there were four of them built, are reminders of the false start in the mid-1934s when the long-talked-of Florida cross-state canal (at that time, it envisioned ocean-going ships) got under construction. Not far away there's also a yawning gap in the landscape where 13 million cubic yards of material had been excavated.

The gash in the earth and the piers that were built to carry a high level bridge, which in turn was to carry a trunk line highway across the canal at an elevation great enough to permit the clearance of the masts of the biggest freighter afloat, are all there was of the canal. Controversy doomed continued construction, the funds ran out and the project was shelved for a quarter of a century. It's now a barge canal and is moving along toward completion.

A cross-state canal has been dreamed of for centuries, starting with Spanish conquistador Ponce de Leon. The Spaniards wanted a protective route after the first galleon was sunk on the way from Mexico to St. Augustine. King Phillip II of Spain ordered Don Pedro Menendez de Aviles, Governor of Florida, to study a route in 1565. Gen. Andrew Jackson, first military governor of Florida, in 1821 urged a canal for military purposes.