Along the Towpath, September 2020

Accompanied by the Past

By Karen Gray

History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illumines reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life, and brings us tidings of antiquity. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE), Pro Publio Sestio

1865–1867: Restoring the Multi-City Eastern Terminus

In the years of the war, the canal company, the boatmen, and all whose business or income was totally or heavily dependent on the canal faced continual difficulties and losses due to war actions. In addition, there was severe disruption to the labor force as many went to war for one side or the other. Then, as the unionists gained power, suspicion and paranoia hardened toward anyone who at any time or in any way had shown rebel sympathies or alliances—or was suspected of such. In consequence boatmen, canal company employees, and some of those who administratively or politically had supported the canal were sometimes fired or forced from their position.

Those who shipped on the canal found the number of freight boats declining and the canal company found itself sometimes having inadequate boats and scows for maintenance and company-use. With the government requiring the canal to stay open as much as possible, even in the winter, the company was caught in a catch-22: unable to do the maintenance it should and forced to keep the canal open.

Perhaps the most dramatic change concerned the canal’s tidewater terminus. At the start of the war in 1861 canal boats were using a system of three canals to serve the capital area: the C&O, with its Georgetown terminus; the Washington City Canal, and the Alexandria Canal. The boats were going by canal directly to wharves in all three cities, as well as entering the river at the tidelock to be taken by tugs to their river wharves. However, with the outbreak of the war, Union forces took over the Potomac waterfront, closing the tidelock and Rock Creek Basin where silt and debris would gather and the structures would deteriorate. Additionally, the Alexandria Canal closed when the Potomac Aqueduct was turned into a road bridge serving the Union forces that held control of a large chunk of Virginia across the river from Washington and Georgetown.

Suddenly the canal boats were landlocked with only the wharves along the canal in Georgetown and their connection to its waterfront (35 feet lower and a long city block away), to serve the canal’s cargoes arriving at the terminus. For the people in Washington and Alexandria who were formerly served by their city’s wharves, supplies coming down the canal now had to be carried in freight wagons to their localities at a significant increase in cost—for coal an additional $1 a ton. At the same time commercial shipping on the Potomac dropped dramatically and sometimes ceased entirely. Although the District’s military needs grew, the loss of transshipment business to coastal and tidewater commercial traffic was significant.

The Georgetown trestles allowed coal to be transported from the canal to the waterfront, but then it had to be lowered into holds of the ships or dumped down—which broke the coal up badly. Image courtesy of the C&O Canal National Historical Park, National Park Service
1865: The War’s Over—What Can Go Wrong?

With Lee’s surrender on April 9th, the war for Virginia and Maryland was essentially at an end. At a later date, a canal official commented that typically 18 days are lost every boating season to stoppages of navigation other than the major floods, boatmen or miner strikes, or exceptional anomalies. However, as the C&O Canal’s first post-war boating season developed, it turned out to be a particularly bad one for interruptions to navigation from the most common causes.

One of the major “ordinary” disruptions to canal traffic was the washing out of a section of canal berm due to the river running somewhat high or simply a weakness or leak in a berm. In 1865 the company experienced 11 such breaks between March (when a 40 ft. long and 10 ft. deep section of towpath below Cumberland gave way) and August (when a similar break, 30 ft. long and also 10 ft. deep) occurred on the same level. Unfortunately, all the breaks that year were bad, taking from five to 16 days to repair.

Another “ordinary” cause of boats being held up was broken gates. In 1865 this happened on five different occasions, two of them due to boats hitting the gates. Indeed, boats breaking gates was a recurring source of local stoppages and replacing or repairing a gate, whatever the cause, normally took one to two days, depending on the extent to which the affected canal section had to be drained and rewatered.

Between the stoppages for berm breaks and broken gates, some 50 to 60 days of navigation appear to have experienced significant interruptions, preventing boats from traveling efficiently up and down the canal.

With the end of the war in the region, throughout the three cities, people began to anticipate the return of the canal boats to their canal and river wharves. But that required reopening the branch canals as well as the river outlet at the Rock Creek Basin and tidelock. However, the Rock Creek Basin access to both the river and the branch to Washington’s canal was hampered by the low bridges in Georgetown over the canal. Prior to the war it had been found that the large freight boats with high cabins that were built in Cumberland could not pass under them without lowering the water level when they were light and riding high in the water. With increasing use in the 1850s of the tidelock and Washington City Canal (WCC) branch, that had become a major terminus issue.

As for the Alexandria Canal, the military continued to control the Potomac aqueduct bridge in 1865, keeping its future on hold. Washington, for its part, began to look at options for the WCC, which had largely become a silted-in putrid sewer—indicative of the city’s need for a sewer along much of the canal’s route. Of course, Washington also recognized that C&O canal boats’ access to its canal and river wharves was tied to the C&O’s Georgetown Rock Creek terminus issues.

However, the transshipment of coal, especially at the District terminus, to ships coming up the Potomac was again becoming important as indicated in a September 30 notice in Washington’s Evening Star:

There continues to be a demand at the docks for vessels fitted for the transportation of coal to distant ports. The shipments from Ray’s Docks amounted to 4,550 tons; from the Cumberland Co.’s wharf 1,617 tons; Borden Co’s. wharf 62 tons; Hampshire and Baltimore Co.’s wharf 1,869 tons.

1866: Washington and Alexandria Against Georgetown

On May 3, 1866, the Alexandria city council leased its canal to three businessmen for 99 years at $1,000 a year. Restoration of the canal began even before the Potomac aqueduct was available—and in Georgetown the opinion quickly hardened against the reopening of the Alexandria Canal and its Potomac Aqueduct converted back from road to canal use. At issue is the road connection between Virginia and Georgetown that had historically been limited to a ferry or to the Chain Bridge three miles up the river, and the Long Bridge between Arlington and Washington. Without a Georgetown Potomac bridge, the town was isolated from commerce with nearby Virginia. Significantly, many in Virginia also supported the Potomac Aqueduct remaining a vehicle and pedestrian bridge to Georgetown.
However, Georgetown was opposed not just to the restoration of the Alexandria Canal, but also to the Rock Creek Basin and tidelock, as it had greatly benefited from the C&O Canal boats being limited to its canal wharves during the war. The town had not forgotten that, by 1861, hundreds of canal boats had bypassed it, carrying their cargo to Alexandria and its superior port, or continuing to the Rock Creek Basin outlet or the short connecting branch canal to the Washington City Canal.

Meanwhile the possibility of a canal between the Chesapeake Bay’s Severn River and the Eastern Branch/Anacostia, began to look like it might actually happen with the organization of the Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River Tidewater Canal Company. During the year three possible routes were surveyed by an engineer and, in November, a report detailed the preferred route. However, the company and its dream subsequently disappeared.

The year also was not good in terms of interruptions to navigation. Although there were only seven breaks in canal berms and only two broken gates, an estimated 35 days were lost due to shutdowns for repairs. Additionally, a break in Dam 1—a simple rubble dam—added to the growing tension between the canal company and the millers in Georgetown who relied on adequate water in the canal not only to run their waterpower machinery but also to bring the canal boats carrying grain and corn. If the Alexandria canal were reopened and boats were passing again through the four locks at the eastern end of town and into the Rock Creek Basin, large amounts of canal water would be used for those purposes and the frequency with which the Georgetown mills experienced disruptions due to inadequate water would increase.

Quite aside from the matter of the branch canal to the WCC, Washington was eager to see the Rock Creek outlet basin, dam, and lock restored so canal boats could enter the river and be taken to the wharves between the tidelock and Easby Point. A New York line of steamers was using its G St. wharf there and, during the war, the government had found its channel and waterfront to be significantly more convenient than Georgetown’s. Indeed, the G St. Wharf had become “a depot for all kinds of supplies” according to a lengthy May 5, *Daily National Intelligencer* article.

Some Georgetown leaders mounted an attack on the raising of the bridges, knowing how they served to discourage the river wharf and WCC traffic. They also attacked the Potomac Aqueduct, championing Georgetown’s need for a road and pedestrian bridge and noting that the aqueduct prevented larger sailing vessels from passing to the waterfront above it where some of the town’s businessmen desired to improve the wharves. Some even called for the aqueduct to be replaced with a bridge that would have a section that could be raised like that in the Long Bridge to allow the passage of the taller sailing vessels farther up the tidal Potomac.
Georgetown lost its battle over the canal bridges, the replacement of which began in 1866 and was finished in early 1867. The battle over the aqueduct, however, produced multiple incidents, newspaper editorials, and letters to the editor during the year. The town’s leaders pressured Congress and the military to retain the aqueduct as a road bridge and there was even a suggestion that the Alexandria Canal be extended up to the head of Little Falls where a connection with Inlet No. 1 could be created for C&O Canal access.

In May of 1866, with the Potomac Aqueduct still in government hands and to the consternation of the people in Georgetown, work began on restoring the Alexandria canal to usability, including its short aqueduct at the Four Mile Run. As the summer progressed rumors and activism by Georgetown citizens resulted in confusing incidents in which the lessees, military, and the people of Georgetown reflected competing understanding of the aqueduct’s status. On one occasion in July, a warrant was issued for the arrest of the lessees’ contractor who was driving piles under the aqueduct (still open to road and pedestrian traffic). The piles were, in fact, not provided for in the canal’s charter, and ultimately were removed.

Bowing to heavy pressure from Alexandria, on September 26, 1866, the military turned the aqueduct over to the lessees of the Alexandria Canal and on October 1, the Potomac Aqueduct bridge was closed to vehicular and pedestrian passage and work on restoring the trunk of the aqueduct begun. In an Oct. 1 article on “Georgetown Items” in the Washington Evening Union, the complaint appears that Georgetown was in danger of becoming “a mere station, instead of the main terminus of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal.” By mid-November enough water had been let into the aqueduct to reveal that “little streams are pouring out from the bottom and sides of the trunk in many places, and if they increase in size as rapidly as they have in number, the aqueduct will be of but little use to the canal company.”

During the year, the contentious issue of the Alexandria Canal was sometimes made more confusing and divisive by rumors that the lessees intended to allow a railroad to be built on its berm and on the aqueduct piers and abutments—speculation usually centering on the B&O or the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. Late in the year, that possibility led to a bill promoting the railroad idea being submitted to the Virginia legislature.

On December 22, Alexandria’s City Council unanimously approved a resolution stating (among other things) that it was “not adverse to a sale of the privilege of erecting a railroad over the aqueduct and on the berm bank of the Canal” but only “if a proposition is made for its purchase, and the contracting parties come to such terms as will secure the compensation and a permanent structure for Canal purposes over said aqueduct.” In other words, they would agree to having both a canal and railroad, and getting paid for the canal properties used! Alexandria’s Common Council took the position that the lessees “shall first compensate the city of Alexandria for the use of said berm bank and aqueduct piers” if they were to be used for a railroad.

On January 12, a Gazette article regarding the canal stated: “We want every possible safeguard thrown around this [the canal], our last artery of trade. – Losing the Canal, we lose all.” Ultimately the railroad option died, and lessees decisively rejected it themselves.

1867: Georgetown Loses Its Monopoly

On January 8, 1867, the Alexandria Gazette, anticipating the canal’s reopening at the beginning of the boating season, printed a lengthy article that included the following observations:

The farmers all along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, are looking to the Alexandria Canal as affording them the only cheap outlet to the eastern markets for their grain. If they send their wheat by rail, to Baltimore, they have to pay about thirty-eight cents per bushel for transportation. They can send the same wheat to the same market, by the Canal, for about ten or fifteen cents per bushel.
Hence, the Canal will bring an immense amount of grain to this city for shipment to the eastern markets.

With the grain, it will also bring horses, cows, pork and a part of almost every article of produce of the country through which the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal passes; and in return carry back fish, oysters, stoves, tin ware, hardware and merchandize generally.

Even the tow-boy will not leave without spending his dollar or two, in this city; and hardly one member of the business community of Alexandria will fail to be benefited directly or indirectly, by a communication of two hundred miles with a wealthy and populous country.

The coal trade alone, is worth, to Alexandria, about forty thousand dollars a month, and one merchant on King street, sold annually, when the Canal was open, ten thousand dollars’ worth of dry goods to the town of Hancock.

In mid-January it was reported that two of the Maryland coal companies that had been operating in Georgetown, had taken a five year lease for a coal wharf on certain property in Alexandria south of and adjoining that city’s Pioneer Mills. With a superior port to Georgetown’s in terms of its depth and ease of access, it was virtually inevitable that Alexandria would begin to attract to their waterfront at least some of the companies that had been forced to use Georgetown’s canal wharves during the war.

On March 28 water was admitted from the C&O Canal to the Alexandria Canal and an American Coal Company boat left Cumberland for Alexandria. On the 29th it was reported that invoices for several more cargoes had been received (telegraphs were used for such notifications at the time).

On April 2 the Gazette triumphantly declared:

“Navigation on the Alexandria Canal, after a total suspension for six years, has again been resumed, and with—as everyone interested in Alexandria’s future prosperity will be pleased to learn—every prospect of an uninterrupted continuance during the rest of the season.

The article also mentioned that the level of the water on the Georgetown level of the C&O had been increased. That resulted in the Alexandria canal attaining a depth four inches greater than previously, putting greater pressure on its berms than the old canal had sustained, and necessitating the raising of the sides of the canal six inches—a project rapidly and energetically worked on. In addition, the sides of the basin above the locks to the river, were sodded to prevent washing.

All was not well with the Alexandria Canal, however, as within a few days a significant break occurred near the Four Mile Run Aqueduct and the Potomac Aqueduct was determined to be leaking so badly that it created a current at its connection with the C&O sufficiently rapid that boats continuing down into Georgetown had trouble getting past. Ultimately in June the Potomac Aqueduct would be closed to navigation and not opened again until the wooden trunk had been rebuilt.

By this time all the bridges over the canal in Georgetown had been raised and the C&O Canal Company was busy cleaning out the Rock Creek Basin and repairing the dam and tidelock with predictions that they would be ready by fall. Needless to say, Georgetown’s powerbrokers renewed their attack on the Alexandria canal, arguing that tugs could take canal boats from the Georgetown outlet to Alexandria’s wharves, as well as to Washington’s Anacostia River wharves. Thus, the Alexandria Canal was unnecessary!

Nevertheless, Georgetown would again lose. The aqueduct would be rebuilt and the Alexandria Canal reopened in 1868; the Rock Creek outlet in late 1867 would again provide for tug-pulled canal boats to serve all the waterfront wharves in the three cities. The situation with the Washington City Canal (and thus the C&O branch to it) remained the subject of debate and studies until late 1870, when a contract was let for its dredging. In reality, it never became a part of the C&O’s eastern terminus waterways again, although some of waterfront wharves in both Washington and Alexandria would continue to be visited by canal boats until the canal’s last season of 1923.

Note
1. The primary source for this information is found in newspaper articles transcribed by William Bauman in his canal trade searchable pdf files on the Association’s website: www.candocanal.org/histdocs/newspaper.html