

Accompanied by the Past

By Karen Gray

The Trusteeship's First Years 1891 to 1906

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***

On January 30, 1894, the trustees for the bondholders of 1844 filed a report with the circuit court of Washington County, then under Judge Edward Stake, and petitioned for an extension of their control of the canal beyond the original May 1, 1895, date. The trustees' petition was very revealing of the challenges they faced (emphasis in bold):

- “As the work of repairs progressed it was found that the eighteen months during which the canal was practically abandoned and dried out, had added much to the damage caused by the flood of 1889, and had also weakened the canal at points untouched by the flood. It was also found that the walls of many of the locks and the gates in almost all the locks required renewal. These Trustees have, nevertheless, carried out the work of repair and renewal, although at a cost far exceeding what they had anticipated.”
- In September of 1891 when traffic could at last move up and down the entire canal, “few of the boats used on the canal before the flood of June 1889 were even capable of repair.”
- “Throughout the year 1891 and indeed during the year 1892 and the Winter of 1892–3, the repair of the canal and its works was continued.”
- “When these Trustees received possession of the canal..., the canal as a business enterprise and a means of transportation was discredited. Its traffic had sought other routes and other methods of transportation. The port of Georgetown had lost its standing as a coal shipping port and vessels no longer sought it for cargoes of coal. Shippers of coal did not believe that the business of the canal could be revived, and coal shipped coastwise from Georgetown.”
- The **boats on the canal during the year 1891 numbered only ninety** and those parties who would have otherwise been willing to renew their investments of former years in canal boats and equipment were deterred by the court's provisions giving the trustees

control initially for only four years. Those provisions resulted in uncertainty as to the maintenance of the canal after that and prevented investments by all except those sufficiently interested otherwise in the success of these Trustees, to take the risk.

- “**During the season of 1892 the number of boats on the canal increased to one hundred and eighty-two**, representing with their equipment an additional investment of about \$150,000. **During 1893 the number has not materially increased**, although some new boats have taken the places of old ones.”
- Further, lessees of canal properties or water rights had been challenging the right of the trustees to collect their payments and hoped that the trustees will be gone before they could be dispossessed of their lease. By the same token, the Trustees find they couldn't make new leases, as those who might want them were not certain they'd have them for more than the trustees appointed 4 years.

Clearly the Trustees had valid arguments that the four-year initial limitation on their control of the canal worked powerfully against a full restoration of the canal's income and its use in the present and the future.

The Promise of Electrically Powered Towing

In the January 30, 1894, petition for an extension, the Trustees also requested approval of their contract with the Chesapeake and Ohio Transportation Company (C&OTC) that was incorporated November 29, 1893. Although the court approved the contract (which guaranteed a \$100,000 payment annually to the Trustees), the appeals process on extension ruling, delayed the signing of the contract until 1896.

In 1893, even before the C&OTC was incorporated, there was considerable interest in the use of electrically powered systems to tow canal boats. In fact, it was the C&OTC's inclusion of an intent to “operate canal boats by means of electricity” that was likely the most immediate cause of support for the new company. At the time, experiments with an electrical cable towage system were underway on the Erie Canal and even C&O Canal captains were discussing it, as we see in this Washington *Evening Star* article of May 2, 1893:

“BELIEVES IN ELECTRICITY. Capt. Jackson of the Chesapeake and Ohio canal notes several exceptions to the statements made by Capt. Hebbs in an interview a few days ago with a reporter for *The Star*. He believes that the towline and the shaggy



Weston Family on canal boat. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service, C&O Canal NHP.

mule are back numbers and that the electric barge is the inland marine vehicle of the future. Two miles an hour is too slow to travel in this age of electric shocks. He thinks the trolley experiment on the Erie canal will be a success.”

In addition to a cable system, an electric trolley system was proposed and the General Manager of the canal under the trustees, George Nicholson, was interviewed for a Washington *Evening Star* article that appeared on June 23, 1893:

“MULES VERSUS ELECTRICITY. General Manager Nicholson of the Chesapeake and Ohio canal stated to a reporter for *The Star* this morning that if the trolley experiment proves to be a success on the Erie canal it will be a question of but a short time when the system will be adopted on the Chesapeake and Ohio. He believes that there is room for improvement in canal navigation and believes that electricity is the system which will revolutionize canal methods. The trolley people insist that their plan is cheaper absolutely than mule power and vastly cheaper relatively. Four miles an hour can be run without endangering the embankments.”

By August 1, 1893, the *Evening Star* reported that there was growing support among boatmen for electrical power as seen in this article:

“ABOUT GEORGETOWN – Traffic on the Canal – There have been no more arguments of late among canal men on the subject of “the mules versus

electricity” for the reason that the former has lost his champions, and by the time the Erie experiments have proved successful the animal will be looked upon for canal purposes as an antediluvian.”

By December 4, 1893, the C&O was incorporated, and the *Evening Star* reports:

“The new Chesapeake and Ohio corporation will endeavor to make arrangements with the canal company to furnish the motive power necessary in transporting cargoes on the canal. The trolley system is the one under active consideration.”

However, by July 11, 1895, the Washington *Evening Star* noted that the system experimented with on the Erie “did not fulfill expectations” and attention had turned to experiments with the new Lamb electrical cable system for boat haulage being made in Trenton, N. J. That system was described as involving “a towpath overhead cable line, with the motors suspended from the cable...to which the towline is attached.” The Lamb system was also tested on the Erie in the fall, Oct. 28 to Dec. 11 at a cost of \$1,468.95.¹

Nevertheless, neither the trolley nor the cable system were ever used on American 19th Century canals.

Conditions for the Boaters

It is hard to imagine what the canal people went through with the uncertainty of the canal’s future as it lay derelict after the June 1, 1889, flood, and then under the first years of the potentially temporary Trusteeship arrangement. During

the period of decline in canal business and management from 1878 to 1889, the transition had begun from experienced, mostly male crews operating the canal boats on a demanding schedule, to increasing cases of men being hired as captains who use their family as crew. Typically, these families were poor with no home on land and thus living year-around on their boat. After the 1889 flood, recurring newspaper reports highlighted the needs of these impoverished people.

Unfortunately, we have no significant information on what boats were repaired and put back into service in 1891 and 1892, and what was done with the permanently abandoned boats. Nor do we know anything of the labor force seeking employment as a captain on the boats that were being put into service, or how many former captains still wished to operate a boat—perhaps the one they'd been living on—after the 18 months of the canal's disuse. It seems clear that only boats owned by companies or owners with sufficient funds to make their boats usable again were reactivated.

Boat building began quickly after the canal reopened, as seen in this article in the Baltimore *Sun*, on April 14, 1892, from the Cumberland *Times*:

“Mertens & Sons have just launched two more new canal boats, known as No. 104 and No. 105. This makes four new boats this firm have launched during the past two weeks or thereabouts. The Meredith-Winship Company are building boats as rapidly as possible and have launched quite a number recently at their leased yards, in the rear of the West Virginia Central Station. The other boat yards are actively engaged in building and repairing boats.

On December 13, 1894, an article in the Hagerstown *Herald and Torchlight* reported:

“To Revive Boat Building. – G. L. Nicholson, superintendent of the Chesapeake and Ohio canal and Wm. T. Hassett, of Four Locks, one of the supervisors, have purchased the old Mitchell & Dawson boat yard at Hancock, which has been idle for some years and will recommence boat building. This means employment to a number of idle boat builders and carpenters about Hancock.”

It's clear from shipping reports in the newspapers in 1892 that many of the Consolidation Coal Company's boats in their large fleet, were reactivated and that the CCC was the primary shipper of coal on the canal. However, in May of 1894 a miners strike stopped coal shipments into July. For a time afterwards, the CCC shipped most of its coal on the B&O RR.

On the positive side, in July the American Coal Company announced that it was opening two new mines, which

increased optimism for the canal. Then, Judge Stakes decision July 30, 1894, to extend the Trusteeship and approve the Trustee's contract with the C&OTC, helped even more.

However, the situation of the impoverished boat people at the end of 1894 remained unchanged. As an article states from the Hagerstown *Herald and Torchlight*, printed December 19, 1894, by the Cumberland *Evening Times*, states:

“Many boating families will live the entire winter in the cabins of the flat-bottomed, dreary water houses, held fast in the mud of the big trough, while others call shanties in lonely spots along the river their winter quarters. Some few will find employment in the cities along the water course. Most boatmen, those who are true to their calling, though, do not work in winter, they just exist and wait for the summer to come again. None ever make enough during the boating months to keep them comfortable throughout the year, but this does not interfere with their winter rests usually.”

If the reader detects a critical trace in the comments, I will note that newspaper reports are rarely objective and most fall towards the “romanticized” or “exceedingly grim” ends of the spectrum. These comments are as close to a moderate report on the boat people's situation as one will find.

A glimpse into the boatmen's values may be seen in a quote from the Hagerstown *Mail* published in a Washington *Evening Times* article on April 17, 1895:

“A petition has been sent to Georgetown, signed by two-thirds of the captains of canal boats on the Chesapeake and Ohio canal, requesting General Manager Nicolson to enforce the Sunday law on the canal; that is, that he order all boats to tie up at 12 o'clock Saturday night and remain tied up until 12 o'clock Sunday night.”

Sunday closure of the canal was one of those recurring issues in the canal's history. While religious principles were doubtless a factor, the boatmen couldn't simply decide for themselves to take Sundays off. Agreements with the boat owners or shippers generally carried a requirement that the boat be operated whenever the canal was open for navigation. Consequently, Sunday closure regulations amounted to an assured day off every week without contravening boat operation agreements.

Ultimately, one of the most frustrating aspects of studying the Trusteeship years, especially these early ones, is that our sources provide no definite information on the economics of being a boat captain such as we have in the 1870s especially. At best for this time, we find statements like this which appeared in the Washington *Evening Times*, April 23, 1895:

Across the Berm

Dr. James Gilford

Dr. James “Jim” Gilford died on August 19, 2021, in Frederick, Md. Dr. Gilford was a long-standing member of the C&O Canal Association and an original member of the C&O Canal Advisory Commission. As a member of the Monocacy Aqueduct Committee he was instrumental in the efforts that ultimately led to restoration of that aqueduct. He also served as a C&O Canal Association director from 2004 to 2007.

Dr. Gilford’s career spanned education and study of biological science, and he ultimately retired from the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, D.C. In addition to his support and advocacy of the C&O Canal, he served on and chaired numerous environmental-related boards and committees at both the state and federal levels. He was an avid outdoorsman and sportsman.

Dr. Gilford served on the C&O Canal Advisory Commission from 1971 until the interregnum that began in 2011. As a member of the commission, he was instrumental in advocacy and a major influence on the direction of the newly established park. He took an active part in the deliberations on the general plan of the C&O Canal NHP. A summary of the commission’s activities and establishment of the general plan was written by Dr. Gilford and published in the September 2011 *Along the Towpath*; it is available at candocanal.org/atp/2011-09.pdf.

Ken Rollins hailed Dr. Gilford in a December 1995 *Along the Towpath* feature article. He commented on Dr. Gilford’s long service: “He is an outstanding illustration of the value of continuity within the membership of any organization, which we shall soon see. Turnover and new membership are invaluable in assuring growth and adaptability of any group, but continuity is also vital lest it unwittingly stray from its intended purpose or lose the history of its various considerations through time.” Ken summarized Dr. Gilford’s support of the Monocacy Aqueduct: “... Jim Gilford’s quiet, firm insistence that something be done, and that we can wait no longer has set all this in motion. I hereby nominate Jim for the title *Hero of the Canal*.”



Dr. Gilford (back row, second from left) with the initial C&O Canal Advisory Commission in 1972. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service, C&O Canal NHP.

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“Hard Times on the Ditch: The fact that Georgetown is overstocked with coal adds to the lull in the trade on the Chesapeake and Ohio canal and makes the depression along the entire line of the waterway a distressing feature.... The blow strikes the boatmen hardest, many of whom purchased teams and outfits on time and contracted to pay for them by the trip. Thus, their source of revenues is cut off, and they are placed in a trying position. Some have temporarily abandoned boating until trade resumes and are seeking employment in another way.”

While indications are that most (if not all) the boats were owned by companies and builders, this suggests that most or all the captains provided the mules, with their equipment such as harnesses, as well as their feed and care, including the frequently needed services of farriers. If a captain didn’t own mules and their associated equipment, he would lease or buy them, making a payment each trip out of his earnings. His earnings were determined by the tons carried

and their destination. Likely the boat owner did equip the boats with the requisite ropes, etc., and basic furnishings in the crew cabin (stove, table, and chair and bunk); but the captain would feed and pay the crew (a fact that pushed men to use their families) as well as pay boat operation expenses such as tolls, as well as wharf and trimmer fees. If there were times when there was no cargo, or a captain could not operate the boat for some reason, he still would have had expenses related to his crew and mules.

Although much is not certain about boat operation at this time, everything we do know indicates that it was not possible for a captain to earn enough during the boating season to cover his expenses in the winter. Those men who lived year around on a boat with their family were even less likely to escape poverty as indicated by the frequent reports of destitution among the boat people that appear with some regularity after the 1889 flood.

Notes:

1. *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York*, Issues 58-67, p. 128.