

# Accompanied by the Past

By Karen Gray

## 1903 and the Beginning of the Canal Towage Company

*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*

*This article must be preliminary until the Canal Towage Company archives in Baltimore's B&O Railroad Museum's Watkins Research Library & Archives have been examined. Those will provide the administrative side of the Canal Towage Company's (CTC) story. This column is based on the newspaper reports in 1903 as gathered by William Bauman in his canal trade file for 1903.<sup>1</sup>*

What we do know about the CTC from the minimal archival information online is that the company's Articles of Incorporation were dated February 23, 1903, indicating that it was legally organized in that year, not 1902 as is often stated. The company's Certificate of Dissolution is dated December 27, 1935. Thus, we know with considerable certainty that it existed from 1903–1935.

In a *Cumberland Evening Times* article on January 19, 1903, it was reported that the boatmen who regularly carried coal to Williamsport had met and unanimously voted to demand 50 cents per ton for freight. This was significantly below the tonnage paid to the boat captain prior to the 1889

flood when it was at its peak, well above \$1 per ton. However, if a captain did not own his boat but operated it for an owner, depending on their agreement, he might have no boat mortgage or maintenance and repair cost. Also, it's clear that the use of wives and children to avoid having to pay for crew was growing at this time.

### A "Syndicate" Buys the Coal Boats

The *Alexandria Gazette* reported on January 20:

It is said that a syndicate or transportation company will get control of the transportation facilities of the waterway and conduct navigation hereafter, introducing some decided changes. It is understood that the syndicate has purchased all the boats owned by the Consolidation Coal Company [CCC] and H. C. Winship, and negotiations are now pending with the Mertens for their boats. The wholesale purchase of boats by the syndicate as reported gives it complete control of navigation on the waterway.

This and later reports seemed to indicate that *if* there were privately owned boats freighting coal in 1891 and after, the number was very small. Another report indicated that there were approximately 150 coal boats on the canal in 1903, 100 or more of which were owned by the CCC and the remainder by the Winship or Mertens companies.

It's important to recognize (what the newspaper report does not make clear) that the "syndicate" was interested in the coal boats only. There were boats used and likely owned by companies transporting other products on the canal such as wood, stone, and agricultural products, especially grain.



*A Consolidation Coal Company boat meets a boat with "Coxey's Army" protesters bound for Washington, D.C., 1894 – Photo courtesy of the National Park Service, C&O Canal National Historical Park*



*Consolidation Coal Co. boat moored along the berm – Photo courtesy of the National Park Service, C&O Canal National Historical Park*

Perhaps more importantly, the takeover of coal boating on the canal by the CTC was not a case of independent boatmen becoming subject to a big company (as is often said), because the coal boats at that time were apparently all owned by one of the three companies that sold their boats to the CTC.

A January 21 article in the *Cumberland Evening Times* indicated that Mertens also had sold its boats to the syndicate. That article mentioned that:

The special from Hagerstown also stated that the syndicate was composed of Pennsylvania railroad company and the Consolidation Coal Co., and that the promoters of the enterprise will make the canal boom and that the employees will be given an increase of ten per cent in wages.

It should be noted that, since 1901, the Pennsylvania RR controlled the B&O RR with its majority ownership of B&O stock, and that this followed the B&O's receivership that began with its 1896 bankruptcy.



Canal Towage Company markings on the stern of a boat – Photo courtesy of the National Park Service, C&O Canal National Historical Park

Mr. Winship had been the first superintendent of the canal under the trustees in 1891, and he was replaced by his assistant, George L. Nicholson in 1893. Nicholson was said to have worked for the C&O Canal as an engineer and superintendent prior to the 1889 flood, and it's clear that he was thoroughly familiar with the canal. He would still be the canal's superintendent in 1938 when it was sold. Nevertheless, he emerges as spokesman for the syndicate and after the incorporation of the CTC in February 1903, he was variously referred to as the general manager, president, or superintendent of that company. There is evidence that he retained his superintendent or general manager title with the Trusteeship as well.

### The First Proposal to the Boatmen

The January 20<sup>th</sup> article also states that Nicholson held a conference at the office of Steffey & Findlay in Williamsport the day before. It was attended by a number of the boatmen and representatives of the shipping firms. At it he announced the syndicate's proposition to engage the boatmen's services to operate the boats at a salary of \$100 a month. In addition:

Each captain was to hire the regular complement of men, a steersman and two drivers and board and pay them out of his salary, while the syndicate agrees to furnish the mule team and feed and the boat rigging.... [and further] the syndicate will purchase the mules owned by boatmen at a fair price. He also said that the boat captains would be paid for any loss of time on account of breaks [in the canal] or delay on the canal.

The article says that the proposition "came as a surprise" and the boatmen could not give him an answer at the time.

That *Cumberland Evening Times* article included information from the *Baltimore Sun* to the effect that an official of the Consolidation Coal Company explained the change as: "to run the boats under one management and on a systematic basis in order to improve the traffic as well as to better the conditions on the canal."

According to him: "At present it requires a month for a boat to make the [presumably round trip] run from Cumberland to Georgetown, and at the destination antiquated methods for unloading were in use." It was stated that at present the captains of the Consolidation Coal Company boats had been paying 10 cents a ton for the use of the boat.

However, almost immediately a dispatch was received in Baltimore from Williamsport and reported by the newspapers that stated:

A committee of boatmen has waited upon General Manager Nicholson and notified him that they had



decided not to accept the terms of the proposition, which he presented to them. The boaters argue that they could not make an ordinary living at a salary of \$100 a month, which the syndicate agrees to pay, and hire hands and board them. Figures furnished by boatmen place the pay of a steersman at \$20 a month and two drivers at \$15 each, and after boarding them, the captain would have \$15 left for his services. According to Mr. Nicholson's figures, boatmen should be able to employ a steersman for \$18 and drivers at \$12, and, after paying for necessary expenses, the captain would have about \$30, while the boatmen claim it is almost impossible to hire hands at the figures they have submitted.

This makes it clear that the boatmen were making well over the one round trip a month that the CCC official had indicated was the norm. The discrepancy in the pay rates for crew could well have represented competitive variations such as between the best and the less qualified boat hands.

Additional changes that were made included operating the boats 24 hours a day and establishing stores at convenient points offering the boatmen "reasonable prices".

Subsequently, at meetings of the boatmen in Williamsport and Sharpsburg reports indicated:

Resolutions were adopted and will be sent to the shippers at Cumberland and places along the line demanding an increase in freight rates. They want 50 cents for hauling coal to Williamsport and \$1 to Georgetown. They are now receiving 40 cents to the former and 80 cents to the latter place.

According to a *Cumberland Evening Times* article of January 28, 1903, Nicholson had met with about 50 boatmen in Washington the day before, and while he said the original \$100 a month offer still stood, he also offered a tonnage pay alternative:

The company to pay 22 cents a ton for hauling coal to Williamsport and 40 cents to Georgetown, the boatmen to hire and board the necessary number of hands and pay for a few incidentals. The company agrees further to pay the boatmen \$1.50 trip-page for each mule, or \$6 for a four-mule team to Williamsport, and double that amount to Georgetown, [and to] furnish feed for the mules, [provide] lines, etc.

The Sharpsburg boatmen who would receive the same tonnage fee as Williamsport boatmen particularly objected. Nevertheless, Nicholson said that "unless [the boatmen] accept this proposition, they may never have an opportunity to accept any other."

On February 2 the boatmen meeting in Williamsport rejected the new proposal, and then, on February 6 a committee of five met with Nicholson at his office at Hagerstown, but they left saying they would put the tonnage offer before all the boatmen for their decision. In the same *Cumberland Evening Times* article, Nicholson also said:

Notices have been issued by the company to boatmen requesting them to make application for boats before February 20. The company has already received a number of applications for boats, and it is understood that if the boatmen do not come to terms soon, their opportunity will be lost.

A *Cumberland Evening Times* article on February 10 said that the Sharpsburg boatmen, meeting secretly on the 9<sup>th</sup>, declined both the \$100 a month and the \$40 tonnage-based offer. News from boatmen meeting at Boyds (in Montgomery County) indicated that they also were rejecting the offers.

### **The Boatmen Finally Agree to the CTC Offer**

Then, on February 14, a *Cumberland Evening Times* article reported:

Nearly all of the canal boatmen of this place Thursday signed an agreement to accept the proposition made by the new transportation company [i.e., the CTC] to take charge of the company's boats next season. The company agrees to pay 22 cents freight to this place [Williamsport] and 40 cents to Georgetown, and furnishes the mules, feed, lines, etc.

The Sharpsburg boatmen were reportedly still holding out and Nicholson had set the following Thursday, the 19<sup>th</sup>, for the final conference. However, it was later reported in the *Baltimore Sun* on the 15<sup>th</sup>, that they too had accepted the latest 40-cent tonnage pay to Georgetown in their meeting on the 14<sup>th</sup>; and on the 16<sup>th</sup> the *Washington Evening Star* reported the boatmen at Boyds had also accepted the last offer.

It was also announced at this time that the company would be erecting a large building at Four Locks for a supply depot under the management of William T. Hassett and his son (the senior Hassett is later referred to as a "supervisor").

In a February 20 edition of the *Frederick News* Nicholson stated that the company had more applications for boats than boats to be assigned but that the boating season would start with 125 boats and at a later date 150 would be in service. He also noted that "every available boat is being thoroughly overhauled" and that the CTC had control of the CCC boatyards in Cumberland.

As indicated, the CTC was not legally incorporated until February 23, 1903, by which time the so-called syndicate behind the company had already organized it to operate when the canal was watered for the 1903 boating season. A February 20 issue of the *Washington Times* refers to Nicholson as “formerly general manager of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company, now president of the Canal Towage Company.”

A Frederick News article on March 3 stated that the CCC “holds the bulk” of the CTC stock, adding; “It is trying to control the soft coal business of the national capital and is installing in Georgetown modern devices for unloading coal involving an expenditure of \$100,000.”

A March 4 *Frederick News* article states:

Canal boatmen at Seneca, Point of Rocks, Dickerson and Catoctin are getting ready to resume the transportation of grain when the canal opens March 10. The grain boatmen were not interfered with by the recently organized towage company, which purchased only [coal] boats.

However, references to the CTC controlling all traffic on the canal, begin to appear. I believe that any official transfer of controlling navigation on the canal from the trustees in charge, would require a court approved contract or agreement of some sort, and as yet I have not found evidence of such. The CTC also appears to become toll collector for non-CTC boats at some point, moneys they would pay into the trustees’ canal accounts along with the toll on their own boats.

As the canal was being watered for the 1903 boating season, an article in the *Cumberland Evening Times* noted that there are:

200 mules on the way here from Kentucky to be used in hauling boats and when they arrive the business is expected to hum. Each boat will be provided with 4 mules and will be run day and night. The boats will be required to run on a sort of schedule, leaving here at a certain time and reaching Georgetown in a given period. They must make at least three round trips in a month. Each captain will be allowed 40 cents a ton for boating coal [to Georgetown], out of which he must pay and board the helpers.

Boatmen who provide their own mules are to be reimbursed three dollars a trip for each mule. The article repeats the information about the supply depot at Four Locks for mule feed and boat supplies.

Two significant comments appear at the end of this article: (1) that “this will cause many of the stores along the canal to close up”; and (2) that “boatmen stated today that they were having a hard time securing crews on the wages they could afford to pay for help, which were very small.” By 1920, a study of child labor on American canals<sup>2</sup> stated that according to company records for that year, of the 66 captains on the canal, 59 were married and 41 had their children with them (and thus, presumably, also their wife). Thus about 62% of the boatmen were operating their boat primarily with their family, although reports of having one hired man are frequent. The CTC years became the heyday of the family-run boats.



Lock 50 and the site of the site of the supply depot at Four Locks – Photo by Steve Dean

#### Notes:

1. The 1903 Canal Trade and the comparable documents for most years of the canal’s operation can be found on the Association’s web page: [candocanal.org/newspaper/](http://candocanal.org/newspaper/)
2. Springer, Ethel M., “*Canal Boat Children*”, *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. XVI – No. 2, Washington, February, 1923