

A Brief History Of The Big Slackwater Restoration Committee

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August, 2012

As the time approaches when the towpath through the Big Slackwater area of the C&O Canal is to be reopened, it occurred to me that the major involvement of the C&O Canal Association, hereafter known as C&OCA, needs to be made part of the record. As Chairperson of the Big Slackwater Restoration Committee, I rejoice that our efforts have borne fruit and I want to recognize the labors of those who tirelessly moved us toward our goal.

We are indebted to former Federal Advisory Commissioner and C&OCA member, Ed Miller, for the catchy slogan, "No Slack at Big Slack." It had been ten years since persistent flooding had forced the towpath in that area to be closed and the traffic diverted to a very dangerous detour consisting of narrow, winding, county roads with no shoulders. A 1998 "Final Report" from the National Park Service had envisioned a two-phase restoration that included a temporary path away from the river and an eventual rebuilding of the stone masonry at its edge. The options would provide for the historical integrity of the towpath. However, the report stated that at that time, no funding was available.

Basking in the success of C&OCA's push to have the Monocacy Aqueduct stabilized, C&OCA's president (and my brother) Bob Perry in 2006 envisioned our taking on the enormous challenge of securing public/private cooperation for restoring the only break in the continuity of the 184.5 mile long national park. In February 2005, the C&OCA Board of Directors had transferred the balance of the funds from the Widewater account to a newly created Big Slackwater Fund. In his final report to the members at the annual meeting, Bob lamented the lack of progress toward restoration. Letters had been sent to the Washington County members asking their support. They were invited to participate in a committee to spearhead the push toward the goal.

In April 2006, I accepted appointment as chairperson of the committee. Seven of us from Washington County began and continued to meet together to plan activities to engage the public. It was a pleasure to serve with: Ken and Pat Heck; Charlotte Loveless; the Honorable James McCleaf, Major of Williamsport; Carl Pedersen; and John Ziegler.

Our first and biggest event was to provide a view of the damaged towpath from the Potomac River using pontoon boats from the Western Maryland Sportsman Club. It was our intent to provide the tour for local, state, and federal officials. The sportsman club had opposition from their insurance carrier. In addition, we had opposition from the

National Park Service, which objected to us using the boat launch above Dam # 4. In August 2006, to our good fortune, we received tremendous support from neighbors across the river, the Izaak Walton League of West Virginia. Not only did they provide the boats and give the officials an up close view, they provided a bountiful picnic lunch for all who attended.

We are grateful to all elected officials who supported our efforts. In particular, I mention State Senator Don Munson, and United States Senator Ben Cardin. At each step along the way our committee strove to work with the Park Service personnel, while attempting to maintain our own perspective. One aspect of our work came into question and that was fund raising on our part, since a new directive of the National Park Service indicated that we could not raise “partial funding” as was the case with Monocacy Aqueduct. As it happened, our committee envisioned our role as being that of disseminating information to secure public and private support for the project, and not for soliciting money. This did not alter the reality that the C&OCA did indeed have a fund for Big Slackwater into which contributions were flowing continually. We are grateful for the contributions made by individuals and groups. In 2007, Friends of the Historic Great Falls Tavern contributed \$5000.

We had our disappointments along the way. Early on, we approached the Washington County public schools in an attempt to promote public awareness through a county-wide poster contest. We envisioned the students designing a logo for our project for which they would have been amply rewarded. But it was not to be. Also, the several organizations supporting the Great Allegheny Passage did not respond to our request for their support when, in actuality, the Slackwater area, if not restored, would have been the only break in a non-motorized vehicle passage from Georgetown to Pittsburgh.

Early on we had no idea where the enormous amount of funding (\$14 million) would come from. We were simply motivated by the need to make known the dangers of the 4.7 mile detour onto narrow winding roads with no shoulders and frequently traveled by trucks and boats being towed. We sent letters, and gathered signatures from residents along the detour, hikers, and bikers. We positioned ourselves along the detour and handed out bottles of water to through-bikers on a very hot day. We approached the county for statistics regarding mishaps and accidents along the detour. We talked with anyone who would listen and learn.

In 2007, the National Park Service did not include Slackwater in the Federal Parks Centennial initiative. However, in order to help with the preparation of a design plan and the environmental impact study, upon the request of the superintendent of the national park, C&OCA contributed \$80,000 in several increments toward making the project “shovel ready.”

Our disappointments and concerns for the funding faded as we moved to 2008 when the crisis of the recession resulted in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which provided federal stimulus monies of \$12.1 million for the restoration of the towpath through Big Slackwater.

In 2010, \$4.4 million was released by Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley from the Transportation Enhancement Fund. The amount needed had been achieved. Groundbreaking took place on August 7, 2010, at the boat ramp at the Dam #4 area. We rejoiced that our work had borne fruit and that we could disband with satisfaction over the role of our C&O Canal Association in this enormous undertaking.