

**HISTORIC RESOURCE STUDY
CHESAPEAKE & OHIO CANAL NHP**

**3.
LABOR FORCE
OF THE C&O CANAL:
1828–1850**

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I. A TIME OF EXPERIMENT: 1812–1831

When the actual digging of the canal commenced in the autumn of 1828, the main problem facing the company was the supply of labor. The scarcity of workers and the consequently high rate of wages threatened and upset all the financial calculations of the contractors. There were few laborers available in the largely agricultural valley itself, and few could be attracted to it because of the reputation of the Potomac for ill health during the long hot and humid summer and because of the construction of other railroads and the Pennsylvania Main Line Canal. Added to these considerations was the competition for workers between the railroad and the canal, with the farmers at harvest time, and among contractors themselves as a result of undertaking the construction of 48 miles of waterway to Point of Rocks within one year. The consequence of this scarcity was that labor costs were unexpectedly high and the average ability of the workers apparently rather low.¹

The poor quality of the work performed by many of the laborers is graphically portrayed in the field notes of W. Robert Leckie, the newly-appointed inspector of masonry, during the spring of 1829. At one of the stone quarries being opened for use on the canal, he found the quarry and stonecutters so inexperienced that he “gave directions to have some clay joints cut off some of the stones, made a drawing of lewis and lewisings tools, and gave also a drawing of a mallet and a description of the tools necessary to make them.” The quality of the walls of the lockhouse at Lock No. 26 was “not good.” Here he observed that both:

Contractors and masons seem totally ignorant of what they should know, have neither skills nor tools to work with, everything done carelessly, and no attention paid to the mixing of the mortar.²

Following another inspection tour of the masonry works on the canal in August, he informed Chief Engineer Benjamin Wright that:

The prospects of this important branch (masonry) are truly appalling. There are scarcely and masons on the line and the most of the small number are laborers totally ignorant of masonry, and who ought never be permitted to spoil such an important work.³

Despite the low assessment of the workers’ capabilities by Leckie, not one of those laboring on the line of the canal were so ill-prepared. For example, contractor Mowry of Section No. 9, informed the company in July 1829 that he would bring an

Experienced “canaller” to direct his work, who has been on the Eire and the Union, Susquehanna Division, and who is now collecting a set of his old hands, and will bring houses (horses), wagons, tools, and men to the C&OI Canal.⁴

¹ *First Annual Report* (1829), C&O Co., 19; *Second Annual Report* (1830), C&O Co., 5–6; *Baltimore & Ohio Railroad* (2 Vols., New York, 1928), I, 118–120.

² *Diary and Account Book, 1828–1829* (April 11 and May 12, 1829), W. Robert Leckie Papers, Duke University Library.

³ Leckie to Wright, August 21, 1829, Leckie Papers

⁴ Mowry to Mercer, July 9, 1829, Ltrs. Recd. C&O Co., Records of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Company, Record Group 79, National Archives. (Unless otherwise noted, all document sources used in this chapter are located in this collection.)

Mounting wages proved inadequate to overcome the scarcity of workers in the Potomac Valley. Wages averaged \$8 to \$10 a month for common labor in November 1828, and continued to rise to \$12 and \$13 a month by mid-summer of the following year.⁵

A. W. Campbell, the contractor for Sections Nos. 30–31, complained in August 1829 that the rapid escalation in wages would bring on

an average of 12 9/10 dollars per month, which is equal to 46 ½ cents per day. The board of the hands then at 1 50/100 dollars per week amounts to .25 cents for each working day. To this sum I add 5 cents for the board of men wet days and parts of days that their board is more than the proportion of work. The whiskey consumed is worth 4 cents per day. The use of barrows, picks, and shovels at the very low estimate is worth 6 cents. To this add a reasonable sum for superintendence and the expense of building, say 10 cents of the amount will stand thus:

For labor	46½ cents per day
For board	30 cents per day
For whiskey	4 cents per day
For use of tools	6 cents per day
For superintendence	
and buildings	<u>10 cents per day</u>
	96½ cents per day ⁶

Yet despite this wage increase, inspector of masonry Leckie reluctantly reported in the spring of 1829 that there were only “about 50 stonecutters on the line.” This deficiency was critical when one compared it with the number of stonecutters needed to complete the canal within the time limits set by company charter, for example, Leckie noted:

There are in the Monocacy Aqueduct 160,000 feet of cutting which dissected into 180 parts the working days in 6 months would be 900 feet per day, and supposing every stonecutter to cut 8 feet per day it would require 112 stonecutters 6 months to do it.

The Seneca Aqueduct if built of cut stone would require 16 stonecutters 6 months. There is 6,000 feet in a lock of [text missing] per day it will require 6 men 6 months to cut a lock.⁷

During the same period, Leckie also complained that the scarcity of masonry on the line was hindering construction. He informed Chief Engineer Benjamin Wright that there were fewer than fifty masons on the line, a fact that would make it difficult to complete the canal on schedule. Again using the locks and the Monocacy and Seneca Aqueducts as examples, he observed:

Eight masons may set a lock in 40 days. There are in the Monocacy Aqueduct 11,000 perches and supposing each mason to lay three perches per day it would require 20 masons 6 months to lay it. Seneca Aqueduct would require 5 masons 6 months to lay it.⁸

⁵ Mercer to Richards, July 8, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co., and Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 140, 309.

⁶ Campbell to Mercer, August 30, 1829, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

⁷ Diary and Account book, 1828–29 (May 26 and April 23, 1829), Leckie Papers.

⁸ Diary and Account Book, 1828–29 (March 1829), and Leckie to Wright, August 21, 1829, Leckie Papers.

The board also took special note of the labor shortage and its effects on the construction of the canal in its first annual report to the stockholders in June 1829. According to the last weekly labor reports taken during the previous month the “number of hands, consisting of men and boys engaged on the works of the canal, was 2,113, of which 2,000 were men and the residue boys.” However the directors estimated that the “number necessary to complete the canal under contract, in the time specified in the several contracts, cannot be short of 6,000.”⁹

In desperation the canal company turned to various devices to relieve the labor shortage. As early as November 1828, the board had undertaken, through special agents and extensive correspondence, to encourage the migration of workers from all parts of the United States and from various European countries, especially Great Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands.¹⁰ The company inserted advertisements in the newspaper of Dublin, Cork, Belfast, and Amsterdam, offering prospective workers meat three times a day, plenty of bread and vegetables, a reasonable allowance of liquor, and \$8, \$10, and \$12 a month wages. Mercer estimated 2,000 or 3,000 were needed.¹¹ Supporters of the canal project in Congress even petitioned for the use of troops in the construction of the proposed tunnel on the mountain section through the Alleghenies, the most formidable undertaking of the projected connection between the Potomac and the Ohio.¹²

The efforts of the directors to secure an adequate number of workers at low wages led to a reversion to the colonial practice of using indentured servants. On January 31, 1829 the board authorized President Charles f. Mercer to make an agreement with Henry Richards, a Welshman formerly employed on the Erie and the Chesapeake and Delaware Canals.¹³ Richards was to be the agent of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Company in Great Britain and was to recruit laborers to work on the line. The board also continued for a short period to negotiate for workers from the British Isles. In its general instructions to Maury and Richards in July, the company offered to pay all costs of transportation in return for the indentures of the immigrants for three months, each month computed at 26 working days. The directors requested that the workers be sent out in time to arrive between late September or early October. In this way they would avoid the “sickly” season and yet have three months of good working weather before winter. Quarrymen, stone cutters, and masons were most in demand for they were badly needed to stimulate the lagging masonry work, a fact demonstrated two months earlier when instructions were given by Mercer “to engage the services of 300 stone cutters and masons from Europe.” The board discouraged the enlistment of farmers and if they came, required them to pay their own way and to find their own accommodations on the line.¹⁴

The detailed instructions to Richards included seven stipulations.

1. Upon his arrival in Britain he was to cooperate in every way with Maury.
2. He was to engage the services of English, Welsh, and Scottish laborers accustomed to digging.
3. Common laborers must sign obligations requiring three months’ labor, while masons were to sign indentures for two months’ service.

⁹ *First Annual Report* (1829), 19–20.

¹⁰ Mercer to Cope, November 18, 1828; and Mercer to Barbour, November 18, 1828, Ltrs. Sent C&O Co., and Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 105.

¹¹ Mercer to Maury, November 18, 1828, Ltrs. Sent C&O Co.; and Tear to Mercer, January 12, 1829, Ltrs. Recd. C&O Co.

¹² *Second Annual Report* (1830), 25–27.

¹³ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 153, 175.

¹⁴ Mercer to Maury, July 8, 1829, and Mercer to Richards, July 8, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co., and Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 226.

4. Any advances beyond the cost of transportation were to be repaid at the rate of \$8 a month for common laborers and \$15 a month for masons.
5. They were to receive the same subsistence as the other workers, but were to be boarded free of charge.
6. If necessary, Richards was authorized to offer wages as high as \$10 a month for common laborers and \$20 a month for masons and stone cutters.
7. Finally, the men so transported were to work on the canal for one year after the termination of their indentures at the prevailing rate of wages or at the stipulated rate, whichever the laborer in question desires. No contracts were to be made to extend beyond December 1, 1830.¹⁵

The mission of Richards on behalf of the canal company came at a most opportune time for the latter's purpose. Britain was in the midst of complex economic and social change, accompanied by unemployment, high prices, and unrest among the working classes. The effect of the Napoleonic Wars had stimulated British agriculture and given her a monopoly of the world carrying trade. The inevitable dislocation caused by rapid economic expansion produced sporadic riots and social discontent. The unrest was further fueled as farming and shipping slowly lost their wartime advantages. Demobilization as well as mechanization caused unemployment, and new jobs did not materialize in time to absorb surplus labor. Furthermore the antique borough system [somewhat analogous to U.S. legislative districts] left many fast-growing areas underrepresented in parliament. At the same time taxes were high for rich and poor alike because of the costs of the wars. In addition, the mounting cost of poor relief, borne by local property taxes, added to this tax load, while high prices and massive indirect taxation burdened the poor. Erratic fluctuation in production, wages, and prices, as well as import and exports, contributed to the social unrest. The instability in society was aggravated by a rapid population growth, the consequences of which included an enlarged labor force that outgrew the expanding economy and problems of urban life, housing, poverty, and crime. In London and the burgeoning industrial centers of northern Britain—Manchester, Birmingham, and Glasgow—organizations formed to angrily protest against the great variety of national ills, their memories of the French Revolution kept fresh and fired by agitators such as Henry Hunt. These working class and radical movements for political and economic reform to correct the inequities of British society were generally repressed with the aid of the military, the banning of public assemblies and the suspension of *habeus corpus*. Under these conditions, the Irish, Welsh, and English workers in the mines, mills, and factories were receptive to the terms offered by the Chesapeake and Ohio agent.¹⁶

While Richards was conducting his recruitment activities the board also took steps in July 1829 to attract additional workers to the Potomac Valley from other parts of the United States. The directors ordered that President Mercer be authorized

To draw for and advance such sum of money as might be found necessary to pay the expense of transporting to the line of the canal, such number of laborers as the contractors will oblige themselves to employ, on the terms to be prescribed by the President.¹⁷

¹⁵ Instructions to Richards, July 8, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co.

¹⁶ Walter Phelps Hall and William Stearns Davis, *Course of Europe Since Waterloo* (New York, 1951), 47–56.

¹⁷ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 309.

The following month the board approved the expenditure of \$975 for the transportation of laborers from New York under the direction of Joel Crittenden, on of the company agents in that state.¹⁸

Meanwhile Richards began sending the British laborers to America in August. The first group of about 320 workers crossed the Atlantic in the *Pioneer*, the *Julian*, and the *Boston*. Concerning the immigrants that he was sending, Richards wrote:

I have been very careful to select men of good character, steady, and industrious...Some few Irishmen are among them but all these have worked some time in England & amongst Englishmen and are good workmen and peaceable.

There are a great many miners and colliers chiefly in the *Boston*. The masons and quarry men have been selected from the quarries rail roads and canals in the different countries of England and Wales.

...Some few of the men are rather small and young—but most of these, if you think it is required, will serve for the longer time.

According to your first instructions the men have agreed to work in lieu of their passage—the stone cutters, and masons and some blacksmiths & carpenters for three months, the laborers agree to work four months....The instructions received yesterday [missing text] shorter say 2 months for masons and 3 months for others, but as I shall be able to engage men on the same terms as before, I shall continue to do so leaving it to you to shorten their time after they arrive if you think proper. And this will perhaps be more satisfactory to the men themselves, who will think it a great favor.

I have sent as few women and children as possible and those only the families of good workmen. I will send no more if I can possibly avoid it.

...I have sent with each vessel a careful and trusty man...(who will) see the workmen delivered to you.¹⁹

Another large contingent of laborers came over on the *Nimrod*.²⁰ Although Rice requested further instructions and authority to hire a thousand laborers, the group of 176 sent over on the *Shenandoah* which arrived late in October, was the last.²¹

The trip across the Atlantic was a harrowing affair for both the immigrants and their overseers. The latter were responsible for the safe delivery of the hands assigned to them and for the distribution of rations on board ship. On both counts they gained the hatred of the laborers. They differed widely in character, some being described as wretched, ignorant, and terrified men, and others as proud, arrogant, and disdainful of the workers.²² The experience of the bosses was quite similar. The daily distribution of bread and meat often brought tempers to a boiling point as the immigrants complained of favoritism, (short) weight, and inedible provisions. At times they appealed to the ship captains, who invariably washed their hands of the quarrels and sometimes

¹⁸ Ibid, A, 331, 337.

¹⁹ Richards to President and Directors, August 21, 1829, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co., quoted Walter S. Sanderlin, *The Great National Project: A History of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal* (Baltimore, 1946), 73–74.

²⁰ Boteler and Reynolds to Ingle, November 1839, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

²¹ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 380, and Ingle to Janney, October 26, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co.

²² Powell to President and Directors, November 18, 1829; and Gill to President and Directors, November 18, 1829, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

urged the men to take matters into their own hands. Although the overseers were subjected to a constant stream of threats and abuse, all of them survived the journey.²³

The company directed its agents to send the laborers to either Alexandria or Georgetown, fearing that if the men landed at another port, they might be diverted to some of the other internal improvement projects in the East. On their arrival they were assigned to directors Walter Smith at Georgetown and Phineas Janney at Alexandria.²⁴

The latter paid the marine insurance on them, and completed arrangements for them to be housed in one large building in Alexandria.²⁵ They were then placed under supervision of a superintendent of imported laborers, one of the assistant engineers assigned to that duty, and those among them who were sick received medical attention from Dr. Joshua Riley prior to commencing work.²⁶ As the charges for the medical services were chargeable to the sick themselves, he was asked to reduce the charges in some degree to the ability of the workers to pay for such services. Subsequently they were turned over to the contractors and their indentures delinquent up to the latter upon receipt and upon the assumption of responsibility for the cost of transportation, a sum set at \$32 per man by the board in September.²⁷ The contractors called the roll to have the indentures acknowledge by the laborer. If any of them refused they were [missing text].²⁸

The experiences of the contractors with the immigrants varied widely, probably according to the character of the workers and the treatment given them. The 5 or 8 laborers and quarrymen assigned to Henry Boteler and George F. Reynolds, the proprietors of the Potomac Mill near Shepherdstown, were entirely satisfactory, although the mill owners attempted to reduce labor costs by paying wages below the \$10 per month average for the canal and by failing to provide even a limited supply of clothing.²⁹ The men were described as lacking skills and initiative.³⁰

Some of the laborers had real grievances in the treatment they received at the hands of the contractors. Those working for M. S. Wines left him and returned to Washington. They consented to resume work only on certain conditions that were agreed upon by their leaders and company officials. The demands they made were

That they shall have as soon as it can be made so, a tight house with comfortable lodgings, as tight and comfortable as common board can make it; a sufficient supply of good bread, and meat, with such other things as are customary for laboring men, and these prepared in a cleanly manner; that their baggage shall be sent after them...and lastly that you (Wines) will open an account with each man and charge him with his passage over, and

²³ Powell to President and Directors, November 18, 1829, Gill to President and Directors, November 1829, and Jones to President and Directors, November 18, 1829, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

²⁴ Mercer to Maury, July 8, 1829, and Mercer to Richards, July 8, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co., and Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 380.

²⁵ Ingle to Riley, October 21, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co., and Watts to President and Directors, November 4, 1829, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

²⁶ Ingle to Riley, October 21, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co., and watts to President and Directors, November 4, 1829, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

²⁷ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 364.

²⁸ Mercer to Ingle, September 30, 1829, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

²⁹ Ingle to Boteler and Reynolds, October 22, and November 19, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co., and Boteler and Reynolds to Ingle, November 5, 1829, Ltrs. Recd, C&O Co. Clerk Ingle also assigned a woman and child to Boteler and Reynolds to serve as a cook and clothes washer as the shanties along the line were too uncomfortable for women and children. The company continued to urge Boteller and Reynolds to accept more women and children as they had better housing facilities than were found elsewhere on the line.

³⁰ Diary and Account Book, 1829–1830, November 18, 1829, Leckie Papers.

with all other expenses incurred for him and credit him for his work at the customary price of labor until the account shall be given up to him.

In return the company promised that if Wines failed to live up to these conditions it would transfer them to another section. In notifying the contractor of these conditions, company John P. Ingle reminded Wines that:

We should make some allowance for men in a strange country who have probably lived tolerably well at home and humanity requires that we should do all that is reasonable to make them contented. With kind treatment I really believe that everyone one of your men will faithfully serve you.³¹

These terms soon were ordered to apply to the entire line of the canal by the director, and Ingle was directed to go up the line and to investigate the complaints so generally made.³²

One of the cases found by Ingle where friction between the contractors and the immigrants had led to a work stoppage was settled by a special meeting of the board with the disputing parties. It was agreed that the thirteen laborers who had left the line would return to work [missing text] paying the approved workmen and mechanics \$1.12 ½ per day and the others according to merit down to \$1 each besides their board. Thus the stage was set for still higher wages along the canal in the hope that this would avert further turmoil.³³

Many of the dissatisfied workers were not so patient or conscientious. Some deserted the line of the canal and disappeared into the neighboring countryside. At first the board dealt leniently with the runaways that were captured and imprisoned, releasing them from jail on the promise that they would return to the canal.³⁴ The directors believed at this time that the grievances would be correct and the men retained. As they continued to abscond, the board began to lose faith in their good intentions and ordered effective steps taken to apprehend them.³⁵

When it was reported that some of the men fled to the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, the directors appealed directly to the President of the rival work not to hire the immigrants that had been brought to the Potomac Valley by the Canal Company.³⁶ Failing to receive full satisfaction from the railroad, the board ordered the preparation of a resume of the laws relative to indentured servants to be printed for distribution to the foreign laborers.³⁷

Following a report in late October that 23 runaways had been caught and that many others had absconded, the board ordered that “immediate steps be taken to apprehend those now absent.”³⁸ One of the principal consequences of the company’s policy of taking a hard line against the apprehended runaways was a series of costly trials. On October 24, the *Washington Chronicle* reported that a number of such laborers had been brought before Judge Cranch in the District of Columbia court on a writ of habeas corpus. The workers had refused to comply with their contracts on the ground that they could not make themselves slaves and were under no obligation to serve the company. Hence they had left the line of the canal, only to be captured and imprisoned. The judge, at the urging of the company counsel, “wholly subverted” these “new-fangled notions

³¹ Ingle to Wines, October 3, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Cao.

³² Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 367.

³³ Proceedings of the President and Board of directors, A, 376.

³⁴ Ibid, A, 367–368

³⁵ Ibid, A, 379

³⁶ Jones to President and Directors, October 1829, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co., and Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 369, 377.

³⁷ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 378.

³⁸ Ibid, A, 379.

of American liberty” by sending the workers back to prison until they were willing to comply with the terms of their contracts.³⁹

The series of trials in Baltimore where the company caught up with a large number of laborers and prosecuted them as runaways and debtors, proved to be a costly failure. Baltimore was hostile to the claims of the company, and the workers received the sympathetic assistance of lawyers, merchants, and tavern keepers who had been influenced by the emerging Jacksonian political philosophy. On one occasion in late October when agents of the canal company were about to take 20 captured runaways from Baltimore to Washington by steamboat, an innkeeper named Fox and an attorney named David Stewart informed the men that “they were of right perfectly free and therefore unlawfully arrested.” After hearing this language, the workers “united in an effort and succeeded in an escape.” Accordingly, the board ordered director Janney to consult with William Wirt, the former U.S. Attorney General who had set up a private practice in Baltimore shortly after leaving the government, concerning “the subject of prosecuting to the utmost rigor of the law this Mr. Stewart, Mr. Fox, and many others who may have aided in the escape of the men.” The board was anxious that the escapees be captured, imprisoned as runaways, and prosecuted “in the hope that the question may be at once settled in Baltimore as it has been here (in Washington) on a writ of *habeas corpus*.” If they did not act immediately, the board figured that Baltimore would become a haven for the runaways. The board settled on this procedure as it gave them a greater chance for success. Furthermore, a favorable decision in such a case would allow the canal company to hold the men to bail for their performance of their contract or to sue the men for their passage money.⁴⁰

When Wirt reported that it would be difficult to prosecute Fox and Stewart, the canal board determined only to take the eleven runaways that had been captured to trial on a writ of *habeas corpus*. In early November the City Court of Baltimore ruled that the agreements between the company and the workers were not of a master-servant character, but were merely contracts for work. The men were freed, though subject to damages and costs. The company could still sue for debts, and for a short period the directors considered suing each of the men for the cost of their transportation or for the value of their services under the terms of the indentures which were computed at \$50 for a common laborer and \$75 for a mason.

It soon became evident that if such suits were filed, the immigrants could plead bankruptcy and either get off entirely or be sent to jail at the company’s expense. In a jury trial there was always the possibility they might argue that the company had first broken the contract by providing inadequate or rotten food supplies on the voyage from Britain. With this argument, no court in Baltimore would convict them, especially when it might be composed of railroad men looking for workers themselves. In view of this unpromising prospect, the cases were dropped.⁴¹

An unhappy sequel to the Baltimore case occurred when the City Court attempted to charge the canal company for arresting and imprisoning the eleven runaways. Although canal agents assisted in locating and arresting the workers, the company was charged the full amount by law for taking the men into custody. Among the charges were items for the hire and the refreshment of the horses used by the court employees to arrest the men. Furthermore, the company was billed for the jail and tavern expenses of the men while they were awaiting trial.⁴²

The immigrants who remained on the line, servants and freemen alike, suffered greatly from ill-health due to the rigors of the work and unhealthy atmosphere of the Potomac Valley. As early as August, 1829, sickness along the line of the canal forced many engineers as well as con-

³⁹ [citation missing]

⁴⁰ Ingle to Janney, October 26, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co.

⁴¹ Ingle to Wirt, October 29, November 6, 1829, and Ingle to Glenn, April, 1830, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co.

⁴² Ingle to Glen, November 17, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co.

tractors and laborers to cease their work, thus causing the first of many health-related work slowdowns.⁴³

During the following two months, the sick and destitute workers poured into Georgetown in ever-increasing numbers. By October they were being picked up off the streets of the town, sick and starving. [missing text] time, 126 had been cared for by the city authorities, and John Little, Trustee for the city of Georgetown, and John Brigum, Overseer of Poor, complained that these people were not Georgetown's poor and should be the responsibility of the canal company.⁴⁴ Accordingly, the canal board appropriated \$150 for the care of the sick workers.⁴⁵

In some cases the board agreed to pay for the care of entire families that had been imported. For example, the directors paid \$9 per week for Evan, an "aged and infirm man" and his family only two of whom were capable of performing any work.⁴⁶

The influx increased as winter approached, some finding their way to Washington where they were cared for by the city poor house and by private charity.⁴⁷ The miserable conditions of the laborers and the dismal tales of their treatment aroused city officials such as Washington Mayor Joseph Gales and humanitarian groups such as the Society of the sons of St. George, to well publicized attacks, thereby obliging the company to take official notice of the accusations and defend itself.⁴⁸ To counter some of the mounting criticism, the board in April 1830 appropriated an additional \$117.45 to Georgetown and \$267.45 to Washington for the medical care given the workers.⁴⁹

The canal company was further put on the defensive by foreign visitors to Washington who observed the plight of the Irish immigrant workers and described their impressions in published journals of their travels. One of the most scathing indictments of the company's mistreatment of its imported workers was written by Frances Milton Trollope, an English lady who spent the summer of 1830 in the Potomac Valley. Her condemnation of the canal company's labor policy was published in her *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832):

I have elsewhere stated my doubts if the laboring poor of our country mend their condition by emigrating to the United States, but it was not till the opportunity which a vicinity to the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal gave me, of knowing what their situation was after making the change, that I became fully aware how little it was to be desired for them. Of the white laborers on this canal, the great majority are Irishmen; their wages are from ten to fifteen dollars a month, with a miserable lodging, and the large allowance of whiskey. It

⁴³ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 335.

⁴⁴ Little to President and Directors, October 13, 1829, enclosing the report of John Brigum, October 10, 1829, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

⁴⁵ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 380–381.

⁴⁶ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 399. The directors, angered that such a man was permitted to emigrate to the Potomac Valley, order that Evan be discharged from his indenture and that expenses incurred in caring for him be charged to Richards.

⁴⁷ Whitwell to Mercer, March 9, 1830, enclosing the report of John McNerhany, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co. Under the leadership of John McLeod, an Irish schoolmaster in the city, a group founded by the Washington Relief Society in 1830 to help the "indigent and disabled emigrants" and other distressed people who were unable to receive medical care or other treatment at city almshouse. In one winter, the organization boarded forty people in private homes or taverns, and in 1833 it opened an infirmary for destitute foreigners. Constance McLaughlin Green, *Washington: Village and Capital, 1800–1878*, (2 vols; Princeton, 1962), I, 133–134.

⁴⁸ Gales to Ingle, February 8, 1830, and Lenox and Herring to Ingle, February 17, 1830, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

⁴⁹ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, B, 65.

is by means of this hateful poison that they are tempted, and indeed enabled for a time to stand the broiling heat of the sun in a most noxious climate: for through such, close to the romantic but unwholesome Potomac, the line of the canal has hitherto run. The situation of these poor strangers, when they sink at last in “the fever,” which sooner or later is sure to overtake them, is dreadful. There is a strong feeling against the Irish in every part of the Union, but they will do twice as much work as a Negro, and therefore they are employed. When they fall sick, they may, and must look with envy on the slaves around them; for they are cared for; they are watched and physicked, as a valuable horse is watched and physicked: not so with the Irishman: he is literally thrown on one side, and a new comer takes his place. Details of their sufferings, and unheeded death, too painful to dwell upon, often reached us; on one occasion a farmer calling at the house, told the family that a poor man, apparently in a dying condition, was lying beside a little brook at the distance of a quarter of a mile. The spot was immediately visited by some of the family, and there in truth lay a poor creature, who was already past the power of speaking; he was conveyed to the house, and expired during the night. By inquiring at the canal, it was found that he was an Irish laborer, who having fallen sick, and spent his last cent, had left the stifling shantee where he lay, in the desperate attempt of finding his way to Washington, with what hope I know not. He did not appear above twenty, and as I looked on his pale young face, which even in death expressed suffering, I thought that perhaps he had left a mother and a home to seek wealth in America. I saw him buried under a group of locust trees, his very name unknown to those who laid him there, but the attendance of the whole family at the grave gave a sort of decency to his funeral, which rarely, in that country, honors the poor relics of British dust: but no clergyman attended, no prayer was said, no bell was tolled; these, indeed, are ceremonies unthought of, and in fact, unattainable without much expense, at such a distance from a town; had the poor youth been an American, he would have been laid in the earth in the same unceremonious manner. But had this poor Irish lad fallen sick in equal poverty and destitution among his own people, he would have found a blanket to wrap his shivering limbs and a kindred hand to close his eyes.

Trollope concluded her cryptic observations on American immigrant labor practices in general and those of the canal company in particular by stating:

The poor of Great Britain, whom distress or a spirit of enterprise tempt to try another land, ought, for many reasons, to repair to Canada; there they would meet co-operation and sympathy, instead of malice, hatred, and all uncharitableness.⁵⁰

The use of imported laborers succeeded in temporarily stabilizing and lowering the rate of wages on the canal.⁵¹ The total working force on the line rose from a low of 1,600 or 2,000 in mid-summer to over 3,100 in November, 1829.⁵² In the long run, however, the experiment was a failure and the difficulty of enforcing the terms of the contracts in the hostile atmosphere of the Jacksonian Era led to its suspension. The entanglements in law suits, in poor house claims, and in unfavorable notoriety, more than offset the immediate advantages. Even the statistics indicating a substantial rise in the labor force late in 1829 fails to prove the success of the experiment, for

⁵⁰ James E. Mooney, ed. *Domestic Manners of the Americans* by Francis Milton Trollope (Barre, 1969), 229–230.

⁵¹ *Second Annual Report* (1830), 5–6.

⁵² Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 352.

there was a suspension of work on the Pennsylvania Main Line and Chesapeake and Delaware Canals which might have caused migration to the Potomac Valley.⁵³

Before the lessons of the episode had been learned, the directors at the urging of President Mercer, considered the purchase of 100 black slaves for the use of the company.⁵⁴ In taking this step, as in the case of the indentured servants, the board was following the example of the Potomac Company, despite the warning of the unfortunate results of the earlier experiments. As it would be necessary to instruct the slaves in the art of cutting stone and construction masonry, the directors took no action to carry out the recommendation. When a proposal to purchase 350 slaves came up before the annual meeting of the company stockholders in June 1830, it was decisively defeated.⁵⁵ By that time the company, believing the results were not commensurate with the effort, had given up on all schemes to provide cheap labor for the contractors.⁵⁶

Aided in part by the completion of work on the Pennsylvania Main Line and the Chesapeake and Delaware Canals, the canal board had less difficulty in obtaining an adequate labor force in 1830. By May of that year some 6,000 workers and 700 horses were engaged on the line. However, as the legal controversy with the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad restricted construction above Point of Rocks and discouraged progress above Seneca Creek by preventing the building of the planned feeder at Harpers Ferry, far fewer laborers were needed in late 1830 and 1831. By mid-December 1830, there were 2,205 men and 379 horses engaged on the line.⁵⁷ By May 1831, the force working on the line of the canal had been reduced further to 1,326 men and 276 horses.⁵⁸

As construction advanced, the canal directors were occupied with a series of problems related to the labor force. The presence of so large a body of laborers on such an extended line of the Potomac Valley created problems of morale and coordination. The annual sickly season continued to take its toll among the laborers and engineers alike, delaying construction and indirectly forcing wages up to unexpected levels.⁵⁹

Compensation to laborers who had been injured in work-related accidents became an item of financial concern to the directors, thereby forcing them to encourage the contractors to take greater safety precautions when undertaking dangerous work such as blasting. One of the first of these cases was that of John Stubblefield, a free black, who was awarded a \$2 monthly stipend for one year by the board after he lost his left arm while blasting rocks on the line in December 1828.⁶⁰

Other petitions for aid from disabled workers soon were making their way to the board, including an appeal by Felix O'Neal, an Irish immigrant who had suffered a broken thigh bone and an injured hand while blasting on Section A in Georgetown.⁶¹ The company also took steps to protect itself against liabilities when the worker on several different sections applied in February 1830 for the distribution of assessments made for work done in the month prior to the death of

⁵³ Ibid, A., 353–354

⁵⁴ Ibid, A, 310

⁵⁵ *Second Annual Report* (1830), 28

⁵⁶ All told, the company spent \$37,300.54 on the recruitment, passage, and superintendence of the immigrants. Ledger A, C&O Co., 79. For his services in recruiting the laborers, Richards was paid \$605.61. Ibid, 78.

⁵⁷ *Frederick Town Herald*, January 15, 1831.

⁵⁸ *Third Annual report* (1831), C&O Co. 4

⁵⁹ *Second Annual Report* (1830), 25.

⁶⁰ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 149.

⁶¹ O'Neal to President and Directors, April 13, 1831, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co. The board later agreed to pay O'Neal \$5 per month for five months.

one contractor and for the work done in the month prior to the abandonment of a contract by another.⁶²

Some of the most important problems of morale among the labor force centered on such diverse considerations as communications, recreational diversion, and domestic home life. To solve the communication problem, a new postal route was established in the winter of 1828 with its own offices scattered along the canal. In September 1839, service was upgraded so that the mail was delivered twice daily along the line of the canal by horseback. By the following year, there were eight offices on the waterway at the following locations: Magazine, Section No. 8, Bear Island, Clementon, Seneca Mill, Edward's Ferry, Conrad's Ferry, Mouth of Monocacy, and Catoclin. In most cases, the contractor on the section was appointed the postmaster, on President Mercer's recommendation, but several were nearby landowners appointed on the recommendation of their Congressman.⁶³

A critical problem facing the director was that of diversion or recreation. In the absence of other sources of amusement, drinking became almost the sole outlet for the workers.⁶⁴ Furthermore, many of the workers who were expected to put in long hours six days a week, ignored company regulations and insisted on taking an extended vacation over the Christmas holiday season to spend time with their families.⁶⁵ The board, after considerable prodding, also took steps in October 1829 to boost the morale of those workers who had brought their families with them from Europe. To meet the demands of rising inflation, the directors on October 12 increased the weekly allotment to \$2.25 for board to each imported laborer. Furthermore, the workers having families were allowed an additional sum of 50 centers per week, thereby changing the company policies forbidding any aid for families coming with the recruits.⁶⁶

Later, on December 2, the board determined to permit the foreign laborers who had brought families to receive and apply to their own board and wishing bills their earnings until April 1, 1830, after which time they were to use a portion of their earnings to repay the company for their passage and expenses. At the same time, any boys that Richards had recruited were discharged from their indentures and their expenses charged to his personal account.⁶⁷

The company, anxious to rebut the charges of mistreating the immigrants, undertook the care of those imported families where a death made it difficult for the laborer to continue his work. One such case was that of John Wiley whose wife died several months after arriving on the line, leaving three children. Seeking to help the man care for his children, the board granted him a discharge from his indenture and authorized the contractors to pay him any wages he might have earned above the expenses of his passage. Within several weeks, Wiley abandoned the children and the directors determined to provide for the three children. As the directors had warned Richards not to send families, they charged the expenses to his personal account.⁶⁸

⁶² Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, B, 28.

⁶³ Nelson to Mercer, September 28, 1829; Gardner to Mercer, September 29, 1829; and Hobbie to Mercer, February 19, 1830, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

⁶⁴ Watts to President and Directors, December 9, 1829, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

⁶⁵ Owens to Board of Directors, December 9, 1829, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

⁶⁶ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 374.

⁶⁷ Ibid, A, 410–411, and Ingle to Powell, December 8, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co.

⁶⁸ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, A, 395, 424, and Ingle to Ford and Chapman, November 19, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co.

II. A TIME OF TROUBLE: 1832–1842

The decade of construction from 1832 to 1842, which saw the completion of the canal to Dam No. 6 above Hancock, was a period marked by severe cholera epidemics among the workers and a series of labor disturbances often accompanied by violence. As a consequence, the construction of the waterway was hampered and the cost of the work rose sharply, thereby complicating the financial and legal problems of the canal company.

The canal project had been plagued from its inception by the annual “sickly” season in the Potomac Valley, giving the region a reputation as an unhealthy area. In a report to the House Committee on Roads and canals in 1834, the canal board described the problem and the popular beliefs as to its causes:

The autumnal diseases of the Potomac are by no means common to the whole river, which below tide water, as at Georgetown, is remarkable for the salubrity of its climate in autumn as well as at other seasons. Above tide water, which reaches three miles above Georgetown, and below Harpers Ferry, the banks of the Potomac are unhealthy from the last of July until the first hard frost of autumn, their inhabitants being subject for that period to intermittent, and agues and fevers, as on the Susquehanna and Juniata, and it is believed for the same reason, the great breadth of those rivers in proportion to the depth of their volume of water when reduced by autumnal droughts.

One peculiarity is common to those rivers: it is the growth of several species of grass from their bottoms, the stems and blade of which attain, by the first hot weather of August, a considerable height and float on the surface of the water. Where this is shoal, and warmed by the action of the autumnal sun, this grass early undergoes a fermentation and decomposition, and emits an offensive odor, very perceptible by travelers who ford the river at night in the last of August, and throughout the month of September when the air is damp and still. May not this effluvia be the cause of the ill healthy of adjacent shored: In deep water, as opposite to Georgetown and Alexandria, and for the considerable distance above and below these towns, this grass does not appear on the surface of the Potomac, nor does it at Harper’s Ferry, in consequence of the rapidity of the current, nor opposite to Shepherdstown, where a dam erected immediately below that town has deepened the water opposite to it.⁶⁹

So firmly had these ideas become established in the minds of the valley inhabitants that there was usually a noticeable slacking of work on the canal during the summer months as company officials, contractors, and laborers left the region?

The inhabitants of the Potomac Valley were frightened perhaps more from the onslaught of cholera epidemics than any other disease because of its “fearful suddenness,” its dreadful pain, and its “sudden termination.” The afflicted patient

would feel an uneasiness of the bowels with great heat and intense thirst; then would follow a feeling of heaviness and weakness, an almost total suspension of the pulse with a low, weak, and very plaintive voice; then the ‘rice water’ discharge would take place, violent vomiting, oppression of the stomach and an impeded respiration. The circulation of the blood became exceedingly sluggish, the forehead, tongue, and extremities became

⁶⁹ U.S., Congress, House, committee on Roads and Canals, Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, H. Rept. 414, 23d Cong., 1st sess., 1834, Appendix U, 237.

very cold. Cramps occurred in the legs, toes, and hands; the face of the patient became livid and cadaverous and the body presented a mottled appearance.

These symptoms were quickly succeeded by the final stage, which was a complete collapse of the whole system, greatly resembling the appearance of death, which quickly succeeded. The patient sometimes died in a tranquil stupor and sometimes in violent spasms and in great distress. The different stages of the disease followed each other occasionally with such rapidity that death occurred in a few hours after the appearance of the first symptom...The most popular treatment at first was hot applications, mustard plasters, calomel, and opium.⁷⁰

The canal company resorted to unusual precautions to offset the threat of the “sickly” season and to keep the work going when construction commenced above Point of Rocks following the successful resolution of the legal conflict with the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in January 1832. The safeguards provided were the customary ones, but the attempt to prevent the effects of illness among the laborers was unprecedented on the canal. The board resolved to engage a physician to inspect the workers’ shanties along the canal from July to October, to recommend measures for the health of the contractors and laborers, and to acquire and prescribe medicines for the sick.⁷¹ The office of Superintendent was created to let all the contracts above Point of Rocks and to provide “for the removal of the sick and then supply with such necessities, hospital stores, and comfort, as their condition may need.”⁷²

In July, the directors relinquished the condition contained in the recently-let contracts prohibiting the contractors from providing spirituous liquors to the hands employed by them.⁷³

When cholera first appeared among the workers near Harpers Ferry in August, the board authorized President Mercer to rent a suitable building near that town to be used as a hospital and appropriated the sum of \$500 for the workers who would get the disease. As the cholera spread toward Point of Rocks, the board in early September authorized Mercer to provide for a second hospital near that village. Provision was to be made with both the contractors and the laborers to share the expenses of these hospitals with the company.⁷⁴

In addition, steps were taken by the board to comply with a request from the Corporation of Georgetown that the water be drawn off that portion of the canal in the town at least once a week during the summer months as a sanitary measure.

By publicizing these measures for the care and prevention of sickness, the company sought to encourage workers and contractors alike to stay on the job, and perhaps to attract laborers from other public work.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Thomas J. C. Williams, *History of Washington County* (2 vols., Hagerstown, 1906), 221–222. According to Sanderlin, *Great National Project*, 93: “Officials of the Department of Health of the District of Columbia believe that the illnesses described were probably of various origins, coinciding in occurrence.” Water-borne diseases such as typhoid and paratyphoid may have been the most prevalent. Insect-borne fevers undoubtedly accounted for many more. Dysentery from several causes and possibly milk-borne diseases seem best to fit the other symptoms described. On top of these were all the other human illnesses which when occurring in the sickly season, were attributed to the river. The occurrence of the water-borne and pest-borne diseases in late August and September coincided with the mosquito season in the Potomac Valley and the peak of the warm water period in the stream (at which time water-borne diseases are most potent.”

⁷¹ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, c, 174–174.

⁷² *Ibid*, 175

⁷³ *Ibid*, C, 186

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, C, 212–214

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, C, 212

Despite all the precautions, the summer of 1832 proved to be the most disastrous to the health of the workers. Late in August, Asiatic cholera, which had gradually been spreading south from Montreal, made its appearance on the line near Harpers Ferry. The plague, soon popularly called the “the pestilence,” spread rapidly down to Point of Rocks, causing a suspension of work on many sections as fear spread through the ranks of the labor force.⁷⁶

Niles’ Register described in ghastly terms the panic and confusion caused by the epidemic in the vicinity of Harpers Ferry:

The cholera has raged dreadfully among the laborers on the Ohio & Chesapeake canal, in the neighborhood of Harper’s Ferry. As many as six persons are said to have been lying dead, at one time, in a single shanty,—while in others the dead and the dying were mixed in awful confusion. Many had abandoned their employments and fled—and some of these were attached on the roads, and died in the fence corners! The habits and exposures of these poor people fit them for the reception of the cholera, and their accommodations for the sick and wretched and scanty, indeed—for they are crowded in temporary sheds, and badly supplied even with the most common necessities of life. The laborers are chiefly Irishmen.⁷⁷

After a hasty inspection of the Harpers Ferry—Point of Rocks area, President Mercer informed the directors that the panic had resulted in the dispersal of the terrified laborers. Accordingly, he observed:

If the Board but imagine the panic produced by a mans turning black and dying in twenty four hours in the very room where his comrades are to sleep or to dine they will readily conceive the utility of separating the sick, dying and dead from the living.⁷⁸

The cholera gradually spread up the river to the west of Harpers Ferry toward Sharpsburg and Shepherdstown. As it advanced, the same reports of the suspension of work and the panic of the laborers accompanied it. From Shepherdstown Henry Boteler, the proprietor of the Potomac Mill wrote:

Before this letter reaches Washington, the whole line of canal from the point of rocks to WmsPort will be abandoned by the Contractors and Laborers—The Cholera has appeared amongst them, and had proved fatal in almost every case. There has been upwards of 30 deaths nearly opposite to us since Friday last, and the poor Exiles of Erin are flying in every direction...it is candidly my opinion, that by the last of this week you will not have a working man on the whole line.⁷⁹

Similar scenes of suffering and panic were described by the company’s counsel in Frederick:

⁷⁶ Williams, History of Washington County, I, 221, and Rush to President and Directors, August 5, 18) Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co. The cholera soon spread down the Potomac Valley to Washington where the Board of Health blamed the epidemic chiefly on the “large number of foreign emigrants...employed on the public works. Most of these were from Germany and Ireland, men who neither understood our language, nor were accustomed to our climate, habits and mode of living.” Green, Washington: Village and Capital, I, 135.

⁷⁷ Niles’ Register, XLIII (September 15, 1832), 44.

⁷⁸ Mercer to Ingle, September 3, 1832, quoted in Sanderlin, Great National Project, 95.

⁷⁹ Boteler to Ingle, September 4, 1832, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co., quoted in Sanderlin, Great National Project, 95.

They have since been suffering great mortality west of Harpers Ferry, [& c] fear that work is by this time suspended. The poor creatures, after seeing a few sudden & awful deaths amongst their friends, straggled off in all directions through the country; but for very many of them the panic came too late. They are dying in all parts of Washington County at the distance of 5 to 15 miles from the river. I myself saw numbers of them in carts & on foot making their way towards Pennsylvania.⁸⁰

The scenes of suffering and death caused both anguish and alarm to the inhabitants of the valley, Engineer Thomas F. Purcell writing from Sharpsburg, described some of the occurrences of “in-human outrage” as follows:

Men deserted by their friends or comrades have been left to die in the fields, the highways, or in the neighboring barns & stables: in some instances, as I have been told; when the disease has attacked them, the invalid has been enticed from the shantee & left to die under the shade of some tree.

Excited by the sufferings of the miserable victims of this disease; the citizens of this place have ministered to their wants, and sought to sooth their dying moments; but unfortunately for the cause of humanity, nearly every person who has been with the dead bodies or has assisted in burying them have paid the forfeit with their lives: and now it is scarcely possible to get the dead buried.⁸¹

During the first week of September the dead bodies of four canal workers were brought to Hagerstown to be buried in the only Roman Catholic cemetery in Washington County. Terrified by the spreading plague, the citizenry protests against bringing the dead within the town limits and the civic authorities passed ordinances forbidding the entry of any sick or dead canal workers for hospital care or internment. To aid the helpless workers, Father Timothy Ryan, the priest in charge of St. Mary’s Church, in cooperation with Engineer Alfred Cruger of the canal company took steps to provide a burying aground near the canal.⁸²

By late September the epidemic had reached its peak, but the laborers were still suffering and dying. Niles’ Register reported that:

The disease yet prevails severely on the line or in the neighborhood of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, about Harper’s Ferry, & c. and at Sharpsburg, MD. The panic was awful, and the sufferings of the people, chiefly newly arrived foreigners, exceedingly stressing. The bodies of many laid on the roads unburied for days—being abandoned by their late relatives or associates.⁸³

As the epidemic spread, the canal company adopted measures to care for the sick and to calm the panic. President Mercer made an effort to lease an abandoned mill owned by Caspar Wever near Lock No. 31 to be used as a hospital.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Price to Ingle, September 5, 1832, quoted in Sanderlin, Great National Project, 95.

⁸¹ Purcell to President and Directors, September 11, 1832, quoted in Sanderlin, Great National Project, 95–96.

⁸² Williams, History of Washington County, I, 222.

⁸³ Niles’ Register, XLIII (September 22, 1832), 52.

⁸⁴ Mercer to Wever, September 11, 1832, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co.

Wever, a longtime foe of the company, offered exorbitant terms of \$350 per year, a rate double that when the long vacant mill had last been rented, plus all damages awarded by his agents upon examination after the mill would be relinquished⁸⁵

The terms were so repulsive that they did not receive consideration.⁸⁶

Two make-shift hospitals were finally established in some cabins rented near Harpers Ferry and in a large shanty at Section No. 112 just above Dam No. 3. Another was contemplated at Point of Rocks, while these temporary quarters left much to be desired, the permanent hospital at Harpers Ferry was not established until late in September.⁸⁷

Even then the accommodations were not very elaborate, for as late as August 27, Mercer thought that it would only be necessary to purchase

some hundred feet of plank for bunks and some blankets and sacks for straw and as few and as cheap articles for the Hospital as possible and place it in the charge of a physician of this place (Harpers Ferry) after engaging one or two nurses to attend the sick...⁸⁸

The method by which the hospital was supported was a form of group insurance that the directorate had attempted unsuccessfully to introduce earlier in 1830.⁸⁹

Each of the workers contributed 25 cents per month for the doctor's fees and the maintenance of the hospital.⁹⁰

This system had worked successfully before on the James River Canal, but, as could be expected, it worked only as long as the fear of sickness was sufficiently great to cause the men to consent to the deduction from their wages. With the arrival of cooler weather and the disappearance of the cholera, the workers refused to approve further deductions and the program was discontinued. The following spring the hospital services were terminated and the equipment sold.⁹¹

Beginning in 1832, reports of unrest among the workers on the line appear in the company records. In that year the cause of the disturbance was an ill-advised attempt to enforce the prohibition of the use of spirituous liquors by the workers. In an effort to forestall the rioting and loss of time which resulted from excessive drinking, the directors ordered the enforcement of the condition contained in all contracts above Point of Rocks prohibiting the distribution of liquor to the workers. At the same time, President Mercer unsuccessfully sought to secure the passage of a law by the Maryland Assembly prohibiting the sale of liquor within two or three miles of the canal in Frederick, Washington, and Allegany Counties.⁹²

The company had considerable difficulty enforcing its prohibition in the absence of supporting Maryland laws, as the contractors continually faced trouble with shopkeepers along the line who maintained grog shops or surreptitiously sold liquor to the men. Upon the report of Engineer Alfred Cruger that the enforcement of the prohibition was having the opposite effect from that intended, the directors repealed it.⁹³

⁸⁵ Wever to Mercer, September 13, 1832, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

⁸⁶ Mercer to Smith, September 24, 1832, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co.

⁸⁷ Mercer to Smith, September 24, 1832, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co., and Rush to President and Directors August 5, 1833, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

⁸⁸ Mercer to Ingle, August 27, 1832, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

⁸⁹ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, B, 49, 72.

⁹⁰ Mercer to Ingle, September 3, 1832; Mercer to Smith, September 24, 1832; and Rush to President and Directors, August 5, 1833, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

⁹¹ Mercer to Ingle, September 3, 1832, and Rush to President and Directors, August 5, 1833, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co., and Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, C, 263.

⁹² Mercer to Ingle, January 23, 1832, Ltrs. Rec., C&O Co.

⁹³ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, C, 185–186.

Drunkenness had actually increased during the period of prohibition as the men, deprived of a steady supply of spirits during the day, drank excessive quantities of alcohol at neighboring grog shops in the evening. The intoxicated men rioted throughout most of the night, and morning found many of them lying on the ground where they had fallen exhausted, unfit for work that day.⁹⁴

The laboring force was the cause of anxiety on the part of the directors for other reasons. For one thing there was the continued demand for more men, especially skilled masons and stonecutters. Mercer carried the search for hands as far north as Philadelphia on one of his trips to secure funds for the company. In the fall of that year, Mercer reported that he had hired eight men there. The terms which cost the company \$130, included the advance of transportation money, the promise of bonus and the guarantee of work until December 10, 1832, at fair wages.⁹⁵

Despite all the hindrance to the recruitment of laborers, the company had 4,700 men and 1,000 horses working on the line by May 1833.⁹⁶

In the summer of 1833, there was another outbreak of the cholera sickness on a less serious scale. This time it broke out among the workers near Williamsport in July. After ten men died in one day, the symptoms of panic and threatened dispersal of the workers reappeared. The unrest spread to the neighboring village of Hagerstown because so many of the Irish workers were brought there for interment in the Catholic cemetery. Fear in the town increased as the death among the workers multiplied and at least one afflicted laborer came to the hamlet for treatment and died.⁹⁷

A town meeting was held at which civic leaders expressed fear for the health and trade of the community. The town, the company, and the local Catholic parish took steps to provide other cemeteries closer to the line, thereby reducing the time lost from work during the solemnity and revelry of a funeral and removing the threat to the safety of the villagers.⁹⁸

The directors rejected the recommendation of Engineer Thomas F. Purcell to purchase suitable lots for cemeteries, “considering it to be without the line of their duty.” Instead they authorized the engineers “to use any waste ground owned by the Canal Company for the interment of persons dying upon the works of the Company.”⁹⁹

When the board refused to take further action to help the sick workers, Father Ryan, of St. Mary’s Church in Hagerstown, established a burying ground and a hospital in a log house on the “Friend” farm along the Clear Spring road near Williamsport.¹⁰⁰

The epidemic gradually retraced its previous course down the river to Harpers Ferry and then disappeared.

⁹⁴ Cruger to President and Directors, July 7, 1832, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

⁹⁵ Mercer to Ingle, October 8, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co., and Ledger A, C&O Co., 79.

⁹⁶ Mercer to Purcell, May 9, 1833, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co. Of this force, 2,700 men and 655 horses were engaged between Harpers Ferry and Dam No. 5. Fifth Annual Report (1833), C&O Co., 3.

⁹⁷ Williams, *History of Washington County*, I, 223.

⁹⁸ “Resolutions of a Public Meeting in Hagerstown July 27, 1833,” in Williams, Price, and Beatty to Purcell, July 31, 1833, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co., and Purcell to President and Directors, August 1, 1833, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

⁹⁹ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, C, 409. At least four such burying grounds were established pursuant to the Board’s directive Williamsport Cemetery, just above the canal on a small hill in the town; Cacapon Cemetery, downstream from the mouth of the Cacapon River (between what are now the Western Maryland Railroad tracks and the canal; Paw Paw Cemetery, near the present intersection of Md. 51 and the canal next to the river; and Purslane Cemetery, at the upstream side of the mouth of Purslane Run. Edward McMillan Larrabee, “A Survey of histories and Prehistoric Archeological Sites Along the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Monument 1961–1962” (NPS Mss., 1962), 34, 41–42.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, *History of Washington County*, I, 480.

In 1834 and 1835 open warfare broke out between two long feuding rival factions of the Irish workers—the Corkonians and the Longfords, sometime called Fardowners—during the idle winter months.¹⁰¹

The first encounter in January 1834 was the result of a fight between one of the Corkonians and one of the Longfords named John Irons, the latter man being beaten badly that he soon died. The fight had been triggered by the long-threatened effort on the part of the rival factions to oust adherents of the other from the line of the canal, an event which would have led presumably to an increased rate of wages for those remaining. The skirmish between the Corkonians, who were working near Dam No. 5 above Williamsport, and the Fardowners from the vicinity of Dam No. 4, below the town, resulted in several deaths and many wounded in the clash before two companies of the Hagerstown Volunteers arrived on the scene to restore order. The following day the militia returned to Hagerstown with 34 prisoners who were sent to jail.¹⁰²

After the battle there was general demoralization among the workmen, and the countryside took on the appearance of an armed camp. Within a week, a band of Corkonians “committed excesses” above Williamsport, and some of their number attempted to enter the town. However, they were met on the Conococheague Aqueduct by an opposing party of Irishmen in the town and driven back. In this affray one man was seriously beaten and wounded. The citizens of the town quickly took up arms and “soon put themselves in military order” for the protection of their homes and remained on patrol at the aqueduct “for the balance of the day, and the greater part of the night” to keep the warring factions apart.¹⁰³

Notwithstanding these preventative measures a major battle erupted the following day January 24. A party of 300 Longfords, armed with guns, clubs and helms, were permitted to cross the aqueduct and march up to Dam No. 5, when they announced that their intentions were merely to make a show of force. Farther up the line they were joined by 300 to 400 more who had apparently crossed the Conococheague behind the town. In a field on a hill-top just above Middlekauff’s Mill near Dam Mill near Dam No. 5, they met about 300 Corkonians armed with “military weapons.” Accepting a challenge, the Longfords charged up the hill amid an exchange of volley that killed a number of men. Soon the Corkonians fell back and fled before the superior forces of the Longfords. A merciless pursuit took place until nightfall, and many of the fugitives that were overtaken were savagely put to death. Later five men were found in one place with bullets through their heads. In addition, the bodies of other dead and wounded were strewn in every direction. All of the casualties were reported to have been of the Corkonian faction. About 10 o’clock that night the victorious Longfords marched back through Williamsport, disbanded, and returned to their shanties below the town.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ The Corkonians had emigrated from Cork, Ireland’s largest county which included much of the rugged southern coast. The seat of the county was the city of Cork, an emerging manufacturing and commercial center and the main seaport and the largest city on the southern coast. The Longfords emigrated from the county of Longford, a western county of the province of Leinster in north central Ireland. Located just east of the Shannon River, the county was largely agricultural hay and potatoes being its principal crops, with a few small industries in the towns of Longford, Granard, Ballymahon, and Edgeworthstown. Longford’s land was poor, and much of the surface was under peat. Thus, it became one of the least populated regions of Ireland as a result of heavy emigration, especially after the partial failure of the potato crop in 1817, 1821, 1822, and 1829. Carl Wittke, *The Irish in America* (Baton Rouge, 1956), 3–12.

¹⁰² Niles’ Register, XLV (January 25, 1834), 366; Purcell to Ingle, January 23, 1834, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co., and Williams, *History of Washington County*, I, 223.

¹⁰³ Williamsport Banner, January 18, 1834, quoted in Niles’ Register, XLV (February 1, 1834) 382, and Williams, *History of Washington County*, I, 223–224.

¹⁰⁴ Williamsport Banner, January 18, 1834, in Niles’ Register, XLV (February 1, 1834), 382.

The following day Colonel William H. Fitzhugh, the Washington County sheriff, arrived in Williamsport in command of two volunteer companies from Hagerstown, and one of the leading rioters was arrested. Shortly thereafter two companies of local militias, named the Williamsport Rifleman and the Clearspring Riflemen, were organized. But these forces were deemed insufficient for the emergency. An urgent request was sent to Washington to ask for federal troops. At the same time, deputations were sent out by the Williamsport civic leaders to the Corkonians and the Longfords to bring the leaders of the two factions together and effect reconciliation. About sunset on January 17, representatives of the two Irish factions met with the town leaders at Lyles' Tavern. A treaty of peace was prepared by the magistrates under the direction of General Otho Williams which the Irishmen signed.¹⁰⁵

The town authorities warned the immigrants that if either side violated the agreement the citizens and the militia would unite with the other faction to drive the offender out of Washington County.

The Williamsport citizenry took other precautions to preserve the peace. One company of horse and two companies of infantry were organized. When word was received that a force of 100 armed Corkonians had passed Harpers Ferry and were on their way to reinforce their friends at Dam No., 5, the militia leaders were dispatched to meet the party near Dam No., 4. After hearing of the peace treaty, the Corkonians disbanded, surrendered their arms and returned to their work down the river. The forty prisoners in the Hagerstown jail were then released upon their own recognition under the terms of the treaty.¹⁰⁶

In the meantime on January 28, Dr. John O. Wharton, one of the representatives from Washington County in the Maryland House of Delegates, introduced a resolution asking the President of the United States to order out a sufficient number of troops to preserve the peace at Williamsport. The resolution passed the House, but the Senate substituted a resolution of its own authorizing the Governor to call out the state militia. Although the Senate's version was quickly accepted by the House, President Andrew Jackson had already issued orders to send two companies of the 1st regiment of the U.S., Cavalry stationed at Fort McHenry to proceed to the canal. Arriving via the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, the federal force remained along the line of the waterway for several months.¹⁰⁷

The presence of the federal troops triggered a lively debate among the officers of the canal company. John Eaton, the newly-elected company president, urged that the company to take advantage of the situation and discharge the trouble makers.¹⁰⁸

This recommendation however was rejected by the directors because there was continual shortage of laborers and the likelihood that such an attempt would produce more violence.

Hostilities occurred briefly during February 1835 near Galloway's Mill. This time the workers on Sections Nos. 166 and 170–172 struck for higher wages and they made attempts to prevent all the laborers along the line from working. After a riot erupted, a "troop of horse, and company of riflemen" was dispatched from Hagerstown and "reduced the rioters to order and drove them away." The altercation, which had delayed the completion of the four sections by some fifteen days, so disgusted the editors of the Hagerstown Torchlight that they concluded their

¹⁰⁵ Niles' Register, XLV (February 8, 1834), 399. A copy of the treaty may be seen in Appendix A.

¹⁰⁶ Williams, History of Washington County, I, 224.

¹⁰⁷ Niles' Register, XLV (February 1, 1834), 382–383 Washington National Intelligences, January 30, 1834; and Williams, History of Washington County I, 224–225. According to Carl Wittke in his *The Irish in America*, 36, this was the first time that "President Jackson called out federal troops "in" a labor dispute."

¹⁰⁸ Eaton to Janney, Smith, and Gunton, January 31, 1834, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

report by stating: “To refuse such persons employment is the surest way to check a riotous spirit.”¹⁰⁹

The company again attempted to eliminate drunkenness along the line in the summer of 1835 by placing provisions in the contracts for the work between Dams Nos. 5 and 6 prohibiting the contractors from giving liquor to the workers. As the “sickly” season approached, however, the board temporarily suspended the prohibition at the request of John Gorman, the contract for Sections Nos. 247–248 and Culvert No. 190. The prohibition was to be dispensed with for the duration of the “sickly” season in those cases where a contractor obtained a certificate from a reputable physician that the use of spirituous liquors was necessary to the health of his hands.¹¹⁰

The construction of the canal above Dam No. 5 was marred by recurring strike and clashes among the workers. In January 1836, violence flared between the Corkonians and the Longfords near Clear Spring. Two shanties were burned and several men were severely wounded in the encounter. It was said that the rival camps feared each other so much that they posed guards at night “with as much vigilance as would two threatening armies.” In reporting the incident, the Hagerstown *Torchlight* urged the public authorities to “keep a close eye upon them (Irish), or much blood may yet be shed before spring, when their attention to their work will keep them from committing acts of violence on each other.” The newspaper concluded its remarks by saying that “Thus are the ancient feuds of these foreign disturbing the peace of the country, and making life insecure.”¹¹¹

In 1836 violence occurred for the first time during the working months. The cause of these later disturbances appears to have been primarily economic. The faltering national economy as a result of the Jacksonian economic policies was beginning to produce widespread unemployment and consequently lower wages. Competition for the available jobs and for higher wages for found expression in the driving off of rivals and the creation of a scarcity of labor. Disturbances occurred all along the line, but the principal outbreak took place in April at Sections Nos. 229–230 about one mile below Lock No. 51. Here G.M. and R.W. Watkins had a large (under paid) force “principally of Dutch and country borns.” These laborers were attacked by a party of Irish and beaten and dispersed with such ferocity that the contractors still had been unable to collect a work force ten months later.¹¹²

Lee Montgomery, the tunnel contractor, was better able to keep his men on the job and maintain order among them. The canal commissioner explained this as follows:

Our Methodist parson-contractor upon being asked how he escaped, replied that his men were generally picked men, and had provided themselves, he believed, with some guns and few Little Sticks, and it was supposed they would use them rather than be intruded on, the rioters thought it best not to stop as they were passing by—The truth is that in a good cause few men would probably use a “Little Stick” more effectively than himself, although he would pay at the same time against being obliged to “hold them uneasy.”¹¹³

The unrest continued throughout the summer and into the fall. Several of the contractors as well as some non-striking workmen were threatened. Beatings, vandalism, and other forms of physical violence were the common methods of punishment to those who defied the “desperadoes.” Canal

¹⁰⁹ Hagerstown *Torchlight* quoted in Niles’ Register, XLVII (February 21, 1835), 429, and Proceedings of the Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, D, 234, 256–257.

¹¹⁰ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, D, 403.

¹¹¹ Hagerstown *Torchlight* quoted in Niles’ Register, XLIX (January 16, 1836), 337.

¹¹² [citation missing]

¹¹³ Bender to Ingle, May 8, 1836, quoted in Sandelin, Great National Project, 119.

officials attributed the disturbances to the activities of a secret terrorist society from New York with branches in many states—probably an early labor union or Irish fraternal organization. As evidence of this charge was a placard that company men had taken from the door of a shanty near the tunnel. So great was the fear of those punished that none dared testify against their tormentors. While work on the canal gradually slowed because of the rising incidence of mob rule, the directors began to gather evidence for submission to the Governor of Maryland.¹¹⁴

When work resumed on the canal in March 1837, the directors determined to relive the labor shortage for recruiting workers from the depression-ridden cities of the Northeast. Accordingly, Superintendent of Masonry Alexander B. McFarland was authorized to journey to Philadelphia and New York to induce hands to come to the canal. However, remembering their past difficulties with contract labor and uncertain of how the national economic downturn would affect the finances of the canal company, the director instructed him “not to bind the Company to the payment of any money to men who may come on to the work, nor as security for the payment of wages.” The following month when Chief Engineer Charles B. Fisk requested permission to employ an agent in New York City to send hands to the line of the canal, the board refused to act other than to make arrangements for such an agent “if it should hereafter be found necessary to appoint one.”¹¹⁵

The economic plight of the nation forced the suspension of many internal improvement projects during 1837. The resulting layoffs of large numbers of workers made it easier for the Chesapeake & Ohio, which was continuing its sporadic construction operations with the aid of loans from the State of Maryland, to recruit additional laborers. Yet despite the influx of new workers, it was reported that the level of wages on the canal rose to \$1.18 $\frac{3}{4}$ and \$1.20 a day.¹¹⁶

Because of its own financial difficulties the company in late 1837 suspended construction above the Cacapon River (except for the heaviest sections and the masonry) and concentrated its operations on completing the waterway below that point. This curtailment in activities raised fears among company officials that they would lose some of the workers who had been employed above the Cacapon to the James River and the Kanawha Canal in Virginia. As these laborers, some of whom had come well-recommended from Philadelphia and New York, would be needed when additional funds were available to resume full-scale construction, Superintendent of Masonry McFarland urged Chief Engineer Fisk to consider some inducements to keep these reputable workers on the line. Since ten of them had the finances to engage in contracts, steps were taken to offer them contracts for the construction of the remaining culvers below the Cacapon.¹¹⁷

New outbreaks of rioting occurred in 1837 and 1838 among the Irish workers. In May and June 1837, the Paw Paw Tunnel was the site of disturbances, which were repeated in February and June of 1838. Here Parson Montgomery was working with his picked crew, augmented by laborers imported from England to increasing his force and to resist the strikers. Notwithstanding the efforts of the contracts the Irish succeeded in getting control of the work and bringing operations to a halt by commencing a “reign of terror.” After surveying the situation in early June 1838, Engineer Ellwood Morris reported to Chief Engineer Fisk:

Some scoundrels on Montgomery’s Job (tunnel) whose names I cannot discover have taken up (recently) the plan of hammering all new comers. On the night of the 8th, 2 very

¹¹⁴ Bender to Washington, November 17, 1836, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co., and Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, E, 172.

¹¹⁵ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, E, 215, 244.

¹¹⁶ Fisk to Bender, August 3, 1837, Ltrs. Sent, Chief Engineer, and Ninth Annual Report (1837), C&O Co., 9–10.

¹¹⁷ McFarland to Fisk, December 7, 1837, Ltrs. Recd., Chief Engineer.

steady & excellent miners who had been expressly written for by Montgomery & who had not been one week on the work, were assailed at midnight as they ascended from the lower workings (they being on the night shift) & on stepping from the bucket were knocked down & beaten with clubs.

One of them the doctor told me yesterday had his thigh badly fractured. The other is very badly bruised.

The attacking force, I learn from inquiring were 20 to 40 in number armed with shillelaghs.

On the night of the 9th, some others of the shaft workmen were beaten & on Sunday last there was a mob fight in Athys Hollow.¹¹⁸

Four days later on June 14, Morris informed Fisk of the increasingly dangerous situation at Paw Paw Tunnel. On further examination he had found

that the miner (Richardson) who was beaten at the shafts and had his thigh broken, is a boss, & what may appear singular on this work, he is started to have been a faithful one. There is every reason to believe from a variety of indirect information which I have become possessed of, that there is a regular conspiracy, embracing nearly all the men at the Tunnel; which has for its object to make time & get wages, without furnishing the usual equivalent in labor. Succeeding in this they seem to contemplate preserving so desirable a state of things to themselves, by either preventing the coming or instantly driving off, every man disposed to do a days work as well as every boss who seems inclined to exact it.

To attain this end they will doubtless take life itself if their brutal beatings should fail.

One of the best bosses now on the work (Williams) who is driving the bottoming, has received a solemn warning that he must decamp or take the usual consequences, this man has been disposed to do Montgomery justice; but he now stands in this position—he must either decamp, risk his life, or resort to the alternative which seems so well understood on this work....

I find that of the 40 men who came over with Evans but 2 are left on the work, the rest have been driven away in part by their own interests in part by flogging & in part by threatening, but the two last are the chief causes....¹¹⁹

Again the company was partly to blame for its own misfortunes, for it had refused to press the cases against several of the trouble makers at the tunnel after they had been arrested for pulling down shanties in broad daylight. The other workers gained the impression that the company was unwilling to bear the expense of the trial and punishment of the terrorists.¹²⁰

There were other disorders along the line of the canal in 1838, the most notable occurring at Oldtown on New Year's Day and at Prather's Neck in May. The fracas at Oldtown occurred when a large party of men working at the tunnel raided the village and nearly destroyed a tavern owned by Nicholas Ryan. Reacting quickly, Sheriff Thomas Dowden summoned the Cumberland Guards and other citizens to serve as a posse, but when they arrived at Oldtown the Irish had already left. Several ringleaders were arrested and jailed to see what effect that action would have on the others. Apparently it made little impression in the face of the continued uneasiness among

¹¹⁸ Morris to Fisk, June 10, 1838, Ltrs. Recd., Chief Engineer.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, June 14, 1838, Ltrs. Recd., Chief Engineer.

¹²⁰ Fisk to Bender, May 15, 1838, Ltrs. Recd., Commissioner.

the workers. They resorted to burning shanties in order to bring pressure to bear on contractors and to drive away German laborers and newcomers to the line whose presence threatened to reduce the jobs of the Irish and thus force down wages. As the troubles continued, a company of riflemen was organized in Cumberland, and the Governor of Maryland sent to the city 189 muskets and 120 rifles to arm the militia.¹²¹

In May 1838 violence occurred at Prather's Neck where the laborers "insisted" upon destroying the work they had done, since they were to receive no pay for it.¹²²

The trouble was caused by the fact that David Lyles, the contractor for Sections Nos. 205–206, was engaged in a controversy with the company over the completion of his contract and, meanwhile, had refused to pay the wages of the laborers working on these sections. The company had made partial payment of the laborers' wages from \$4,000 of money that had been withheld from Lyles' for the performance of his contract but refused to do more.¹²³

Faced with the destruction of their works, the company asked the local militia to protect canal property, but the directors were embarrassed by the reluctance of the citizenry to turn out. The latter pointed out that both the state and the company had refused to pay their expenses last time. Besides many of them were convinced the company was partly to blame for withholding large sums from the contractors in such critical times.¹²⁴

Some of the members of the local militia "positively refused to turn out while some went" so far as to declare, that if they did they would "fight for the Irish."¹²⁵

Nevertheless, after the company promised to pay all the expenses, two companies of militia from Hagerstown and one from Smithsburg marched to the line, seized 140 kegs of gunpowder from the relatively quiet workers, and returned them to Hagerstown where they were stored on the courthouse lot in the center of town. Militia officers described the workers and their families as being "in suffering and deplorable condition" but determined to prevent work from being done until they were paid.¹²⁶

They rejected an offer of 25 cents on the dollar and held fast to their positions. The local inhabitants assured them that they were in the right and supplied them with provisions on credit.¹²⁷

Throughout the spring of 1838, there were repeated occurrences of work slowdown along the line of the canal, confirming in the minds [?] of the directors that there was a general conspiracy afloat. It was reported by Assistant Engineer Henry M. Dungan that

It is of little use to blow the horn either in the mornings or after meals, as the men take their own time to come out on the work & I really do not think it would be safe for me to attempt to urge them to their duty....

¹²¹ Fisk to Washington, February 5, 1838, Ltrs., Sent, Chief Engineer, and Will H. Lowdermil History of Cumberland (Washington, 1878), 342.

¹²² Williams, History of Washington County, I, 233.

¹²³ Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, E, 397–398, 400–404, 408–409, and Ingle to Fisk, May 9, 1838, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co.

¹²⁴ Price to Washington, May 11, 1838, and Williams to Washington, May 16, 1838, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

¹²⁵ Williams to Washington, May 16, 1838, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

¹²⁶ Williams to Washington, May 17 and 18, 1833 Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co. On December 19, 1838, the directors authorized the payment of \$231.99 to the militia of Washington County for their services in quieting the disorders of Prather's Neck in May. At the same time, they authorized the payment of \$42.62 to the militia for their services in 1837. Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, E, 52.

¹²⁷ Fisk to Ingle, May 19, 1838; Fillebrown to Ingle, May 19, 1838; and Williams to Washington May 24, 1838; Ltrs Recd., C&O Co.

A contractor wrote that his men had “flogged off one of his best bosses if not the very best.” The only reason he could ascertain for the beating was that the boss had “endeavored to get there to work as men usually do.”¹²⁸

Prompted by a report submitted by Fisk in which he blamed much of the escalating cost of building the canal to the continuing labor disorders, the board finally took the long delayed steps to curb the violence and remove the troublemakers in the summer of 1838.¹²⁹

A renewal of strife at the tunnel provided the opportunity for a series of decisive actions by the directors. Upon the recommendation of Montgomery and the concurrence of Fisk, the board on June 28 issued the following order:

Whereas from representations made to the Board, that the laborers at the tunnel are in such a state of disorganization and insubordination that the work cannot be conducted without ruinous consequences to the Contractor; it is therefore ordered that the Contractor be and he is hereby authorized to discharge immediately all the hands now employed at the work on the tunnel, and to suspend said work until the further orders of the Board.¹³⁰

In addition, the directors took steps toward the dismissal and black-listing of troublesome workers all along the line.¹³¹

On July 18, the directors formally resolved

that the President of this company be and he is hereby authorized to direct the discharge of all disorderly men employed on the line of the Canal, and to forbid their employment hereafter, and to enable him to carry said order into effect, he is authorized to draw upon the Commissioner for the amount of wages due and necessary to be paid to the men so discharged which amount shall be charged to the contractors respectively, and that he be authorized to make the arrangements requisite to insure the application of the money for the object indicated.¹³²

Accordingly on August 1, some 130 men were discharged and blacklisted, most from the Old-town Deepcut and the Paw Paw Tunnel.¹³³

Violence along the line of the canal subsided until October 30. On that day John Burbridge, who lived near the canal in the vicinity of Evitts Creek, was nearly beaten to death by a party of Irish workers. Two companies of militia under Captain King and Haller proceeded to the

¹²⁸ Morris to Fisk, June 16, 1838, Ltrs. Recd., Chief Engineer.

¹²⁹ The portion of Fisk’s report that deals with the relationship of the escalating cost of building the canal and the labor disorders on the line may be seen in Appendix B. The report had been submitted to the Committee of Ways and Means of the Maryland House of Delegates in February 5, 1838, but it was also included as part of the company’s annual report in June 1838. Tenth Annual report (1838), C&O Co., 27.

¹³⁰ Montgomery to Fisk, June 23, 1838, and Washington to Montgomery, June 28, 1838, Ltrs. Recd., Chief Engineer.

¹³¹ Nisbet to Randolph, July 7, 1838, and Anonymous to Fisk, September 8, 1838, Ltrs. Recd., Chief Engineer.

¹³² Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, E, 466.

¹³³ Notice signed by C.B. Fisk, dated Chief Engineer’s Office August 1, 1838, Ltrs. Recd., Chief Engineer. The blacklist, which came into general use in the United States after the Panic of 1837, was used as a weapon by employers to keep active labor organizers or those sympathetic to trade unionism from employment. Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morris, *Labor’s Untold Story* (3d. ed., New York, 1975)

canal where the men were working and arrested thirty suspects. The laborers were taken to the Cumberland jail for the hearing.¹³⁴

There were no more incidents of violence among the 2,500 to 3,000 laborers on the canal until August and September 1839. At that time rioting broke out near Little Orleans, between Hancock and Cumberland. Determined to exterminate the Dutch whose general determination is to learn the line, “a large band of Irish attacked a group of Dutch workers on Section No. 281 on August 11:

At an early hour on Sunday morning 11 inst. ninety one men from Watkins and the adjoining sections, while all the men on Section No. 281 were rapt in sleep attacked each shantee, and as the inmates attempted to escape were met by his armed band of outlawed desperadoes. Several succeeded in making their escape by swimming the river, & one while in the water was shot at twice, the last ball lodging in his arm.

They also carried off whatever they could find of value by examining the men’s trunks after forcing the locks. The property taken away was in cash one hundred and ten dollars, also three pistols, one gun and articles of clothing. Their intention was also to attack the Dutch on Sec. No. 280 but the day being too far advanced that was deferred.

Altogether there were 14 German casualties the most severe being a laborer almost beaten to death and one who was almost roasted alive. Most of the remaining Dutch workers on the line fled to Virginia fearing to return “not knowing at what hour they may be attacked.”¹³⁵

The unrest occasioned by the violence affected the surrounding countryside. The lives and property of citizens and contracts were “so utterly at the mercy of the ruffian that not one of the people within their ranks was willing to give information or even to be seen communicating with the troops.” Furthermore, there were reports that a “regular organization among the laborers was forming.” It was reported that the Irish possessed about “50 stand of arms” and that recently they had procured “50 large duck guns from Baltimore.” There were also reports that numerous copies “of printed passwords and counters had been found,” thereby fueling speculation that a large conspiracy was developing.¹³⁶

Two days after the attack near Little Orleans the militia of Washington and Allegany Counties was called out to suppress the violence. A force of some 80 men moved from Cumberland under the command of Colonel Thruston and arrived at Little Orleans where they found “all laborers at work, without any suspicion of his approach.” Thruston “captured all the men on the section, picked out such as could be identified as rioters, disarmed them all, destroyed the arms, and moved up the line. As they proceeded, the militiamen searched for concealed arms and pursued those that fled. Some ten men were shot and severely wounded. Those who attempted to escape across the Potomac were fired upon by the Cumberland Riflemen as they swam and as they clambered up the banks on the opposite shore, and there were reports of several casualties. Joined by several companies of cavalry, Thruston’s increased force of 150 men proceeded to destroy some 50 shanties and shops, to burn 60 barrels of whiskey, to capture 120 guns and pistols, and to arrest 26 prominent leaders who were taken to the Cumberland jail. About \$700 worth of firearms that were purchased for the rioter were intercepted by the troops. The militia was actively engaged for five days during which the soldiers marched 81 miles. The Baltimore Sun appeared to represent the vies of most valley residents when it observed that the “proceedings of the

¹³⁴ Lowdermilk, *History of Cumberland*, 344.

¹³⁵ Coote to Fisk, August 12, 1839 Ltrs. Recd., Chief Engineer; *Niles’ Register*, LVII (September 1839), 37; and Eleventh Annual Report (1839), C&O Co., p ()

¹³⁶ *Niles’ Register*, LVII (September 14, 1839), 37.

troops seem harsh, but are not so viewed by those whose situation has made them acquainted with past acts of violence, and the immanency of future danger.”¹³⁷

Seeking to capitalize on the growing resentment of the local populace toward the lawlessness of the Irish, the company determined to prosecute those in the Cumberland jail to the full extent of the law. In well-publicized cases that extended from October 13 to 29, all but two of the Irish were convicted. One of the key prosecution witnesses was Thomas Conley, who had served temporarily since August as a Superintendent of Sections and may have played the dual role of labor spy. Those found guilty received fines and prison terms in the state penitentiary ranging from one to eighteen years.¹³⁸

In the wake of violence, agent of the Chesapeake & Ohio and the Baltimore & Ohio agreed in October to take united action to regulate the rate of wages and preserve order among the workmen in the Potomac Valley. According to the terms of the agreement, the resident engineers on both lines would collect the names of men discharged by the contractors on a monthly basis. A general blacklist would be compiled from these lists and from 150 to 300 copies would be distributed to each contractor and resident engineer on the canal and railroad. In this way it was hoped that all troublesome workers would be driven out of the valley.¹³⁹

Throughout the fall working season, both canal and railroad officials worked hard to implement the agreement, and the results were on the whole satisfactory.¹⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the Irish workers were not ready to admit defeat. A large party formed between Hancock and Little Orleans, and it was reported that this band possessed 500 stands of arms. Sometime during October, a shipment of 500 additional duck guns arrived from Baltimore to reinforce the large cache of weapons that the Irish held. As news of the gun-running operations spread through Washington and Allegany Counties, there was general alarm and widespread fear. On October 14, a number of the contract petitioned the board to exert pressure on the Governor of Maryland to station a military force along the line of the canal to preserve peace among the workmen and to protect the waterway from destruction.¹⁴¹

A recurrence of the riot at Little Orleans on November 9 brought harsh retaliation similar to that of the preceding summer. This militia was summoned as quickly as possible, and three companies were soon on the scene—the Cumberland Riflemen under General Thruston, the Clear Spring Cavalry under Major Barnes, and the Smithsburg Company under Captain Hollings. Many of the rioters were arrested and their arms taken from them, thereby restoring order and ending the threat of armed rebellion.¹⁴²

The drastic actions of the militia are the protests of some local residents who had not participated in the riots but whose property was destroyed. Apparently, the property of some innocent individuals was damaged when they refused, out of fear of reprisals by the Irish marauders, to cooperate with the militia in their search for the ringleaders and the hidden caches of weapons

¹³⁷ Ibid, and *Baltimore Sun*, September 4, 1833

¹³⁸ Lowdermilk, *History of Cumberland*, 344 and Byers to Fisk, November 12, 1839, Ltrs Recd., Chief Engineer. The canal company used an early form of labor spy in suppressing labor outbreaks among the workers in 1839. James Finney received \$100 for his “services”. Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, F, 405. Labor spies did not come into general use until the 1870s and the 1880s when strikes in the burgeoning American industries made the hiring of such individuals big business. Soyer and Morais, *Labor’s Untold Story*, 50

¹³⁹ Latrobe to Fisk, October 5, 1839, Ltrs. Recd., Chief Engineer.

¹⁴⁰ Byers to Fisk, November 8, 1839, and Patterson to Fisk, November 14, 1839, Ltrs. Recd., Chief Engineer.

¹⁴¹ Williams, *History of Washington County*, I, 233, and Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, F, 113.

¹⁴² Williams, *History of Washington County*, 233.

of the rioters. Accordingly, a local man named McLaughlin, brought suit in the U.S. Circuit Court at Baltimore against Thruston, Hollingsworth, and Charles B. Fisk, chief engineer on the canal. After a lengthy trial, the defendants were found guilty of exceeding their authority and acting illegally. A judgment of \$2,337—was rendered against them, and, after the state legislature refused to pay the sum, the canal company agreed to reimburse the men for the bill.¹⁴³

There were no further outbreaks of violence on the canal after November 1839. The end of large-scale disorders was due in part to the harsh retaliatory tactics of the militia and the use of blacklists and labor spying by the canal company. Moreover, the worsening state of the nation economy weakened the workers' ability to resist.¹⁴⁴

Construction on the canal continued sporadically from the fall of 1839 until the spring of 1842 when the faltering finances of the company finally brought all operations on the waterway to a halt. As the company faced the dismal prospect of curtailing its operations, canal officials increasingly blamed the escalating cost of labor as one of the leading causes of increasing the cost of construction above the original estimate. In August 1839, the General Committee of the Stockholders reported that:

The actual cost of common labor to contractors during the last year had been \$1.37½ per diem, including the usual allowances. Add a fair profit to the contractor, and we have the daily cost to the company \$1.50. Until within the last 3 ½ years, it did not exceed \$1.¹⁴⁵

The following year in June the board made the same point in its annual report to the company stockholders:

Whilst the first 107½ miles of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal was being constructed, the average price of labor was less than ninety cents per day, and the total cost of that whole work, extending from the basin at Georgetown to dam No. 5 was \$4,776,118. The Canal Company have already expended, since prices appreciated, on the 76½ miles west of dam No. 5 \$4,162,000. And would have had to expend but for the depreciation of labor and produce to complete the same \$2,152,663—\$6,314,663. Making a difference of \$1,538,545 in the cost of 76½ over and above the cost of 107½ of Canal.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Ibid, and Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors, F, 410–411.

¹⁴⁴ Walter S. Sanderlin, *A Study of the History of the Potomac River Valley* (Washington, 1952), 74.

¹⁴⁵ Report of the General Committee of the Stockholders of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Company (Washington, 1839), 30.

¹⁴⁶ Twelfth Annual Report (1840), C&O Co., 4. Although building operations were somewhat curtailed, there were still 1,902 workers on the line in May 1840. Ibid, 7.

III. A TIME OF RELATIVE CALM: 1847–1850

When work on the canal resumed November 1847 under a contract with Hunter Harris & Co., many of the old labor problems returned to hinder construction. Sickness and the scarcity of workers appear to have been the major problems facing the company in this period. President James M. Coale reported to the stockholders in June 1849 that:

We are constrained to say, that during the year 1848, the force employed on the line was not as large as was desirable, although urgent appeals were made for its increase. It is true, that, for a part of the time, severe sickness prevailed among the laborers, and it was difficult to procure additional hands or even to retain those employed; but we think, that in the Spring months, and in the Fall after the frosts had produced a return of a healthy atmosphere, a larger force, than the one engaged, might reasonably have been expected.¹⁴⁷

In spite of these distractions, however, the force employed on the line increased to 1,447 men and 594 horses, mules, and oxen in May 1849.¹⁴⁸

Throughout the year 1849, the lack of sufficient labor force continued to hamper construction. This problem was the result of two ever-present difficulties—the financial troubles of the contractors and to attract workers to the Potomac Valley. By the end of the “sickly” season in late September, the number of workers had been reduced by more than one-half. It was estimated that 146 masons, 46 bricklayers, and 971 laborers were needed to complete the canal by December according to the term of the contract with Hunter, Harris & Co. However, there were only 60 masons, 18 bricklayers, and 458 laborers at work on the line. Furthermore, there were not enough quarrymen to keep the 60 masons working much longer. Of the 55 carpenters that it was estimated were needed, there were only a handful at work.¹⁴⁹

While there were no reported outbreaks of violence on the canal during the last years of construction, the company took an increasingly hard line against those workers who were performing poorly. There were several instances in 1849 when the company discharged “poor quality” laborers. In October three such men were fired—Francis Crawford, a mason at Culvert No. 211, Patrick Connelly, a brick sorter at the tunnel, and Enos Belt, a boss at Locks Nos. 62, 63 1/3, 64 2/3, and 66.¹⁵⁰

The following month, four workers, who had been part of a large group of men recruited in New York to make bricks at Paw Paw Tunnel, were removed from the payroll. The four workers—Patrick Lully, a packer [?], and George Brice, John Glassgow, and James Lynch all brick-

¹⁴⁷ Twenty-First Annual Report (1849), C&O Co., 5, and Fisk to Trustees, March 29, 1848, Ltrs. Recd. Chief Engineer.

¹⁴⁸ Twenty-First Annual Report (1849), 6–7. The number of men and work animals on the line was broken down into the following categories: 77 bosses, 39 blacksmiths, 54 carpenters, 75 drillers and blasters, 107 quarrymen, 59 stonecutters, 73 masons, 112 mason’s tenders, 6 brick molders, 50 others engaged in making bricks, 16 bricklayers, 19 bricklayer’s tenders, and 760 laborers. In addition, there were 233 drivers, 562 horses, 26 mules, and 6 oxen. The transportation vehicles and machinery in use was categorized as follows: 285 carts, 20 scoops, 13 ploughs, 11 two-horse wagons, 3 three-horse wagons, 28 four-horse wagons, 1 six-horse wagon, 5 one-horse railroad cars, 14 two-horse railroad cars, 10 three-horse railroad cars, 14 drags, 4 brick-molding machines, and numerous cranes. Fisk to President and Directors, June 2, 1849, in Twenty-First Annual Report (1849), Appendix A, 24.

¹⁴⁹ Fisk to Trustees, October 8, 1849, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

¹⁵⁰ Dungan to Fisk, October 16, 1849, Ltrs. Recd., Chief Engineer.

layers—were said to be the work of a poor contingent of men at the tunnel. Hence they were singled out to serve as examples for the rest of the workers at Paw Paw.¹⁵¹

In March 1850, the financial difficulty of Hunter, Harris & Co. came to a head when they were unable to pay the workers on the line. There was suspension of work for several days, and the restless laborers threatened violence as they had been unpaid for some time. Nathan Hale, one of the agents and attorneys of the contractors, proceeded immediately to Cumberland and the other points along the line where the workers were gathering and succeeded in making arrangements with them for their wages. The laborers resumed operations, and Hunter, Harris & Co. assigned their contract to their trustees, the aforementioned Hale, John Davis and Horatio Allen, for the completion of the work.¹⁵²

When work on the canal resumed under the new financial arrangement, the company faced a critical labor shortage. In early June, President Coale informed the company stockholders:

The force at present employed on the line of the work, consists of 37 Bosses, 7 Blacksmiths, 70 Carpenters, 22 Quarrymen, 10 Stone-cutters, 20 Masons, 33 Mason Tenders, and 414 laborers, making the aggregate of all classes 613 men.

There are also 104 Drivers and 215 Horses, together with the requisite carts, wagons, & c., for such numbers. The Chief Engineer is of opinion that it will be necessary for the contracts and assignees to increase the above mentioned force about fifty per cent, to enable them to complete the Canal for the admission of the water from Cumberland to Dam No. 6 by the first of July, and that with the present force it may be done by the middle of that month.¹⁵³

During the summer of 1850, the final disruption of construction occurred. On July 18, the director negotiated a new contract with Michael Byrne, one of the major contractors in Frederick County who had constructed a number of works on the canal, and work was soon resumed. Construction proceeded without incident until the formal opening of the canal on October 10, 1850.¹⁵⁴

At the inaugural ceremonies at Cumberland on that date, one of the two long speeches of welcome and eulogy was given by William Price, a citizen of Cumberland who had long been associated with the company. In his remarks, he reminded his listeners of the difficulties that had attended the construction of the waterway and of the sacrifices of those who had built it. His summary of the trials experienced by those who had constructed the canal is perhaps the most enduring epitaph ever uttered on their behalf:

Many of us were young when this great work was commenced, and we have lived to see its completion, only because Providence has prolonged our lives until our heads are gray. During this interval of four and twenty years, we have looked with eager anxiety to the progress of the work up the valley of the Potomac. That progress has been slow—often interrupted and full of vicissitudes. At times the spectacle of thousands of busy workmen has animated the line of the work, when, to al human calculation, no cause was likely to intervene to prevent its early completion. But when we have turned to look at the scene again, it was all changed; contractors and laborers had departed and the stillness of deso-

¹⁵¹ Dungan to Fisk, November 24 and 28, 1849, and McFarland to Fisk, November 27, 1849, Ltrs. Recd., Chief Engineer.

¹⁵² Twenty-Second Annual Report (1850), C&O Co. 6–7

¹⁵³ Ibid, 4.

¹⁵⁴ Report to the Stockholders on the Completion of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal to Cumberland (Frederick, 1851), 110–111.

lation reigned in their place. Thousands have been ruined by their connection with the work, and but few in this region have had cause to bless it.

Go view those magnificent aqueducts, locks and culverts, of hewn stone—those huge embankments, on which you may journey for days down the river; go view the great tunnel passing three fifths of a mile through rock, and arched with brick, its eastern portal opening upon a thorough-cut almost equal in magnitude to the tunnel itself. Look at the vessels lying in the basin, ready to commence the work of transportation, and large enough to navigate the Atlantic,—look at all these things, and then think how soon the fortunes of individuals embarked in the prosecution of such an enterprise would be swallowed up, leaving upon it but little more impression than the bubbles which now float upon its waters. It will not be deemed out of place, if I here express the hope that those whose losses have been gains of the company, should not in the hour of its prosperity be forgotten.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Cumberland Civilian, quoted in Report on the Completion of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, 130–131.

EPILOGUE

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE IMPORTATION OF FOREIGN IMMIGRANTS
TO BUILD THE CHESAPEAKE & OHIO CANAL AND THE RISE
OF POLITICAL NATIVISM IN MARYLAND: 1829–1862.

The influx of foreign immigrants into the State of Maryland to provide a cheap pool of labor for the construction of its internal improvements projects had a profound impact on the social, religious, and political institutions of its people. This was particularly true of the largely Roman Catholic Irish workers who began to immigrate to the state in 1829–1830 to work on the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal and the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. Despite an early colonial history of religious toleration and a continuing high proportion of Catholics in the population, Maryland proved to be no more immune to religious and national prejudice than any other state during the three decades of the ante-bellum period. Prompted by the accelerated immigration of the Irish and Germans after 1845, nativism—best defined as “intense opposition to an internal minority on grounds of its foreign connections”¹⁵⁶—erupted into a political movement in the New England, mid-Atlantic, and Border States during the 1850s. Maryland, where the nativist tradition had been a latent force since the 1830s when the first waves of immigrants had arrived, emerged in the mid-1850s as one of the leading states in the political nativist movement¹⁵⁷

As the earliest election successes of the nativist movement in Maryland occurred in the Potomac Valley towns of Hagerstown and Cumberland in 1854, it can be conjectured that the importation of foreigners by the canal company to build its works served as one of the earliest and most important episodes in the long chain of events that led to the formation of a political nativist movement in the state.¹⁵⁸

The source of discontent which led to the formation of a political force, commonly known as the Know-Nothings but officially named the American Party, were related to the ultra-conservative sentiments of a nation caught up in the sweeping institutional changes of the ante-bellum period.¹⁵⁹

The sources of discontent in Maryland were similar to those of the country as a whole. Native Marylanders despaired of the influx of foreigners particularly as the state was caught up in the accelerated rush of Irish and German immigrants who came to America in the late 1840s and early 1850s in response to famine and political unrest in their homelands. During these years, the foreign-born population of Maryland increased from 7 percent in 1840 to 12 percent in 1850, and the numbers kept climbing until 77,529 foreign-born persons lived in the state in 1860, comprising 15 percent of the total white population.¹⁶⁰

The problem of the immigrants went beyond their numbers to the unwillingness of many of them to assimilate quickly, the political and economic radicalism of some of their leaders' the ease with which political machines often engineered them into voting in blocks, and the competition they presented to the American labor market. Distrust of the immigrants was closely linked to fear of Roman Catholicism the principal question in Maryland on this point being the loyalty or patriotism of the Catholics since they owed allegiance to the foreign hierarchy through their church. Distraught over the moral and social climate of the urban, industrial society that they saw

¹⁵⁶ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land* (New Brunswick, 1955), 4.

¹⁵⁷ Mary St. Patrick McConville, *Political Nativism in the State of Maryland* (Washington 1928), is the best reference to Maryland nativism prior to 1850.

¹⁵⁸ Lawrence Frederick Schmeckebier, *History of the Know-Nothing Party in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1899), 17.

¹⁵⁹ Richard Walsh and William Lloyd Fox, *Maryland A History, 1632–1974* (Baltimore, 1974), 304–305.

¹⁶⁰ William J. Evitts, *A Matter of Allegiances: Maryland from 1850 to 1861* (Baltimore, 1974), 68.

emerging around them, many old-line Americans blamed the sudden increase in crime pauperism, insanity, and drunkenness on the new immigrants. Perhaps, the greatest concern of the Know-Nothings was for the preservation of the Union as founded by the revolutionary generation. By returning to the “simpler politics” and the “purer precepts” of the Founding Fathers, the nation could overcome its social breakdown and political malaise.¹⁶¹

“Heed the warnings of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Jackson,” said the Hagerstown Herald and Torch, “and...inscribe the soul-stirring motto upon the Star-Spangled Banner—Americans shall Rule America.”¹⁶²

They hoped to cleanse politics of its demagoguery and corruption by extending the period of naturalization and electing qualified, statesmen like candidates to office.¹⁶³

Traces of anti-Irish sentiments in Maryland and particularly in the Potomac Valley were manifested almost as soon as the first Irish workers arrived in mid-1829 [?] to work on the canal. The attitudes of some canal company officials undoubtedly represented the feelings of some of the valley residents. One of the overseers who was sent out with a boatload of immigrants to America referred to them as “clowns,” “brutes,” and “frauds.”¹⁶⁴

Clerk John P. Ingle described the newly-arrived immigrants as “plagues.”¹⁶⁵

Anti-Irish sentiment in Maryland and particularly in the Potomac Valley was very much on the mind of the English woman Francis Milton Trollope after she visited the line of the canal in the summer of 1830. Although she had had doubts that emigration to America would improve the living standards of the Irish, it was not until her examination of the squalid living conditions of the Irish on the line of the canal that she “became fully aware how little it was to be desired for them.” During her stay in America she found “a strong feeling against the Irish in every part of the Union.” Moreover, she “heard vehement complaints, and constantly met the same in the newspapers” of a practice “stated to be very generally adopted in Britain of sending out cargoes of parish paupers to the United States.” These sentiments were particularly pronounced in Maryland newspapers. One such article told “of a cargo of aged paupers just arrived from England,” with the remark “John Bull has squeezed the orange, and now insolent casts the skin in our faces.” Such a feeling she declared, demonstrated “that these unfortunates are not likely to meet much kindness or sympathy in sickness, or in suffering of any kind.” Stating that all—inquiries into the matter had failed to substantiate the newspaper charges, she observed:

All I could ascertain was, that many English and Irish poor arrived yearly in the United States, with no other resources than what their labour furnished...It is generally acknowledged that the suffering among our labouring classes arises from the excess of our population; and it is impossible to see such a country as Canada, its extent, its fertility, its fine climate, and know that it is British ground, without feeling equal sorrow and astonishment that it is not made the means of relief.¹⁶⁶

Mrs. Trollope was particularly incensed by the emerging anti-Irish customs already emerging in the Potomac Valley. An example of such a practice in Hagerstown and other communities was the “suspension,” on the eve of St. Patrick’s Day, in some conspicuous place, of a dummy figure, popularly denominated a ‘Paddy’ with the view of annoying the Irish residents of the town and

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 67–80.

¹⁶² Quoted in Walsh and Fox, *Maryland: A History*, 30.

¹⁶³ Bernard C. Steiner, *Citizenship and Suffrage in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1895), 29–47.

¹⁶⁴ Gill to President and Directors, November 18, 1839, Ltrs. Rec., C&O Co.

¹⁶⁵ Ingle to Janney, October 26, 1829, Ltrs. Sent, C&O Co.

¹⁶⁶ Mooney, ed., *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 229–231.

vicinity. On numerous occasions, this practice provoked serious disturbances, but it continued to be condoned by the civil authorities.¹⁶⁷

The arrival of large numbers of immigrants, particularly the Catholic Irish [...?] beliefs, disturbed the social tranquility of the Potomac Valley which up to this time had been characterized by its largely agricultural pursuits and its predominantly Protestant German and Scotch Irish community.¹⁶⁸

The presence of large numbers of persons in crowded and filthy temporary quarters brought increasing health problems to the valley. During the major cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1833, fears that the sickness would spread from the workers to the local inhabitants led to town ordinances, such as those in Hagerstown, which prevented the stricken workers from entering the town limit for medical treatment and which permitted Catholic Irish workers who died to be buried only in cemeteries along the canal and away from inhabited areas.¹⁶⁹

In addition, the existence of so many rough and tumble, unassimilated laborers in a limited area raised the question of the maintenance of law and order. Drunken brawls accompanying all night drinking bouts alarmed the valley.¹⁷⁰

The clashes between the Irish factions in the winter months of 1834, 1835, and 1836 terrified citizens in the neighborhood from Williamsport to Clear Spring.¹⁷¹

The rising nativist sentiment in the valley could be seen in the Hagerstown Torch Light comments on the January 1836 riot near Clear Spring:

The public authorities should keep a close eye upon them (the Irish), or much blood may yet be shed before spring, when their attention to their work will keep them from committing acts of violence on each other. Thus are the ancient feuds of these foreigners, disturbing the peace of the country, and making life insecure.¹⁷²

The later disputes between the workers and the canal company in 1837, 1838, and 1839, at Paw Paw Tunnel, Old Town, and Little Orleans intensified the growing anti-foreign feeling in the valley by bringing the local inhabitants of the area into the difficult positions of militia, arbiters, and innocent victims.¹⁷³

Nativist sentiment in Maryland erupted into a “Native American” party in Baltimore in 1844 and 1845.¹⁷⁴

However, after receiving only 9 percent of the vote in Baltimore city elections in 1845, nativism left politics and went underground. Between 1845 and 1852 the nativism faith throughout the state was kept alive by fraternal orders carrying names like the United Sons of America, the Order of United Americans, and the Union of American Mechanics. Because their lodges were secret societies, no accurate estimate of their strength exists. By the early 1850s, however, these societies were certainly well attended.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁷ John Thomas Scharf, *History of Western Maryland* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1882), II, 1067.

¹⁶⁸ Sanderlin, *A Study of the History of the Potomac River Valley*, 89.

¹⁶⁹ Purcell to Eaton, June 24, 1833, and Stewart to Ingle, July 10, 1833, Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

¹⁷⁰ Cruger to President and Directors, July 7, 1832,—Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co., and Lowdermilk, *History of Cumberland*, 342.

¹⁷¹ Williams, *History of Washington County*, I, 223–224; Niles’ Register, XLV (January 25, 1834, and February 1, 1834), 336, 382–383; *ibid.*, XLVII (January 16, 1836), 337.

¹⁷² Hagerstown Torch Light, quoted in Niles’ Register XLIX (January 16, 1836), 337.

¹⁷³ Price to Washington, May 11, 1838; Williams to Washington, May 16, 17, 18, 1838; Fisk to Ingle, May 19, 1838; and Fillebrown to Ingle, May 19, 1839; Ltrs. Recd., C&O Co.

¹⁷⁴ Benjamin Tuska, *Know-Nothingism in Baltimore, 1854–1860* (New York, 1930), 2.

¹⁷⁵ Evitts, *Matter of Allegiances*, 64.

By 1853 the nativist societies had reversed their policy, as their numbers and influence warranted a more active pursuit of their principles. Their interest in politics was accentuated during this period by the statewide controversy over the Kerney School Bill, which would have provided public funds for parochial schools and the visit of the Papal legate Bedini to the United States and Baltimore.¹⁷⁶

At first, the various Maryland nativist societies merged into one large body called the Order of the Star Spangled Banner or, more commonly, the Know-Nothing Order.¹⁷⁷

Order retained secrecy, and members swore oaths to protect the American nation and the ideals it stood for from all subversion. In August 1853 the Order staged its first public demonstration in an effort to influence the House of Delegates election in Baltimore. Then in the spring of 1854, the Order scored its first political victories in the municipal elections of the western Maryland communities of Hagerstown and Cumberland. In both elections, all the candidates which the Order had secretly endorsed were swept into office.¹⁷⁸

By fall 1854 the Know-Nothing movement had gained considerable momentum throughout Maryland. In Baltimore Samuel Hinks, the nativist candidate was elected by a margin of 2,744 votes, and the American Party also elected fourteen members to the upper chamber and eight to the lower chamber, thus gaining control over the city council.¹⁷⁹

In the following year Americans added to their successes by expanding their political base to include victories in Annapolis and Williamsport.¹⁸⁰

In the wake of the Whig Party's demise and with these nativist successes in Maryland and other victories in such states as Massachusetts and Delaware, the Americans threatened to become the second major national party. When the party's national council met in Philadelphia in 1855, it threw off the mantle of secrecy which had surrounded its activities and drew up a public platform of principles which stressed unionism, nationalism, and political reform. Among the planks in the platform were calls for: (1) a revision of state and national laws regulating immigration and the settlement of foreigners; (2) laws prohibiting the immigration of felons and paupers; (3) the repeal of laws allowing un-naturalized foreigners to vote or own land; (4) an end to corrupt political bossism, particularly as it related to the efforts to get the foreign minorities to vote as a block, and (5) resistance to the aggressive and corrupt policies of the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁸¹

By 1855 the emerging Know-Nothing movement had great appeal to the Protestant middle class in Maryland, and for its leadership it began to draw heavily on the upper-middle class business community. The organization was ready to make its assault on the state offices, and it did very well in the fall elections of 1855. Hinks won re-election as mayor in Baltimore by over 3,700 votes and the Americans retained control of the upper chamber of the city council. In November Know-Nothing William Purcell won the comptrollership; carrying twelve of Maryland's

¹⁷⁶ Schmeckebier, *History of the Know-Nothing Party in Maryland*, 15–17.

¹⁷⁷ Walsh and Fox, *Maryland: A History*, 311. Some nativists also temporarily cooperated with the Maine Law temperance movement, which was a political force advocating a state prohibition law similar to that passed by the State of Maine. The temperance movement also had nativist overtones, as it was basically a reaction by the old-line Marylanders of the corrupting influence of the temperance movement, which had built a program in Maryland by 1853, was the product of anti-saloon agitation which had begun in the 1830s shortly after the first waves of Irish began to immigrate to the state.

¹⁷⁸ Schmeckebier, *History of the Know-Nothing Party in Maryland*, 17.

¹⁷⁹ John Thomas Scharf, *History of Maryland from the Earliest Period to the Present Day* (3 Vols., Baltimore, 1879), III, 2.

¹⁸⁰ Walsh and Fox, *Maryland: A history*, 312.

¹⁸¹ John Denig, *The Know-Nothing Manual* (Harrisburg, 1855), 1–64.

twenty-one counties plus Baltimore. The nativists elected one-half of the commissioners of Public works and filled all three available judgeships. Know-Nothing Daniel McPhail won the state lottery commissioner's job. Of the six Maryland Congressmen elected, four were Know-Nothings, one was an independent Whig, and one was an independent Democrat. Henry W. Hoffman, the American candidate from the Fifth Congressional District, won handily with a 749 majority, his most concentrated support coming particularly from Frederick and Washington Counties. Led by a sweep of Baltimore then House of Delegates seats, the Know-Nothings gained a 54 to 17 advantage over the Democrats in the lower chamber, while the makeup of the eleven State Senators elected consisted of 8 Know-Nothings, 2 Democrats, and 1 Whig. The know-Nothings had come a long way since their first cautious entry into politics two years earlier by capturing 51 percent of the state's vote.¹⁸²

The Western Maryland counties played a significant role in the election of the American candidates to the state office in 1855. While Montgomery and Allegany Counties did not give the majority of their votes to Know-Nothing candidates, the total Know-Nothing vote in those two jurisdictions was nevertheless 49.6 and 49.1 percent respectively. On the other hand, Washington and Frederick Counties were in the Know-Nothing column giving 50.8 to 55.8 percent of their vote respectively to American candidates.¹⁸³

With a series of brilliant successes in the 1855 elections, Maryland Know-Nothings looked optimistically towards the 1856 presidential election. However, schism over slavery and defections within the party's ranks over the issue fatally sapped the movement's strength on the national level. The only state that the American standard-bearer Millard Fillmore carried in that year was Maryland. Gaining more votes in the state than the Americans had in 1855, Fillmore won 55 percent of the electorate and carried fifteen of the twenty-one counties plus Baltimore. In Western Maryland, he carried Montgomery County (51.8%), Frederick County (53%) and Washington County (50.4%), losing only Allegany County (46.3%).¹⁸⁴

Although the national American Party's demise quickly came the following year, it temporarily remained a viable political coalition in Maryland. After a spirited campaign, the American Thomas Hicks was elected governor in November 1857, getting 54.9 percent of the state vote. The Know-Nothings carried the other state offices, elected four Congressmen out of six, and continued their control of the state legislature. Yet the 1857 election marked the first obvious defect from the party, and the losses were nowhere more noticeable than in western Maryland. All four of the western counties gave a lesser percentage of the vote to Hicks than they had to Fillmore. Montgomery County's support dropped from 51.8 to 48 percent, Frederick from 53 to 51.3 percent, Washington from 50.4 to 50.2 percent, and Allegany from 46.3 to 43.6 percent. The American candidate, Henry W. Hoffman, who had won handily in 1855, now was defeated by the Democrat, Col. Jacob Kumkel, by 168 votes. These trends, coupled with a collapse national organization, were ominous signs for the American in Maryland.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Evitts, *Matter of Allegiances*, 80–88

¹⁸³ Thomas J.C. Williams, *History of Frederick County, Maryland* (Baltimore, 1910), 287–297; *ibid*, *History of Washington County*, 274–275; James Walter Thomas and Thomas J.C. Williams, *History of Alleghany County, Maryland* (Cumberland, 1923), 258; and Lowdermilk, *History of Cumberland* 383–385.

¹⁸⁴ Evitts, *Matter of Allegiances*, 100–101. In municipal elections in Baltimore in September, the American Thomas Swann was elected as mayor, and of the Know-Nothings won control of the lower chamber of the city council while splitting the upper chamber evenly with the Democrats.

¹⁸⁵ Walsh and Fox, *Maryland: A History*, 319–326, and Evitts, *Matter of Allegiances*, 106–107. The year 1859 also marked the election to Congress of Alexander Robinson Boteler, a member of an old-line Virginia family in Shepherdstown, Virginia. Active in the Whig Party during the late 1840s and early 1850s, he joined the American Party in the middle of the latter decade. He represented the Harpers Ferry District

While the Americans attempted to straddle the slavery issue, the Democrats, as the champions of Southern rights benefited from the growing sectional cleavage and especially from the widespread fear produced by John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry. In the 1859 elections, they nearly swept up all the state offices. In addition, they carried three of six congressional seats (including Western Maryland Fifth District), and won control of the House of Delegates, 45 to 29, and the Senate, 12 to 10. Only the comptrollership was kept in American hands, but that victory was achieved by a violence-studded campaign that produced a 12, 783—vote majority in Baltimore. By the following year as events were leading inexorably toward civil war, the Know-Nothings were in total eclipse in the state, particularly after a crushing defeat in the Baltimore mayoralty race.¹⁸⁶

in Congress under the American Party label from 1857 until Virginia seceded from the Union in the spring of 1861, at which time he accepted appointment to the Confederate Provisional Congress in Montgomery, Alabama. Misc. Mss., Scrapbook I, Alexander Robinson Boteler Papers, Duke University Library and Ezra J. Warner And W. Buck Years, *Biographical Register of the Confederate Congress* (Baton Rouge, 1975), 25–26.

¹⁸⁶ Schmeckebier, *History of the Know-Nothing Party in Maryland*, 99–115.

APPENDIX A

The following is a copy of the treaty of peace made and concluded at Williamsport, on the 27th day of January, 1834, between the Corkonians and Longford men, the two contending parties of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal laborers.

Whereas great commotions and divers riotous acts have resulted from certain misunderstandings and alleged grievances, mutually urged by two parties of laborers and mechanics, engaged on the line of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, and natives of Ireland; the one commonly known as the Longford men, the other as the Corkonians; and whereas it has been found that these riotous acts are calculated to disturb the public peace, without being in the least degree beneficial to the parties opposed to each other, but on the contrary are production of great injury and distress to the workmen and their families.

Therefore, we, the undersigned, representatives of each party, have agreed to, and do pledge ourselves to support and carry into effect the following terms of the agreement:

We agree, for ourselves, that we will not, either individually or collectively, interrupt or suffer to be interrupted in our presence, any person engaged on the line of the canal for or on account of a local difference or national prejudice, and that we will use our influence to destroy all these matters of difference growing out of this distinction of parties, known as Corkonians and Longfords; and we further agree and pledge ourselves in the most solemn manner, to inform on and bring to justice, any person or persons who may break the pledge contained in this agreement, either by interrupting any person passing along or near the line of the canal, or by secretly counseling or assisting any person or persons who may endeavor to excite riotous conduct among the above parties; and we further bind ourselves to the State of Maryland, each in the sum of twenty dollars, to keep the peace towards the citizens of the state. In witness thereof, we have hereunto signed our names, at Williamsport, this twenty-seventh day of January, eighteen hundred and thirty-four.

Timothy Kelly
William O'Brien
Michael Collins
John Bernes
Thomas Bennett
Michael Driscoll
Jeremiah Donovan
John Namack
Garret Donahue
Patrick McDonald
James Slaman
John O'Brien
Edward Farrell
Thomas Hill

Michael Tracy
Thomas Mackey
James Riley
Daniel Murrey
Murty Dempsey
James Carroll
Thomas Cunningham
Bathu S. McDade
James Clarke
Michael Kain
Pat Purell
William Moloney
Wm. Brown
Peter Conner

Signed before us, two justices of the peace, in and for Washington County and the State of Maryland this 27th day of January, 1834

Charles Heseltine
William Boulton¹

¹ Excerpted from *Niles' Register*, XLV (February 8, 1834), 399.

APPENDIX B

REPORT OF CHARLES B. FISK, FEBRUARY 5, 1838, REGARDING
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LABOR DISORDERS AND COST OF THE CANAL

In this connection, I will briefly allude to a very important cause of the great cost of work on our canal; one that has no reference to change of times, or the cost of provisions. I know not that a more appropriate occasion than this can be selected for the purpose, inasmuch as the influence of this cause, to which I am about to refer, has been more severely felt on the “7 ½ miles” than hitherto, and will continue to be felt, perhaps, in a still greater degree in our progress towards Cumberland, unless legislative action shall be efficiently exerted to prevent it.

Not one individual of the large body of Irish laborers along the line of the canal dares testify against another of their number in a court of justice. A murder may be committed—a hundred of them may witness it—and yet not one person can be found who knows anything about it. The remark upon all this, by the citizens of the State, is very apt to be, that these men do not interfere with the inhabitants; that their quarrels are among themselves, or between the two parties into which they are divided. Grant, for the moment, that their quarrels are among themselves. Who feel the consequences? The company, and, as a stockholder, the State. Let me mention a few facts. I have known a contractor on the “27 ½ miles” forced to give up his contract, his shanties burned, and death threatened, if he could be caught, simply because the engineer, as he had a right to do under the contract, had discharged from the line some notoriously worthless and disorderly men; and the contractor was suspected of having given information to the engineer.

Again: at the time of our greatest pressure for mechanics, several excellent masons, perfect strangers to all on the line, were induced to go up to the neighborhood of Hancock. They worked for one day, but were given to understand that they must not remain. They, in consequence, immediately returned to Washington.

Such are not solitary and rare occurrences. Many, and many, and many an instance have I known, in which quiet, peaceable, orderly, and well-disposed persons, from among the Irish laborers have been driven off from our canal, by their countrymen, simply from unwillingness to submit to the dictation of a tyrannical, secret, party organization, which, for the last two years, has been entirely beyond the reach of all law, all authority.

True it is, these persons elsewhere have their quarrels and disputes among themselves; but they have rarely, as has been the case with us, been permitted to act with that organization as a body, that enables them to control the operations of a whole work.

The consequences of such a state of things will at once suggest themselves to everyone who reflects on the subject. Mechanics out of employ elsewhere often refuse to come upon our work for no other reason, than that the laws of the State afford them no protection when upon it. Other works, in other states, where the laws are respected, have a comparatively quiet and orderly body of laborers; the worthless leave them, and congregate, of course, where they will be least subject to the restraints of law.

But it is not the case, as admitted for the moment, that the quarrels of these persons are confined to themselves. I have known instances in which native citizens, laboring upon the “27 ½ miles” of canal, have been driven away from it, and repeatedly have German laborers been forced to quit the line.

This state of things, alone, I know has been very instrumental in keeping up the high prices of labor upon our canal. Its effects are felt in several ways. It keeps down the supply of labor below the demand. It gives us an inferior class of workmen. And afraid to give them directions contrary to their will, the contractor is sometimes, to all intents and purposes, under their control.

Notwithstanding all this, there are upon our canal many well-disposed and quiet laborers. Yet, although they may even be a majority in point of numbers, they are still under the control of that secret organization of which I have spoken. To these well-disposed persons I feel that I shall do a service, if by any means I can be instrumental, in the least, in inducing an action, by the competent authority that shall enforce quiet and good order upon our work. It is practicable; and recent movements on the part of the authorities of Washington and Allegany counties show that they have a willingness and disposition to give their aid. I will refer to a late occurrence.

Having been regardless of all civil authority on the “27 ½ miles” of the canal, along the narrow territory of the State of Maryland (at one point less than two miles in width), the idea at last became prevalent among the laborers, that in the mountains of Allegany County no force, in support of the laws of the State, could be brought to bear upon them. They conducted themselves accordingly. At length, upon the occurrence of an outrage, or rather of several—tearing down buildings and threatening lives, in one day, at Oldtown, in presence of many of the inhabitants, by upwards of four hundred men, who had come more than twelve miles for the purpose. The sheriff of the county, with a military force from Cumberland and other parts of the county, together with citizens from Virginia, assembled, arrested ten of the ringleaders, and have them now in jail awaiting their trial. The effect of this movement by the authorities of Allegany county, so far as we can judge in the short time that has since elapsed has been and will be of great service, and has satisfied me, in addition to previous observations, that provision be made by the Legislature that shall cause the laws of the State to be respected; and if so, one of the great difficulties we have to encounter for the last two years, in obtaining a sufficiency of laborers, will be done away. There will be a great improvement in the character of the line; and, as a necessary consequence, we shall do our work at less cost. So firmly convinced am I of good effect of the recent exercise of civil authority in Allegany county, that I have little doubt, should, unfortunately, our present embarrassments end in a total suspension of our work, we shall have much less to fear than we otherwise would have from the laborers who will be thrown out of employ. Indeed, had this authority not been exercised, I do not believe we should have escaped thus long from acts of violence on the part of the laborers, from want of confidence caused by the inability of the company, for the last two months, promptly to meet its engagements.

If the work should be entirely suspended, it can hardly be supposed that 3,000 laborers will quietly disperse—suddenly thrown out of employment, with money due to them, and many of them without the means of taking them elsewhere—especially little accustomed as they are to the restraints of law.²

² Excerpted from Tenth Annual Report (1838), C&O Co., 27–29