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BOAT FAMILIES ON THE C&O CANAL
AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND COMMUNITY

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During the opening decades of the nineteenth century, the greatest obstacle the United States faced in its westward expansion was providing effective transportation routes between the newly opened areas in the Ohio River Valley and established cities along the eastern seaboard. Many believed that slackwater canals provided the answer. A proven method of commerce in England by that time, only a few short canals had been constructed in America before the turn of the century.

The Erie Canal, an engineering marvel extending 363 miles in length from Albany to Buffalo, opened in 1825 and greatly reinforced New York City's existing pre-eminence over the other major port cities. Not to be undone, work soon began on other major canal projects such as the Pennsylvania Main Line Canal, which was to link Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal in Maryland, intended to travel from Georgetown in the District of Columbia to Pittsburgh. All of these canals were constructed primarily by immigrant Irish laborers, many recruited from Ireland specifically to work on these projects.[1]

Slackwater canals constructed during this period shared most of the same characteristics. They generally consisted of a level, excavated ditch 40 to 60 feet in width, and six to eight feet in

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[1] Ronald E. Shaw, Canals for a Nation: The Canal Era in the United States, 1790-1860 (1990); Harry Sinclair Drago, Canal Days in America: The History and Romance of Old Towpaths and Waterways (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1972); Peter Way, Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of North American Canals, 1780-1875 (1993).

depth. Changes in elevation were accomplished through the use of lift locks. Along one side of the canal was a built up levee, known as a towpath, on which mules or horses walked as they towed the boats behind them. The boats were long and narrow, generally about 90 feet in length and 15 feet in width, and had a relatively shallow draft, even when loaded. In addition to a cargo hold, most boats also had a small cabin for the crew, a stable for the mules or horses, and a hay storage area.

Most studies to date have focused on construction of the canals, or on the economic histories of individual canal companies. There has been little focus on the social or cultural aspects of canal life, other than to note the belief that canallers formed their own closed society apart from others, that contemporaries viewed them as degraded and somewhat outside the law, and that canallers passed on their occupation from generation to generation as a result of children residing and working on the boats. Even less attention has been paid to the role of women in canal boating, other than to note that families often accompanied boatmen.[2]

Using the C&O Canal as a backdrop, I focus in this paper upon

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[2] For examples of typical canal studies see Robert McCullough and Walter Leuba, The Pennsylvania Main Line Canal (York, Pennsylvania: The American Canal and Transportation Center, 1973); James and Margaret Cawley, Along the Delaware and Raritan Canal (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1970); C.P. Yoder, Delaware Canal Journal: A Definitive History of the Canal and the River Valley through which it Flows (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Canal Press Inc., 1972). A notable exception is the recent study by Carol Sheriff, The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996). Sheriff looks closely at public perceptions of the boating communities and organized efforts to uplift them morally and spiritually, although she does not address boat families as such.

the role of women and families on canal boats. In particular, this study addresses to what degree family participation in canal boat operations was driven by economic necessity versus a desire to stay together as a family unit or to participate in that lifestyle. As a parallel focus, I look at how the canal structured the family and community life of the canallers and how this may have changed through time. My research centers on the period from 1870 to 1924, during a transition from independent to company boatmen, and focuses on one community--Sharpsburg, Maryland--where a large number of canallers resided during this period.

To date, the only significant research conducted on canal boat families has been by English scholars. As a result, I open with a section detailing their research results as they relate to this paper. This is followed by a brief historical overview of the C&O Canal, focusing upon events and issues that have a bearing upon the canallers. Using information gleaned primarily from census records and oral history interviews, the next section looks at canal boat families from Sharpsburg relative to the issues raised above. The final discussion draws together the information presented about the C&O Canal boat families and places them within a national context.

Canal Boat Families

Canal boat families have received much greater attention in Great Britain, both by contemporaries and by modern scholars. In the nineteenth century, boatmen were scrutinized closely by social

reformers, who tended to view them as somewhat akin to gypsies, and characterized them as a degraded class. Present-day historian Harry Hanson was the first to study the boating population systematically, taking a careful look at its economic and social standing and how it changed during the course of the nineteenth century.[3]

One of the central issues Hanson addresses is the advent of family boats, which he traces to the early nineteenth century. Presenting evidence that women-occupied boats were a regular sight by 1840, Hanson discredits an earlier belief that family boats only became common with increased railway competition in midcentury, forcing down freight rates and boatmen's wages. In summary,

> The factors which caused women to take to the boats are not certain. Poverty cannot be ruled out as a reason for the arrival of some women (through unfortunate circumstances or improvidence), but the suggestion that the competitive nature of canal carrying over a period of time forced women and children on to the boats through poverty is belied by the evidence showing the general prosperity of master boatmen. The reasons for a woman joining her husband probably varied from one boat to the next, and they may have been decided as much by

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[3] Harry Hanson, The Canal Boatmen, 1760-1914 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975).

sociological as by economic pressures.[4]

Continuing this line of thought, Hanson believed that "from the day that women came to live upon canal boats, the links of their husbands and children with some fixed home and community, and with outside society, were cut off, as indeed were their own." A self-perpetuating boating population developed as children, reared in this closed community, grew up with little opportunity to break away through education or other contacts.[5]

Although Hanson denies that poverty forced families on the boats, he does concede that railroad competition led to an increase in the number of family boats in mid century, that from the mid-1850s the standard of living for boatmen probably began to deteriorate, and that family boats made more money than all-male boats, since wages did not have to be paid to the hired hands. In point of fact, family boatmen were undercutting the wages paid to male boat crews.

> It became increasingly difficult for [masters] to get the labourers to crew their boats at the wages that they could offer and yet still compete for work with the family-boat men, who could afford to accept less. Bitterness that the men of all-male boats felt for the family-boat men became increasingly acidic, as the latter

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[4] Ibid., 55-56.

[5] Ibid., 57.

were accused of keeping wage rates low.[6]

Reading this, it is difficult to believe that something greater than simple changes in lifestyle preference were occurring on English canal boats during this period.

Focusing on census records, Wendy Freer sought to address the persistence of the family boating community during the slow decline of the canal carrying trade from around 1840 to the mid twentieth century. She identified a range of survival strategies--family, community, voluntary agencies, and the state as welfare provider--that contributed to the longevity and closeness of the boating community.[7]

Freer concurred with Hanson that the practice of family boating did not develop as a result of competition from the railroad. She also deduced from her own research that the decision for families to live on the boat was a matter of regional custom and personal choice, and not merely the result of economic circumstances. Even so, Freer notes that "As the economic position of the trade worsened, outsiders were more likely to be replaced by members of the immediate nuclear family who could be expected to

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[6] Ibid., 91, 94. Hanson continues on to state that at the end of the nineteenth century, "the family-boat men were still generally prosperous individuals . . . whereas the men without their wives . . . were slipping into the earnings group of the labouring class."

[7] Wendy Jane Freer, "Canal Boat People, 1840-1970" (Ph.D. diss., Uni. of Nottingham, 1991); "Standards of Living Among Canal Boat People, 1840-1939," J. of Transport History, 3rd ser., 13 (March 1992): 43-58.

return their share of the boat's income to the family funds."[8]

Contrary to Hanson, however, Freer concluded that boat families did not cut their ties with shore-based communities. First, her examination of the census schedules revealed that the majority of boatmen who took their families with them retained a house on land in which all or part of the family lived from time to time. Secondly, these families utilized extended kinship relationships to maintain social connections with the land-based community. For example, it was not uncommon for children to reside with other relatives, primarily grandparents, while their parents were boating. As the nineteenth century progressed, Freer discovered a marked increase in the number of extended family members in households associated with boating, which she interprets as being to some extent a survival strategy adopted in response to declining trade.[9]

Freer found a high incidence of early marriage among boatmen. Even so, few newly married couple lived with relatives, but instead had a home of their own or lived on their boat. She attributes the high incidence of early marriage to the fact that a young boatman could easily procure a boat of his own, and that it was in his best interest to marry early if he intended to use family labor. In the boating community of Braunston along the Grand Junction Canal, Freer discovered that prior to "the middle of the nineteenth

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[8] Freer, "Canal Boat People," 119; "Standards of Living," 43-58.

[9] Freer, "Canal Boat People," 114-117; Freer, "Standards of Living," 50-52.

century there was obviously a strong tendency for passing boatmen to marry local girls and set up home in the village with most of their children being born there."[10]

The children who grew up in these boating households had a marked tendency to become canallers themselves, resulting in an increasingly closed society through time. As the nineteenth century progressed, it became a common belief that children not brought up on the boats would never take up the work in later life and that the source of canal labor thus would disappear. This was frequently cited by the boatmen as a reason for not banning child labor on the canals, along with the fact that they could not afford to continue in the canal carrying trade without the assistance of their families.[11]

Due to past perceptions that the canal boat people were a degraded and distinct social group, it had been assumed "that [they] came to be shunned by the so-called settled section of the working classes and were forced to take up a position on the fringes of society." This included living apart from others in separate settlements. In actuality, Freer discovered that in the

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[10] Freer, "Canal Boat People," 121-123, 189; "Standards of Living," 53.

[11] Freer, "Canal Boat People," 189; "Standards of Living," 51; Hanson, 57. Unlike the United States, there was a strong reform movement in Great Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century concerning living conditions on the canals. This resulted in the Canal Boat Acts of 1877 and 1884, which regulated sanitary conditions, the number of people permitted to live on the boats, and provided education requirements for canal boat children. See Hanson for a full discussion of these regulations and their results.

canal-side community of Braunston, canal families lived intermingled with other families, albeit concentrated in the poorest and cheapest sections of the village. Most of the boating families inhabited dwellings similar in standard to those of the unskilled and semi-skilled groups within Braunston.[12]

According to a 1919 survey of Gloucester schools cited by Freer, most boat families had houses in town where the mother, daughters and younger children resided while the fathers and sons went on the boats. How pervasive this strategy was, and how far back in time it extended are open to question. Hanson, however, did note that in the second half of the nineteenth century, "there is some evidence to show that, among the more respectable (and perhaps better off) boating class, as the family increased in numbers, the wife and children went to live permanently on shore."[13]

In a detailed study of one small community in Oxford, historian Mary Prior looked closely at the residential and family patterns of canal boatmen who inhabited Fisher Row. At its peak between 1790 and the 1840s, this community housed several dozen boat families at any given time. This number fell dramatically in mid century due to railroad competition, and continued to decline throughout the remainder of the century.[14]

Although hinted at in Freer's work, Prior interpreted the

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[12] Freer, "Canal Boat Families," 148, 191, 224.

[13] Freer, "Canal Boat People," 98; Hanson, 126.

[14] Mary Prior, Fisher Row: Fishermen, Bargemen, and Canal Boatmen in Oxford, 1500-1900 (Oxford: Oxford Uni. Press, 1982).

census data for Fisher Row as indicating that the boatmen lived in "matrilocal, extended, women's households." She discovered that "because the boatmen were always on the move, when a woman married a boatman she seems to have stayed in the community in which she had grown up, and where she knew everyone." As the nineteenth century progressed, however, boating families more and more frequently intermarried, creating a tight, introverted community.[15]

Prior also found that in the mid nineteenth century the majority of boat families lived in extended households, depending upon their location in the life cycle and financial status. Young mothers often resided with their parents while their husbands boated, or left their children with them if they joined him on the canal. Likewise, elderly parents sometimes lived with their daughters and younger grandchildren, while the husband and older children worked on the boats. Land-based homes were not always maintained, however:

> The age of the children, their number, the ability of the wife to earn a second income at home whilst the elder children helped run the boat, the responsibility for dependent relatives, the possibility of sharing a house: such factors governed the decision to keep up a home on the land.[16]

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[15] Ibid., 235, 249.

[16] Ibid., 242-243.

In summary, the studies of Hanson, Freer and Prior, which represents the major scholarship conducted to date on English canal boat families, reached several similar conclusions: 1) family boating increased with economic pressure, although life-style preferences played a major role; 2) family boats made more money for boatmen, as they did not have to pay wages to hired hands; and, 3) boat families became an increasingly closed occupational community, as children followed their parents in the boating trade. They disagreed concerning one major point--the degree to which boating families maintained connections with land-based communities. Hanson concluded that these connections had been cut, but through close work with census schedules, both Freer and Prior conclusively show that close links were maintained between the two. In addition, they found close kinship connections between boat families and land-based communities, and that the boat families lived intermingled with other non-boating families, and not within separate communities as stated by Hanson.

Historical Overview of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal

From the earliest days of western exploration, it was well known that the Potomac River Valley represented the shortest route to the old west. Initially it served as a route along which the Ohio Company blazed overland trails. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Potomac Canal Company constructed a number of skirting canals around impassable sections of the river and

transported goods downstream on flat batteaus. Although a vast improvement over slow and cumbersome overland transport, the Potomac Canal Company system still proved inefficient due to insufficient financial support and the volatile nature of the Potomac River.[17]

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company, successor of the failed Potomac Canal Company, formally organized in 1828. On July 4th of that year, President John Quincy Adams turned the first spadeful of earth inaugurating construction of the C&O Canal. As reflected in its name, the original plans for this canal called for it to extend from Georgetown in the District of Columbia to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Due to chronic financial shortfalls, labor and contractor problems, and legal battles with the competing B&O Railroad; however, it took the canal company 28 years to reach what was to become its final terminus at Cumberland, Maryland, a distance of 184.5 miles from Tidelock. As a result, its dream of reaching headwaters of the Ohio River was not to be realized.[18]

Most traffic on the C&O Canal in its early years consisted of agricultural products, particularly flour. This changed dramatically once the canal opened to Cumberland, close to the coal mines of the Allegheny Plateau. After 1850, coal gradually superseded agricultural products as the primary commodity shipped on the canal. The growing power of the coal companies on the canal

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[17] Walter S. Sanderlin, The Great National Project: A History of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1946), 22, 28-29, 45.

[18] Ibid., passim.

is revealed by the fact that while almost all registered boats in 1851 were owned by individuals, in 1873 nearly one-fourth were owned by coal companies.[19]

Independent boatmen who operated their own or private company-owned boats transported numerous shipments down the canal each season. The C&O Canal Company charged them tolls for use of the canal, but left the establishment of freight fees, or what boatmen charged for carrying the cargo to its destination, to the boatman and his employer. Over time, this led to a tense triangle of conflicting interests between the canal company, the boatmen and the contractors.[20]

Traditionally, the 1870s have been labelled the "Golden Age of the C&O Canal." The early years of this decade witnessed the zenith of trade on the canal, with over 500 boats in operation, and the only profitable years the C&O was to experience. Even as the canal company prospered, however, the boatmen found themselves increasingly squeezed between higher tolls and lower freight rates. As a result, they went on strike on numerous occasions throughout the decade in an attempt to redress their grievances.[21] Canal

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[19] Ibid., 189-190, 304; Harlan Unrau, "Chronological History of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, 1828-1924, an Historical Resources Study," . TMs [photocopy], Vol. V, Chapt. XI, 26, C&O Canal National Historical Park, Sharpsburg, Maryland.

[20] Ibid., 187; Elizabeth Kytle, Home on the Canal: An Informal History of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, and Recollections of Eleven Men and Women who Lived and Worked on It (Cabin John, Maryland: Seven Locks Press, 1983), 87.

[21] Sanderlin, 227, 237-238, 241, 247, 270. The boatmen went on strike in 1871, 1874, 1876, 1877 and 1880.

historian Walter Sanderlin described the plight of the boatmen during this period:

> The canallers were caught in a squeeze between the effort of the coal companies and the canal company to reduce expenses. The coal companies, which built and owned most of the canal boats, sought to maintain boat rents and sale prices at high levels. To meet these continuing costs, boatmen needed high freight charges. But the canal company, seeking to cut transportation costs and maintain tolls at a profitable level, demanded lower freight costs.

In 1873, and again in 1874, the boatmen went on strike to demand a uniform freight rate of $1.35 per ton of coal; the coal companies had cut the rate to $1.25, with the result that the boatmen could not cover their expenses.[22]

An investigation by the canal company following the 1874 strike sharply criticized the shippers' exploitation of the boatmen, pointing out that the cost of the boats sold to the boatmen was exorbitant and the terms of their purchase unfair, and that higher freight rates were needed for the boatmen to cover their costs. The Canal Company did not agree, however, that part of

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[22] Sanderlin, 270; President's Report, April 15, 1873; Vol. M, p. 103; Proceedings of the President and Directors; Records of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, Record Group 79; National Archives, Washington, D.C. [hereafter cited as C&O Canal Records RG 79, NA].

the problem was the high tolls it charged the boatmen, and refused to cut them. Although proclaiming itself sympathetic to their plight, the demands for a speedy resumption of business led the canal company to break the strikes without following through on the boatmen's demands.[23]

Freight rates paid to the boatmen continued to decline throughout the remainder of the 1870s, even as trade declined on the canal due in large part to the nation-wide depression of that decade. By 1978, the canallers were receiving only 70 cents per ton of coal--almost half that of 1872.[24] As rates fell, strikers sometimes turned to violence. Following the strike of August 1874, the C&O Canal Company Board of Directors passed the following resolution:

> Resolved. that the President be and he is hereby instructed to notify the Collectors, Superintendents and other officers of this Company, to enforce strictly all the rules of the Company, and to report the names of any person who shall in any way interfere with the loading of any licensed Boat or Boats, or shall interfere with, or

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[23] Sanderlin, 238, 270; Report of the Committee on the Boatmen's petition, September 17, 1874; Vol. M, 1872-1877; Proceedings of the President and Board of Directors; C&O Canal Company Records, RG 79, NA; Forty-Seventh Annual Report of the President and Directors of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company, to the Stockholders, June 7th, 1875 (Annapolis: L.F. Colton & Co., Steam Printers, 1875.

[24] Fifty-First Annual Report of the President ad Directors of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company, to the Stockholders, June 2nd, 1879 (Annapolis: Steam Press, 1879), 12.

molest its master or owner; And the President is hereby authorized and required to furnish such additional protection as may be deemed necessary to prevent injury to the canal or its works, and to licensed Boatmen or Wharfowners.

In 1880, the Washington County Board of Commissioners submitted a bill to the Board of Directors to help defray cost incurred "in investigating and suppressing the Rioting on the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, at Millstone Point, Williamsport and the Shades of Death near Sharpsburg in said county, during the months of July and August 1880." Among other things, the rioters were throwing stones at passing, non-striking canal boats.[25]

Business on the C&O Canal began a steady decline in the 1880s due to a combination of factors, including trade stagnation, financial depression, physical deterioration and political interference. The decade culminated with a disastrous flood on May 30-June 1, 1889, that heavily damaged or destroyed much of the canal infrastructure and halted its operation. While flooding of the Potomac River was a recurring problem on the canal from its inception, the 1889 flood was the highest on record and forced the tottering canal company into bankruptcy. Following the flood, many boatmen left the Potomac River Valley or turned to other

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[25] President's Report, Sept. 10, 1874; Vol. M, 1872-1877, pp. 176-177; and President's Report, Sept. 22, 1880; Vol. M, 1878-1890, p. 120; Proceedings of the President and Directors; C&O Canal Company Records, RG 79, NA.

occupations.[26]

Speculation was rife concerning the future of the wrecked canal, which fell into court hands following the canal company's bankruptcy. Ironically, arch rival B&O Railroad emerged as a primary creditor of the canal, as it held substantial amounts of the latter's bond issues. Concerned that another carrier might acquire the canal right-of-way and construct a competing rail line, the B&O decided to restore the canal for navigation. Repairs were completed in September 1891 and the canal reopened for business. In 1894 the railroad set up a shadow corporation, the Chesapeake and Ohio Transportation Company, to operate the newly refurbished canal and absorb its operational losses.[27]

In 1902, the canal receivers created the Canal Towage Company, inaugurating a new era in the organizational structure of canal transport, particularly for the boatmen. According to Sanderlin:

> The primary function of this enterprise was to provide economy and regularity in the runs of the waterway. To do this the company supplied the boats, teams, and equipment, and established a regular schedule for the boatmen to follow. It

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[26] Sanderlin, 248, 256-257, 263; Thomas F. Hahn, The C&O Canal Boatmen, 1892-1924 (Shepherdstown, West Virginia: The American Canal and Transportation Center, 1977).

[27] Sanderlin, 263-267; Kytle, 116. According to the terms of the court settlement, the canal had to show a profit or be sold. The B&O Railroad figured that it would be cheaper to rebuild the canal than buy it at a sale. Unfortunately for the railroad, repairs cost much more then initially anticipated, which is why it formed another company to absorb the operational losses even while the canal showed a profit on paper.

> also cut freight rates and controlled the distribution of cargoes. There is no doubt that the company improved the service and the efficiency of canal navigation, but in so doing it destroyed the last shred of independence for the canallers.[28]

Unlike the earlier Canal Company, the Canal Towage Company monopolized access to the canal, for it controlled all freight rates, and set high prices for the regulation boats and other articles required by the boatmen. Independent boatmen could not compete with the new company, and either became employees or left the canal altogether. Discipline became the ruling order: "Spirited, unruly, ad lackadaisical boatmen were alike undesirable to the company; the rougher ones were not permitted to use its boats."[29]

Becoming an increasingly obsolete mode of transportation, operations on the C&O Canal continued their slow decline into the opening decades of the twentieth century. In March 1924, a major flood wrecked the canal for the last time. For several years the B&O Railroad maintained the legal fiction that the canal could be made navigable again if conditions warranted, but finally sold the entire C&O Canal to the federal government in 1938 due to

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[28] Sanderlin, 269.

[29] Sanderlin, 269. According to Kytle (p. 117), "Those [boatmen] expelled were replaced by a less obstreperous group, many of them devoted family men." She does not provide a source for this comment.

indebtedness.[30]

C&O Canal Boat Families

An 1851 registry of boats on the C&O Canal, in which the homes of the boat captains were listed for the first time, revealed that over 40% came from the two end points of the canal. Of the 223 registered boatmen, 18% (41) resided at the terminus at Cumberland, while 23% (52) lived at the downstream end, in Georgetown, Alexandria and the District of Columbia. Most of the remainder hailed from other communities along the canal, while over a dozen boatmen originated from New York, most likely having been previously associated with the Erie Canal. Strikingly absent was Sharpsburg, with only one registered boat captain.[31]

Next to nothing is known about the composition of boat crews on the C&O Canal before the Civil War. Of this period, historian Harlan Unrau notes:

> Although many of the 'canaller' were hard-working and conscientious, the canal company records are filled with references to the brawling, unpredictable, and quarrelsome behavior of the boatmen. In their relationships with each other and with company officials, they exhibited a fierce independence and contentiousness

[30] Sanderlin, 278-279.

[31] Unrau, Vol. VI, Chapt. XVI, 45.

that often ignored or opposed any show of authority by the company officials.

This type of behavior paralleled that recounted for other American and English canals of the period. Such anecdotal evidence might suggest that there were more all-male crews in the early years of the canal, for women essentially are absent from these accounts.[32]

One anonymous account by a man who served on a C&O Canal boat crew for a single trip in 1859 provides a glimpse of life on that waterway at that time. The captain owned "a comfortable home in Williamsport" and two canal boats; his wife and family remained at home during the boating season. The other crew consisted of a freed black male who also resided in Williamsport and two tow boys, each about 12 years old (one the son of the black man). Only one other boat crew was described in the account, as the result of a mishap when "an old lugger standing high out of the water drawn by an old white horse" and steered by a mulatto woman collided with the author's boat, bringing out the woman's husband, who had been asleep in the cabin.[33]

The hailing places of canal boatmen listed in the 1851 registry changed dramatically over the next two decades. In an 1873-74 registry, the last years for which residences were noted, 539 boatmen operated vessels on the canal. Thirty percent (162)

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[32] Ibid., Vol. VI, Chapt. 16, 16.

[33] Ella A. Clark and Thomas F. Hahn, Life on the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, 1859 (York, Pennsylvania: The American Canal and Transportation Center, 1975).

considered Cumberland home, while Williamsport and Sharpsburg were tied at almost 10% (49) apiece. A significant number (36) still came from New York, while somewhat less are listed for the state of Maryland as a whole (27), the small community of Bakersville situated near Sharpsburg (26), and the canal-side town of Hancock (26). The 1870 census for Sharpsburg closely mirrors the register, as it lists 53 men as boating on the canal and an additional four male teenagers as mule drivers.[34]

Of the 53 boatmen enumerated in the 1870 census, 29 are identified as household heads, 10 possessing real property ranging from $300 to $1,200 in value, with a mean of $600. Four other boatmen are shown as married, but living in other households: two were living with their wives' parents, one with his mother, and the other unknown, although possibly with a parent or grandparent. Half of the 20 unmarried boatmen resided with their widowed mothers, most of the remainder with their parents (6) or boating brothers (2).[35]

With one exception, all of the boatmen's wives, whether living in their own household or with others, were enumerated as keeping house. This one wife was listed as a cook on a canal boat; she and her husband are shown as residing with his parents. A second,

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[34] Unrau, Vol. VI, Chapt. XVI, p. 46; Federal Manuscript Census, Maryland [Town of Sharpsburg, Washington County], Schedule of Population, 1870 [hereinafter cited as 1870 census]. Unfortunately, the 1850 and 1860 population census schedules, which also list occupations, do not enumerate the town of Sharpsburg separately from the surrounding district.

[35] 1870 Census.

single female listed under her nonboating father's household also was identified as a cook on a canal boat.[36]

The number of boatmen residing in Sharpsburg increased almost 50% between 1870 and 1880 (from 53 to 73). While the number of heads of households remained almost exactly the same (30), there was a significant increase in the number of married boatmen living in other households (14). Over half (8) of the latter resided with their wives' parents and two with their brothers; relationships with the remaining households are unknown. The 1880 census also revealed a significant increase in the number of unmarried boatmen (29), almost all of whom were listed with both parents, most of the fathers boatmen themselves, or widowed mothers. All of the boatmen's wives were enumerated as "keeping house."[37]

While the 1880 census does not list property ownership, it is possible to compare this schedule with an 1877 map of the town of Sharpsburg that identifies residences. Correlations can be made for approximately one-third of the boatmen, which suggests a high degree of movement. Boatmen residences were scattered throughout the town, with a higher concentration on the south side of town, along the roads leading to Snyder's Landing, a wharf along the canal where most of the Sharpsburg boatmen kept their boats. Very few boatmen lived along the main street in the center of town,

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[36] 1870 Census.

[37] Federal Manuscript Census, Maryland [Town of Sharpsburg, Washington County], Schedule of Population, 1880 [hereinafter cited as 1880 Census]. Of the 29 unmarried boatmen, 27 lived with at least one parent and two boarded in unrelated households.

where most of the substantial residences were located. One of the more intriguing aspects of this map is the large number of shared surnames between the boatmen and many of the town's nonboating inhabitants, suggesting a high degree of interrelatedness between them.[38]

The 1900 census shows a downward trend in the number of Sharpsburg boatmen, from 73 in 1880 to 45 twenty years later. This most likely is a direct reflection of the overall decline in the carrying trade on the C&O Canal following the 1889 flood. Half (23) of the boatmen are identified as heads of households. Of these, ten owned their own house, while the remainder rented. There was a significant difference in average age between those who owned a house and those who did not. Two of the boatmen shared household head status with a second family living in the same house. It appears likely that they were related to these other families through their wives.[39]

Reflecting a significant proportional decrease from 1880, five other boatmen were married, but residing in other households. Two of them lived with their wives' parents: one with his own parents, one with his son-in-law, and the last with a family of unknown

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[38] Lake, Griffing & Stevenson, An Illustrated Atlas of Washington County, Maryland (1877; Reprinted by Washington County Historical Society, 1975), 35.

[39] Federal Manuscript Census, Maryland [Town of Sharpsburg, Washington County], Population Schedules, 1900 [hereinafter cited as 1900 Census]. The average age of a boatmen home owner was 52, as compared to 39 for those who leased. No such difference was reflected in the 1870 census, where there was no correlation between age and home ownership.

relationship. Sixteen boatmen were listed as unmarried and living in the households of their parents, primarily boating fathers or widowed mothers. Finally, three unmarried boatmen were enumerated as boarders in unrelated households.[40]

Between 1900 and 1920 the number of boatmen in Sharpsburg decreased by almost half (from 45 to 24). Of these, exactly two-thirds were heads of households, with most of them owning their homes and only a few renting. One-fourth of the total boatmen were unmarried sons of boating families, while the final two unmarried boatmen lived with their sister's family.[41]

Taken together, the 1870 through 1920 census records reveal a number of trends through time. The first is an increase in the number of boatmen in Sharpsburg through to 1880, followed by a gradual decline. If the census records for 1890 had been available, they might have revealed a significant decrease occurring around that time as a result of the 1889 flood. Second, a three-fold jump occurs between 1870 and 1880 of married couples living with other relatives, primarily the wives' parents. This dropped back to the earlier levels by the end of the century. At the close of the canal era, all of the boat families were living in their own households.

The census records also show an increase through time in the proportion of unmarried male boatmen residing within their parents'

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[40] 1900 census. Given the surnames of the widowed mothers, it is highly likely that many of them had been married to boatmen.

[41] Federal manuscript Census, Maryland [Town of Sharpsburg, Washington County], Population Schedules, 1920. The average age of home ownership (39) was not that much higher than of those who rented (34); this reflects quite a change from the 1900 census.

boating households, suggesting an increase in the proportion of family boats, particularly from 1880 onward. Home ownership appears to hold steady at about 20% of the Sharpsburg boatmen throughout most of this period, but rises to over half in the last decade of canal operations. In 1870, there was no correlation between age and home ownership, while it was strong in both 1900 and 1920. The average age of home ownership dropped substantial within that 20 year period--from 52 to 39, while the average age of boatmen who leased declined less precipitously from 39 to 34. This somewhat reflects what was happening with the age composition of the boatmen as a whole through time. From 1870 to 1900 the average age of boatmen heads of household rose from 35 to 46, and then dipped by 1920 to 42.

For each census enumeration under consideration, rough calculations were made for each boatman and his wife of their age at the birth of their first child.[42] From 1870 through 1920, the ages were a remarkably consistent 22 for the females, and stayed within a narrow range of 25 to 27 for the males. There may have been a very slight drop in age by 1920, but these numbers might have been skewed by the small number of canallers employed at that late date. It is not known how these numbers might compare with nonboating populations, and whether any significant difference exists.

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[42] I did this by subtracting the age recorded for the eldest child from the recorded age of the parent. This of course does not reflect their ages at marriage, which usually occurred about one year prior to the birth of their first child, judging from census records that recorded the number of years of marriage.

Oral history interviews, primarily of canallers from Sharpsburg, provide much evidence concerning strategies followed by canal families in the first quarter of the twentieth century. They reveal that the wives' duties included cooking, child rearing, washing, and steering the boat when the rest of the crew rested. One boat captain's wife, Mary Mose, recalled very little difference, either in quantity or variety of work, between housekeeping on the canal boat and at her home in Sharpsburg.[43]

If they were of sufficient size and age, families sometimes ran two boats simultaneously, generally the mother running one and the father the other. As recounted by boatman James Eaton:

> We had a -- well, a pretty-good sized family, and so they asked my dad, would he take another boat. So my dad and my youngest sister next to me, well, we were on one boat and my oldest sister next to me and my mother and my oldest brother, why, they were on the other boat.

In addition, Eaton's mother did all her own baking and washing while tending the boat. When running two boats, the family tied up at night; otherwise, when they only had one, they ran it around the

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[43] Kytle, 190; Joe Sanbower, Interview by Ed Wesley, November 1967, interview 30, transcript, 23; Clifford Swain, Interview by Woody Wineholt, September 1973, interview 18, transcript, 32, C&O Canal National Historical Park, Sharpsburg, Maryland.

clock.[44]

On occasion a woman became a boat captain in her own right, but always as the widowed wife of one who was deceased. One of the more notable, and perhaps tragic, of these was Catherine Ensminger, a young widow from Williamsport, who boated with the assistance of her young sons and a "servant" named James Hetzer around the turn of the twentieth century. In 1920, a number of years after Ensminger had remarried and left the canal, Hetzer murdered her in her home at Snyder's Landing, the result of a long-standing case of unrequited love.[45]

It was often the case that older children worked on the canal boats with their fathers while the mother stayed home most of the time with younger family members. Sometimes only boys worked on the canal boats and the girls stayed at home, while other times the girls would go on the canal boats when they were around ten years old to do housework and cooking, and some mule driving. As recollected by Clifford Swain:

> Now, the boy; the male was the one who suffered. Now the girls; they had all the chance in the world. . . . Well,

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[44] James Eaton, Interview by Martha Ross, May 25, 1974, interview 3, transcript, C&O Canal National Historical Park, Sharpsburg, Maryland.

[45] 1900 Census, Ensminger is listed as a 33-year-old widow, head of a household that consisted of her two sons, one 13 and the other 10, listed as drivers on canal boat, and 32-year-old male servant Hetzer, listed as a boatman; Mamie Swain, Interview by Martha Ross, September 1, 1973, interview 10, typescript, 7, C&O Canal National Historical Park, Sharpsburg, Maryland; Shepherdstown Register, May 13, 1920.

> they were home; they could get their education. Now, not all the girls . . . a lot of those girls had to be taken on the boat, and some of them drove mules. . . . Steered the boat, and worked just the same as the boys. But very few of them.

Several of those interviewed noted that their mothers might make one or two trips a season to go shopping in Georgetown.[46]

It was not uncommon for mothers to take very young children on the boat, leaving only when they reached school age. Boatman J.P. Mose noted that "when us children were small, my mother spent a lot of time on the boat with my father. As the children got bigger--we had a right good-sized family--why, she didn't go on the canal so much. She stayed in Sharpsburg." During the trip, his father would try to stay one night at home with the rest of the family, and to pick up food and clean clothes:

> My mother, she'd have some pies baked, maybe a couple of cakes, and we'd load a basket and take it along on the boat with us. And we'd get a lot of clean clothes. We never washed clothes; we'd just take them home to our

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[46] Clifford Swain, Interview by Ross Hubbard, July 8, 1965, interview 46, typescript, 12; Mary Schroeder, Interview by Mr. Wesley, no date, interview 26-27, typescript, 3, C&O Canal National Historical Park, Sharpsburg, Maryland; Kytle, interviews with Mrs. Lester Mose, Theodore Lizer and Mrs. Sam Liston. None of the interviews I reviewed focused on canal boat families; the information recorded on this subject was incidental to discussions concerning subjects such as canal operations and mules.

mother. And she'd have us all clean clothes enough to do us until we'd get back.

In some cases, parents stopped boating altogether when the children reached school age, and often became locktenders instead.[47]

Not all canal boat families had land-based homes. According to boatman Roy Bender, "There was [sic] two families that was raised on the canal. They didn't know what a home was." A United States Department of Labor investigation conducted in 1921 revealed that five captains lived the year round on their boats, one having done so for 18 years. Raised in a family on one of these boats, James Eaton related that in the winter they lived on their canal boat in Cumberland, and after the canal shut down continued to live in it year round until 1932.[48]

The 1921 Department of Labor investigation focused on

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[47] Kytle, interviews with Otho Swain, 138, and J.P. Mose, 150; Lavenia Waskey, Interview by Martha Ross, Sept. 5, 1973, typescript, 4; Clara Manning, Interview by Martha Ross, May 26, 1974, interview 6, typescript, 2, C&O Canal National Historical Park, Sharpsburg, Maryland.

[48] Roy Bender, Interview by unknown person, 1967, interview 39, typescript, 21; James Eaton interview, 24 and 27, C&O Canal National Historical Park, Sharpsburg, Maryland; Ethel M. Springer and Thomas F. Hahn, Canal Boat Children on the Chesapeake and Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York Canals (Shepherdstown, West Virginia: The American Canal and Transportation Center, 1977), 16. One of the two families without a land-based home was the Eatons, mentioned about in the text as running two boats. For the remaining boat captains, the investigation found that all the other families visited maintained homes on land: "The dwellings were chiefly small detached wooden houses, some being built of logs. None of them ad modern conveniences in the way of inside plumbing. Nearly all, however, were located in or near towns along the canal within one mile of schools."

conditions under which children lived on the few remaining canals in the country, including the C&O. According to this report:

> Practically all the traffic [on the C&O Canal] at the time of the study was conducted by one company [Canal Towage Company] which owned the boats and employed captains to operate them. The policy of this company was to give preference to married men on the ground that a married man is steadier in his job than a single man, and that the presence of his wife and children on a boat raises the moral tone. For the year 1920, the company reported that all but 7 of the 66 captains on its pay roll were married men.

The large majority of the married captains had their wives and children with them. In fact, of the 59 married captains, 41 were found who had their children with them, totaling 135. Slightly more than one-third of these children were under seven years old, while the remainder were spread fairly evenly between the ages of eight and seventeen. Of course, as noted in the interviews cited above, the presence of children on the boat did not necessarily mean that the mother also was present.[49]

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[49] Springer and Hahn, 8. Unfortunately, the file for this investigation in the Childrens' Bureau papers at the National Archives was empty. The report's basic findings, echoing those of nineteenth-century Britain, were that "while the number of children living on canal boats in this country is small, the conditions under which they are living and working present unusually serious problems. School attendance is difficult, hours of work are

The report cited as the reason for taking families on the boats the fact that "on all canals . . . the inherent nature of the work necessitates long periods away from a home on shore is an impelling motive to boatmen to take their wives and children with them." However, it is evident from the investigation that the canal boatmen depended upon the labor of their families; as one boatman succinctly put it, "If it weren't for the children the canal wouldn't run a day." While half the captains reported having paid helpers, the majority of families having four or more children did not hire crews.[50]

Interviews with early twentieth-century canallers and census records substantiate the 1921 Labor Department study conclusion regarding the C&O Canal boat families, that they were tightly intermarried and passed on their occupation from generation to generation. A number of these interviews provide fairly complex genealogies that show boating relationships extending back to at least grandparents on both sides.[51]

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excessively long, doctors are inaccessible, and proper recreation is lacking" (p. 6).

[50] Springer and Hahn, 12-13.

[51] A case in point is Sharpsburg native J.P. Mose, whose parents both came from boating families: "My mother was May Mose. She was a Renner before she was married. My Grandfather Renner was on the canal. And my uncle Charlie Renner boated on the canal. Uncle Ed Renner boated on the canal. And Uncle Ridgely boated on the canal. And Uncle Clell boated on the canal. And Uncle Ivan boated on the canal, but then he was never the captain of a boat" (Kytle, p. 150). Perhaps the most notable canal family were the Swains. John Swain helped construct the C&O Canal, then built and operated over a dozen canal boats until forced to sell them by the Canal Towage Company. He moved to Sharpsburg before the Civil War and founded a boating dynasty that lasted until the canal went out

Discussion

The evidence concerning canal families from Sharpsburg points toward an increasing dependence upon family boating through time, particularly following the tumultuous decade of the 1870s as the boatmen's financial position deteriorated. This economic decline is reflected in the 1880 census by the tremendous jump in boatmen residing in other households. The increase of boating sons within boatmen's households in 1880 as compared to 1870 (which showed more unmarried boatmen and mule drivers as originating from nonboating households) suggests that the strategies of boatmen changed during this time to include more family members.

Oral history evidence also suggests that family boats were commonplace by the 1880s, since the vast majority of those interviewed were on the boats as children from the late nineteenth century to the demise of the canal. Most of their parents, both mothers and fathers, also had been raised within the boating community during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The importance of family labor is reflected in comments made during the 1921 Department of Labor investigation that the canal could not run for a single day without the labor of the children. Although not the focus of that particular study, it also is likely that the unpaid labor of the boatmen's wives also contributed greatly toward keeping the canal open. While citing the elevation of the moral

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of business (Kytle, pp. 131-132); Clifford Swain interview, September 1973, 35.

tone of the canal as its reason, the Canal Towage Company's real intent in preferring married men over those who were single, and in having the wives and children on the boats, probably had more to do with keeping wages low than any other reason.

Finally, the tendency of women to leave the boats when financially able, or when some of the children were old enough to replace her, suggests that economic necessity played a large role in decision making. As such, this reflects strategies utilized by other working class families of the period in other occupations and areas of the country.[52]

The economic strategies employed by the Sharpsburg boat families strongly influenced and helped form the structure of their family and community life, in many ways paralleling the English canallers of the same period. All of these families had close ties with the land-based community, maintaining residences there at least during the off season. Census records and maps reveal a high degree of integration within the community, at least in terms of residential patterns.

As in England, extensive kinship relations are evident between both boating and nonboating families in Sharpsburg. This point is brought out strongly by the oral history interviews conducted of

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[52] See for example, Miriam Cohen, Workshop to Office: Two Generations of Italian Women in New York City, 1900-1950 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Gerald David Jaynes, Branches without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Susan Estabrook Kennedy, If All We Did was to Weep at Home: A History of White Working-Class Women in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979.

former canallers. A cursory review of marriage records against the 1870 census reveals a high incidence of intermarriage between Sharpsburg residents, and in particular between boat families.[53]

Freer had concluded in her research of English canal families that living in extended families was one of the survival strategies they employed. This certainly held true for the Sharpsburg boat families, especially during the economic upheavals of the 1870s and 1880s. The vast majority of couples living in extended households resided with the wives' parents, mirroring Prior's findings that many boatmen lived in matrilocal households. It does not appear to be the case for the Sharpsburg boatmen, however, that through marrying local women they ended up settling in that community. In fact, the large majority of boatmen surnames found in Sharpsburg predate construction of the canal, suggesting that boating as an occupation may have developed within the preexisting social and economic structure of the town.[54]

All the evidence suggests that the Sharpsburg boating community, however it originated, became an increasingly closed one through time. Lack of education and opportunity among the boat children were the primary factors:

> The operation of canal boats is an occupation handed down

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[53] Washington County Marriage Records, Hagerstown, Maryland.

[54] J. Thomas Scharf, History of Western Maryland (Reprint. Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1968). The town of Sharpsburg was founded in 1763, and settled by people of English and German descent. Many of the boatmen appear to have been descended from German Lutherans.

> from father to son. Said one mother: "The children are brought up on the boat and don't know nothin' else, and that is the only reason they take up boating." . . . Several men complained that they knew "nothing else" and realized that their children would have the same disadvantage.

As the interviews revealed, it also is evident that boat children tended to marry other boat children, further reinforcing the tightness of the boating community. As one woman noted, she didn't exactly meet her husband, for they had known each other all their lives.[55]

Employment under the Canal Towage Company apparently led to increasing stability within the Sharpsburg boating community during the closing years of canal operations. Home ownership grew and increasingly fewer families lived with relatives. This stability, however, was purchased through the toil of family members. While their mobile lifestyle may have seemed unusual, canal families followed strategies common to other members of the working classes at that time, utilizing the unpaid labor of women and children to run the canal boats as the boatmen became squeezed in an uncompromising market environment.

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[55] Springer and Hahn, p. 8; Kytle, p. 196.