A Journey on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal

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Introduction

The O' Leary family lives on a canal boat on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. William O'Leary is the Captain of their family boat named the "Turn Over." Captain O'Leary takes care of the family business, which is transporting cargo up and down the length of the C&O Canal.

Captain O'Leary's wife, Anna, takes care of the family. They have three children. Michael O'Leary is nine years old and is a mule driver. Elizabeth O'Leary is seven years old and helps her mother with the family chores. Jeffrey O'Leary is two years old and keeps everyone busy! Everyone in the O'Leary family (except Jeffrey) works together to make the canal boat run. Michael has decided this year to keep a diary of his journeys on the C&O Canal. Let's take a peek into Michael's diary to see what he's been up to.

DIARY

Monday June 7, 1876

Today we left **Cumberland** where the canal begins and started our trip to Georgetown where the canal ends. The men from the Consolidated Coal Company used huge buckets to fill up the "Turn Over" with 120 tons of Coal. Cumberland gets real busy sometimes with everybody hurrying to start their trip. We were the second boat in line this morning, so we got a good start.

I hitched Frances and Ida (our mules) up all by myself, and Dad steered instead of Mother since there were so many boats nearby. This is my third year walking these mules up and down the towpath. I hope next year Dad will let me steer the "Turn Over". After we'd been on our way for a few hours, Mother sent Elizabeth out on the towpath with me. I have to teach her how to be a mule driver. She can say "Whoa" and "Come Up" all right, but she never fixes the harnesses right. I have to watch her all the time.

Tuesday June 8, 1876

We stopped last night just after we got out of the **Paw Paw Tunnel**. It was dark and I get the creeps walking through the tunnel even in daylight. I say the tunnel is haunted, Dad says he isn't going to find out! Too many unexplained things happen at the tunnel at night.

I heard of this one Captain who tied his boat up for the night too close to the tunnel. He and his family hadn't been settled down for more than an hour or two and were eating supper. That's when they noticed the line tying them to the shore had mysteriously come undone. Well, everybody jumped up and used the poles to push the boat back over and tie it up again. Then the Captain noticed that the mules were very restless on the towpath and were not eating their grain. That night after everyone was in bed, the Captain heard the heavy hatches covering the coal being lifted. When he got up to see what was wrong, everything was in place perfectly. Well, that was enough. The Captain and his family and the mules were getting no rest. So they all got up and moved the boat a

couple of miles further downstream. The mules settled down right away and ate their grain. Nothing else unusual happened for the rest of the night. I don't know about Dad, but I sure believe in ghosts!

Wednesday June 9, 1876

I can hardly believe it! Dad let me steer the boat today. It was great. Once we got into **Hancock**, Dad called out, "Hey Michael, I think it's time you started learning a new job. How about taking a turn at the tiller?" I nearly jumped right over Frances and Ida to get on the boat. I didn't think I'd get to steer the "Turn Over" until I was ten, when most other boys start learning, but Dad thinks I'm big enough now.

I started out at Little Pool, since the canal's wide and straight there. I did a good job, too. You have to push the tiller arm to the left to make the boat go to the right, and push the tiller arm to the right to make the boat go to the

left. Seems backwards to me, but it works! I steered all the way until just before the **Licking Creek Aqueduct**. Then Dad took over again and I went back to the mules. We didn't want Elizabeth walking the mules over the aqueduct alone for her first time. An aqueduct is like a bridge which carries the canal, water and all, and towpath over a creek or a stream. The towpath is pretty narrow and high above the ground. No need getting the mules spooked for nothing. Elizabeth just needs practice. Maybe if I get her to be a good mule driver, Dad will let me steer some more.....

Thursday June 10, 1876

We passed through **Williamsport** today. Lots of warehouses. Seems like all we did today was chores. I gave the mule stables a good cleaning this morning before starting. Dad spliced a new towline since our old rope that leads from the boat to the mules was starting to get worn out. Mother and Elizabeth washed just about everything in sight. They scrubbed the cabin, top to bottom, trying to get rid of some of the coal dust. Then they washed clothes and hung them on a line Dad and I put up on the deck.

Jeffrey was tied to the roof all day today. We put him in a kind of harness with a long rope attached to a ring on the deck. That way he can wander around and play without any of us having to watch him too closely. If he falls off the boat, we just pull him in like a big fish. Only he doesn't actually fall in the water. We made sure the line wouldn't reach the water so he can't drown. We all started calling Jeffrey "fish bait" today, though. He fell over at least three times, just dangling about two feet above the water teasing all the catfish.

Elizabeth sewed some buttons on Dad's shirts while Mother cooked up some bean soup and biscuits for supper tonight. Dad says when we return to Cumberland, he and I are going to do some painting on the "Turn Over" so she'll look fresh and new again. I'll sleep good tonight. I'm extra tired and Dad said I could sleep in the hay cabin tonight, since I worked so hard cleaning it and all. Plus we went 30 miles today, and I had to walk extra with the mules while everyone was busy with other chores.

Friday June 11, 1876

It rained today. Not too hard, but enough to be a bother. We were a few miles from the Antietam Battlefield today where a giant battle took place during the Civil War. I learned in school that the battle at Antietam was the single bloodiest day in all of American History! We also studied John Brown's raid at **Harpers Ferry** where he tried to get guns to the slaves.

I only get to go to school about three to four months a year when the canal is closed for the winter. The rest of the time I work with my family on the canal. Sometimes it's hard to keep up with the other children who are in school the full time. The boys who work on some of the nearby farms don't get a full school year either so it works out all right. I keep up pretty well with the other students, though. I'm going on McGuffey's Third Eclectic Reader this winter, only one behind the boys my age who go to school full time. Mother says keeping this diary is a good way for me to practice my penmanship and orthography (that means spelling). Tonight we are all going to gather together and listen to Father tell stories about the war.

Saturday June 12, 1876

It is so hot today that Mother let us go swimming for awhile. Elizabeth could only jump off the boat into the canal, but I dove. We passed a boat today that was headed upstream towards Cumberland which was carrying a bunch of watermelons. A few of them fell off, so I swam over and brought two back to our boat. Dad scooped them out of the water and brought them onboard the "Turn Over".

I also got to do some fishing from the boat today. I caught two perch, a catfish, and a sunfish. Dad caught some fish too so we had fish for dinner, corn, and watermelon for dessert. We had a contest to see who could spit the seeds the farthest and Dad won.

Some of the farmers along the canal leave the two rows of corn closest to the canal for the boatmen and their families to pick as kind of a neighborly thing to do. Elizabeth picked enough for supper tonight. We never pick more corn than we can use or else the farmers might not be so generous.

I saw some people crossing the Potomac River as we passed by **Whites Ferry** today, and there were a lot of folks out fishing the river's bank. There is a mill here where they cut sandstone used in making buildings. I know they used

the stone from here to make the Smithsonian Museum in Washington. Tonight we've been invited to the Eaton's boat to listen to some music and sing songs. A couple of other families are coming too. I hope there are some other boys there my age. We're bringing some freshly made cornbread to share that Elizabeth helped Mother make.

Sunday June 13, 1876

Since today is Sunday, Father decided we should take the day off. We walked to a nearby church and then visited with the lockkeeper, at **Rileys Lock**. Mr. Riley let me help him "lock through" a couple of boats. I helped him push open and push closed the big lockgates, and he even let me turn the lock key to let the water out of the lock to make the boats lower. Tomorrow we're going to stop at Great Falls for awhile, and then we'll be in Georgetown.

Monday June 14, 1876

When we got to **Great Falls** today, I took Elizabeth out to see the falls. If it weren't for those waterfalls and all of those rocks in the Potomac River, we wouldn't be here. Folks would have used the river to carry their cargo instead of building this canal.

You can tell when we're close to the city, lots of people come and watch the boats. At the Crommelin House (Great Falls Tavern) the lockkeeper added a hotel to his home so all the folks visiting would have a place to stay.

When we got into **Georgetown** today, we had to wait in line awhile for our boat to be unloaded. Mother went shopping and bought fabric, some for 15 cents a yard and some calico for 8 cents a yard, to make new clothes. Elizabeth and I got to buy some candy, four pieces for a penny! When we got back to the "Turn Over", all the coal had been unloaded. The company doesn't always get all the coal off so I crawled underneath the hatches and swept up what coal they left so we can use it in our stove to cook with on our way back. Tonight we sleep in the city, and tomorrow we'll head back for Cumberland.

Adapted from a previous instructional resource in partnership with Washington County Public Schools and the National Park Service

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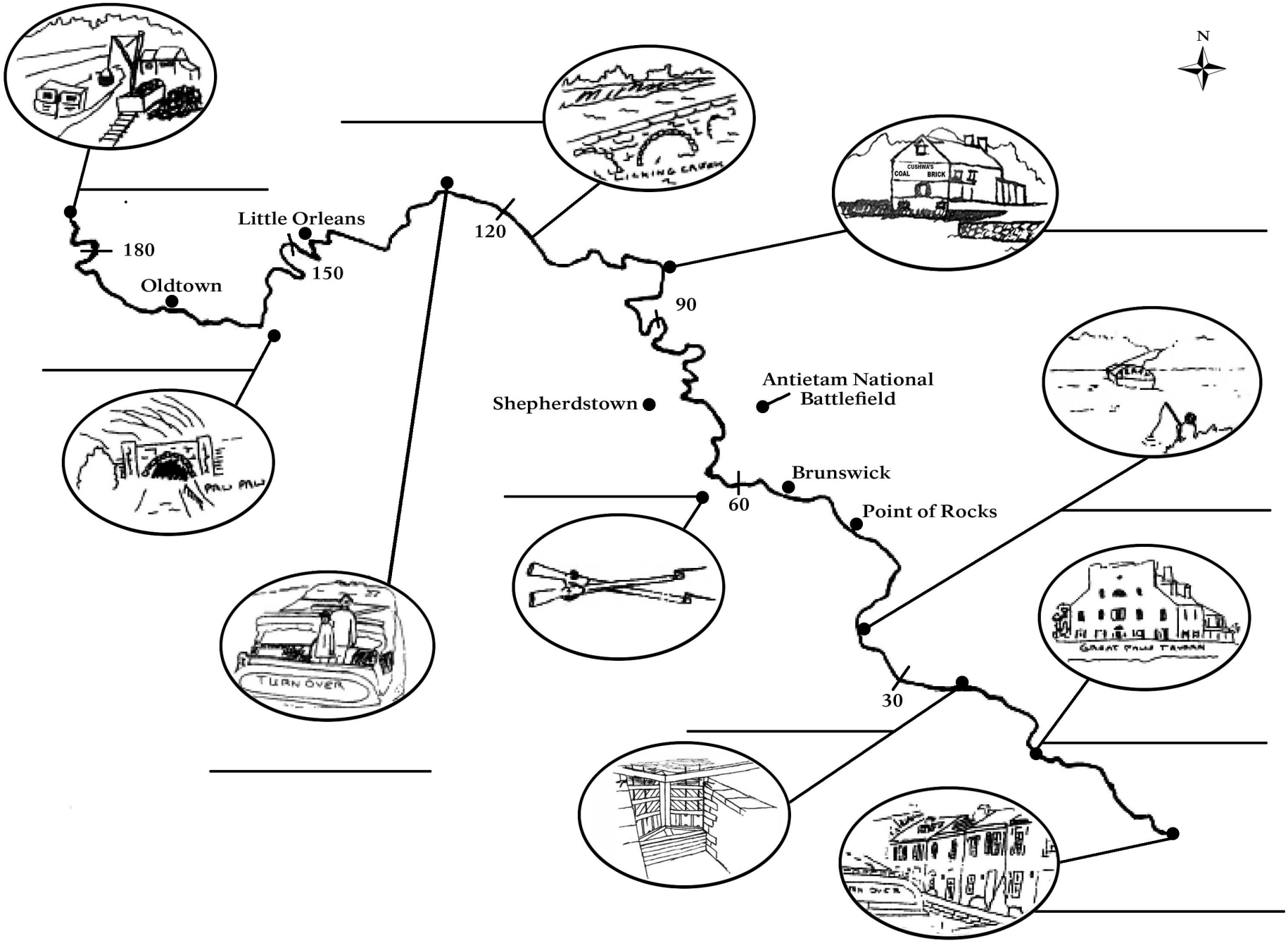
Michael's Journey on the C & O Canal