

Dreams Along the C&O Canal

“... justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.... Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.”

Martin Luther King, *I Have a Dream* Speech, August 28, 1963

Presented at the Lincoln Memorial downstream from the eastern terminus of the C&O Canal

Dreams motivated many along the Potomac – from George Washington looking for a transportation route to the west, to Irish and German laborers who built the C&O Canal, to escaped runaways traveling on the underground railroad fleeing north to freedom, to Martin Luther King who downstream from the canal at the Lincoln Memorial shared his dream that one day all will live in this land as equals.

To George Washington the “mighty stream” was the Potomac River, a potential water route to the west. His dream envisioned the Potomac as a means of expanding the young country away from the east coast through the Allegheny Mountains and beyond. Throughout his adult life, even during the American Revolution and his presidency, Washington worked to create the Potomac Canal, a series of skirting canals that provided passage around rapids and falls to allow for boat travel on the river. Regretfully, Washington never saw his dream in operation as the Potomac Canal began operating in 1803, four years after his death.

The Potomac Canal was the precursor to the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. By the 1820s the Potomac Canal was not the “highway” to that west that Washington and others hoped. In 1828, construction began on a new self contained canal, the C&O Canal, parallel to the Potomac River from Georgetown to the Ohio River. Irish laborers and German stone masons signed on as indentured servants to construct the canal, lured across the Atlantic Ocean by the promise of work and a better life in America. For many their dreams faded as the reality of hard and dangerous work, low wages or lack of pay, labor conflicts, disease and death – engulfed their lives.

As the C&O Canal was constructed and operated from east to west, another transportation route crossed the canal from south to north. This route was the Underground Railroad. Over time escape routes crossed the “mighty stream” – the Potomac River, and C&O Canal – in Western Maryland, the last major physical barriers before reaching the Mason/Dixon Line. Though details are sparse, the canal and its towpath served as an escape route for many runaways as they traveled from slave states in the south, such as Virginia and Maryland, to the north into Pennsylvania and beyond, along the way dreaming of freedom.

Accounts of the passage of runaway enslaved along the C&O Canal are as elusive as the footprints of the mules along the dusty canal towpath. But looking at the newspaper accounts, the stories are there! The National Intelligencer tells of Jerry a runaway who in 1830 is believed to have fled “from Washington pass up the Canal.” In 1833, an enslaved name Henson escaped “up the Canal toward Harpers Ferry.” Another runaway, Ben, in 1852 was believed to have “left for Cumberland by way of the Canal.” In the 1830s, there were accounts of a handful of runaways from Prince William County, Virginia who were all last seen on the towpath. One, a runaway named William was seen with his father George Soloman, a

freeman who worked on the canal, on his way to Washington where he may have continued onto the canal.

What attracted enslaved to flee along the canal? First there were many fords and ferrys that provided easy crossing of the Potomac River. The canal towpath then provided an easy route of travel until runaways continued north. Some fled toward Hancock, MD, where the distance to the Mason/Dixon Line was but a few miles. Some sought the National Road that led to Cumberland, Maryland, where the runaways only had a short distance before entering Pennsylvania. Some traveled toward South Mountain, Catocin Mountain, or one of the other mountains in western Maryland, to follow the ridgelines to the north. Perhaps this was Martin Luther King's reference in his speech as he declared, "Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania." Some runaways discovered solace as they fell in along the canal where they posed as freemen and found work with other canawlers.

Since many details are lost to time, questions remain as to who and if there were Underground Railroad agents that operated along the C&O Canal. In the 1850s African Americans Henry Williams and Andy Jenkins each captained canal boats. In 1857, the C&O Canal Company was pressured to remove the position of captain from all African Americans who worked the canal. Was this due to Williams and Jenkins assisting runaways as they traveled along the canal?

Fleeing north runaways had to cross the Potomac River. In the 1830s, John Blackford owned Ferry Hill Place across from Shepherdstown, West Virginia (before the Civil War Virginia). Blackford owned the ferry that crossed the river. Two of his slaves, Ned and Jupe, operated Blackford's Ferry. As ferry operators, did these two enslaved workers provide safe passage for runaways here? Then too, there were some locals in the Ferry Hill area who caught and turned in runaways to be jailed and returned to slavery. So, the Ferry Hill environment provided both opportunities and challenges for runaways.

Though slavery ended over 100 years earlier, many civil injustices still existed in this country by the 1960s. On August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, presented his *I Have a Dream* speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. On the edge of the Potomac River, just one mile downstream from the start of the C&O Canal in Georgetown, King called for a day when "this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'"

Today, millions of visitors annually come to the C&O Canal. For most the towpath is a recreational route. In the words of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, the canal is "... a refuge, a place of retreat, a long stretch of quiet and peace at the Capitol's back door--a wilderness area where man can be alone with his thoughts., a sanctuary where he can commune with God and nature,...."

But, when on the canal towpath, reflect back to those who previously traveled this route with very different hopes and dreams. Think of those who did not achieve the promises made to them as they were lured from their home lands in Europe to build this canal. Instead they suffered and only too often ended up buried in now long forgotten graves along the canal.

Reflect on the enslaved African American runaways who walked the towpath as they moved closer to achieving their dream of freedom. Listen for the words of Dr. King as he called out, "Free at last, free at

last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last!” The C&O Canal has many stories that echo along its course; of transportation, of construction, of the boat captains, crews and families, of lockkeepers, of floods and recovery. Too, the stories of enslaved who passed along the C&O Canal are still echoing along the “mighty” Potomac and along the canal towpath – lingering here for us to learn from and to remember.