

# A Chronological History of the Alexandria Canal (Part I)

By MAXINE GOFF MORGAN

A history of the Alexandria Canal would not be complete without incorporating into it the events which led to its establishment. Such events should prove to be as interesting and important to the reader as the construction and operation. This article, then, is intended to deal with the early problems, and a subsequent one will cover the latter phase.

The *Journals of the House of Burgesses* contain much legislation on river navigation from its beginning in 1619, through that final day, "Monday, the 6th of May, 16 Geo. III, 1776. Several Members met but did neither proceed to Business, nor adjourn, as the House of Burgesses. Finis."<sup>1</sup>

The *Writings of George Washington* contain volumes on the subject of navigation. He wrote extensively on the matter, both privately and as a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses. Washington persistently pressed for construction of canals on both the Potomac and the James "for the purpose of opening and extending navigation of the rivers as far as practicable, communicating them with good roads with the nearest navigable waters (for inland craft) to the Westward; opening intercourse between tidewater and the greatest extent of the back Country within the United States."<sup>2</sup>

Insofar as the Journals affect our subject, the proceedings of that body are given here. Although repetitious, the entries dealing with river navigation are presented in their entirety so that we may grasp an insight into the manner in which various questions were resolved. The following legislation was enacted by the Assembly from the year 1769 through 1776.

"The General Assembly, began and held at the Capitol, in the City of Williamsburg, on Tuesday, the Seventh Day of November, in the Tenth Year of the Reign of our Lord George the Third, by the Grace of God, of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, &c., Annoque Domini, 1769"<sup>3</sup>

**Tuesday, the 5th of Decembar, 10 Geo. III, 1769.**

"Ordered, That Leave be given to bring in a Bill for clearing and making navigable the River Potowmack from the Great Falls of said River, up to Fort Cumberland; and that Mr. Richard Henry Lee and Mr. Washington do prepare and bring in the same."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Journals of the House of Burgesses*, 1773-1776, p. 283.

<sup>2</sup> *Writings of George Washington*, Volume 28, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> *Journals*, 1766-1769, p. 225.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 314.

**Friday, the 8th of December, 1769.**

“Mr. Richard Henry Lee<sup>5</sup> presented to the House, according to Order, a Bill for clearing and making navigable the River Potowmack, from the Great Falls, up to Fort Cumberland; and the same was received, and read the first time.”

“RESOLVED, That the Bill be Read a second Time.”<sup>6</sup>

**Wednesday, the 13th of December, 1769.**

“A Bill for clearing and making navigable the River Potomack, from the Great Falls of the said River, up to Fort Cumberland, was read a second Time.”

“RESOLVED, That the Bill be committed to Mr. Richard Henry Lee, Mr. Washington, and all the Members who serve for the Counties of Frederick and Hampshire.”<sup>7</sup>

**Thursday, the 14th of December, 1769.**

“Mr. Richard Henry Lee reported, from the Committee to whom the Bill for clearing and making navigable the River Potowmack, from the great Falls of the said River, up to Fort Cumberland, was committed, that the Committee had gone through the Bill, and made several Amendments thereunto, which they had directed him to report to the House; and he read the Report in his Place, and afterwards delivered the Bill, with the Amendments, in at the Clerk’s Table; Where the Amendments were once read throughout, and then a second Time, one by one; and upon the Question severally put thereupon, were agreed by the House.

“Ordered, That the Bill, with the Amendments be ingrossed.”<sup>8</sup>

**Wednesday, the 18th of March, 1772.**

“A Petition of the Inhabitants and Freeholders of the County of Frederick, whose names are thereunto subscribed, was presented to the House, and read; setting forth, that the Navigation of the River Potowmack from Tide-Water to Fort Cumberland, if properly improved, would be productive of great Advantage, not only to those who are settled upon the adjacent Lands, but to the whole Colony, by introducing a most extensive Trade; and therefore, praying, that an Act may pass for opening the Navigation of the said River, at the Expences of the Public, to be reimbursed by reasonable Tolls upon the Commodities which shall be carried in the said River; or for granting the like Tolls to such Adventurers as shall be willing to undertake the work, at their own Expence; or for empowering trustees to receive and lay out the Money, which Subscribers may voluntarily contribute, for that Purpose.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Lee represented the County of Westmoreland, and George Washington, the County of Fairfax.

<sup>6</sup> *Journals*, 1766-1769, p. 322.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 1766-1769, p. 334.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 338.

<sup>9</sup> Burgesses representing the County of Frederick were Robert Rutherford and James Wood. The latter was the surveyor of most of the territory beyond the Blue Ridge, which was then called Orange County. When Frederick was formed from Orange, Wood became the County Clerk. He founded the town of Winchester, Virginia, and served in the House of Burgesses from 1766 to 1776.

“Ordered, that the said Petition be referred to the Consideration of the Committee of Propositions and Grievances; and that they do examine the Matter thereof, and report the same, with their Opinion thereupon, to the House.”<sup>10</sup>

**Friday, the 20th of March, 1772.**

“Resolved, That it is of the opinion of this Committee, that so much of the Petition of divers inhabitants of the County of Frederick, as prays that the Navigation of the River Potowmack, from Tide Water to Fort Cumberland, may be improved at the Expence of the public be rejected.

“Resolved, That it is the Opinion of this Committee, that the Residue of the said Petition, praying that the said Navigation be improved by Subscription, or Lottery, is reasonable.

“The said Resolutions, being severally read a second Time, were, upon the Question severally put thereupon, agreed to by the House.”<sup>11</sup>

**Friday, the 3rd of April, 1772.**

“Ordered, That Leave be given to bring in a Bill for opening and extending the Navigation of the Potomwack, from Fort Cumberland, to Tide Water;<sup>12</sup> and that Mr. Thompson Mason, Mr. Washington, Mr. West, Mr. Francis Peyton, Mr. Tebbs, Mr. Marshall, Mr. Scott, Mr. Henry Lee, Mr. Alexander, and Mr. Yelverton Peyton, do prepare and bring in the same.”<sup>13</sup>

**Monday, the 6th of April, 1772.**

“Mr. Thomson Mason presented to the House, according to Order, a Bill for opening and extending the Navigation of the River Potowmack, from Fort Cumberland to Tide Water; and the same was received, and read the first Time.

“Resolved, That the Bill be read a second Time.

“Ordered, that the Bill be now read a second Time.

“The Bill was accordingly read a second Time.

“Ordered, That the Bill be engrossed.”<sup>14</sup>

**Wednesday, the 8th of April, 1772.**

“An engrossed Bill for opening and extending the Navigation of the River Potowmack, from Fort Cumberland to Tide Water, was read the third Time.

“Resolved, That the Bill do pass; and that the Title be An Act for opening and extending the Navigation of the River Potowmack, from Fort Cumberland to Tide Water.

“Ordered, That Mr. Thomson Mason do carry the Bill to the Council, and desire their Concurrence.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Journals*, 1770-1772, p. 252.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 1770-1772, p. 258.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 292.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson Mason and Francis Peyton were from Loudoun County; George Washington and John West, from Fairfax County; Thomas Marshall and James Scott, from Fauquier County; Fouchee Tebbs and Henry Lee, from Prince William County; and John Alexander and Yelverton Peyton, from Stafford County.

<sup>14</sup> *Journals*, 1770-1772, p. 297.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 304, 305.

**Thursday, the 9th of April, 1772.**

“The Council have agreed to the Bill, intituled, An Act for opening and extending the Navigation of the River Potowmack, from Fort Cumberland to the Tide Water, with an Amendment, to which Amendment the Council desire the Concurrence of this House; and also,<sup>16</sup>

“The Council have agreed to the Bill intituled An Act to encourage the further Settlement of the Town of Alexandria, in the County of Fairfax, with an Amendment to which Amendment the Council desire the Concurrence of this House.”<sup>17</sup>

“And the Messenger withdrew.”

“The House proceeded to take into Consideration the Amendment made by the Council to the Bill, Intituled An act for opening and extending the Navigation of the River Potowmack, from Fort Cumberland to Tide Water.

“And the said Amendment was read, and is as followeth, viz.,

“Page 5, Line 7, after ‘ever’ insert ‘Provided nevertheless, that if any further Damage should arise to any Proprietor of Land, in Consequence of the opening of such Canal, than had been before considered and valued, it shall be lawful for such Proprietor, as often as any such new Damage shall happen, by Application to the Court of the County where the Land shall lie, to have such further Damage valued by a Jury, in like Manner, and to receive and recover the same of the said Trustees, and upon every such Valuation, the Jury is hereby directed to describe and ascertain the Bounds of the Lands valued.’

“The said Amendment being read a second Time, was, upon the Question put thereupon, agreed to by the House.

“Ordered, That Mr. Thomson Mason do carry the Bill to the Council, and acquaint them that this House hath agreed to the Amendment made by them.”<sup>18</sup>

**Friday, the 10th of April, 1772.**

“Ordered, That Mr. Speaker<sup>19</sup> do transmit to the Speaker of the Lower House of Assembly, of the Province of Maryland, a Copy of the Act for erecting a Lighthouse on Cape Henry, and also a Copy of the Act for opening and extending the Navigation of the River Potowmack, from Fort Cumberland, to Tide Water, and desire the Assembly of the said Province to enact Laws of the like import.”<sup>20</sup>

**Saturday, the 11th of April, 1772.**

“A Message from Council, by Mr. Blair:<sup>21</sup>

“Mr. Speaker,

“The Governor<sup>22</sup> commands this House to attend his Excellency immediately, in the Council Chamber,

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 1770-1772, p. 310.

<sup>17</sup> This entry was inserted as an interesting sidelight.

<sup>18</sup> *Journals*, 1770-1772, p. 310.

<sup>19</sup> Peyton Randolph, Williamsburg.

<sup>20</sup> *Journals*, 1770-1772, p. 312.

<sup>21</sup> John Blair, Clerk of the Council.

<sup>22</sup> His Excellency, the Right Honourable John, Earl of Dunmore, of the Colony and Dominion of Virginia, and Vice Admiral of the same.

“Accordingly Mr. Speaker, with the House, went up to attend his Excellency, in the Council Chamber, where his Excellency was pleased to give his Assent to the several public and private Bills, following, viz.<sup>23</sup>

“An act<sup>24</sup> for opening the falls of James river, by subscription, and for other purposes.

“An act<sup>25</sup> for opening and extending the navigation of the river Potowmack, from Fort Cumberland, to tide water.

“An act<sup>26</sup> to encourage the further settlement of the town of Alexandria, in the County of Fairfax.

“An act<sup>27</sup> for cutting a navigable canal from Archer’s Hope creek to Queen’s creek, through or near the city of Williamsburg.”

“After which his Excellency was pleased to make a Speech<sup>28</sup> to the Council, and this House.”

#### **Monday, the 5th of June, 1775.**

“Mr. Mercer<sup>29</sup> presented to the House, according to Order, a Bill for raising a Capital sum of forty thousand Pounds, sterling, by subscription, and establishing a Company for the opening and extending the Navigation of the River Potowmack, and the same was received and read the first time.

“Resolved, that the Bill be read a second time.”<sup>30</sup>

#### **Wednesday, the 14th of June, 1775.**

“Mr. Mercer reported from the Committee to whom the Bill for establishing a Company for opening and extending the navigation of the River Potowmack, was committed, that the Committee had gone through the Bill, and made several Amendments thereunto, which they had directed him to report to the House; and he read the report in his place, and afterwards delivered the Bill, with the Amendments, in at the Clerk’s Table; where the Amendments were once read throughout and then a second time, one by one, and upon the question severally put thereupon, were agreed to by the House.

“Ordered, that the Bill with the Amendments be engrossed.”<sup>31</sup>

#### **Saturday, the 17th of June, 1775.**

“An engrossed Bill for raising the Capital sum of forty thousand Pounds Sterling, by Subscription, and establishing a Company for the opening and extending the Navigation of the River Potowmack, was read the third time.

“Resolved, that the Bill do pass; and that the title be An Act<sup>32</sup> for raising a Capital sum of forty thousand Pounds Sterling, by subscription,

<sup>23</sup> A total of 68 Acts were approved by that session.

<sup>24</sup> *Hening*, Statutes VIII, p. 564.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 570.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 613.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, VIII, p. 562.

<sup>28</sup> *Journals*, 1770-1772, p. 317.

<sup>29</sup> James Mercer, Hampshire Co.

<sup>30</sup> *Journals*, 1773-1776, p. 191.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 1773-1776, pp. 229, 230.

<sup>32</sup> *Hening*, VIII, p. 570.

and establishing a Company for the opening and extending the navigation of the River Potowmack."<sup>33</sup>

**Wednesday, the 21st of June, 1775.**

"The Council have agreed to the Bill, intituled An Act for raising a Capital sum for forty thousand Pounds Sterling by Subscription, and establishing a Company for opening and extending the navigation of the River Potowmack, without any Amendments."<sup>34</sup>

The House of Burgesses met three more times in June of 1775 and conducted very little business; convened again in October, but since only 37 members showed up they were unable to proceed.

A few of the Burgesses met on the 7th of March, 1776, but no business was transacted. The final meeting on the 16th of May, 1776, ended the House of Burgesses, and submission to the whims of a British sovereign. Urgent business, such as the Declaration of Independence, and the Revolution caused many matters to be held in abeyance.

Seven long eventful years intervened. Independence had been achieved, but at great cost. A war debt totaling one hundred and seventy million dollars was vastly out of proportion to the country's resources. The States, acting individually, were in a weak condition; some ignored the orders of Congress; entered into competition with each other for foreign trade, while others were unable to enforce collection of taxes within their own boundaries. Domestic manufacture was ruined because British merchants flooded American markets with their imports at reduced prices. Heavy duties were levied in some States and not in others. The country was drained of its specie, and a general poverty ensued along the Eastern coast, which gave rise to much discontent.

These were a few of the problems facing the Nation when Washington resigned his commission as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army December 23, 1783. Little wonder that a man with so much concern for his country and its welfare exerted all of his efforts toward development of waterways, through which means he hoped to connect the rich western lands with the impecunious eastern States.

Although the Alexandria Canal, as such, did not materialize until its completion in 1843, the seaport of Alexandria did receive benefits from previous efforts of the Potomac Company.

A clear, progressive picture of the establishment of the Potomac Canal, (as well as that on the James) could not be written more intelligibly than in Washington's own words. For this reason some of his official correspondence is given in the following pages, as taken from "*The Writings of George Washington, from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*"; prepared

<sup>33</sup> *Journals, 1773-1776*, p. 249.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 274.

under the direction of the United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission. John C. Fitzpatrick, Editor. U. S. Government Printing Office, 1931-44:

“To the President of Congress, December 14, 1784, Mount Vernon.<sup>35</sup>  
“ . . . (Excerpt of letter)

“The Assemblies of Virginia and Maryland have now under consideration the extension of the inland navigation of the rivers Potomac and James, and opening a communication between them and the Western waters; they seem fully impressed with the political as well as the commercial advantages which would result from the accomplishment of these great objects; and I hope will embrace the present moment to put them in train for speedy execution. Would it not at the same time be worthy of the wisdom and attention of Congress, to have the western waters well explored, the navigation of them fully ascertained, accurately laid down, and a complete and perfect map made of the Country; at least as far westwardly as the Miamies running into the Ohio and Lake Erie; and to see how the waters of them communicate with the Wabash? I cannot forbear observing there, that the Miami Village in Hutchins map, if it, and the waters here mentioned are laid down with any degree of accuracy, points to a very important post for the Union. The expence attending this undertaking could not be great, and the advantages would be unbounded; for sure I am, nature has made such an ample display of her bounties in those regions, that the more the Country is explored, the more it will rise in estimation, consequently, the greater might the revenue be to the Union. Would there be any impropriety do you think sir, in reserving for special sale, all Mines, Minerals, and Salt springs in the general Grants of Land belonging to the United States. The Public, instead of the few knowing ones, might in this case derive the benefits which would result from the sale of them, without infringing any rule of justice that occurs to me, on their own laws, but on the contrary inflict just punishment upon those, who in defiance of the latter, have dared to create enemies, and to disturb the public tranquility, by roaming over the country, marking and surveying the valuable spots in it, to the great disquiet of the Western Tribes of Indians, who have viewed these transactions with jealous indignation. To hit upon a happy medium price for the Western Lands, for the prevention of monopoly on one hand; and not discouraging useful settlers on the other, will no doubt require consideration, but should not employ too much time before it is announced. The spirit of emigration is great, it is yet in your power to mark the way; a little while and you will not be able to do either. It is easier to prevent, than to remedy an evil . . .”

On February 1, 1785, Washington wrote to his wealthy friend, Robert Morris,<sup>36</sup> informing him that laws had been enacted in both the States of

<sup>35</sup> *Writings of Washington*, Vol. 28, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Morris (1734-1806). American merchant and banker, signer of the Declaration of Independence. He was vice-president of the Committee of Safety (1775-76); member of the Continental Congress (1775-78), and served in the Pennsylvania legislature (1778-79 and 1780-81); financier of the American Revolution. In 1781 Morris established in Philadelphia, the Bank of North America, chartered first by the Congress and later by the State of Pennsylvania.

Virginia and Maryland for the purpose of opening and extending the navigation of the rivers Potomac and James; the first to be undertaken by corporate companies with public aids; the other at public expense. He stated that the tolls which were granted, were in his judgment, fully adequate, "as a candid man, I think them too high, considering the harvest which the public is preparing for the adventurers in that undertaking . . . And if I live to see the issue, I will, if it does not prove so, acknowledge myself more mistaken than I ever was before, in any speculative point."

The letter continues:

"There are some things of which some men have better opportunities to form opinions than others; . . . I have as good a means to judge from as most men, and every proof that nature, and reflection upon its bountious gifts can adduce, to convince me that there is no field for commerce equal to it, if extent of Country, population, and produce with the conveniences of transportation, as essential to the encouragement and support of it. But these want to be embraced. This, however, will not much longer be the case, A Mercantile eye is penetrating, and the first capital House that is established may form connexions, and lay a sure foundation of trade to the greatest possible extent from the upper sea ports of this river.

The upper seaports which he had in mind were Alexandria and Georgetown, and in this regard Washington went on to explain the situation to his friend.

"Alexandria and Georgetown are the highest shipping Ports of this river (if the latter can be called one): the trade of Georgetown, I am but little acquainted with; but if I have formed a right idea of the former, it abounds in small dealers; Men who import, or purchase their goods in the Country upon credit, consequently obtain them under very great disadvantages; the former class too for the most part, go to one Market, chiefly to England, for every article they purchase; by which means, such manufactures as Holland, Germany, France, &ca. could supply upon much better terms (being of their own production) come with accumulated charges. These added to House rent, which is high in Alexandria, and sinks deep into the profits of a small capital, occasion considerable advance of the price of Goods, the consequence of which is, that the retail dealers in the interior parts of the Country, are induced to, indeed are in a manner driven, to Baltimore or Philadelphia for their goods. How otherwise is this fact, and the transportation of the staple and other produce of this country, to those markets to be accounted for. The navigation of this river is equal, if not superior to any in the Union. Goods, I presume may be imported into it, and the produce of the Country exported from it, upon as advantageous terms, as they can from either Philadelphia, Baltimore, or any other place, which evinces the truth of my observation, or that the traders of Alexandria are not content with the profits of their fellow labourers in the places I have named. But would either of these any longer exist if large whole-sale Stores, upon the most advantageous terms, were established in that place? And the produce of the back Country brought thither by water, for one fourth of what



is now by land, or a sixth, perhaps tenth, (according to the distance carried) of what it can be transported to Baltimore?

“At present every farmer who lives on the West side of the blue ridge verging upon Shenandoah, gives I am told one third of his wheat for bringing the other two thirds to any shipping port. Tobacco costs at least 40/ a Hhd., and other things in proportion. A little higher up, and the expence of transportation is a prohibition of the culture of them; tho’ the land is better adapted, than any other in the State for the cultivation of them. But if water transportation is effected, that which now costs a 1/3, may be delivered for 6d. or less a bushel, and where the expence of carriage has hitherto discouraged the growth of it altogether, it will be raised in great quantities, and so with respect to Tobo. and other articles.”

Washington’s epistle to Morris continues. In this he presents a picture of the situation in the western sector.<sup>37</sup>

“From Fort Cumberland, a good road may be had to the Turkey foot, or three branches of the Yohoghaney, which will not I am told, exceed thirty miles. From thence the navigation to Fort Pitt, about 75 miles further, altho’ there is one fall in the way, can be made good at a very moderate expence. By going up the No. Branch of Potomac about 40 miles above Fort Cumberland, a portage may be had with the Cheat river, which will not exceed 20 miles of good road, from hence to the Monongahela by land or water may be about 25 miles more. We are then in the case of the Yohog. communication, open to the diffusive navigation (more extensive perhaps than is to be met with in any Country upon Earth) in its natural state, of the whole western Territory. And if I am not misinformed with respect to the carrying places between Cayhoga (a water of Lake Erie) and the big beaver, the Muskingum, which disembogue into the Ohio at different points; there is no route so short, so easy and attended with so little expence, as those I have just mentioned, to bring all the Fur and Peltry of the Lakes, even from that of the Wood, to tide water. One of them (by the Yohoganey) is shorter by more than 150 miles, than that to either Albany or Montreal; and the way open at seasons, when the others are block’d, and is besides more independent of the interference of foreign powers.

“That the greatest part, if not all the produce of the Ohio its waters as low as the Falls, if a better channel cannot be found for part of it by way of the Gt. Kanhawa and James River to Richmond; or as low as the little Kanhawa, admitting this, I have very little doubt. It is true that there are some branches of the Alleghany above Fort Pitt, which communicate pretty nearly with the waters of Susquehanna, which by great exertion and expence, may be made use of at certain seasons of the year, but droughts in Summer, and Ice in Winter will render them of little value.

“But to place things in a less favourable point of view, I will grant that a communication between the Kiskeminetas Moghulbughkitum, or Toby’s Creek (waters most favourable for it) and the Susquehanna shall be opened, and by that way to the Markets below; that the Gt. Kanhawa

<sup>37</sup> The letter to Morris is not given here in its entirety, nor do the paragraphs necessarily follow the same sequence as in the original.

shall be found free from obstructions, and easy both in its navigation, and communication with James River, and that all the province below the mouth of the former, and as far up the Ohio as the Little Kanhawa shall be transported that way; there yet remains the thick settlement of the Ohio, between Fort Pitt and Wheeling, all the Settlement of the Monongahela, and all that of Yohiogany, which constitute a very large majority of the Inhabitants West of the Laurel Hill, to bring their produce to the Markets of this river.

“In admitting this, I admit, in my opinion a good deal; but if the plan for opening the navigation of Potomac should succeed, of which I have not the smallest doubt, I will go further and venture an assertion which I think is founded in fact; that without any support from the Western Territory, there is no place within my knowledge to which so much produce will, from the nature of things, be brought, as to the highest shipping port on this river. That this may not appear as mere assertion, I will give you my reasons.

“At present Baltimore not only receives the greatest part of the produce of Frederick County<sup>38</sup> and the Counties above it on the No. side of Potomac, but a great deal also of that which is raised on the south side; and this thro’ a long land transportation; besides which, the produce of that rich and extensive Country, between the blue ridge and Alleghany mountains, for at least 200 miles So. West of the Potomac, is (or such part of it is as will bear land transportation carried partly to Alexandria, and the towns below it on this river, partly to Fredericksburgh and Falmouth on the Rappahanock, partly to Richmond and Petersburg, and some part also to Hanover town, the highest navigation upon the York river. But let the benefits arising from water transportation, be once felt, and then see, if men possessed of the spirit of Commerce and large capitals should settle at the shipping ports at the head of this river, whether an atom of it will cross the Potowmack for Baltimore; whilst everything within its vortex on the No. side will be sucked into, and be transported by water. In like manner the Shennandoah will intercept every article 200 miles from its mouth, and water bear it to the markets at the head of this river. In September last I was on the Shennandoah, near or quite 150 Miles from its mouth, and was told by well informed Gentlemen living thereon that the navigation of it might be improved, and rendered fit for inland craft at the smallest expence imaginable, the distance here mentioned. In a word, the Shennandoah which runs thro’ the richest tract of Country in this State, the South branch of Potomac; which may, with great ease be made navigable 100 miles, and the intermediate streams of lesser note which pour into Potomac; will not only bring the land transportation of every farmer and Planter in that Country within the short distance of fifteen or twenty miles, but in the upper and more remote parts of it, induce hundreds and thousands of them to cultivate articles from the growth of which they have been entirely discouraged by the length and expence of land transportation, except in the article of live stock which will carry itself to market, attempting to raise no more than will supply their own necessities. On the other side of the river, the

<sup>38</sup> Maryland.

Conogoge and Monocasy, tho' of less importance, will be improved to great advantage.

"The mercantile interest of Baltimore effect to treat the extension of the navigation of Potomac as a chimerical plan; but you may be assured Sir, that from the Great Falls, which are within eight or nine miles of tide water, to Fort Cumberland, there is no more difficulty or uncertainty in the execution, comparatively speaking, than there is in bringing water to a Mill by a common race: if nothing more therefore is ever effected, the object notwithstanding is immense, when the field into which it leads is considered."

On February 15, 1785<sup>39</sup> Washington wrote a similar communication to the Marquis De Lafayette, but in addition to the enthusiastic promotional tone, the subject of an engineer was mentioned:

". . . if a company should be established and the work undertaken, a skillful Engineer, or rather a person of practical knowledge will be wanted to direct and superintend it. I should be glad therefore, my Dr. Sir you would bear this matter in your mind, that if the company when formed should be disposed to obtain one from Europe I should prefer France, proper characters may be applied to, without loss of time. You will readily preceive, my Dr. Marqs. that this is more a private intimation of mine, than an authorized request, consequently how improper it would be to raise the expectation of any Gentlemen to the employment, without being able to give him the appointment. If a company should be formed, it will be composed, no doubt of many men, and these of many minds; and whilst myself and others may be disposed to go to France for an Engineer, the majority may incline to send to England for one, on account of the language, and from an opinion that there is greater similarity between the inland navigation of that Kingdom and the improvements which are intended here, than prevails between any in France and them, whilst others again may turn their Eyes towards Holland. The nature of our work, as far as I have been able to form an opinion of it, will be first, at the principal falls of the river to let Vessels down by means of Locks, or if Rumsey's<sup>40</sup> plan should succeed, by regular and gradual slopes, in either case, the bad effect of Ice and drift wood in floods, are to be guarded against. 2d. As the Canals at these places will pass thro' rocky ground, to be able to remove these with skill and facility, and to secure the Canals when made. 3dly. in other parts of the river, the water will require to be deepened, and in these places the bottom generally is either rock under water, or loose stone of different sizes; for it rarely happens that Sand or Mud is to be found in any of the shallow parts of the River. I mention these things because it is not the man who may be best skilled in Dikes, who knows best how to conduct water upon a level, or who can carry it thro' hills or over Mountains, that would be most useful to us."

In January, 1785, the General Assembly passed an act giving Washington 50 shares in the Potomac Company, and 100 shares in the James Company.

<sup>39</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 28, p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> James Rumsey, in 1787, was the first to successfully operate a steamboat on the Potomac River. This occurred at Shepherdstown, W. Va. Rumsey was finally chosen engineer of the Potomac Canal.

His reaction to the gift was one of shock and embarrassment and he sought advice from his many friends as to whether or not he should accept it. To his good friend Thomas Jefferson, on February 25, 1785, he wrote: <sup>41</sup>

“As I have accustomed myself to communicate matters of difficulty to you, and have met forgiveness for it, I will take the liberty, my good Sir, of troubling you with the rehearsal of one more, which has lately occurred to me. Among the Laws of the last Session of our Assembly, there is an Act which particularly respects myself; and tho’ very flattering, is also very embarrassing to me. This Act, after honorable, flattering, and delicate recitals, directs the treasurer of the State to Subscribe towards each of the Navigations fifty Shares for my use and benefit which it declares, is to be vested in me and my heirs forever. It has ever been my wish, and it is yet my intention, never to receive anything from the United States, or an individual State for any Services I have hitherto rendered, or which in the course of events, I may have it in my power to render them hereafter as it is not my design to accept of any appointment from the public, which might make emoluments necessary: but how to decline this act of generosity without incurring the imputation of disrespect to my Country, and a slight of her favors on the one hand, or that of pride, or an ostentatious display of disinterestedness on the other, is the difficulty.”

The final outcome of this “difficulty” was an arrangement agreed to by the General Assembly “to please permit me to turn the destination of the fund vested in me, from my private emolument, to objects of a public nature, it will be my study in selecting these to prove the sincerity of my gratitude for the honor conferred on me, by preferring such as may appear most subservient to the enlightened and patriotic view of the Legislature.” <sup>42</sup>

The foregoing correspondence has permitted a glimpse into the inner workings behind the scenes of establishing a canal on the Potomac, as well as a more personal insight into the character of the man behind the movement. The next logical step in our chronology should touch on the Potomac Canal. For this the publication prepared by the United States Department of Interior, called CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO CANAL, (U. S. Printing Office, 1956) is quoted:

“The removal of rocks and other obstructions from the Potomac River channel was begun immediately. In August, 1785, four ‘flat boats’ and two ‘sets of hands,’ numbering 50 men each, performed the initial work of this type for the Potomac Company.<sup>43</sup> In addition to removing the loose rock and sand bars from the river bottom, other devices were designed and built to improve the channel. ‘Chutes’ or narrow passageways, were blasted through the solid rock formations to provide sufficient depth

<sup>41</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 28, p. 80.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 304. Letter to Gov. Patrick Henry, dated Oct. 29, 1785.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p. 278, in a letter of September 26, 1785, to Thomas Jefferson, Washington wrote the “subscriptions . . . require no aid from Foreigners”; “the product of the first when the Books were exhibited . . . May list, . . . 40,300 pounds sterling, and since nearly completed to the full sum required by Law.”

to some sections. At many points along the river low dams were constructed, which raised the level of the river approximately 18 inches and diverted the water thus collected into walled channels 20 feet wide and which were used by boats for passage over the shallow rapids. By these structures and a series of five short canals skirting the major river falls where a channel could not be provided, it was hoped that boats might float with ease from west of Cumberland to tidewater at all stages of the river.

"In 1802, the Potomac Company river and canal navigation system was substantially completed. Five canals, varying in length from 50 yards to more than 2 miles, had been excavated. The longest of these was located on the Maryland side of the river around Little Falls, a few miles above Washington City. At Great Falls, on the Virginia shore, a canal three quarters of a mile long, with five lift locks, was constructed. The third short canal was built around Seneca Falls, and the fourth and fifth near and above Harpers Ferry.

"Gondolas and sharpers carrying furs, whisky, flour, and lumber followed this treacherous and winding channel from Western Maryland to Georgetown. The gondola was a flat-bottom raft, 50 to 75 feet long and 9 feet wide. When loaded, it drew only one foot of water and was propelled by poles with the help of the river currents. It is said that this type of boat did not attempt the hard upstream trip, but was sold for lumber upon reaching Georgetown. The sharper was more securely built. Boats in this class were pointed at both ends and measured 60 feet long and 7 feet wide. When their cargo had been discharged at tidewater, the boats were poled, against the current, back up the river through the canals and channels of the Potomac Company. In 1807 about 65 boats of these types were in operation on the Potomac Company System. During this year \$15,000 were collected in tolls, the largest sum reported up to that time.

"More than \$500,000 was expended on this project; yet the removal of obstructions to navigation was never successfully completed. It was found that the boating season was limited to periods of high water, or freshet, which did not much exceed 2 months a year. The shippers complained that boats waiting for the river to rise were often delayed so that cargoes were not delivered on the date promised. Frequently, the boat and cargo were seriously damaged in the perilous passage down the river. It became obvious that a more serviceable route to the west was needed if cheap and reliable transportation to the Ohio was to be secured. In 1821, a joint committee appointed by the Virginia and Maryland Legislatures to examine the affairs of the Potomac Company recommended that its charter be revoked.

"Men who supported the movement for an improved means of communication along the Potomac route envisioned a continuous canal of some 360 miles in length connecting tidewater of the Potomac River, near Georgetown, with the navigable waters of the Ohio River at Pittsburgh. The feverish enthusiasm which arose in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia in the 1820's for this new thoroughfare resulted only in part from the failure of the Potomac Company to establish reliable water communication with the West. Great stimulus came after 1817 when the rival States of New York and Pennsylvania began to plan and

build extensive canal systems connecting their tidewater cities with the interior. This threat to trade already coming to Baltimore via the Cumberland Road and the desire of the District of Columbia cities to enhance their commercial position were convincing arguments used by the promoters of a Chesapeake & Ohio Canal.

“The canal movement gained momentum when the first surveys indicated the practicability of the undertaking. Local and State-wide conventions called to consider the project were enthusiastically attended. The route of the canal, its dimensions, and probable cost were carefully studied. In June, 1828, the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Company was organized with a capital stock totaling some \$3,000,000. Soon afterwards the old Potomac Company turned over all its charter rights and privileges along the Potomac Valley to the new company.”

From this humble beginning emerged the main canal with its two branch canals: the Washington City Canal, and the Alexandria Canal. A detailed and documented story of the Alexandria branch will be forthcoming in a future issue of the *Arlington Historical Magazine*.

(To be continued)