TROUBLES ON THE PENNSYLVANIA CANAL

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Most of us have read about the Pennsylvania Canal, one of the great engineering feats of the nineteenth century. Mr. Willard R. Rhoads wrote a very interesting and informative article about it in the Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, Vol. 43, No. 3. Mr. William H. Shank wrote The Amazing Pennsylvania Canal, published in 1965 by the Colonial York County Visitors and Tourists Bureau, Inc., York, Pennsylvania, and Mr. Clarence D. Stephenson of Marion Center, Pennsylvania, published a book titled The Pennsylvania Canal in Westmoreland and Indiana Counties in 1961. These books and articles deal for the most part with the construction and operation of the canal system. The following material was gathered from letters written to Colonel Jacob D. Mathiot while a member of the legislature from 1831 through 1834. These letters are part of the collection known as the Mathiot Papers, now in the possession of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. They emphasize the damage done to the canal and to the industries along the canal by floods, injustices, charges of corruption and unfair practices by the canal commissioners and other employees.

One of the first letters received by Jacob D. Mathiot after his election to the legislature in 1831 was from an engineer by the name of Mr. Philo Ingerson. Mr. Ingerson built two locks on the canal, No. 3 on the Ligonier Line and No. 12 on the Kiskiminitas-Conemaugh Line. A Mr. Sylvester Welch, Esq., was the engineer in charge of one of these sections of the canal and made a final estimate of the cost of one of the locks. His estimate was much lower than Mr. Ingerson thought it should be, so, according to the law, he appealed to the Board of Canal Commissioners for redress. The Board of Canal Commissioners was to appoint an impartial panel of engineers to review the estimate. This they did but one member of the “impartial”

Mr. Sharp, a member of this Society, is well known to our friends and readers not only through the book A Guide to the Old Stone Blast Furnaces in Western Pennsylvania but through his continued research in the Mathiot papers.

—Editor

2 Mathiot Papers, Box 7, File 6, No. 18. (M.P. 7-6-18)
3 Pennsylvania Canal, Westmoreland and Indiana Counties, by Clarence D. Stephenson, 40, 41.
panel was Mr. Sylvester Welch, the engineer who, under oath, had given the original estimate which caused the appeal in the first place. Because of the oath he could not change his estimate and the other two members of the panel went along with him with only minor exceptions. As the Board of Canal Commissioners was responsible only to the House of Representatives of Pennsylvania, Ingerson was appealing to them, through Mathiot, for justice. He thought it very unfair that the man who made the original estimate was selected to review his own decision. He wanted the legislature to appoint an unbiased panel of engineers to review the case and he hoped in that way to obtain justice.

It would be interesting to know what happened but unfortunately there is no more correspondence on the matter among the Mathiot Papers. Possibly a search of the Board of Canal Commissioners records at Harrisburg might shed some light on this episode. Evidently the decision did not go against Mr. Welch because he continued to work for the Pennsylvania Canal and the Portage Railroad on important assignments.4

At about the same time that Philo Ingerson was writing his letter to Mathiot, high water on the Kiskiminitas and Conemaugh Rivers, “freshets” as they were commonly called in those days, was causing serious damage to the canal. Because of the mountainous country through which the canal ran, it followed very closely the banks of the rivers. The Conemaugh, Kiskiminitas, Allegheny River system was the most level route through the mountains and therefore the most likely route for the canal. Because of this proximity to the rivers, high water in the rivers affected the canal.

On January 29, 1832, Andrew Boggs, one of the engineers on the Kiskiminitas-Conemaugh Line section of the canal, wrote to Colonel Jacob D. Mathiot giving a report on the condition of the canal.5 He said Mathiot was “the only member of the House of Representatives who seems to have a personal interest in the canal.” (Mathiot did have a personal interest in the canal. He shipped much of his iron from the Ross Iron Works, of which he was part owner and manager, to Pittsburgh by way of the canal.)

Boggs said he found Dam No. 3 “safe to all appearances but Dam No. 2 was in a dangerous situation.” The flood of 1831 had

5 M.P. 7-6-23.
washed away a protective wall below the dam and between the lock and river which had been rebuilt the previous summer (1830). The foreman and laborers were kept repairing the towing path so this protective wall was left half finished "and the ice flood of a few days ago carried away all that was done and also washed away the filling close to the lock so that the water was running around the end of the dam and between that and the lock soon after the ice went out. The next flood will wash it out entirely unless a crib is built at the place and filled with stone." He was going to call on Mr. Jamison, the division engineer, and urge him to do this at once. Ice was lying on the towing path in such large amounts, especially above Leechburg, "that it will be there until May unless removed." The supervisor seemed to have focused his entire attention on the new dam. "If serious exertions are not made at Dam No. 2 and other places there will be no navigation this spring and in that case I will be ruined." The ice and water were six feet high above the towing path. He hoped efforts would be made to stop further breaks. He lost about two hundred fifty barrels of salt because of the high water. Major Bigham and Dr. Tatman (sp) each lost about one thousand dollars. "The Canal has been a serious curse to me and many others and will continue to be so as long as it is conducted by the party men and party measures, particularly in the appointment of under-officers. The Commission cannot know the extent of negligence on this line but I hope they will see it in the spring."

Apparently there was another flood due to an "extraordinary freshet" about the eighth or ninth of February because Samuel Kennedy wrote on February 14, 1832, about a trip he had just taken "down the line." He wrote of the destruction and damage to the canal. "The lock and abutment at Leechburg are taken away but the dam remains uninjured. One half of the lock at Dam No. 2, or the first above Leechburg, is taken away but the dam is not injured and the water, though pouring around the end of the dam has not washed a passage as deep as the bottom of the dam." Part of the lock at the next dam and part of the abutment at the tunnel dam were washed away but the dam remained intact. At Blairsville water broke through the embankments on both sides of the lock and washed away the saw-mill and several buildings. He gave a lengthy list of things damaged. There was some damage done to the aqueduct over the Allegheny River at Freeport and the Buffalo Aqueduct. A small aqueduct over

6 M.P. 7-6-28.
Ball (sp) Creek was destroyed. The Pittsburgh Aqueduct and all other edifices were not injured as far as he knew.

Kennedy talked to several men who had spent many years on the rivers and they all agreed that this flood "was higher by two or three feet on the Conemaugh and upper end of the Kiskiminitas River and about four feet near the mouth of that river than it was in the 'Pumpkin Flood' about twenty four or twenty five years ago, which was the highest known."

George Landers of Pittsburgh wrote that the "Mamoth or Jackson Day Flood was two feet higher than the 'Pumpkin Flood.'" He had almost four feet of water in his office. "The Aqueduct had hard work to stand the current. It is said one foot more it would have went."

On February 20, 1832, Mr. Wilson Knott wrote from Blairsville about the damage. His letter was more or less the same as the letter already quoted from Samuel Kennedy. Mr. Knott did give an estimate of the damage at fifty-five thousand dollars but said sixty-seven thousand dollars would be required to repair and put the canal in such condition that a similar flood could not damage it again. Although he was six thousand dollars in debt he intended going ahead with the repairs on his own, trusting to be quickly reimbursed by the legislature. He hoped navigation could be resumed by May.

James Clark of Blairsville, in a letter dated February 21, 1832, pointed out that although many people feared that the canal would never be repaired, the entire damages were "less than 1/45th part of the cost of the Western Division and not 1/200th of the sum the state had already expended on her canals and railroads."

On March 17, 1832, Mr. Samuel Kennedy wrote from Blairsville explaining that the slow start on the repair work was due in some cases to a shortage of tools and in other cases to a lack of boarding facilities for the laborers. At some places boarding houses had to be built before repairs on the canal could begin. He was shooting for a May 1 completion date but admitted it all depended on the weather which at present was bad.

The state had appropriated seventy-five thousand dollars which he said was not enough and he feared that the contractors would again be embarrassed for want of funds. The contractors would have to use most of this money to pay their debts of the past fall repairs to

7 M.P. 7-6-29.
8 M.P. 7-6-32.
9 M.P. 7-6-33.
10 M.P. 7-6-44.
get their credit back. This would leave very little for the present repairs.

J. D. Mathiot showed Andrew Boggs’ letter of January 29 to some people and as a result they were angry with Boggs. In a letter dated February 26, 1832, Boggs told that Mr. Jamison in particular was making things hard for him. Boggs’ friend, Mr. McNickles, was building a forge at Dam No. 3. He planned to take the water out above the dam, use it, and return it below the dam. Jamison thought that Boggs was interested financially in this forge (which he may well have been) and was trying to prevent McNickles from proceeding with his work. In this way he hoped to get even with Andrew Boggs for what he had said in his letter to Mathiot. Boggs said that “Mr. Jamison is not qualified to be a Supervisor. His only qualification is that he was a supporter of Mr. Stevenson during his last campaign for Congress.” Boggs estimated the repair costs at one hundred thousand dollars and thought that the canal would not be usable before August.

On February 2, 1832, Mr. Isaac Harris of Pittsburgh wrote that he was now “idle, poor, penniless, engaged part of my time in settling up my old business.” He had engaged in canal construction, considering it a safe proposition because the state promised to pay the contractors once every month. For a year or two things went very well but then “the state became embarrassed” and continued so for about two years. He had gone heavily into debt, buying equipment and paying his contractors. He had proof of all his debts but owing to “Stevenson’s destroying influence,” the debts due him had not been paid. He thought the state should pay him at least twenty thousand dollars.

Samuel Kennedy wrote that the salt manufacturers along the rivers suffered heavily. Most of the salt at all of the works was destroyed. Mr. Boggs alone lost between forty and fifty thousand dollars. Houses and furniture were carried away. Much property was destroyed both on the river and on the small streams. James Rodgers and John McKeown had been partners in the salt business on the Conemaugh River for many years. They took their salt to market by the river. After the canal was built they could no longer use the river because of the dams that had been built and had to use the canal instead. The flood of 1831 closed the canal from February until

11 M.P. 7-6-37.
12 M.P. 7-6-24.
13 M.P. 7-6-28.
14 M.P. 8-2-18.
August. They could not ship salt but continued to manufacture it. When the flood of 1832 came they had three or four thousand barrels of salt on hand. They were all lost. Some property was lost also. They had entered a claim against the state for damages. Kennedy said "the disaster will have a bad effect on our canal system. It will give the enemies of the system a strong hold and the advocates of rail will make use of it . . . ." 15

Things returned slowly to normal. Apparently there were no damaging floods in the fall of 1832 or during 1833, but in January 1834, Edward P. Emerson of Blairsville16 wrote that a flood was in progress at that time. Dam No. 2 had been damaged and the river had broken through into the canal. A few days later William Robison wrote from North Huntington17 that "Dam No. 2 was badly damaged by the late freshets. This will retard navigation for some time." He suggested that they should either give up the "Cannels" and improve the roads or employ men of better judgment on the "Cannells." His opinion was that they should get to work in earnest on the roads and make them permanent.

In April 1834 two letters were received by Mathiot about Dr. Appleton and his brother who were petitioning the legislature for payment for losses sustained while excavating the Staple Bend Tunnel on the Portage Railroad. One letter was from P. Hugus of Pittsburgh. The other was from E. Appleton, brother of the doctor.18

Early in 1834 charges of various kinds were made against the members of the Board of Canal Commissioners and others connected with the canal.19 James Moorhead and a man he called Irish started on a tour of the canal system, questioning witnesses about the charges. In Northumberland they had questioned thirty witnesses and had proved nothing against the Commission or their agents. In a letter to Mathiot he said it was the "biggest farce I have ever witnessed." Irish appeared ashamed of the matter and discharged a number of witnesses that he and Cummins, the accuser, had summoned. A few days later in Wilkes-Barre they examined twenty-five or thirty more witnesses with the same results. At Berwick about ten people were examined on charges against Dr. Hadley, a collector, and others. Nothing was proved.

History shows that the Pennsylvania Canal was a political foot-

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15 M.P. 7-6-28.
16 M.P. 8-2-8.
17 M.P. 8-2-9.
18 M.P. 1-11-54 and 8-2-63.
19 M.P. 8-2-25, 26, 31, and 1-11-25.
ball. All jobs, from commissioners down, were political appointments. Personnel changed with every change of administration. As a result it was a model of inefficiency. There were many honest, hard-working men in the organization but there were also many who were not. For thirty-five years it was as a millstone around the necks of the citizens of Pennsylvania. True, it filled a need for transportation and, slow and costly as it was, it was the best available until the railroads took over.

On November 28, 1847, George T. Paull of Uniotown,\textsuperscript{20} son of James Paull, Jr., the long-time partner of Colonel Jacob D. Mathiot at Ross Iron Works, wrote to Mathiot telling of a break in the canal which had caused a large increase in travel over the National Road and an increase in freight rates “from $50 to $125 to Brownsville.” Also, “as one thousand laborers are wanted to work on the canal repairs, I am afraid the woodchoppers will be scarce at Ross Furnace.”

In 1854 the Pennsylvania Railroad was completed\textsuperscript{21} from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. By 1864 the last section of the Western Division of the Pennsylvania Canal had been abandoned.\textsuperscript{22} Thus ended an era.

\textsuperscript{20} M.P. 9-8-28.

\textsuperscript{21} Pennsylvania Canal, by Clarence D. Stephenson, 28.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 29 and WPHM, Vol. 43, No. 3, 235.