

## EXCURSION BOATS on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal

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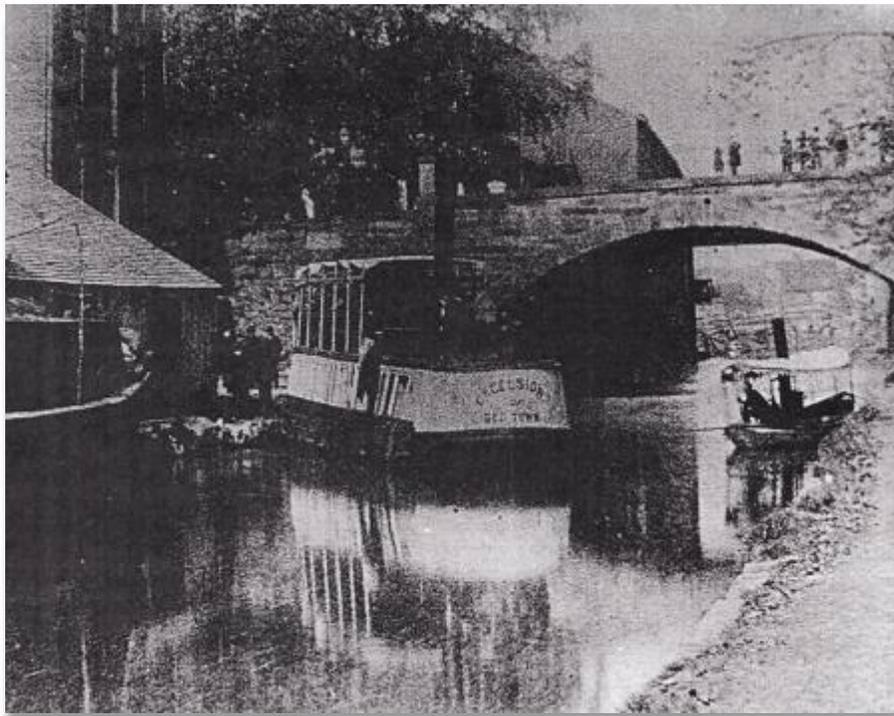
The fundamental purpose of the C&O Canal was to extract raw materials from western Maryland and northern Virginia and do so at the lowest possible cost, so it was a surprise when tourists began to appear along the Canal during its first year of operation in 1831. These travelers were individuals, families and affinity groups such as the “Butchers of Georgetown” who were determined to enjoy a leisurely float into the countryside where they could enjoy a hike in the woods, a bit of fishing or a site-seeing adventure.

What sort of vessel did these tourists favor? Most often a 60 to 90 foot, double-decker configured for socializing or even dancing. Called an excursion boat, this type of vessel was readily identifiable by its canvas canopy which stretched across the upper deck. Such a covering sheltered riders from the sun and rain while freeing them from the often hot and stuffy cabin space below.



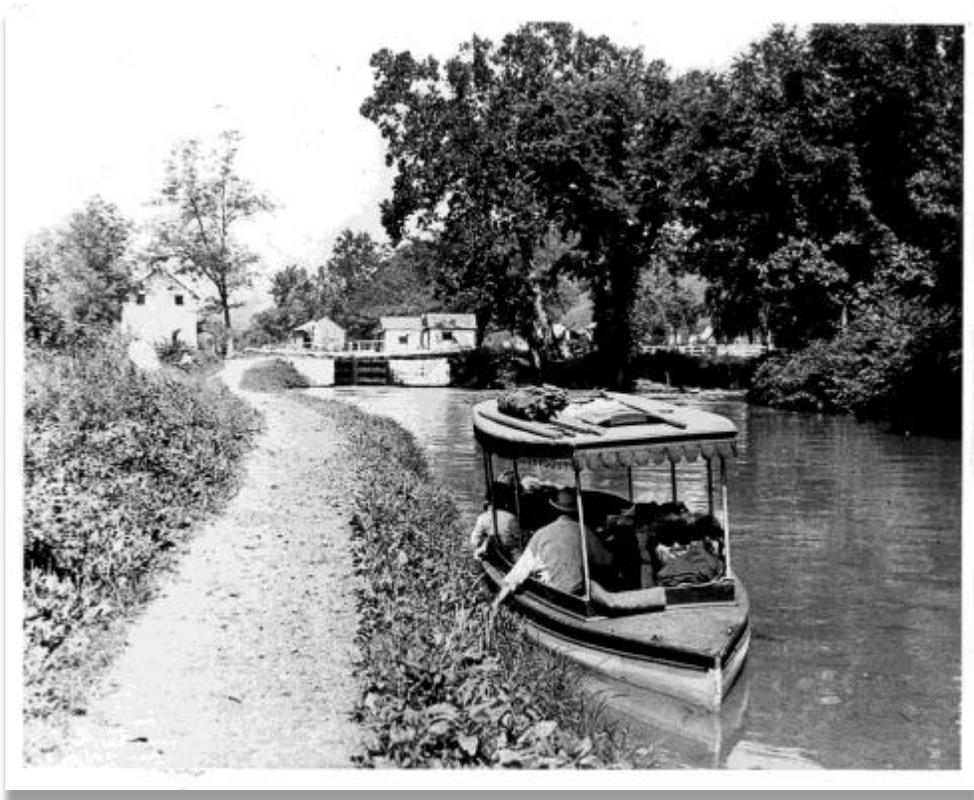
Excursion boat *John R. Mason*, 1905. Courtesy Historical Society of Washington DC.

At first, all excursion boats were horse or mule-drawn, like the freighters, but by the late 1840s, steam-powered boats were also in operation.



Excursion steamboat *Excelsior* with steam launch, c.1888. Courtesy Historical Society of Washington DC.

Single and double-decker gasoline-powered excursion boats joined these first two varieties beginning around 1910.



Excursion motor boat *Bartholdi*, August 26, 1916. Courtesy Washingtonia Room, M.L.K. Library.

The first government-sponsored excursion boat on the C&O Canal was the *Canal Clipper* which entered service three years after the Federal Government acquired the Canal in 1938. During its inaugural season and perhaps the one following, the *Clipper* operated along the first 22 miles of the Canal between Georgetown and Violettes Lock, a stretch that had been recently restored by two battalions of Civilian Conservation Corps workers. It ferried passengers as well as a Park Service historian or naturalist between Chain Bridge and Carderock, Carderock and Great Falls and Great Falls and the mouth of Seneca Creek on a rotating basis. Buses returned the *Clipper's* passengers to their starting points.



Excursion boat *Canal Clipper I*, October 24, 1954.

After WWII, the *Clipper* settled into a schedule of 4-hour trips that ranged between Level 3 in Georgetown and Lock 5 at Brookmont, Maryland. This was a routine that would persist through two more generations of *Canal Clippers*.

The *Canal Clipper II* replaced the venerable *Clipper* in 1961, and then was itself replaced by the *Canal Clipper III* in 1976.



Excursion boat *Canal Clipper II*, c. 1962.



Excursion boat *Canal Clipper III*.

Meanwhile at the Great Falls, another government excursion boat called the *John Quincy Adams* entered service on June 30, 1967. It launched just above a pedestrian bridge some 360 yards above Lock 20 and ranged as far as Swains Lock. The *JQA* operated until 1972 when the flood waters of Hurricane Agnes swept it away.



Excursion boat *John Quincy Adams*, June 30, 1967.

In 1979, the *Clipper III* was transferred to Great Falls when construction activity at the Georgetown Mall interfered with its operation. The *Georgetown*, the *Clipper's* replacement, arrived in 1982. It operated for 29 years before it was finally removed from service on July 7, 2011.



Excursion boat *Georgetown*, June 8, 2003.

In 2012, a replica of a small, 20th. Century excursion boat was launched at Williamsport, Maryland. Electric rather than gas-powered, the *Katie Dreamer* is one of four such boats the Park Service hopes to place in service in the years to come as funding becomes available.



Excursion boat *Katie Dreamer*, April 26, 2011. Photo by Yvette May, Hagerstown Herald-Mail.

The *Canal Clipper III* continued to operate at the Great Falls until 2003 until it was finally replaced by the *Charles F. Mercer* in September 2006.



Excursion boat *Charles F. Mercer*, August 2007.

A next generation NPS excursion boat is expected to appear on the Georgetown levels of the C&O Canal sometime between 2018 and 2019, thanks to the fund-raising efforts and leadership provided by the Business Improvement District of Georgetown and a generous grant from the District of Columbia government. Boating enthusiasts look forward to the day!