

Tracing Towpath Mileposts Across Time

June 3, 2020

For as much information as we possess about the making and operation of the C&O Canal, it's *probably* fair to say that just as much information – personal accounts and stories, that is – has been lost to time, or perhaps waits to be known again...

When put on an assignment to research the origin story of the towpath mileposts, I started off feeling excited and confident, but quickly hit dead ends in the searches I was performing. After a good many hours, and having consulted with what I assumed to be some of the best possible resources, I still only managed to scrounge a few bits of information about their coming to be. The following points detail what I was able to unearth:

- **October 18, 1834**

It is directed for the first time ever that the constructed portion of the canal (thus far completed between Georgetown and Shepherdstown) be measured in length. "Stones or locust posts were to be placed on the berm side of the canal at intervals of one mile, designating the distance from the eastern terminus" (Unrau 205).

- **August 5, 1835**

The canal board instructed for the erection of mileposts on the towpath side of the most recently opened section of canal, which now extended as far as Dam 5 in Clear Spring (Unrau 207)

- **August 17, 1836**

The canal board specified that the mile posts along the canal needed to be henceforth placed in a consistent manner (Unrau 211).

- Numerous surveys took place over time in an attempt to measure the true distance of the canal. The Canal Company led official surveys in 1835, 1851, and 1870, always measuring from the starting point of Tide Lock (Davies 4). There are still discrepancies regarding milepost placement to this day.
- Numerous original milestones carved from aquia sandstone still exist in the park, namely at miles 7, 9, 17 and 22 (Davies 56, 65, 97, 107).



Above: The original sandstone marker at mile 9 on the towpath. Photo by VIP Jim Tomlin.

- The modern-day towpath mile posts are believed to have been erected by the National Park Service in the late 1970's or early 1980's. Their placement occasionally varies from that of the Canal Company's. There is an anecdotal story that the modern-day mile posts were placed by C&O Canal park rangers who drove the towpath using the vehicle's odometer to roughly establish the mile points. This tale is not confirmed (Gray).

Despite difficulty and discrepancy in ascertaining an exact evolutionary tale of the towpath mileposts, there is no doubting their significance as a park resource. For the past and present generations who travel the towpath, each passing marker is a welcome sight, indicative of forward motion. The perseverers as silent bystanders on the journey of thousands, serving to distinguish significant landmarks and their stories.

Today the towpath mileposts are newly refurbished and as striking as ever, thanks to the dedicated efforts of park VIPs. When you next view one, we hope you will feel a newfound sense of appreciation and connection to their intrinsic value.



*Above: The modern mile 9 milepost, pictured before and after being refurbished.
Photos by VIP Jim Tomlin.*

Works Cited

[*Historic Resource Study: Chesapeake and Ohio Canal*](#), Harlan D. Unrau

[*The Geology and Engineering Structures of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal*](#), William E. Davies

Karen Gray. Personal Interview. 19 May 2020.