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WHITE'S FERRY

by Mary Ann Kephart

"Welcome to Historic White's Ferry," painted across a hospitable-looking gateway, invites us to a modern ferryboat waiting to take us, in our cars, across the Potomac River to Virginia. Approaching the ferry, we pass an abandoned metal bridge, remnants of stone foundations of a granary, an old ferryboat named "General Jubal Early" that is parked high and dry, a building with flood-level markings on its wall, some picnic tables, a few small boats and canoes ready to be enjoyed.

White's Ferry is located six miles west of Poolesville on Maryland Route 107, Whites Ferry Road. The landing in Loudoun County, Virginia, is three miles from Leesburg on Virginia Route 655, also called Whites Ferry Road, leading to Route 15.

As settlement in this northwestern part of Montgomery County was taking place, Loudoun County was being settled at about the same rate. In the late 1700s, travelers and commerce between the states depended on ferries to cross the Potomac River. Local residents crossing the river to visit families and friends used ferries or small boats. When we travel across the river today, we are continuing this historic heritage.

The land at White's Ferry was once part of three tracts: Discord, Accord and Concord. Along the Potomac River was Discord, a long, narrow strip patented by Isaac Hite (or Hyte) of Virginia in 1748 for 215 acres. Just east of it was Accord, also long and narrow, 400 acres taken up in 1732 by James Edmonston and William Cumming. Farther east was Concord, a huge tract, patented to Daniel Dulaney in 1722 for 1106 acres.

It is said that in the Colonial period there was a ferry where White's Ferry is located today, but we cannot be sure. We do know that quite early someone decided it was an excellent location for a ferry across the Potomac River - deep enough to carry a boat, shallow enough for a man to pole a raft across, and where the river was tranquil enough for a safe crossing.

As early as 1786 a man named Conrod Myers was operating a ferry at this location. He was in the county at the time of the 1776 census and was listed in Sugarland Hundred as Conrod "Mires," age 38, with his wife Margaret, age 45, and children John, 11, and Mary, 10. He served as a private in the Upper Battalion of the Maryland Militia during the Revolutionary War¹ and the 1783 Maryland General Assessment for Sugarland Hundred notes that Conrod Myers owned no land in the county but had one male slave, age 14 to 45, valued at 70 pounds, and three horses, six cattle and other personal property worth 8 pounds, for a total worth of 95 pounds. At the time of the 1793 Montgomery County assessment of personal property, Conrod no longer had a slave.

Conrod Myers' ferryboat would have carried horses and riders, or a few cattle or pigs, six or eight passengers on foot, a wagonload of farm produce or a carriage. Owning no land, Conrod apparently rented or leased a small part of the tract Discord from Isaac Hite, as it was Discord which lay along the river.

In November 1781 the Maryland General Assembly (Ch. 22) enacted "An Act to Regulate Public Ferries." It was decreed that the justices of county courts were required to grant a license for a public ferry at any place then used as such, if they thought a ferry should be kept there and the person was a county inhabitant. Any person keeping a ferry without a license was to forfeit five pounds for every offense and the court was to determine the price of ferriage for passengers, horses and carriages, what kind of boats were to be kept and "what number of able-bodied and skillful hands" were to be employed in the boats. A copy of the license and prices allowed for ferriage were to be set up in the most public part of the person's house. Every person obtaining a license was to post a bond of 50 pounds, with two sufficient sureties and "faithfully and diligently" keep the ferry from daylight to daylight from November 1 to March 1, and from an hour before to an hour after daylight for the residue of the year.

Montgomery County Minute Books show that in 1786 Conrod Myers complied with the requirement for a license to operate a ferry "over the river Potomack" when he posted bond of 50 pounds and provided two sureties, Zachariah Ellis and Enias Campbell, who also posted bonds, 50 pounds each. He is listed as obtaining licenses in 1793, 1795, 1797, 1798, 1800, and 1802, using various sureties. From 1798 to 1802 the records note that the license was "for Myers keeping a public ferry over Potomack river at the place commonly called Conrod's ferry." In 1795 he also obtained a license for "retailing," that is, having a store.²

Conrod Myers, born in 1738, would have been 64 years old in 1802 and his name disappears from the records at that point. In 1803, 1807, 1809 and 1810 George Bowling was granted a license "for keeping a ferry over the Potomack river at the place commonly called Conrod's ferry."³

The importance of Conrod's ferry is reflected in "An Act to lay out certain roads in Anne-Arundel and Montgomery Counties, passed by the Maryland General Assembly in November 1791 (Ch. 53). A road was to be built "from Green's bridge, on Patuxent River, to the mouth of Monocacy." Another was "from Conrad Myer's ferry, on Patowmack river" to intersect that road, and a third was from Conrad Myer's ferry either to the mouth of Seneca or to

intersect the road from George-town to the mouth of the Monocacy. Laurence Oneale, Thomas Fletchall and Aquila Johns were appointed commissioners to lay out, survey, mark and bound the roads from Conrad Myer's ferry, which were to be two perches (33 feet) wide.

While all this was going on, Leonard Marbury Deakins of Prince George's County was putting together acreage in the area near Conrod's ferry as an investment. In 1780 Deakins purchased 55-1/4 acres of the tract Accord from Adam Burns for 4000 pounds Continental currency and in 1792 James Tannahill conveyed part of Accord to Deakins.⁴

Deakins was also interested in Concord, the tract patented by Daniel Dulaney which lay just east of Accord. During the Revolutionary War Maryland confiscated all land belonging to Loyalists and British citizens. Dulaney had sided with the British. In October 1781 his lands were put on the auction block and Leonard Marbury Deakins purchased 120-1/4 acres of Concord for 250 pounds. On 19 May 1800, the Honorable Alexander Contee Hanson, Chancellor, on behalf of the State of Maryland, conveyed this land to Deakins, the purchase money having been paid.⁵ Finally, in July of 1809, Deakins purchased 36-1/2 acres of Resurvey on Discord from Isaac Hite of Virginia for \$913,⁶ and had land on the banks of the Potomac River where Conrod's Ferry was located.

Just twelve years later, on 22 March 1823, Leonard M. Deakins of Prince George's County conveyed to his wife Deborah M. Deakins, for \$5, parts of Discord, Accord and Concord, a total of 227-3/8 acres.⁷ Leonard died the next year, leaving Deborah Deakins to manage the land on the Potomac. From an Equity case, we know that Conrod's Ferry was in operation. On 16 March 1827, a petition was filed concerning improving Coxen's Road, which was on low swampy ground and many times impassable, "from the ferry now kept by Isaac Nicholls and known by the name of Conrod's Ferry to Seneca Bridge."⁸

Then came the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. As it was being laid out along the Potomac River, it was evident that there would be a problem with the land at Conrod's Ferry. The canal would cut off access from the public road to the ferry landing. In May 1830, Clement Cox, attorney for the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Company, wrote to its President and Directors concerning Deborah M. Deakins' land and said that the value of the ferry there would be destroyed unless a facility for crossing the canal was provided and that she was to be paid for the cost of two boats, in addition to being paid for the land.⁹

Clement Cox also stated in his letter that "a road culvert shall be made of sufficient dimensions for passing cattle and if practicable horsemen and uncovered wagons. This convenience had been promised by General Mercer [President of C & O Canal Co.] and requires nearly the same culvert that was laid down in the plan of the canal and I am told is necessary in as much as droves of cattle which are made to swim across the river (in consequence of the difficulty of confining them to ferry boats) cannot be allowed to swim across canal." Culverts were necessary in low spots to allow water to drain down to the river and the one under the canal at White's Ferry was made larger than normal. It was made of cut Seneca red sandstone and had a semicircular arch with a ten-foot span.¹⁰

When the river was high, a culvert would be useless and Proceedings of the President and Directors of the Canal in November 1832 state: "Resolved, that suitable docks be provided on the Canal in the public road opposite to Conrad's Ferry and a ferry boat be purchased, and stationed there, to be used in time of high water by the proprietor of said ferry."¹¹

The President and Directors of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company were required to have a value given to each piece of land through which the canal was to pass. Deborah Deakins' land near the river, bounded by Joshua Chilton's land to the south and Daniel Trundle's to the north, was surveyed. It was calculated that the land to be occupied by the canal contained 6 acres and 1 perch and the land between the canal and the river had 19 acres 1 rood and 6 perches. On May 5, 1830 an inquisition to value the land was held, a value was set, and Deborah M. Deakins signed a receipt for \$856 paid her by the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company.¹² The canal cut some landowners off from land they had used for farming or grazing and apparently the canal company was required to pay for loss of use for the land between the canal and the river. When Deborah sold her land, the deed made it clear it included land to the banks of the Potomac River.

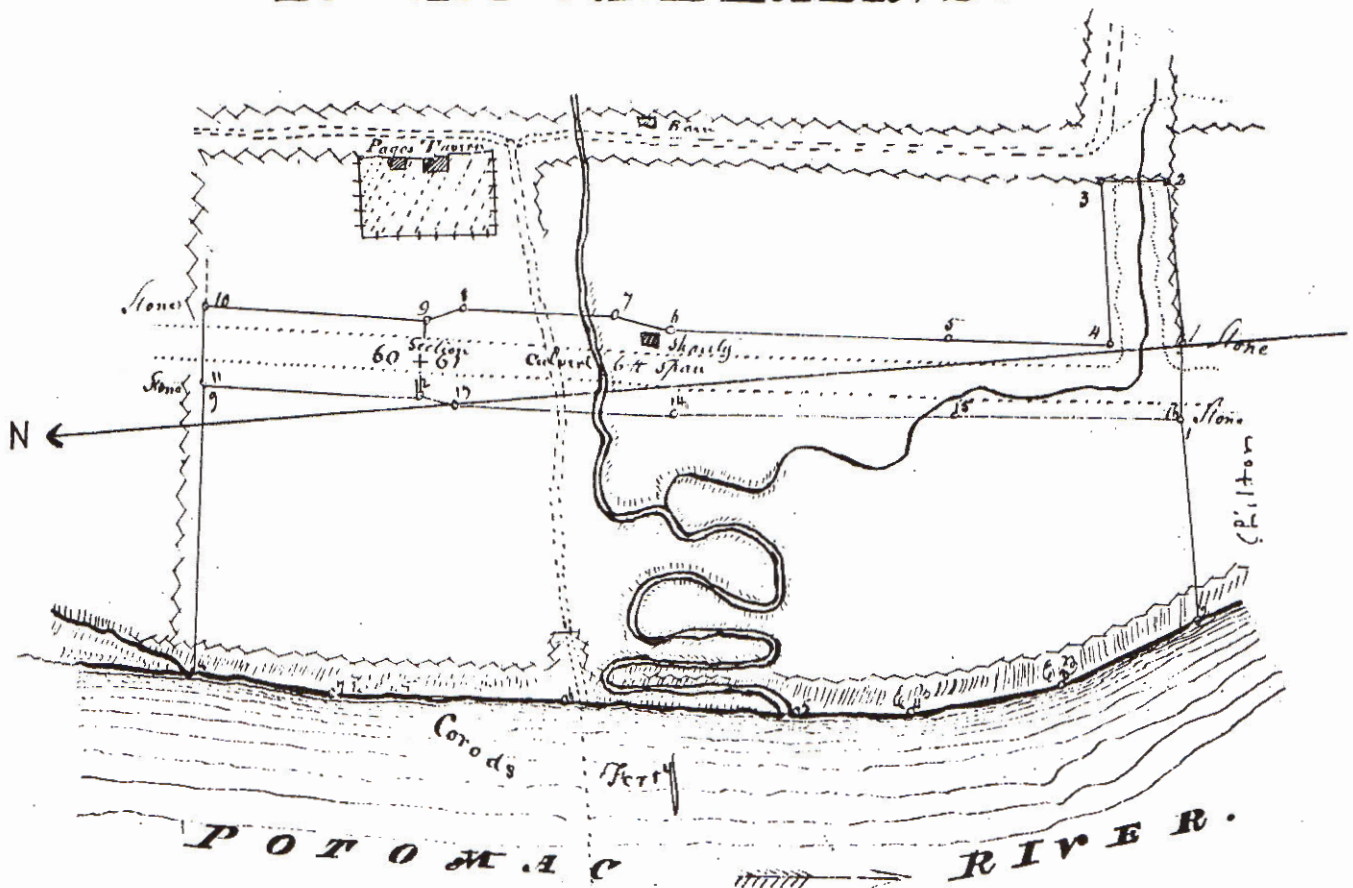
Land records concerning the canal contain the plat reproduced on the opposite page. It shows the canal crossing Deborah's land between the public road and the river and a stream meandering down to the river. Some of the printing is difficult to read, but there is a barn on one side of the road and on the other, in a fenced area, are two buildings marked "Pages Tavern." Along the route of the canal is a "shanty," quite possibly the house of the ferryman. A culvert is marked where the road down to the ferry goes under the canal. The ferry is clearly marked, with its route across the river, although unfortunately the draftsman left the "n" out of "Conrods Ferry." "Pages Tavern" was operated by Peyton R. Page, mentioned as a tenant in the deed from Deborah M. Deakins to the canal company in June 1830, and listed in license records as a tavernkeeper from 1831 to 1835.¹³

The culvert under the canal was adequate until 1864, when General Superintendent Spates of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company, proposed that a bridge be constructed over the canal to replace the culvert, which was "very much filled up, so that carriages and wagons could not pass through it." A wooden bridge built about a mile upstream proved unsatisfactory; the grade was too steep and the bridge's clearance above the canal less than 12 feet, the desirable height to allow canal boats to pass under it. These problems were corrected, but others developed and a metal bridge was built in 1876,¹⁴ its frame still there at what is now White's Ferry.

Recognizing the need for officers and workers to send and receive mail while the canal was being built, the U.S. Post Office Department agreed to establish eight post offices about four miles apart along the route of the canal between Georgetown and Point of Rocks. The one at Conrad's Ferry was opened in the winter of 1828-29 with Jared Darrow as postmaster and mail was delivered twice a week by horseback.¹⁵

Although Conrod Myers' ferry was "commonly called Conrod's ferry," a few records in the early years referred to it as "Conrads Ferry" - the 1791 General Assembly law concerning roads, for instance. As time went on, however, the ferry was increasingly called "Conrads Ferry," probably because

DEBORAH M. DEAKINS.



"Conrad" was a much more common name than "Conrod." When Julius T. Ducatel, State Geologist, made his map of Montgomery County in 1837, there were few towns on it, but he did put in "Conrads Ferry" and later records consistently spelled it that way.

After the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was completed, Conrad's Ferry was increasingly used as goods transported by way of the canal were ferried to Virginia and Virginia goods could be brought to the canal. The value of the land at the ferry no doubt increased in value and in June of 1840 Deborah M. Deakins sold it to Dr. Stephen N. C. White for \$1185. The deed conveyed parts of tracts Concord, Accord, Discord and Resurvey on Discord, running to the "margin of the bank of Potomac River" and containing, clear of land taken for the canal, a bit more than 220 acres.¹⁶

In 1854, Stephen N. C. White gave the land he purchased from Deborah Deakins, and other land, to his children, Daniel T. White, Margaret A. Smoot and Benjamin R. White, who promptly filed an equity case to divide it. The plat in the case shows three lots. Benjamin R. White received the middle lot, Lot 2, and Daniel T. White the southernmost, Lot 3. On the land between the canal and the river is the notation: "All this portion of whole tract west of canal belongs to 3rd lot," that is, Daniel T. White was to receive the land along the river.¹⁷ Daniel T. White and his wife Virginia

had been listed earlier, in the 1850 census of the Medley District, with James R. Walker, "ferryman" in their household, possibly indicating that Daniel was managing Conrad's Ferry at that time.

When the Civil War broke out, Union forces swiftly occupied crossing places on the Potomac River. The First New Hampshire Infantry occupied Conrad's Ferry and constructed the first earthworks in defense of the crossing in 1861. Militarily there was not a great deal of activity at Conrad's Ferry, but from time to time throughout the war both Confederate and Union forces used the ferry or improvised ferries to cross the river at this point.¹⁸

During Jubal Early's march on Washington in 1864, Confederate General McCausland's cavalry, following a different retreat route than the main body of Early's forces, crossed back into Virginia at Conrad's Ferry. Lt. Col. John Singleton Mosby used Conrad's Ferry crossing with his Rangers into Maryland. While Union cavalry were busy with Jubal Early near Washington, Mosby's Rangers crossed at Conrad's Ferry to pass through the county and hit the deserted camp of the 2nd Massachusetts at Muddy Branch.¹⁹

Elijah Veirs White, originally a Marylander, was one of those who fought for the Confederacy. He had grown up in Montgomery County at Stoney Castle, built by his father just west of Poolesville. After Elijah married in 1857, he and his bride moved across the river to a 350-acre farm in Loudoun County. As signs of war between the North and South increased, he joined the 7th Virginia Cavalry and by October 1862 was leading a unit mustered into the Confederate Army as the 35th Battalion, Virginia Cavalry.²⁰

After the war ended, Colonel Elijah Veirs White, now a civilian, returned home in late May 1865 with plans to establish himself in the business world, plans which in a few years involved Conrad's Ferry. As he and other farmers set about revitalizing their farmland, Colonel White realized there would be a ready market for fertilizers and grains in both Loudoun and Montgomery Counties. A ferry would provide farmers with the means to transport goods across the river to and from the C & O Canal, so in 1871 he was able to obtain permission from the Loudoun County Court for a ferry. Probably with the idea that the ferry would be good for the economy, the Court agreed to have the county pay his \$100 franchise fee.²¹

What had been Conrad's Ferry now became White's Ferry and "E. V. White" placed an advertisement in the March 1, 1873 issue of the Leesburg Washingtonian stating that his boat would go anywhere on the river or canal for freight and that at White's Ferry he had for sale grain, fertilizer, salt, flour, bacon, fish, hardware, Cumberland coal, and lump plaster. He would buy grain and was willing to barter.

Colonel White must have had some leasing arrangement for a ferry landing in Montgomery County earlier and on 26 May of 1875 bought land there. He paid \$7900 for 81 acres, described as "part of Accord or Concord," from trustees appointed to sell the land which had belonged to Daniel T. White, deceased. Metes and bounds in the deed begin on the banks of the Potomac River at the mouth of a culvert of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and mention the eastern abutment of the bridge crossing the canal on the road to Whites Ferry, as well as a warehouse on the property.²²

His business increased and Colonel White acquired storehouses and warehouses in Virginia and on the canal in Maryland. Five years later, he formed a partnership, under the name of "White and Wootton of White's Ferry," with Edward Wootton, a Poolesville physician and long-time friend who had been a surgeon in White's 35th Calvary. G. M. Hopkins' 1879 Atlas of Montgomery County shows five buildings owned by Col. Elijah V. White at Whites Ferry, one marked "warehouse." Grain from area farms was stored in a two-story timber building called the Granary, 23 feet wide and 70 feet long, parallel to the canal.²³

The business prospered and continued to expand but in 1886 White, by this time 56 years old, decided to limit his business activities and sold his interest in land in Montgomery County to Wootton. The 81 acres at White's Ferry was sold to Edward Wootton on January 1, 1886 for \$11,000.²⁴ Wootton continued to call the ferry "White's Ferry" and through the years since then the name has remained the same.

In his "History of Western Maryland" published in 1882, J. Thomas Scharf gave the location of Whites Ferry and said that L. C. White was postmaster, William Rollison was ferryman, E. W. Mercer had a store, and White and Wootton were grain dealers.²⁵

White's Ferry had been operating on a cable for years, but was still poled across the river until 1920. Charles Ashley Williams of Virginia became the owner and operator of White's Ferry in 1918 and after two years of poling decided to take advantage of the automobile engines then widely available. He installed a Ford Model T gasoline engine in a rowboat attached to the wooden barge and used it to power the barge across the river. It usually carried two trucks or three cars. When Herbert Hoover was President, he crossed on the ferry in his White House car, complete with secret service. A newspaper photographer asked Mr. Williams if he would like to have his picture taken with the President and he said, "No, I'm not having my picture taken with any Republican." Williams' ferryboat was used until 1942, when a severe flood washed it away from its moorings and all the way down to Great Falls, where it was dashed to pieces on the rocks.²⁶

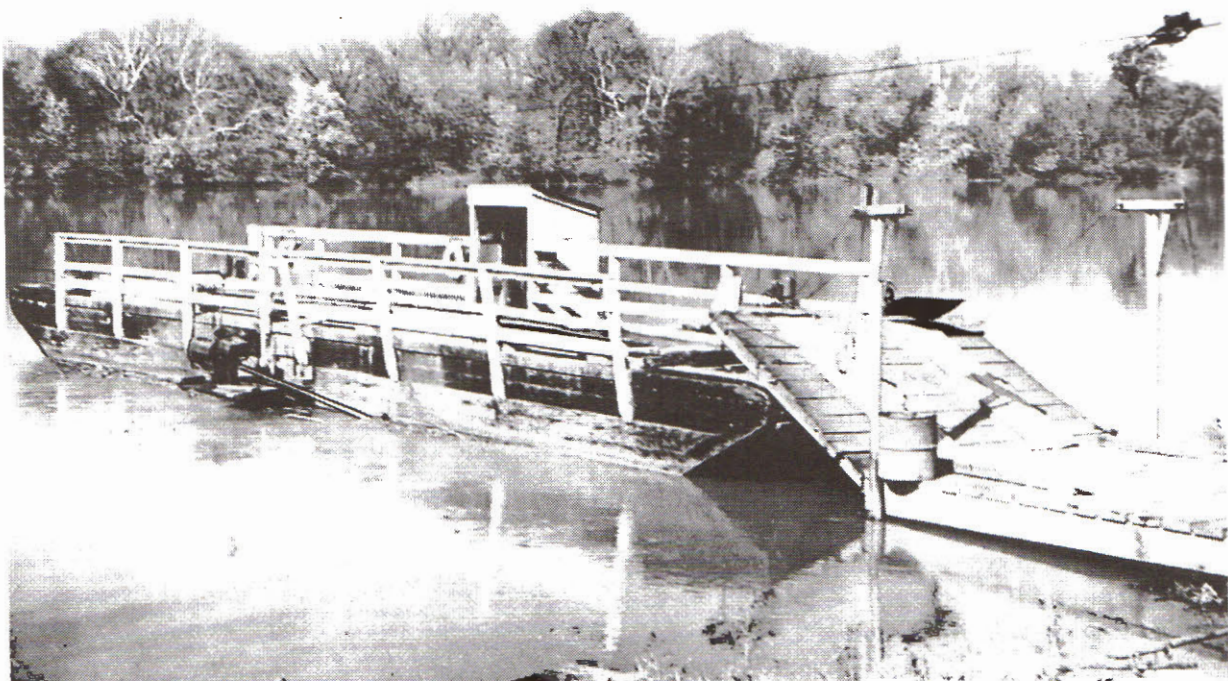
The ferryboat was not replaced and operations ceased. Our country had entered World War II the year before, gasoline rationing curtailed driving, and obtaining materials and labor for non-essential business was difficult. At the end of the war, in 1946, a group of six businessmen and lawyers formed a corporation to operate the ferry and bought from the Williams family the rights to the ferry and two acres on which the ferry landing stood. The men were Dr. John Gibson, James Symington, Robert Greundidge, Judge Lucas Phillips, Ralph Altizer, all of Virginia, and R. Edwin Brown, an attorney practicing in Rockville.

During World War II a pontoon bridge had been constructed across the Potomac River at the base of Key Bridge, to be used in the event Key Bridge became impassable. When the war ended, the pontoon boats became Army surplus and the ferry corporation purchased one with a wooden platform to use at White's Ferry. The ferryboat was about 60 feet long, could carry three automobiles or two trucks, and was propelled by a "hay baler" engine, commonly used in farming, which had a specially made shaft with a marine propeller on the end. The engine was fixed on a swivel so that it could be

turned around to propel the ferryboat either way, and a cable extended across the river. The ferry began regular service in April 1947.²⁷

The new owners of White's Ferry built a house for the ferryman and his family, the lower part built of masonry to withstand the force of floods. Raymond Jordan, the ferryman in 1949, ran a small store in his basement and in an interview said he usually worked the ferry from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. but sometimes he was awakened during the night to take across a doctor being called from Leesburg into Maryland for some emergency. Weekdays there was considerable traffic with farmers traveling between Loudoun and Montgomery Counties. The wooden pontoon ferry was finally caught in ice and sank when a flood destroyed its landing facilities.²⁸

That was in 1954 and it was replaced the same year by the "General Jubal Early," named after the famous Confederate general. It was a 60-foot barge of welded steel, built in Baltimore to conform to Coast Guard requirements, and carried six cars or a 20-ton truck. The power was supplied by a marine jet engine in a small tugboat fastened to the main boat by metal rods. On approaching shore, the tug was swung out and turned around, which provided braking power and had the ferry ready for the return trip. An inch-thick cable stretched 1000 feet across the river, running along the river bed so fishing boats could pass. At White's Ferry on the Maryland side, the ferrymen operated a boating concession and swimming, camping and fishing sites.²⁹



Wooden Pontoon Ferryboat - 1947-1954

In 1971, when Malcolm Brown, the son of one of the owners, returned home after finishing college and a stint in the Army, the owners of the ferry persuaded him to run the ferry "for a couple of years." He spent much of his first year putting the grounds and machinery in order, but Hurricane Agnes came the next year and left chaos behind that was worse than ever. It was not a good beginning, but now, 29 years later, he is not only running the ferry but, with his staff of five to eight, operating a small restaurant, renting boats and picnic tables, selling fishing gear, bait, souvenirs and snacks.

As commuter traffic increased after 1971, the "General Jubal Early" became obsolete and a larger ferryboat was needed. The next boat, which is in use today, was launched on August 18, 1988, and because two boats cannot be registered with the same name, the new one was named the "General Jubal A. Early."³⁰ It was made to carry 15 cars, was built in six parts at Norfolk, Virginia, and assembled at the river. Since then, a 9-car section has been added so that the ferry now carries 24 cars.

The two greatest threats to regular operation of the ferry are ice on the river and flooding. The February 9, 1961 issue of Washington Star reported that it had been the East's worst winter in decades. Two weeks earlier the ice was so thick you could walk all the way across the river - not that anyone tried it - and at White's Ferry the General Jubal Early, shoved ashore by a tremendous mass of shifting ice, was secured by heavy cables and awaiting the first thaw. The ice situation on the Maryland side has improved since a power plant was constructed at Dickerson and it began dumping warmed water into the river.



General Jubal A. Early - lauched in 1988

Flooding is a more frequent problem than ice. In an interview with Malcolm Brown appearing in the Washington Times on July 6 1987, he said there had been 30 floods since 1971 when he took over operation of White's Ferry - and he did not consider it a flood until the water came into his store. Floods have increased as vegetation which used to soak up flood rains has been uprooted by construction upriver. The worst flood in modern times was caused by Hurricane Agnes and afterward someone marked on the store's front: "Flood 34 feet 6/24/72."

Mr. Brown has developed a clever means of coping: he put wheels on every piece of equipment in the store. At the first sign of trouble, he brings a truck to the door, rolls out his freezer, his refrigerator and his counters, tosses in table and chairs, and drives away. Just before he leaves, he opens every door and window in the house so that the water can flow freely through the building instead of putting pressure on it.

From time to time, there have been other problems, of course. The December 21, 1978 issue of the Sentinel mentioned that in the summer of 1973 the river was so low the ferryboat "bottomed out" on the Virginia side. In the summer of 1972, a man drove his front-end loader onto the ferry, after saying it was under the 40,000 pound weight limit. Apparently it wasn't. When he drove all the way to the front of the ferry, it took a nose-dive and sank to the bottom, stuck there until the front-end loader was winched off.

The Washington Post on March 27, 1981 had a photograph of two fertilizer trucks and the General Jubal Early stranded in the Potomac. The trucks apparently exceeded weight limits, but the ferry sank in just ten feet of water, so the men got off onto the push boat and when enough fertilizer was off loaded onto other boats, the ferry rose to the surface.

With increased population on both sides of the Potomac and light industry in Loudoun County, commuters from both shores have discovered White's Ferry. It is the only ferry operating on the Potomac River and the only crossing point between the bridge on the Capital Beltway and Point of Rocks, ten miles above the ferry in Frederick County. It has an enthusiastic and dedicated clientele on a regular basis. For some, it is a quicker way to their jobs across the river or to Dulles International Airport; others find the quiet, back-road travel a welcome respite from the Beltway. In an emergency, when there is a traffic tie-up on the Beltway bridge, drivers head to White's Ferry.

White's Ferry has long been used for fishing and recreation. Today you can rent a canoe or a flat bottom rowboat called a "johnboat," buy bait and fishing gear. There are picnic tables, a store and small restaurant, and a ramp for launching privately-owned boats, as well as boats owned by White's Ferry. The C & O Canal towpath is nearby for long walks. In 1988 White's Ferry Corporation built a pavillion that can be rented for parties, family reunions, etc. White's Ferry is surrounded by acres of wooded National Park Service land. If your interest is in scenery and the river, the chance to get out in the middle of the river on the General Jubal A. Early and look up and down is well worth the fare.

After crossing to Virginia and returning by White's Ferry, we leave the grounds and see that the big sign welcoming us as we came says, on its

reverse side, "Thank You." And we think to ourselves, "Thank You, General Jubal A. Early, for carrying on the tradition of service that began something over 200 years ago!"

Mary Ann Kephart was born in Silver Spring and graduated from the University of Maryland. She spent five years in Japan and three years in Belgium when her husband was stationed there with the government, became interested in historic preservation while in Europe, and in 1974 was a founding member of the organization "Historic Medley District, Inc." Her article "The Darnall Place," written for a course in Architecture at the University of Maryland, appeared in the May 1978 issue of our publication.

NOTES

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3. Ibid.
4. Montgomery County (hereafter "MC") Land Records A, f. 579; E, f. 169.
5. MC Land Records I, f. 281.
6. MC Land Records O, f. 327.
7. MC Land Records W, f. 496, 499.
8. MC Judgment Records, BS#1, f. 463.
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 29. Washington Post, August 11, 1978. Montgomery County Sentinel, December 21, 1978. Sunday Star, October 27, 1957.
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