

*Towpath Guide to the C&O Canal*

Book Launch Program (abridged)

June 27, 2015

by Catherine Baldau

I am not going to talk about what's inside of this book today, what the new features are, or how to use it....Instead I'm going to tell you the story of the Making of a Book. And I want to do that, because it's a story of a partnership and volunteerism and generosity. And, if you believe in it, there's a little bit of serendipity in this story, too.

When I first started working at [the Harpers Ferry Historical Association] in 2008, we were approaching the sesquicentennial of John Brown's Raid and the Civil War, and there were several book projects in the pipeline. But I still remember [our bookshop manager] saying to me one day, "What we really need to do is update the Towpath Guide."

The book was out of print—we'd sold the last copy on June 17, 2006. BUT, people were still coming into the bookshop on a regular basis asking for it. And folks from the National Park Service were emailing us probably every six to twelve months asking if we were going to reprint it. So in 2012, after publishing five John Brown and Civil War books in four years, we finally prepared to tackle this project.

When the last book was sold in June 2006, it was already outdated—that edition was printed in 1999. That year, the author Thomas Hahn came into our executive director, Debbie's office, he thanked her for always carrying his books in the Bookshop and for always supporting him. He handed her that tattered box of plates and the rights to the book, he said goodbye, have a nice life, and he retired to Florida. I wasn't there that day, I unfortunately never had the opportunity to meet Captain Hahn—for those who don't know he passed away in 2007—but as I was working on this project, I often thought about that moment. Hahn handed over 30 years of his work. Thirty years. Can you imagine the dedication? The passion?

The genesis of the book actually goes back even further to the late 1950s when a man named Orville Wright Crowder began taking notes on the structures and natural features along the canal, with the intention of preparing a canal guidebook. Crowder was

a naturalist, a historian, and an avid hiker—he was the third person ever to hike the entire Appalachian Trail. (And he lived in Harpers Ferry, by the way.) Orville Crowder was THE man who pushed a measuring wheel 184.5 miles from Georgetown to Cumberland. His mileages were used by the National Park Service and are the ones you see in the Towpath Guide.

Orville Crowder was also the man who in 1960 formed the original Level Walkers. For [those] who don't know: Level Walkers of the C&O Canal Association are volunteers who patrol levels—typically two to three miles of towpath or more—they walk it, pick up light trash, and report on the conditions. It's important to note: In 1960, there was no C&O Canal National Historical Park yet. That wouldn't happen until 1971. But there was the C&O Canal Association, which had an active and avid group of canal enthusiasts.

So Crowder used his measuring wheel and took copious notes, 200 plus pages, but he also had his own World Nature Tour Company and was busy circling the globe. He did not have time to put the notes into any sort of book format. And with his busy, busy life, Crowder also didn't have time to devote to the level walker program, so by the end of the 1960s, it too had fallen by the wayside.

Enter Captain Thomas F. Swiftwater Hahn.

Hahn was a naval intelligence officer stationed in Fort Meade, Maryland, and he was one of those active and avid C&O Canal enthusiasts. At their association meeting in April 1969, Hahn suggested it would be a good idea to revive the level walker program. You know what happens when you make suggestions at meetings...Hahn was unanimously “volunteered” to be the new level walker chairman.

It's about this time that Captain Hahn also started working closely with Orville Crowder to publish a *Towpath Guide to the C&O Canal*. The plan was to do it in four sections, the first being from Georgetown to Seneca [Maryland]. At the same time, Hahn was also the editor of a Level Walker newsletter, called “Along the Towpath,” which he typed on a typewriter and printed on an army surplus mimeograph in his basement. A typewriter. Can you imagine?

In his newsletter dated November 5, 1970, in a column called “Captain Comments,” Hahn wrote about finally submitting the Georgetown to Seneca manuscript to the publisher:

*“In case any of you have been wondering why there has been a gap in the issues of Along the Towpath, it is that (aside from the normal pressures of work, vacations, etc.) that we finally completed the first section of the Towpath Guide. After all that writing and re-writing and typing and re-typing, you should be grateful that I could even sit down to a typewriter this week without vomiting...”*

I can totally relate. He then went on to quote from the proposed preface:

*“The Georgetown to Seneca portion of the Towpath Guide to the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal has been compiled by many sources—principally from first hand impressions of the authors, Thomas F. Hahn and Orville W. Crowder, and the Level Walkers of the C&O Canal Association.”*

The Level Walkers of the C&O Canal Association...remember that.

By 1974, all four sections were published and revisions to section one already began. In that time, Hahn retired from the navy and took a job as a supervisory ranger on the C&O Canal. He founded the American Canal Association. AND he co-founded the American Canal and Transportation Center, a publishing company devoted to print material about American canals. Think about that. Today self-publishing or indie publishing is all the rage. *Seven hundred thousand* people a year publish their own books, mostly because the technology today allows it. The technology was not there in the 1970s. As researcher, writer, publisher, and marketer, Thomas Hahn was doing it all. And he was doing it without the internet, without Adobe Photoshop or InDesign, and without social media to market his books.

In 1982, he combined the four sections of the *Towpath Guide* into one volume and over the next two decades, continually updated the book. By 1999, 15 editions had been printed. Fifteen editions in 17 years! Not to mention the fact that during this time, Hahn wrote and published several other canal books, moved his family to Shepherdstown, went back to college, and earned a few degrees including a PhD in industrial archaeology. It’s exhausting just to think about it.

So in 1999, Hahn hands over this project that he obviously was very passionate about—maybe not so much by the end, but still 30 years worth of work—and in 2012 it lands on the desk of Cathy Baldau. Compared to 2012, technology in 1999 was pretty much the dark ages. We did not even have a digital version of the book to edit. We

scanned the pages, but because of the book's quality, much of the text was lost or garbled. About 60% of it needed to be retyped. I needed help.

That March, I sent out the first call for volunteers to HFHA members. Several people responded and we very quickly had a revisable Word document.

BUT, 13 years have now passed since the last edition was printed. The canal had changed. There had been floods and derechos and erosion. Canal structures had been restored or torn down, aqueducts rebuilt. I contacted the National Park Service and they were thrilled to hear we were redoing the book. They directed me to their supervisory ranger in Williamsport, and he could not have been more excited. But unfortunately, he informed me that the Park Service had no available manpower to help me update this book.

My mind immediately started spinning: How many miles can I walk in a day? Where can I get a good pair of hiking boots?

He must have seen the panic in my eyes, because he then did something which to me, what just short of a miracle. He gave me contact information for one of his park's volunteers: Dr. Karen Gray. He said, "She might be interested in helping you."

So I emailed Dr. Gray with fingers crossed. The very first words of her email reply were:

"I'd love to help."

If I had sound effects, now we would hear the alleluia chorus.

Karen is a volunteer in the park's library, she has studied the canal for decades, is a former level walker chair, and lectures and writes extensively on the history and engineering of the canal. Much research had been done since 1999, and Karen was eager to go through the book and verify its historical and technical data. That still left the physical features of the canal that needed to be verified. But Karen sent me another little miracle. She gave me contact information for a man named Steve Dean, their current Level Walker Chairman.

It turned out that Steve was quite familiar with the book, had several copies that he used for years, and he was going to ask his board if he could help me recruit some volunteers.

Cue the alleluia chorus again.

On June 16, 2012, Steve sent out an email blast to all of his level walkers: a call for volunteers to help update the *Towpath Guide*. An hour later I received my first response from a man in Arlington, Virginia. He actually has the original four sections of the book from the 1970s. His words: “Let me know when and where to start.”

That first day I had four other volunteers, all of them enthusiastic to see a new edition published and eager to help out. When all was said and done, 27 volunteers helped bring this book back to life. They not only verified physical conditions, but I had proofreaders, and photographers, and researchers.

*An active and avid group of canal enthusiasts.*

It was almost as if Thomas Hahn sent these people to me, and wherever he was, he was smiling.

Now what I didn’t realize while I was working on this book, was that I was doing the same thing Thomas Hahn did when he published those first four books. He had taken Orville Crowder’s notes and distributed them to volunteer level walkers and they walked their level and updated the notes. They also provided research and images and editorial skills. The exact same thing that we started doing in 2012! Only I did it with Hahn’s book. And I had email and the Microsoft Word “track changes” feature.

The enthusiasm of my little band of helpers was infectious. It kept me energized. I wanted this to be the best book it could be—for them. Their generosity and their passion for their National Park gave me a new appreciation, not just for the towpath, but for my own beautiful National Park right here in Harpers Ferry.

This year the National Park Service launched a year-long commemoration of their centennial. I just happened to find some words by Thomas Hahn, in that same column, Captains Comments, from 1970, that I thought were so fitting for today’s occasion:

*“We hope that the users of the guide will approach the canal and its environs as conservationists, considering the canal as one of the historical treasures of our country, while at the same time receiving maximum enjoyment from its usage—the two are not incompatible. Our philosophy in this regard is summed up in the basic law which established the National Park Service and directed it to, ‘conserve the scenery and wildlife...to provide for the enjoyment of same in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.’”*

I want to finish with a few final words from the Captains Comments, because they are still relative to this new edition:

*“This guide is a beginning, not an end; there is much detailed research work to be done. Our goal is that the reader will use the guide as a “workbook,” adding to its coverage and content as he wends his way along the canal.”*

I have already made a folder, titled *Towpath Guide, 17th edition*. Hahn printed a new edition every couple of years. That is certainly not our goal, but we do hope in a few years to be sold out and ready for another print run. We welcome any changes, corrections, or additions. My personal goal is to walk the entire 184.5 miles before the next edition. I have about 20 miles covered. Just 164 to go....