

19th-Century Packet Boat Travel in Rockbridge

By Dick Halseth

IN THE HEYDAY of canals, there were 59 in Virginia, and the best known were the Chesapeake & Ohio and the James River & Kanawha Canals.

These inland waterways provided passage for boats loaded with freight, passengers, or both. The JR&K system gave Rockbridge a port with access to the Atlantic Ocean. Thomas “Stonewall” and Mary Anna Jackson, in fact, brought furnishings for their house on East Washington Street from New York entirely by water.

THE North River Canal arrived in Lexington in late 1860, a spur of the extensive James River and Kanawha Canal, between Richmond and Buchanan, which had been completed in 1851. John Jordan was a key player in promoting the canal before he died in 1854.

Between Lexington and the James River at Glasgow, the canal incorporated 20 miles of towpath and 14 full locks that could accommodate both freight and passenger boats of up to 90 feet in length and 14½ feet in width.

The James River canal was never a money-maker for its investors. From 1851 until its demise in 1879, it suffered through many costly floods. Although the lock walls were heavy blocks of stone, the gates were made of high-maintenance wood. More fundamentally, the company employed lock keepers and had to provide their housing – in addition to paying back building loans. In 1879 the owners sold the towpath to the Richmond & Alleghany Railroad, soon to become the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad. The towpath is now the Chessie Trail, owned by Virginia Military Institute.

During the 1800s, travelers could choose among the stagecoach,

railroad and packet boat. Each had its benefits and issues. Stagecoach travel was generally faster and served more destinations but was far rougher. Packet-boat travel was slow and leisurely; railroads offered speed and comfort. Travelers often had to employ several modes.

THE PACKET-BOAT

Packet boat: A vessel employed in conveying dispatches and passengers from place to place, or to carry passengers and goods coastwise. – Webster's Dictionary, 1860

MOST packet-boats were constructed with iron hulls and wooden upper bodies with sharp, raking bows and



“James River Canal Near the Mouth of the North River,” showing a typical packet boat. Lithograph by Edward Beyer in Album of Virginia, 1858

shallow drafts. Most had windows with sliding shutters. A narrow deck area surrounded the cabin. Inside the cabin were toilets, cooking and sleeping facilities. The roof was designed to support passengers.

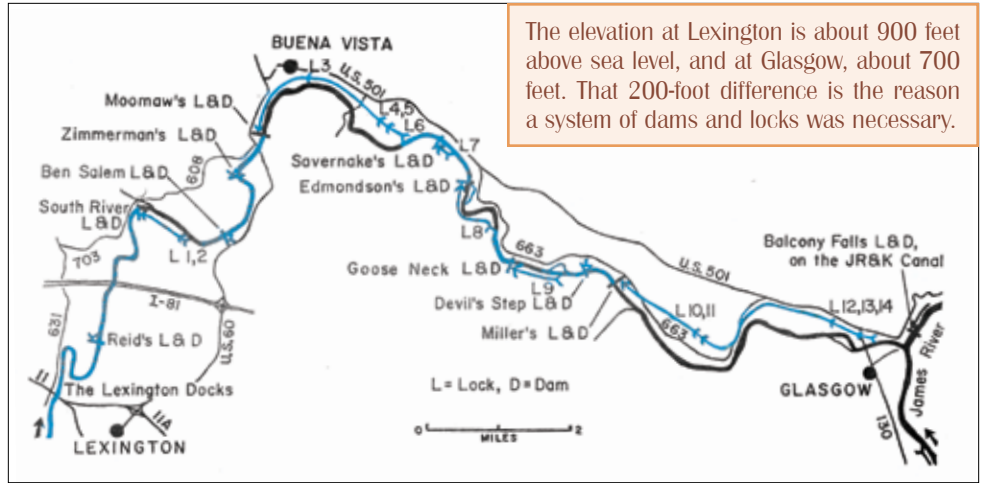
PASSENGER EXPERIENCE

RACKETS plied the waters of the JR&K canal, carrying travelers from Richmond,

Scottsdale, Lynchburg, Buchanan and Lexington. The trip was slow. The waters were usually calm but the accommodations were always questionable. In May 1861, the trip between Lexington and Richmond took 2½ days and cost \$2.50. That’s about \$86 in today’s money. By June 1872, the price had risen to \$4 without meals, and \$7 with. Travel time was reduced to 24 hours once passengers could go by rail to Lynchburg and then by packet to Lexington.

In 1879, when the canal system was sold to the Richmond & Alleghany Railroad, most of the canal’s towpath was converted to roadbed. The arrival of the railroad in Lexington in 1883 ended the era of canal operations, and the 14 lift locks on the North River were abandoned. Many of those locks still exist along Route 60 east and 501 south of Buena Vista to Glasgow. On the Blue Ridge Parkway just past mile

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The elevation at Lexington is about 900 feet above sea level, and at Glasgow, about 700 feet. That 200-foot difference is the reason a system of dams and locks was necessary.

W. E. TROUT III, HISTORIC SITES ON THE NORTH RIVER NAVIGATION

marker 62 and before the parkway bridge over the James River, you will find a restored lock and the visitor center for interpretation.

A traveler wrote in 1878.

“The packet-landing at the foot of Eighth Street [in Richmond] presented a scene of great activity. Passengers on foot and in vehicles continued to arrive up to the moment of starting. . . .

At last we were off, slowly pushed under the bridge at Seventh Street; then the horses were hitched; then slowly along we passed the crowd of boats near the city, until at length with a lively jerk as the horses fell into a trot, away we went, the cut-water throwing up the spray as we rounded the Penitentiary hill, and the passengers lingering on deck to get a last look at the fair city of Richmond, lighted by the pale rays of the setting sun. As the shadows deepened everybody went below. There was always a crowd in those days, but it was a crowd of our best people, and no one minded it. . . .

Supper over, the men went on deck to smoke, while the ladies busied themselves with

draughts or backgammon. But not for long. The curtains which separated the female from the male apartments were soon drawn, in order that the steward and his aides might make ready the berths. These were three deep, “lower,” “middle” and “upper”; and great was the desire on the part of the men not to be consigned to the “upper.” . . . We all went to bed early. A few lingered, talking in low tones; and way-passengers

James River Canal Packet Co.

FROM LEXINGTON AND BUCHANAN TO RICHMOND.

Our Packet Boats leave Lexington and Buchanan Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 5 p. m. for Lynchburg and Richmond, arriving in Lynchburg at 7 a. m. next morning, making close connection with all trains.

Through tickets to Richmond, Petersburg and Norfolk, connecting with railroads at Lynchburg. Baggage checked through and delivered to connecting roads free of charge.

From Lexington to Lynchburg	\$3.50
“ Buchanan “ do.	2.50
“ Lexington “ Richmond (boat & rail)	8.00
“ “ Petersburg, “	“	8.00
“ “ Norfolk, “	“	11.25
“ “ Richmond (by boat)	5.00

Freight from Richmond to Lexington \$1.25; from Lynchburg to Lexington, 50 cts. per hundred pounds; light packages 50 cents.

A. ALEXANDER, Esq., Agent at Lexington for the sale of Railroad tickets.
June 18—1y. GEO. N. WOODBRIDGE.

Advertisement in the Lexington Gazette, 1876

[i.e., those not making the complete trip], in case there was a crowd, were dumped upon mattresses, placed on the dining tables. . . .

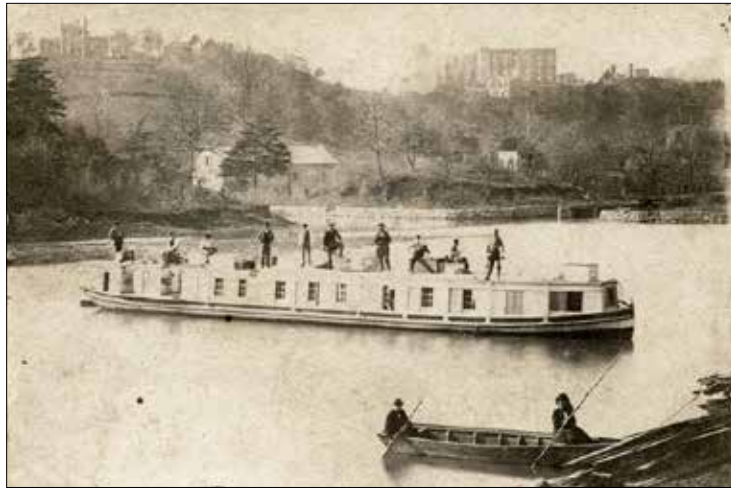
We turned out early in the morning and had precious little room for dressing. . . . There was abundant leisure to enjoy the scenery, which grew more and more captivating as we rose, lock after lock, into the rock-bound eminences of the upper James. . . .

In fine summer weather the passengers, male and female, stayed most of the time on deck. . . .

All the scenery in the world . . . avail not to keep a Virginian away from a julep on a sweltering summer day. From time to time, he would descend from the deck of the packet and refresh himself. The bar was small, but vigorous and healthy. . . . “Gentlemen, your very good health”; “Colonel, my respects to you”; “My regards, Judge. When shall I see you again at my house? Can’t you stop now and stay a little while, if it is only a week or two?” “Sam” (to the barkeeper), “duplicate these drinks!” . . .

Arrived in Lynchburg, this traveler noted that the effect of the canal was soon seen in the array of freight boats, and the activity and bustle at the packet-landing.

(Excerpts from *Canal Reminiscences: Recollections of Travel in the Old Days on the James River & Kanawha Canal*, by G. W. Bagby



The Marshall at Jordans Point, Lexington; VMI is in the background

FAMOUS PASSENGERS

RERHAPS the most famous passenger on the James River Canal was Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson. General Jackson died on May 10, 1863, of wounds suffered at the battle of Chancellorsville, and his body lay in state in Richmond for a few days before it was taken to Lexington on May 13. The trip was by railroad to Lynchburg, where the body was transferred to the packet boat Marshall for transport to Lexington (where, recall, rail service would not arrive for another 18 years). To capture this historic event, there is, in Buena Vista, a casting in the flood-wall on the east side of the Maury River depicting a replica of the Marshall in its exact dimensions.

Robert E. Lee did not travel to Lexington by packet-boat, but early in the morning of December 2, 1865, he rode down to the Lexington landing, when a special packet boat tied up at the dock, bringing to their new home other members of the Lee family: his wife, Mary Anna Custis Lee, and two

of their children, 20-year-old Mildred Childe Lee, young Robert E. Jr., 22, and Eleanor Agnes, 24. (Mary Custis Lee, the eldest daughter, would later join them.) Mrs. Lee, badly crippled with arthritis, was helped into a waiting carriage. Young Rob and Mildred climbed in beside her, and escorted by the General, the carriage went up the winding road to the house on the Washington College campus.

Not a passenger but a regular customer of the canal was Captain Elisha Paxton (1785-1867), a plantation owner who built and lived in the Paxton House located in what is now Glen Maury Park. He transported his agricultural commodities to eastern markets via the canal.



Elisha Paxton

PAXTON HOUSE, GLEN MAURY PARK

THE BOAT OPERATORS



WHILE THE CANAL WAS owned and operated by the James River and Kanawha Company, the boats that

traveled along it were owned by individual operators. Some of the companies operating out of Lexington were Pettigrew and Lucado, Johnson and Burke, and the James River Canal and Packet Company.

THE LOCK KEEPERS



MANAGING THE LOCKS was a busy family operation. The locks operated day and night every day of the week, so lock keepers were on call 24/7. The canal company provided housing and a small plot of land and paid their wages. Many augmented their subsistence with vegetable gardens and sometimes a few farm animals and some keepers sold their products to travelers. The operation of the heavy gates required great strength and agility.



The Echols Farm near the confluence of the James and North (Maury) Rivers at Glasgow, built in the 1850s by the lock keeper Edward Echols. The farm, a National Historic Place, burned at the hand of an arsonist in 2022

One local lock keeper was Captain Edward Echols, a canal boat operator and merchant, whose house was located on the southeast corner of the intersection of Routes U.S. 501 and Virginia 130, just north

of Glasgow. His son, Ernest, remembered canal boats debarking at the warehouse and as many as 20 passengers joining the Echols family for meals in the basement dining room of the house.