

M2157

MINUTES OF THE
BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE
WASHINGTON CANAL COMPANY, 1810–1831

Compiled by Claire Prechtel-Klusens
Records prepared for filming by Diane Burcombe

National Archives and Records Administration
Washington, DC
2012

INTRODUCTION

On the single roll of this microfilm publication, M2157, are reproduced the minutes of the board of directors of the Washington Canal Company, 1810–1831 (ARC Identifier 1487562).^{*} These records are part of Records of the Government of the District of Columbia, Record Group (RG) 351.

BACKGROUND

Plans for a canal to run through the heart of the District of Columbia to connect the Eastern Branch (Anacostia River) and Potomac River date to Pierre Charles L'Enfant's first city plans drawn in 1791. An act of Congress of May 1, 1802 (2 Stat. 175), chartered the privately owned Washington Canal Company to construct a canal within five years, but the company was apparently never formally established. An act of Congress of February 16, 1809 (2 Stat. 517), chartered a second Washington Canal Company with the requirement that the canal be completed within seven years. President James Madison participated in the groundbreaking ceremony on May 2, 1810, and the canal was completed and opened for business on November 21, 1815. However, it was expensive to maintain due to flooding and silting from the tides, so the company's financial situation was precarious.

When the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company was organized in 1828, promoters saw the opportunity to link the two systems. The City of Washington invested in the C&O Canal and arranged an agreement whereby the city would purchase the Washington Canal and the C&O would extend its waterway to a basin that the city would build at the mouth of Tiber Creek. On January 3, 1831, the City Council authorized funds to purchase and improve the canal, and Congress approved those actions by an act of May 31, 1832 (4 Stat. 521). The linkage and improvements were completed by 1837. The canal provided significant economic benefits to the city until the mid-1850s, but then decayed into an open sewer until the city government began filling it in during the 1870s. A lockkeeper's house (built circa 1835) at the southwest corner of Constitution Avenue and 17th Streets, NW, is the most visible remnant of the canal.

RECORDS DESCRIPTION

The minutes of the second Washington Canal Company were written in a single unpaginated bound volume, usually on both sides of each sheet of paper. They begin on January 10, 1810, and end with October 19, 1831. The board ceased to exist after the city of Washington purchased the canal in 1831.

^{*} The Archival Research Catalog (ARC) is available online at www.archives.gov. This series is also identified as Entry (Series) 106, Minutes of the Board of Directors of the Washington Canal Co., Jan. 10, 1810–Oct. 19, 1831, in Dorothy S. Provine, Preliminary Inventory 186, *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Government of the District of Columbia* (National Archives, 1976).

The board's proceedings give the date, names of directors present, reports to the board, and a summary of actions taken, such as resolutions and authorizations. Most of the transactions relate to financing the project or decisions concerning specific construction or repair problems.

Also included are a transcript of a memorandum of agreement dated May 14, 1821, between the directors and David Gillespie of New York regarding the Washington Canal Lottery, and a transcript of articles of agreement dated August 19, 1822, between the city of Washington and the Washington Canal Company concerning a change in the course of the canal.

The minutes were filmed double-shot, that is two pages (left and right) were filmed in one image. A large, somewhat triangular piece is missing from the page upon which the minutes for June 23, 1821, begin. Because both sides of the page were written upon, it affects two pages of the minutes—the page the minutes begin on (a right page) and the next page (a left page). In order to accurately read the text, careful observation is necessary to discern the boundaries of the missing piece; its absence is not obvious from casual observation. Thus, due to the missing piece, words from the page directly below are visible where the missing piece should be.

These records were filmed by National Archives in 1975 for internal reference purposes. This film was assigned the number M2157 in 2012 in order to issue it as a National Archives Microfilm Publication.

RELATED RECORDS

There are several additional record series in RG 351 relating to the Washington Canal, including Minutes of the Board of Commissioners, 1831–38 (Entry 107; ARC Identifier 1487566); Minutes of the Commission to Improve the Washington Canal, 1870–71 (Entry 108, ARC Identifier 1487567); Statement of Interest Due on Stock for the Improvement of the Washington Canal, 1835–38 (Entry 109; ARC Identifier 1487570); Statement of Interest Due on Stock Issued for the Purchase of the Washington Canal, 1837–38 (Entry 110; ARC Identifier 1487573); and a Ledger, 1845–55 (Entry 111; ARC Identifier 1487575).

For a useful overview of the canal's history, see Cornelius W. Heine, "The Washington City Canal," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society of Washington, D.C., 1953–1956*, Vols. 53–56 (Washington: The Society, 1959), 1–27, as well as Dorothy S. Provine, Preliminary Inventory 186, *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Government of the District of Columbia*, 27–8 (National Archives, 1976).