

## Captain George Pointer

Every so often there is a story told, be it fact or fiction, that amazes and inspires. This is one such fact-based story about a unique man named Captain George Pointer. Had he not penned 12 pages of astonishing written artistry in 1829, his amazing story could not be shared. While his name has been known to American researchers and historians for centuries, his life story remained covered in dust. It does not begin with him as a man but as a 13-year-old boy who could mysteriously read and write in 1786 rural America. This is the year he started working for a company started by George Washington, The Patowmack Company, which was established a year earlier. Its purpose was to make the Potomac River safer to transport goods and materials...a water highway of sorts which was George Washington's life-long dream. This would also make it much easier to transport needed building materials to the newly forming Capital city. Pointer was given a cottage that was nestled on the banks of the Potomac River and first hired to guard a company black powder magazine located near the cottage. It was not long before his duties expanded to general laborer assisting the Engineer. Over the course of his career with the Company, he rose from this lowly position to become Chief Engineer-Superintendent directing and overseeing a multi-cultural workforce. His rise in the Company began some 70 years before the Civil War.

This is the story of a man born into slavery in 1773.

George Pointer, also called “yellow George”, was born a slave in Frederick County, MD on October 11, 1773.<sup>1</sup> His owner, William Wallace, rented him out to the Patowmack Company because they needed someone to watch over the black powder magazine that stored powder used to build the canals and loosen stone to transport to the capital. Gun powder was worth its weight in gold in those days and a target for thieves. While it’s believed watching over the powder magazine was his first primary duty, his eagerness and ability to quickly master various sets of skills surely must have amazed the first Engineer of the company as well as on-lookers. As a result, his duties quickly extended to general labor assisting the Engineer. In 1788, 15-year-old Pointer was selected to accompany Col. George Gilpin and the Company's Chief Engineer, James Smith on an expedition; 218 miles of the upper Potomac to complete the first survey and mapping of this area.<sup>2</sup> Since there were Native Americans living along the river during that time it’s quite possible that one or more could have served as guides on such an expedition and young Pointer could have learned a great deal from them. Before the canal this was an 8 to 10-day journey but after the canal was built the same trip could be safely completed in 3 to 5 days.

Workers for the Company were paid in monthly wages with daily rations of whisky. Food and cloth rations could also be received if it was credited from a worker's wages. George Pointer's master allowed him to keep a portion of his wages and at some point, offered him the opportunity to purchase his freedom for \$300 (an average price at the time and equivalent to

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<sup>1</sup> Jane C. Sween. *Montgomery County: Two Centuries of Change* (Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, 1984). 25-29; “George Pointer Petition,” RG 79, NA.

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Kapsch. *The Potomac Canal: George Washington and the Waterway West* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press 2007) “George Pointer Petition,” RG 79, NA. 2.

about \$7000-\$8000 today).<sup>3</sup> Imagine, receiving a few dollars a month, given only a portion of it per month and yet saving \$300 in 5 years. This required strong will and determination! In 1793 a 19-year-old George Pointer paid for his freedom!

For a slave to be set free, did not really mean being free. Life for free blacks in and around the Federal City did not offer any more protection under the law than living as a slave. If a slave was somehow able to earn his or her freedom there was still the constant fear of capture by slave catchers who would ignore freedom papers, kidnap them and then sell slaves to owners in the deep south.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Law stated that any freed slave had to leave the state he/she was freed in or be sold back into slavery. The Law could only add to benefit slave-catchers who did not respect that law. There are no records of Pointer being registered to be freed or of receiving freedom papers and for good reason. Had he owned those documents he would have been forced to move to a different state. Pointer was a great asset to the company and it's highly likely that the board of the company and his owner agreed it would be best that he remained unrecord as freed. After all, he was solidly connected to a powerful company and under their unspoken protection. Moreover, even at the young age of 19, he was a known oddity and his name had surely been spreading like the currents of the river he worked up, down, around and in the Capital city as well. In his letter, Pointer spoke of George Washington and dignitaries' annual visits to the canal to view work progression. This suggests that he had exposure to them as well as their exposure to him. Who would question his freedom? For illegal slave catchers, he would be more trouble than he'd be worth. While a humble man, it's improbable that he held his head down in great fear as he travelled the river, canals and roads along the Potomac and in the Federal City because he was absent of freedom papers. He was a "magnificent oddity", a black man with outstanding river piloting skills, was highly literate, had a level of wealth and the respect of all who knew him, all of which made him nearly untouchable.

Captain Pointer's first tasks at Great Falls included the hard work hammering and digging to break down rocks and move soil to clear for the building of the lock system. In 1796 the Potomac Company made twenty-two-year old George Pointer a supervisor of five boats that transported chiseled stone blocks to Great Falls from the Seneca quarry, eight miles upriver.<sup>5</sup> By 1798 the Potomac Company had not completed the locks, but they had built a temporary inclined plane that would be used to slide cargo from boats at the top of the Great Falls to the bottom while the empty boats with special pilots would descend the river. George Pointer was one of the pilots as he describes below in a letter he wrote to the C & O Canal Company:

*In the meantime, a machine was got under way to lower the flour down for the boats to take it down as the Locks was not finished. Other produce came down so profusely, that the company thought it expedient that pilots should*

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<sup>3</sup> "Patowmack Canal Company Employees, Great Falls, September 1797," reprint. *Annual Reports 1986-88 Great Falls Historical Society*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Leticia Woods Brown, *Free Negroes in the District of Columbia 1790 – 1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 64 - 97

<sup>5</sup> "Potomac Company Proceedings," vol. A. May 11, 1802, entry 230, 380, and "Potomac Company Daybook," Dec. 10, 1804, entry 240, Records of the National Park Service, RG 79, National Archives.

*be chosen to carry the western boats down, four was chosen and among them was your petitioners humble Servant*<sup>6</sup>

The descending drop of the river at Great Falls was seventy-six feet, more than twice the descent at Little Falls. No American had ever built a canal and lock system this high. This made the work on the canal and locks around Great Falls extremely ambitious and as such has been called “America’s greatest eighteenth century engineering achievement”.<sup>7</sup>

George Pointer’s name appears many times in the records of the Potomac Company between 1796 and 1829. In January 1801 the Board of Directors ordered...

*“... Mr. Pointer [to] give notice to the Owners of Boats and Scows now lying at the Basin of the Great Falls.... [that] the owners immediately remove [them].”*<sup>8</sup>

This notation appears to be evidence of the level of trust and respect the directors had in this former slave. They also appeared to be very comfortable with asking him to order the white boat owners to get out of the company’s way. This is also the first time the formal title of “Mr. Pointer” was used in the company records. During these times a black man was rarely given the title of “Mr.” as this was reserved for the white man only.

Shortly after gaining freedom, he married a free woman named Elizabeth Townsend, “Betty” who most likely was Native American according to stories passed down by Pointer’s descendants. Additionally, in the 1820 DC census, Pointer and family are incorrectly listed as “white” a strong indication of mixed race. A year later they welcomed the first of 3 children.<sup>9</sup> This was not the only changes occurring in George’s life during this period. In 1995 Leonard Harbaugh, a contractor from Georgetown became the new superintendent of the Patowmack Company. Harbaugh was a slave owner and apparently a difficult man; he constantly quarreled with the board of directors, rarely met his deadlines and never controlled cost. Presumably George Pointer also found him difficult and by 1802 Pointer had bought his own river boat, left the company and was contracting his labor and boat out to the Patowmack Company instead of staying under the direct supervision of Harbaugh. This proves that Pointer did not suffer fools on a long-term basis. Pointer also supplemented his income by farming and fishing near his cottage for transporting and selling at the Georgetown markets. Surely this was a family effort. In the same year as the 1802 Company Board meeting, Harbaugh, in retaliation for Pointer leaving the company, was the one likely to have demanded the repossession of the Company’s cottage where Pointer had been living for almost two decades. His reason given was to house workers. The outcome of the discussion about Pointer’s house was not recorded in the company proceedings

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<sup>6</sup> National Archives Record Group 79 (hereafter NA-RG 79) Entry 262. “Petition of Captain George Pointer to the President and Directors of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal” September 5, 1829, p. 3-4. Subsequent citations are referred to as George Pointer, “Petition”. George Pointer Petition.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Crosby Brown, *“The Patowmack Canal: America’s greatest eighteenth century engineering achievement”* The Virginia Cavalcade, Vol 12 (1963): 40 – 47.

<sup>8</sup> NA-RG 79 Entry 230 Potomac Company Proceedings, Volume A, 290.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Phillips, *Freedom’s Port* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 90; Registration No. 1636, “Manumission and Emancipation Records 1821-1862, Records of the U.S. District Courts,” in Dorothy S. Provine, *District of Columbia Free Negro Registers 1821-1861*, vol.3

but soon afterwards the company began paying Betty Pointer \$7 a month for "cooking and the lodging of six Negro men."<sup>10</sup> The timing of the payments to her suggests that this may have been the board's resolution to his demand. At the end of 1806, the board fired Harbaugh replacing him with a Georgetown engineer, Josias Thompson and very soon afterwards Thompson rehired Captain George Pointer

In 1807 the Potomac River had become navigable for over fifty miles above Georgetown, an achievement that no other project had accomplished. The Patowmack Company's best year financially was 1811, just before the War of 1812 with England. However, by the end of the war half the trade on the Patowmack Canal had been diverted to Philadelphia and Baltimore; this was because of the British burning of Washington during the war and also fear that they would use the Patowmack River canal as a means of transport. Lost revenues from this war and economic panic, followed by several years of severe drought placed the company in a position it could not recover from.

In 1816 the Company was running major deficits and Mr. Thompson who had been with the Company for 10 years was about to resign. Knowing he would be met with great resistance from the board, he asked George Pointer to accompany him to the meeting. They met at the Union Tavern in Georgetown and in his letter, Pointer describes how it was to meet the board. He shares how Mr. Thompson told the board that it would be inexpedient to hire anyone else to be superintendent since Pointer had "experience enough to superintend any work on the Potomac". While the board members' respect, loyalty and confidence in Pointer's superior work seemingly never wavered, the thought of having a Negro in one of the highest positions representing the Patowmack Company must have been met with a silent pause. Mr. Thompson's plea, however, prevailed and Captain George Pointer was named the next Engineering Superintendent. He was immediately given responsibility over the Patowmack Company work at Great Falls and the Seneca Canal. Inarguably, Captain George Pointer was the first Negro to ascend to the top of an American owned company. Given the period and climate in American history, this is unimaginable. It's been written that there are only three named Negroes who are known to have significantly contributed to the building of the Capital City.... Benjamin Banneker, Philip Reid and Captain George Pointer. While the first two found their way into the history books and school history curriculums sadly the latter remained a ghost for hundreds of years. Captain George Pointer's story is an American treasure, to be discovered and embraced.

An indentured servant working on the canal stated that "canal work was the hardest work a man could do" before running away the next day. The company's records are littered with payments to disabled workers. In the Spring of 1819 Captain Pointer had a major accident while running free stone from Seneca to the little locks. He ran into a boat traffic jam and went around it, hit something downstream and was thrown...trapped in the water for four days with a broken leg which was often fatal in those days. Pointer managed to keep himself safe, extracting himself from the accident site, saving the cargo and making it back downstream to Little Falls, the destination, once again showcasing his skill to persevere and get a job done.<sup>11</sup> This Seneca experience is also mentioned in the June 1987 issue of National Geographic Magazine.

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<sup>10</sup> Petition, George Pointer Petition. 4-6

<sup>11</sup> Petition, George Pointer Petition. 5-7

When the Patowmack Company board met in 1819 surely the hot topic for discussion was their financial debt. The records only show, however, that there was payment made to George Pointer's account for 48 dollars and forty-two cents as well as pay to two other men.<sup>12</sup> It's unknown the exact purpose for this payment; perhaps a combination of his wages plus disability pay for the broken leg he suffered or additional services rendered. What can be said is that the payment was a substantial amount during that time. The company continued to experience financial difficulties however, and the Board eventually filed for bankruptcy in 1828 and then waited for the conclusion. Even then, however, they continued to contract with George Pointer for maintenance work and records show a final payment of \$13.00 in that same year.<sup>13</sup>

George Pointer spent over 40 years living along the Potomac River. In 1829 his "modest little cabin" along the River became at risk of destruction by the C & O Canal Company. The canal plans outlined a path that went straight through the property on which Pointer's home stood. On September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1829 he wrote a 12-page letter to the board members of the C & O Canal Company to protest the construction path of their canal. Though it was not his intention, the information he included in his letter would be a wonderfully articulated chronology of his life along the river and the people he met throughout his work there including General George Washington; Col. George Gilpin, close friend of Washington; Josias Thompson, an engineer from Georgetown and Col. John Fitzgerald, also a friend of Washington's who fought in the Revolutionary War. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1828 President John Quincy Adams traveled to the site of the ground-breaking of the C & O Canal. The celebration was within yards of Pointer's home. George Pointer's granddaughter, Mary Ann Plummer was the pilot of the boat that brought the president and his entourage down the river from Georgetown, having the opportunity to do so after her father made a bet that his daughter could "pilot a boat as well as any man." Certainly, Captain Pointer stood amongst the crowd and was filled with pride as his granddaughter guided the boat to shore and watched the President disembark.

In his letter Pointer begins by writing, "I pray you to read.... the humble petition of an old and obscure citizen..." from there he goes on to describe his life experiences from his birth on a slave plantation in Frederick, Maryland to his last days working for the Patowmack Canal Company. He makes an urgent plea to the C & O Canal Company to not construct their canal so close to the location of his cabin that he will lose his home of 43 years. He ends his letter with the closing, "your humble and very obedient servant, Captain George Pointer."

The original copy of this letter penned by George Pointer holds a wealth of information and is currently preserved and housed at the National Archives building in Maryland where the daybooks of the Patowmack Canal Company, as well as C & O Canal Company records are also stored. This letter has proven to be a very valuable document since it outlines in perfect chronological order the events of the development and daily operation of the Patowmack Canal Company. It is curious how a man who began life as a slave had preferable penmanship and grammar to most of his counterparts he worked with at the time. Moreover, George Pointer's is not the average example of a canal worker's life. This is supported by a wealth of evidence in the

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<sup>12</sup> NA-RG 79, Entry 230, Potomac Company Proceedings, Vol. B, 380

<sup>13</sup> NA-RG 79, Entry 250, Potomac Company Miscellaneous Accounts 1785-1828 (missing number on date) Box 3 Folder 1, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1828.

outstanding positions he held while working for the Patowmack Canal Company; most notably, Superintendent Engineer; supervising the building of the Wing Dam; landlord, boarding canal laborers at his own home property; and Captain of a fleet of boats, piloting them through the rapids of the Potomac when the cargo had to be placed on inclined planes and dropped from the top of the falls to the waiting boats below prior to finishing the locks, just to list a few. As Superintendent Pointer oversaw the construction of the wing dam the intake source of the Potomac for this section of the canal. The wing dam is one of the only consistently operational structures of the canal ruins at Great Falls Park today over 200 years later. During the years when the Company experienced low finances Pointer supplemented his income by building fish weirs and growing crops on his property to sell at market in Georgetown. He was an outstanding early American who practiced being a life-long learner and believed in hard, faithful work, love and support of his family and an unwavering belief in God.

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