

Black History Month

Celebrating Black Canal Workers

By National Canal Museum

Have you checked out our new StoryMap celebrating Black canal workers? With the support of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities last year, we scoured census records and other historic documents to find previously invisible Black men and women who worked along the canals that carried anthracite coal.

Finding the Black workers of the anthracite canals.

The above quote comes from an interview done on September 15, 1975. James Lee interviewed Florence Van Horn about her father, Captain James Campbell, who boated on the Morris Canal. He asked her, "Now, how many Black people were on the canal that you know? Quite a few in this area?" Her response, "There was quite a few, but I can't remember their names" perfectly encapsulates this project. We know that there were many Black canallers, but we didn't know their names.

In 2022, the National Canal Museum began to research Black canal workers to see what we could find. This map shows the concentration of Black workers along the canals that carried anthracite coal.

These points represent the over 180 Black canallers that we can name. Some of these canallers were family sharing the same address. Those families have a single dot representing them. The anthracite canals were in operation between the 1820s and the 1930s, though some canals did not last that long.

Canaller Highlight: Captain James "Jimmy" Brown

Jimmy Brown is one of our most well documented canallers. He was born in Bristol, PA on August 8, 1900. His mother died when he was young and he never particularly liked school. He did like watching the mules along the canal. One day when he was 9, he was watching the mules pull canal boats along the Delaware canal and saw 2 White children walking with their mules. When the boat captain, their father, came by, young Jimmy yelled out "Mister! Give me a job!" The captain told Brown to go and walk with his kids and mules. When they got to

Captain James "Jimmy" Brown

the next lock the captain invited Brown aboard and asked him what he wanted. Brown said he wanted some food and a place to sleep. With that, Brown began working on the canals. He became a captain at 15 and owned his own boat when he was 21. He worked until the canals closed in the 1930s.

New Jersey Canals: Morris Canal and Delaware & Raritan Canal 1831-1932

James E. Campbell was born in New Jersey in 1856. He became a captain at only 15 years of age and after marrying in 1878, had 8 children. He founded a Black church and community in Washington, NJ. Campbell's daughter remembers him as a happy man, who would go out of his way to help others. When the mule of the Lenstrohm family (who were White) died, James Campbell lent them one of his own until they could purchase a new mule in Phillipsburg, NJ. Being without a mule would have crippled the family. Campbell retired from the Canal Company after the canal's abandonment in 1924. He passed away in 1932.

Fred Thomas might be the only Black canaller on the Anthracite canals to have his portrait painted. The portrait was painted in 1887 by E. L. Henry. Thomas was a trout stream guide and a boatman on the Delaware and Hudson canal (D&H) in New York State.

In 1888 Thomas and another Black canaller, David Depuy, quarreled while on a boat on the D&H near Ellenville, NY. Thomas was badly beaten, but survived the attack. He then had Depuy arrested. Between the time of Depuy's arrest and his trial, Fred Thomas had succumbed to his injuries and died. Depuy was sentenced to 10 years in prison for second degree manslaughter.

