

The Winding Potomac River

*A view from Point Lookout
in Green Ridge State Forest
at Little Orleans*



View from "Point Lookout" looking toward West Virginia from Maryland. The elevation is estimated to be about 2,000 feet and the GPS coordinates are 39°37'87"n x 78°26'10.13w. The overlook is located on Carrol Road just off Oldtown Road.



Little Orleans

In Touch with a Proud Past

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The Potomac River on a quiet summer day.

Inset: An aqueduct, once used to carry canal boats across a tributary of the Potomac River, is now part of the C&O Canal hiking/biking trail from Washington, DC to Cumberland, Maryland.



Fifteen Mile Creek, two sources of fresh water winding through a dense forest.

In 1758, Little Orleans witnessed traffic along a colonial route between Fort Frederick and Fort Cumberland. Prior to the National Highway, a pathway following the Potomac River provided the most direct east-west route in the region. Much of the credit for blazing the

path belongs to Thomas Cresap, pioneer and patriot who cleared a 62 mile section of roadway between the two forts. Cresap's alignment improved upon a longer road that crossed the Potomac River at two points.

Located at the eastern end of Allegany County is a small community that traces its founding to the 18th century when transportation on the Potomac River was convenient, and travel by road a rugged experience. The community was apparently named by an early settler for his former home of Orleans but was changed to Little Orleans by 1838. The area was likely favored as a settlement because of its location at the confluence of the Potomac River and

A variety of oaks and other valuable trees created interest in what would become Allegany and Hampshire counties. While on a survey of his property in 1784, George Washington became sufficiently impressed with the trees on the

southern side of the Potomac River at Fifteen Mile Creek that he recorded a diary entry describing the natural resources. Early settlers also found the white oak trees to be particularly valuable. As John Mash noted in his study of eastern Allegany County, white oak trees “literally made the foundation for pioneer life” as settlers built cabins, barns, bridges, and mills from the wood.

The trees, an integral part of pioneer life, later became the cause for commercial ventures. In 1806, one of the first recorded sawmill operators along Fifteen Mile Creek, Ignatius Bevins, constructed facilities along the stream because logs could be floated to his mill. Bevin’s planks were transported to Little Orleans for shipment to eastern markets. Today, there remains evidence of diversion dams and mill races along Fifteen Mile Creek from undocumented saw mill operators.

Residents of Little Orleans and other small communities in eastern Allegany County developed a largely self sufficient agricultural lifestyle throughout the 19th century. Transportation links to major markets were limited until the arrival of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal and railroads.

The 184½ mile C&O Canal was constructed between 1828 and 1850 at a cost of 11 million dollars, a substantial sum of money for the 19th century. The waterway’s purpose was to link the resource-rich frontier lands of the west to eastern markets. Unfortunately, the project fell short of expectations and the western terminus became Cumberland, Maryland.

Working conditions associated with the C&O Canal were harsh even by standards of the time. The canal operators dispatched labor agents to Europe for the purpose of recruiting laborers, primarily from England, Wales, Ireland, and Germany. Deceptive recruiting practices may have occurred in the early days of the project, and most laborers suffered from disillusionment once they settled in America. Conditions were so deplorable that



A canal boat emerging from the tunnel near Paw Paw, West Virginia.

Irish-American newspapers repeatedly warned men in the homeland to avoid canal recruiters.

Ethnic and economic divisions also plagued the canal workforce. Irish workers, while resentful of working conditions, also brought with them old grudges from northern and southern Ireland. Irish workers also argued with English and German workers over work related issues.

In 1837, a series of labor disputes along the eastern end of Allegany County occurred when the canal company hired English laborers for tunnel work near Paw Paw, West Virginia. Irish laborers perceived the English workers to be



Saint Patrick's Church and Cemetery located on the bank of Fifteen Mile Creek at Oldtown Road. Many of the tombstones are inscribed with references to Irish counties; the earliest is dated 1815.



wage and job security threats, and subsequently, drove them from the area. English shanties were torn down as work halted on the canal for an extended time.

Labor pressures again reached a boiling point in 1839 when German workers, who the Irish also resented because of labor issues, were brutally attacked at Little Orleans. More than 100 Irish workers surprised unsuspecting and sleeping German workers, destroying shanties and assaulting bystanders. One resisting victim was thrown into a fire where he suffered fatal injuries.

According to a report filed by a canal company official, the precipitating incident was “a difference between a Dutchman (German) on No. 281 and an Irishman from Watkins section.” The official also concluded the Irish were attempting “to exterminate the Dutch.”

The conflict at Little Orleans made for a newsworthy event in a Cumberland

Orleans Grocery shown below in 1896, moved in 1904 to its present location to make room for the abandoned Western Maryland Railway. Destroyed by fire in 2000, it has been rebuilt and is open today.





Remains of the aqueduct, over a tributary of the Potomac River at Little Orleans, with railings and stone walls for water retention. Many canal boats were pulled through this area carrying goods east and west.

Inset: Detail of the original iron railings of the aqueduct.

newspaper. The September 5th, 1839 edition proclaimed that “The Canal War” was raging and that militia forces under the command of Colonel Thurston of Cumberland were being dispatched. The newspaper account listed the razing of “40 or 50 shanties and shops...the destruction of about 120 guns and pistols, and the capture of 26 of the prominent leaders who are now in the Cumberland jail.” The troops were actively engaged for five days. “The state of the country, along the whole line, is described as the most unhappy conditions.” Despite labor disputes that halted construction of the canal from 1836-1839, work

eventually continued, and increased shipping opportunities became available for Allegany County residents.

Irish connections to Little Orleans are documented in the Saint Patrick’s Church Cemetery located on the bank of Fifteen Mile Creek at Oldtown Road. Many of the tombstones are inscribed with references to Irish counties; the earliest is dated 1815. According to the Maryland Historical Trust, some graves are unmarked and likely contain the remains of canal workers and their descendants. In 1808, George Bevans, resident of Little Orleans, donated property for the cemetery and a small log church. No date has been established for construction of the present Gothic-influenced church, but it appears to have been built in the mid 19th century.

Little Orleans became a shipping center in 1850 after the canal and railroads became viable operations. The nearby

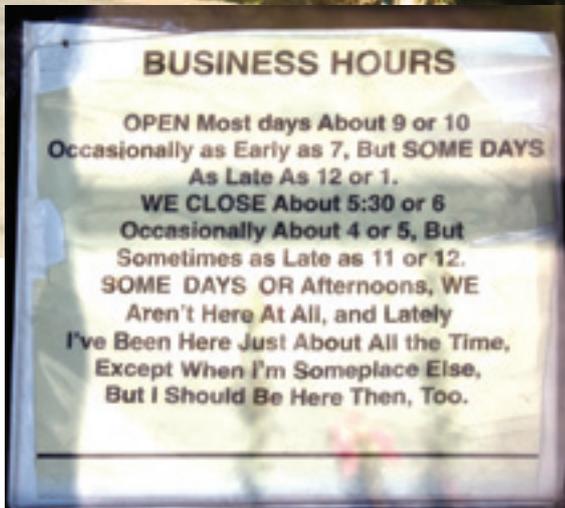


Bill Schoenadel, owner and proprietor of Bill's Place (Orleans Grocery), sitting at the bar happily talking about life and times in the area. With a lot of stories and a memory like a steel trap he's quit a "colorful" character, as evidenced by his sense of humor, shown in these photos, as well as his good nature, related in the text. Everyone has something good to say about Bill, he's the man; the front of his shirt says, "Because I'm Bill."

sawmills and lumber yards transported products to the site where docks provided for the loading of canal boats heading east and west. Completion of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad on the West Virginia side of the Potomac River and later the Western Maryland Railway on the Maryland side, meant that commerce flourished in the community. Rail passenger service provided new amenities and conveniences to residents. A store and warehouse facility was built close to the canal in the 1840s and became the central location for commerce in the Little Orleans community. The store was later acquired by the Callan family who operated the enterprise and post office for two generations. In 1904 it became necessary to move the building farther up the hill to make way for the Western Maryland Railway.

Several of Callan's early 1900s business registers survived and are in the possession of Little Orleans resident Bill Schoenadel who purchased the building in 1968. Prices of popular items included the following: 25 pounds of sugar for \$1.63, three pounds of coffee for 63 cents, and one quart of milk for 10 cents. Also noted are services no longer needed by the general public, including shoeing horses and replacing pick handles. The names of Callan's customers, including, Roby, Price, Creek, Higgins, Martin, and Yonker, make the books a valuable source of local history.

Little Orleans is no longer a shipping center or timbering community. The Western Maryland Railway discontinued rail passenger service in 1958, and CSX (successor to the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad) and Amtrak do not offer passenger service to the small community. The C&O Canal was so severely damaged by a flood in 1924 that it ceased operations. In recent years, Little Orleans has become associated with Bill Schoenadel's Orleans Grocery



Bill's Place as it is now and two of the signs that testify to his wry sense of humor.

Store, a 150 year old business that welcomes hunters, fisherman, and tourists. In fact, Bill has become a legendary figure along the C&O Canal. Scouts, hikers, bikers, campers, and C&O Canal enthusiasts generally know Bill personally or know about him. Over the years, Bill has fixed flat tires, rented canoes and boats, provided candy to youngsters, served as a fishing guide, sold groceries and hardware items, cooked meals, and hosted thousands of customers who stopped by to visit. To the uninitiated, some of Bill's acquaintances may seem more important than others—politicians, government officials, and even foreign travelers. But to those who know, Bill treats all visitors with the same style, including kids who look eagerly at the candy case.



A tradition at Bill's is to sign a dollar bill for the ceiling. Look close and you may see someone you know.



Canal boats on the C&O Canal (above) were a way of life and means of transportation for many people.

The map below shows the distance from Georgetown (red numbers) and the route from I-68 to Little Orleans and Point Lookout overlook.



An avid fisherman recalled a childhood incident at Bill's. "I went into Bill's store with my father while on a fishing trip. My two brothers waited in the car. While in Bill's store dad bought me and my brothers about ten Tootsie Roll Frooties. This was a treat because dad was frugal with money and he rarely bought us candy. As dad handed me the bag he ordered, 'Split those with your brothers.' Bill immediately said to me, 'Wait—come here!' I walked over to Bill and he asked, 'How many brothers do you have?' I told him two. Bill replied sharply, 'That's not enough candy, take these,' and he proceeded to put a large handful

of Tootsie Roll Frooties into my paper bag. 'I don't do this (operate the store) to get rich,' Bill explained, as we walked away." The brothers never forgot Bill's generosity and continue to visit the store.

Bill's store is a refuge for basic necessities, a shelter from bad weather, and a setting for great conversations along the Hancock to Paw Paw stretch of the towpath. A small State of Maryland campground near the river, a boat launch, and private campgrounds and parks add opportunities for outdoor experiences at Little Orleans.

Known as the Mayor of Little Orleans, Bill serves as the local historian, easily recounting facts, stories, and changes pertaining to the area. One of the major improvements Bill has witnessed since the 1950s is the Potomac River clean up which greatly improved fishing opportunities. A major unfortunate change was the blaze that destroyed the original canal building hosting his business. The building was full of memories and eclectic pieces of local history, including signed and dated dollar bills that were displayed on the ceiling. Fathers would proudly point out their dollar to family members upon return visits. Today, the Mayor of Little Orleans operates from a new building at the same location. And yes, the signed dollar bill collection is growing and covers much of the ceiling as Bill is again awaiting guests.

Little Orleans is approximately 12 miles west of Hancock and 23 miles east of Cumberland off Interstate 68. Take Exit 68 Orleans Road south and travel 6 miles to the store.



Mountain Discoveries staff writer Dan Whetzel (far right) talks with cyclists at Bill's, after their 145 mile trek from Washington, DC along the C&O Canal towpath. The trail is 184.5 miles from DC to Cumberland, Maryland.

Note: *Mountain Discoveries* would like to thank Gary Bartik, of the Allegany Museum, for suggesting this story along with his guidance and introduction to Bill Schoenadel.