

Mary Hassett Martin – Canal Boat Captain

By Tom Castaldi

On May 1, 1842, Mary Ann Hassett was born in Ireland's Tipperary County and at age four years emigrated from her home to America arriving in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1846. Her husband to be, Patrick Henry Martin was born in 1840, in Cincinnati and in 1858 the two were joined in marriage at Franklin, Ohio.

After the Civil War broke out Patrick Martin enlisted in the army as a Private on May 2, 1864 serving with of Ohio Company E, 146th Infantry Regiment mustering out on September 7, 1864. He returned to Ohio where he went canalling between Dayton, Ohio running on the Miami & Erie Canal to its connection with the Wabash & Erie Canal at Junction, Ohio and then on the Wabash & Erie. Eventually, operating two boats Martin's route included landing at ports between Toledo, Ohio to Lafayette, Indiana and below.

Canal boat crews were usually described as a five-man team: captain, two steersmen, a driver for the horses or mules and a man to do the cooking but sometimes a woman. Captains were typically men folk who had to deal with rough and tumble boat hands. Nothing was motorized including the boat towed by animals. Work on board was done by hand. It also meant navigating past on-coming boats and moving through locks which, although rules governed such movement, were mostly ignored in favor of a boat crew who could fight with fists and clubs to determine who got first passage.

After Patrick died in 1871, his wife Mary Ann took over operating the boats during the last years of the old waterway. In 1874, the courts ordered the canal closed, and by 1876 a group of investors, with rail interests in mind, purchased the route from Lafayette to the Ohio state line. However, before the canal-era ended, Mary Ann Martin of Defiance, Ohio was issued a license to operate the canal boat *John Jay* with its 62 plus tonnage rating, its plain head and square stern, measuring 78 feet long and 13 feet wide on the Wabash & Erie Canal. A rather typical canal vessel, since these long narrow crafts had to be maneuvered into and out of lifting locks, which were constructed on a standard inside measurement of ninety feet long by fifteen feet wide chamber.

Other than having to deal with tough crewmen of the day Mrs. Martin was responsible for all manner of boat master duties including the accounting of cargoes and passengers at toll stations in northern Indiana located at Fort Wayne, Lagro, Logansport and Lafayette.

During those final years, neighbors along the canal had tired of the old ditch, blaming the canal for all sorts of reasons real or imagined. Among those accusations were fever emanating from canal water, occasional inadequate water supply, decaying structures, overwhelming debt, crop-field flooding, the inconvenience of roadways interrupted by canal waters, as well as a growing public agitation for ever-improving railroad technology.

Not surprising one night a disgruntled citizen cut a ditch through the canal towpath. That meant

the water in the canal channel between the lift locks drained away putting a stop to navigation. Such vandalism was the reason Martin lost her two boats – one at the Carrollton lock near Delphi and another at Logansport. After an interesting career as a canal boat master, Mary Ann Hassett Martin died in September 1914 at the age of seventy-two and was laid to rest beside her husband Patrick in the Catholic Cemetery at Logansport, Indiana.

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“Mary Hassett Martin - Canal Boat Captain” is from an article that appeared in Fort Wayne Monthly magazine. Allen County Historian Tom Castaldi is author of the Wabash & Erie Canal Notebook series; hosts “On the Heritage Trail,” broadcasts on WBOI, 89.1 FM; and “Historia Nostra” heard on Redeemer Radio 106.3 FM. and 95.7 F.M. His previously published columns may be found on the History Center’s blog “Our Stories” at historycenterfw.blogspot.com.