One way to evaluate the importance of the C&O Canal to the Union during the American Civil War is to examine how the Confederates treated the canal during the conflict. If the southern civilian and military leadership had paid scant attention to the canal, or devoted few resources to disable it, then its importance to the Union could be considered suspect, or perhaps of secondary importance to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and other transportation lines.

During the first two months of the war, the Confederacy hoped that Maryland would secede and join its “southern sisters” in the Confederate States of America. During this time, the Confederates treated the canal (as well as the B&O Railroad) with kid gloves. Since Maryland was the majority stockholder of the canal company, and had a significant ownership stake in the B&O Railroad as well, the Confederates were initially reluctant to disable either carrier out of fear that doing so would turn political and create public support against joining the South. As a result, when on April 24, 1861, one of Charles Wenner’s canal boats, loaded with grain, was seized by the Confederate troops occupying Harpers Ferry, the state of Virginia reimbursed Wenner for the cost of his grain. By June, however, the Maryland General Assembly adjourned without taking any steps toward secession, and a large Union army under General Robert Patterson was forming in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, to oust the Confederates from Harpers Ferry. No longer willing to wait on Maryland to join it, the Confederate army evacuated Harpers Ferry in mid-June 1861. Before doing so, it disabled both the canal and railroad in that region.

To the east of Harpers Ferry, on June 10, Confederate General Robert E. Lee ordered an officer in Leesburg, Virginia, to disable the canal by breaking a nearby dam or the Monocacy Aqueduct. Two days earlier he had received information that a Union expedition was preparing to depart from Georgetown with a number of canal boats loaded with provisions and munitions. For unknown reasons — likely because it could be more easily accomplished — on June 12 a small party of Confederates crossed the river at Edwards Ferry and let the water out of the canal. This action prevented the Union army from using the waterway as supply line past Edwards Ferry, but only temporarily.

The Confederates soon withdrew from the Potomac above Washington to meet the Union occupation of northeastern Virginia, which culminated in the July 21 First Battle of Bull Run (Manassas). This withdrawal, together with Confederate evacuation of Harpers Ferry, allowed the canal company to repair and re-water the canal, which it accomplished in late August. The main stem of the B&O Railroad — a significant portion of which lay south of the Potomac River — would remain in disrepair until March 1862. Because the canal company resumed boating long before the B&O Railroad was able to repair the main stem, a case can be made that in 1861 the canal was of more importance to the Union than the railroad. The Confederates certainly demonstrated the significance of the canal by developing and launching a number of raids designed to slow or halt boating.

Initially, with canal navigation restored, the Confederates sent parties of riflemen to the Potomac to take pot shots at passing canal boats in an effort to discourage boat traffic. In fact, in September at least one boatman—a “towboy,” by one account—was shot and killed by border crossfire near Shepherdstown.

In mid-September, Confederate cavalryman Turner Ashby wrote to Richmond and offered to lead an expedition to disable the waterway. Robert Chilton, a Confederate staff officer, replied, “I am instructed to inform you that it has been our object, with the President [Confederate President Jefferson Davis], to destroy the canal at any point where it could not be repaired. . . . The destruction of the canal and railroad have been cherished objects, and a disappointment at the failure of all past attempts to effect them has been proportionate to the importance attached to their achievement.” Chilton granted Ashby the permission he sought. Ashby appeared along the Potomac in late September and early October 1861 in the vicinity of Dam Number 4 and opposite Antietam Creek. Heavy rains thwarted his efforts. In early November the Potomac flooded and accomplished Ashby’s objective by damaging the canal and stopping boating. Some thought the navigation was over for the remainder of the year.

Before the flood waters struck, a number of other Confederate officers and high-level officials proposed raids to disable the waterway. On October 10, President Jefferson Davis explained to a corps commander that although its army was not strong enough to invade Maryland and expel the Union army, raids would help bolster the morale of the troops. One of these raids, he suggested, would be a foray across the Potomac to disable the canal. On October 20, Colonel Angus McDonald proposed that the War Department combine General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson’s command with his at Romney, Virginia, because both the railroad and canal were within a day’s march and the combined force could disrupt travel on both carriers. On October 31, C. H. McBlair, a commander in the Confederate navy, gave his opinion about affairs aground to President Davis. He recommended an attack on Cumberland because, in part, it would prevent the continued use of the canal to supply Washington with coal and horse fodder.

Their lack of success in permanently breaking the canal frustrated the Confederates. On November 10, Davis explained to a subordinate officer that the Union army was moving troops and munitions to the Shenandoah Valley. He added: “the failure to destroy his [Union] communications by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and by the Potomac Canal has left him in possession of great advantage for that operation.”

By early December, the canal company repaired the damage caused by the autumnal flooding and boating began again. “Stonewall” Jackson, with headquarters in Winchester, Virginia, soon received word that boats were again moving on the canal. Over the next thirty days, Jackson would send three separate raids against Dam Number 5 and one against Dam Number 4, attempting to breach the dams that impounded the water used to fill the canal. After the second raid against Dam Number 5 (which the Confederates erroneously thought had created a breach), Jackson’s commanding officer, General Joseph E. Johnston, wrote military officials in Richmond: “It is needless for me to attempt to impress upon the Administration the importance of preventing the reconstruction of the
Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in Virginia, which has been increased by the breaking of Dam No. 5, above Williamsport. No one," he added, "[understands] this subject better than the President [Jefferson Davis] himself." Although the raids were actually not successful, once again the weather accomplished the Confederates' objective. A late January ice freshet, combined with other factors, put the canal out of order until April 1862.  

During the Maryland (Antietam) Campaign of 1862, disabling the canal was a secondary objective of the Confederate invasion. General Lee dispatched two separate parties to destroy the Monocacy Aqueduct. Destruction of the largest aqueduct on the canal — over five hundred feet long with seven arches — had the potential to cut the canal in two for the duration of the war and halt shipments of coal from western Maryland. The first party attempted to damage the aqueduct during the initial invasion of Maryland in early September, but the expedition failed due to insufficient tools and black powder. When the Confederates advanced to Frederick, on September 9, Lee sent another party back to the aqueduct. This expedition had as little success as the first one. The officer in command wrote, "The attempted work of destruction began, but [so] admirably was the aqueduct constructed and cemented that it was found to be virtually a solid mass of granite. Not a seam or crevice could be discovered in which to insert the point of a crow-bar, and the only resource was blasting. But the drills furnished to my engineer were too dull and the granite too hard, and after several hours of zealous but ineffectual effort the attempt had to be abandoned."  

Where the Confederates crossed the river, the southern soldiers cut the canal in five places. They also damaged a lock and large culvert in the same area, as well as locks near Knoxville and Harpers Ferry. During the Pennsylvania (Gettysburg) Campaign of 1863, the Confederates damaged the canal across a broad front. On June 10, Major John Singleton Mosby's band was the first to strike, crossing the canal at Muddy Branch and taking the mules from a canal boat before chasing away Union cavalry and destroying their camp.  

To secure the left flank of his advance, Lee sent General John Imboden's Northwestern Brigade toward Cumberland, which he occupied for several hours on June 17. Leaving Cumberland, Imboden advanced to the east, destroying portions of both railroad and canal. Officials at the highest level of the Confederate government and military were very interested in the damage Imboden inflicted to the waterway. In a letter to President Davis, General Lee described the damage Imboden's men committed: "The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, about 2 miles above Old Town, where the embankment is about 40 feet high, has been cut, and General Imboden reports that when he left it the entire embankment, for about 50 yards, had been swept away. A similar crevasse, with like results, was also made in the canal, about 4 miles below Old Town."  

To the east, Confederate cavalryman James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart led a sizable band of horsemen across the river near Seneca Creek on June 27. Before departing the Potomac, Stuart's men burned nine canal boats, damaged locks and let the water out of the canal.  

The primary Confederate line of advance took its army across the fords at Williamsport and Shepherdstown. At the former location, the Confederates breached the canal in five places, not only to disable the waterway but to pass their wagons and artillery without having to bridge the canal. They also removed two rows of stone from Lock Number 44 and tore out the stone on the four corners of the Conococheague Aqueduct. At both locations, the southern soldiers burned canal boats. After the Confederates returned to Virginia, small bands of cavalry were soon crossing the Potomac to conduct raids. Although the raids tended to be small-scale — consisting of mule stealing and boat burning — they were not without their effect. By September, the boatmen were so alarmed by the incursions, and fearful of losing their means of earning a living, that many began to refuse freight until the Union Army strengthened its defenses of the border. On September 2, 1863, canal company director Albert C. Greene wrote from Cumberland: "You cannot have failed to learn that the canal is again practically closed by the neglect of the Government to afford the boatmen protection against the robbery of their teams by the Virginia guerrillas. The few boats which arrive at Cumberland decline to load and tie up their boats, being unwilling and, in fact, unable to risk the loss of, in many cases, everything they have." The Union army soon improved its border defenses and the reluctant boatman returned to their boats.  

In mid-September and again a month later, Confederate General Imboden offered to lead raids to disable both the B&O Railroad and C&O Canal. In the earlier plan, he also proposed to burn the coal mines west of Cumberland. Due to threats elsewhere, Lee did not authorize either proposal. In 1864, the first raid that impacted the canal occurred early in the year. On February 2, Confederate General Thomas Rosser's men crossed the Potomac at Patterson's Creek. In addition to damaging the railroad, the southerners burned the bridge over the canal and damaged a lock. During the Monocacy Campaign of that year, the canal suffered its most extensive damage at the hands of the Confederates during the entire war. On July 2, Lee ordered General Jubal Early to prepare to strike both the B&O Railroad and C&O Canal. In order to screen his advance, additional Confederate commands would aid him. East of Early's main line of advance, portions of Colonel John Singleton Mosby's ranger unit crossed the river at Point of Rocks and the Monocacy River and burned canal boats. To the west, Imboden's command partially burned two railroad bridges and crossed the river at South Branch, where his men began to set boats afire before they were chased away by a Union iron-plated railroad car that contained an artillery piece. Early's main army crossed the river at Shepherdstown. In addition to boat burning, his men set their sights on the nearby Antietam Aqueduct. On the berm side, the Confederates tore out the stonework down into the arches. On the towpath side, the stone was removed two-thirds of the way toward the arches. The Antietam Aqueduct suffered the most extensive damage of any stone structure on the canal during the entire war. Early moved on, achieved a victory at the Battle of Monocacy and threatened Washington, but then retreated back to Virginia. On July 29 he sent two brigades of cavalry under Brig. Gen. John McCausland back across the Potomac to ransom Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and other towns. After Chambersburg was burned on July 30 for failing to provide the ransom, Union cavalry began a hot (Continued on p. 14)
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pursuit. A day later, while in possession of Hancock, the Confederates burned boats, and then moved west toward Cumberland. In order to distract and allow opportunity for McCausland to escape, Early on August 5 sent additional units across the river at Williamsport and Shepherdstown. The Confederates burned more boats and committed minor damage to the Conococheague Aqueduct during these screening raids. As a result of these raids and invasions during the summer of 1864, about eighty canal boats were burned. This was one third of the pre-war total of boats that navigated on the canal and was the highest number of boats destroyed during any single campaign of the war.

In September and October 1864, the Confederates conducted a number of relatively minor raids across the Potomac, consisting of the usual boat burning and mule stealing. The raids, however, had the intended effect of slowing boating. On Oct. 15, 1864, the Washington Evening Star described the effect of the incursions: “the stealing of a team or two, or the destruction of a boat, is sufficient to alarm the boatmen, who before lost heavily by the raids of Mosby and the invasion of Early, and induce them to refuse freight and stay at home.”

Damage the Confederates inflicted and attempted to inflict to the waterway during the war, as well as proposed operations that were not authorized, illustrates the importance of the canal to the Union in the minds of the Confederates. Only disrupting the B&O Railroad was not enough to prevent movement of coal and other goods to Washington, or to prevent the canal from being used to supply commands in the field. In fact, the canal was the only supply line leading directly to Washington, D.C. from western Maryland’s coal fields, and was the primary route by which coal entered the city. The Washington Branch of the B&O Railroad had no waterfront connection with the Washington docks and largely carried passengers and light freight. That officials at all levels of the Confederate government and military debated and/or conducted numerous raids against the canal during the entire four years of the conflict highlights the significance of the C&O Canal to the Union during the Civil War.

Notes:
6. Greene to Ringgold, Sept 2, 1863, Letters Received, C&O Canal Papers, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md.