

The Walters — Growing up in a Lockmaster's Family



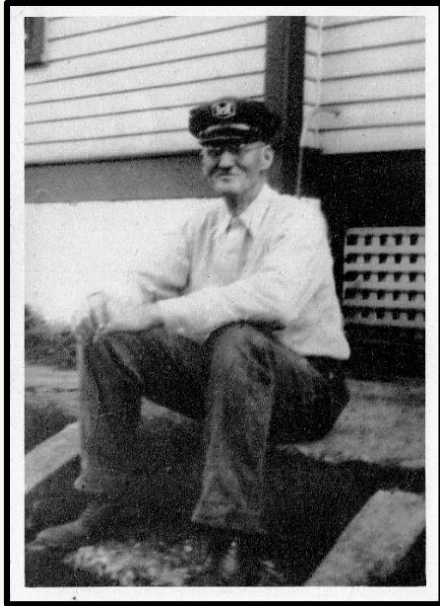
The Walters family, including John Walters Sr. (far left), his wife Jennie (second from the left), and their children. Courtesy of the Kentucky River Museum Collections. The Walters had nine girls. John A. Jr. (third from the right) was the only son.



John Adams Walters Sr. served as lockmaster at Lock No. 10 from 1914 to 1941 and from 1942 to 1946. Born in 1877 in Estill County, he spent most of his life working on the Kentucky River. As a young man, he operated log booms, rode log rafts down the river, and worked for the Burt and Brabb Lumber Company in Ford, Kentucky. In 1898, Walters Sr. married Jennie Mabel Easter, a native of Missouri. They had ten children: Annie, Ethel, Martha, Emma, Ruby, Dorothy, Alice, John Adams Jr., Mary, and Mabel.

In 1906, Walters Sr. was hired as a laborer at Lock No. 10 and became lockman in 1908 under lockmaster Bert Ross. In 1912, he was appointed lockmaster at Lock No. 7 near Shakertown, and two years later Walters Sr. became lockmaster at Lock No. 10. During his tenure as lockmaster, Fred Tipton, Jennie's brother-in-law, served as lockman. The Tiptons lived in the lower lockhouse, and the Walters family lived in the upper lockhouse.

The Walters headed down to the river. Courtesy of the Kentucky River Museum Collections. Breakfast on the beach was one of the family's favorite traditions.



John A. Walters Sr. at Lock No. 10. His hat bears the United States Army Corps of Engineers emblem. Courtesy of the Kentucky River Museum Collections.

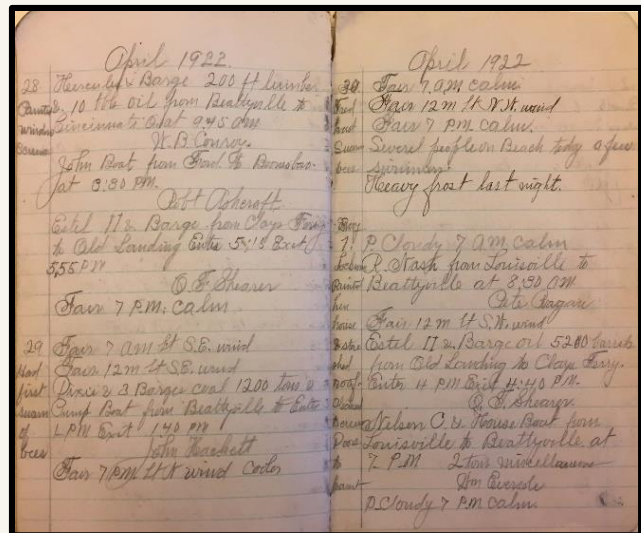
Lockkeeping was often a family tradition, and when his father retired in 1941, John “Jay” Walters Jr. became lockmaster at Lock No. 10. In 1942, Jay enlisted in the United States Army, serving in the 480th Engineer Maintenance Company during World War II. Walters Sr. was reinstated as lockmaster until his son returned in 1946. After the war, Jay married Delphia Robinson and they had three children, Marion, Barbara, and John Adams, III. Three generations of the Walters family lived on the reservation until Walters Sr. and his wife moved away in 1952. Walters Sr. died a few years later in 1959. Jay and Delphia stayed on the reservation until they moved in June 1975. Jay passed away shortly thereafter.

As lockmaster, Walters Sr. and his son were responsible for the operation and maintenance of the lock and dam. The lockmaster’s logbooks from Lock No. 10 record the variety of tasks they completed on a daily basis. A day of work could include locking through a dozen boats or no boats at all, fixing a faulty valve, clearing brush, hauling coal, or building a chicken coop. Their day began before dawn. The man on duty would raise the American flag on top of the hill before heading down to the river to take the air temperature and record the upper and lower water gauges. Then the lanterns, which were used to guide boats to the lock at night, were removed from the top of the lock.

When they were not locking through boats, the lockmaster and lockman maintained the reservation. Jenimarie Sowers, the granddaughter of Walters Sr., serves as a tour guide at the Kentucky River Museum and remembers that “they had to keep [the reservation] mowed with the big swing blades...they had their own chickens and eggs and they had the cows that they milked.” The United States Army Corps of Engineers also conducted regular inspections of the lock and dam and the reservation. The lockhouses, outbuildings, and the grounds had to be well-maintained and the lock kept in good working order. The lockmaster and lockman had to keep everything in excellent condition to pass the inspection.

Operating a lock was a difficult job. Before modern electric systems were installed, the lock gates and valves were moved manually. Safety and precision were important. If a boat locked through too quickly, it could bounce against the walls of the lock and become damaged. If a boat moved too close to the lock gates, it could be pulled into the doors by the current created by opening the valves. Thanks to the skill and accuracy of the lockmasters and lockmen operating along the Kentucky River, few serious accidents occurred.

Lock No. 10 is owned by the Kentucky River Authority and managed by the state park system. The lockhouses and outbuildings on the reservation were restored in 1996 to reflect their historic appearance. In 2002, the upper lockhouse became the Kentucky River Museum, which tells the story of the Walters family and their time at Lock No. 10.



Entry from the lockmaster’s logbook, April 28–May 1, 1922, noting the weather, condition of the river, and the boats passing through the lock. Courtesy of the Kentucky Historical Society.

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