

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

MULTIPLE COAL BARGES BREAK FREE

FROM TOWBOAT *AMBER BRITTANY* NEAR THE * Accident No.: DCA24FM025

McALPINE LOCKS AND DAM IN LOUISVILLE, *

KENTUCKY ON MARCH 8, 2024 *

* * * * *

Interview of: GREGORY H. WHITTINGTON, Captain
Imperial River Transport, LLC

via Microsoft Teams

Friday,
March 20, 2024

APPEARANCES:

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United States Coast Guard

CW03 ██████ Investigator
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I N T E R V I E W

MR. [REDACTED] -- and just the city and state where you reside.

MR. WHITTINGTON: Yes, sir. Gregory H. Whittington and Purvis, Mississippi.

MR. [REDACTED] Hang on, I'm trying to do it again, folks. I'm sorry, I'm just trying to get it.

(Pause.)

MR. [REDACTED] Okay. This is [REDACTED] [REDACTED] with the Coast Guard, we're starting the interview with Captain Gregory Whittington.

Captain Whittington, could you say your full name and your city and state where you reside one more time for me, for the transcript?

MR. WHITTINGTON: Yes, sir. Gregory H. Whittington, Purvis, Mississippi.

MR. [REDACTED] Thank you, Captain. So we're going to go around the room and introduce everyone to you so you know who's in the -- in the meeting or on the phone with you today. For Crounse Corporation.

MR. MILLER: Tom Miller, attorney for Crounse.

MR. BOWLING: Randy Bowling, Port Captain here at Crounse.

MR. [REDACTED] Thank you. For Imperial River.

MR. WHITTINGTON: This is Dennis Watson for Imperial.

MR. PORTER: Michael Porter, Port Captain.

MR. [REDACTED] And I think we also have Mr. Watson on, too, right?

1 MR. WATSON: That's correct, [REDACTED]

2 MR. [REDACTED] Okay. And for the Coast Guard we have [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
3 and Chief Warrant Officer [REDACTED] [REDACTED] You might've met Mr. [REDACTED]
4 out on the boat that night, Captain Whittington.

5 MR. WHITTINGTON: Yes, sir, I believe I did.

6 MR. [REDACTED] Yes, sir.

7 For NTSB.

8 MR. McCLAY: This is Daniel McClay, I'm the investigator-in-
9 charge with the NTSB.

10 (Crosstalk)

11 MR. WHITTINGTON: I'm sorry, were you speaking with me?

12 MR. McCLAY: I'm sorry.

13 MR. [REDACTED] No, sir.

14 MR. McCLAY: This is Daniel McClay, I'm the investigator-in-
15 charge with the NTSB.

16 MR. MUISE: And this is Marcel Muise, M-u-i-s-e, also an
17 investigator with the NTSB.

18 MR. [REDACTED] Thank you.

19 Did I miss anybody? Mr. Englert.

20 MR. ENGLERT: Yeah, James Englert representing Captain
21 Whittington in this interview.

22 MR. [REDACTED] I think that's everyone, I didn't miss anybody,
23 did I? So Captain Whittington, the Coast Guard will ask you some
24 questions first, then NTSB and then we'll allow the parties-in-
25 interest, which would be Crounse and Imperial, to ask you some

1 questions. Will that be okay with you?

2 MR. WHITTINGTON: Yes, sir, that's fine.

3 MR. [REDACTED] Okay.

4 INTERVIEW OF GREGORY H. WHITTINGTON

5 BY MR. [REDACTED]

6 Q. For the Coast Guard, the first question is how long have you
7 worked in the marine industry on the river or on the rivers?

8 A. Oh, including my deckhand time, I was 16 years old, I
9 actually started on a boat as a deckhand March 11th, 1987, on my
10 16th birthday. And I went to the wheelhouse, I would have to look
11 that up, I really do not remember, I feel it's 1991 or 1992 when I
12 got my first license issued.

13 Q. And how many -- have you always -- what companies have you
14 worked for?

15 A. Oh, let's see, I started years ago with, well, working for
16 two different companies during the summer months, I worked for
17 McAllister Towing, which was then out of Paducah, Kentucky, on
18 what was the *Jinx P.* -- I mean, the *Joe McAlister* at the time, and
19 during school months, when I was in school, I would work part time
20 for Weber Marine, Incorporated, out of Burnside, Louisiana. I've
21 worked for McKinney Towing Company in the past. I have done some
22 trip work with ACBL, American Commercial Barge Line, years ago.
23 Chem Carriers, Western Rivers Navigation. I've worked a lot
24 places, quite honestly.

25 Q. Yeah.

1 A. I've done trip work with Terrel River Services. Yazoo River
2 Towing Company out of Vicksburg, Mississippi, I spent quite a
3 number of years there before I come to Imperial. And most recent,
4 before Imperial, a full two hitches with Excell Marine on the Ohio
5 River and -- you know, I was just tripping for them and I decided
6 to go to Imperial when Mr. Davy Johnson, the owner of Imperial,
7 called and made me an offer that sounded really well and I took
8 him up on his offer and that was at the end of last April, April
9 of 2023, and I think I caught -- actually caught the boat for the
10 first time about the middle part of May, if I remember correctly,
11 of 2023.

12 Q. And so Mr. Johnson hired you?

13 A. I'm sorry, say -- yeah, Davy, Mr. Davy Johnson himself hired
14 me. Yes, sir.

15 Q. Okay. So you've been there about a year?

16 A. Yes, sir, right close to a year, maybe not quite a full year,
17 but close to it. Yes, sir.

18 Q. Okay. So on March 8th of 2024 were you serving as the master
19 aboard the *Amber Brittany*?

20 A. Yes, sir, I was indeed.

21 Q. In your own words, can you explain the day on March 8th
22 aboard the *Amber Brittany*?

23 A. Yes, sir. Well, we were northbound with 15 loads, we had
24 departed a mulch dock, New A. fleet, you know, mulch fleet, New
25 Amsterdam, after being down to make some repairs and bring the

1 boat back up to the Coast Guard regulations, we had been released,
2 I believe it was on March 7th, went to approximately 50 miles
3 below McAlpine Locks and we, you know, proceeded to go northbound
4 and everything was operating as a normal move. Of course, you
5 know, the river was rising, we had had quite a bit of rain and the
6 river was starting to rise at a pretty good rate and, of course, I
7 went over that with my whole crew as we got under way or before we
8 got under way, what to expect and precautions to take, you know,
9 with the river conditions and what was coming and so forth and we
10 proceeded to go northbound.

11 Now, on March 8th, at the time of our watch change prior to
12 the allision, we were waiting lock turn below McAlpine Lock and
13 there was three waiting spots below McAlpine Lock and it's fairly
14 close to the lock, you know, within two to three miles of the
15 lock, each waiting spot, different spots.

16 I was at -- I was number three in line to go north, so I
17 initially stopped at the lowest waiting point for the other two to
18 have the other two spots and as those two spots opened up, I
19 proceeded to move up to the next waiting spot there below -- I
20 believe it's the I-60 or I-65 bridge there below McAlpine Lock, I
21 forget which interstate it is. Anyway, moving up to the next
22 waiting spot and I was in between, about halfway in between the
23 two waiting spots when my pilot, Patrick Springer, come up to
24 relieve me and I went over all the normal watch change procedures,
25 telling him what number and lock we was, where I was going,

1 pointed out to him the next waiting spot, which he claimed he knew
2 about, but it's all marked on my personal settings on the chart,
3 pointed out to him where I was going, what he needed to do and,
4 you know, that he was number three in line and the lock would call
5 him when it was time for him to proceed up to the lock. Until
6 then, he needed to stop at this waiting spot and he seemed to
7 understand, he said I've got it, I've got you fine.

8 And I went on downstairs and proceeded to eat some lunch and
9 go, you know, take me -- go to my quarters for some rest and, you
10 know, he didn't ever say anything, any otherwise or give me any
11 indication that he wasn't okay with the information I passed on to
12 him, which is, you know, the river's rising, when you go into the
13 lock, you'll be taking the riverside chamber, that's the one the
14 lock gave me, and the reason for that in this river stage, that's
15 the way it is set, it's going to want to pitch (ph.) you and he
16 seemed to understand everything that I was telling him. And from
17 there, I'm assuming you want me to tell the story all the way up
18 to the time of the allision?

19 Q. Yes, sir, if you don't mind.

20 A. Okay, that's no problem. Okay. Now, I mean, he proceeded on
21 through the lock, I never heard anything else, of course, I was in
22 bed resting, but when you've been on a boat as long as I have,
23 engines change speed suddenly, like if he starts driving real
24 hard, you know, coming ahead real hard suddenly or vice versa,
25 change directions and back real hard suddenly, that automatically

1 triggers an alarm in an experienced mariner's mind, even in his
2 sleep, and it's usually, you know, not just the sound of the
3 engines changing suddenly, but the feel of the boat vibrations or
4 whatever alerts you and you will wake up and listen for anything
5 else and I did not hear any of that as he was going through, you
6 know, the locking process. And I explained to him the railroad
7 bridge, you know, and so forth, and he seemed to be knowledgeable
8 of what I was telling him.

9 You know, when you come -- the railroad bridge is narrow and
10 as you know, it is in a left-hand, slow left-hand turn all the way
11 through the bridge and -- the railroad bridge, L&I railroad bridge
12 in the city of Louisville, and the river is rising and it's rising
13 at a fairly decent rate of speed. At that time, if my memory
14 recollects, we was expecting somewhere between a nine to ten-foot
15 rise in the next four to five days. That is a fairly good rate of
16 rise to cause current conditions to constantly change every few
17 hours.

18 So I explained, you know, when we -- I'm sorry -- when you
19 come up out of this bridge, stay away from that dike, stay away
20 from over here, it is going to try to pull you over there, you
21 need to shape up, you know, around, slowly around the turn, basing
22 yourself off of the city front. Even told him there was a red
23 navigational buoy marking shallow water there at the foot of
24 Louisville city front. I play off of it, I steer off of it and
25 shape myself up until I am well above and away from any set that

1 could pull me toward that dike or to the bad side of the channel
2 over here toward the dam and the falls and the actual river on the
3 other side of the canal, so you need to stay well away from it,
4 shape yourself out, you know, until you know you're not going to
5 get set over there, shaping yourself up for the bridge. And I
6 said it's slow through that bridge, it's possible to steer,
7 maintain steerage and control of this tow, shaping out, until you
8 get to the bridge shaped out and cleared and you're ready to build
9 up speed.

10 So myself and most other mariners do not get above maybe two
11 and a half to three miles an hour. Me, personally, I like to stay
12 around two and a half miles an hour through the bridge, that way
13 if something goes astray, I am moving slow enough I could take
14 corrective actions including stopping, if I need to, before
15 something bad happens.

16 And he seemed to understand everything I was telling him and
17 as I do with all of my pilots, whether they're a new pilot or a
18 well-seasoned pilot, I explain to them if any doubt about
19 anything, just stop and/or come get me before you get in trouble.
20 And again, he seemed to understand everything, he said I got it,
21 I'm ready, I got you, I got you, come on out of there, get out of
22 there and let me have it. So I did. And not once did I hear
23 anything that alarmed me before the actual crash, he didn't
24 suddenly change engine speeds, he didn't suddenly go to backing on
25 it or anything like that. He hit the general alarm, I heard the

1 general alarm and I immediately got out of the bed, grabbed my
2 clothes, headed to the wheelhouse and by the time I got to the
3 wheelhouse, the crash had already taken place and he was in really
4 bad shape. Hit the top side of the dike, the canal head light was
5 -- I guess that on the tow, it was probably 300 foot away from the
6 boat, it's about halfway up from the steering couplings, from the
7 first coupling, about halfway in between, that's where that piling
8 was, way in between the steering coupling and the second coupling
9 out, with the tow already breaking wires and breaking loose and
10 going to the backside. By the (indiscernible) I felt the bump and
11 heard the general alarm at pretty much the exact same time.

12 Q. And did you hear -- did you just hear the general alarm? Do
13 you have a wheelhouse incapacitation alarm up there --

14 A. Yes, sir, we do.

15 Q. -- on that boat?

16 A. Yes, sir.

17 Q. Did you hear that or did you hear --

18 A. No, sir.

19 Q. Did you hear them?

20 A. No, sir, I never heard the alarm for pilot incapacitated or
21 -- no, sir, I never heard that alarm, it was just the general
22 alarm that he sounded and it was still sounding when I got to the
23 wheelhouse. And, of course, you know, the first thing I asked him
24 is did you call for help, did you call -- have you called for a
25 fleet boat, you know, have you called the Coast Guard, called for

1 help from a boat, called the lock, any -- have you called anybody
2 to let them know you're in trouble and he had not, so I told him
3 that needs to be what you're doing now, calling for help because
4 you are in bad trouble, you need to be calling for some help. And
5 which at that time, he did.

6 Q. I think you stated this earlier, but did you -- did you have
7 any machinery, mechanical or navigation equipment problems on your
8 watch that morning?

9 A. No, sir.

10 MR. ENGLERT: I don't think that question was asked.

11 MR. [REDACTED] Excuse me?

12 MR. ENGLERT: Officer [REDACTED] I don't think that question was
13 asked.

14 BY MR. [REDACTED]

15 Q. No, it wasn't. I think the captain had said something about
16 the machinery or -- well, just go ahead, that question is did you
17 have any machinery, mechanical or navigation equipment problems
18 aboard the vessel during your watch the morning of the 8th?

19 A. No, sir, I had not. Everything was operating perfectly
20 normal and as should be, no steering problems or engine problems,
21 nothing, no, sir.

22 Q. Okay. And I know I'd already asked you about the
23 incapacitation alarm, if you heard it, but did you hear any of the
24 crew members say to you that they had heard it before they heard
25 the general alarm?

1 A. No, sir, none of the crew members mentioned to me that they
2 had heard it before --

3 Q. Okay.

4 A. -- the general alarm.

5 Q. How did you know -- did you -- did you recommend or lead the
6 pilot to Imperial, did you recommend that he apply to work there?

7 A. Well, I guess you could say I did, I knew him from Yazoo
8 River Towing and we had worked together on the Chen-ton (ph.)
9 Waterway and on the Lower Mississippi River, which he had done
10 good in those areas the little bit I had worked with him, a week
11 or two at a time here and there when, you know, I had to either go
12 to his boat because my vessel was in for repairs or vice versa.

13 So when he told me that he was looking for a job, I also knew
14 we were needing a pilot, so I gave him the phone number to the
15 gentleman he needed to be talking to at Imperial, which is Mike
16 Porter, and I gave Mike Porter Patrick Springer's telephone number
17 and put them in touch with one another.

18 Q. When you worked for Chem on the Lower Miss, did you all --
19 were you pushing oil or were you pushing -- what size tows were
20 you all pushing down there?

21 A. It was usually liquid fertilizer and anywhere from four, you
22 know, on my vessel, anywhere from four jumbo to six or eight jumbo
23 liquid fertilizer on the Lower Mississippi River, you know, just
24 depending on how many they needed to go where for Yazoo River
25 Towing. But on my boat, which was the *Jinx P. Smith* at the time,

1 we pushed liquid fertilizer. Jumbo barges, which eight jumbo
2 barges would be equivalent in size to like 15 regulation loads,
3 actually a little bit longer and wider in length than regulation
4 loads would be.

5 Q. Yes, sir. So what about on the Ohio, how much time had he
6 been on -- on the *Amber Brittany* with you or on another vessel
7 with you?

8 A. No other vessels with me --

9 (Crosstalk)

10 MR. ENGLERT: Can I interrupt?

11 MR. [REDACTED] Yes, sir.

12 MR. ENGLERT: Hold on for just a second. So Officer [REDACTED]
13 is the question how much time had Captain Whittington worked on
14 the Ohio with Patrick [REDACTED] (sic)?

15 BY MR. [REDACTED]

16 Q. Yes, how much experience did Patrick -- to your knowledge,
17 how much experience did Patrick Springer have on the Ohio, so I'm
18 asking with you, how much. Either on the *Amber Brittany* or
19 another vessel with you.

20 A. With me, riding a boat with me, only on the *Amber Brittany* in
21 the time that he had been on there this trip, starting this trip,
22 that's the only time I worked the Ohio River with him.

23 Q. Okay.

24 A. As far as his previous experience, only by his word, I -- you
25 know, only by what he had told me about him running the Ohio prior

1 to coming to work with us.

2 Q. And did he tell you that he had been on the Ohio before with
3 other -- other companies or boats?

4 A. Well, he told me at that time when he called me that he had
5 been on the Ohio, that he was familiar with the Ohio. Yes, sir,
6 he had told me that.

7 Q. But during this trip, had you all come through Louisville at
8 all before this northbound transit through McAlpine?

9 A. Yes, sir, twice. Northbound and southbound once before,
10 prior to this northbound time in question.

11 Q. Were you on watch when you made the McAlpine Lock or was he
12 at any point in time that you know of?

13 A. I was on watch both directions for McAlpine and through the
14 city of Louisville, both times, northbound and southbound, it fell
15 on my watch.

16 MR. [REDACTED] Understood. Mr. [REDACTED] do you have any questions
17 for Captain Whittington?

18 (No audible response.)

19 MR. [REDACTED] Okay. Having none, we'll turn it over to the
20 NTSB.

21 BY MR. McCLAY:

22 Q. Good afternoon, Captain, this is Danny McClay with the NTSB,
23 I just have a few more follow-up questions and some clarifying
24 questions. What watches, exactly, did you and the pilot rotate?

25 A. Six-hour intervals, we was working from noon until 6:00 and

1 6:00 until midnight, you know, and midnight until 6:00 in the
2 morning and then my watch -- of course, my watch, being the front
3 watch, would be the 6:00 to noon or the 1800 to 2400 watch.

4 Q. And do you remember when your hitch started, you and -- you
5 and the pilot's?

6 A. When the initial hitch started, yes, sir, it was
7 February 22nd, we moored the *Amber Brittany* there at mulch fleet,
8 New Amsterdam.

9 Q. Okay. As far as the brief during watch turnover, you said
10 you kind of had your watch turnover before the McAlpine Locks and
11 I know -- I know you had kind of given us a general overview of
12 what to look out for, but you said all of those -- I mean, it was
13 a detailed watch turnover, how long do you think that watch
14 turnover kind of took? Just in general.

15 A. That particular watch turnover, at least 10 minutes.

16 Q. Okay.

17 A. You know, me explaining everything he needed to know and
18 asking him do you have any questions for me or anything you may
19 feel that I haven't told you that you need to know and he answered
20 no, you know, it's -- again, during each watch change, whether
21 it's waiting for a lock or anywhere, I discuss the same things.
22 Of course, if you're waiting for a lock, there's more detail of
23 what number you are and so forth, but I discuss every watch change
24 with any of my pilots, any problems that I may have ran into or
25 any problems concerning current or anything else, weather or

1 anything we may encounter on his watch or that I may have
2 encountered, filling him in on things to watch for with rising
3 river and currents or if the river would've been falling, it's
4 falling fast, you may need to watch out for possible shoaling here
5 or there or whatever. Or any Notice to Mariners broadcast I may
6 have heard during my watch, of course, I'm going to pass that
7 information on to my pilots, as well.

8 Q. With this particular lock, did you discuss at all the
9 shoaling on the starboard side of the turn right across the
10 channel from the light there?

11 A. Yes, sir, I did. I explained to him -- are you talking about
12 below the lock, entering the lock?

13 Q. Correct.

14 A. Yes, I explained to him these buoys are there for very good
15 reasons, you do not want to get out behind them, there's a gravel
16 bar there, there's -- you know. And as the river goes down, it's
17 actually visible in low water or, you know, in lower river stages,
18 that gravel bar is actually visible, you need to stay on the good
19 side of the buoys and the channel. Yes, sir, that was discussed.

20 Q. Okay. You use Rose Point on the boat, is that correct?

21 A. Yes, sir, that is correct.

22 Q. For the settings that you put in, do you remember, do you
23 save the tracks that you've transited before, through the river?
24 Like, I know the last time you went through was southbound on the
25 -- I think the 4th, but would he have been able to see your

1 historic track lines on the Rose Point?

2 A. On my particular settings, no, sir, I do not leave a constant
3 track line running because eventually it would just clutter the
4 whole screen up where you're not even seeing your navigation line
5 anymore, you would just have track lines all over the place.

6 Q. Yeah.

7 A. And so no, sir, I did not have my previous track line through
8 there, saved on my settings. To the best of my knowledge, there's
9 not any settings that's on there, the previous track line of
10 whoever took it saved like that.

11 Q. Okay.

12 A. No, sir, I did not.

13 Q. Do you change the settings -- do you know if you change
14 settings from watch to watch, from hitch to hitch, with your
15 relief or are they -- you kind of set them up the way you like it
16 and that's the way they are?

17 A. Well, I mean, some people have their own setting on their
18 chart for their notes and so forth, they prefer to use, so they
19 would change over to their settings, but Patrick was just running
20 off of mine, he wasn't changing it to somebody else's, he didn't
21 load his on there from a thumb drive or anything, if he had any,
22 he was just running off of mine.

23 Q. Okay. And all your -- I mean, you had a -- you know,
24 decade's worth of experience on the -- I know, on the Lower
25 Mississippi. If you were to tell me how many years of your

1 maritime career do you think you spent on the Ohio with various
2 companies.

3 A. Probably about 12, maybe 13 now.

4 Q. Okay. And then as far as the -- this section of the river in
5 particular, is there anything to you that stands out in terms of
6 navigation difficulty as compared to the other portions of the
7 river, other locks, other sections, is it harder, easier, kind of
8 the same, run of the mill, anything like -- anything that sticks
9 out to you?

10 A. No. McAlpine Lock in Louisville is definitely one of them
11 trickier places, especially in high water, when the water is
12 rising and especially in that area where he had the allision. So
13 like I said, you know, it's a man-built canal through there, you
14 basically have no current compared to in the natural river, so you
15 know, the closer you get up to coming out of that canal, when you
16 get up to that point, it is going to try to set you toward that
17 dike and you better be well aware and alert and paying attention.

18 And I went over all of that with him and explained to him
19 this is what I do to avoid anything from happening, which is, like
20 I explained to you all, you favor more toward that left descending
21 as safely as you can to keep yourself from crashing over there and
22 make sure your boat has enough room for you to steer out of the
23 L&I railroad bridge. And that's when I explained to him about the
24 red buoy marking a mudflat there toward the foot of city front, it
25 is on the left descending bank, and explained to him I play off of

1 that red buoy and I come up either on the sailing line on the Rose
2 Point or to the left descending side even with the boat, maybe put
3 my port string on that sailing line or whatever, to avoid being
4 set over there and once I know I have the bridge safely made at a
5 safe speed, again, I explained to him, myself, I navigate through
6 that bridge at around two and a half miles an hour to make sure I
7 can safely steer and so forth through the bridge.

8 And once I have cleared the bridge and I am headed upriver, I
9 start speeding up accordingly to how I feel I need to speed up to
10 outrun any set that may or may not occur and I shape out the city
11 front. I think I'm explaining myself the way I want to, as to
12 what I mean by shape it out, I just play off of that buoy and the
13 city front, shaping the turn out around the city front at a safe
14 distance and watching myself, not only visually and by radar, but
15 also I use the Rose Point as a reference, knowing I'm not setting
16 toward that dike and as you come up out of there, playing off it
17 just the way I just explained, that should -- and it has, every
18 time for me, put my tow right dead in the middle of the channel
19 span and navigational section of the first bridge there above the
20 canal and so on.

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. And he seemed to understand what I was telling him very
23 perfectly, like he already knew what I was telling him, like he
24 had done it before, he seemed to perfectly understand what I was
25 telling him. He didn't ask any unusual questions that alerted me.

1 Q. On the Rose Point, when you transit, do you build out your
2 tow on the Rose Point, in other words, can you see the towing
3 configuration in front of you, kind of on the screen or is it just
4 your vessel on display?

5 A. Oh, no, sir. I put the tow on there, as well. No, sir, I do
6 put the tow and any time my tow configuration may change, I change
7 my tow diagram on the Rose Point to match exactly what I have in
8 front of me.

9 Q. I mean, just that was built up when you guys were transiting,
10 that's correct?

11 A. Yes, sir, that is correct. I had it filled out to, you know,
12 15 barges in the configuration we had, which was five lengths
13 long, 975 feet long, if I'm correct, with Crounse's rake barges,
14 by a hundred and five feet wide, with our boat made up in the
15 center of that tow, to the center string of that tow, just the way
16 I was actually made up. So everything I had set on Rose Point for
17 a tow diagram and where the boat was positioned was what we
18 actually had in front of us.

19 Q. Okay. And as far as -- so if you -- I'm gathering this is a
20 pretty tricky section of the river, as you had mentioned. If
21 there's something that you could change or the Army Corps could
22 change, maybe, about the layout, something, move a buoy or
23 something along that nature that would make it easier, is there --
24 and you could make them wave a magic wand and it could happen,
25 what would you change, if anything?

1 A. Well, honestly, I don't think there's a whole lot about the
2 way they have it could be changed in the way the canal had to be
3 dug around, you know, the river that couldn't be made
4 navigational, that would make it any different, I don't feel,
5 because I mean, like I said, it's worked for me for over a decade
6 now and everybody else for several decades, unless they just let
7 themselves get out of shape for whatever reason. I really don't
8 see what could be changed.

9 Q. All right. I'm also interested on the -- I'm not as
10 experienced as you with the -- on the river, so I'm curious to how
11 much that current could take a hold of you before the edge of that
12 vane dike, does it -- can it grab the head of your tow inside,
13 through that little cutout there between the island and that
14 concrete wall or is it --

15 A. It could if you -- I'm sorry.

16 Q. No, go ahead. Or is it -- I'm just wondering how strong it
17 is versus the out-draft as you kind of come out at the light
18 there.

19 A. Okay. In the current there before the bottom of the dike,
20 I'm assuming that's where you're questioning, the small cutout
21 there --

22 Q. Yes.

23 A. -- between the mooring cells from the railroad bridge to the
24 dike itself.

25 Q. Yes.

1 A. And it can run through there fairly hard, yes, sir, it can.
2 If you get close to it, it could grab you, it could indeed. And
3 that's another part of what I was explaining to him, stay away
4 from that dike and, you know, it could happen, but I've never had
5 it grab me there at that cutout so hard that it couldn't be
6 corrected or avoided before something bad happened. But again, I
7 don't get close enough to it over there for it to just grab and
8 swing me, either.

9 Q. Did --

10 A. If I'm making --

11 Q. Yeah, that's very clear, that's very clear.

12 A. Okay.

13 Q. Did you take the -- did you take the controls at any time
14 after, after the allision and while the barges were still kind of
15 floating through, like did you relieve him at all or --

16 A. At watch change I took -- at our actual watch change I did
17 relieve him and take it. By then, we had helper boats there and
18 so forth, you know, we -- the boat wasn't going to get in danger
19 at that point and the three we still had across the face of the
20 boat and then two more ahead. Our port string, if I remember
21 right, was still three barges long and the center string and the
22 starboard string, by that time, if I remember correctly, only had
23 one barge left in them, so we had five barges still left there.
24 But at that point, yes, sir, I relieved him at watch change. We
25 were stopped, helper boats was on the way, our helper boats was

1 already there by the time I relieved him. Yes, sir.

2 MR. McCLAY: Okay. I think that's all I have for now, thank
3 you.

4 BY MR. MUISE:

5 Q. Hey, good afternoon, Captain. This is Marcel Muiise with the
6 NTSB and I just have one follow-up. The red buoys you mentioned,
7 can you confirm that they were there on the day of the accident?

8 A. Yes, sir, it was there. They are on the Rose Point and I
9 visually saw it, the red buoy was there.

10 Q. Okay. I'm looking at -- my Rose Point has two buoys there,
11 is that two red buoys, is that right?

12 A. Well, I only remember one being there, but it's possible that
13 Rose Point shows two.

14 Q. Okay. How about a green buoy just beyond the Coast Guard
15 light?

16 A. I do not remember specifically seeing it there. They are on
17 Rose Point, you know, the digital buoy on Rose Point was there,
18 but I do not remember seeing it physically, no, sir.

19 MR. MUISE: Okay. Well, thank you, sir.

20 That's all I had, [REDACTED]

21 MR. [REDACTED] Okay. Can I squeeze a Coast Guard follow-up in
22 there before I let it over to the PIIs?

23 BY MR. [REDACTED]

24 Q. Captain, are you familiar with the waterway action plan?

25 It's a voluntary document, it's not a required participation or

1 anything, but it's an information document.

2 A. Yes, sir, I am familiar with it.

3 Q. Can you tell me what it is?

4 A. Yes, discussing an event, you know, high water procedures, an
5 event when high water is approaching or the river is rising and so
6 forth, and if I remember our waterways action plan, it has a river
7 towing company even included when the river started falling and
8 showing what we call finger bars could build up in different
9 places and so forth, and actions to take to prevent a collision,
10 allision, or grounding or such resulting from rapid rising water
11 or rapid falling water.

12 Q. Do you know if any of the sensors right in that -- as you
13 enter into the VTS zone, it's -- there's some in that WAP, in that
14 waterway action plan, I think they talk about some of the sensors
15 that are available to you. Do you know that there's a sensor or
16 did you know that there's a sensor up at the water tower up around
17 599, but it provides -- I think the USGS puts it out on the
18 Internet, but it's in cubic feet per -- what is it? It's in the
19 cubic feet per second, it's not in miles per hour.

20 Do you think putting that information -- you can get the
21 miles per hour with the currents running up there at the water
22 tower. Do you think that would be helpful to make that sensor
23 default to miles per hour versus this cubic feet per second
24 measurement to the river men?

25 A. Personally, yes, sir, I believe it would. I surely do. I

1 believe that, you know, converting to your actual miles per hour
2 current speed or even nautical miles per hour current speed versus
3 your CFF in the flow would be helpful to us. I personally feel
4 like -- yes, sir, I feel like that would be helpful.

5 MR. [REDACTED] Okay. Nothing further from the Coast Guard.

6 Crounse, do you have any questions for Captain Whittington?

7 BY MR. MILLER:

8 Q. Captain, Tom Miller for Crounse, I'm going to try not to ask
9 anything that's already been covered, but when you were talking
10 about how fast the river was rising, I couldn't quite hear the
11 number, how many feet per day?

12 A. If I remember correctly, it was either right around two feet
13 per day or just under two feet per day. You know, I was
14 constantly monitoring each pool we went in, of how fast it was
15 rising, and I just remember seeing that from the 8th, when the
16 accident occurred, you know, either a four or a five-day time
17 period from there forward, we were expecting somewhere between a
18 nine and a 10-foot rise, if I remember correctly.

19 Q. And then when you were talking with Mr. Springer about his
20 experience on the Ohio, do you recall if he said he'd been on this
21 part of the Ohio, if he'd been through Louisville on the Ohio?

22 A. I don't recall if he specifically said that, but I do
23 remember him telling me I have ran the Ohio and, you know,
24 actually word for word what he told me on the phone, I'm not sure
25 what he told anyone else after talking to him, but he told me I

1 can run anywhere.

2 Q. Okay. And then do those dikes show up on the Rose Point?

3 A. Yes, sir, they do.

4 Q. And did you ever talk with Mr. Springer about how this
5 happened?

6 A. Yes, sir, I did.

7 Q. What did he say?

8 A. He claimed the current just grabbed faster than what he could
9 check it down and of course, when I spoke with him about that, I
10 had not yet seen the Rose Point replay. But he told me, when he
11 got up close to the head of the -- you know, up close to the dike
12 or, you know, coming up toward the top of the dike, that the
13 current just grabbed him so fast that he couldn't -- couldn't
14 change anything, you know, couldn't stop it.

15 But he also told me that the current had started to stall him
16 out and if that was the case, he should've come either full ahead
17 or stopped or whatever before, you know, he got up clear of the
18 dike or even the head of his tow cleared that dike and it was very
19 obvious he'd done neither.

20 Q. All right, let's see. Okay. And then are those dikes easily
21 visible with the naked eye?

22 A. Until the water gets above a certain stage, but that day that
23 dike was very visible to the naked eye, it was not completely
24 under water.

25 Q. Okay. And then where and when was this tow made up?

1 A. This tow was made up before I caught the boat on December --
2 I'm sorry, February 22nd. I'm not sure where the previous crew
3 departed from with it. I'm sure by that -- no, no, I'm sorry.

4 Q. That's fine.

5 A. That was not correct, that was the tow previous to that. I'm
6 sorry, I am getting confused on my times there.

7 Q. That's okay.

8 A. We had made one round trip, I'm sorry, it was a very
9 stressful time.

10 Q. Sure.

11 A. That particular tow, I don't remember where we had got it, so
12 -- I'd have to look back in my plan.

13 Q. That's fine.

14 A. To be quite honest. We turned so much --

15 Q. Sure.

16 A. -- and to be honest, we turned so much that particular tow,
17 I said --

18 Q. Yeah, that's fine.

19 A. That particular tow I don't remember where we departed with
20 it, but I -- I really don't, but --

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. -- it was wired for sound, I promise you.

23 Q. Right. And did you say wired for sound?

24 A. Yeah, it was wired very good, I mean, if you want to know --

25 Q. Yeah.

1 A. -- exactly how I had it wired up, my outside fore and aft, on
2 the way out, were doubled up. My steering coupling was scissor
3 abreast, ahead and the stern, it was scissor abreast, the second
4 coupling out was scissor abreast, you know, opposite -- you know
5 what I mean by scissor.

6 Q. Yes.

7 A. It was -- yes, sir.

8 Q. Okay. And then the last thing I had was just were you all in
9 any hurry for any reason?

10 A. No, sir. I mean, other than normal, you know, navigation, we
11 try -- when current permits us, we try to make, you know, five
12 miles an hour in every direction, a steady five miles an hour.

13 Q. Sure.

14 A. But no, we were -- you know, when safe to do so.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. No, we wasn't in an unusual hurry for anything, just normal
17 operations.

18 MR. MILLER: Very good. That's all I had for you, sir, and I
19 appreciate your patience.

20 MR. WHITTINGTON: Yes, sir.

21 MR. [REDACTED] Mr. Bowling, you got anything? Captain Bowling?

22 MR. BOWLING: No, I don't have any questions at this time.

23 MR. [REDACTED] Imperial?

24 MR. WATSON: No, I have no questions.

25 MR. [REDACTED] Mr. Englert, do you have any questions for your

1 client?

2 MR. ENGLERT: No, I do not.

3 MR. [REDACTED] Okay, having none, [REDACTED] you got any follow-ups?

4 (No audible response.)

5 MR. [REDACTED] NTSB, any follow-ups?

6 BY MR. McCLAY:

7 Q. Yeah, I had just one quick point of clarification, but when
8 you were talking about speed, I just want to make sure that we're
9 talking about always speed over ground, right? Like when you said
10 you're transiting five knots, it's always five knots over ground
11 and not five knots plus the current, plus or minus the current?

12 A. Well, that's correct. Of course, in high water, I mean, you
13 can only run -- you know, you're going to go with flow of current
14 regardless, you know, but northbound, yeah, we just -- actually,
15 we have our Rose Point actually set on statute five miles per
16 hour.

17 Q. Okay.

18 A. Or four miles per hour. We have that set on statute, you
19 know, actually what you would read on a speedometer on a car.

20 Q. Okay.

21 A. But we're talking about how fast we're actually moving and
22 not across the flow of current.

23 Q. All right.

24 A. Or that, you know, negative flow of current.

25 MR. McCLAY: Thank you.

1 MR. [REDACTED] Any more alibis?

2 (No response.)

3 MR. [REDACTED] Hearing none, Captain Whittington, I just want to
4 thank you for participating today. I know it's been a stressful
5 couple weeks and we know your time is valuable, especially when
6 you're off the boat. And to all the PIIs, all the parties-in-
7 interest, I thank you also on behalf of the Coast Guard and the
8 NTSB.

9 If you need anything, give us a holler. Has anybody got --
10 any of the PIIs have any more witnesses they feel that we need to
11 talk to? If you do, get them to me or -- I'd like to get stuff
12 scheduled, you know, get people scheduled sooner rather than
13 later. So if you do have any, you can e-mail them to me. Yes.

14 MR. ENGLERT: [REDACTED] this is James Englert. Have you
15 interviewed Patrick Smith? Springer, rather.

16 MR. [REDACTED] Yes, we did. The night of the incident, [REDACTED]
17 actually did.

18 MR. ENGLERT: Okay.

19 MR. [REDACTED] That doesn't mean that we couldn't do follow-up
20 if we've got some relevant -- if you feel that there's --

21 MR. ENGLERT: No, I just didn't know, that's all.

22 MR. [REDACTED] Yes, sir. Yes, we did.

23 Any other questions from anyone?

24 MR. WHITTINGTON: I have one question that pertains to what
25 we talked about, but within, say, the next week to week and a

1 half, do you all feel you all will be needing me, to speak with me
2 again for anything? I was planning to try to just slip out of
3 town into the woods camping for a little while with my wife and I
4 don't want to get out where there's no phone, so I know if
5 somebody is going to need to be contacting me.

6 MR. [REDACTED] No, sir, but I will be needing that location
7 where you don't get any phone reception.

8 (Laughter.)

9 MR. WHITTINGTON: Well, Tishomingo State Forest in North
10 Mississippi, anywhere in the Appalachian Mountains or the
11 foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, you can forget about phone
12 signal.

13 MR. [REDACTED] Thank you, Captain. Thank you for your time and
14 thank you, everyone, for your patience today.

15 MR. WHITTINGTON: Yes, sir, thank you.

16 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 1: Thank you very much.

17 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 2: Thank you.

18 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 3: Gentlemen, have a good day. Thanks.

19 MR. WHITTINGTON: Thank you.

20 (Whereupon, at 3:25 p.m., the interview concluded.)
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22
23
24
25

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

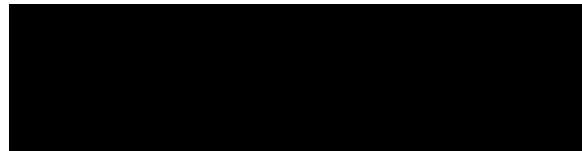
IN THE MATTER OF: MULTIPLE COAL BARGES BREAK FREE
FROM TOWBOAT *AMBER BRITTANY* NEAR
THE McALPINE LOCKS AND DAM
IN LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY
ON MARCH 8, 2024
Interview of Gregory H. Whittington

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA24FM025

PLACE: via Microsoft Teams

DATE: March 20, 2024

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.



David A. Martini
Transcriber