

# Chesapeake & Ohio Canal

NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA/MARYLAND

## ADMINISTRATION

Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

For general information about the section from Georgetown to Seneca, phone Great Falls Tavern, 301-299-3613, or write the Superintendent, George Washington Memorial Parkway, Turkey Run Park, McLean, VA 22101

For information about the canal from Seneca to Cumberland, Md., phone 301-432-5124, or write the Superintendent, Antietam-C&O Canal Group, National Park Service, Box 158, Sharpsburg, MD 21782.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities to protect and conserve our land and water, energy and minerals, fish and wildlife, park and recreation areas, and for the wise use of all those resources. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

**National Park Service**  
**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**

NATURAL AREAS POSSESS HAZARDOUS MATERIALS  
ENCOUNTERED IN YOUR HOME  
ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR FAMILY'S  
WELFARE • SERVICEMEN'S  
ATTENTION FOR SAFETY

The C. & O. Canal towpath can serve as an afternoon's return to the past, a week-long hiking trip, a place for quiet meditation, a site for an ambitious field trip concerned with ecology, geology, engineering history, economic theory, and local culture.

It offers the sudden delights of wood ducks with their young, of cardinals and bluebirds flashing among the foliage, of a fox scrambling up a bank, of the ruined industrial sites of another era.

Weathered by time, the aqueducts and Paw Paw Tunnel have become more than engineering feats. They now are subtle parts of the landscape. The canal's beginning, the tidal lock at Rock Creek, is divorced from its main section and hidden in a clump of weeds, and its end, the basin at Cumberland, has been filled, but on all that remains between them the special pleasures of walking and looking can be fully realized.

The canal and its right-of-way are symbolically without beginning and end, for they offer a journey into the past surrounded by the timelessness of living things.

—George Zabriskie



## RECREATION ALONG THE CANAL

A wide variety of recreational activities can be enjoyed in the park.

**HIKING AND BICYCLING.** The canal towpath is an elevated trail historically 12 feet wide. Built mainly of earth and crushed stone, it provided a good walking surface for the mules pulling the barges. Some of the towpath is in a good state of repair. Much of it is slippery when wet, but it dries rapidly after a rain. Although the land along the canal is overgrown in many places, the towpath is clear and follows the canal for its entire length. Night travel, especially alone, is not recommended. After sudden heavy rainstorms in the mountains or after lengthy periods of rainfall locally, portions of the towpath may wash out or become flooded. Hikers and bicyclists should turn back when this occurs.

In summer, conducted walks and evening programs are offered to visitors, and information about these activities can be obtained from the appropriate superintendent's office. A museum at Great Falls, Md., open daily, helps to tell the story of the canal.

**CAMPING.** Camping is restricted to designated areas only. Tent camping is available at "hiker-

biker" campsites approximately every five miles along the 162-mile section from Seneca to Cumberland. These campsites are available on a first-come, first-served basis and have water, toilets, picnic tables, and fire grills. One campsite, with pit toilets only, midway between Seneca and Georgetown is available by permit to through hikers and bicyclists. Such permits may be requested from the site supervisor, Great Falls Tavern, 11710 MacArthur Blvd., Potomac, MD 20854.

The drive-in tent and trailer sites at McCoys Ferry, Fifteen Mile Creek, and Spring Gap have only primitive facilities. There are no hookups for trailers.

Antietam Creek and Mountain Lock campgrounds are walk-in tent camping areas with adjacent parking.

**CANOEING AND BOATING.** Canoeing is popular in the watered levels of the canal between Georgetown and Violets Lock near Seneca. Portages are required around each lock. Only short and widely separated stretches of the canal upstream from Lock 23 are deep enough for canoeing. Some of these are Big Pool, Little Pool, and a 4.5-mile section from Town Creek to Oldtown. Canoeing on the Potomac River is recommended only for experienced canoeists. Portages must be made at Dams 2, 3, 4, and 5, the power plant dam at Williamsport, and the PPG dam at North Branch.

Canoeing is not recommended between Dam 3 and the U.S. 340 bridge downstream from Harpers Ferry or in the Great Falls to Chain Bridge (Va. 120) area. Canoes are available at Swains Lock (mile 16) and Fletcher's Boat House (mile 3). Only canoes and boats without motors are permitted on Big Pool, Little Pool, the rewatered canal at Oldtown and on the canal between Violets Lock and Georgetown.

The Potomac River is not part of the national historical park. Boating on the river is subject to Maryland regulations. Slack-water areas behind dams are excellent places for most types of boating. Public access to the river is provided by National Park Service boat ramps at Dargan Bend, Snyders Landing, Taylors Landing, Dam 4 (Big Slackwater), Four Locks, McCoys Ferry, Hancock (Little Tonoloway), Fifteen Mile Creek, Spring Gap, and Nolands Ferry. Private and State boat ramps are on the Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia shores. Fees are usually charged for use of private ramps.

In spring and summer, canal barge trips are offered on Sundays and holidays at Great Falls and on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays at 30th Street (Lock 3) in Georgetown.

**VEHICLES ON TOWPATH.** All motor vehicles, including motorcycles and snowmobiles, and horse-drawn vehicles are prohibited on the towpath.

**HORSEBACK RIDING.** Horseback riding is permitted from Seneca to Cumberland. Because of limited facilities, large equestrian groups should make arrangements with private landowners for camping accommodations.

**PICNICKING.** You are welcome to picnic without fires anywhere along the canal. Please leave the area as you would like to find it. There are several designated areas with facilities for your comfort. Fires are permitted only where fireplaces are provided.

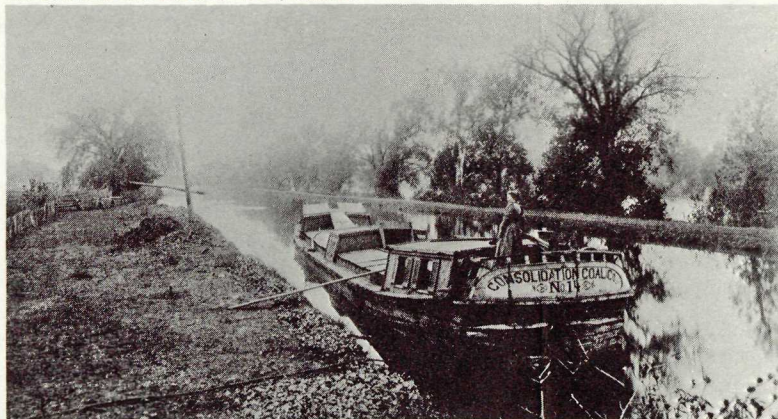
**SUPPLIES.** Camping supplies, ice, food, and soft drinks may be purchased at most stores along the various access roads.

## FOR YOUR SAFETY

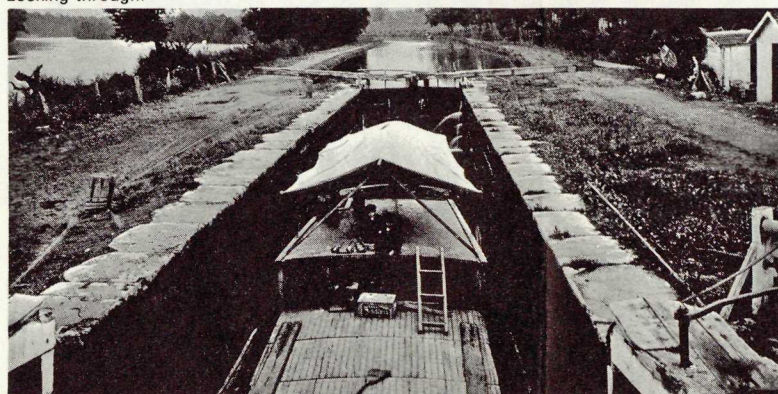
Please use caution and common sense to avoid accidents and ensure a pleasant visit. Help prevent drownings by keeping your family or group together. Stay on the trail and out of the water.

Visitors should be prepared to deal with such annoyances as insects, polluted river water nearby, and adverse weather conditions.

The canalboat was home for many families.



Locking through.



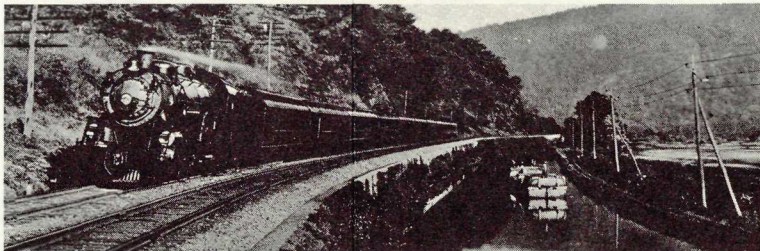
### WATERWAY TO THE WEST

A national transportation dilemma confronted the United States at the beginning of the 19th century—the Appalachians had to be conquered to unite the commercial establishments of the East with the frontier resources of the West. Significantly improved transportation facilities were needed to link the two regions.

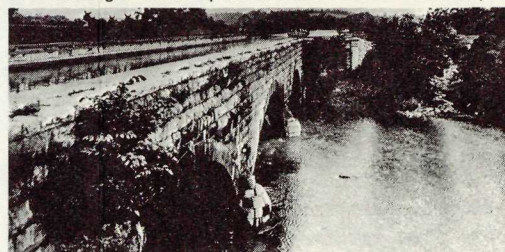
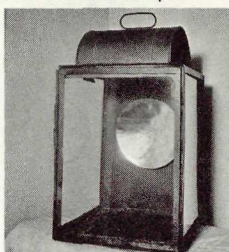
In 1806, President Thomas Jefferson's interest in developing national resources and expanding the country prompted him to secure Federal money to build a national highway across the Alleghenies as a step toward opening the West and tying the rich Ohio River Valley to the Eastern seaboard. By 1817, the National Road from Cumberland, Md., to Wheeling on the Ohio River was completed. Maryland made a bid for this traffic by opening an extensive system of State turnpikes or roads radiating from the National Road to the seaboard. Pennsylvania had already spent millions on a road system constructed westward across the Alleghenies and converging at Pittsburgh.

The heavy traffic on this road system soon led to the search for and development of an even more economical means of transportation. A belief that water transportation on either canals or improved riverbeds was vastly superior to roads swept the country in the early 1800's. The Erie Canal, begun in 1817 and opened for its 363 miles in 1825, had successfully provided an economical outlet in the East for the rich raw materials of the West.

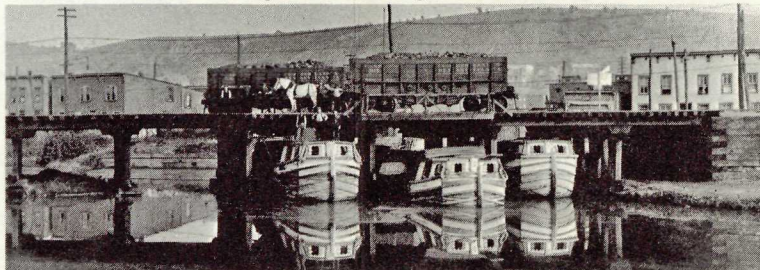
The steam locomotive hastened the end of the canal era.



Canalboat headlamp. Conococheague Creek aqueduct at the turn of the century.



Canalboats at Cumberland taking on coal for Georgetown.



Young boys often drove the mule teams.



Canalboats at Williamsport wait for their next haul.



Lock 33 across from Harpers Ferry.



The Chesapeake & Ohio Canal was begun as a proposed waterway along the established Potomac and trans-Allegheny trade route to the Ohio River. It was the economic heir of the Old Potomac Company which had attempted unsuccessfully from 1785 to 1819 to fulfill George Washington's dream of developing a practical water route through the Potomac Valley.

Construction of the C. & O. Canal started on July 4, 1828. After much glowing oratory President John Quincy Adams turned the first spade of dirt. On the same day, construction of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad began in Baltimore. The race for the West across the Alleghenies was on!

From the beginning, the canal was beset with many problems. Lumber, building stone, lime for cement, and other building supplies were often scarce and expensive. Excavation frequently revealed unexpected hardpan, slate, or gravel which made the work difficult and costly. Many difficulties were encountered in securing land titles for the right-of-way. Land costs were frequently above estimate and excessively high.

Because the Potomac Valley was predominately agricultural, skilled labor was virtually unavailable. The canal company turned to Europe for indentured labor. Men arriving from Ireland, Germany, Netherlands, England, and Wales soon provided a pool of stone cutters, masons, carpenters, and laborers. Welsh miners were imported later to dig Paw Paw Tunnel. Many workers became the unwitting victims of unscrupulous contractors. Food was often poor and housing consisted of makeshift dwellings. Diseases swept through the labor camps. Because of rivalries and prejudices the workers brought with them from

Europe, there was much fighting between groups. Sometimes the men rioted when they weren't paid and the militia had to be called out. On top of these troubles, the B. & O. Railroad continued to press westward.

Canal and railroad were soon competing for property rights. The C. & O. Canal Company had decided to locate its waterway along the north bank of the Potomac in Maryland. The B. & O. was organized in such haste that the final decision concerning its route was not made until after it had gotten underway. The railroad then decided to construct its line from Baltimore through Frederick to Point of Rocks in the Potomac Valley. Confident of securing the right-of-way in the Potomac Valley inherited from the Old Potomac Company, the C. & O. Canal Company directors proceeded in a leisurely fashion to secure necessary land titles. However, the railroad moved more aggressively and sent agents far up the valley to secure land rights from the inhabitants at many points—particularly at the narrow gorge above Point of Rocks. Because the bluffs come close to the river, there was room for only one of the lines. The B. & O. Railroad claimed the right-of-way and secured an injunction against the canal company. The canal company appealed and the courts eventually ruled in the canal's favor—thus ending a 4-year bitter struggle.

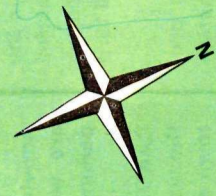
The canal was used as each section was completed: first, from Georgetown to Seneca in 1831; then to Harpers Ferry in 1833; and to near Hancock in 1839, 134 miles from its beginning in

Georgetown. About this time the canal encountered serious financial problems and the next 50.5 miles to Cumberland were not completed until 1850—8 years after the railroad reached that point. The faster and less expensive railroad had made the canal obsolete, and the C. & O. Canal Company dropped its plans to continue another 180 miles westward to Pittsburgh.

The company had spent \$22 million to build 184½ miles of canal consisting of 74 lift locks which raised it from sea level at Georgetown to 605 feet at Cumberland, 11 stone aqueducts which carried the canal over major Potomac tributaries, seven dams to supply water for the canal, a number of waste weirs to control the water level, hundreds of culverts to carry roads and streams under the canal, a 3,117-foot tunnel to take it under a mountain, and an assortment of stop locks, river locks, bridges, shops, section houses, and lock houses. The canal generally was 50 to 60 feet wide at towpath level, sloped to 30 to 40 feet across at the bottom and carried a minimum depth of 6 feet of water. The size of the locks—15 feet wide and 100 feet long—restricted the size of the barges. A typical barge was 14½ feet wide, 92 feet long, drew 4½ feet of water, and could carry upwards of 120 tons of cargo.

The canal did not attain any great measure of economic success, but it provided a prominent and leisurely means of transporting coal, flour, grain, and lumber to Washington. In the early summer of 1889, a titanic flood swept the Potomac Valley, leaving the canal in ruin. However, it was rebuilt and used until 1924, when another flood seriously damaged the already financially troubled canal company.

# CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO CANAL



## LEGEND

- C & O Canal and Towpath
- Interstate Highway
- U.S. Highway
- State Highway
- Other Roads
- Mileage Marker
- Drinking Water
- Hiker-Biker Overnight Camp
- Carry-in Camp Area
- Drive-in Camp Area
- Picnic Area
- Boat Ramp
- Information Center
- Campfire Program
- Hike-in Group Camp

