

Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Lockhouse 25- Edwards Ferry

The Calm Before the Storm 1831-1861



Situated at a Potomac River Ferry crossing that had been operating since 1791, the small but thriving community of Edwards Ferry had always welcomed travelers to and from Virginia. When the Canal reached Edwards Ferry in 1831, a river lock was built just downstream to further encourage trade and commerce. The area became an important transportation conduit between the farmlands of Loudon County, VA, and the communities up and down the 184.5 mile canal. Poised in the middle of two major transportation arteries, the C&O Canal and the Ferry Road, it seemed like Edwards Ferry was destined to have a prosperous future. That was before the Civil War.

Slavery on the Border

By the mid 1800s, African-American slavery had become a major political, economic and social issue in the United States. Enslaved people, considered property and not citizens, had little or no rights under the laws of the nation.

The state of Maryland, from its earliest days, had one of the largest populations of enslaved people in the United States. The 1860 population of those enslaved in Montgomery County alone accounted for 5,500 of its inhabitants. Documentation shows that Asa Aud, the lock tender at Edwards Ferry in the 1840s, owned at least one slave, though it is unknown whether this slave resided at the lockhouse or in another building in the Edwards Ferry community.

In the more industrialized northern states, the abolitionist movement began to take hold, calling for an end to slavery. In the South, where slavery accounted for the vast majority of the agrarian workforce, many held steadfast to their way of life. Slavery became one of the central issues leading to the Civil War.

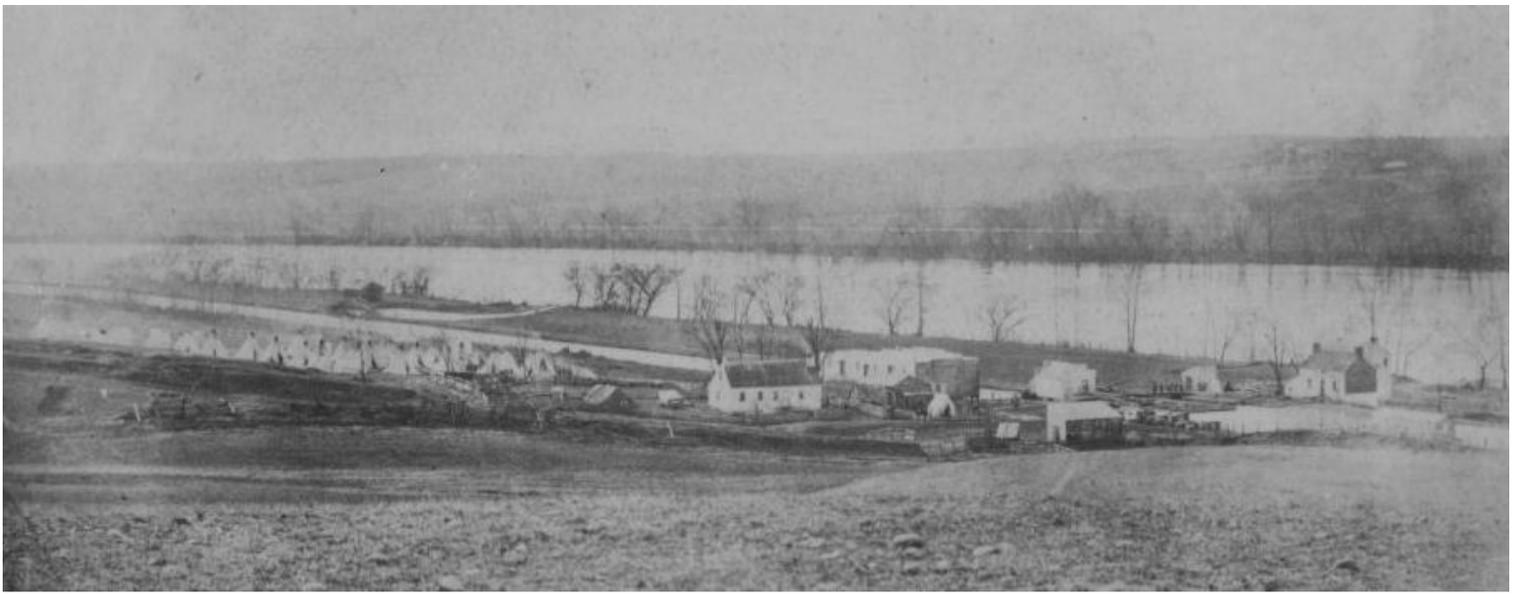
Increasing, the C&O Canal- running from Washington, DC to Cumberland, Maryland- was used to transport more than legal goods. Parts of the canal towpath became part of the Underground Railroad, a secretive route for those seeking freedom in the north. Edwards Ferry, as a crossing point from Virginia, was well situated to help.

War Comes to Edwards Ferry 1861-1865

With the outbreak of Civil War in 1861, Edwards Ferry and the entire C&O Canal found themselves in the precarious position of being located on the border of north and south. Due to the ferry crossing at Edward's, this area quickly became a strategic hotspot. Suddenly the area was under martial law, trade across the river was halted, and canal traffic came under attack.

On October 21, 1861, those living in the Edward's Ferry community witnessed the Battle of Ball's Bluff, just across the Potomac River. Following the bloody encounter of Union and Confederate forces, the citizens of Edward's Ferry opened their homes as hospitals to those wounded in the battle.





In December 1861, as many as 50,000 Union troops were stationed at Edwards Ferry to guard the crossing. During that time period, inventor Thaddeus Lowe utilized his specially designed hot air balloon for reconnaissance purposes, floating above the trees and surveying the movements of the Confederate troops across the river in Virginia.

In late June 1863, during the march that would culminate with the battle of Gettysburg, 70,000 Union troops, under the command of Gen. Joseph Hooker, crossed the Potomac at Edwards Ferry using two 1400 ft. long pontoon bridges.

Peace Returns to the C&O Canal

Once the Civil War ended, Edward's Ferry aided in the country's healing by serving as a United States parole site. Former Confederate troops were officially pardoned if they took the Union Oath of Allegiance. Soon after the last report of oath-takers was submitted by the provost marshal in May of 1865, life at Edward's Ferry began to return to normal.

The border reopened and the ferry started running again. Commercial

service also resumed on the C&O Canal as the boatmen and locktenders returned to their livelihoods. The 1870s and early 1880s proved to be the canal's most profitable years.

Edward's Ferry also saw a period of peace and prosperity. Former Confederate officer Elijah White and Dr. Edward Wooton purchased the long-standing general store, the ferry, and a granary.

Towards a New Century

As the 19th century moved towards the 20th, life on the C&O Canal began to slow. The Canal could not continue to compete with the ever-improving railroad technology.

In the later years of the canal, floods became the engineering and financial bane to its existence. In 1889, when the canal was almost completely destroyed by high flood waters, it was only with financing from the canal's old commercial rival, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, that repairs were made. The

Canal operations continued for the next 25 years. In 1924, following another devastating flood, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal finally ceased its operations.

As the canal experienced its ups and downs throughout the course of its existence, so did the community of Edward's Ferry. Eventually, families moved away, the old general store fell into ruins, the granary all but disappeared and the last family to tend the lock at Edward's Ferry moved from Lockhouse 25.