

# **Great Falls Park**

**VIRGINIA**

**Great Falls Park of Virginia** is 800 acres of scenic beauty and historic importance at the fall line of the Potomac River. Here, visitors can see the beautiful Potomac in a 76-foot drop over a massive rock outcrop; the Potowmack Canal, designed in the 1700's by George Washington and used by riverboatmen to skirt the falls; Matildaville, the dream town of Lighthorse Harry Lee, father of Robert E. Lee; hundreds of plant species which inhabit the upland forest, swamps, and meadows of the park; and many species of animals.

## ENJOYING THE PARK

**Visitor center.** Stop here for information and orientation before starting your tour. The center houses an audiovisual exhibit outlining the history of the area and offers short films and programs about the Potomac River basin and conservation.

**The Falls of the Potomac.** A short walk from the parking lots will bring you to an overlook where you can view the Great Falls of the Potomac.

**Tours.** Interpretation of historic and natural features is given in daily tours conducted by National Park Service employees. A schedule can be obtained at the visitor center.

**Hiking.** More than 4 miles of roads and trails are available for exploring this scenic area. Natural overlooks along River Trail give a striking view of the Potomac River and gorge.

**Picnicking.** Facilities for family picnicking are on a first-come, first-served basis and cannot be reserved. Fires should be built only in fireplaces or in rock crevices within the designated area. Picnickers are urged to leave the park as clean as they would like to see it when they return.

**Fishing.** Catfish, perch, and bass are caught in the river. A Virginia license is required when fishing in the tributaries; a Maryland license or a special Potomac River license—valid in Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland—is required when fishing in the Potomac River. State regulations on catch and season apply. Caution should be used by fishermen climbing on the rocks at the falls.

**Children's play area.** There is a large playground with swings, slides, and teeter-totters.

**The Carousel.** Built in the late 1800's by two European immigrants, this carousel was brought to the park in 1952. Each animal was hand-carved from a single wooden block.

## YOU WILL WANT TO KNOW

**Assistance.** In case of emergency, notify park headquarters, located at the visitor center, or notify the nearest Park Service employee.

**Park season.** The park is open all year from 8 a.m. until dark.

**Camping.** There are no camping facilities within the park. Information on campgrounds in the Washington area is available at the visitor center.

**Parking.** You may park only in designated areas. Cars may not enter the picnic grounds.

**Pets** must be under physical control at all times.

**Speed limit** within the park is 10 miles per hour.

**Climbing** on the rocks near the river is hazardous. Climbers should notify park headquarters.

**Swimming and boating.** Due to the hazards of the Potomac River in this area, entry into the river from park land is prohibited.

**Trails.** Stay on designated trails. Motorcycles, jeeps, and bicycles are not permitted on trails.

**Preserving park features.** The destruction, defacing, or removal of trees, rocks, or ruins is prohibited, as is the picking of wildflowers and other plants, or killing, capturing, or injuring wildlife.

## HISTORY

Settlers in frontier America depended upon rivers as trade routes from the populous east to the expanding west. Few of these rivers were navigable in their entirety and all had at least some hazards that deterred the free flow of commerce from the west to the eastern markets. In considering ways to overcome the Appalachian Mountain barrier and the Great Falls of the Potomac, George Washington envisioned a series of canals that would bypass the falls and other unnavigable stretches of the river. His dreams became a reality by the formation of the Potowmack Company, and he became its first president. In 1785, the company began work on the first series of skirting canals. During the 26 years that the canal was in operation, flour, corn whiskey, furs, and raw materials were poled down the river from the Alleghenies to Georgetown and the Federal City.

In 1790, when trade began to flourish in the area, Lighthorse Harry Lee, a Revolutionary War hero, sponsored a town to be built along the Potomac at Great Falls; he named it Matildaville in honor of his wife. The prosperity of the town depended largely upon the Potowmack Company and its canals; however, in the 1820's a sharp decline in traffic along the Potomac brought a waning of interest in Matildaville as a trade center. The town never realized its original charter size of 43 acres, but it did have an inn, a forge, a gristmill, and storage buildings. Their foundations and water courses can be seen today adjacent to the canal.

Although Washington's hope of uniting east and west by an inland waterway was a practical idea, he failed to consider the drastic changes in water level of the Potomac River at various times of the year—changes that could close the waterway either by turbulent floodwaters or insufficient water in drought conditions. Because of these fluctuations and a lack of money, the Potowmack Company was short-lived. In 1828, the commercial rights of the Potowmack Company were sold to the Chesapeake and Ohio Company which built a continuous inland canal from Cumberland, Md., to Alexandria, Va. However, the Potowmack Company had succeeded in helping to open western trade and in uniting the eastern seaboard and the western frontier.

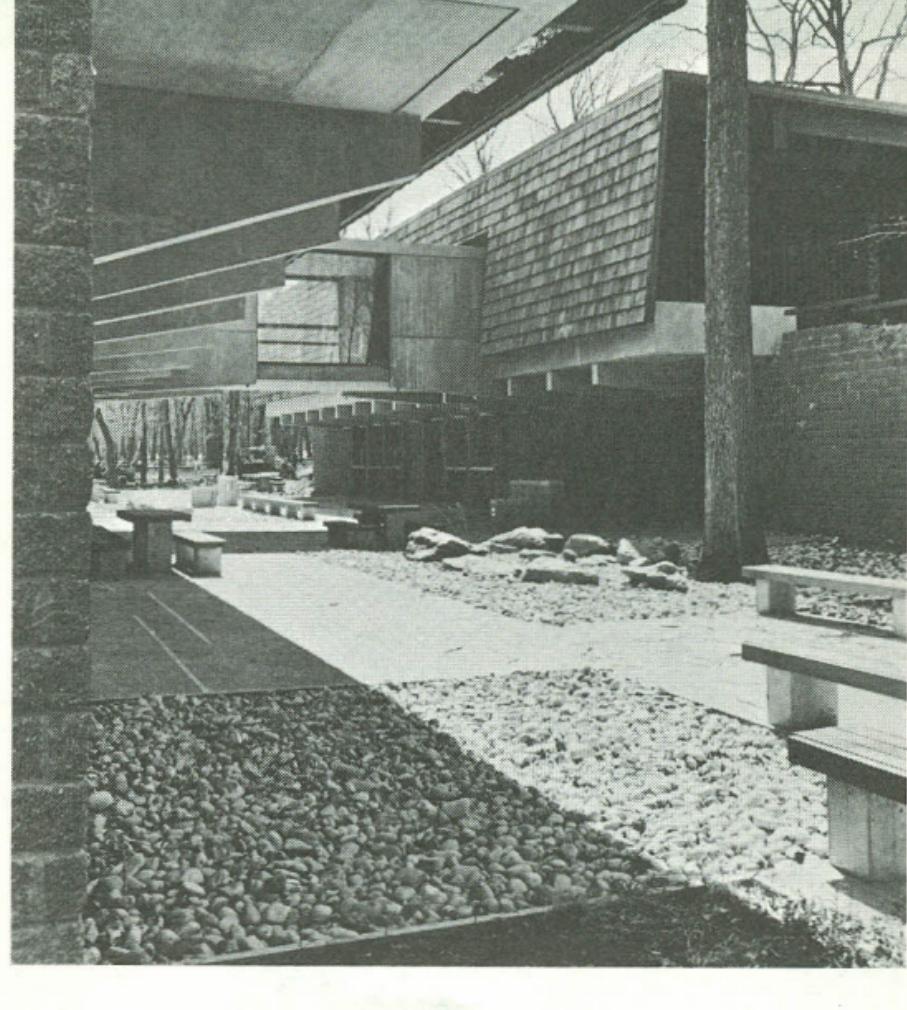
For the most part the remains of the Potowmack Canal and the town of Matildaville are in an area reclaimed by nature. Trails lead through the trees and undergrowth past the foundations and, in some cases, walls of the structures that made up Matildaville, including the remains of the canal

company house. The several locks that in part composed the company's skirting canal around Great Falls are in a remarkable state of preservation, and evidences of construction, such as blasting holes, are plainly visible. The canal bed that connected the locks is also discernable, as are two holding basins and their attendant accesses and waste weirs.

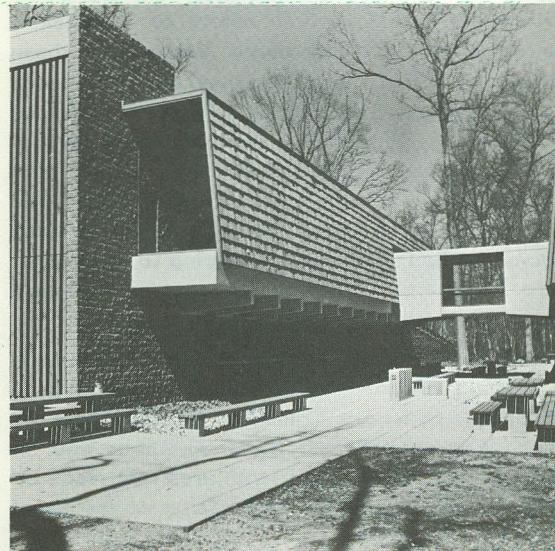
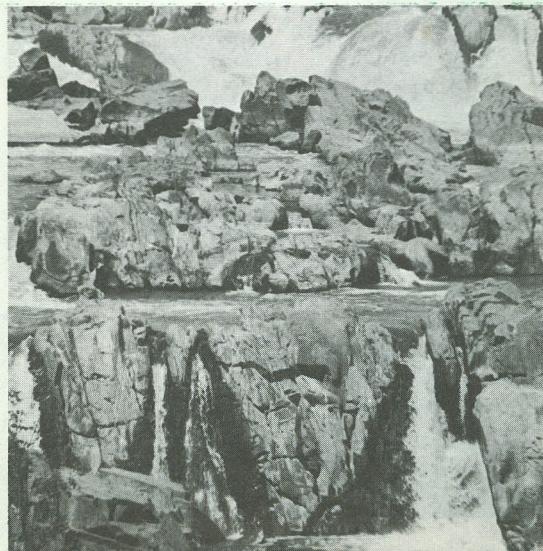
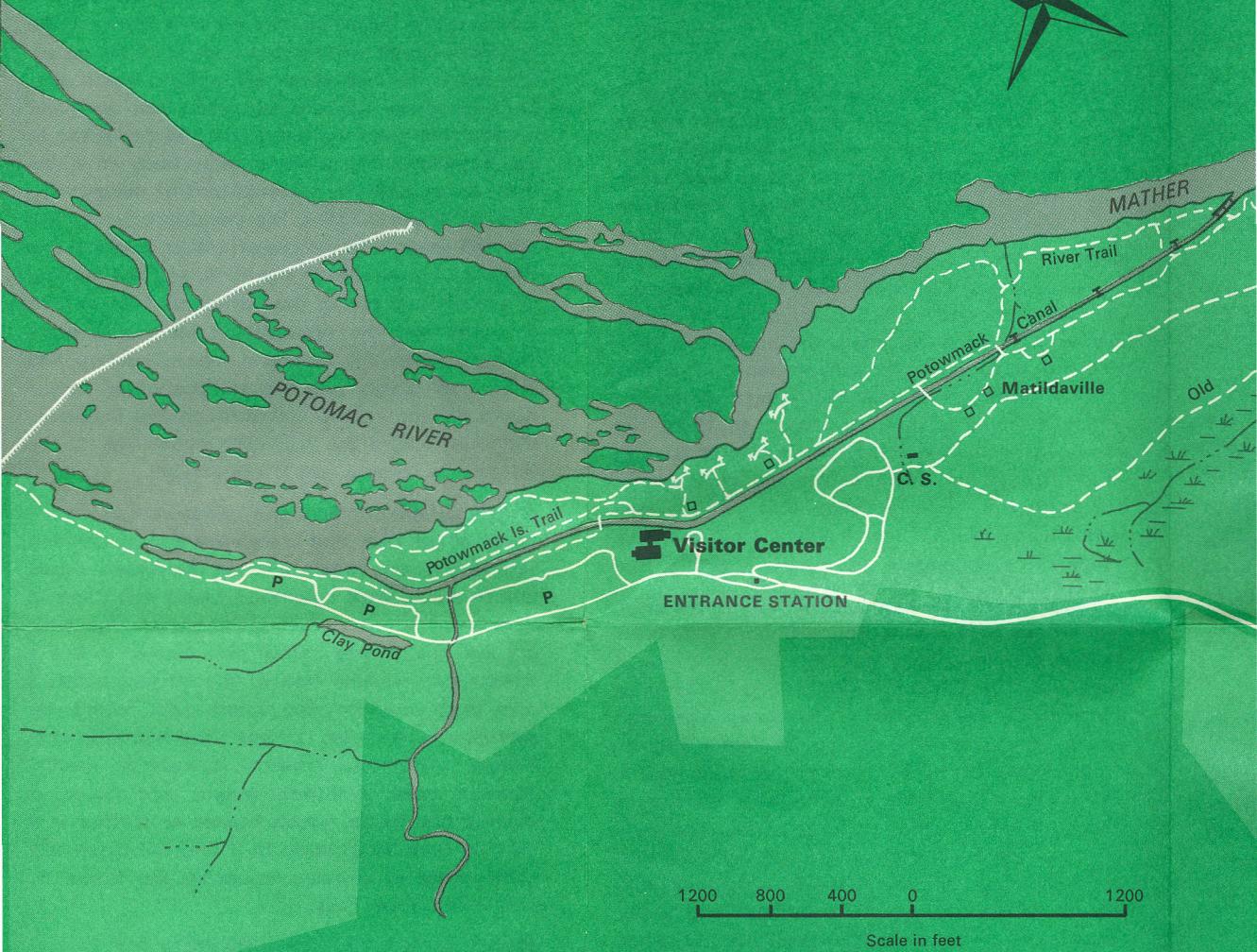
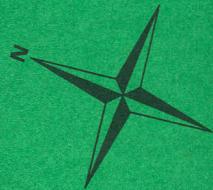
## NATURAL FEATURES

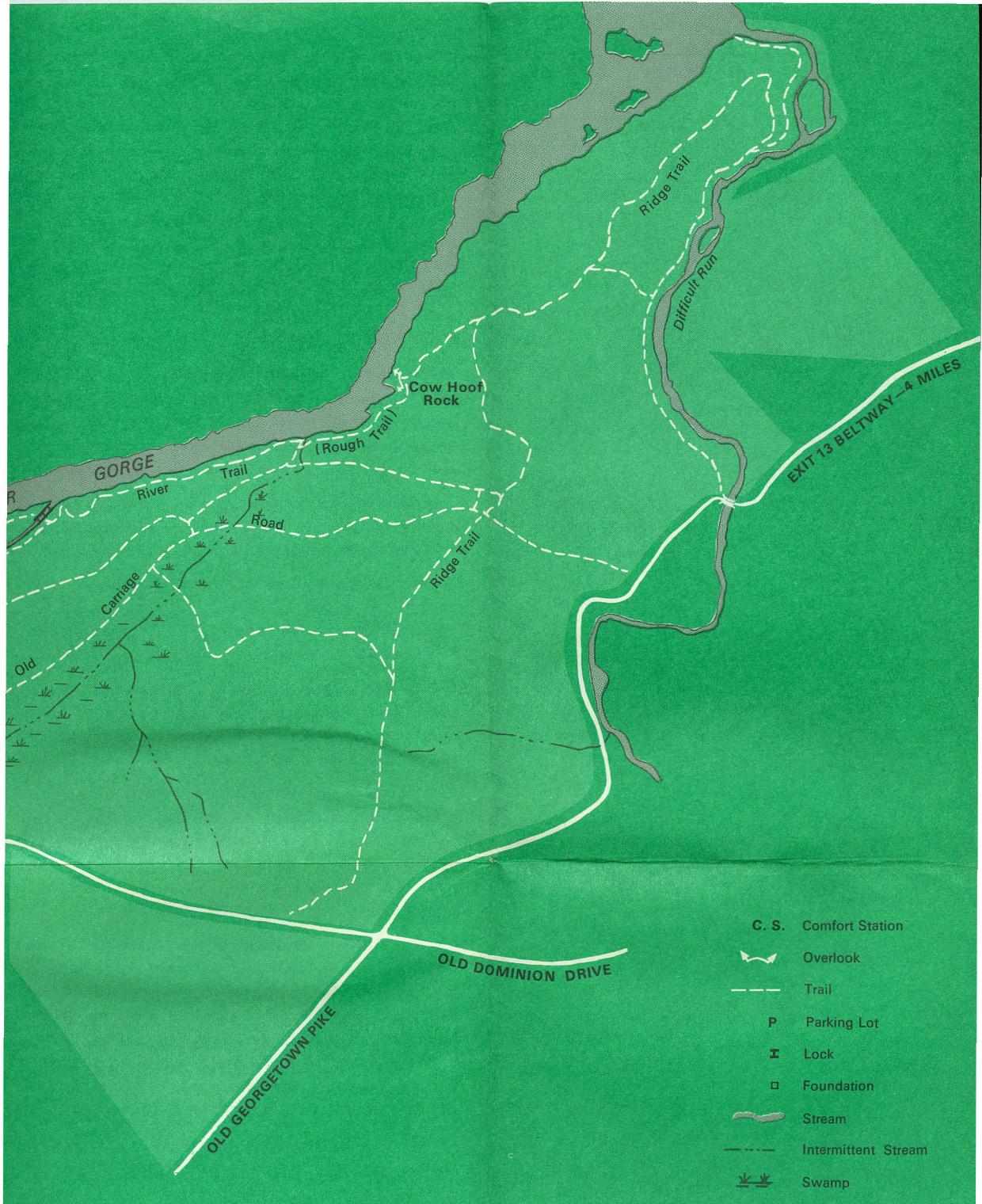
The Potomac River has been flowing through this channel at Great Falls Park for approximately 180 million years. The rocks over which it flows are the remains of a zone of resistant rock of an old mountain range, formed about 500 million years ago. Through these millions of years, the soil and eroded rock were carried away and deposited in the Appalachian Trough—a large body of water that ran through the western part of present-day Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, and eastern Tennessee and West Virginia. The shifting of pressures in the earth and the cooling of certain sections of the earth's surface caused an uplift, and the Appalachian Mountains were formed. After this upheaval, approximately 180 million years ago, rain and surface water flowed down the mountains and through the Piedmont sections toward the Atlantic Ocean. One of the rivers thus formed was the Potomac.

A wide variety of plants and animals live along the banks of the river and in swamps and upland forests of the park. Here are found the pawpaw tree, whose edible fruit nourished Lewis and Clark in their journey to the Pacific Ocean; the rare trailing arbutus, whose dainty pink flower is like a treasure to all who find it; the beaver, nature's own civil engineer; the wood duck, which resembles a feathered rainbow; the beautiful orb-weaver spider; the muskrat; broadwing hawks; Fowler's toad; jack-in-the-pulpit; and the slow-moving box turtle, which travels no farther in a lifetime than humans do in a day. All these and many more of nature's treasures are found by visitors to Great Falls, Va.



# GREAT FALLS PARK VIRGINIA





## **ADMINISTRATION**

Great Falls Park is administered by the National Park Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior. Inquiries should be addressed to the Superintendent, George Washington Memorial Parkway, 1400 Wilson Blvd., Arlington, VA 22209, or to Great Falls Park, 9200 Old Dominion Dr., Great Falls, VA 22066. Telephone 381-7417.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.

**U. S. Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

