

CHESAPEAKE *and* OHIO
CANAL



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA *and* MARYLAND

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal

One of the least-altered of the older American canals, this waterway is an example of the ever-improving means of transportation that helped to bind the Nation together.

The Potomac River Valley, as a western route, has played an important role in the growth and development of our Nation. Through it has passed the Indian trail, colonial wagon road, canal, railroad, telegraph and telephone, and the modern super-highway. East and West were firmly linked socially and commercially by these improving means of communication. The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, built during the great canal-building era, illustrates one of the most interesting early phases of our national communication system.

Potomac Canal, 1785-1828

Before the American Revolution, internal transportation was largely confined to the East along the tidewater reaches of the rivers and bays. Soon after the settled frontier had extended beyond the Allegheny Mountains, plans were made to connect the East and West by a navigable waterway. As early as 1754, George Washington, then still in his twenties,

fostered a system of river and canal navigation along the Potomac Valley. Largely through his efforts, the Potomac Company was organized in 1785 to carry out this plan. As the first president of the company, Wash-

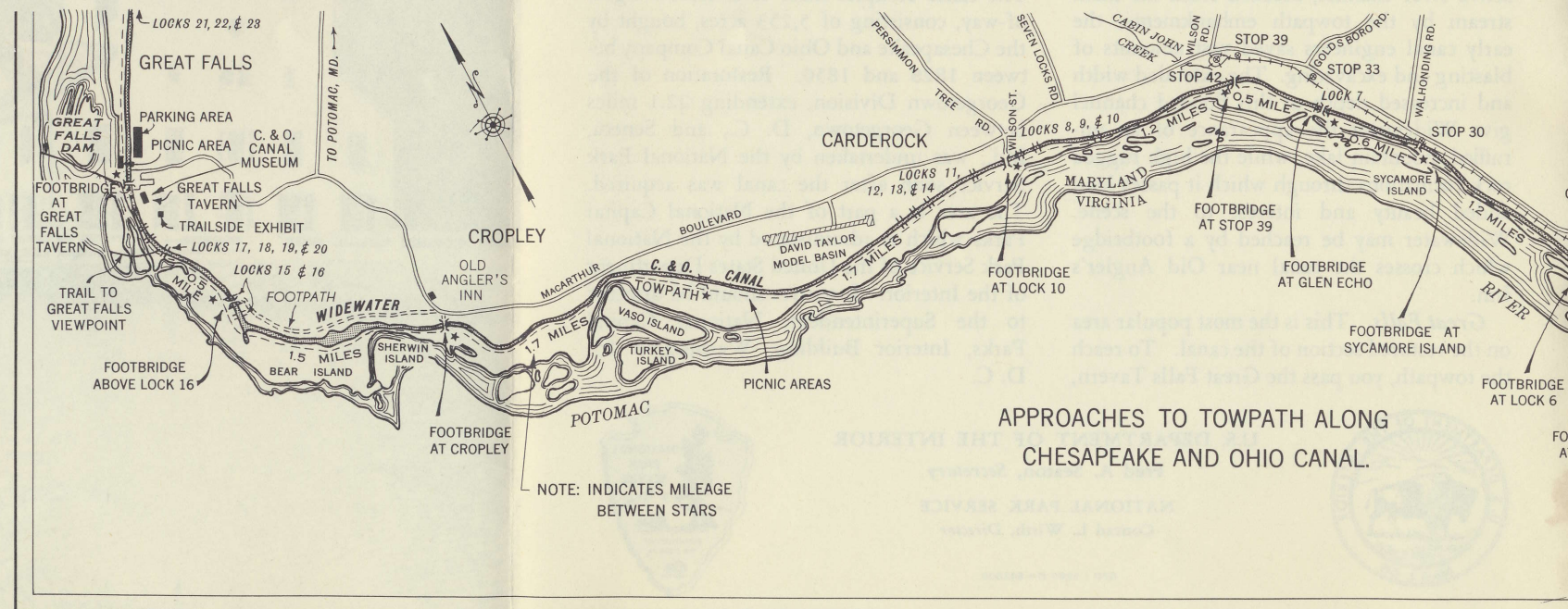
ington was actively engaged in the project. He frequently visited the working parties assigned to clearing the obstructions from the river and building short, skirting canals around the treacherous river falls. Although Washington resigned this office when he became President of the United States, his interest in the affairs of the Potomac Company continued.

In 1802, the Potomac Company canals were substantially completed. Small raftlike boats, moved by hand with the aid of the river currents, then began to bring furs, lumber, flour, and farm produce to Georgetown. Upon reaching the impassable Great Falls of the Potomac, the boats entered the company's outstanding skirting canal. Here, on the Virginia banks of the river, the canal was 1,200 yards long, 25 feet wide, and 6 feet deep. It passed boats through 5 lift locks over an elevation of more than 76 feet. Four other short canals, with a total length of slightly more than 3 miles, were built by the company. These were at Seneca and Houses Falls, on

the Virginia side of the river, and Little and Shenandoah Falls, on the Maryland side. Although the canals and locks of the Potomac Company were considered a great engineering accomplishment, the improvements to the river channel were inadequate.

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, 1828-1924

Following the success of the Erie Canal, the popularity of the continuous canal idea increased rapidly in the second decade of the 19th century. In the 1820's and 1830's, during the great canal-building era, more than 4,000 miles of canals were begun or planned. The Potomac Company had failed to provide a dependable water route to the West. This, together with the feverish canal building of the time, led to the successful organization of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company in 1828. Anxious to enjoy a large share of the trade with the rapidly growing West, promoters in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia planned a canal some 360



APPROACHES TO TOWPATH ALONG CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO CANAL.

The National Park System, of which the National Capital Parks are a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and enjoyment of its people.

miles long. It was to connect Georgetown on the Potomac River, with Pittsburgh, on the Ohio River. On July 4, 1828, President John Quincy Adams formally began this tremendous undertaking by lifting the first shovelful of earth near Little Falls. In 1831, water was admitted into the first completed division—the section, which is now restored, between Georgetown and Seneca. Soon afterwards, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company encountered financial and legal difficulties. The increased cost and long delays in construction caused by these troubles forced the stockholders to give up part of the proposed route. This was the section beyond Cumberland, where the canal was to cross the Alleghenies and extend to Pittsburgh.

Navigation of the canal was begun as the divisions were completed: First, from Georgetown to Seneca in 1831; then to Harper's Ferry in 1833; to near Hancock, Md., in 1839; and finally to Cumberland in 1850. Canal boats carrying coal, flour, grains, and lumber were seen on the canal until 1924

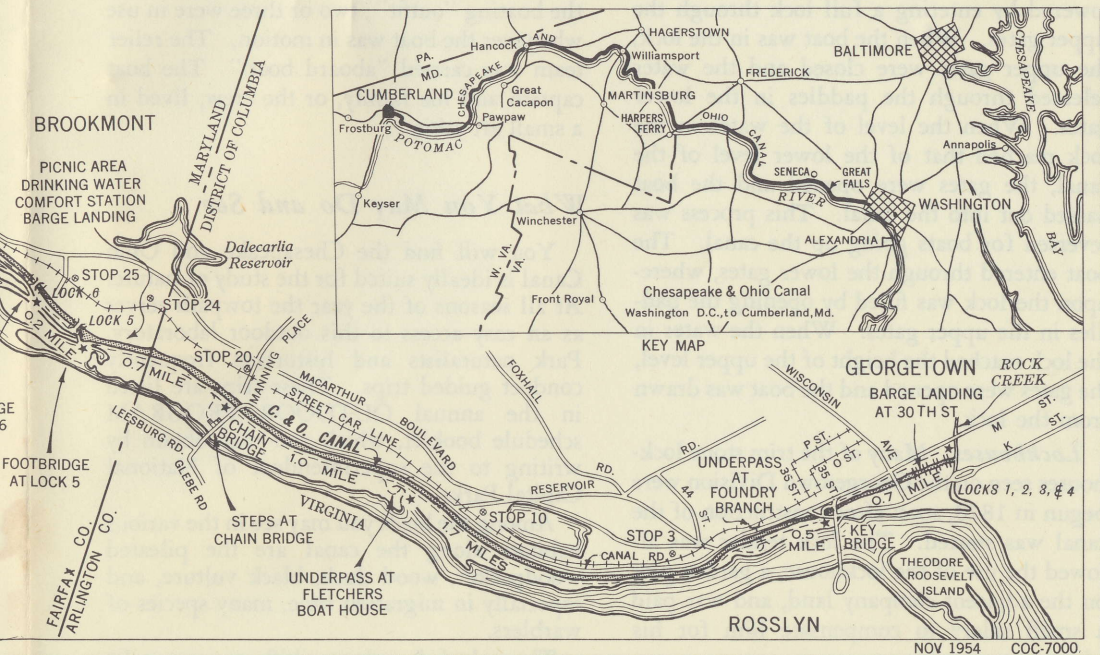
when loss of traffic to the more modern transportation agencies caused its abandonment.

Canal Dimensions, Structures, and Boats

Distances and elevations. The length of the canal is 184.5 miles. The total rise, or incline, between Georgetown and Cumberland is approximately 605 feet.

Dimensions of the canal. The Georgetown level (between Georgetown and Little Falls) is approximately 80 feet wide and 7 feet deep. Above Little Falls (Lock 5) the canal is about 60 feet wide and 6 feet deep. The towpath is generally 12 feet wide.

Locks. There were 74 lift-locks between Georgetown and Cumberland, each having the capacity to lift or lower a boat approximately 8 feet. Twenty-three of these are located on the restored Georgetown Division. The locks measure 100 feet long, 15 feet wide, and about 16 feet deep. Inlet locks at various points along the canal and a tide lock, or outlet lock, at the mouth of Rock Creek in



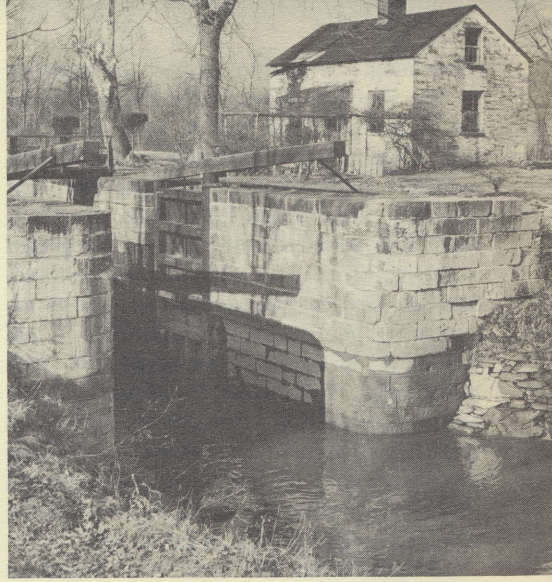


Typical canal boating scene of several decades ago.

Georgetown originally gave entrance to and exit from the canal and river.

The small iron paddle-gates located near the bottom of the large wooden lock-gates admit and release the water from the lock chamber. Boats moving down the canal were lowered by entering a full lock through the upper gates. When the boat was in the lock, the upper gates were closed and the water released through the paddles in the lower gates. When the level of the water in the lock reached that of the lower level of the canal, the gates were opened and the boat passed out into the canal. This process was reversed for boats going up the canal. The boat entered through the lower gates, whereupon the lock was filled by opening the paddles in the upper gates. When the water in the lock reached the height of the upper level, the gates were opened and the boat was drawn from the lock.

Lockhouses. Many of the trim stone lockhouses seen on the Georgetown Division were begun in 1828, soon after construction of the canal was started. The lock tender was allowed the use of the lockhouse, a garden plot on the adjacent company land, and was paid a small salary to compensate him for his labors.



Canal at Lock 13.

Canal boats. In the 1870's, during its heyday, as many as 540 boats were navigating the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. A typical boat measured 92 feet long and 14 feet 6 inches wide and carried 110 to 120 tons of cargo. Three to five mules were required for the boating "outfit"; two or three were in use whenever the boat was in motion. The relief team was carried "aboard boat." The boat captain and his family, or the crew, lived in a small aft cabin.

What You May Do and See

You will find the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal is ideally suited for the study of nature. At all seasons of the year the towpath serves as an easy access to this outdoor laboratory. Park naturalists and historians frequently conduct guided trips. These trips are listed in the annual OUTDOOR PROGRAM schedule booklet, which you may obtain by writing to the superintendent of National Capital Parks.

Among the birds you may see in the various habitats along the canal are the pileated woodpecker, wood duck, black vulture, and especially in migration time, many species of warblers.

The colorful spring wildflowers must be

left for all to enjoy. You are expected to observe park laws and not pick the flowers.

The stone in the canal structures and the bedrock exposed by construction tell fascinating stories of earth history.

Canoeing, boating, hiking, fishing, picnicking, and ice skating are among the recreational facilities you may enjoy. Special conducted tours, via an old-time mule-drawn barge, are available during the summer.

Georgetown to Seven Locks. The short narrow levels of the canal in Georgetown, once the busy tidewater terminal, afford picturesque views along the canal. These include the first four lift locks joined by small canal basins, old Wisconsin Avenue Bridge, and the north abutment of the Alexandria Aqueduct (Thirty-sixth Street). The feeder canal for the Georgetown level at Lock 5 was originally a part of the old Potomac Canal around Little Falls. The series of locks between No. 8 (Cabin John) and No. 14 (Canderock) is known as "Seven Locks."

Widewater. The construction of the canal here differs from any other section of the Georgetown Division. By using an inactive river channel, blocked from the main stream by the towpath embankments, the early canal engineers saved vast amounts of blasting and excavating. The extended width and increased depth of this flooded channel give Widewater the appearance of an unruffled mountain lake, while the high rugged rock formations through which it passes lend added beauty and interest to the scene. Widewater may be reached by a footbridge which crosses the canal near Old Angler's Inn.

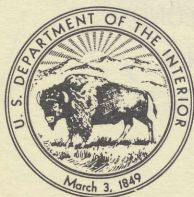
Great Falls. This is the most popular area on the restored section of the canal. To reach the towpath, you pass the Great Falls Tavern,

which was built between 1828 and 1831. The main room of the tavern houses the C. & O. Canal Museum, which contains many exhibits graphically telling the story of the canal. The room next to the museum is furnished as a typical lockhouse, the space being originally divided by a center wall. Directly east of the tavern is a trailside exhibit on flora and fauna found along the canal. Continuing east along the towpath the hiker follows the six locks toward Widewater. West of the tavern you may hike or canoe along one of the most scenic levels of the canal. An excellent view of the Great Falls of the Potomac may be seen from Conn Island which is reached by bridges located below the tavern.

Locks 21, 22, 23. This section of the Georgetown Division seems far removed from the rush of urban life. The long levels, quiet and not frequently visited, make this section of the canal well suited for nature walks and canoe trips.

Administration

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was purchased by the Federal Government in 1938. The canal occupies most of a narrow right-of-way, consisting of 5,253 acres, bought by the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company between 1828 and 1850. Restoration of the Georgetown Division, extending 22.1 miles between Georgetown, D. C., and Seneca, Md., was undertaken by the National Park Service soon after the canal was acquired. The area is a part of the National Capital Parks which is administered by the National Park Service of the United States Department of the Interior. Inquiries should be directed to the Superintendent, National Capital Parks, Interior Building, Washington 25, D. C.



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