

THE POTOMAC RIVER AND THE C&O CANAL

MAP THREE

Broad Run to Point of Rocks

ON THE FOURTH OF JULY, 1828, President John Quincy Adams turned the first spadeful of earth for the construction of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal at Little Falls (see Map One). On the same day, in a much less impressive ceremony, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad began construction of its right of way from Baltimore to Cumberland. The canal met the railroad head-on at Point of Rocks, where both transportation companies fought for the same narrow shelf of land along the Potomac. The canal won the legal battle—but lost the race to Cumberland. Beset by financial and labor problems, the canal construction lagged more than four years behind the railroad in reaching Cumberland, and never fully recovered.

The railroad still runs along the river for most of its length above the Monocacy River. Freight trains loaded with coal from the West Virginia highlands run daily along the river, as well as a more recent development: commuter trains from Harpers Ferry and Martinsburg to Washington, D.C.

During the Civil War, the area between Lower Mason Island and the Monocacy River known as White's Ford became one of the most important crossing points for Confederate Armies advancing into the North. Robert E. Lee crossed here from Virginia on September 6, 1862, on his way to Antietam. The river formed an important dividing line between North and South, and was crossed many times by advancing or retreating troops.

