

# Great Falls Tavern

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal  
National Historical Park  
Maryland





Great Falls Tavern and Lock 20, 1983.

## “An excellent hotel . . .”

The Great Falls Tavern and its surroundings remind park visitors of colorful early days along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. Soon after construction began on the canal in 1828, the Canal Company let the contract to build Lockhouse 12 at Great Falls, 14 miles west of Washington, D.C. This structure forms the central part of Great Falls Tavern.

**Raising the Roof** When the section of the canal between Georgetown and Seneca was opened to boat traffic, prospects for a thriving hotel patronage appeared bright. In 1830 the Canal Company granted the lockkeeper, Mr. W.W. Fenlon, permission to operate a hotel and awarded him \$2,100 to enlarge the lockhouse for this purpose. The lockhouse roof was raised to provide a full second floor. A three-story addition was built on the north side and the south wing was added as living quarters for the lockkeeper's family. These additions were of brick, plastered and scored to look like the large stone blocks used in building the original lockhouse. Porches were added later. Over the years the porches, fences, and walks have undergone changes. The present garden of flowers and herbs is based on records of a century ago.

The first floor housed a barroom, dining room, and ballroom. The second floor was divided into individual and

dormitory sleeping rooms each with its own fireplace. On the third floor the “honeymoon suite” had a lovely view up the canal. The locktender and his family lived in the south wing. A separate building for cooking and storage of food helped guard against fire. Water had to be hauled from a spring about 300 yards to the northeast until a well was dug nearby in 1877.

By June 1831 the hotel was open for business. It was called the Crommelin House in honor of a Dutch family who had helped to finance the construction of the canal. That same spring two U.S. Army engineers who were surveying the canal reported that they found: “At this lock (#20) an excellent hotel kept by Mr. Fenlon. The house is built upon the ground of the company, and with company's funds, and is a necessary and a great accommodation to those who visit this great work.”

**Hotel Closed** Down through the years the house at Great Falls had many uses. During the 1840s the Canal Company twice revoked the Crommelin House license to sell liquor. Alcohol consumption by Canal people was a continuing problem. In 1849 the company closed the hotel, then in 1851 the ballroom became a grocery store. Finally, in 1858 the hotel was reopened but without spirits.

Summer day alongside the canal, 1889.



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Outings at Great Falls, Md., 1910-1920.

Top: Suspension footbridge to Falls.  
Lower: A party locking through, 1917.

Top: Canoeing past Crommelin House.  
Lower: Wanderlust hiking group.

**The Social Center** In that same year the Army Corps of Engineers began work on a water conduit which was to serve the City of Washington. The construction directly behind Crommelin House caused such damage that the U.S. Government was obliged to pay \$1200 for restoration. In 1862 the local newspaper encouraged guests to come again to the hotel, "well supplied with everything, newly-fitted up and handsomely decorated . . . ."

In the heyday of Crommelin House in the late 1800s, up to 100 boats locked through daily on the way to Georgetown, Cumberland, or points in between. Packet boats carried passengers along the canal. The innkeeper rented every available space to travelers and to sightseers who wished to view the Great Falls of the Potomac, a short walk away. The community surrounding the inn grew to more than 100 persons. The hotel served as a social center for local people who formed a Grange, debating group, shooting club, Sons of Temperance, Sunday school, Knights of Pythias Lodge, even a baseball club. For a number of years Great Falls had its own post office.

**Fish and Game** Even in winter when the canal was drained and transportation limited to horse and carriage, the Crommelin House kept busy. At Christmas dinner in 1880 guests dined on two "fine wild turkeys" captured by the hotel proprietors. Fishing parties were popular in the spring and local newspapers reported plentiful catches of bass and shad. The hotel grounds hosted jousting tournaments during the summer. A "Queen of Love and Beauty" was crowned to the music of a string band, celebrities gave speeches, and the winning "knights" received prizes.

In the early 1900s the Canal Company rented the Crommelin House to a private club; the lockkeeper moved to a smaller house nearby. A 10-mile, single-track trolley line operated for a few years to spur development between Great Falls and Bethesda, but the project failed and the line was abandoned. In 1915 the road between Angler's Inn and Great Falls was improved and the newly popular automobiles sallied forth to replace other forms of transport.

**Floods Win Out** Throughout its history the C&O Canal has been plagued by floods. The great flood of 1889 forced the Canal Company into bankruptcy. The flood of 1924 washed out its operation completely. However, Crommelin House, now called Old Lock Tavern, continued to operate. When the National Park Service acquired it in 1938, the hotel was still favored for its chicken dinners. Ten years later fire damaged the building but the Park Service restored and reopened it in 1950 as a museum.

In 1971 Congress established the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park, and Great Falls Tavern became the park's main visitor center. Today, in the tradition of past hospitality, visitors are welcomed to its museum, audiovisual shows, and barge program. Park Service staff and volunteers offer activities ranging from history lectures and old-time music gatherings to hikes and bird watching to rock climbing and river-safety training.

Children play tag on the lawn, the mule-drawn barge "locks through," and visitors can sense the spirit of days gone by. Reflections of the past swirl in the quiet waters of the canal at the Tavern's door.

**GREAT FALLS TAVERN**  
Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park  
Great Falls, Maryland

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