

Great Falls Park

VIRGINIA

☆GPO: 1976-211-313/70

Great Falls Park is located at the intersection of Va. 193 (Georgetown Pike) and Va. 738 (Old Dominion Drive) in Great Falls, Virginia. It is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Address inquiries to the Superintendent, George Washington Memorial Parkway, Turkey Run Park, McLean, VA 22101; or to Great Falls Park, 9200 Old Dominion Drive, Great Falls, VA 22066. Telephone 703-759-2915.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department also assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

At the fall line of the Potomac River, Great Falls Park of Virginia is a riverside landscape of scenic beauty and historic importance. Here, visitors can see the beautiful Potomac in its turbulent plunge over a massive rock outcrop. Here, too, are the ruins of the Patowmack Canal, which was proposed and planned by George Washington and used by riverboatmen to skirt the falls. Nearby are the foundations of Matildaville, a river town that died with the decline of canal traffic.

VISITING THE PARK

The park is open from 9 a.m. until dark every day except December 25. Handicapped persons may use reserved parking spaces nearest the visitor center.

Please stop at the visitor center for an introduction to the park. Come in and browse. Exhibits on a variety of subjects are changed periodically.

The Falls of the Potomac can be viewed from overlooks a short walk away from the visitor center. The trail to one of the overlooks is paved.

For what to do at Great Falls Park, Virginia, see the other side of this folder.

Another place to view the Falls is on the Maryland side of the river. That area also is known as Great Falls Park, but it's really part of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park. To get to the Great Falls Tavern Visitor Center, take exit 15, the first beltway exit across the river in Maryland.

HISTORICAL NOTES

The Indians rightly named the river Patowmack, or trading place. The river was in constant harmony with their way of life, providing food, water, and an easily accessible transportation network.

When the first Europeans settled in this area, they, too, saw the great river as a trading place, but one of even greater dimensions. They had the tools with which they could remove hazards and make the river navigable in its entirety.

As a young man, George Washington surveyed the Potomac River and envisioned it as a trade link with the west—the lands beyond the Appalachians. He wanted to tie the productive farmlands of the Ohio Valley, where he eventually owned thousands of acres, with the markets on the eastern seaboard. He proposed a series of five canals that would bypass the unnavigable stretches of the river. In 1784 the Patowmack Company was formed with Washington its first president.

Construction began the next year and was not completed until 1802. The canal at Little Falls on the Maryland side of the river just above Georgetown and the one at Great Falls took the longest time to build because they had to be fitted with locks which early American engineers had little experience in designing. Skirting canals were dug further upriver on the Virginia side at Seneca Falls and at Harpers Ferry. At other rough-water places on the river the canal company simply dredged and cleared a path right in the riverbed.

During the 26 years that the canal system was in operation, flour, corn, whisky, tobacco, furs, iron ore, and raw wood materials were poled down the river on flatboats from as far away as Cumberland in the Allegheny Mountains. The flatboats, which were about 23 meters (75 feet) long and 1.5 meters (5 feet) wide and pointed at both ends, usually took about three days to travel the 296 kilometers (185 miles) from Cumberland to Georgetown just above the Federal City. The return trip took about 10 days, but most boatmen saved time by dismantling their boats, selling them for lumber, and walking back.

In 1793, when trade began to flourish in the area, "Lighthouse Harry" Lee, a Revolutionary War hero and friend of Washington, sponsored a town to be built at Great Falls near the Patowmack Company locks. Lee had every expectation that the town would prosper and named it Matildaville in honor of his first wife, Matilda.

Matildaville was to flourish and grow with the canal, but trade sharply declined in the 1820s and



From Virginia the view of Great Falls is one of enduring beauty.

with decline came the town's demise as a trade center. The town never realized its original charter size of 17.2 hectares (43 acres), but it did have an inn, a forge, a gristmill and other out-buildings.

Although Washington's hope of uniting east and west by an inland waterway was a practical idea, his hopes for the canal system fell short of their full dimensions. Drastic changes in the water level of the Potomac River brought about by floods or droughts would close the canals. But poor management and a lack of operating capital also contributed to the Patowmack Company's lack of success. In 1828, the commercial rights to the Patowmack Company were sold to the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Company, which was organized to build and operate a new canal on the Maryland side of the river. This canal eventually linked Cumberland and Georgetown in a continuous, closed-water system unaffected by all but the most drastic flooding of the Potomac River. By making the level of water in the canal constant, regardless of the river's height, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal surmounted the major problem of the old Patowmack Canal.

Today, the ruins of the Patowmack Canal and Matildaville are in an area reclaimed by nature. Footpaths lead through the trees and undergrowth to the walls and foundations of some of the town buildings. Two of the five canal locks that were built at Great Falls remain standing. Blasting holes in the sides of the rock can still be detected. These ruins and the shallow bed that lies across the park terrain are the remnants of Washington's canal, one of the first highways west.

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 parts of present-day Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, and Pennsylvania and eastern sections of 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 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 trees, 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; and the beaver, nature's own civil engineer. Here, too, are the wood duck, the orb-weave spider, the muskrat, the broadwing hawk, the red fox, the white-tailed deer, and the box turtle, which travels no farther in a lifetime than humans do on foot in a day. Take your time and look around; you're bound to find other forms of plant and animal life here at Great Falls.

WHAT TO DO

Special tours and hikes are conducted all year. Park rangers lead history and nature walks to points of interest every day during the summer. See the list of times at the visitor center. Large groups may schedule tours any time of the year by calling the visitor center at 703-759-2915.

Hiking. The park roads and trails are for exploring on your own. Along the blue-blazed River Trail are places to stop and view the Potomac River and Mather Gorge. The major interpretive trail goes along the old canal. Novice and expert hikers will find other suitably enjoyable trails within the park.

Picnicking. Picnic tables, a limited number of grills, and a picnic shelter are to be used on a first-

come, first-served basis; they cannot be reserved. Please use charcoal or artificial fuels; ground fires are prohibited.

Fishing. Catfish, bass, carp, and a variety of panfish are caught in the Potomac River. Persons over 16 years old will need a Maryland or Virginia license to fish in the Potomac.

Rock Climbing. Climbing on the rocks near the river is an especially dangerous activity. Only experienced climbers with proper equipment should attempt to scale the cliff walls. Please register to climb at the visitor center.

Playground. Swings, see-saws, and a slide are near the pavilion in the picnic area.

Horse Trails. Horse riders should ask for a trail map of horse trails. Riding on trails designated for other use or in the picnic area is prohibited.

Snack Bar. Food service is in the visitor center.

REGULATIONS

Motor vehicles are not allowed on the trails or in the picnic area. Park only in the designated areas. Please observe posted speed limits.

Pets must be leashed and under control at all times.

Camping is not allowed within the park. Information on campgrounds in the Washington area is available at the visitor center.

There is no boating access in the park. A public marina with launching ramp is administered 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) upstream by the Fairfax County Park Authority.

You are prohibited from picking wildflowers; killing, capturing, or injuring wildlife; destroying, defacing, or removing trees, rocks, or ruins.

SAFETY

Strong currents are extremely hazardous at all places along the banks of the Potomac River in the park. **NO SWIMMING OR WADING;** this prohibition is strictly enforced. **STAY OFF ROCKS AT WATER'S EDGE,** and closely watch and control children at all times. These warnings must be heeded for a safe visit.

