

Potomac Portage: Great Falls Park and the Potomac Divide

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Abstract

Dr. Stephen Potter has a long-standing interest in Great Falls Park, a unit of the George Washington Memorial Parkway (GWMP), in Virginia. The park is located in the Potomac Gorge, a rocky area where rapids divide the upper and lower Potomac River valley. Breathtaking in its beauty, Great Falls was also an important feature of the Native American and Colonial era landscape. The falls were able to be crossed, but not without difficulty and danger. Native American petroglyphs are concentrated in Great Falls, attesting to the importance or significance of the area. There were several Colonial ventures in Great Falls, including an early canal. Dr. Potter was drawn to the rich history of the park, and its interpretive potential, and was instrumental in having an archaeological overview and assessment conducted. The work is being done as a multi-year project and is currently ongoing.

General Setting and Project Background

Great Falls Park, a unit of the George Washington Memorial Parkway (GWMP), is located along the Potomac River approximately 15 miles upstream from Washington, D.C. The park is about 800 acres in size and encompasses a set of dramatic rapids and waterfalls. It has its primary facilities on the Virginia side of the river. The waterfall at Great Falls is the largest waterfall of the Potomac River; it drops about 80 feet over a distance of about 1,000 feet.

The Potomac River has a fall zone rather than a fall line. The Fall Zone includes the rapids, falls, and swift water at Great Falls and extends down-river for approximately 10 miles to Little Falls, which is where the Potomac River estuary begins. Great Falls is actually within the Piedmont physiographic province, while Little Falls and Theodore Roosevelt Island are located at the transition to the Coastal Plain. The Fall Zone includes stretches of river with a deep gorge, including Mather Gorge, which is located just below Great Falls, and the Potomac Gorge, which is further downstream.

The park includes Piedmont upland landforms, an ancient abandoned flood-chute of the Potomac River, and Pleistocene terraces related to the ancient flood-chute. The park parking lots, picnic areas, visitor center, and the historic Patowmack Canal and town of Matildaville (discussed below) are all situated on the ancient stream terrace (Southworth and Dennenny 2006).

Great Falls Park is the subject of a multi-year study being conducted for the National Park Service, National Capital Region (NPS NCR). The project will assist the NPS in complying with Section 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The study is currently ongoing, and two years of the four-year study have been completed, with the work being done by The Louis Berger Group, Inc. (Louis Berger). In the present paper, I will review the findings from Years 1 and 2 at Great Falls, and will talk about the significant resources of the park. I also will discuss the importance of Great Falls to Regional Archeologist Stephen Potter, and the important role Mr. Potter has played in creating and guiding the multi-year study of the park.

Historical Overview

The park property has a rich history with three main periods of significance. The first of these is prehistory, or Native American history. Great Falls may have been an important part of the Native American landscape for as long as humans have inhabited the Middle Atlantic Region, although no Paleoindian sites or finds have been documented, and Late Woodland period sites are sparse. Habitation sites in the park area have evidence of occupation beginning around 6500 BC (Gardner 1969) and extending through to about AD 900.

Archeologists have speculated that the fall zone, where the Great Falls are situated, served as a largely uninhabited buffer between coastal Algonquian tribes in the Tidewater zone and tribes of different ethnic or linguistic make-up that lived in the Piedmont. There are no known village sites at the falls. No large sites of ritual feasting and gathering, and no known sites of large-scale fish harvesting and cooking. A large group of rich Native American sites has been identified around the bottom of Little Falls, at the eastern end of the fall zone; however, the next comparable group of large sites going upriver is in the area of Selden Island and the McKee-Beshers Wildlife Refuge, more than 5 miles upriver from Great Falls (Fiedel et al. 2005). No generalization about how much contact there was between these zones can apply to all of prehistory, but it might be that for very long periods of prehistory there was rather little contact between people upstream and downstream of Great Falls.

In anthropological terms, the falls were a liminal space; it was a space in-between homelands, a place of transition. As a boundary it was quite permeable; portage around the falls and rock outcrops is not overly difficult. Numerous smaller Native American sites dot the area around the falls, but it must be said that their nature and function are not well understood. The sites identified by the falls may have been short-term camps used by people portaging around the falls, or they may have been small fishing

stations. Prior to the recent NPS study, there was not sufficient investigation of the sites to adequately characterize them.

As cultural anthropologists have discussed (e.g. Turner 1969), liminal spaces can be imbued with magico-religious or spiritual significance, and can be integrated into ritual behavior. Of course not all liminal places occupy important cultural and spiritual space. And moreover, spirituality and ritual can be nearly impossible to read into the archaeological record of the Middle Atlantic region.

At Great Falls, a concentration of petroglyphs has been identified around the falls, suggesting that the falls had great significance to Native American peoples. One of the petroglyphs is a panel of images located near Difficult Run. The panel shows several stick figures with atlatls (spear-throwers). The panel was identified in the late 1980s and brought to the attention of Stephen Potter, who recorded the site with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. The petroglyphs were studied in more detail by Ed Lenik (Lenik 2009). Mr. Potter has interpreted the panel as showing a hunting party (“group hunt”) and as recording “a scene frozen in time” (Lenik 2009: 77). During our time together in the park he mentioned the great fondness he has for the rock art panel.

Additional petroglyphs have been recorded near Great Falls outside of the boundary of the park. A well-known fish effigy or “fish head” glyph has been found near the falls within the C&O Canal parkland (Curry 1996; Silsby n.d.).

The second period of historical importance of the park is from about 1785-1828 AD. It was during this period that George Washington established the Patowmack Canal, which ran through the park and included a small town known as Matildaville. The Patowmack Canal was designed to skirt the rapids and waterfalls at Great Falls, thereby fostering commerce along the Potomac River upriver of the District of Columbia. George Washington was committed to the idea of making a navigation link between the Tidewater and the Ohio Valley, believing that the link would tie together the expanding nation both politically and economically. In 1785 Washington forged an agreement between Maryland and Virginia regarding Potomac River navigation. Five canals were envisioned, located between Harper’s Ferry and Little Falls. Locks were needed at both the Great Falls and Little Falls canals (Barka and Troup 1979; Barnes 1978).

Canal construction commenced at Great Falls in 1785 and was completed in 1802. The canal was just over a mile-long and had five locks to handle an 80-foot drop in elevation between the upstream and downstream ends. The construction required complex engineering and a large labor force. Workers on

the canal construction consisted of skilled and unskilled laborers, including the labor of slaves, freedmen, and indentured servants. The work included black-powder blasting through rocky cliffs, and stone-masonry for construction of the canal prism and locks. Portions of the open river channel were also cleared of obstructions.

Company headquarters and staging areas were along the canal in the town of Matildaville. The town was chartered in 1790 and included a number of residences, an inn, a market, a grist mill, sawmill, foundry, ice house, workers' barracks, and boarding houses. In the park visitors can still see above-ground remains of many of these structures. Matildaville has been the subject of considerable historic and archaeological work, and both the town and the canal structures have been recorded as archaeological resources.

Neither the town nor the canal prospered. Potomac River navigation was plagued by extreme variability in stream flow, and the canal was only navigable for one-to-two months per year, principally during spring flooding. The canal structures were expensive to build and operate, and the Patowmack Canal Company operated heavily in debit. When the Erie Canal opened in 1825, this spelled the end of the Patowmack Canal and it shuttered in 1828. The assets of the Patowmack Canal Company were sold to the newly-formed Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company, who never utilized the canal and lock structures at Great Falls.

There was a brief attempt to turn Matildaville into a mill town and textile manufacturing center. The Great Falls Manufacturing Company purchased the canal and town in 1839, and re-chartered the town as "South Lowell." The textile operations continued into the 1850s. After this point the community at Great Falls dissolved. A tavern remained, while other structures fell into ruins. After the Civil War, use of the land moved to be almost entirely for fishing and recreation.

In 1906 an amusement park was built at Great Falls, marking the third period of historical importance of the park. The amusement park included a carousel, a dance pavilion, ice skating, overlook decks, an observation tower, a Lovers Lane along the canal ruins, and an inn (Dickey's Inn) for lodging and dinners. The park and was connected to the District of Columbia by a trolley line. The amusement park was turned over to the National Park Service in 1966 and Great Falls Park was born. The carousel continued operation at the park until 1972 when it was destroyed by flooding associated with Hurricane Agnes.

Multi-year Investigation

The Louis Berger Group, Inc. (Louis Berger) was contracted by the National Park Service, National Capital Region (NPS NCR) to conduct two years of what is planned to be a multi-year study of Great Falls Park. Like other multi-year studies Stephen Potter planned for parks of the NCR, the project is intended to inventory and evaluate resources thereby meeting regulatory requirements, but has elements designed to serve diverse audiences – park interpretive staff, the general public, and professional archaeologists. At Great Falls Stephen Potter was involved in all aspects of the project, from working to secure funding, to providing input on the research design, and even periodic days in the field.

The first year of the program focused on background research, especially a review of previous reports, and the archeological survey of previously unexplored high-potential areas. In all, approximately 42 acres was investigated during Year One, amounting to approximately six percent of the park, and encompassing a majority of the high potential land that has not been previously surveyed.

Sixteen new archeological sites were defined during Year One, and three sites originally defined on the basis of map research or surface inspection were confirmed through subsurface testing. The sites consist of prehistoric camps/lithic scatters, a prehistoric stone-tool workshop, domestic sites dating to the canal period, domestic sites dating to the later 1800s, and a mill site (Towlston Mill) spanning the pre-canal to the post-canal era (ca. 1750 to 1850).

The canal-period domestic sites identified were found beyond the bounds of Matildaville, showing that occupation of the Great Falls area was expansive while the canal was in use. The prehistoric sites, taken together, show that camping around Great Falls was fairly common in some parts of prehistory, with almost every level spot near the Potomac, the Glade, or Difficult Run yielding at least a few flakes of stone.

The second year of the program included additional survey of previously unexplored areas, and featured evaluation studies of two previously-documented sites. During Year 2, approximately 30 acres were surveyed. This covered essentially all of the remaining high potential area for archaeological sites, outside of the Glade and Matildaville. To complement the archeological investigation, geomorphological studies were carried out by Dr. Daniel Wagner of Geo-Sci Consultants LLC.

Four new archeological sites were defined during Year Two, and one previously defined site was re-investigated. All were prehistoric camps.

Additional testing was carried out on two known sites, the Stout Site (44FX0002) and the Difficult Run Site (44FX0515). The Stout Site is located on the north bank of Mine Run, just west of the road to the parking areas. The site occupies two terrace landforms along the stream. Test excavations were carried out at this site in the 1960s by archaeologists from Catholic University under the direction of William Gardner (Gardner et al. 1969). Catholic University found a variety of Archaic Period diagnostic artifacts and also Middle Woodland Period diagnostics.

Louis Berger excavated seven test units at the Stout Site. Artifact finds were generally consistent with the initial reconnaissance of the site, with a number of Late Archaic Period projectile points recovered and also finds of Early Woodland pottery. Louis Berger recovered approximately 1000 artifacts from the site, mostly debitage but also bifaces and broken tools. Tools recovered include a drill and an endscraper, suggesting hide-working or resource processing as a site activity. Moderate quantities of fire-cracked rock were recovered from the site, but no distinct hearths were found. An analysis of the site is still ongoing; however, an initial analysis is that the site served as a short-term encampment, perhaps hunting related, for multiple episodes during the period from approximately 6500 to 500 BC. It is also apparent that tool production was a major site activity.

The second site investigated was the Difficult Run Site (44FX0515), located at the mouth of Difficult Run on a narrow high terrace at the foot of steep bluffs. The Archaeological Society of Virginia conducted limited investigation of the site in 1981, and recovered a small prehistoric artifact assemblage of unknown age (VDHR records).

Louis Berger investigated the site with the excavation of ten test units. Soils at the site are deep with archaeological potential extending deeper than able to be tested with small hand-excavations. The upper sediment package at the site extends to about 48 centimeters below ground surface and includes artifacts from the Late Archaic and more recent periods.

Louis Berger recovered approximately 600 artifacts, mostly debris from making stone tools, but also including small quantities of prehistoric ceramic and also one fragment of a soapstone bowl. A few biface fragments were also recovered. Some fire cracked rock was recovered from the testing, suggesting a short-term encampment. The soapstone bowl fragment indicates an occupation during the Late or Terminal Archaic Period (circa 2000 BC), while the prehistoric ceramics are Accokeek and Popes Creek wares, indicating occupation of the site in the Early and Middle Woodland periods.

The Stout Site and Difficult Run Site are the only sites subjected to intensive excavation in Years 1 and 2 of the investigation of Great Falls Park. Years 3 and 4 may include the investigation of canal-related resources and parts of Matildaville, although the research plans are still being finalized by NPS-NCR.

The two site investigations were able to shed light on prehistoric encampments at Great Falls. Main occupations date to the Late and Terminal Archaic Periods (3750 to 1250 BC), with smaller occupations during the Early Woodland (1250 to 500 BC) and Middle Woodland (500 BC to AD 950) periods. The sites seem to have served as relatively short-term encampments associated with tool production and resource processing. Looking at the body of sites in Great Falls Park, there is only trace evidence of Native American use of the landscape in the earlier and later portions of prehistory. As part of a study of the C&O canal, Louis Berger found nearly identical information at the downstream end of the Fall Zone, at Little Falls (Fiedel et al. 2005). Seasonal fish runs were clearly exploited near Little Falls, but no evidence of their exploitation has been found at Great Falls.

While Native Americans undoubtedly did portage around Great Falls, the distribution of encampment sites is diffuse, and no archaeological data yet that illuminates these routes or trails. Perhaps more data will be generated on the portage routes in the two upcoming years of study of the park.

In conclusion, Stephen Potter has a long-standing interest in the archaeology of Great Falls Park and has long been an advocate for the park. He studied the petroglyphs of the park and through them recognized the falls as a special place in the Native American landscape. The falls and the petroglyphs are also clearly dear to his heart. Stephen was able to muster resources for a multi-year archaeological study, and has been guiding this research; for this he deserves gratitude from the archaeological community and the broader public.

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