

## ADMINISTRATION

Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

For general park information, phone 301-739-4200 or write the Superintendent, C & O Canal National Historical Park, Box 4, Sharpsburg, Md. 21782. For specific information about the lower section from Georgetown to Seneca, phone Great Falls Tavern, 301-299-3613. In case of emergency anytime in the park, call 301-739-4206.

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 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**

# Chesapeake & Ohio Canal

NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA/MARYLAND

The C. & O. Canal towpath can serve as an afternoon's return to the past, a week-long hiking trip, a place for quiet meditation, a site for an ambitious field trip concerned with ecology, geology, engineering history, economic theory, and local culture.

It offers the sudden delights of wood ducks with their young, of cardinals and bluebirds flashing among the foliage, of a fox scrambling up a bank, of the ruined industrial sites of another era.

Weathered by time, the aqueducts and Paw Paw Tunnel have become more than engineering feats. They now are subtle parts of the landscape. The canal's beginning, the tidal lock at Rock Creek, is divorced from its main section and hidden in a clump of weeds, and its end, the basin at Cumberland, has been filled, but on all that remains between them the special pleasures of walking and looking can be fully realized.

The canal and its right-of-way are symbolically without beginning and end, for they offer a journey into the past surrounded by the timelessness of living things.



The canalboat was home for many families.



Locking through.



The steam locomotive hastened the end of the canal era.



Canalboat headlamp.



Conococheague Creek aqueduct at the turn of the century.



Young boys often drove the mule teams.



Canalboats at Williamsport wait for their next haul.



Lock 33 across from Harpers Ferry.



Canalboats at Cumberland taking on coal for Georgetown.



## WATERWAY TO THE WEST

A national transportation dilemma confronted the United States at the beginning of the 19th century—the Appalachians had to be conquered to unite the commercial establishments of the East with the frontier resources of the West. Significantly improved transportation facilities were needed to link the two regions.

In 1806, President Thomas Jefferson's interest in developing national resources and expanding the country prompted him to secure Federal money to build a national highway across the Alleghenies as a step toward opening the West and tying the rich Ohio River Valley to the Eastern seaboard. By 1817, the National Road from Cumberland, Md., to Wheeling on the Ohio River was completed. Maryland made a bid for this traffic by opening an extensive system of State turnpikes or roads radiating from the National Road to the seaboard. Pennsylvania had already spent millions on a road system constructed westward across the Alleghenies and converging at Pittsburgh.

The heavy traffic on this road system soon led to the search for and development of an even more economical means of transportation. A belief that water transportation on either canals or improved riverbeds was vastly superior to roads swept the country in the early 1800's. The Erie Canal, begun in 1817 and opened for its 584-kilometer (363-mile) length in 1825, had successfully provided an economical outlet in the East for the rich raw materials of the West.

The Chesapeake & Ohio Canal was begun as a proposed waterway along the established Potomac and trans-Allegheny trade route to the Ohio River. It was the economic heir of the Old Potomack Company which had attempted unsuccessfully from 1785 to 1819 to fulfill George Washington's dream of developing a practical water route through the Potomac Valley.

Construction of the C. & O. Canal started on July 4, 1828. After much glowing oratory President John Quincy Adams turned the first spade of dirt. On the same day, construction of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad began in Baltimore. The race for the West across the Alleghenies was on!

From the beginning, the canal was beset with many problems. Lumber, building stone, lime for cement, and other building supplies were often scarce and expensive. Excavation frequently revealed unexpected hardpan, slate, or gravel which made the work difficult and costly. Many difficulties were encountered in securing land titles for the right-of-way. Land costs were frequently above estimate and excessively high.

Because the Potomac Valley was predominately agricultural, skilled labor was virtually unavailable. The canal company turned to Europe for indentured labor. Men arriving from Ireland, Germany, Netherlands, England, and Wales soon provided a pool of stone cutters, masons, carpenters, and laborers. Welsh miners were imported later to dig Paw Paw Tunnel. Many workers became the unwitting victims of unscrupulous contractors. Food was often poor and housing consisted of makeshift dwellings. Diseases swept through the labor camps. Because of rivalries and prejudices the workers brought with them from

Europe, there was much fighting between groups. Sometimes the men rioted when they weren't paid and the militia had to be called out. On top of these troubles, the B. & O. Railroad continued to press westward.

Canal and railroad were soon competing for property rights. The C. & O. Canal Company had decided to locate its waterway along the north bank of the Potomac in Maryland. The B. & O. was organized in such haste that the final decision concerning its route was not made until after it had gotten underway. The railroad then decided to construct its line from Baltimore through Frederick to Point of Rocks in the Potomac Valley. Confident of securing the right-of-way in the Potomac Valley inherited from the Old Potomack Company, the C. & O. Canal Company directors proceeded in a leisurely fashion to secure necessary land titles. However, the railroad moved more aggressively and sent agents far up the valley to secure land rights from the inhabitants at many points—particularly at the narrow gorge above Point of Rocks. Because the bluffs come close to the river, there was room for only one of the lines. The B. & O. Railroad claimed the right-of-way and secured an injunction against the canal company. The canal company appealed and the courts eventually ruled in the canal's favor—thus ending a 4-year bitter struggle.

The canal was used as each section was completed: first, from Georgetown to Seneca in 1831; then to Harpers Ferry in 1833; and to near Hancock in 1839, 216 kilometers (134 miles) from its beginning in Georgetown. About this time the canal encountered serious financial problems and the next 81 kilometers (50.5 miles) to Cumberland were not completed until 1850—8 years after the railroad reached that point. The faster and less expensive railroad had made the canal obsolete,

and the C. & O. Canal Company dropped its plans to continue another 290 kilometers (180 miles) westward to Pittsburgh.

The company had spent \$22 million to build 297 kilometers (184.5 miles) of canal consisting of 74 lift locks which raised it from sea level at Georgetown to 184 meters (605 feet) at Cumberland, 11 stone aqueducts which carried the canal over major Potomac tributaries, seven dams to supply water for the canal, a number of waste weirs to control the water level, hundreds of culverts to carry roads and streams under the canal, a 950-meter (3,117-foot) tunnel to take it under a mountain, and an assortment of stop locks, river locks, bridges, shops, section houses, and lock houses. The canal generally was 15 to 18 meters (50 to 60 feet) wide at towpath level, sloped to 9 to 12 meters (30 to 40 feet) across at the bottom and carried a minimum depth of 1.8 meters (6 feet) of water. The size of the locks—4.57 meters (15 feet) wide and 30 meters (98 feet) long—restricted the size of the barges. A typical barge was 4.41 meters (14.5 feet) wide, 28 meters (92 feet) long, drew 1.37 meters (4.5 feet) of water, and could carry upwards of 122 metric tons (120 tons) of cargo.

The canal did not attain any great measure of economic success, but it provided a prominent and leisurely means of transporting coal, flour, grain, and lumber to Washington. In the early summer of 1889, a titanic flood swept the Potomac Valley, leaving the canal in ruin. However, it was rebuilt and used until 1924, when another flood seriously damaged the already financially troubled canal company.

## RECREATION ALONG THE CANAL

A wide variety of recreational activities can be enjoyed in the park.

A Georgetown Visitor Center is located between Thomas Jefferson and 30th Streets on the Canal.

Conducted walks and evening programs are offered year-round to visitors. Information about these activities can be obtained at information stations and the superintendent's office. A museum at Great Falls, Md., open daily, helps to tell the story of the canal.

**HIKING AND BICYCLING.** The canal towpath is an elevated trail, originally 3.6 meters (12 feet) wide. Built mainly on earth and crushed stone, it made a good walking surface for the mules that pulled the barges. Although land along the canal is overgrown in many places today, the towpath is unobstructed and follows the entire length of the canal. Much of it becomes slippery for several days after a hard rain, and after sudden heavy rainstorms in the mountains or after lengthy periods of rainfall locally, portions of the towpath may wash out or become flooded. Hikers and bicyclists should turn back when this occurs. Night travel on the towpath, especially alone, is not recommended.

**CAMPING.** All camping is restricted to designated areas.

"Hiker-Biker" overnight campsites for tent camping are spaced approximately every 8 kilometers (5 miles) along the 261-kilometer (165-mile) section from Carderock to Cumberland. The campsites are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. They have toilets, picnic tables, fire grills, and, in most cases, water. All camping gear must be carried in. Only 2 campsites, Antietam Creek and Mountain Lock, have adjacent parking.

One campsite, with pit toilets only, is midway between Seneca and Georgetown and is available by permit to through hiker-bikers. Such permits may be requested from the park ranger at Great Falls Tavern, 11710 MacArthur Blvd., Potomac, Md. 20854.

Drive-in camp areas at McCoys Ferry, Fifteen Mile Creek, and Spring Gap are first-come, first-served. They have primitive facilities only and there are no hookups for trailers. These sites are not for group camping.

Group campgrounds are at Antietam Creek, Millstone Point, Fifteen Mile Creek, and the Marsden Tract.

**CANOEING AND BOATING.** Canoeing is popular on the canal in the watered levels between Georgetown and Violets Lock near Seneca. Portages are required around each lock. Canoes can be rented at Swains Lock (milepost 16) and at Fletcher's Boat House (milepost 3). Only short and widely separated stretches of the canal upstream from Violets Lock are deep enough for canoeing. Some of these are Big Pool, Little Pool, and a 7-kilometer (4.5-mile) section from Town Creek to Oldtown. Only canoes and boats without motors are permitted on the canal.

Canoeing on the Potomac River is recommended only for experienced canoeists. Portages must be made at Dams 2, 3, 4, and 5, the power plant dam at Williamsport, and the industrial dam at North Branch. For safety reasons, canoeing is strongly discouraged between Dam 3 and the U.S. 340 bridge downstream from Harpers Ferry, in the area of the Great Falls of the Potomac, and in the Little Falls to Chain Bridge (Va. 120) area.

All boating on the Potomac River is subject to Maryland regulations; the river is not part of the park. Slack-water areas behind dams are excellent places for most types of boating. Public access to the river is provided at 14 National Park Service boat ramps. There are also private and State boat ramps on the Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia shores. Fees are usually charged for use of private ramps.

**VEHICLES ON TOWPATH.** All motor vehicles, including motorcycles and snowmobiles, and horse-drawn vehicles are prohibited on the towpath.

**HORSEBACK RIDING.** Horseback riding is permitted from Seneca to Cumberland. Because of limited facilities, large equestrian groups must make camping arrangements with private landowners. Horses must be kept 30.5 meters (100 feet) away from picnic areas and campgrounds.

**PICNICKING.** There are several designated areas with facilities for your comfort, but you are welcome to picnic anywhere along the canal. Fires are permitted only where fireplaces are provided. Please leave the area as you would like to find it.

**SUPPLIES.** Camping supplies, ice, food, and soft drinks may be purchased at most stores along the various access roads.

## FOR YOUR SAFETY

Please use caution and common sense to ensure a pleasant visit without accidents. Help prevent drownings by keeping your family or group together. Stay on the trail and out of the water.

Be prepared to deal with such annoyances as insects, polluted river water, and adverse weather conditions.

# CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO CANAL



## LEGEND

- C & O Canal and Towpath . . . . .
- Interstate Highway . . . . .
- U.S. Highway . . . . .
- State Highway . . . . .
- Other Roads . . . . .
- Mileage Marker . . . . .
- Hiker-Biker Overnight Camp . . . . .
- Drive-in Camp Area . . . . .
- Hike-in Group Camp . . . . .
- Picnic Area . . . . .
- Drinking Water . . . . .
- Boat Ramp . . . . .
- Information Center . . . . .
- Campfire Programs . . . . .

**WE'RE JOINING THE METRIC WORLD**  
 The National Park Service is introducing metric measurements in its publications to help Americans become acquainted with the metric system and to make interpretation more meaningful for park visitors from other nations.

**METRIC MEASUREMENTS**  
 The scales show the ratio between customary measurements and metrics. One meter is 3.3 feet, and 1 kilometer is 0.62 miles.

