

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal

National Historical Park
Washington, D.C./Maryland/
West Virginia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Darby Mill, Williamsport, Md., about 1895.

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal began as a dream of passage to western wealth. It operated as a conduit of eastern coal, suffered extensive and finally fatal flooding, and then resisted being paved as a highway. Today it endures as a national historical park—a pathway into history, nature, and recreation.

The Great National Project

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal is a link to a time when America's prosperity depended upon its waterways. During the late 1790s and early 1800s, the United States experienced an unparalleled period of canal construction that continued through the middle of the century and slowed only when railroads began to come of age. More than 3,000 miles of canals were built during this period. Canals were a vital part of American life. They carried goods and supplies from coastal areas inland and aided the migration of people heading west to settle beyond the original 13 colonies. Many types of goods were shipped on canal boats, ranging from fine cloth and china to lumber, grain, hay, and the building block of the industrial revolution, coal.

By the middle of the 19th century, railroads had outpaced the canals, and the canallers' unique way of life began to fade out of existence. Today all that remains of most of these great waterways are crumbling lock gates and towpaths wandering alongside the filled-in ditches that once made up the canals. In some cases these vital reminders of our past have been preserved and afford glimpses of what life might have been like on America's early canals. The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal is one of those reminders.

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal had its beginning on July 4, 1828, when President John Quincy Adams broke ground for what was then called the "Great National Project"—a canal that would stretch from Georgetown, near Washington, D.C., to Pittsburgh, Pa., and connect two great waterways, the Chesapeake Bay and the Ohio River. It had long been a dream of speculators like George Washington and others to be able to tie the inland area of the Potomac River basin to the coastal plain. Unfortunately the job was made very difficult by the river's rocky and shallow nature. An earlier attempt to build a canal on the Virginia side of the river had met with only marginal success and the idea was discarded. But, with the advent of the canal era, speculators' dreams began to come alive again and the idea for the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was born.

With ground-breaking ceremonies concluded, construction proceeded. Original construction estimates stated that the 460-mile-long canal would take 10 years to build and cost about \$3 million. Money problems, labor difficulties, disease epidemics, and the rivalry of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which began construction the same day as the canal, made it impossible to maintain the schedule. By the time the canal was completed in 1850, it had taken 22 years and \$13 million to build, and fell far short of its intended destination of Pittsburgh, terminating instead at Cumberland, Md.

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was already obsolete at the time it was finished, for the railroad had made great strides in those same 22 years and arrived in Cumberland eight years earlier. Nevertheless, the canal remained in operation for 74 years, from 1850 to 1924. Boats pulled by mules floated tons of cargo—coal, hay, hydraulic cement, fertilizer, anything that could be put on a boat—from Cumberland to Georgetown. Unfortunately for the men and women who made their living on the canal, it was a way of life that was dying out due to progress in other forms of transportation and shipping, lack of money, and unpredictable variations in the weather. The canal was finally closed in 1924 after several devastating floods had sent the canal into receivership.

The canal sat neglected until the early 1950s when Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas led a march to save it and the towpath from demolition. Today, as a national historical park, the canal preserves both history and nature along its 184.5-mile length. From tidewater at Georgetown in Washington, D.C., to Cumberland on the Allegheny Plateau, it winds through the Piedmont, past the dramatic Great Falls of the Potomac, and then through the ridge-and-valley section of the Appalachian Mountains. Its rich floodplain forests are gifts of the river's frequent floods.

General Information About the Canal
Chesapeake and Ohio Canal
National Historical Park
1850 Dual Highway
Hagerstown, MD 21740
301-739-4200
www.nps.gov/choh

Hiking and Bicycling Mile markers are posted. Bicyclists must observe these regulations: Do not exceed 15 mph. • Sound your bell or horn when approaching within 100 feet of other towpath users. • Ride single-file and stay to the right unless passing. • Yield to pedestrians and horses. • Wear a helmet as required by local law. • Walk bikes across aqueducts.

Camping Drive-in camping areas (primitive facilities only, no group camping allowed) at Spring Gap, Paw Paw Tunnel, Fifteenmile Creek, McCoys Ferry, and Antietam Creek operate on a first-come, first-served basis, with a 14-day limit May 1 to September 30 and a 30-day limit per year. Fees are charged. Potable water is not available in the winter. Group campgrounds are found adjacent to Fifteenmile Creek and at the Marsden Tract. Both require a group camping fee and Marsden Tract requires a permit, which can be obtained at Great Falls Fee Station. Hiker-Biker campsites for tent camping occur approximately every five miles between Evitts Creek and Swains Lock. Camping is permitted only in designated areas. Camping supplies, ice, food, and beverages can be bought at most stores along access roads.

Canoeing and Boating Canal canoeing and boating are popular in watered levels or sections from Georgetown to Violette Lock. Canoeists must portage around each lock. Canoes can be rented at Swains Lock and at The Boathouse at Fletchers Cove. Above Violette Lock only short, isolated stretches can be canoed—Big Pool, Little Pool, and a 4.5-mile section from Town Creek to Oldtown. Motorized craft are generally prohibited; electric trolling motors are allowed at Big Pool, Little Pool, and canal waters from Lock 68 to Town Creek Aqueduct.

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Visiting the Canal Today

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal runs along the Potomac River from the mouth of Rock Creek in Georgetown to Cumberland, Md. Its 74 lift locks raise up from near sea level to an elevation of 605 feet at Cumberland. The towpath, originally built 12 feet wide as a path for the mules that pulled the boats, provides a nearly level byway for hikers and bicyclists to experience the quiet beauty of the canal. Its watered sections provide quiet waters for canoeists, boaters, and anglers, while park rangers in period clothing take you back to the time when the canal was alive and well.

Canal Boat Rides Relive the canal's heyday aboard one of the park's two reproduction canal boats. Enjoy a ranger-led program as you glide along the canal under mulepower. Boats operate from April through October at Georgetown and Great Falls, shown on the map at right. For group reservations or ticket information, as well as hours of operation, call the Georgetown or Great Falls Tavern visitor centers.

Georgetown Visitor Center is located at 1057 Thomas Jefferson Street NW, Washington, D.C.. Phone: 202-653-5190.

Great Falls Tavern Visitor Center at 11710 MacArthur Blvd., Potomac, Md., was first built as a locktender's house and later expanded. Exhibits illustrate the history of the canal and area. Phone: 301-767-3714.

Additional information about the canal and its history is available at the following visitor centers along the waterway. (See the large map on the other side of this brochure for locations.) Hours vary seasonally, so please call ahead for times and schedules.

Brunswick Visitor Center at 40 West Potomac Street contains exhibits highlighting the transportation history of the town of Brunswick from early ferry service to the predominance of the railroad. Phone: 301-739-4200.

Williamsport Visitor Center is located at 205 West Potomac Street in this historic canal town. The nearby Cushwa warehouse and basin on the canal are perfect locations to delve into its history. Phone: 301-582-0813.

Hancock Visitor Center, located at 326 East Main Street just outside this historic canal town, offers a variety of displays on the history of the canal and its operations. Phone: 301-678-5463.

Cumberland Visitor Center is located in the Western Maryland Railroad Station at 13 Canal Street and offers extensive exhibits on the transportation history of Cumberland, including the National Road, the railroad, and the canal. Phone: 301-722-8226.

For Safety's Sake
The Potomac River must be considered extremely dangerous at all times. River currents are very strong, deceptive, and unpredictable.

Swimming and wading in the canal are prohibited. So, too, are hunting and trapping. Fishing is subject to Maryland or Washington, D.C., regulations. Possession of metal detectors and relic hunting are prohibited on park property. The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park is a trash-free park. Please take your trash with you when you leave.

Detail Map of Georgetown to Swains Lock



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