

Cumberland Terminus

C&O Canal National Historical Park
Cumberland, Maryland



Spires of Cumberland's churches rise across Wills Creek from the main basin and terminus of the C&O Canal, ca. 1898.

The joyful crowd gathered early on October 10, 1850, as the Independent Blues Band played. Folks came from far and near to celebrate the long-awaited opening of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal between Cumberland and tidewater Maryland. A procession of citizens and officials marched to the locks at the mouth of Wills Creek where five coal boats waited to start the run down to Georgetown. “Many of us were young when this great work was commenced,” said the spokesman for the town. “The opening of yonder gates to let through the first boat carrying freight . . . is the turning point in the history of the canal.”

To reach Cumberland, canal engineers began near the nation's capital in 1828 to construct 184.5 miles of ditch and towpath. They built 74 lift locks, 7 dams, 11 aqueducts, and a 3,118-foot tunnel—remarkable achievements with the tools of the day. As each dam was completed, diverting water from the Potomac River into the canal, boats began using the watered sections. The canal arrived opposite Harpers Ferry, then Virginia, in 1833 and reached Hancock, Maryland, in 1839. Work on the final 50 miles was stalled by labor unrest, financial troubles, and the challenges of constructing the tunnel at Paw Paw.

Meanwhile, the nation's first railroad for public traffic, the Baltimore & Ohio, steamed into Cumberland in 1842. The railroad, which had begun its East-West route the same day as the canal, had won the race to Cumberland. Passengers could continue the trip from Baltimore to the Ohio Valley by boarding a horse-drawn stagecoach at Cumberland and crossing the mountains on the National Road. The railroad eventually continued westward as well, but the canal company abandoned plans to build the waterway farther than Cumberland.

Waterway Pays Off

Despite the brave oratory of opening day, canal business grew slowly, delayed by seasonal floods, then threats to commerce during the Civil War. In the 1870s, the canal at last made good its bright promise. The rich harvest of coal from western Allegany County mines became the mainstay of canal shipping. A small world of canal enterprise developed in Cumberland around the two boat basins—stables, drydocks, hotels, saloons, and warehouses. Branch rail lines entered the area to facilitate loading of coal. In 1870 canal boats moved almost a million tons of freight, not only coal but also building materials, lumber, and flour from local mills.

Return to Canal Days

The map in this brochure shows features of the canal's heyday, though the lay of the land is much changed today. Dam 8 was destroyed and the embankment raised more than 20 feet in the 1950s for flood control. The railroad track runs above the old canal towpath.

The final mile marker—184.5—stands at the western terminus of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. A stonework channel remains from the intake and guard locks that watered the boat basins and nearby canal sections. The inlet was originally 15 feet deep, but only about 5 feet of the stone wall is still above ground. The locktender's house stood here.

Overhead, traffic rumbles on highway I-68 past the historic site of Fort Cumberland. The new interstate replaces the National Road which began in this crossroads town. Church spires rise from a strategic bluff once an outpost for colonial troops commanded by Colonel George Washington in the French and Indian War. No one knows just when travelers began using this “Gateway to the West,” but Cumberland has long been a transportation center. Even before the Ohio Company chose the location for its fur trade and depot in the 1700s, a Shawnee Indian stockade stood near the natural pass through the Appalachians called “The Narrows.”

From Fort to Port

Offers of land persuaded canal company officials to locate Dam 8 and the turning basins for boats at Cumberland's commercial center. The canal terminus settled on a part of town known as “Walnut Bottom.”

Just below Dam 8 two basins were dug, the main basin stretching in a long curve next to the North Branch of the Potomac River. Beyond that lay the broader Shriver Basin. The double locks watered both basins, although a steam pumping station was needed later to boost the water level for the 50 miles of canal downstream.

Stores for provisions crowded grog shops and pool parlors—among them such colorful bars as Aunt Susan's Rising Sun Saloon and Louise's Den of Iniquity. The string of establishments along Wineow Street that served the watermen was called “Shantytown,” “probably the roughest, toughest spot along the Canal,” according to one mule driver.

The company's boatyard was located about where the railroad station now stands. Frederick Mertens operated another boatyard near the entrance to Shriver Basin. At that point a trestle carried coal company railroad cars above boats

lined up to receive coal by chute. New wharfs and warehouses bordered the area. At the canal's peak, as many as 500 boats a season plied the canal and waited turns in the basins to collect cargo. One tall tale speaks of a bulldog trained to swim the towline across the basin so as to speed hitching up the mules.

The port of Cumberland was busy: At its peak, boatyards turned out 170 new craft, repair scows moved to shore up embankments, and mules in tandem stepped briskly down the towpath. Many boatmen and families wintered over in Cumberland when the canal did not operate. During the decades around the turn of the century, the city of Cumberland attracted new industries and enjoyed a robust prosperity. The population doubled and doubled again. A rolling mill for the manufacture of rails set up shop along with tanneries, glassworks, and a furniture factory. Footers Dye Works began business on the far side of Shriver Basin. Cumberland ranked as the second largest city in the state, after Baltimore.

Golden Years Washed Away

In 1889 a devastating flood destroyed the canal. For 18 months no boats could move; the canal company went bankrupt. The canal's long-time rival, the B&O Railroad, took over receivership under the name of the Consolidation Coal Company. In return for restoring operations, control of the canal passed into the hands of the railroad directors.

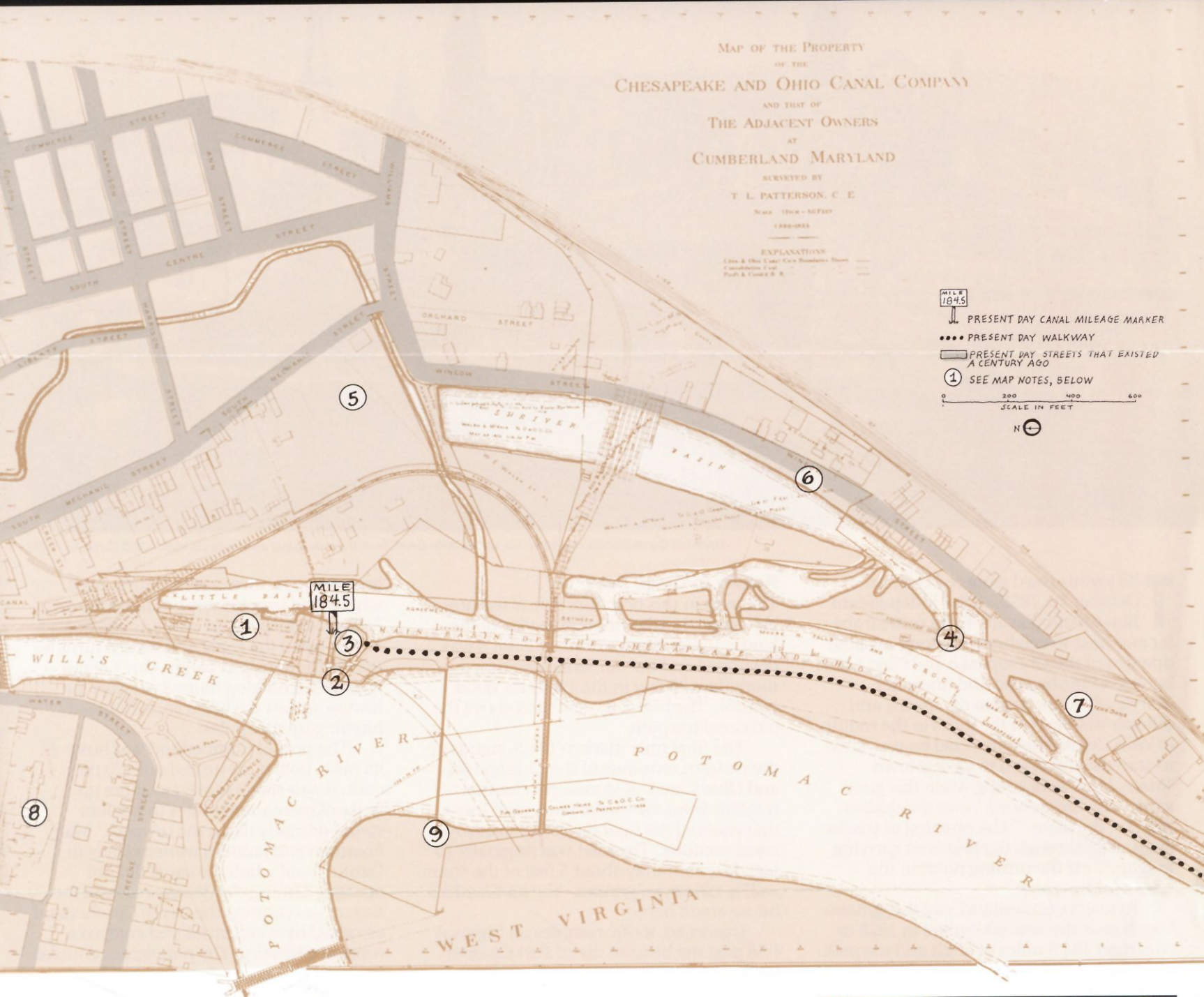
As the canal's freight business dwindled, the receivers sold parts of the basins. Under the Canal Towing Company (another subsidiary of the B&O), organized in 1902 to manage the boats, mules, and watermen, the canal folk lost their independent way of life. Boats once owned by the watermen became company property; impersonal numbers replaced the boat names. The Western Maryland Railway filled in the upper reach of the main basin and built its station, part of which is now the park's visitor center.

Another great flood in 1924 left the canal in ruins. The railroad that had been considered at the start “an experiment, wholly untried in any country,” ushered in the nation's industrial boom. The canal age was abandoned to history.

Since 1971 the canal has a new lease on life as the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park. The National Park Service has restored the towpath and rewatered several sections of the canal. The park offers visitors a rich resource of recreation and preserves a significant landmark of trade and transport in the new nation.

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Map Notes

The way it was a century ago.

Canal basins shared this part of Cumberland with wharfs, railroad spurs, and warehouses. Numbered points pick out main features of the Canal era.

1. At the **company boatyard**, carpenters and caulkers repaired canal boats.

2. Double locks: a guard lock that admitted boats from the river, and an inlet to water the basins and canal.

3. The **locktender's house** stood between the locks.

4. The Consolidation Coal Company loaded boats by chute under the trestle at the entrance to **Shriver Basin**.

5. Footer's Dye Works, a major industry in the state, at times tinted the basin blue from excess dye.

6. Shantytown saloons and pool parlors gave **Wineow Street** the look of a raw western town.

7. Mertens Boatyard added to the canal fleet, numbering 500 vessels at its high mark.

8. Fort Cumberland, a stockade and trading post, established in 1755 where Wills Creek joined the river.

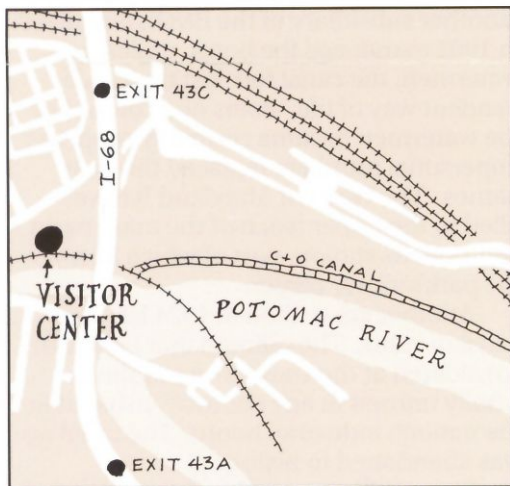
9. Dam 8 (Dam 7 not built for economy's sake) impounded water for the canal but was later destroyed for flood control.

Other Points of Interest

- At the Western Maryland Railway Station, the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad offers 3-hour train excursions from Cumberland to Frostburg and back. Call 1-800-TRAIN-50 for information and reservations.

- Inquire at the Allegany County Convention and Visitors Bureau about self-guided walks through Cumberland's Washington Street Historic District and other historic sites in the area.

- Paw Paw Tunnel, located 25 miles from Cumberland, off MD Rt. 51, preserves an extraordinary engineering feat of canal construction.



Facilities

- Visitor Center contains exhibits on Boat Building, Cumberland as a Transportation Crossroads, and the coal industry
- Parks and History Bookshop
- Handicapped Accessible

How to Get There

Cumberland, Maryland, is approximately 130 miles by road from Washington, D.C. Take I-270 to Frederick, then 70 West to Hancock, and I-68 to Cumberland. From I-68 take exit 43C (take exit 43A if coming from the west), following signs for tourist information to the Western Maryland Railway Station for parking. The canal visitor center is located on the first floor of the train station.

Information

Call 1-301-722-8226 or write:
C & O Canal National Historical Park
Western Maryland Railway Station
Room 304
13 Canal Street
Cumberland, MD 21502

The C&O Canal

Begun in 1828 as a transportation route between commercial centers in the East and frontier resources of the West, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal stretches along the Potomac River for 184.5 miles from Georgetown in the nation's capital to Cumberland, Md. Maintained by the National Park Service, the towpath provides a nearly level trail for hikers and bicyclists, and watered sections welcome canoers and anglers. In addition, remnants of locks, dams, lockhouses, and other historical features along the way invite discovery of a bygone era.

