

Exploring the C&O Canal and the Potomac River

A supplement to the C&O Companion



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General

The canal and the river offer such a wide range of recreational activities that it's hard to imagine something that you do outdoors that can't be combined with a trip to the C&O. The following pages suggest ways to see the canal on foot, by bike, or by canoe, as well as some more exotic possibilities. Some tips for enjoying the canal:

- Remember that spring and summer weekends are especially crowded, particularly from Georgetown to Great Falls. The further you go upstream, the further you get from modern civilization.
- The canal is well shaded from May to October, but you'll want to bring insect repellent in the summer and wear long pants if you're going off the trail for a better look at culverts and other structures.
- Don't ignore the winter season. The canal is somewhat sheltered from the wind, and when the leaves are down you can get a much better sense of the topography of the region. The vistas in the falls region and in the Paw Paw Bends are particularly notable.

Day or Weekend Trips

If you like the outdoors in small doses, you may want to visit the canal while staying at some of the towns along the way. Whether you plan to take day hikes or short bicycle rides, you can use the bed and breakfasts and motels at Harpers Ferry, Shepherdstown, Paw Paw, or Cumberland as staging areas for your visits to different parts of the canal. If you're willing to stay a little further from the river, Berkeley Springs (9 miles from Hancock) and the hotel at Town Hill (on Scenic Route 40) are good base camps for the upper reaches of the canal. The following pages suggest some different ways to work your way up the canal to Cumberland. Refer to the "Trail Guide" section of the *C&O Companion* for more details on what to look for.

Washington DC Area

The canal park in the District includes many hidden treasures, including Fletcher's Boathouse (mile 3.2), and the overlook at Little Falls (see mile 4.5 for directions). The path from the towpath up to MacArthur Boulevard also gives a good view of the Cabin John Aqueduct (especially in winter).

The rugged hiking trails at Great Falls are a delight for visitors with a good set of boots and an interest in its unique landscape — Maryland residents should note that there are equally scenic trails through the National Park on the Virginia side of the river.

Seneca Aqueduct

An excellent alternative to the over-trafficked stretch at Great Falls, the portion of the canal around Seneca River and the Seneca Falls has nearly as many interesting features, albeit on a smaller scale. The red stone aqueduct across Seneca River is the closest and most accessible aqueduct for Washingtonians. The aqueduct is built as one piece with Riley's Lock, an arrangement found nowhere else on the canal. On weekends, Girl Scouts in period dress lead tours of the lockkeeper's house.

A brief walk upstream and around the berm side of the turning basin brings you to the ruins of the old stone-cutting mill that provided more of the strikingly red sandstone for the Smithsonian castle. A half-mile downstream you'll find Violettes Lock and an Inlet Lock, at one time the site of Dam no. 2

and Rowers Ford. In fact, Seneca would be my favorite stopping place on the canal if it wasn't for the constant roar of the jetskis on weekend afternoons.

Edwards Ferry/Whites Ferry/Monocacy

This pleasant 12-mile stretch across the Potomac from Leesburg has an assortment of historic and architectural features, all within a two-hour bike ride (round trip) or a day's hike. Edwards Ferry is a nice stopping point because its small parking lot is off the beaten track, where River Road turns into a single lane winding through dark hollows. Here you'll find such curiosities as the remains of Jarboe's store and the "mystery aqueduct," as well as the Goose Creek River Lock. It's also a good place to launch your canoe or kayak for a tour of Harrisons Island.

Whites Ferry is more convenient than Edwards Ferry, but its parking area is starting to resemble the hustle and bustle at Great Falls on weekends. Of course, no visit to the area is complete without taking the ferry over to Virginia, where you can pay a visit to the Balls Bluff Battlefield. Should you wander to the north of Whites Ferry, you'll pass scenic Locks 26 and 27 on your way to the barely stabilized Monocacy Aqueduct, which was once the jewel of the canal system. If you want to start upstream and work your way down, the aqueduct has its own parking lot at the end of Mouth of Monocacy Road.

Harpers Ferry



A scenic landscape that is beautiful in any season, Harper's Ferry is worth repeated visits if you live in the Washington area. The lower town is now a National Historical Park, with several museums dedicated to the early industry and the historic events of the Civil War. The interpretive displays along the walking trails through the old Armory grounds and Virginius Island provide an extensive view of 19th century water industry.

Shepherdstown



Shepherd College; the Opera House; and Ferry Hill Plantation (on the Maryland side of the river, overlooking Shepherdstown).

Not as famous as Harpers Ferry, but every bit as charming, Shepherdstown is a wonderful place to spend a day or a weekend. Your walking tour of the town should include a stroll around the gristmill (the giant overshot wheel is visible from Princess Street) and a visit to the working replica of Rumsey's steamboat.

Across the Potomac, where Rumsey tested his boat, the canal passes Ferry Hill Plantation at Lock 38. Walking downstream, you'll find the Shepherdstown River Lock (0.5 mile), Packhorse Ford (1.3 miles), and, if you're really ambitious, Antietam Aqueduct (3 miles). Moving further inland on the Maryland side, it's only three miles to the historic battlefield of Antietam, now an extensive national park.

Williamsport/Four Locks

This is a delightful and little-known stretch of the canal, encompassing the Cushwa Loading Basin and the Conococheague Aqueduct at the lower end, and the vista at Dam no. 5 and the little community of Four Locks roughly 10 miles upstream. A nice day-trip on a bicycle.



Hancock/Round Top

Whether you stay in town, or in nearby Berkeley Springs (on the other side of the river in West Virginia), there are a number of notable canal features within close proximity. Just below the town lies the Tonoloway Aqueduct, and just above the town a broad and splendid masonry culvert lets Little Tonoloway Creek slip under the canal bed. Two miles upstream, you'll find the ruins and the cliffside kilns of the Round Top Cement Mill. From Hancock, it's a quick ride up to Little Orleans (15 miles) or down to Fort Frederick (13 miles). The further you travel upstream, of course, the quieter and more peaceful the surroundings, as the canal and the river pass through the Green Ridge State Forest.

Paw Paw

A unique landmark on the canal, the Paw Paw Tunnel is difficult to get to, but well worth the visit. If you can find your way to the parking lot off Route 51, take a walk south to the tunnel entrance (0.5 mile). A flashlight would be handy, because the tunnel runs 0.6 mile and is quite dark. Beyond the tunnel you'll find a long gorge cut through loose shale, a most romantic scene on an overcast day. Another mile downstream from the tunnel will take you past Locks 66, 64 $\frac{2}{3}$, 63 $\frac{1}{3}$, and 62, as well as the odd remains of a waste weir and a beaver dam. If you're feeling spry, you may want to try the ridge trail instead of the tunnel on the way back.



The Paw Paw bends, downstream from the town of Paw Paw, make a splendid autumn canoe trip. You'll enjoy a unique view of the mountain ridges and the twisting bends that the canal company avoided when it built the tunnel. Check with the Little Orleans Campground or Bill's Boats for canoe rental and advice.

Cumberland

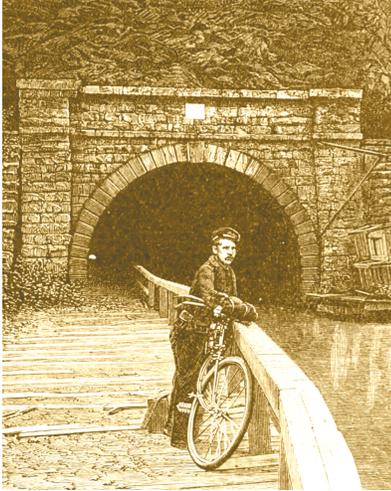
Accessible by Amtrak's **Capitol Limited**, which uses the old B&O railroad line, the Queen City is not fancy, but has much that is of interest. Canal Place, the terminus of the C&O, has a Park Service visitor's center and is adjacent to the county museum. A walking tour takes you around the former site of Fort Cumberland, the Allegheny Courthouse, and the elegant old houses of Greene and Washington Streets. In season, you can take the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad up to Frostburg and back.

You can explore the canal by renting a bicycle at the shop at the canal basin, and take an hour's ride down to Spring Gap. On the way you'll pass the locks and the canal boat replica at North Branch, pass through the narrows at Iron Mountain, and see the remains of the steam pump near Pattersons Creek.

The truly ambitious may want to cycle another 8 miles down to Oldtown and pass by the Cresap house (a historic landmark dating to 1763; open to the public only on select days).

If you're traveling by train or car, an overnight or weekend stay in Cumberland can easily be combined with a trip across the mountains (*see* "Extensions," later in this section, for a description of historic landmarks west of Cumberland.)

Planning a Bike Trip



My favorite way to see the canal, as you may have guessed, is on a bicycle. Freed from the distractions of cars and road maps, you can travel anywhere from 40 to 60 miles a day in a progressively deepening reverie, cleansing your psyche of all the frustrations of urban living.

The 184 miles of towpath provide many options for the cycling enthusiast. You can drive your car to one of the smaller locks and take a morning or afternoon for a brisk round trip, or you could bicycle to an overnight stop and come back the next day (for instance, from Harpers Ferry to Shepherdstown, touring the Antietam Battlefield on one of the days). If you want some company, the Potomac Pedalers Touring Club holds frequent rides along the towpath (www.potomacpedalers.org).

If you're more ambitious, you can choose the whole enchilada, riding from Georgetown to Cumberland, or even Georgetown to Pittsburgh, an experience that many riders have decided to make an annual ritual.

Overnight stopping-points for bike-camping		
Three day itinerary ~60 miles/day	Four day itinerary ~45 miles/day	Five day itinerary ~34 miles/day
Harpers Ferry Hancock	Brunswick / Harpers Ferry Williamsport Little Orleans	Leesburg via Whites Ferry Harpers Ferry/ Shepherdstown Williamsport/Hancock Little Orleans/Paw Paw

Overnight stopping-points Hotels and B&Bs		
Three day itinerary ~60 miles/day	Four day itinerary ~45 miles/day	Five day itinerary ~34 miles/day
Harpers Ferry Hancock	Brunswick / Harpers Ferry Williamsport Little Orleans	Leesburg via Whites Ferry Harpers Ferry/ Shepherdstown Williamsport/Hancock Little Orleans/Paw Paw

One thing you'll notice on the canal is that it doesn't really matter whether you're heading upriver or downriver because the canal towpath is essentially level, except for the 8-foot rise at each lock. (On average, you'll pass a lock every 2 to 3 miles, though they tend to be clustered around the falls.)

I've tried it both ways, and I have a strong preference for leaving Georgetown and working my way west to the mountains. Traveling upstream, you follow the rough chronology of early settlement (1700–1750) and the progressive stages of canal construction a century later (1828–50). Oddly enough, as you move forward through the chronology of events, you gradually move backwards in time, leaving the settled valleys for the mountain forests of Appalachia. By the third and fourth day, civilization is far behind, and the frontier beckons in the winding river-bends of Paw Paw and the outposts at Little Orleans and Oldtown.

The decision to travel upriver or downriver is important in terms of how you plan to start your trip. If you live in the Washington area and want to start in Cumberland, you have to convince someone to drop you off in Cumberland. This can be difficult, since it's a three-hour drive just to get there. An alternative is to take the pedals off your bike, box it, and take it down to the bus station as luggage (I did this once in the 90s, but I'm not sure how it works these days). The bus will put you in Cumberland around noon, so plan on a short first day, overnighing near Paw Paw.

On the other hand, if you're going to start in Georgetown and finish in Cumberland, you still have to get someone to pick you up—you may be able to convince some friends to spend the weekend at the inn and rendezvous with you.

The next choice that you have to make is whether you want to camp or stay at hotels along the way. Either way, you'll need panniers on your bike for a change of clothes and other necessities. To camp, you'll also need to buy, borrow, or rent a small tent or sleeping bag. The more aggressive riders cover the trail in three days, but that's a demanding pace on an unpaved surface, and leaves you with no time or energy for detours or savoring the vistas and interesting sidelights of the trail. Four to five days is a more reasonable time frame. Use the chart of towns and campsites in the "Resources" section to plan your overnight stops at appropriate stages along the way.

The usual recommendation is to use a mountain or hybrid bike with tires at least 1.25 inches in diameter. However, I've ridden the canal with people on touring bikes, and Steve Roberts gives an interesting account of his trip down the canal on a computer-rigged recumbent bicycle in his book *Computing Across America*. As an alternative, you might consider renting a mountain bike in Georgetown.

Once under way, you'll find that there are surprisingly few bike shops near the trail, so be sure to bring a patch kit and a spare inner tube to be safe. As of this writing, the best shop outside of Georgetown and Cumberland are in Shepherdstown, Williamsport, and Hancock.

If you feel like you need a little help with the logistics or just some moral support, you may want to contact one of the companies that lead bicycle tours on the canal.

Padding the Canal and River



Canoeing and kayaking in the canal itself is naturally limited to those parts of the canal that have water: Georgetown to Seneca, Big Pool at Fort Frederick, Little Pool near Hancock, and the watered stretch between Town Creek and Old-town. The longest stretch, the 20 miles from Georgetown to Seneca, is extremely popular with canoeists and kayakers, but you'll want to avoid the clumps of locks at miles 8.4–9.5 (Seven Locks) and miles 13.6–14.4 (Six Locks). A clever trick is to take a canoe or kayak to Violettes Lock, put it in the Potomac, paddle across the river downstream and go through the old Seneca Canal along the Virginia shore—then cross back to the Maryland side and paddle back up the canal to avoid the current.

Canoeing the river can be very easy, until you hit one of the many rapids that made the canal seem like a good idea. From Chain Bridge down to Little Falls are Class V rapids (significant hazard to life). The stretch of rapids around Harpers Ferry (Dam no. 3 to the Route 340 bridge) are considered hazardous Class III rapids. Only kamikaze paddlers have taken the plunge down Great Falls, which are Class VI rapids (risk of life). If you are an expert paddler with a death wish, be advised that before attempting to shoot Great Falls, you must register with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources/Boating Administration at (410) 974-2916.

River Levels for Boating				
	Point of Rocks	Shepherdstown	Hancock	Paw Paw
Dangerous	Above 5 feet	Above 5 feet	Above 5 feet	Above 7 feet
Caution	2 to 5 feet	2.7 to 5 feet	3.5 to 5 feet	5 to 7 feet
Normal	0.7 to 1.5 feet	1.7 to 2.4 feet	2.5 to 3.5 feet	3 to 5 feet

Source: Maryland Natural Resources Police

Aside from the falls, most of the river is pleasant and slow moving. If you know what you're doing, there's no more time-honored way to follow the Potomac River. The Indians were the first to use the river for transportation, and George Washington was shooting "the Spout" at Harpers Ferry at the tender age of 21, on his way back from the French and Indian War. One of the earliest European travelers in this region, Baron von Graffenried, left an evocative account of his return journey down the river from Conoy Island (*see* mile 48.2). He was most impressed by the skill of his Indian guides, who sang in unison as they steered through the dangerous rapids at Great Falls while the baron prudently watched from the riverbank.

If your singing voice isn't that good, you may want to seek the assistance of one of the many outfitters that lead canoeing and rafting expeditions on the Potomac (*see* "Resources"). In addition to renting equipment, the outfitter will usually provide dropoff and pickup services, so that you don't have to worry about getting back upstream. Keep in mind that 15–20 miles can be a full day in a canoe, even if you're just going downstream. Upriver, there are several dams that require a portage (notably Dam no. 4 at mile 85 and Dam no. 5 at mile 105), and the water is often so shallow in the Paw Paw bends and other stretches that you'll scrape bottom more than a few times.

If you want to take some longer canoe trips on the river, it helps to break the river into sections that avoid the falls and the dams. For convenience, I've divided the river into three sections: Piedmont (between the rapids at Harpers Ferry and Seneca Falls), the Great Valley (between the high-rock dams and the rapids at Harpers Ferry), and the Mountains (between the dams at Cumberland and the high-rock dams). The table below gives the best put-in and take-out points in each stretch of the river.

Piedmont		Great Valley		Mountains	
Brunswick	55	Dam no. 4	84.6	Spring Gap	173.3
Point of Rocks	48.4	Taylor's Landing	81	Oldtown	166.7
Nolands Ferry	44.6	Snyders Landing	76.8	Paw Paw	156.2
Monocacy	42.2	Shepherdstown	72.7	Little Orleans	140.9
Whites Ferry	35.5	Antietam Creek	69.6	Hancock	124.4
Edwards Ferry	30.9	Dargan Bend	64.9	McCoys Ferry	110.2
Seneca	22.7			Four Locks	108.8

There are no boat ramps between Great Falls and Little Falls, but if you put in near the Angler's Inn parking lot on MacArthur Boulevard, it's a rough six-mile paddle down to Little Falls. Take your canoe out of the Potomac just below Sycamore Island and use the canal to paddle down to the Lock 6 parking lot.

Since time immemorial, drought and flood conditions have also played random havoc with the river's navigability. The **National Weather Service** provides up-to-date readings for its sites all the way from Little Falls to Kitzmiller (see "Potomac River Basin Stages" at water.weather.gov).

For the Potomac below Monocacy, 3–4 feet is considered a fairly good level; anything over 5 feet is dangerous, and under 3 feet may be too shallow in many spots.

Hiking the Towpath

Long-distance hikers have an enviable equanimity, keeping a pace that's more appropriate to the canal era than to a modern world hurried along by television sound-bites, interstate highways, and jet travel. For the more sociable sort, the **C&O Canal Association** offers occasional group hikes, including occasional hikes to commemorate the anniversary of the original 1954 hike inspired by Justice William O. Douglas. For comparison's sake, the association hike covers the canal in 14 days, with most days ranging from 12 to 16 miles. A more aggressive pace for a smaller group would take about 8 to 9 days.

For the most part, campsites are scattered conveniently along the towpath, every 4 to 8 miles. There are two notable exceptions. The first unrestricted-use campsite on the towpath is at Swains Lock, which is 17 miles from the start of the canal in Georgetown. However, you can camp at mile 11 if you obtain a pass for the Marsden Tract campsite (contact the park ranger at Great Falls). Another significant gap is the 12-mile stretch from the Bald Eagle Island Campsite (mile 50.3) to the Huckleberry Hill Campsite (mile 62.9).

The campsites have portable toilets and water pumps. The Park Service checks the quality of the water regularly, and will remove the pump handles if the water is unfit for drinking. (The pump handles are also removed in winter.) A chart indicating the location of campsites and stores is included in the "Resources" section.

Other Things to Do on the Canal

Birdwatching



The islands and wildlife sanctuaries along the canal and river bring many birdwatchers to the towpath. Many prime birdwatching areas lie within 30 miles of Georgetown, such as Fletcher's Boathouse (*mile 3.2*), the Dierssen Waterfowl Sanctuary (*mile 20*), and the McKee-Besher Wildlife Management Area (*mile 27.2*).

One long-time Potomac birdwatcher, David Byrne, shares some of the sights along the canal as it nears Washington:

Dabbling ducks—particularly mallards and black ducks—gravitate to the lower canal in late autumn and winter. More than five hundred mallards were counted on one November tour between Fletcher's Boathouse and Seven Locks. The still water and plentiful vegetation provide a perfect habitat for the dabblers.

Winter also brings ducks and geese to the river itself; rafts of lesser scaup, Canada geese, and the various mergansers frequent the river as it narrows toward the fall-line. Other waterfowl—grebe and coots, particularly—are in evidence throughout the winter months.

Flickers, hairy, downy, and red-bellied woodpeckers are a common sight in the drowned deadwood between the river and the canal. Also, the huge and spectacularly red-crested pileated woodpecker has made a resurgence in this area in recent years. Brown and bare patches of brambles provide both shelter and a contrasting backdrop for the scarlet northern cardinal and its slightly duller mate.

Prehistoric-looking great blue herons—a rare sight a generation ago in this area—stand motionless at river's edge, awaiting prey.

During the spring and fall, heavily wooded areas along the towpath are magnets for warblers and a myriad of other migrating songbirds.

Removal of DDT and other pesticides from the food chain has saved once-endangered raptors—bald eagles are once again nesting along the tidal Potomac. Ospreys and redtailed hawks are a common sight.

It is the ecological diversity of the lower towpath (along with the decreased pollution) that accounts for the variety and number of birds. River, canal, marsh, swampland, and timbered areas provide both casual and serious birdwatchers a constant opportunity to observe and learn.

For more information about participating in bird-watching, you may want to contact the DC branch of the Audubon Naturalist Society.

You may also find it helpful to consult Claudia Wilds's book, *Finding Birds in the National Capital Area*. Wilds not only discusses the lower stretch of the canal, but describes good sites all the way up to the dirt roads of the Green Ridge State Forest and the canal terminus in Cumberland.

Fishing

Anglers and other “afishnadoes” are regular visitors to the park, wading out into the river at places like Whites Ford and Botelors dam to reel in bass, crappie, and tiger musky (stocked). The Dickerson Conservation Area (Whites Ford) is especially popular because of the warm water produced by the power plant just upstream.

The best resource for anglers is *Fishing The Upper Potomac River*

The spawning season in April brings shad, herring, and many fishermen to the Chain Bridge area just below Little Falls. (The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is considering a fish ladder around the Little Falls Dam to help the fish upstream on their spawning runs, an idea that was once even attempted along the forbidding gorge at Great Falls.)



Smallmouth bass; Maryland Department of Natural Resources

You can also fish in the canal itself; the watered portions of the canal have catfish, carp, sunfish, pickerel, and occasional bass. In addition to the stretch from Georgetown to Seneca, the watered stretches of the canal include Big Pool and Little Pool below Hancock and an area below Old-town that has been rewatered by local organizations expressly for fishing.

The Potomac River falls under Maryland jurisdiction, so you must get a state fishing license to fish in the canal or the river above Little Falls.

Rock Climbing & Spelunking

Rock climbing is very popular at Carderock and along the Great Falls gorge, not too far from the canal. Much further along, the towering cliffs on the other side of the dry canal bed also tempt many climbing groups. For instance, the cliffs just below Killiansburg Cave (mile 73.2) are a popular training site. It's also possible to do a little **caving** in the Great Valley, where the limestone cliffs are pockmarked with caves. However, you should not explore the caves alone or without a knowledgeable guide.

Skiing & Skating



During winter storms, some skiers turn the towpath into a cross-country trail, and even though the Park Service has posted warning signs, many skaters take to the ice in the watered portions of the canal. If you want to take to the ice, remember that the temperature has to have been well below freezing for several days for it to become sufficiently thick—a condition that is relatively rare in this temperate climate. However, it does happen on occasion. In the winter of 1994, when the daytime high temperatures barely reached the teens, the dog and I had the pleasure of walking across Widewater to the islands along the far shore.

Horseback Riding

Horses are allowed on the tow-path upstream from Swains Lock but are prohibited in the congested areas below there.

The Park Service can't seem to make up its mind on whether bikes or horses have the right-of-way on the towpath. Some park publications say that the horses must stop to let bicyclists pass, but the park also distributes leaflets saying the opposite.

Hunting

Hunting is strictly forbidden in the park, so the deer, groundhogs, and wild turkeys that you see along the canal are safe from human predators. However, hunting is one of the most popular recreations on the properties that border the canal, especially beyond Hancock. So don't be surprised to find yourself surrounded by an excited pack of beagles at Little Orleans, or to be engaged in a discussion of black-powder hunting on the firing range at Fort Frederick. Note that hunters are allowed to cross the park if their guns are unloaded and cased.

Riding the Train

You can get an interesting perspective on the canal and the Potomac Valley by using something other than a car to head west. For instance, you could take the train to a weekend getaway in Harpers Ferry or Cumberland. The Capitol Limited connects Washington, Pittsburgh, and Chicago, using the historic B&O route from Harpers Ferry to Cumberland. This very scenic route hugs the West Virginia riverbank from McCoys Ferry until it approaches Cumberland. Amtrak offers a “Route Guide” in brochure form that details some of the historic locations along the railroad line. Unfortunately, the train travels only once a day in each direction, and it does not take bicycles at this time (though this policy may be reconsidered).



From mid-April to early December, you can take a 32-mile ride on the *Western Maryland Scenic Railroad*, from the train station at the end of the canal out to Frostburg and back (800-TRAIN-50).

Flying

An even more dramatic view is the river valley seen from a small plane. This requires a strong stomach, because of the turbulence that lingers over the mountains, but it is a truly unforgettable experience. Renting a plane can be relatively inexpensive; contact one of the smaller local airports for more information. (For better visibility, ask for an airplane with an overhead wing.)

Extensions: Washington, Alexandria, and the Virginia Canals

Precious little remains of the two local canals that connected to the C&O. At mile 1.1 of the towpath, you'll find a small park alongside the ruins of the *Alexandria Aqueduct*. Close to the Virginia shore, a single pier of the aqueduct is still visible just upriver from the Key Bridge. The only other sign of the canal is a modern facsimile of a lock and an interpretive display along the waterfront at the Canal Center Plaza in Alexandria. (Follow the George Washington Parkway to Washington Street in Alexandria and take Montgomery Street east to Canal Center Plaza.)



The *Washington City Canal*, which was built before the C&O Canal, conducted boats along what is now Constitution Avenue, turned south just before reaching the Capitol, and then split into two different channels leading to the Anacostia River. The canal was used to bring stone to the U.S. Capitol for construction, including some of the Potomac Marble coming from the quarry near Dickerson (*see* mile 38.2).

Unfortunately, the canal kept silting up, and turned out to be more of a nuisance than an asset to the C&O Canal Company. A solitary lockhouse still stands at the intersection of Constitution Avenue and 17th Street, almost in the shadow of the Washington Monument.

The C&O Canal towpath trail connects to the bicycle trail along Rock Creek Parkway, which is another part of the remarkable web of paved off-road recreational trails that radiate from the city. You can take the *Rock Creek Trail* nearly 25 miles north to Lake Needwood (adjacent to Rockville). If you head south on the Rock Creek Trail and cross at Memorial Bridge, you have even more choices. On the Virginia side, you can head downriver past National Airport and through Alexandria, all the way to *Mount Vernon*.

If you head upriver, you'll pass Roosevelt Island and come to an elevated concrete bridge that carries the trail over the George Washington Parkway. Crossing a couple of intersections in Rosslyn, you can connect to the bike trail along Route 66, which will connect in due time to the *Washington and Old Dominion Trail (W&OD)*. The W&OD Railroad trail runs 45 miles, from

Shirlington along Interstate 395 in Arlington, through Falls Church, Vienna, Herndon, and Leesburg, and finally ending in Purcellville. It's possible to use both the W&OD and the canal to make an interesting round trip from Georgetown, crossing at Whites Ferry and using Route 15 to connect to Leesburg. To make this a two-day trip, you can stay at the Days Inn at Leesburg, or at one of the bed and breakfasts in the very scenic stretch of rolling farmland between Leesburg and Purcellville.

Patowmack Canal (Great Falls). One of the five skirting canals built by Washington's Patowmack Company, the Patowmack Canal offers a spectacular view of the Great Falls area, with the remains of the canal passage that was blasted through the towering rocks on the Virginia side. Take Old Georgetown Pike (193) north from the Washington Beltway (495) and turn right at signs for the Great Falls Park.

Patowmack Canal (Seneca). Another Patowmack Company skirting canal, Seneca Canal is north of Great Falls Park on the Virginia side of the Potomac. The barely recognizable remains of the canal are on state parkland; however, the park area has not been developed for public use. It is legal to visit the area, taking care not to trespass on the private property in the vicinity. Take Old Georgetown Pike (193) north from the Washington Beltway (495), passing signs for Great Falls Park and Riverbend Park. Turn right on Seneca Road and follow it until you reach a gate across the road. Park along the shoulder and enter the parkland by following one of the trails immediately to your right (east). Turn north at the earliest opportunity and follow the trail to the river (a little over a half mile).

Fortunately, parts of many historic canals have been preserved as public parks or converted into recreational trails. Here are some of the canals in the mid-Atlantic states, listed in alphabetical order.

Extensions: Completing the Route to Pittsburgh

While the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal never made it to the Ohio River, the railroads did, and their legacy has been turned into the **Great Allegheny Passage**, a rail-trail that crosses the Appalachians between Cumberland and Pittsburgh.



Together, the GAP trail and the C&O towpath constitute a 340-mile off-road corridor along the Potomac, over the Eastern Divide, and down the Youghiogheny to the very Forks of Ohio. Allow seven days for the full trip.

Among the highlights of the GAP rail-trail are the Savage Tunnel, at the summit of the highest ridge between the Potomac and Ohio watersheds; Ohiopyle Falls, a former logging town and later resort; the rail hub and coal/coke town of Connellsville; and the remains of the great steel industry at McKeesport, Duquesne, and Homestead. For more information on this route, visit the Great Allegheny Passage website (www.atatrail.org).

You can also cross the Appalachians via the historic *National Pike*, numbered Route 40, which runs through Cumberland and heads west to Wheeling. Running along side the modern interstate (Route 68), the National Pike is a two-lane mountain road that approximates the route of Braddock's Road and Nemaquin's Trail across the remaining 60 miles of the Appalachians.



The National Road from Cumberland to Brownsville, Pennsylvania, detail from The Cumberland Road, Archer Butler Hulbert, Historic Highways of America, Vol. 10.

The terrain is often spectacular, including crossings of the Casselman and Youghiogheny rivers, and passage across the major ridges of Savage Mountain, Negro Mountain, Laurel Hill, and Chestnut Ridge. A drive over these mountains in summer will give you an

invaluable perspective on the herculean labors of the soldiers who built the first road for Washington and Braddock. A drive on a snowy winter's day will likely send your heart to your teeth and make you wonder what combination of poverty and persecution could have driven settlers to this harsh frontier.

If you look closely along Route 40, you can still see an occasional small white obelisk used to mark the miles to Wheeling. And about 50 miles west of Cumberland, you'll come to the site of **Fort Necessity**, now a small National Park. The Visitor's Center overlooks the broad meadow that Washington injudiciously chose for his charming encounter with the French, with a reconstruction of the small circular stockade that his men built to protect their supplies. A few miles further along the pike are **Jumonville Glen**, where Washington ambushed a French scouting party, and the site of **Braddock's Grave**, where the unfortunate general is believed to have been buried during the retreat from the massacre near Fort Duquesne.

Other Canals in the Mid-Atlantic Region

Once you've spent some time on the C&O Canal, you might be interested in comparing it with some of the other canals in the mid-Atlantic region. A good starting place is just across the Potomac.

Chesapeake and Delaware Canal. This 13-mile canal near Chesapeake City, Maryland, still serves as a shortcut between the bays of Chesapeake and Delaware, and is a part of the Intercoastal Waterway. An unpaved path along the canal is suitable for bicycling. Contact the Inn at the Canal for reservations and information at (410) 885-5995.

Delaware and Raritan Canal State Park. Approximately 70 miles of this trail is deemed suitable for bicycling. From Philadelphia, take Interstate 95 North; immediately after crossing the Delaware River into New Jersey, take the exit for Route 29. Contact the park at (908) 873-3050.

Dismal Swamp Canal. One of the earliest canals, the Dismal Swamp project was blessed by George Washington and begun in 1787. The canal survives only as a "ditch," but the region around it has some interest, as it is a part of the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in southeastern Virginia. Unpaved roads, particularly the Washington Ditch Road, are suitable for hiking and biking. Contact the refuge manager at (804) 986-3705 on weekdays for more information.

Lehigh Canal. Located along the Lehigh River at its juncture with the Delaware River, the Lehigh Canal has a museum and a restored locktender's house; it also offers rides in a canal boat. Follow Interstate 78 to the town of Easton, Pennsylvania. Call (215) 250-6700 for more information.

Towpath Bike National Recreation Trail. An 8-mile trail that adjoins the Lehigh Canal trail. The trail itself is a converted railroad right-of-way. Contact the township of Easton at (215) 253-7191.

Union Canal. Near Reading in southeastern Pennsylvania, the Union Canal, completed in 1827, was nearly 80 miles long and joined the Schuylkill and Susquehanna Rivers through an impressive system of locks, aqueducts, and a tunnel. Presently this trail is only 4.5 miles in length; plans call for it eventually to connect to the trails around Blue Marsh Lake. Contact Berks County Parks and Recreation Department at (215) 372-8939.

Even further afield, of course, lies the granddaddy of all American canals, the Erie Canal. Still going strong after 170-plus years, the canal now carries motorized vessels during the boating season. There are several trails running along different stretches of the old and the modern Erie canals. The best path runs along the original (now abandoned) Erie Canal, from Dewitt (near Syracuse) to Rome. If you're in Syracuse, the Erie Canal Museum is worth a visit (318 Erie Boulevard), as is the Erie Canal Village near Rome.

If you still have canal fever after visiting these North American canals, you may want to ask a travel agent for information about touring the European waterways. England, Ireland, and France all have extensive working canal systems. It's relatively easy to tour with a group or charter your own boat and travel the Canal du Midi, much as Thomas Jefferson did in 1787. And if that's not enough, you can always visit the great interocean canals at Panama and Suez.