

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal
National Historical Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Four Locks Walking Guide



Introduction

Four Locks was much like modern communities with families working and playing together and supporting each other. Unlike other C&O Canal towns which were founded before the canal was even an idea, Four Locks began because of the canal. The C&O Canal Company purchased 548 acres owned by James Prather which became the community of Four Locks. Over 30 buildings once stood along this 1/4 mile stretch of land including houses, warehouses, stores, a one-room school, and post office.

As you explore Four Locks, imagine children playing, canallers and villagers conversing with each other; or picture mules walking the towpath pulling a cargo boat, people passing on the road, and boats waiting to lock through at the four locks.

Tour begins on the towpath at Lock 47.
See map on pages 5-6

Stop 1 – Lock 47

How to Repair a Boat



Any boat owner knows that even with proper maintenance boats will need repair. Today, it is a simple matter of driving the boat onto a trailer at a boat ramp and taking it to a repair shop. It was not so simple on the canal. There were no boat ramps located along the prism which made it nearly impossible to remove a boat from the water. Dry docks were the solution. Similar to a lock, a boat could be floated into the dry dock through an upstream gate, after which the gate would be closed and a sluice gate opened at the downstream end to drain the dock. The boat settled down on raised beams as the water level dropped. This allowed workmen to crawl under as well as around the boat to make the necessary repairs. Located over the flume next to lock 47, this dry dock was kept busy with minor and major repairs. Done quickly and efficiently, canallers were able to continue their journey with little lost time.

Continue upstream to Lock 48

Stop 2– Lock 48

A Country Store

Today, the country store evokes images of wooden floors, built-in shelves covered with canned goods, barrels and sacks stacked on the floor, and a myriad of food, clothes, and tools to entice the customer. The store once located over the flume at lock 48, may have been similar to our perceptions and supplied the residents of Four Locks with many of their needs. Began in 1875, the store changed ownership to finally become the Snyder-Fersner Store. Canaller Frank Zimmerman remembers the store’s hams as “the best around.”

Continue upstream to Flory House

Stop 3 – Flory House

Neither Hail, Nor Sleet, Nor Snow....



Twenty-first century technology gives the capability for instantaneous communication. Waiting a day to hear about the birth of a grandchild or world news is obsolete. During canal operations, the telephone was the fastest way to communicate but most people sent letters. The Four Locks Post Office was a vital link to the outside world for its residents who anxiously waited up to a week for a letter to arrive. It operated here from 1878-1903. Of its eight postmasters, Mrs. Mary Flory was the only woman and served the longest term, eight years from 1885-1903.

Continue upstream to Lock 49

Stop 4 – Lock 49

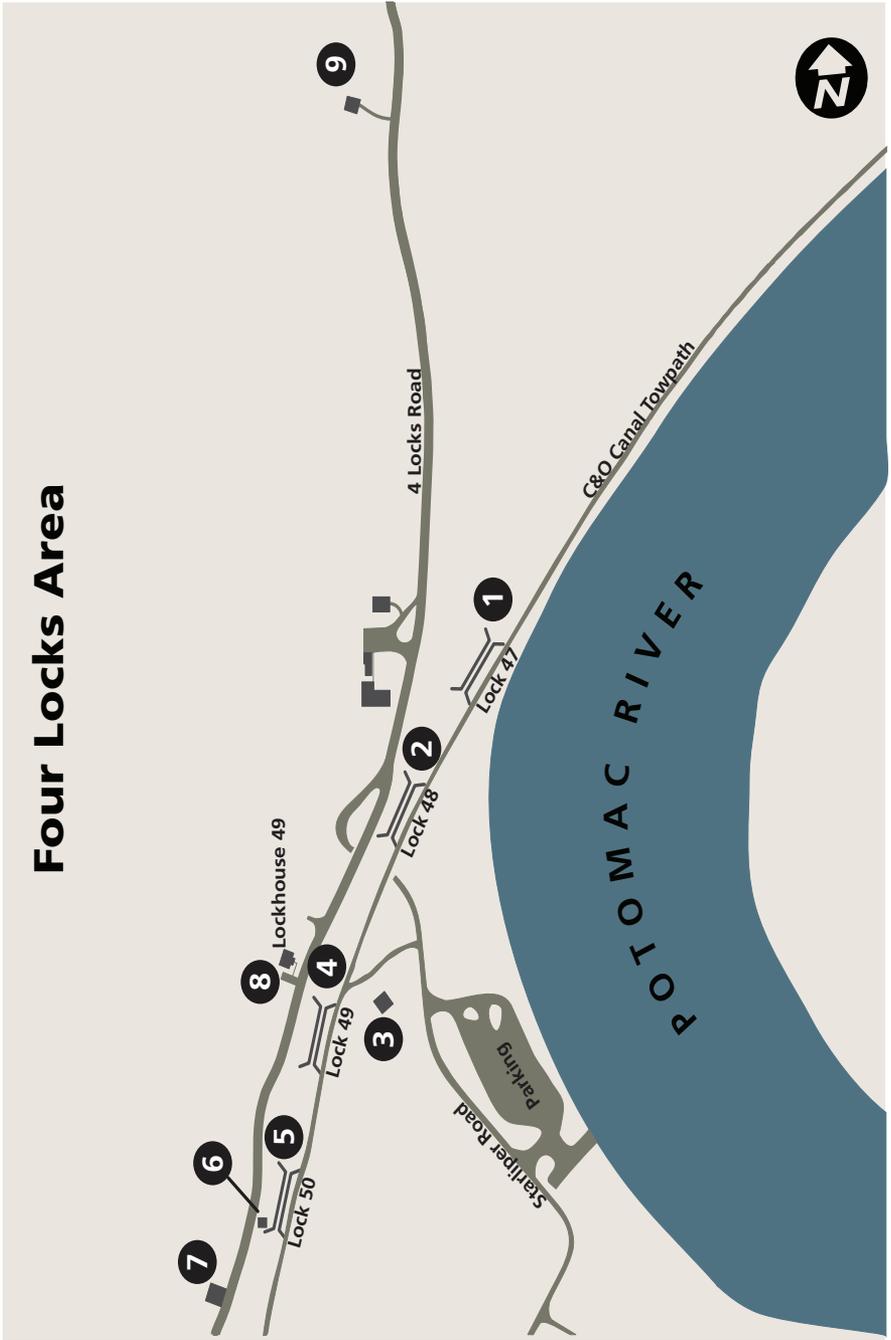
Hay and Ice



Imagine traveling in a canal boat down the canal in the heat of summer in 1910. Hay for the mules is getting low. Sweat drips from your brow and the tepid water does not quench your thirst. Stopping at Lock 49 solves these problems. Built in 1863 and leased from the Canal Company for \$36 a year, the building once located over the flume at lock 49 operated as an icehouse, storehouse, and warehouse. Local farmers hauled grain and hay which was stored here and later sold to the canallers. Ice was sold to canallers and local residents.

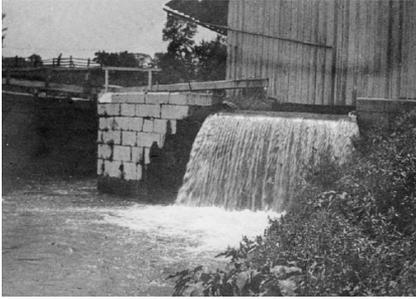
Cross the bridge over the lock and proceed up the road to the left.

Four Locks Area



Stop 5 – Lock 50

In Peril

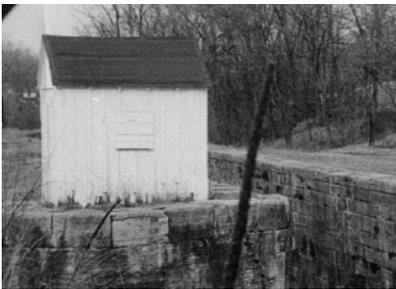


Walking along the canal today, one envisions a peaceful era with little danger. The oft empty prism and bypass flumes belie the danger that awaited even the most cautious of canallers. Some of the most dangerous places on the canal were the bypass flumes. Located next to locks, bypass flumes were used to regulate the water level downstream of the locks even when the locks were not in use. Rushing water from the flume created mini waterfalls which could be dangerous. This was unfortunately true on July 23, 1923, when 8-year old Albert Hart accidentally fell into the turbulent waters. He faced certain death until 11-year old Louis Myers jumped in and saved the unconscious Hart.

Continue to the end of Lock 50

Stop 6 - Watch House

Last One Standing



Being on call 24 hours a day seven days a week, it was easier for lock keepers to see oncoming boats from a watch house than from the lockhouse. Used by lock keepers while waiting for canal boats, this watch house located at Lock 50 is the only one left standing on the canal.

Continue up the road to the Mule Barn

Stop 7– Mule Barn

Canal Boat Engines



Mules were the engines of the canal boats. Captains typically kept two pairs of mules: one would tow the boat and the other would rest in the mule barn on the boat. Each pair typically worked a six hour shift called a “trick” covering about 16

miles. A diet of corn, hay, and oats kept the mules strong so they could pull the 120 tons of coal carried by the boat. During the winter when the canal was closed, mules were housed in barns. This barn was reconstructed by the National Park Service and stands as a reminder of the hard working mules that towed canal boats between Georgetown and Cumberland.

Turn around and follow the road to Lock House 49

Stop 8– Lock House 49

Lock Keepers



Lock keepers were responsible for lock operations and maintenance and usually operated only one lock. The lock keeper at Four Locks was responsible for four locks. To do so, the lock keeper enlisted help from

other residents in order to keep canal traffic moving. The Taylor family housed four generations at Lock House 49. Today, you can stay overnight in the lock house as part of the Canal Quarters program and experience what it might have been like for the residents.

Continue approximately 300 yards down the road up to the school house

Stop 9 – School House

Reading, and Writing, and 'Rithmetic



For many, the one room school house symbolizes a simpler time. Operating from 1877 until 1943, this building stands as a reminder of those days. Imagine teaching up to thirty children in eight grades for \$240 a year. Things we take for granted today - central heat, electricity, indoor plumbing - were not found here. Instead, oil lamps provided light, the pot-bellied stove provided heat, and one had to venture outside into the heat or cold to visit the outhouse. Besides learning, students had additional responsibilities such as being required to stack firewood for the stove and carry drinking water from the Hasketts well located near the canal. On occasion, Charles Merlott and other boys would purposely spill much of the water from a bucket while walking back to school only to be sent from class to get more water. As you look through the windows listen for the scratch of chalk on slates as students recite history under the watchful eye of the teacher.

Conclusion

Four Locks lost its economic importance in 1924 with the closing of the canal. However, it became a major center for recreation along the Potomac River and the slackwater above Dam 5. Popular for boating and fishing, Four Locks boasted numerous summer residences from 1924 until the mid-1950's. Today, the remaining buildings stand as a legacy to the community and families that once lived here.

