

Few ventures were dearer to George Washington than his plan to make the Potomac River navigable as far as the Ohio River Valley. In the uncertain period after the Revolutionary War, Washington believed that better transportation and trade would draw lands west of the Allegheny Mountains into the United States and "bind those people to us by a chain which never can be broken."

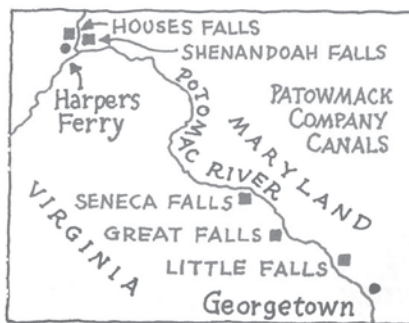
"The way," Washington wrote, "is easy and dictated by our clearest interest. It is to open a wide door, and make a smooth way for the produce of that Country to pass to our Markets ..."

A WATERWAY WEST

The Potomac River could be that "door." It was the shortest route between tidewater, with access to East Coast and Trans-Atlantic trade, and the headwaters of the Ohio River, with access to the western frontier. But both political and physical obstacles had to be overcome.

Opening the Potomac required cooperation of Virginia and Maryland which bordered the river. In 1784, Washington convinced the states' assemblies to establish a company to improve the Potomac for navigation between Cumberland, Md. and Georgetown. Delegates from Virginia and Maryland met at Washington's home in 1785 and drew up the Mount Vernon Compact, providing for free trade on the river. Then, in 1786, delegates from all 13 states were invited to a convention in Annapolis "to consider how far a uniform system in their commercial regulations may be necessary to their common interest." The Annapolis Convention led to a general meeting in Philadelphia the following May.

The Patowmack Company, organized May 17, 1785, drew directors and subscribers from both states. The office of president, Washington wrote in his diary, "fell upon me." He presided over the project until he became the nation's first president.

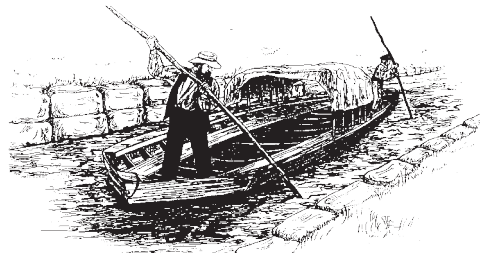


Back on the Potomac, the Patowmack Company faced many obstacles. Narrow and winding in places, the river drops over 600 feet in 200 miles from Cumberland to sea level. Spring rains swell the river to dangerous heights; summer droughts can render it impassable. In order to allow boats to navigate the river, sections of the riverbed were dredged, and five bypass canals were built around the roughest stretches of water.

The most demanding task was building a canal with locks to bypass the Great Falls of the Potomac. Roaring over rocks, the river drops nearly 80 feet in less than a mile.

Like a steep stairway, a series of five locks raised and lowered boats around the falls. Construction required engineering skills and a labor force not easily found in 18th-century America. The majority of the workers were slaves and Irish indentured servants.

Work was difficult and often dangerous. Workers used black powder to blast a hole through a cliff in order to construct the last three locks. Construction of this one mile long canal took 17 years.



Life on the Canal

Thousands of boats locked through at Great Falls, carrying flour, whiskey, tobacco, and iron downstream; carrying cloth, hardware, firearms, and other manufactured products upstream. Vessels varied from crudely constructed rafts to the long narrow "sharper," a keelboat that could carry up to 20 tons of cargo. The trip took 3 to 5 days down to Georgetown and 10 to 12 days poling against the current back to Cumberland.

An entire town grew up around the canal to serve as headquarters for the Patowmack Company and home for the workers. The Revolutionary War hero "Light Horse" Harry Lee founded the town and named it Matildaville in honor of his first wife. The town boasted a superintendent's house, a market, gristmill, sawmill, foundry, inn, ice house, workers' barracks, boarding houses, and a sprinkling of small homes. Boaters stopped here to wait their turn through the locks, to change cargo, or to enjoy an evening in town before continuing their journey.

The End of an Era

The greatest obstacle to the Patowmack project proved to be financial. High construction costs - particularly the Great Falls section - and insufficient revenues bankrupted the company. Extremes of high and low water restricted use of the canal to only a month or two each year. The tolls collected could not even pay interest on the company debt.

In 1828, the Patowmack Company sold its assets to the newly formed Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company. The C&O Canal had an even more ambitious undertaking - a man-made waterway stretching 184 miles from Georgetown to Cumberland on the Maryland side of the river.

The Patowmack Canal was abandoned in 1830. With boats no longer traveling through the locks, Matildaville soon shared the canal's fate.

Although the Patowmack Company was a financial failure, its builders pioneered lock engineering and stimulated a wave of canal construction important to the country's development.

George Washington did not live to see the completion of the navigation project that had been his obsession since youth. He died in 1799, two years before the canal opened at Great Falls. But in the long run Washington's vision of a strong nation linked by trade came true. His frequent toast, "Success to the navigation of the Potomac!" became a footnote of American history.

For Your Safety

Swimming, wading, camping, alcohol, and groundfires are prohibited.

Help protect your park! Stay on marked trails and do not climb on canal and Matildaville ruins.

Pets must be leashed at all times.

Visitor Information



The Patowmack Canal Trail is accessible by wheelchair as far as Point #8 on the map. The trail surface consists of compacted soil with no curbs. Wheelchairs with wider tires are available at the Visitor Center on a first come, first serve basis.

For further information, call 703-285-2965 or visit the park's website at <http://www.nps.gov/grfa>

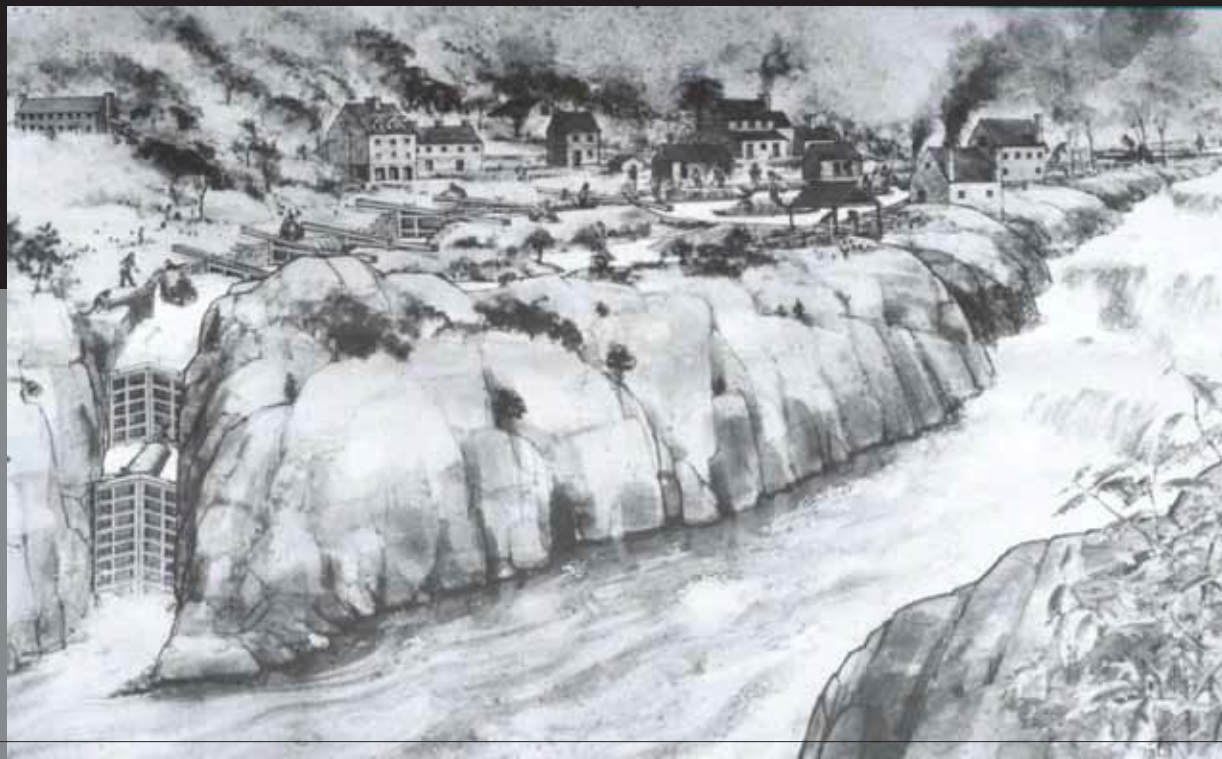
The Patowmack Canal

Great Falls Park Virginia

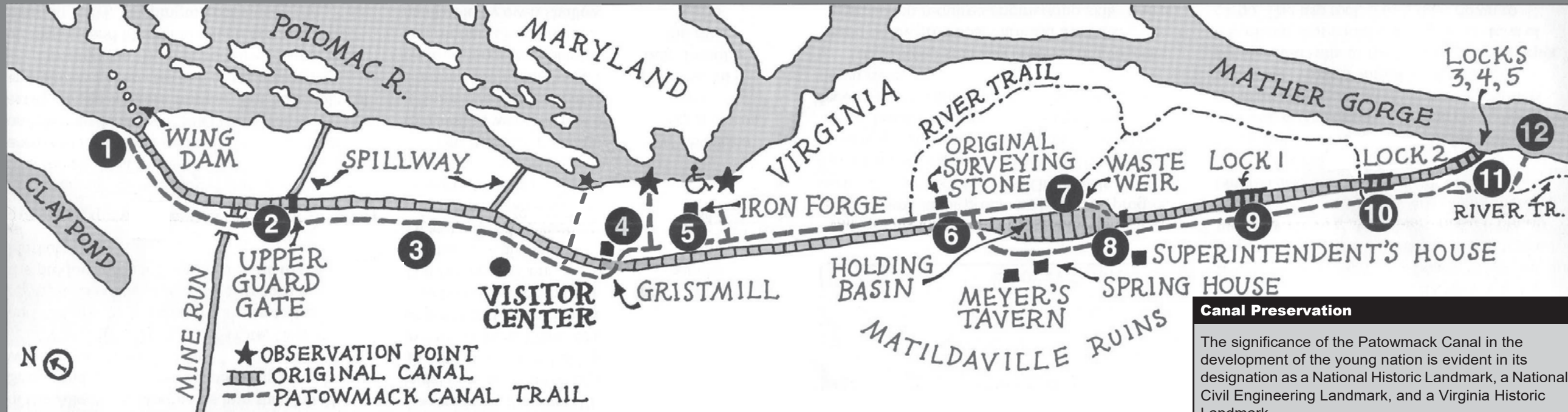


This illustration by William H. Bond suggests how Matildaville would have looked in 1802 when the locks were in operation.

© National Geographic Society



Trail Guide



Canal Preservation

The significance of the Patowmack Canal in the development of the young nation is evident in its designation as a National Historic Landmark, a National Civil Engineering Landmark, and a Virginia Historic Landmark.

In 1930 Congress authorized this place of human history and natural beauty as a park. The National Park Service took on responsibility for its management in 1966.

The preservation of the Patowmack Canal, dictated by Congress, is part of the Park Service's continuing efforts to manage special resources of the park. The Patowmack Canal and Matildaville ruins are protected by the Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979. This law prohibits excavation, removal, or defacement of archeological resources.

HELP PROTECT THIS NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK BY STAYING ON MARKED TRAILS AND OFF THE CANAL WALLS AND OTHER HISTORIC RUINS.



1 Wing Dam - To provide a sufficient level of water, the wing dam diverted river water into the canal. It was built of wooden cribs filled with rocks and extended 1200 feet into the river. During periods of low water, the outline of the dam is visible.

2 Upper Guard Gate - Walking downstream, you will cross a small bridge over Mine Run, which also brought water into the canal. Just beyond are the massive stones of the upper guard gate walls. During floods, wooden gates were closed across the canal, diverting high water through the spillway back to the river. Thick walls were needed to withstand the powerful Potomac.

3 Dry-Laid Walls - Continuing downstream, note the stone wall on the other side of the canal prism (a term for the shape of the canal.) These walls were 20 feet thick and 10 feet high. They provided protection for canal bed. The Civilian Conservation Corps rebuilt the small dam and spillway at the end of the wall in the 1930's.

4 Gristmill - Near the visitor center lie several foundation walls of the Samuel Briggs gristmill. Water from the canal powered the waterwheel to grind corn and grain for Matildaville and Georgetown.

5 Iron Forge - Past the path to Overlook 2, another small bridge leads to the remains of the Potts-Wilson iron forge. A large building here once housed four hearths where raw ore was reduced to pig iron and wrought into utensils, nails, and other hardware.

As you follow the trail into the woods beyond the picnic area, note a gray stone outcrop, which was used as a mark by the original surveyors for the area. The bowl-shaped area beyond was the holding basin.

6 Holding Basin and Matildaville - Here boats waited their turn to lock through the canal. They moored along the walls of the basin while crews visited Matildaville, once a bustling commercial center for the canal trade. Only the tumbled ruins of Meyer's Tavern, a springhouse, and the canal superintendent's house remain.

7 Waste Weir - Across the holding basin from Matildaville, you will see a wooden bridge. The waste weir next to it regulated the water level and permitted draining the canal for cleaning and repair. Archeologists suggest that a sawmill may have existed in this area.

8 Lower Guard Gate - Here masons used hand-cut red sandstone blocks quarried at Seneca, Maryland, the first example of Seneca sandstone used in the canal construction. The gate controlled the flow of water to the locks, and, in the event of flooding, protected the locks below. You can see Lock 1 through the gate opening.

9 Lock 1 - This lock is 14 feet wide and 100 feet long, and is faced with Seneca sandstone. Lock 1 is the largest lock, and raised and lowered boats a total of 10 feet. National Park Service preservation work restored the walls of the lock in the 1980's. The downstream gates and sill are on display in the visitor center.

10 Lock 2 - Both Seneca sandstone and local rock made up this lock. Stonecutters' marks, signatures of completed work, were cut into the blocks. This lock has been filled with earth to stabilize and protect the canal walls.

11 Locks 3, 4, and 5 - As you look down this sheer man-made cut, visualize a series of connected locks sharing common gates. The bend in Lock 3 allowed boats to turn 18 degrees.

Locks 4 and 5 were blasted out of solid rock with black powder, an engineering achievement far ahead of its time. Drill marks are still visible in the cliffside. These two locks accomplished half of the total lift needed to skirt Great Falls, lowering boats a distance of 38 feet. Notice iron rings and bolts used to hold ropes to maneuver boats through the locks.

12 Mather Gorge - A river overlook awaits up the hill and across a small wooden walkway. You have walked the way of the canal boats that helped the young United States grow and prosper. Pause a moment to reflect on the canal that met the river's challenges and the ongoing efforts to preserve what remains.