

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...."

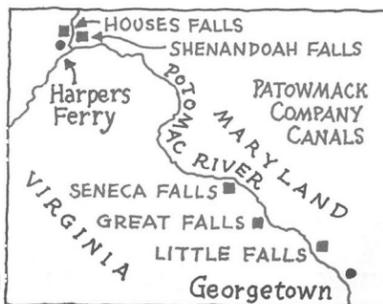
WATERWAY WEST

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 between its headwaters near Cumberland, Md., and tidewater at Georgetown. 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 chief executive.

Delegates from Virginia and Maryland meeting at Washington's home in 1785 drew up the Mount Vernon Compact, providing for free trade on the river. Virginia and Maryland legislators ratified the compact and then invited all 13 states to send delegates to a convention in Annapolis in 1786 "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. Thus, George Washington's lobbying for interstate cooperation on the Potomac helped prepare the way for the Constitutional Convention of 1787.



The Potomac presented physical obstacles to travel as well. Narrow and winding in places, it 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. To make the river navigable by even shallow draft boats, the Patowmack Company had to dredge portions of the riverbed and skirt five areas of falls.

By far 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.

Swift currents, solid rock, and constant financial and labor problems hindered the progress on the Patowmack Canal at Great Falls. Construction begun in 1786 took 16 years to complete - six years longer than required to locate, build, and begin occupying a new federal city, Washington D.C., ten miles down river.

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. Crews consisted of unskilled laborers, skilled indentured servants, and slaves rented from nearby plantations. The work was difficult and dangerous. With one of the earliest uses in this country of black-powder blasting, workers forced a channel through the rock cliffs for the final three locks.

Canal Headquarters

An entire town grew up around the construction site to serve as headquarters for the Patowmack Company and home for the workers. Founded by the Revolutionary War hero "Light Horse" Harry Lee and named for his first wife, Matildaville at its height boasted the company's 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.

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 "sharpers," 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.

Built to support the canal industry, Matildaville's fate was tied to that of the Patowmack Canal. Today, only a few fragile remains of Matildaville are visible.

Financial Obstacles

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.

The Patowmack Company succumbed in 1828, turning over its assets and liabilities to the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company. The new company abandoned the Patowmack Canal in 1830 for an even

more ambitious undertaking - a man-made waterway stretching from Georgetown to Cumberland on the Maryland side of the river.

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

- Alcoholic beverages, swimming, wading, camping, and groundfires are prohibited.
- Help preserve historic ruins by staying on marked trails.
- Pets must be leashed at all times.
- Great Falls is a trash free park.

Information

 The Patowmack Canal Interpretive 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 and may be borrowed.

Great Falls Park, a unit of the National Park Service, is administered by the Superintendent of the George Washington Memorial Parkway. For further information, call 703-285-2965.

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.

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