

# Great Falls Park

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Great Falls Park  
Virginia



Carol M. Highsmith

## Great Falls and Mather Gorge

Welcome to Great Falls, Virginia. Here, near the Nation's Capital, the Potomac River builds up speed and force as it falls over a series of steep, jagged rocks and flows through a narrow gorge. This dramatic scene makes the falls and Mather Gorge, named for the first National Park Service director, Stephen T. Mather, a popular site with local residents and with tourists from around the world. The river here was a trading place for American Indians and early colonists, and it is still a gathering place. History buffs and geology enthusiasts find plenty to interest them—in the remnants of George Washington's canal and in the natural structure of the gorge. People come here to take a walk, picnic with family and friends, and enjoy the view.

The Patowmack Company was organized in 1784 to construct a series of five canals to make the river navigable. George Washington presided over the effort, a dream of his since his youth when he surveyed the river and its tributaries. Washington was convinced that such canals would stimulate trade between the East and the Ohio Valley and bind the country together in a framework of trade and mutual interest.

Construction began on this canal system (one of America's first) in 1785 and was completed in 1802. The canals at Little Falls above Georgetown and at Great Falls required locks, a challenge for the company's engineers. Canals that skirted unnavigable features, such as falls and rapids, were dug at Seneca Falls and Harpers Ferry; elsewhere the company dredged the existing riverbed.

During the 26 years that the canal system was in operation, flour, corn, whiskey, furs, tobacco, iron ore, and timber were poled down the river on flatboats from as far away as Cumberland, Maryland, a market center in the Allegheny Mountains. The flatboats were about 75 feet long, five feet wide, and pointed at both ends. It took about three days to travel the 190-plus miles from Cumberland to Georgetown. Most boatmen dismantled their boats, sold them for the lumber, then walked back home.

In 1790 the town of Matildaville was sponsored by "Lighthouse Harry" Lee, an American Revolutionary War hero and friend of Washington. The town, near Great Falls, flourished for nearly 30 years but declined in the 1820s. In

1828 the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company bought the old Patowmack Canal and its rights and began construction of an ambitious canal system—a

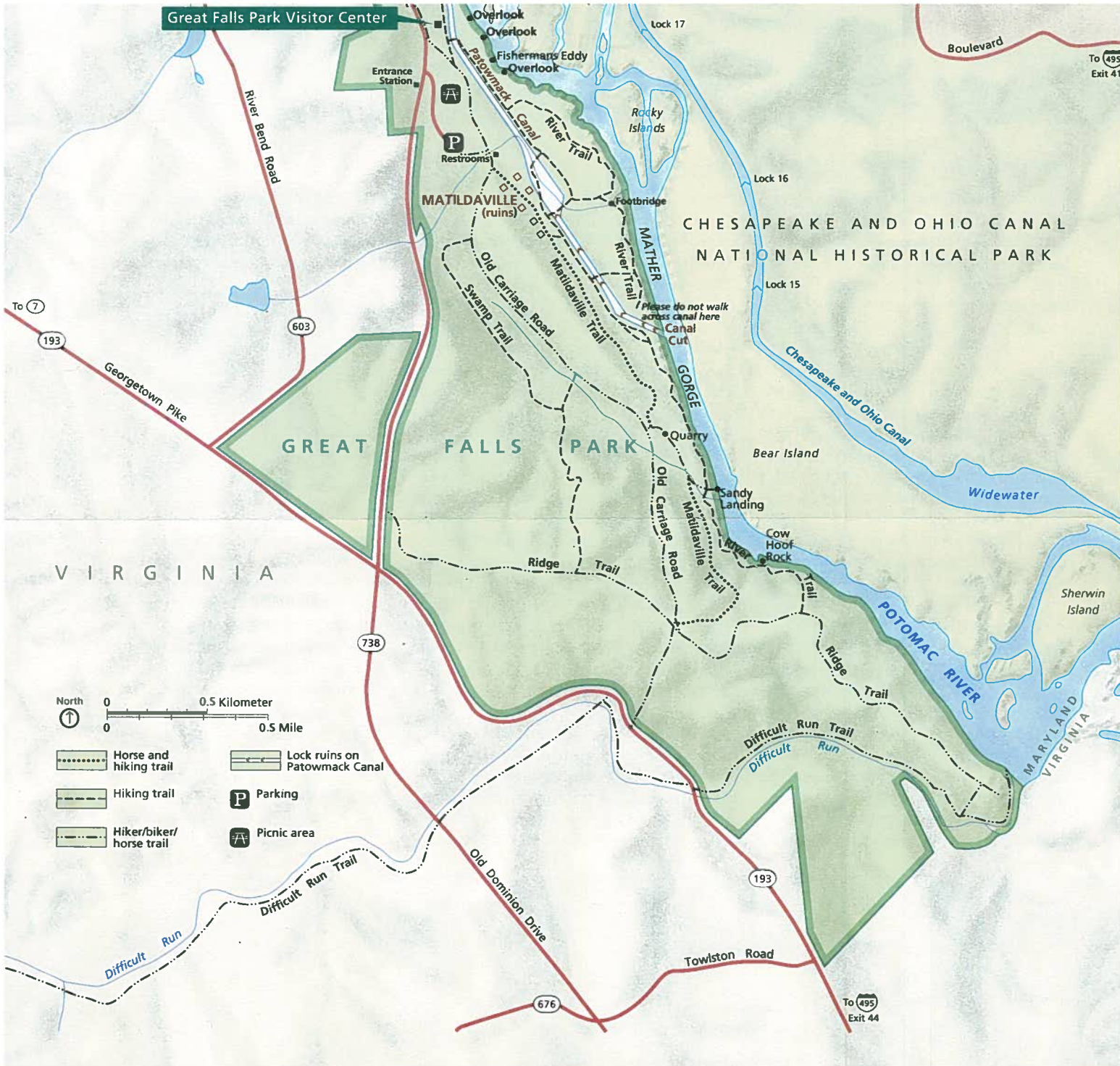


Partial remains of Matildaville.

water highway—that would link Washington, D.C. and Pittsburgh, Penn. By 1850 labor disputes, money problems, and rivalry with the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad halted the canal at Cumberland, Md. The C&O Canal operated until 1924 but eventually lost out to the railroads and newer modes of transportation, which could haul larger loads much faster than the canal boats.

Today, footpaths lead through the quiet woods to remnants of Matildaville and the Patowmack Canal.





## What to See and Do

The park is open every day except December 25. The park opens at 7 a.m. and closes at dark. There is an entrance fee. Your receipt, valid for three days, includes admission to the Maryland side of Great Falls, part of C&O Canal National Historical Park.

**Visitor Center** Stop here first. Park staff can help you plan your visit. Exhibits tell the story of the Patowmack Canal and other park features. Books and maps are for sale.

**Seeing the Falls** The falls are a short walk from the visitor center. To see the falls safely, stay on the overlooks provided. The overlooks date from the early 20th century when the land was a private amusement park, and visitors arrived by train from Washington, D.C.

**Guided Programs** Programs are conducted year-round. These include history and nature walks to points of interest. See program times at the visitor center or call 703-285-2965.

**Hiking and Exploring** The blue-blazed River Trail offers views of the Potomac River and Mather Gorge. Other trails lead through quiet woodlands and past historic structures. Trail maps are available at the visitor center.

**Horseback Riding and Bicycling** You may ride horses and bicycles only on designated trails, as shown on the trail map. Bicycles and horses are not allowed in the courtyard area or on the Patowmack Canal Trail. Ask for details.

**Picnicking** Picnic tables, some with grills, are available, but they cannot be reserved. There are no picnic shelters. You may bring your own grill, but please use charcoal or artificial fuels and deposit ashes in the red containers. Ground fires are prohibited. A snack bar is open seasonally in the park's courtyard near the visitor center.

**Please Recycle** Deposit cans, bottles, and recyclables in marked containers in the picnic area. Deposit paper and other trash in waste cans.

**Whitewater Boating** The river here is for experienced boaters only. Boaters must enter the river below the falls at Fishermans Eddy or farther downstream.

**Anglers** You can fish for bass, catfish, or carp. A Virginia or Maryland fishing license is required for those over age 16.

**Rock Climbing** Several stretches of rock offer adventure for this challenging sport. Climbing can be extremely dangerous and should be attempted only by experienced climbers with proper equipment. **Please register at the visitor center or lower parking lot before climbing.**

**Volunteer** Share your talents with others. There are openings in visitor services, maintenance, and historical research. Ask at the visitor center for information.

© GPO, 2009—349-224/80321 Reprint 2002  
Printed on recycled paper