Chesapeake and Ohio Canal

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historical Park
Maryland / Washington, DC /
West Virginia



Cargo boat on the canal at Darby Mill in Williamsport, MD, about 1895 NPS

The Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal began as a dream of passage to wealth in the West. Operating for nearly 100 years, it was a lifeline for communities along the Potomac River as coal, lumber, and agricultural products floated down the waterway to market. Today the canal endures as a pathway for discovering historical, natural, and recreational treasures.

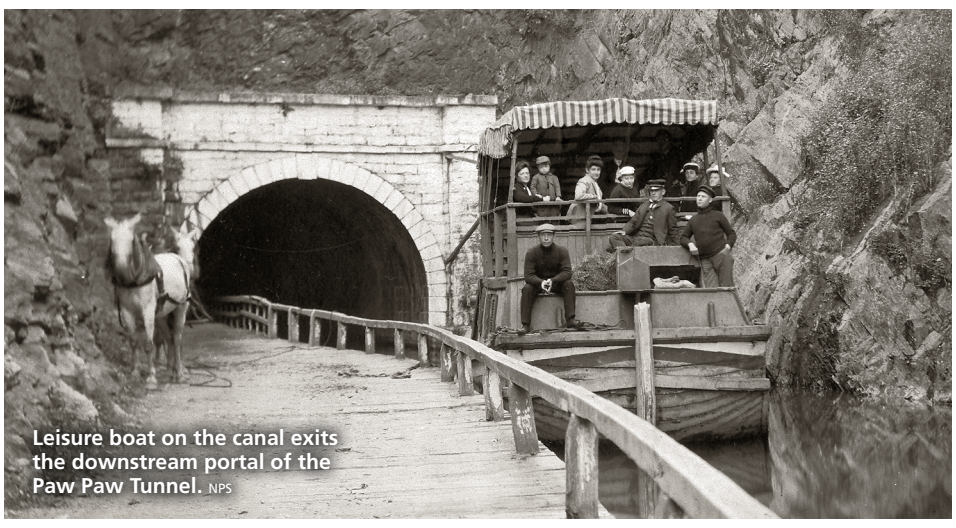
Historic Waterway to the West

The goal was ambitious: to improve on nature with a navigable waterway from tidewater at Georgetown in Washington, DC, to the Ohio River. In 1828, amid Fourth of July fanfare and canal fever across the nation, ground was broken for the C&O Canal. While in operation, the C&O Canal witnessed a race west by transportation giants, the growth and decline of communities and businesses along the banks of the Potomac River, fierce battles between a divided nation, and technological improvements that eventually made business on the canal obsolete.

In the span of a lifetime, canals faded from beacons of a dawning age to quaint reminders of a bygone era. From 1828 to 1850 thousands of immigrants found work—and hope for a new life—building the canal. Families worked and lived on the long, narrow boats, and children often tended the mules.

The C&O Canal closed in 1924. It sat mostly unused for 30 years, its physical features surviving, until it became a national historical park in 1971. Eventually the canal took on a new role, serving as a window to the past and witness to the resilience of nature.

Today the nearly level towpath runs 184.5 miles along the Potomac River and serves as the spine of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail. Hikers, campers, bikers, and others can experience the history, wildlife, and geology of the Potomac valley. In sections with water, the canal accommodates paddlers, boaters, and anglers. Explore canal history on ranger- and volunteer-led programs.



Leisure boat on the canal exits the downstream portal of the Paw Paw Tunnel. NPS

Enjoy the Towpath and Canal

The C&O Canal runs along the Potomac River from the mouth of Rock Creek at Georgetown in Washington, DC, to Cumberland, MD. Its 74 lift locks raised canal boats from near sea level to 605 feet of elevation at Cumberland. The towpath, built 12 feet wide as a mule path, is now a nearly level byway where hikers and bikers can enjoy the canal's quiet beauty.

Hiking and Biking Brown mileposts mark every mile along the towpath. Bikers must observe these regulations: Do not exceed 15 mph. Sound your bell or horn approaching others. Ride single-file. Stay to the right. Yield to pedestrians, horses, and mules. Wear a helmet, as required by law. Walk bikes across aqueducts.

Ranger-Led Programs The park offers talks, walks, and other programs in multiple locations. For information and schedules check the park website or the official NPS App.

Camping Camp only in designated sites. Reservations are required for sites reachable by car and for group campsites; reserve at *www.recreation.gov*. Hiker-biker tent sites along the towpath every 5–7 miles are free; first-come, first-served; and limited to one night. Pack out all trash. For more information check the park website. To stay overnight in a historic lockhouse, visit *www.canaltrust.org/quarters*.

On the Canal Paddling and non-motorized boating are possible in sections of the canal with water from Georgetown to Milepost 22 and for short stretches above that. **You must carry watercraft around each lock.** Motorized craft are generally prohibited. Swimming and wading in the canal are prohibited. Follow state or Washington, DC, fishing regulations.

The Potomac River is always extremely dangerous. Currents are very strong, deceptive, and unpredictable. Do not swim in the river.

Visitor Centers

Canal information and history are available at visitor centers and seasonal contact stations (*maps at right and on other side*). Hours and days vary by season; for schedules check the park website or call 301-739-4200.

Georgetown Visitor Center 1057 Thomas Jefferson St. NW, Washington, DC. Located in an urban canal setting. Exhibits on canal history.

Great Falls Tavern Visitor Center 11710 MacArthur Blvd., Potomac, MD. Originally a lockkeeper's house and later expanded. Exhibits on canal and area history.

Brunswick Visitor Center 40 W. Potomac St., Brunswick, MD. Exhibits highlight the town's transportation history from early ferry service to the canal and the railroad.

Williamsport Visitor Center 205 W. Potomac St., Williamsport, MD. Explore this canal town's history at the Cushwa warehouse and basin. Exhibits on canal and area history.

Cumberland Visitor Center Western Maryland Railway Station, 13 Canal St., Cumberland, MD. Exhibits on the canal and its western terminus.

Other Facilities Park staff and partners open historic buildings to the public on occasion. Contact the park for a seasonal schedule.

Accessibility We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to a visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check the park website.

Regulations Federal laws protect all natural and cultural features in the park. Hunting, trapping, metal detectors, and relic hunting are prohibited. Check the park website for firearms, drones, and other regulations.

This is a trash-free park. Take your trash with you when you leave.

More Information
Chesapeake and Ohio Canal
National Historical Park
142 W. Potomac St.
Williamsport, MD 21795
301-739-4200
www.nps.gov/choh

Follow us on social media. Use the official NPS App to guide your visit; select "save this park" to use offline.

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park is one of over 425 parks in the National Park System. Learn more at *www.nps.gov*.

National Park Foundation
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www.nationalparks.org

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Georgetown to Swains Lock



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