



Background on the C&O Canal

The Chesapeake & Ohio (or C&O) Canal was designed as a transportation link connecting the more populated towns of the east to the frontier land of the west. Coal, lumber, produce and even livestock all moved on canal boats; during the Civil War, those boats carried troops and ammunition. The canal follows the path of the Potomac River from Georgetown in Washington, DC, to the town of Cumberland in the Western Maryland mountains. It was supposed to stretch even further west, all the way to the Ohio River near Pittsburgh, but it went out of business before it made it that far.

George Washington envisioned the canal project as a way to connect and develop a young nation. He knew the Potomac River well from his days as a surveyor, and he understood that the waterway is rocky and shallow in many places and therefore would pose countless challenges for boats laden with supplies. It took a generation for the dream of the canal to become a reality, however, and it was President James Monroe who signed the bill that created the canal in 1825 as one of the final acts of his presidency.

Construction began in the nation's capital three years later. The groundbreaking ceremony took place on July 4, 1828 and was presided over by President John Quincy Adams. Construction officially ended in Cumberland on October 10, 1850, eight years after the competing Baltimore & Ohio Railroad reached the same town. The railroad was one reason the canal ultimately went out of business, making it unnecessary to continue the path out to the Ohio River. Another reason was what's at the heart of the canal's story ... water. From the beginning of the project, flooding due to its proximity to the Potomac River presented significant challenges to construction, maintenance and operations.

What it took to build and maintain the canal was nothing short of phenomenal. There was an elevation change of 605 feet along the 184.5-mile route, necessitating the construction of 74 locks that could raise and lower boats eight feet. In addition, 11 aqueducts were created to cross major streams and culverts were put in place to cross smaller ones. Perhaps the biggest engineering marvel

of the entire project is the Paw Paw Tunnel, which travels 3,118 feet through a mountain. Had the canal gone around it instead, the diversion would have added another five miles to its length.

It took hundreds of people – entire families, in fact – to pilot the boats, collect tolls and operate the 74 locks. In addition to the human component, the canal ran on mule power, with the large animals pulling the boats along its towpath.



Though the canal became obsolete as a transportation system, it continues to have value as part of the historical record and is treasured for its natural beauty. That said, saving it took an incredible amount of effort and advocacy from conservationists. Congress finally voted to preserve the canal as a National Historical Park in 1971, and today it's the National Park Service's most visited historical park. Each year it welcomes roughly 5 million visitors, who come from across the country and around the globe to enjoy it.

It's also one of the NPS's most biologically diverse parks, playing host to more than 1,000 rare, threatened or endangered plant species. The park offers unparalleled recreational opportunities, from kayaking and fishing to horseback riding and rock climbing. But the majority of visitors are there to hike or cycle along the towpath.

Along the way, those visitors can explore hundreds of years of history, learning stories of Native Americans, the Civil War, enslaved people, westward expansion, immigration, industrial development and conservation. In addition to traveling the towpath, they can stop at visitor centers and interpretive signs along the way.

Within the park's 20,000 acres, visitors can find more and 1,300 historic structures, including two dozen lockhouses. Seven of those houses currently operate as overnight lodging for modern-day guests, with an eighth one set to open later this year. Amazingly, 5 percent of all historic structures within the entire National Park System can be found within this single historical park, setting these Canal Quarters apart as a truly unique way for guests to immerse themselves in history.

Photo: Paw Paw Tunnel / Credit: mdmountainside.com