

A Brief History of the C&O Canal National Historical Park

At the beginning of the 19th century, the land beyond the Appalachians lured settlers, with visions of wealth, land, freedom and the subtle challenge of the unknown. With a prophetic resemblance to a modern rush hour, pioneers jostled each other in the race to where their suns would set. The few trails heading west became a tangle of humanity, wagons and livestock. Hucksters were quick to note the need for commerce along the way. The demand for an economical means of transportation for commercial goods coincided with the wave of canal building in Europe and found many converts in the new and growing country. The Erie Canal, begun in 1817 and launched in 1825, had shown that it was feasible to use waterways as a means of exchanging finished goods for the untold raw materials of the west.

The C&O Canal was the heir apparent of the Old Potowmack Company, envisioned by George Washington in 1785. On July 4, 1828, John Quincy Adams broke ground to initiate development of a waterway to connect with the Ohio River located across the Alleghenies. Coincidentally, construction of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad began on this day. From these two foundations a bittersweet competition was formed from which there would be only one victor.

Construction of the canal was a slow, expensive undertaking. Building supplies were scarce, land costs high and since the Potomac Valley was predominantly agricultural, skilled laborers were almost unknown. Indentured laborers were brought from Ireland, Germany, Netherlands, England and Wales and brought with them skills in carpentry, masonry and stone cutting. Miners from Wales were of inestimable value during construction of the Paw Paw Tunnel.

Life was extremely difficult for immigrants as well as local drifters looking for work. Living conditions were appalling and the ravages of disease, nature and prejudice took their toll. On top of these problems, it is doubtful if the workers lost much sleep over the westward-running steel tracks to the north of them.

Canal management was beginning to feel the pressure from the B&O. Land acquisition between the two factions grew into a bitter dispute. The narrow gorge at Point of Rocks became the focal point for the contention. There was room for only one right of way. After four years of litigation, the case was settled in favor of the canal. Financial crises further delayed the completion of the canal with the final stage to Cumberland completed in 1850, eight years after the railroad reached that point. The speed and economy of railroad made it clear to the C&O Canal officials that they should drop plans to extend the canal to Pittsburgh.

The company had spent \$22 million to build 297 kilometers (184.5 miles) of canal consisting of 74 lift locks which raised it from sea level at Georgetown to 184 meters (605 feet) at Cumberland, 11 stone aqueducts which carried the canal over major Potomac tributaries, seven dams to supply water for the canal, a number of waste weirs to control the water level, hundreds of culverts to

carry roads and streams under the canal, a 9,180 meter (3,117 feet) tunnel to take it under a mountain, and an assortment of stop locks, river locks, bridges, shops, section houses and lockhouses. The canal generally was 15 to 18 meters (50 to 60 feet) wide at towpath level, sloped to 9 to 12 meters (30 to 40 feet) across at the bottom and carried a minimum depth of 1.8 meters (6 feet) of water. The size of the locks--4.57 meters (15 feet) wide and 30 meters (98 feet) long--restricted the size of the barges. A typical barge was 4.41 meters (14.5 feet) wide, 28 meters (92 feet) long, drew 1.37 meters (4.5 feet) of water, and could carry upwards of 122 metric tons (120 tons) of cargo.

In the early summer of 1889, a titanic flood swept the Potomac Valley, leaving the canal in ruin. However, it was rebuilt and used until 1924, when another flood seriously damaged the already financially troubled canal company.

Though the canal was not a financial success, it did provide for transportation of coal, flour, grain and lumber between Washington and Cumberland. It created a unique way of life for the people who labored or lived along the canal. It was born of the vision of men who could not foresee the impact of mechanization on a new and striving country. Their desire, to supply the commercial needs of a growing population and to reap its benefits, displayed a daring which was fundamental in opening up the frontiers to the streams of pioneers seeking new freedoms.

The 185 miles of the canal contain an array of historically significant sites which trace the comings and goings of Indian tribes, mountain men, settlers, missionaries, all playing a part in expanding the nation from a few cities and settlements in the east to the diverse expanse it is today. Take time to see and understand for we have probably only scratched the surface.

Legislation

Pertinent federal legislation of interest to VIP's:

Act of June 8, 1864 - established Yosemite as a state park.

Act of March 1, 1872 - established Yellowstone National Park, the world's first national park.

Act of June 8, 1906 - Antiquities Act gave the President authority to establish national monuments and gave legal protection to historic and prehistoric objects.

Act of August 25, 1916 - established the National Park Service.

Act of June 5, 1920 - authorized the Secretary of the Interior to accept lands and money for parks.

Act of March 3, 1933 - Reorganization Act brought many areas from the Department of War and the Department of Agriculture into the National Park System.

Act of August 21, 1935 - Historic Preservation Act to preserve historic sites, etc.

Act of 1938 - The United States purchased the canal right of way from the B&O Railroad.

January 18, 1961 - President Eisenhower designated the area from Seneca to Cumberland as a National Historic Monument

Volunteers in the Parks Act, 1970 - authorized the National Park Service to use the services of unpaid individuals in the parks.

Act of January 8, 1971 - to establish and develop the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park.