

Great Falls Park

Virginia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide



Photographs by Valerie Haase

Great Falls and Mather Gorge

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 Mather Gorge, named for the first director of the National Park Service, a popular site with local residents and tourists from around the world who are visiting the Washington area. The river here was a trading place for Indians and early colonists, and it is still a gathering place today. History buffs and geology enthusiasts find plenty to interest them in the ruins of George Washington's dream canal and in the natural structure of the gorge itself. But many people come here just to take a walk, to picnic with family and friends, and to enjoy the view. Welcome to Great Falls, Virginia.

The Patowmack Company was formed 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, more importantly, bind the country to-

gether in a framework of trade and mutual interest.

Construction began on this canal system—America's first—in 1785 and was completed in 1802. The canals at Little Falls above Georgetown and here at Great Falls both required locks, a challenge for the engineers of the company. Skirting canals also were dug at Seneca Falls and Harpers Ferry; elsewhere the company simply dredged and improved the existing riverbed.

During the 26 years that the canal system was in operation, flour, corn, whisky, tobacco, furs, iron ore, and timber were poled down the river on flatboats from as far away as Cumberland, Maryland, which was a market center in the Allegheny Mountains. The flatboats were about 75 feet long, 5 feet wide, and pointed at both ends. It took about three days to travel the more than 190 miles from Cumberland to Georgetown. Most boatmen dismantled their boats, sold them for the lumber, and then walked back home.

In 1790 the town of Matildaville (right) was sponsored by "Lighthouse Harry"

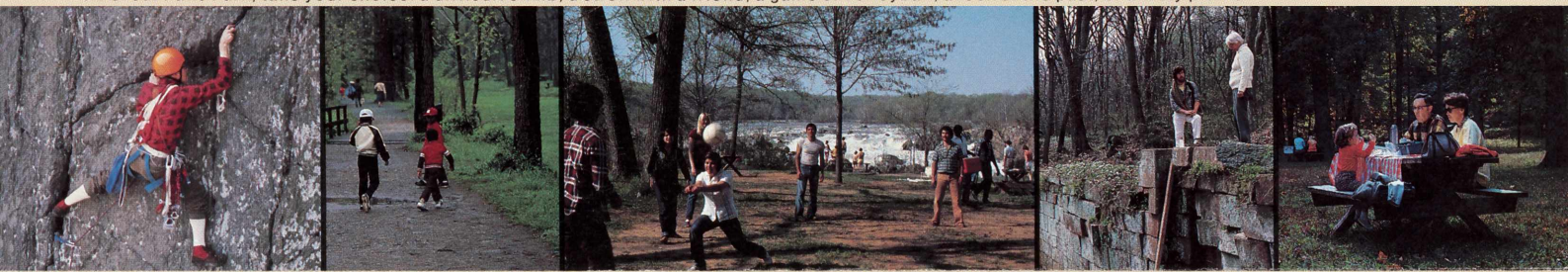
Lee, a Revolutionary War hero and friend of Washington. The town, near Great Falls, flourished for nearly three decades but declined in the 1820s as trade dwindled.



In 1828 the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company bought the old Patowmack Canal and its rights, eventually linking the city of Washington to the west with a continuous canal. The C&O Canal was one of the first "highways" to the west, but it was soon superseded by the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, which could carry larger loads faster and less expensively than the canal barges.

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

At Great Falls Park, take your choice: a difficult climb, a stroll with a friend, a game of volleyball, a look at the past, or a tasty picnic.



What to See and Do

The park is open from 9 a.m. until dark every day except December 25. Parking spaces for the handicapped are nearest to the visitor center.

The **Visitor Center** is the place to start your visit. The exhibits and staff there will help orient you to the park and give you an idea of the recreational possibilities. Publications on the area's human and natural history are on sale.

The Falls of the Potomac can be viewed from overlooks a short walk from the visitor

center. The overlooks date to the early part of this century when the land was a privately owned amusement park and Washington residents went back and forth by train.

Special tours and walks are conducted all year. Staff members lead history and nature walks to points of interest. See the list of times at the visitor center. Large groups may schedule tours any time by calling 703-285-2966 in advance.

The park road and trails are for **hiking and exploring** on your own. Along the blue-blazed

River Trail are places to stop to view the river and the gorge. The main interpretive trail follows the old canal route. Both novice and expert hikers will find suitable trails in the park. Ask for the trail map at the visitor center.

Picnic tables and a few grills are available but cannot be reserved. You may bring your own grill if you like but in any case please use charcoal or artificial fuels. Ground fires are prohibited.

Whitewater boating is for experienced boaters who are permitted to boat **BELOW** the Falls only.

Fishermen can try their luck with catfish, bass, carp, and a variety of panfish in the Potomac. If you are older than 16 you will need a Virginia or Maryland fishing license.

Rock climbing is one of the more challenging sports enjoyed here. The park has several good stretches of rock available for climbing and some vantage points for those who want to watch. Climbing can be extremely dangerous and should be attempted by only experienced climbers with proper equipment. Please register at the visitor center before climbing.

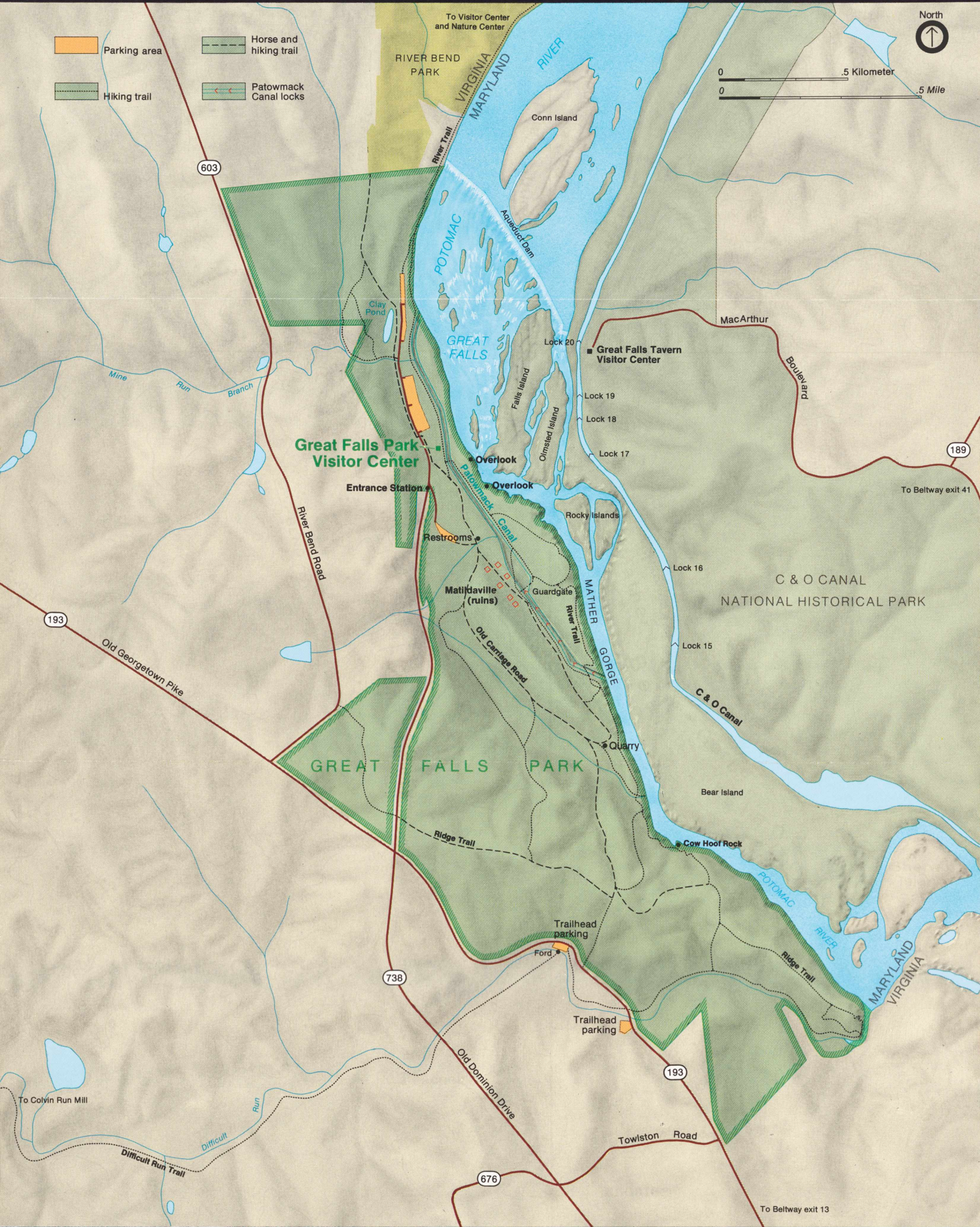
Horseback riding is permitted on designated trails. Ask for a map at the visitor center. You cannot rent horses in the park.

Volunteer and share your skills and talents with others. Do you like people, nature, history? Volunteering is for everyone: professionals, senior citizens, students, and youngsters. Ask a ranger for information.

Please read and heed the safety message on the other side of the folder.

TDD: 703-285-2966

Park regulations are enforced for your safety and the safety of others, so please observe them. Camping and overnight parking are not permitted. All motor vehicles must stay on paved roads at all times. There is no boat access to the river. Alcoholic beverages are not allowed in the park. Ground fires are not allowed. Regulations also prohibit the picking of wildflowers, the injuring or capturing of wildlife, and the destroying or removal of trees, rocks, and ruins. Pets must be kept on a leash at all times. The park is closed at dark, and the gates are locked.



Safety Notes

- When water goes over a fall or dam, the current underneath runs faster than the surface. This causes water to curl backward trapping any object, including people, in the backwash. Almost everyone who ends up in this "Killer Hydraulic" drowns. Stay away.
- Stay away from the river's edge and closely watch and control your children at all times.
- Swimming and wading are prohibited because of strong currents.
- The park is inhabited by one poisonous snake species, the copperhead, so be careful where you place your hands and feet, particularly in rocky areas.
- Remember, rangers are here to help prevent accidents, but safety is everyone's responsibility.

Nearby Parks
Great Falls Park is one of several sites in the National Capital area administered by the National Park Service. The superintendent of the George Washington Memorial Parkway is directly in charge. Other areas administered by the parkway are: Theodore Roosevelt Island, Arlington House, and Fort Hunt Park.

Adjacent to the north of Great Falls Park is Riverbend Park, which is administered by the Fairfax County Park Authority. Some of the trails in the two parks run into each other. Riverbend has a marina facility on the Potomac, a visitor center, and a nature center.

on the Maryland side of the Potomac is within an easy drive. This center is a part of Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park, and thus its historical and natural history themes are closely allied with Great Falls Park here in Virginia. The C&O park offers a wide range of recreational activities. You can reach Great Falls Tavern by returning to

the Washington Beltway (Route 495), traveling north across the Potomac, and taking exit 41 toward Carderock.

Ask at the visitor center for further information about these and other parks in the Washington, D.C. area.

