

Great Falls Park

Virginia
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide



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 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.

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, more im-

portantly, bind the country together 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, whiskey, 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, 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 (*above right*) was sponsored by "Lighthorse 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 ball game, a look at the past, or a picnic.

Photographs, except second from right, by Valerie Haase

Safety Notes

- Swimming and wading are prohibited.
- Stay away from the river's edge and closely watch and control your children at all times.
- 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.
- There is one poisonous snake species, the copperhead, within the park. Be careful where you place your hands and feet, particularly in rocky areas.
- Remember, safety is your responsibility. Be observant of park safety tips.

Nearby Parks

Adjacent to the north of Great Falls Park is Riverbend Park, which is administered by the Fairfax County Park Authority. Some of the trails of the two parks merge. Riverbend Park has a visitor center and nature center.

As the map at right shows, Great Falls Tavern Visitor Center on the Maryland side of the Potomac is a short drive away. This visitor 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 I-495 (Capital Beltway), 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.

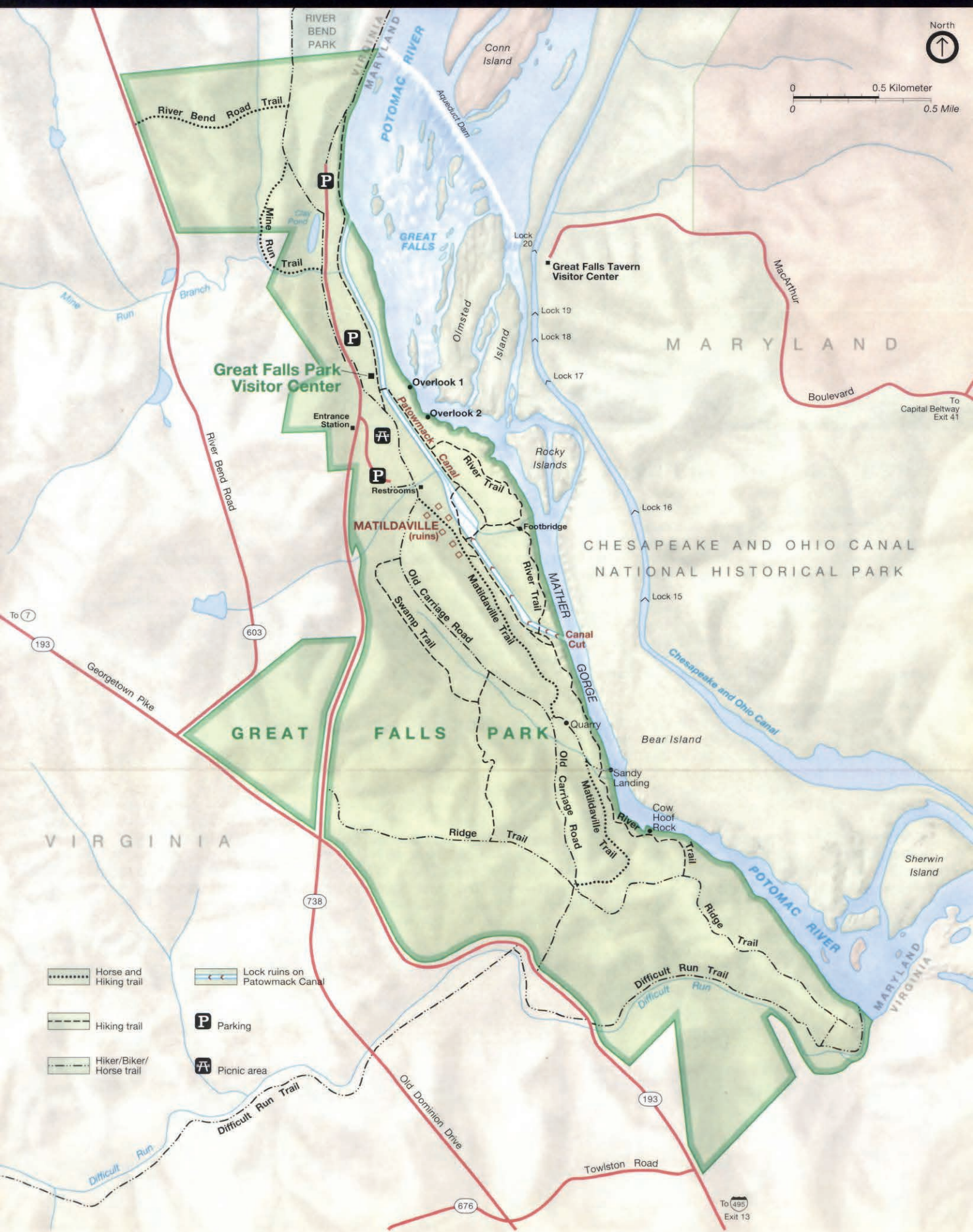
Administration Great Falls Park, Virginia, is part of the National Park System, one of more than 370 areas that are examples of our nation's natural

and cultural heritage. For information, write to: Superintendent, George Washington Memorial Parkway, Turkey Run Park, McLean, VA 22101.



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What to See and Do

The park is open every day except December 25. The park is closed at dark, and the gates are locked. 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.

Stop first at the visitor center. 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.

The falls of the Potomac can be safely viewed within a short walk of the visitor center.

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 are conducted year-round. These include history and nature walks to points of interest. See program times at the visitor center, or call 703-285-2966 (voice and TTD).

Hike and explore along the park road and trails. View the river and Mather Gorge along the blue-blazed River Trail. Trail maps are available at the visitor center.

Horseback riding and bicycling are permitted only on designated trails shown on the trail map. Bicycles and horses are not allowed in the courtyard area or on the Patowmack Canal trail.

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 located in the courtyard.

Please recycle. Deposit cans, bottles, and recyclables in marked containers in the picnic yard. Deposit paper and other trash in waste cans.

Whitewater boating is for experienced boaters only; boaters must enter the river below the falls.

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

Rock climbing is a challenging sport enjoyed here. Several good stretches of rock offer adventure for

climbers and good observation points for those who wish to watch. 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 and share your talents with others. There are openings in visitor services, maintenance, and historical research. Ask a ranger for information.

Regulations are enforced for your safety and for the park's protection. • **Pets must be leashed at all times.** • **No camping or overnight parking allowed.** • **Motor vehicles must stay on paved roads.** • **Picking wildflowers, injuring or capturing wildlife, and destroying or removing cultural or natural objects are prohibited.** • **Alcoholic beverages are not allowed in the park.** • **Swimming and wading are prohibited.**

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

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