

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR FEDERAL PROPERTIES

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

AUG 13 1979

DATE ENTERED

OCT 18 1979

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

Patowmack Canal at Great Falls Historic District

AND/OR COMMON

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

9200 Old Dominion Drive

(within Great Falls Park, Virginia)

— NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Great Falls

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

10th

STATE

Virginia

CODE

51

COUNTY

Fairfax

CODE

059

3 CLASSIFICATION**CATEGORY**

- ☒ DISTRICT
☐ BUILDING(S)
☐ STRUCTURE
☐ SITE
☐ OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

- ☒ PUBLIC
☐ PRIVATE
☐ BOTH

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

- ☐ IN PROCESS
☐ BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

- ☐ OCCUPIED
☒ UNOCCUPIED
☐ WORK IN PROGRESS
ACCESSIBLE
☐ YES: RESTRICTED
☒ YES: UNRESTRICTED
☐ NO

PRESENT USE

- ☐ AGRICULTURE ☐ MUSEUM
☐ COMMERCIAL ☒ PARK
☐ EDUCATIONAL ☐ PRIVATE RESIDENCE
☐ ENTERTAINMENT ☐ RELIGIOUS
☐ GOVERNMENT ☐ SCIENTIFIC
☐ INDUSTRIAL ☐ TRANSPORTATION
☐ MILITARY ☐ OTHER

4 AGENCY

REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS (If applicable)

National Capital Region, National Park Service

STREET & NUMBER

1100 Ohio Drive, S.W.

CITY, TOWN

Washington

STATE

VICINITY OF D.C.

20242

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTIONCOURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Fairfax County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

4000 Chain Bridge Road

CITY, TOWN

Fairfax, Virginia 22030

STATE

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Historic American Engineering Record

DATE

1974-1975

☒ FEDERAL ☐ STATE ☐ COUNTY ☐ LOCALDEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Library of Congress

CITY, TOWN

Washington

STATE

D.C.

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION

☐ EXCELLENT

☐ GOOD

☐ FAIR

☐ DETERIORATED

☒ RUINS

☐ UNEXPOSED

CHECK ONE

☐ UNALTERED

☒ ALTERED

CHECK ONE

☒ ORIGINAL SITE

☐ MOVED

DATE _____

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Patowmack Canal at the Great Falls of the Potomac in Virginia is a skirting canal approximately 3/4 of a mile long and containing five locks, a large holding basin, two guard gates, a wing dam, and several other related features. It was constructed by the Patowmack Canal Company between 1785 and 1802 to provide passage around the Great Falls of the Potomac.

The canal consisted of: a large wing dam at its upper terminus, an upper guard gate, the canal bed, a large holding basin, a lower guard gate, the five locks including their attendant gates, and a stone jetty at its lower terminus. In addition, the town of Matildaville was to be constructed as an accompanying trade center and headquarters for the Patowmack Company.

Wing Dam (canal inlet)

At the upper terminus of the canal, a wing dam extended into the river approximately 1,200 feet. Its purpose was to channel water into the canal, especially at times of low water. Remnants of this structure indicate it was constructed of stones, possibly in wooden cribs, and its upper elevation would have been the operating level of the canal. Thus, surplus water simply flowed over the top of the dam. This structure is located 1,600 feet above the Great Falls Park Visitors Center.

Upper Spillway

Below the wing dam in the river side of the canal wall, there was a low masonry dam constructed in the bed of an existing stream channel. Its upper elevation was again the working level of the canal and it allowed excess water to spill over the dam and return to the river. This structure is only barely visible and is located 1,300 feet above the Great Falls Park Visitors Center.

Upper Guard Gate

Immediately below the upper spillway was the upper guard gate. This controlled the entrance of water into the entire canal system below this point. Evidence indicates that the gates were of the swing or mitre type. On the berm bank a heavy stone wall 20 feet thick extends nearly 40 feet into the berm wall to resist flood waters. On the river side, below the guard gate, the canal walls are about 20 feet thick and constructed of large stones, dry laid with a slight batter. In places these walls, extending 10 feet from the canal bed, rise from bedrock, and in places the canal bed was cut into bedrock from 1 foot to 3 feet. The guard gate is located 1,300 feet above the Great Falls Park Visitors Center.

Holding Basin

About 2,800 feet below the upper guard gates, a large holding basin was constructed. It is roughly triangular in shape, covering approximately 2 acres, with the long axis parallel to the canal. This basin provided for the turning and docking of the canal boats and a large impound area providing water to the locks located below it. The river side wall of this basin is constructed of stone of a size and manner similar to that below the upper guard gate. The berm-side wall no longer exists, but it is assumed it was constructed in a like manner. Water from the holding basin was

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW				
☐ PREHISTORIC	☐ ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	☐ COMMUNITY PLANNING	☐ LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	☐ RELIGION	
☐ 1400-1499	☐ ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	☐ CONSERVATION	☐ LAW	☐ SCIENCE	
☐ 1500-1599	☐ AGRICULTURE	☐ ECONOMICS	☐ LITERATURE	☐ SCULPTURE	
☐ 1600-1699	☐ ARCHITECTURE	☐ EDUCATION	☐ MILITARY	☐ SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
☐ 1700-1799	☐ ART	☒ ENGINEERING	☐ MUSIC	☐ THEATER	
☒ 1800-1899	☒ COMMERCE	☐ EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	☐ PHILOSOPHY	☒ TRANSPORTATION	
☐ 1900-	☐ COMMUNICATIONS	☐ INDUSTRY	☐ POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	☐ OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		☐ INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES 1785-1830

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Patowmack Company was organized to construct a canal system making the Potomac River navigable for trade from Georgetown to Harpers Ferry. If the Potomac River could be made navigable, it was a short land passage from Harpers Ferry to the Monongahela or Youghiogheny Rivers and then to the Ohio River, which at that time was a principal route to the west. Canals were to be built at Great Falls, Little Falls, Seneca, Shenandoah, and House Falls. Only at Little Falls and Great Falls were locks required. During this period canals with locks were uncommon in the United States, and thus represented a significant engineering achievement.

The Patowmack Canal at The Great Falls of the Potomac was the largest of the five skirting canals on the Potomac. To re-enter the river below The Great Falls, a channel had to be blasted through solid rock. Holes were bored by hand into the rock and filled with blasting powder, and fired. This constituted one of the first uses of explosives in an American Engineering project.

George Washington, early in his life, realized the importance of the Potomac River as a route to the west. Before the Revolutionary War he was active in soliciting the interest of Virginia and Maryland legislators in a canal venture, and he was successful in securing the passage of an act in Virginia in 1772 for improving the Potomac. Due largely to Washington's influence, the legislators of Maryland and Virginia passed laws incorporating the Patowmack Company in 1784; Washington served as the Company's first president. Shares in the Patowmack Company were sold to subscribers. Although the country was in a period of financial stress, the stock was quickly taken with a large number of Alexandria residents participating. The states of Maryland and Virginia originally purchased 50 shares each, and by 1821 Virginia had 70 shares and Maryland held 220. These states purchased almost half of the 701 shares of the Patowmack Company, a sizable investment during a period when states did not promote extensive public works. The Patowmack Company's venture was one of the first state financed internal improvements in the USA.

Work on the canal began in 1785 and was completed in 1802, under the direction of several canal engineers, John Rumsey appears to have been the principal engineer. The Patowmack Company was a financial failure; however, it is significant for its early recognition of the need for an effective means of transportation between the east and west, and the development of canal building in the United States.

On August 15, 1826, the bankrupt Patowmack Canal Company dissolved and its charter and its charter and official papers passed to the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company.

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

See attached.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 19

UTM REFERENCES

A 18 30,46,20 4,31,91,80
ZONE EASTING NORTHING
C 18 30,53,10 4,31,77,50

B 18 30,50,80 4,31,86,90
ZONE EASTING NORTHING
D 18 30,47,80 4,31,84,30

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The entire canal is within the boundaries of Great Falls Park, Virginia. The canal enters the river above Great Falls. Its southern terminus is through a man made cut entering Mather Gorge. The nominated property includes only the canal and related ruins of the foundry, grist mill and Matildaville. The modern park visitor center abutting the canal is excluded. (See enclosed park leaflet for sketch map.)

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	Virginia	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
			Fairfax	
STATE		CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE Gary Scott, Historian
Nicolas Veloz, Curator

May 2, 1978
July 12, 1979

ORGANIZATION George Washington Memorial Parkway

DATE 557-3635

STREET & NUMBER Turkey Run Park

TELEPHONE

CITY OR TOWN

STATE

Mc Lean, Virginia 22101

12 CERTIFICATION OF NOMINATION

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER RECOMMENDATION

Tucker Hill, Executive Director

YES X

NO

NONE

Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

In compliance with Executive Order 11593, I hereby nominate this property to the National Register, certifying that the State Historic Preservation Officer has been allowed 90 days in which to present the nomination to the State Review Board and to evaluate its significance. The evaluated level of significance is National State Local

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE Asst. Dir., Cultural Resources

DATE 8/6/79

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I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Coral Shull

DATE 10-18-79

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST: Emma Jane Sage

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE 10-16-79

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Regional Coordinator

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channeled into the locks of the canal through a lower guard gate, and the excess was returned to the river via a waste weir/spillway. This basin and its attendant waste weir and guard gate are located approximately 1,500 feet below the Great Falls Visitor Center.

Waste Weir/Spillway

In the river side of the basin wall there is a break in the masonry where the waste weir was located. The exact configuration of this structure cannot be determined at this time, but it may have been constructed of wood. Its purpose was to maintain a maximum operating level for the water in the holding basin.

Lower Guard Gate

The lower guard gate, located at the southwest end of the holding basin enabled the water in the locks below to be regulated. Hollow quoin stones of well dressed Seneca sandstone are visible in the walls on either side, thus indicating the use of a swing-type mitre gate. An extra 4-inch recess in the quoins accommodated two sliding wicket gates in each of the swing gates. The guard gate channel was 14 feet in width, and there was apparently extensive use of flat strap iron cramps in the coping and stones beneath them in the channel walls.

Locks

Below the guard gates were the locks which were numbered in descending order, with number I being at the upper end, adjacent to the holding basin, and number V being located near the weir.

Lock I

From the lower guard gate the canal wall is constructed of native stone. Lock I is approximately 100 yards below the guard gate and seems to have been 14 feet wide and 100 feet long, pocket to pocket. Its lift capacity was 10 feet. The walls were probably a composite of ashlar dressed red Seneca sandstone face over a rubble interior. The two pairs of gates were of a swing-type with sliding wicket gates. The upper lock gates and quoin stone coping were 2 feet, 2 inches above the level of the coping of the lower lock gates. The upper course is the only one currently in view and it consists of four stones with a recess of 8½ inches deep to receive the mitre sill. There was evidently little use of iron cramps in the lock walls, except in the gate pockets. There are currently a few bulges in the lock walls, and there has been some repair to the walls with brick, rubble, and cement in modern times. This feature is located 1,700 feet below the Great Falls Visitor Center.

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Lock II

Lock II is 12 feet wide, 88 feet long between gate pockets and had a lift capacity of 15 feet. There were several types of stone used in the construction of this lock, with free stone used in all of the gate pockets. Ashlar red sandstone was used on the river side wall, except for a small section of rough cut nature stone. There are a large number of stonecutters' marks found in the stones of this lock, particularly in the free stone.

The lock gates were of the swing mitre type with butterfly wicket gates. There are indications that the cut stone in the gate pockets were cramped, but all pockets have since collapsed. About 30 feet of the upper end of the berm wall have collapsed below the breast wall, as have about 16 feet below the lower gate pocket, on the river side. This lock is located 1,800 feet below the Great Falls Visitor Center.

Locks III, IV, and V

Locks III, IV, and V were a riser, or stairstep, of locks, each being immediately adjacent to the other, and sharing the common gate between them. Lock III is 12 feet wide, 111 feet long, and has a lift of 15 feet. Locks IV and V, however, were blasted from the bedrock with black powder in hand-drilled holes. Lock III is unique in that the lock bends 18 degrees within the lock itself. These locks are 2,100 feet below the Great Falls Visitor Center.

Jetty

At the lower end of the gorge of Locks IV and V, the canal returns to the Potomac River. On the river side of this gorge, a stone jetty was built into the river to protect the entrance/exit to the canal. Presently there are no known remnants of this jetty remaining.

ASSOCIATED FEATURES

Mill Site

Just below the Great Falls Visitor Center and adjacent to the river side canal wall are the foundations of an old mill. Period maps refer to the existence of a grist mill, while more recent maps refer to a saw mill. Ruins of masonry walls indicate the water wheel pit was adjacent to the wall of the canal and that it was fed from the canal by a wooden flume from some distance above the location. The remains of an existing masonry weir which now feeds water to the complex seems to be of more recent construction and probably is not original to the construction of the mill.

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Forge/Foundry Site

Just below the mill site are the remains of footings and foundation for a forge/foundry. Archeological evidence has revealed the function of this building through excavation of both artifacts and slag. There are also the remains of a cast iron pipe below the foundation which seems to lead from the canal bank to the river bed. It is assumed this would have enabled the use of a turbine as power necessary for a forge.

Matildaville

Initially it was planned for a small town of 40 acres to accompany the development of the canal as a trade center and headquarters of the Canal Company. Lighthorse Harry Lee, father of General Robert E. Lee, was the founder of this town. Due to the financial failure of the canal the town never fully developed and all that currently remains are the ruins of a few structures. It is known that there were additional wooden structures, including, among others, warehouse and workmen's quarters, but no remains of these are known.

Dickey's Inn (Myers Tavern)

This building survived for many years following the failure of the canal and Matildaville. It was constructed of logs, squared and whitewashed, of two stories, with five rooms upstairs and two downstairs, and a kitchen. During the Civil War the inn was used for a Confederate Army headquarters. The building burned in 1942, and the chimney still partially stands surrounded by a pile of rubble. The inn is located 1,500 feet below the Great Falls Visitor Center.

Spring House

The spring house, located near Dickey's Inn, served to keep perishables cool. The floor of the spring house was approximately 30 inches below grade. All that currently remain are the foundation walls, the spring inlet, and a small set of stairs.

Superintendent's House

The Superintendent's house was constructed in 1796 of stone and brick. It was two stories with a front elevation of 25 feet and a depth of 35 feet. At present only the foundation and some of the corner stones remain standing. It is located 1,700 feet below the Great Falls Visitor Center.

General Appearance

The Patowmack Canal is currently in "ruin," in that much of the canal bed is filled with debris and silt. It is quite possible, however, that the canal prism is intact throughout the major portion of its length. The lock gates are no longer in existence, as the locks were dismantled in 1830, but significant archeological and documentary evidence exists to accurately interpret their manner of construction.

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Associated Historic Artifacts

All historic artifacts and documents original to or historically associated with the property described herein and in National Park Service ownership and control are defined as components of this property for the National Register. Such materials are listed and described in the park's museum catalog.

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The town of Matildaville was a speculative venture to parallel the development of the Patowmack Canal at The Great Falls. In a letter of February 13, 1789, to Thomas Jefferson, George Washington stated, "...I conceive that place [future town site] must become very valuable... I cannot entertain a doubt of the establishment of a town in that place." The establishment of the town was financially undertaken by General Henry ("Light Horse Harry") Lee, who obtained a charter for the 40 acre townsite from the Virginia Assembly in 1790.

Lee and his business associates hoped that Matildaville would grow into an important industrial center in which surplus water from the canal could be used for power. With the failure of the Patowmack Canal at The Great Falls, Matildaville lost its economic base and ceased to function as a community, never realizing the expectations of Lee and the other investors.

The Patowmack Canal at The Great Falls survives today as an example of the Patowmack Company's pioneering canal venture in the United States. Although it, and the various structures associated with it, are in ruins, they still constitute significant remains of early canal technology and represent commercial speculation by individuals and states that marked much of the nation's growth.

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1

Manuscripts:

The records of the Potomac Company, deposited at the National Archives, are the main source of manuscript material. Unfortunately, the records are incomplete and the bulk of those available relate chiefly to finances. With only few exceptions, however, the minutes of meetings of the Company presidents and directors and meetings of stockholders have been preserved. There was one annual meeting of directors and stockholders held in August, and many special meetings during the year. These minutes provide practically all the information that is available about construction activities, 1785 through 1828. Also useful are some letters sent and received by Company officials, reports of the president and directors to the stockholders, other reports, memoranda, lists, printed documents, and the like, classified in the Archives as Correspondence and Reports.

Internal evidence suggests that the Company superintendents and engineers prepared detailed monthly and bi-annual reports. By a rare coincidence, almost all of these reports are missing.

Printed primary sources:

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