



CHESAPEAKE

AND

OHIO *canal*

MARYLAND

INCLUDING

MAP SHOWING

ACCESSES TO TOWPATH

# CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO Canal



NATIONAL CAPITAL PARKS  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF  
THE INTERIOR, Harold L. Ickes, *Secretary*  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, Newton B. Drury, *Director*

THE NATURAL PASSAGEWAY to the West afforded by the Potomac River Valley has played an important role in the growth and development of our Nation. Through it have passed the Indian trail, colonial wagon road, canal, railroad, telegraph and telephone, and the modern superhighway. By these constantly improving modes of communication the widely separated eastern and western regions of the fast growing Union were firmly linked both socially and commercially. The Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, constructed during the great canal-building era, illustrates one of the most interesting early phases of the development of our national communication system. The canal is preserved by the National Park Service so that contemporary and future Americans may see and enjoy one of the early attempts of the Nation's fathers to provide easy access between the older East and the expanding frontiers of the West.

POTOMAC CANAL, 1785-1828

CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO CANAL, 1828-1924

Prior to the American Revolution, internal transportation was largely confined to the East along the tidewater reaches of the rivers and bays on the Atlantic coast. Soon after the settled frontier had extended beyond the Allegheny Mountains consideration was begun of a plan to provide easy means of communication between the East and West by a navigable waterway. As early as 1754, George Washington, then still in his twenties, began to contemplate and foster a system of river and canal navigation along the Potomac Valley. It was largely through his long and untiring efforts that the Potomac Company was organized in 1785 to carry out this plan. As the first president of the company, Washington was actively engaged in the project. He frequently visited the working parties assigned to clearing the obstructions from the river channel and building short skirting canals around the treacherous river falls. Although he resigned this office when he became the President of the United States, Washington's interest in the affairs of the Potomac Company never waned.

In 1802, the Potomac Company canals were substantially completed. Small raft-like boats, propelled by hand with the aid of the river currents, then began to bring furs, lumber, flour, and farm produce to Georgetown. Upon reaching the impassable Great Falls of the Potomac the boats entered the company's outstanding skirting canal. Here, on the Virginia banks of the river, a canal 1,200 yards long, 25 feet wide, and 6 feet deep conveyed boats through 5 lift locks over an elevation of more than 76 feet. Four other short canals, with a total length of slightly more than 3 miles, were built by the company at Seneca and Houses Falls, on the Virginia side of the river, and Little and Shenandoah Falls, on the Maryland side. Although the canals and locks of the Potomac Company were considered a great engineering accomplishment, the improvements to the river channel were inadequate. Disappointment grew as it became known that after the expenditure of more than one-half million dollars the navigation of the Potomac was possible only at times of high water.

Influenced largely by the success of the Erie Canal, the popularity of the continuous canal began to increase rapidly in the second decade of the nineteenth century. There followed in the 1820's and 1830's a great canal building era when the construction of more than 4,000 miles of canals was begun or planned. The failure of the Potomac Company to provide a dependable water route to the West and the feverish canal building of the era contributed greatly to the successful organization of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Company in 1828. Anxious to enjoy a large share of the trade with the rapidly growing West, promoters in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia planned a canal of some 360 miles in length connecting Georgetown on the Potomac River with Pittsburgh on the Ohio River. On July 4, 1828, John Quincy Adams, then President of the United States, formally began this tremendous undertaking by lifting the first shovelful of earth near Little Falls. In 1831, water was admitted into the first completed division: that section which is now restored between Georgetown and

Seneca. Soon afterwards the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Company began to encounter financial and legal difficulties. The increased cost and long delays in construction caused by these troubles forced the stockholders to give up the contemplated route beyond Cumberland, where the canal was to cross the Alleghenies and extend to Pittsburgh.

Navigation of the canal was begun as the divisions were completed, first from Georgetown to Seneca (1831), then to Harper's Ferry (1833), to near Hancock, Md. (1839) and finally to Cumberland in 1850. Canal boats carrying coal, flour, grains, and lumber were seen on the canal until 1924 when diversion of traffic to the more modern transportation agencies caused its abandonment.

## CANAL DIMENSIONS, STRUCTURES, AND BOATS

*Distances and Elevations.*—The length of the canal is 184.5 miles. The total rise, or incline, between Georgetown and Cumberland is approximately 605 feet. The difference in elevation on the restored section of the canal, extending 22.1 miles between Georgetown, D. C., and Seneca, Md., is about 190 feet.

*Dimensions of the Canal.*—The width of the canal varies. The Georgetown level (between Georgetown and Little Falls) is approximately 80 feet wide and 7 feet deep. Above Little Falls (Lock 5) the canal measures about 60 feet wide and 6 feet deep. The towpath is generally 12 feet wide.

*Locks.*—There were 74 lift locks between Georgetown and Cumberland, each having the capacity to lift or lower a boat approximately 8 feet. Twenty-three of these are located on the restored Georgetown Division. The locks measure 100 feet long, 15 feet wide, and about 16 feet deep. Inlet locks at various points along the canal and a tide lock, or outlet lock, at the mouth of Rock Creek in Georgetown, originally gave entrance to and exit from the canal and river.

The small iron paddle gates located near the bottom of the large wooden lock gates admit and release the water from the lock chamber. Boats moving down the canal were lowered from the upper to the lower level by entering a full lock through the upper gates. When the boat was within the lock, the upper gates were closed and the water released through the paddles in the lower gates. When the level of the water in the lock reached that of the lower level of the canal the gates were opened, and the boat passed out into the canal. This process was reversed for boats going up the canal. The boat entered through the lower gates, whereupon the lock was

filled by opening the paddles in the upper gates. When the water in the lock reached the height of the upper level the gates were opened, and the boat was drawn from the lock.

*Lock house.*—Many of the trim stone lock houses seen on the Georgetown Division were begun in 1828 soon after construction of the canal got under way. The lock tender was allowed the use of the lock house, a garden plot on the adjacent company land, and was paid a small salary to compensate him for his labors.

*Canal Boats.*—In the 1870's, during the heyday of the canal, as many as 540 boats were navigating the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal. A typical boat measured 92 feet long and 14 feet 6 inches wide and carried 110 to 120 tons of cargo. Three to five mules were required for the boating "outfit;" two or three were in use whenever the boat was in motion. The relief team was carried "aboard boat," while the boat captain and his family, or the crew, lived in a small aft cabin.

*Bridges and Underpasses.*—Pedestrian and vehicular access across the canal was provided at frequent intervals. Narrow pivot foot bridges were found at each lock. These bridges were so constructed that they could be swung to one side when a boat entered the lock. Stoutly constructed bridges, which could also be swung from across the lock, were provided at some points where vehicular access across the canal was necessary. At Foundry Branch, Fletcher's Boathouse, and Carderock, on the Georgetown Division, arched stone underpasses, or tunnels, give access to the river from the berm side of the canal.

## ADMINISTRATION

The Chesapeake & Ohio Canal was purchased by the Federal Government in 1938. The canal occupies most of a narrow right-of-way, consisting of 5,253 acres, bought by the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Company between 1828 and 1850. Restoration of the Georgetown Division, extending 22.1 miles between Georgetown, D. C., and Seneca, Md., was begun by the National Park Service, of the Department of the Interior, soon after the area was acquired. This work was sufficiently advanced in September 1940 to readmit water to this section. The area constitutes a unit in the park system of the National Capital. All communications should be directed to the Superintendent, National Capital Parks, Interior Building, Washington, D. C.

## WHAT TO DO AND SEE

Canoeing, boating, hiking, fishing, picnicking, nature walks, and ice skating are among the recreational facilities. Canoes and rowboats may be rented at Great Falls; privately owned canoes also are permitted on the canal. Personnel is not available to operate the locks, but equip-

ment is being installed to aid in portaging. By selecting the longer levels, trips of 3 and 4 miles in each direction may be made without passing a lock.

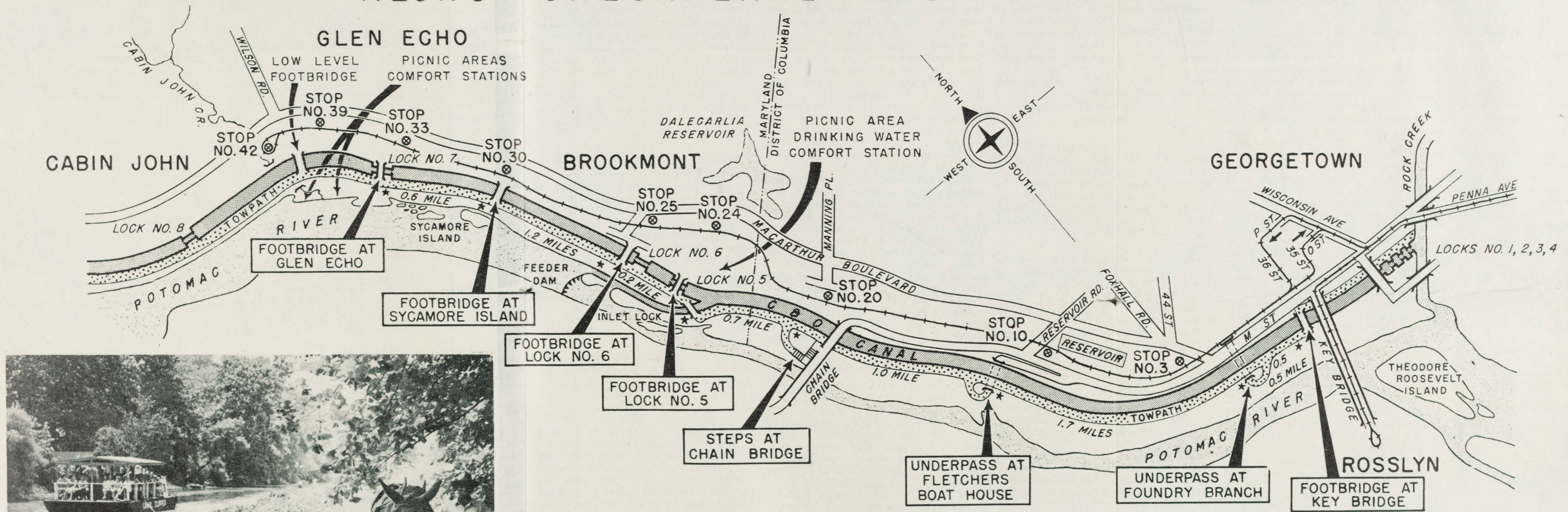
*Georgetown to Seven Locks.*—The short narrow levels of the canal in Georgetown, once the busy congested tidewater terminal, afford one of the most picturesque scenes along the canal, including the first four lift locks joined by small canal basins, old Wisconsin Avenue Bridge, and the north abutment of the Alexandria Aqueduct (Thirty-sixth Street). The feeder canal for the Georgetown level at Lock 5 was originally a part of the old Potomac Canal around Little Falls. Nearby, at the north abutment of the Little Falls Dam, the ceremony which launched the construction of the canal was staged on July 4, 1828. The series of locks between No. 8 (Cabin John) and No. 14 (Carderock) is known as "Seven Locks."

*Widewater.*—The construction of the canal in this region differs from any other section of the Georgetown Division. By utilizing an inactive river channel, blocked from the main stream by the towpath embankments, the early canal engineers saved vast amounts of blasting and excavation. The extended width and increased depth of this flooded channel give Widewater the appearance of an unruffled mountain lake, while the high rugged rock formations through which it passes lend added beauty and interest to the scene. Widewater may be reached by a foot bridge which crosses the canal near Old Angler's Inn.

*Great Falls.*—This is the most popular area on the restored section of the canal. To reach the towpath the visitor passes Great Falls Tavern, built between 1828 and 1831, and crosses the canal by a bridge at Lock 20. Here the hiker may turn left (east) and walk along the series of six locks toward Widewater. To the right (west) from Lock 20 the visitor may hike, or canoe, along one of the longest and most scenic levels of the canal. An excellent view of the Great Falls of the Potomac may be seen from Conn Island which is reached by a suspension bridge located near the tavern.

*Locks 21, 22, 23.*—This section of the Georgetown Division seems far removed from the hubbub of urban life. The long levels, quiet and not frequently visited, make this section of the canal well suited for nature walks and canoe trips. Pleasant views of the river and canal, the old stone lockhouses at Locks 21 and 22, and the Seneca feeder canal and dam at Lock 23 may be seen in this area.

# MAP SHOWING ACCESSSES TO TOWPATH ALONG CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO CANAL



MULE-DRAWN BARGE EXCURSIONS  
DURING THE SUMMER. FOR INFORMATION  
CALL REPUBLIC 1820, EXT 2557

NOTE: DISTANCES ALONG TOWPATH  
ARE MEASURED BETWEEN STARS

UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
NATIONAL CAPITAL PARKS  
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