

LESSER KNOWN TREASURES OF THE C&O CANAL

BY HEIDI SCHLAG | PHOTOS BY WIB MIDDLETON

For many Montgomery County residents, the C&O Canal and its towpath are a part of daily life, whether that includes an early morning run, a family bike ride, or a hike with the

dogs. But the C&O Canal National Historical Park, which lines the Potomac River along the southern border of Maryland, also holds the distinction of being the 16th most visited national park in the United

Late afternoon on the towpath can be a perfect time for a peaceful hike or bike ride.



States, welcoming more than 4.4 million visitors annually.

Constructed between 1828 and 1850, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was a vital transportation route that facilitated the movement of goods to and from the Ohio River Valley. Despite fierce competition from the railroads, the canal was a significant driver of the regional economy, supporting communities by creating jobs and fostering trade. However, by 1924, decreased business and significant flood damage closed the canal to boat traffic for good.

Today, the C&O Canal National Historical Park retains the majority of its historic and natural assets, thanks to preservation efforts by countless community members. The 184.5-mile scenic towpath is perfect for hiking, biking, and horseback riding, while the Potomac River provides opportunities for kayaking, canoeing, and fishing. History buffs can explore preserved canal structures, lock houses, and visitor centers that tell the story of the canal's construction and operation.

The Canal's Natural Treasures

The Park's lush forests, wetlands, and meadows provide crucial habitats for wildlife and act as a riparian buffer. They play a crucial role in maintaining the health of the Potomac River by filtering pollutants, reducing erosion, and supporting water quality. Over 500 mammals, birds, fish, and amphibians, and over 1,500 plant species call the canal home.

Park naturalists have identified 200 rare, threatened,



Left: Blue herons are frequent sights along the canal; above: towpath at Great Falls; below: post-storm drama at Great Falls.

and endangered (RTE) plant species in the Park since its founding in 1971, but a 2020 survey found that number had

dwindled to just 106. Invasive non-native plants, surging visitation, and regional urbanization have taken a toll on the area's fragile habitats. Rangers are hoping to conserve RTE species by identifying and monitoring these plants, protecting their habitats, collecting seeds, propagating new plants, and establishing new populations of RTE species in unique habitat niches within the Park.

The most ecologically significant area of the Park, Mather Gorge, is also one of the most significant in the country. Lying just downstream of Great Falls, the Gorge's unique geological and hydrological features provide habitats for many of the RTE species, from those that thrive in moist, shaded areas to those that are adapted to drier, sunnier conditions.





This rugged terrain also offers challenging rock-climbing opportunities for experienced adventurers on three Billy Goat Trails. The most well-known access point to this area of the Park is at Great Falls Tavern, where guests can find mule-drawn canal boat rides, a small museum inside an historic tavern, and Great Falls Overlook, which provides easy access to spectacular views of the falls. Great Falls charges an entrance fee, but all other entry points to the C&O Canal National Historical Park are free.

Long before English settlement, Indigenous groups fished from the waters of the Potomac, as have generations of Americans since, including President Grover Cleveland. Pennyfield Lock at mile marker 19.6 was a particular favorite of Cleveland's in the 1870s. He would stay at the Pennyfield Inn to escape the pressures of the Oval Office, catching bluegill, sunfish, large-mouth bass, and eel from the riverbank.

Left: Pennyfield Lock near mile marker 19; below: blue heron perches on rocks at the Widewater area of the C&O Canal.



A barred owl watches passersby in birding hotspot near Riley's Lock, an engineering feat, pictured at right.



Thanks to the woodlands and marshes lining the Potomac River, the area between Pennyfield and Rileys locks is also home to a diverse variety of migrating, nesting, and overwintering birds. This area has been identified by eBird as the number one birding hotspot in Montgomery County, with over 275 species of birds reported. Bald eagles often nest in the trees here, while herons, hawks, and ducks are common sights.

The Canal's Historic Treasures

The C&O Canal is a testament to 19th-century engineering prowess. Locks, with their intricate system of gates and chambers, raised and lowered boats to navigate the canal's changing elevations, while aqueducts carried the boats across rivers and streams. These structures join culverts, the towpath, and the canal basin itself as remnants of an ingenious transportation artery.

At Rileys Lock 24, visitors can see the only instance on the C&O Canal where a lock and an aqueduct are merged. At this spot,

the canal's path experiences a significant change in elevation as it intersected with Seneca Creek. In order to cross the creek and adjust the canal's level, engineers creatively integrated a lock and an aqueduct into a single structure.

Making the structure even more unique is the fact that, along with neighboring lockhouse 24, the lock/aqueduct combination was constructed of Seneca red sandstone. This material is recognizable for its distinctive rusty red color, resulting from iron oxide seeping into the sandstone. Mined just west of here, the sandstone was also used to build Smithsonian Castle.

Nearby Edwards Ferry at Lock 25 once supported a thriving canal community with residents dependent on the canal and the ferry for their livelihoods. Both provided crucial transportation links to other settlements along the canal, while the ferry also facilitated trade, commerce, and social interaction across the river in Virginia. Today, the ruins of Jarboe's store beside the lockhouse offer a tangible connection to the

commerce once conducted there.

At Lockhouse 21, the Swain family spent generations living and working on the canal. The family's connection began with John T. Swain, Sr., who helped construct the canal and worked as a boatman. His sons followed in his footsteps, becoming boatmen and captains themselves.

When the canal closed in 1924, the family adapted to the changing times by operating a concession stand, renting boats, and becoming integral to the area's transition into a recreational destination.

The Canal's Recreation Treasures

Once the C&O Canal transitioned to the National Park Service in 1971, its primary usage became recreational. Accessible from every entry point, the flat towpath is perfect for leisurely strolls. The river and the canal itself offer excellent opportunities for paddling the canal's calm waters or the Potomac's more challenging rapids.

Cycling is also extremely popular. Because of the towpath's



184.5-mile length, many cyclists challenge themselves to ride the entire length from Washington, D.C. to Cumberland; some continue on to Pittsburgh via the Great Allegheny Passage. The Park offers 36 campgrounds for these cyclists, known as “thru-riders,” to get some rest.

For a unique experience, visitors can immerse themselves in life along the C&O Canal by staying in a restored lockhouse. The C&O Canal Trust’s Canal Quarters program manages five lockhouses in Montgomery County: Lockhouses 6, 10, and 21 (Swains) offer running water and electricity, while Lockhouses 22 (Pennyfield) and 25 (Edwards Ferry) are rustic.

Ten Canal Towns also line the C&O Canal, offering quaint restaurants and shops for both



Kayaker on the canal at Violet’s Lock.

thru-riders and visitors to explore. Although most of the Canal Towns are west of Montgomery County, charming Poolesville is a short five-mile ride from White’s Ferry.

The C&O Canal National Historical Park is more than just a scenic waterway. It’s a living testament to America’s industrial

past and a vibrant haven for nature enthusiasts. As you stroll along the towpath, the historic lockhouses whisper tales of a bygone era when canal boats plied these waters, connecting bustling cities to the heart of the Appalachians. Meanwhile, the surrounding ecosystem teems with life, offering opportunities for wildlife spotting, hiking, and fishing. This harmonious blend of history and nature makes the park a must-visit destination for anyone seeking a unique and enriching outdoor experience.

Heidi Schlag serves as the Assistant Director of Heritage Montgomery. She is a seasoned marketing and communications professional with expertise in promoting nonprofit, heritage, culture, and tourism organizations.

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