

Canal lined with scenery and history

by Geoff Fox

On July 4, 1828, President John Q. Adams turned the first shovel full of dirt on the C&O Canal near Washington D.C. with the idea the canal would allow heavier cargo to be transported east to west.

A canal system was a dream of George Washington and the C&O Canal assumed the Patowmack Company's charter.

The initial idea would see the canal stretch from Washington to Ohio, but at the same time President Adams was at the groundbreaking for the canal, the B&O Railroad was laying track and would beat the canal to Ohio.

The canal would only make it 184.5 miles west to Cumberland, before construction would end on the C&O Canal.

The canal was built with hand tools and horse power. When construction started, it wasn't started at one end and work continued westward.

Instead, workers were working simultaneously in half-mile increments.

In some instances, blasting would need to be done to clear a path for the canal.

After trees were cut or broken, stumps were pulled with huge winches pulled by horses.

Root cutting plows scraped the surface in preparation for the digging, berm building, and puddling with waterproof clay.

With cut stone, pre-build lock gates and iron hardware shipped to the site, workers would then construct the aqueducts, feeder dams, guard locks, culverts, retaining walls, lift rocks and flumes, waste weirs, and stop locks.

According to Emily Leatherman's book, *Hancock 1776-1976*, the canal was 60 feet wide and six feet deep.

The largest structure on the C&O Canal is near Paw Paw, WV – the Paw Paw Tunnel.

Construction on the 3,118-foot tunnel began in June 1836 with estimated cost of \$33,500 (\$922,522.37 in 2019) and take two years to build. However, tensions rose between 1837 and 1839 when workers used beatings, destruction of property, and other forms of physical violence to halt construction.

Lack of funds also put construction on a five-year hiatus between 1842 and 1847. Construction resumed in November 1848 with the tunnel opening on October 10, 1850.

The C&O Canal would close for good in 1924 after the receivership

was transferred to the canal's stiffest competition, the B&O Railroad. The move came after the devastating 1889 floods.

Now, 190 years later, instead of teams of mules pulling large barges up and down the canal, the canal's towpath is filled with people walking or riding their bikes along its length.

While the canal stretches 184.5 miles, there are 45 miles in neighboring Washington and Allegany counties in Maryland that borders West Virginia and Morgan County. This stretch of canal runs from Big Pool to Old Town and the Paw Paw Tunnel.

While on the towpath, visitors can see a variety of bats, white-tailed deer, foxes, wildcats, otters, numerous birds, and assorted fish.

According to the National Park Service, there are also a number of different reptiles including numerous snakes and turtles.

As you walk or ride along the towpath, you may see one of a number of different species of hawks, eagles, vultures, ducks, geese, and other birds.

The C&O Canal is also filled with a wide variety of plant life, including around 150 rare plant species in both Maryland and Washington, D.C.

The Park Service says several species are globally rare and occur in the park "because they are dependent upon special habitats and ecological conditions present along the Potomac River."

The canal also holds history within its depths with the majority of the area's history happening in Hancock.

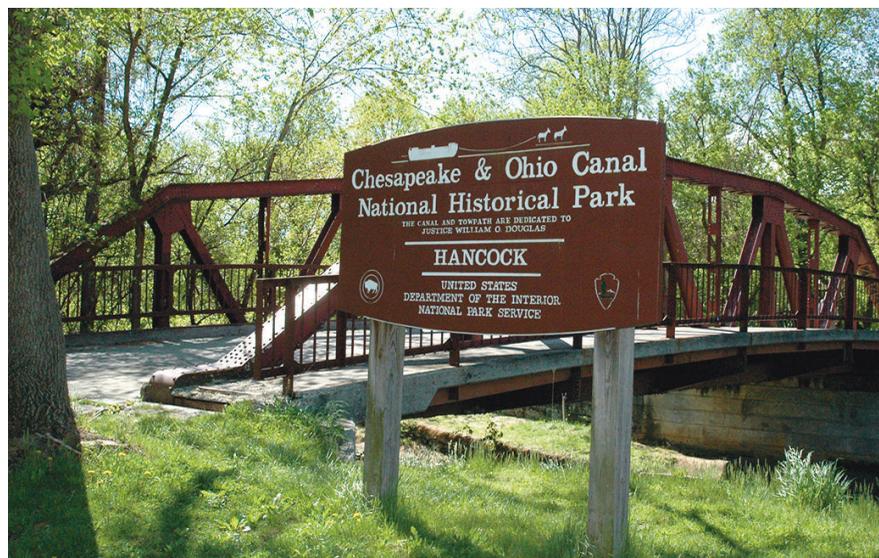
The Hancock Historical Society has the diary of a resident, James Ripley Smith, who wrote for 60 years noting everyday life and historic moments in Hancock.

In October 1860, Smith took a ride down the canal to Georgetown. From October 10 to 25, 1860, Smith described the two-week trip.

Along the way, he talked about an incident where a mule was lost or drowned and a man drowned after falling while putting a lamp on the bow of the barge.

The canal also played a part in the Civil War, as it was part of the reason Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson wanted to capture Hancock during his Bath-Romey Campaign.

Jackson, like many others during the war, wanted to destroy the canal so supplies couldn't reach Union troops.



Leatherman collected stories from Hancock residents who depended on the canal for income as well as living along its banks.

One story came from James "Wes" McCarty about a boat coming loose. His family lived just west of Big Pool.

McCarty told Leatherman how the captains of the boats would pull to the berm of the canal and tie the boat to a tree when they'd rest for the night.

"One night about 3 a.m. the boat gave a big jar," he said in the book. "The bow knot had slipped and the boat floated until it grounded and was crosswise in the canal."

He said they were able to hook the mules to the stern and moved the boat slowly off the ground.

"Lucky we didn't float into Big Pool waters," McCarty said.

According to the James Ripley

Smith diary, during the 1889 flood from the same storm that flooded Johnstown, PA, bridges along the C&O Canal, as well as the railroad and National Pike, were washed out.

A year earlier, the canal from Round Top Cement to Dam 6 was completely washed out.

Reach the C&O Canal in Hancock by going north over the U.S. 522 bridge and turning east into town. Look for parking lots on Berm Road. Main Visitors Center at 439 E. Main Street, Hancock. Reach the C&O Canal in Paw Paw from Oldtown Road, north of Paw Paw. Campsites available between Hancock and Paw Paw. Call 301-739-4200 for information and reservations or visit the C&O Canal National Historical Park website.

BELOW: The Paw Paw Tunnel

