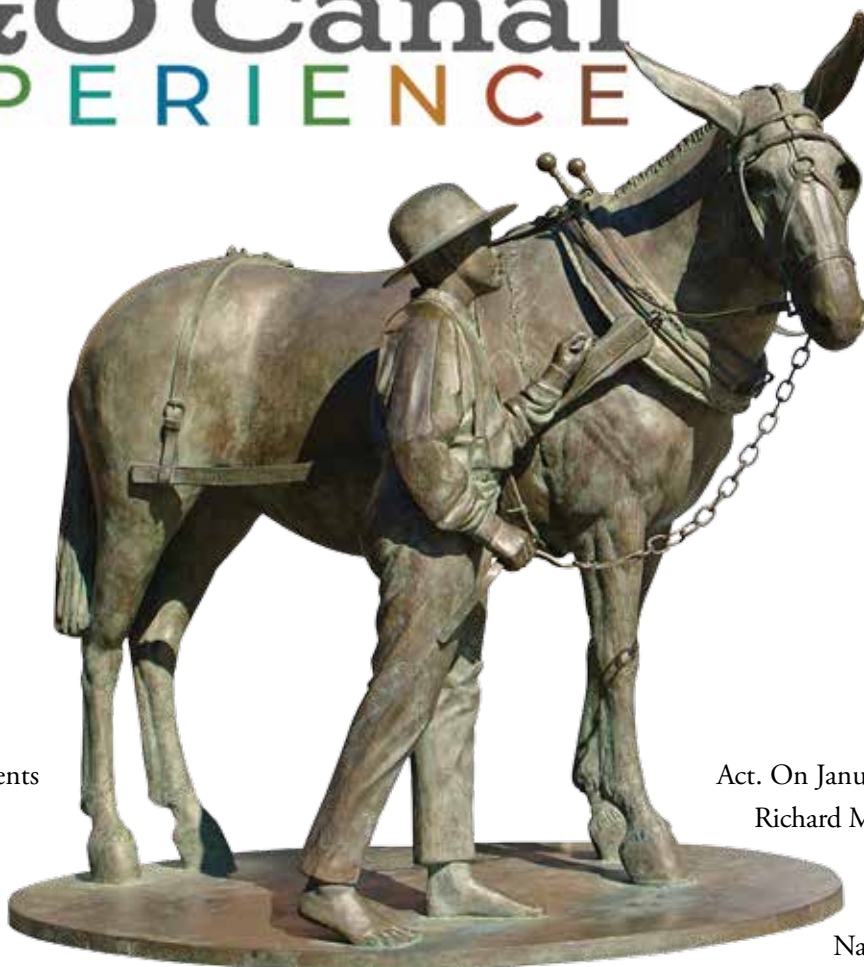


C&O Canal National Historical Park Celebrates its 50th Year

Written by: **Sara Mullins**

C&O Canal EXPERIENCE



Bronze lifesize statue of a canal boat mule and his young driver at the C&O Canal terminus in Cumberland, MD.
PHOTO BY LANCE BELL

The year 2021 represents a milestone for the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park, extending east to west from Georgetown in Washington, DC, to Cumberland, MD. The C&O Canal National Park is celebrating its 50th birthday as a National Historical Park, in recognition of the canal's role for almost a century as a 184.5-mile lifeline facilitating transportation and commerce for communities along the Potomac River. In Washington County, MD, several Canal Towns lining the towpath are planning a birthday bash offering a wide range of activities for all ages.

In 1961, President Dwight D. Eisenhower designated the C&O Canal as a National Monument under the Antiquities

Act. On January 8, 1971, President Richard M. Nixon signed legislation officially creating the C&O Canal National Historical Park.

Today the Park is a year-round recreation mecca that draws more than five million visitors annually to enjoy what U.S. Supreme Court

Justice William O. Douglas once described as "a refuge, a place of retreat, a long stretch of quiet and peace." In 1954, Justice Douglas and others of like mind hiked the entire towpath to bring attention to its value as a public footpath rather than a proposed highway for vehicle traffic.

Today the functional remnants of the canal tell the story of its origins as a passage to the West and a lifeline to communities along the Potomac River, delivering raw materials and agricultural products to market. The canal also provided

employment and opportunities to residents of the Potomac River Valley from Washington, DC, to Western Maryland.

Originally planned in the 19th century as a link between the Potomac and Ohio River basins, the C&O Canal could go no farther than Cumberland due to complications with securing land titles and constructing a route west through the rugged Allegheny Mountains. After its completion in 1850 to the tune of \$22 million, the canal moved freight and people by mule-driven barge until closed by flooding in 1924. What business remained was finished off by the railroads, especially as they incorporated improved technology that allowed them to undercut the canal's rates. The Paw Paw Tunnel remains as an engineering marvel, constructed of more than six million bricks that run three-quarters of a mile beneath a mountain.

Tunnel engineers estimated that construction would take two years, at a cost of \$33,500. Fourteen years later, the tunnel opened, with a price tag exceeding \$600,000. Within a hundred years, advancements in technology – notably the rise of the railroads – along with westward migration, a continuous influx of immigrants and increasingly bitter political divisions within the nation contributed to the decline of community life along the Canal.

Today, the Canal's journey from Harpers Ferry, WV, to Cumberland, MD, is an ideal route for visitors, offering abundant opportunities for biking, hiking,



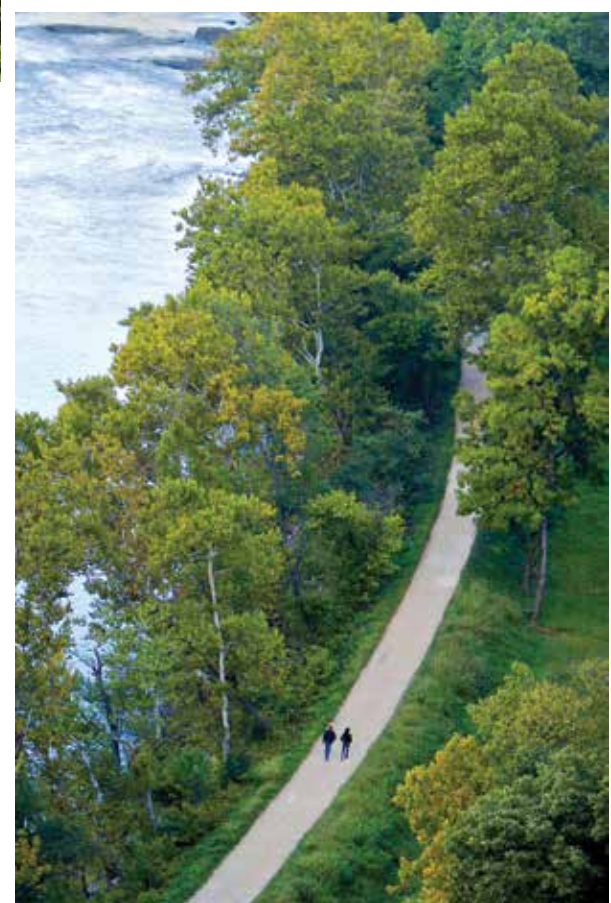
Top to Bottom:

**"Cushwa's Wharf at Williamsport, Maryland,"
June 22, 1904.** PHOTO AND PRINT BY ROBERT SHRIVER,
ELEANOR LEFEVRE HOLZSHU COLLECTION.

**"Passing a Canal Boat, below Orleans, Maryland,"
September 18, 1904.** PHOTO BY J.L. GRIFFITH, PRINT BY ROBERT
SHRIVER, ELEANOR LEFEVRE HOLZSHU COLLECTION.

**"Fourth Lock Below the Tunnel," September 18,
1904.** PHOTO BY J.L. GRIFFITH, PRINT BY ROBERT SHRIVER,
ELEANOR LEFEVRE HOLZSHU COLLECTION.

**"West Portal of C&O Canal Paw Paw Tunnel,"
September 18, 1904.** PHOTO BY J.L. GRIFFITH, PRINT BY ROBERT
SHRIVER, ELEANOR LEFEVRE HOLZSHU COLLECTION.



Above: Maryland Heights Overlook, viewing Harper's Ferry, WV, at the confluence of the Potomac (right) and Shenandoah Rivers (left). This intersection is known as the Potomac Water Gap, a double water gap and the lowest crossing of the Blue Ridge Mountains. PHOTO BY CHARISSA HIPPI

Inset: A view of the C&O Canal towpath near Maryland Heights and Harper's Ferry. PHOTO BY JIM KIRBY

camping, sight-seeing and paddling. Within this 78-mile stretch of Washington County are five national parks: the C&O Canal National Historical Park, Harper's Ferry National Historical Park, Antietam National Battlefield, Appalachian Trail, and Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail. Also known as "The Nation's River," the Potomac Heritage trail is a network of locally managed trails that lie within the corridor carved by the Potomac as it made its way to the Allegheny Highlands and served as a barrier between the northern and southern states. More than 830 miles of existing and planned trails are part of this historical route, which can be found online in the Potomac River Atlas at <https://gis.visithagerstown.com>.



The Conococheague Aqueduct near the Cushwa Basin at Williamsport, MD, was a two-year restoration project between the National Park Service and the State of Maryland, making it possible for the aqueduct to again carry water. Visitors can take a canal boat tour across the aqueduct or they can paddle their own boat through the aqueduct or under it as shown in this photo. PHOTO BY DWIGHT WINGERT

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park is known for its scenic location, offering views of three states – Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia – from The Point at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers. This intersection, known as The Potomac Water Gap, is a double water gap and the lowest crossing of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Its history has not lacked for drama. After the United States Armory and Arsenal was established in 1799, Harpers Ferry evolved from a remote village into an industrial center. It was here that abolitionist John Brown launched his futile crusade to free slaves from bondage. Today John Brown's Fort and the Arsenal ruins represent the legacy of our nation's struggle with slavery and civil rights. The Civil War wreaked havoc upon Harpers Ferry town by destroying its

economy and forcing many residents to move elsewhere. Frequent flooding has been a periodic problem, with waters rising to almost 30 feet on two separate days in 1996.

As a starting point for the trek from Harpers Ferry to Cumberland, the highest point known as Maryland Heights offers a stunning view of Harpers Ferry, nestled below across the Potomac River on a point where it converges with the Shenandoah River. Its 300-foot southern face is a vertical cliff that towers over the Potomac River, the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad and the C&O Canal. Maryland Heights hosted the first battle between Union and Confederate troops in Maryland. The hike to the top is steep, rugged, and worth every step.

Harpers Ferry is home to the Appalachian Trail Visitor Center, a legendary landmark along the 2,200-mile Appalachian



National Scenic Trail, often referred to as the AT. Almost all of Maryland's section along the AT lies within Washington County. The Center is located near the highest point of Harpers Ferry at what's known as the "psychological midpoint" of the trail. For hikers, it's a popular location for a photo op. Within the Center, visitors can view exhibits that include a 10-foot-long three-dimensional map of the Appalachian Trail and the famous sign from Katahdin's summit at the Trail's northern terminus in Maine. The story wall features notable hikers like the celebrated Grandma Gatewood, an Ohio mother of 11 and grandmother of 23 when she began hiking in 1955 at age 67 "as a lark." She became the first solo female thru-hiker of the 2,168-mile Appalachian Trail. Today the Center's display of 30,000 photos of hikers from 1979 and beyond is testament to the AT's enduring popularity.

Although not located directly along the C&O Canal Park, the Antietam Battlefield, where a single day's combat determined the outcome of the Civil War, is well worth the detour. On September 17, 1862, more than 23,000 soldiers were killed, wounded or reported missing after 12 hours of intense combat. The Union victory stopped the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia's first invasion into northern territory and laid the groundwork for Abraham Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Whether exploring the Battlefield by car,

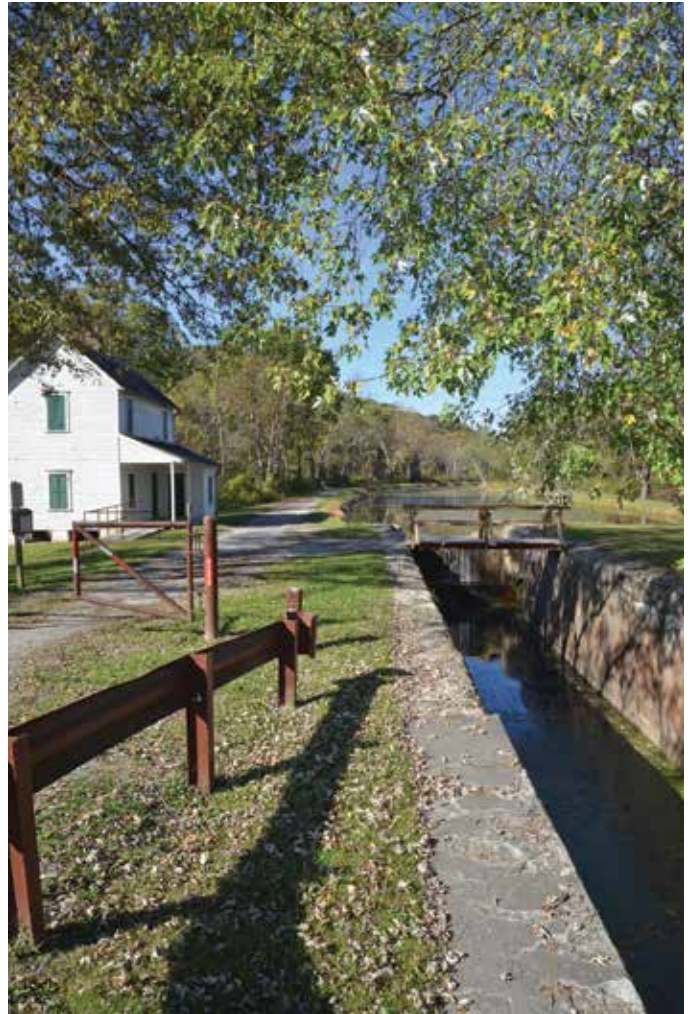
Top: Although not located directly along the C&O Canal, the Antietam Battlefield is well worth the detour.

Middle: Biking is a popular activity for all ages on the towpath of the C&O Canal.
BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY VISITHAGERSTOWN.COM

Bottom: A group with River & Trail Outfitters enjoys tubing on the Potomac River.
PHOTO BY JOHN CANAN



The Paw Paw Tunnel, an engineering marvel constructed of more than six million bricks, runs three-quarters of a mile. Tunnel engineers estimated construction would take 2 years, but ultimately took 14 years to build. PHOTO BY LANCE BELL



Lockhouse #70 at Oldtown, Maryland is a popular spot for fishing. Just below the lockhouse, the Battie Mixon Fishing Rodeo is held each year for children. This year's rodeo is June 5, 2021. PHOTO BY LANCE BELL

bicycle or on foot, many visitors find the journey enlightening, sobering, even haunting. The Battlefield's historic visitor center is currently undergoing major rehabilitation, with reopening anticipated in late 2022. Meanwhile, a temporary visitor center will offer basic amenities such as site information and restrooms.

The C&O Canal route between Harpers Ferry and Cumberland is ideally suited to a wide range of activities in the great outdoors. Those interested in hiking or biking the canal will find campgrounds along the towpath, most of them free of charge. Lockhouse 49 at Four Locks offers indoor lodging on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Visitors seeking lodging, advice and guided tours can turn to River & Trail Outfitters for assistance. With 40 years'

experience and a staff of over 70, this family-operated business offers tours and amenities that include a campground and rental cabins that can sleep up to six people, plus space for RV and tent camping. River & Trail outings range from Harpers Ferry Food & Drink tours to history tours, hiking or biking or kayaking/canoeing trips, zip-lining adventures, and, of course, rafting – your choice of Mellow Tubing on the Shenandoah River or Whitewater Tubing on the Potomac River. Other options include Civil War & Natural History Tours, an Antietam Kayak & Brunch, and a Maryland Heights Overlook Hike. Custom outings can also be arranged.

The C&O Canal's 50th has sparked some entrepreneurial creativity within the local beverage community, resulting in the new C&O Canal Libations Trail that offers visitors



The Western Maryland Railroad Station and C&O Canal Terminus, located in Cumberland, MD, is part of the festival grounds for the annual Heritage Days Festival, September 9 – 12, 2021. PHOTO BY LANCE BELL

their choice of local, canal-themed brews, wine and spirits available at several Canal Towns along the towpath. In partnership with the C&O Canal Trust, Maryland's Route One Apparel company has designed t-shirts featuring renderings of the towpath on the back. A portion of sales will support the C&O Canal Trust's mission to preserve and protect the Park.

The 50th birthday of the "Grand Old Ditch," as the C&O Canal was affectionately known in its early days, will be celebrated in great style in 2021, thanks to a robust schedule of events developed as a collective effort involving a wide range of community groups. Celebratory events include a C&O Canal Photography Competition and Exhibit from May 6 - June 1, "Culture and Cocktails: Spotlight on the C&O Canal" in Hagerstown on August 13; the 45th Annual C&O Canal Days in Williamsport on August 28; and the World Canal Conference in Hagerstown from August 30 – September 2. And finally, the Heritage Days Festival at the Cumberland terminus returns this year after having been cancelled in 2020. The Festival has been expanded from two to four days, with events set for September 9 – 12. Highlights include the Allegany Museum's Whiskey Rebellion Reception and a new Wills Creek Muster

reenactment event featuring re-enactors, demonstrators and settlers from the period between 1750 and 1790. Details can be found online at <http://heritagedaysfestival.com>.

A current schedule for the entire C&O Canal National Historical Park's 50th anniversary events can be found at: <http://www.canaltrust.org/plan/co-canal-experience/50th-anniversary-events/>.

For more information, contact the Hagerstown-Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau at 301-791-3246 or visit info@visithagerstown.com.

Please note the following updates from The National Park Service concerning visitation and public safety at the C&O Canal National Historical Park:

- Visitors should be aware that visitor centers are closed in Williamsport, Hancock and Cumberland.
- Face masks are required on NPS-administered lands where physical distancing cannot be maintained and in all NPS buildings and facilities. Park operations vary based on local public health conditions. Before visiting, please check the park website to determine its operating status. Additional details are available at www.nps.gov/coronavirus. Please recreate responsibly.