

FROM WASHINGTON TO OPEQUON CREEK

The Potomac above Washington is a fascinating river, which quickly sheds its urban character and becomes a near wilderness, full of history and wildlife. Alongside the river for 184 miles winds the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, an engineering milestone of the 19th century. Begun in 1828, the canal took two decades to complete its 74 locks, 11 stone aqueducts, and seven dams to feed the waterway from the Potomac. Maintained today by the National Park Service, the canal is one of the best ways to reach the Potomac for hiking and biking along its banks. Floods have long ravaged the canal, however, and only the 22 miles from Washington to Seneca (maps 1-4) are watered. These maps span 92 miles of the most popular part of the river and canal above Washington. Maps 1 and 2 include Great Falls--the river's spectacular change from a free flowing river to a tidal estuary at Little Falls. Maps 3 and 4 include Seneca and the Seneca slackwater area, popular for recreation behind one of the canal dams. Maps 5 and 6 take you around Point of Rocks, where the B&O Railroad fought a bitter legal battle with the canal company. In maps 7 and 8, you go through the Blue Ridge and the Potomac's confluence with its great tributary, the Shenandoah River at Harpers Ferry. Maps 9 and 10 include areas of the Potomac that saw great bloodshed during the Civil War battle at Antietam.

MAPS 1 & 2: Tide Lock to Great Falls

More than three million people live in the Washington metropolitan area, and many of them find the Potomac to be the center of their recreational activities. Cyclists and joggers crowd the towpath of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal; skilled canoeists and kayakers challenge Mather Gorge and Stubblefield Falls below Great Falls. Rock climbers test their ropes on the cliffs along the Potomac, while hikers find solitude on the craggy Billy Goat Trail, less than a 25 minute drive from downtown Washington.

In 1608, Captain John Smith, after sailing up the Potomac to what is now Washington, reported fish "lying so thickke with their heads above water...we attempted to catch them with our frying pans." Still popular for fishing, the river here is also the major source of drinking water for the Washington area. At Great Falls, about 200 million gallons of the Potomac are withdrawn daily for water supply of the District of Columbia, Arlington, and Falls Church, Va. Operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the system carries the water ten miles downstream along MacArthur Boulevard for treatment at the Dalecarlia Water Treatment Plant. One of the outstanding structures of the Aqueduct is the Cabin John Arch. Built in 1862, it was at one time the largest single-span stone arch in the western hemisphere.

MAPS 3 & 4: Pennyfield Lock to Goose Creek

Above Great Falls, the Potomac is a calm and peaceful river. Behind a rock dam built for the C & O Canal at Seneca (Feeder Dam No. 2), the river forms a seven-mile stretch of flat water. Turf farms and quiet villages dot this area, along with the 1475-acre McKee Beshers Wildlife Management Area, operated by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. In the summer, the "Seneca Slackwater" is a popular spot for water skiing and power boats, and the little town of Seneca becomes overcrowded with boaters. But during the rest of the year, the most populous inhabitants of the area are deer, quail, birds, rabbits, and waterfowl.

It was not always thus. During the second half of the 19th century, thousands of tons of red sandstone were quarried nearby and cut here. The durable stone was used in constructing many buildings and locks along the C & O Canal, and dozens of buildings in Washington, D.C. At Seneca, it was cut by hammers, stone chisels and large saws. By 1900, most of the better-quality stone was cut, and the industry declined.

The deciduous woodlands of this part of the Potomac Valley are called the Piedmont, and lead to the foothills of the Blue Ridge beginning at Point of Rocks, on the next map. The Virginia shore of this section of the river is mostly privately-owned farmland, except for the Algonkian Regional Park, which includes a public golf course and picnic area.

MAPS 5 & 6: Broad Run to Point of Rocks

On the fourth of July, 1828, President John Quincy Adams turned the first spadeful of earth for the construction of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal at Little Falls. On the same day, in a much less impressive ceremony, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad began construction of its right of way from Baltimore to Cumberland. The canal met the railroad head-on at Point of Rocks, where both transportation companies fought for the same narrow shelf of land along the Potomac. The canal won the legal battle, but lost the race to Cumberland. Beset by financial and labor problems, the canal construction

MAPS 5 & 6: Broad Run to Point of Rocks continued

lagged more than four years behind the railroad in reaching Cumberland, and never fully recovered.

The railroad still runs along the river for most of its length above the Monocacy River. Freight trains loaded with coal from the West Virginia highlands run daily along the river, as well as a more recent development: commuter trains from Harpers Ferry and Martinsburg to Washington, D.C.

During the Civil War, the area between Lower Mason Island and the Monocacy River known as White's Ford became one of the most important crossing points for Confederate Armies advancing into the north. Robert E. Lee crossed here from Virginia on September 6, 1862, on his way to Antietam. The river formed an important dividing line between north and south, and was crossed many times by advancing or retreating troops.

MAPS 7 & 8: Catoctin Creek to Harpers Ferry

"This scene is worth a voyage across the Atlantic," wrote Thomas Jefferson of the view from Harpers Ferry in 1783. Today, it's still as impressive as in Jefferson's time, although the area has seen repeated industrial growth, wars, destruction, fires, and floods. Robert Harper's mills became an important arms-producing center, and east-west transportation link--and the remains of many bridges still stand in the Potomac and Shenandoah. John Brown's raid and the Civil War brought the area into national prominence. In 1859, Brown captured the federal arsenal in an attempt to secure arms for slaves. Brown was eventually captured and hanged in Charles Town, W.Va. The arsenal was blown up 1861; in 1862, a garrison of more than 10,000 Union troops surrendered to Stonewall Jackson.

Harpers Ferry still has many remnants of its busy pre-Civil War industries. Harper House is the oldest surviving structure in the town, built around 1775, and restored by the National Park Service, which administers the Harpers Ferry National Historic Park. Other highlights include Jefferson rock, St. Peter's Catholic Church, and Master Armorer's House. Hilltop House is a famous hotel with a view of the town below; and the remains of the Salty Dog Tavern are filled with the memories of boisterous brawls, Prohibition, and legendary moonshine operations.

MAPS 9 & 10: Mountain Lock to Opequon Creek

Paddling through the battlefield at Antietam Creek is one of the best ways to view the site of the Civil War's "bloodiest day," September 17, 1862. More than 23,000 casualties were reported in this epic battle between north and south. At Burnside Bridge, where southern sharpshooters contested an advance of four Union divisions, National Park Service interpreters today describe the many attacks during that fateful day in September.

The Potomac and its tributaries have many other interesting sights for the canoeist. They vary from the difficult rapids near Harpers Ferry, both on the Shenandoah and Potomac, to long stretches of flat water for easy paddling. A few tips: make sure someone in your group is familiar with the area, or is an experienced canoeist. Check the river level before leaving, since during summer dry periods, small creeks can be unnavigable. Carry things you want to keep dry in a plastic bag, and wear old sneakers, because you may end up pulling, or pushing, your canoe out of difficult spots.

Above the Blue Ridge, the Potomac drains a series of ridges and valleys and winds through gargantuan bends that caused great difficulty during canal construction. The section of the river from here to Cumberland is far less populous than the lower portion.