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## Getting a lock on history with a night on the C&O Canal

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As a guest at Lockhouse 49, I was charged with the same job as its past inhabitants: overseeing a lock along the C&O Canal and upholding a tradition recently updated for the modern traveler.

Of course, the locks of now are vastly different from the locks of then. Those of yore manipulated the water levels of the canal, helping cargo-laden boats pass through the tricky spots between Cumberland, Md., and Georgetown.

My lock, which required a four-digit code, a tug on the released key and a slow turn, simply opened the lockhouse door. Not as important in the context of history, but essential if I wanted to sleep in a bed and not in my car. (For a visual aid to extracting the key, the C&O Canal Trust posts an instructional video on its Web site.)



The two-bedroom, no-bath (no kidding!) structure near Clear Spring, Md., sheltered the lockkeepers during the canal's years of operation, from 1831 to 1924. The workers' families also settled here, creating a vibrant community in Four Locks, which was named for the quartet of locks lined up within 1,540 feet of one another. The settlement included a school, two general stores, a pair of warehouses, a post office, several homes and a mule barn still visible from No. 49's porch.

Twenty-six lockhouses of various sizes and states of deterioration dot the 1841/2-mile canal, now a national historical park. Lockhouse 49 is one of three open to overnight guests. (The others are No. 22 at Pennyfield, in Potomac, and No. 6 at Brookmont in Cabin John.) The buildings remained empty and little used until January 2009, when the C&O Canal Trust, which works with the National Park Service to protect the site, started renovations.

Over the winter and spring, the nonprofit repurposed the properties into public lodging, with each lockhouse encapsulating a specific era, such as the mid-1830s to the early 1840s (No. 22) and the mid-20th century (No. 6), in honor of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas's 1954 hike along the canal to highlight the need to preserve it. My lockhouse for the evening followed the fashions of the 1920s, which meant pine floors, white-painted walls with gray trim, electricity, heat and no indoor plumbing. In place of a modern toilet, I relied on a port-a-potty in the parking lot, and for washing up, jugs of water from the supermarket and the thought of an eventual shower at home. (Between April 1 and Nov. 11, guests can retrieve water from an outdoor pump.)

"This gives visitors the opportunity to go back in time and sleep as it was in the 1800s," said Tom Riford, president of the Hagerstown-Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau and a member of the trust. "It preserves the structures and also gives them a function."

Let's see a show of hands from people who fantasize about getting locked inside a museum overnight. I am waving mine. It was a dream realized to play house in a historical structure, with no punitive guards skulking about or signs warning me to keep off the furniture.

"It's like sleeping at the house of the mayor of Four Locks," exclaimed Larry Brewster, a towpath enthusiast and curious passerby who asked for an invitation inside. "As a history lover, I would love to say, 'Wow, I stayed in a lockkeeper's house.' "

Arriving under a coal-black sky, the canal as dark as an empty grave, I slightly lost the "wow" factor as I mentally chanted, "Ghosts are not real, ghosts are not real, ghosts are not real." I let myself in, scolding my imagination for interpreting the floorboard creaks as phantom footsteps. To distract myself from the horror flick unrolling in my mind, I started rummaging around the house - with all the lights on.

The kitchen featured a fireplace big enough to rotisserie a wild boar, a heavy wooden table (to hold said boar) and a two-burner hot plate in case the boar did not cook properly and you needed to make soup instead. A wooden cabinet with glass doors displayed elegant dishware, and I tackily flipped over a plate to see its origins (English china).

In the living room, I knocked around some marbles left on a toy chest but worried that one might roll down the basement steps that I did not wish to descend. For lighter entertainment, I perused the reading material stacked on a table, including an 850-page study on the canal that infused life into the characters who once ran the locks. I read of wages (\$400 a year), female lockkeepers (typically the wives took over when their husbands died or were drafted by the Union) and drinking on the job (here comes the pink slip).

When it was time for sleep, I felt the eyes of the black-and-white photos on the walls follow me as I brushed my teeth and washed my face in a giant basin. I hoped that they approved of my ablutions.

Upstairs, I counted four beds and four trundles, and feeling as picky as Goldilocks, finally chose the bed with the best views of the canal and the Potomac beyond. I threw my sleeping bag on top of the nubby white bedspread, leaving the zipper slightly open in case I needed to make a quick getaway - or a late-night visit to the outdoor loo.

Like the locktenders before me, I was responsible for the house, and I felt the weight of that responsibility. No. 49's past and future partly rested with me.

After a morning hike along the canal, I wiped my tracks clean inside the house and then locked up with great care. I tucked the key into its secret compartment, where it would stay until the next custodian arrived with the code.