



CANAL QUARTERS

Restored lockhouses along the C&O Canal offer guests an opportunity to step back in time



by **ELIZABETH MCNAMARA**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF MAURITZEN

The blue light of an October morning slants through a single upstairs window, and my husband and I unfurl ourselves from layers of down. The midnight chorus of katydids and crickets has been replaced by the even tone of rushing water and the occasional pat-pat of joggers' paced strides on the towpath.

Natives of Virginia and Maryland, respectively, Jon and I have lost count of the number of times we've visited bits and parts of the nearly 20,000-acre Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park. But this time our visit to the scenic stretch of parkland outside Washington, D.C., includes overnight stays in two of the park's newly restored historic lockhouses.

We had arrived after dark, flashlight guiding us through the silhouetted surroundings, so this morning I hastily zip my fleece up to my chin, impatient to better inspect our accommodations. Constructed in 1830, the one-and-a-half-story, white brick building at Mile 5.4 is simple and small. The staircase is steep and creaks as I make

my way downstairs. Doorways are low—Jon nearly hits his head when entering the tiny kitchen—and rooms are outfitted simply in antique furnishings. It's hard to believe this cramped dwelling probably housed a family of at least five: Because the locks had to be tended at a moment's notice, day or night, large families were preferred.

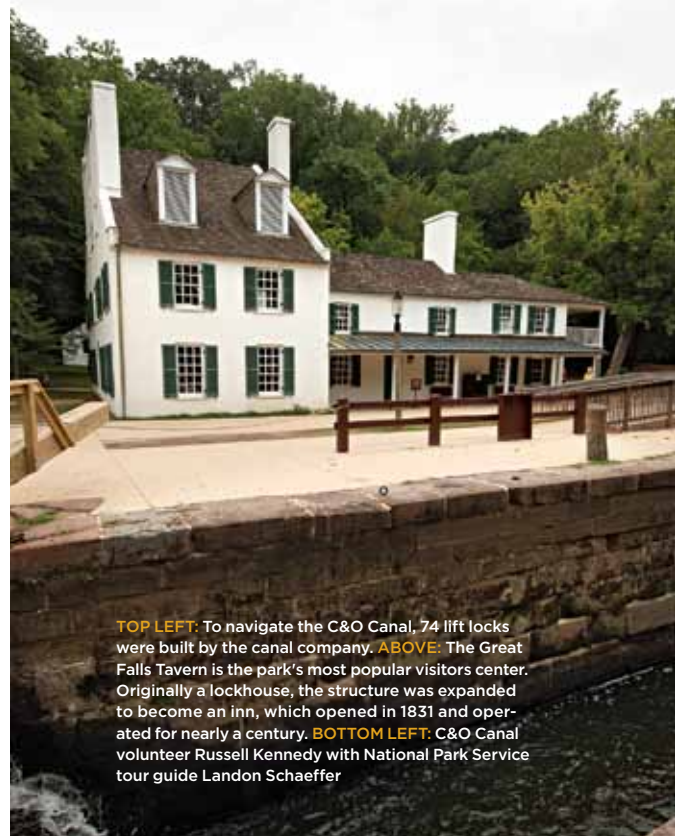


Outside, the morning air is crisp and cool, and for the first time this autumn, I can see my breath against the sky. A hardened gravel towpath stretches out before me,

184.5 miles from Georgetown in D.C. to Cumberland, Md., where the elevation is 605 feet higher. A westward-reaching canal was part of George Washington's vision for the capital city, and the two locks at Little Falls nearby are affectionately named "George" and "Martha."

Little Falls (the rapids that likely stopped John Smith's 1608 exploration up the Potomac) is about a two-mile walk from here, but Jon and I spot a dirt path and follow it into the thickets, which a rainy autumn has rejuvenated to a lush, midsummer green. The path leads to a kayak run in the river channel formed by High Island. A pair of pink Crocs waits at the channel's edge for its owner, who is likely playing in the mild whitewater of nearby rapids. Some of the best kayakers in the United States train here year-round.

President John Quincy Adams wielded the first symbolic spade near where we stand. It was Independence Day 1828, and the president proclaimed the canal would be "a conquest over physical nature, such as has never been achieved by man." But the rocky soil rebuffed his



TOP LEFT: To navigate the C&O Canal, 74 lift locks were built by the canal company. **ABOVE:** The Great Falls Tavern is the park's most popular visitors center. Originally a lockhouse, the structure was expanded to become an inn, which opened in 1831 and operated for nearly a century. **BOTTOM LEFT:** C&O Canal volunteer Russell Kennedy with National Park Service tour guide Landon Schaeffer

declaration, and Adams would have to dig twice more in the ground before he was able to pry a single scoop of earth. It was one of many holdups: Though the canal company hoped to complete 100 miles in five years, runaway indentured servants, labor riots, stubborn landowners, frequent floods, and a cholera outbreak proved that building a canal for the capital city took more money, work, and, above all, time than anticipated.

A three-mile walk north on the towpath would bring us to the 1857 Cabin John Bridge, a 297-foot span that for many years was the largest masonry arch in the world. But pressed for time, we return to the lockhouse and prepare to leave. It's midweek, and Jon joins the throngs of commuters inbound on Clara Barton Parkway. Me? I have a canal boat to catch.

Upriver at Lock 20 (Mile 14.4), the *Charles F. Mercer*, a 57-foot, double-decked replica of a canal packet boat, is moored near the Great Falls Tavern. Originally called the Crommelin Hotel after a Dutch investor who bailed the canal company out of a monetary squeeze (one of many), the tavern functioned as both a lockhouse and an inn for nearly a century. Today, the three-story structure operates as the busiest of six National Park Service visitors centers on the canal.

The dark stone building next to the white brick tavern is the intake for the Washington Aqueduct (built 1853-64). Also part of George Washington's plan for the capital under construction, the 12-mile-long aqueduct taps the river's water and supplies D.C. residents to this day.

The locks and weirs are still in good working condition at Lock 20, and today the *Mercer*, led by mules Dolly and Lil, will take me along the C&O at about three miles per hour on a 90-minute tour.

"The C&O Canal took 22 years and \$14 million to build, and never made it to Pittsburgh," says the park ranger leading the tour. "It was behind schedule, over budget, and never completed. Washington hasn't changed much."

LOCKHOUSE RESTORATION

On the same day the canal company broke ground in 1828, the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad also began construction. The canal and railroad converged 32 miles northwest of here at Point of Rocks, Md. The competing companies then ran parallel to each other to Cumberland.

“The thing is, the railroad reached Cumberland eight years before the canal did, in October 1850,” says the ranger. “Don’t be confused by the name of this canal, folks: It does not go to Ohio and it does not run to the Chesapeake.”

As the ranger speaks, the *Mercer* enters the lock, the upstream gates of which are closed. Lock tenders rush to “snub” the boat to posts built against the lock walls, which are made from stone from nearby quarries such as Seneca Creek. (Notable Washington landmarks, including the historic 1855 Smithsonian Castle on the National Mall, were constructed using stone from the same quarries.) Gates behind the boat swing shut and the cry “Lock ready!” signals that “locking through” can begin. Roughly 10,000 gallons of water rush in, elevating the seven-ton boat about eight feet.

To travel the entire length of the canal’s murky waters, boats journeyed through one tunnel, past seven dams, under 11 aqueducts, over more than 200 culverts, and used 74 lift locks—each with eight- to 10-foot vertical steps. The average trip took seven days.

An experienced lock tender could complete the locking process in just 10 minutes, but it takes today’s crew about 15. The front gates of Lock 20 open, our lock tenders release the *Mercer*’s lines, and we float forward. Our guide pumps a small accordion to the tune of “Battle Cry of Freedom”—apropos, for some historians argue that the Civil War, though destructive to the canal’s infrastructure, kept the waterway in business through its toughest economic times. Cattails and reeds line the sloped shoreline; squirrels scurry about on the grass above the water’s edge, readying for winter. The sun is bright, but the late-morning air is cool. And it’s easy to forget that this canal was built for work, not leisure. (*continues*)

BELOW: C&O Canal Trust Program Manager Becky Curtis with C&O Canal Trust board member and volunteer Robert Mertz at Lockhouse 10



The first time Kevin Brandt saw the interior of a lockhouse was in 1996, soon after he joined the National Park Service’s Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historic Park (see canaltrust.org).

“My heart broke, because the outside of the building didn’t look that bad. But then you open the door, fight your way past the cobwebs, and look down only to see the whole floor gone.”

The lockhouse was just one of more than 1,300 structures in the park, which is home to more historic structures than any other national park in the country. Of the 57 lockhouses built along the canal more than 160 years ago, just 26 remained intact, though most were boarded up. Brandt was charged with finding a use for them.

But it wasn’t until 2006, after Brandt took over as park superintendent and hired Sam Tamburro, that solutions crystallized. Using the 10th Mountain Division Hut Association in Colorado and the White Mountain Huts system in New Hampshire as models, Brandt and Tamburro developed what’s now named the Canal Quarters Program. They partnered with the nonprofit C&O Canal Trust and opened three lockhouses to public use in three years. By 2012, they had opened three more.

Today they offer guests the opportunity to experience life during different eras of the canal’s operation, from the construction of the canal in the 1830s to the 1950s, when the campaign to preserve the canal began. In the last 12 months, the lockhouses have drawn more than 2,000 visitors, and rates range from \$70 to \$150 per night.

“When people come to a park visitors center, they’re there for 15 or 20 minutes,” says Tamburro. “But we have a captive audience for 24 hours or more. People are living in them, and that’s pretty powerful.” —EM



LEFT: Patrons enjoy brunch at Old Angler's Inn, which opened 10 years after the canal. **RIGHT:** The kitchen in Lockhouse 10 has a stove and refrigerator from the 1930s, when workers from the Civilian Conservation Corps and Public Works Administration first restored the structure.



Though the canal's late arrival in Cumberland was anticlimactic, by the end of the 1860s, more than 500 boats were plying its waterway, conveying nearly 1 million tons of coal in 1871 alone. But the good fortune did not last. Revenues steadily declined in the 1880s because of competition from the railroads, which could carry more freight to ships in the deep harbors of Baltimore. The great flood of 1889 caused \$1 million in damage to the canal and would have ended its operation altogether, but the B&O Railroad purchased the waterway and repaired it to keep the land from falling into the hands of rival railroad companies.

Appalachian coal kept the canal in business for another 34 years, until another flood—though modest—led the canal company to cease operations again in 1924. The railroad maintained enough of the lower stretch to supply water to the mills in Georgetown but, eager to unload the mostly drained and damaged waterway, sold the canal to the federal government in 1938 for a measly \$2 million.

Dolly and Lil tug the packet boat back toward the tavern, and I hop off. Many communities surrounding canal lockhouses once bustled, some supporting more than 100 people, and a quick drive up MacArthur Boulevard brings me to Old Angler's Inn, which opened 10 years after the canal. The modest stone restaurant served those

journeying to and from the capital on the canal, as well as those who

lived in the area's surrounding country estates. Teddy Roosevelt, a nature enthusiast and conservationist, was a frequent patron.

Chicken salad tucked into a croissant arrives at my patio-front table, and the iced tea will probably be my last of the season. The light fare and white tablecloth offer a welcome reprieve from my morning's more rustic surroundings. I recall a funny story about the longtime owner of this restaurant who famously ejected Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas when he arrived wearing soggy, muddy hiking attire. It was 1954 and Douglas, a self-professed outdoorsman, was leading a hiking party of geologists, ornithologists, conservationists, and journalists in an effort to save the canal from being turned into a highway. Douglas's eight-day hike from Cumberland to Georgetown was widely publicized, raised national public awareness of the canal's proposed fate, and eventually led to the establishment of the national park in 1971.

Tonight we'll stay at Lockhouse 10, three and a half miles from Lockhouse 6. Built in 1830, it's next to one of the "Seven Locks" that traverse the canal approximately 56 feet over one mile. Seven Locks runs parallel to Great Falls, where the Potomac plunges 76 feet in unnavigable waterfalls. I remember the tour guide's quip from earlier in the afternoon: "How many times can a boat go through Great Falls? Once, and then you need a new boat."

In 1939, when President Franklin Roosevelt wished to transform the federally owned C&O Canal from an abandoned transportation system into a recreational park, Lockhouse 10 was one of the first to be rehabilitated. As part of the federal government's first major effort in the field of historic preservation, this work set a precedent for preserving examples of the nation's built environment as recreational resources.

Still early in the afternoon, I walk the packed dirt towpath while I wait for Jon to join me after work. The dense canopy of sycamore, elm, ash, and maple trees offers long, repetitive stretches perfect for meditation. The sun starts to set, bathing the white-washed lockhouse in fiery light, and the season reclaims its grasp on my surroundings.

As our two-day excursion back to the 19th century comes to an end, I reflect on the big dreamers who made this 184.5-mile waterway what it is today. It took great imagination and determination to conceptualize and create the canal, and then faith and perhaps more than an element of stubbornness to save it. Crickets once again begin their evening song, and it seems these locks, lockhouses, and well-worn towpath are suspended somewhere between the past and present day. **P**



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: Check out a gallery of additional photos from the C&O Canal at PreservationNation.org/online.