

FamilyFun

GREAT MEMORIES START HERE

10

WAYS TO
GIVE YOUR
PUMPKINS
PIZZAZZ

INSTANT
T-SHIRT
COSTUMES

(EASY, CHEAP
& BOO-TIFUL)



YES, PLEASE!
PIE FOR
DINNER

TRUNK-OR-TREAT
ONE TOWN'S
CANDY
SOLUTION

HEALTHY EATS
A NEW WAY
TO MAKE
SMOOTHIES

be spooky!

FRIGHTENINGLY FUN PARTY FOODS & DECORATIONS

WHOOO
LIKES OWL
COOKIES?


(WE DO! SEE PAGE 84)

travel back in time

ALONG THE CANAL

Living like lockkeepers on Maryland's C&O Canal brings industrial history to life for the author and his family.

BY NATHANIEL READE



The Reades study a plaque explaining the mechanics of a C&O Canal lock in Cabin John, Maryland.

CHARLEY, MY 11-YEAR-OLD SON, was born a curmudgeon. Even when he's eating cake, his mother, Michaela, and I have a hard time telling whether or not he's having fun. So when we told him about our plans to stay in a National Historical Park along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal in Maryland, we got the usual shrug.

His 14-year-old brother, Henry, a devoted history buff, told us not to

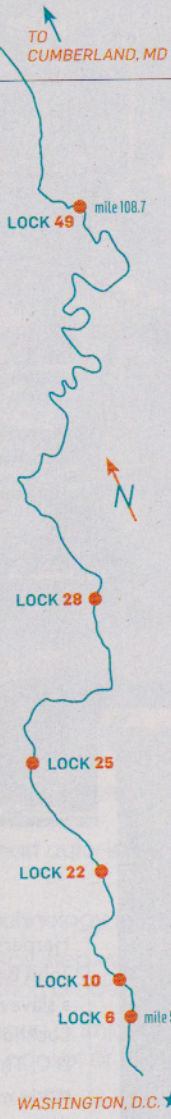
worry. "Every kid," he said knowingly, "loves solving historical mysteries."

Maybe, I thought to myself. But Charley is a mystery unto himself.

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, commonly called the C&O Canal, was an attempt to connect Washington, D.C., with the Ohio River and Pittsburgh on the other side of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a concept first championed by George Washington. Construction of the actual canal alongside the

Potomac River finally began in 1828. By creating a level waterway, with each change in elevation controlled by a lock, the canal allowed boats as large as 14 feet wide and 90 feet long to travel both upstream and down, pulled by teams of mules walking along the adjacent towpath.

The C&O Canal never made it to Pittsburgh—it was beaten out and ultimately taken control of by the railroads—but for nearly a



**C&O
CANAL
QUARTERS
SITES**

← Lockhouse 10, at left and below, has running water, simple, 1930s-era furnishings, and a screened porch.

century it served as a means for people and goods to travel up and down the river route. A storm in 1924 damaged it beyond its value to repair, and it lay neglected until 1938, when the Roosevelt Administration bought rights to it and made some improvements. In 1971 it became a National Park.

In cooperation with the park's official nonprofit partner, the C&O Canal Trust, the Park Service has now restored six of the houses in

which the lockkeepers lived with their families, and rents them out at reasonable rates. Each is outfitted to re-create an era from 60 to 150 years past. After examining the trust's informative website, we settled on one at each end of the canal.

Charley perked up considerably once we arrived at our home for the first two nights: Lockhouse 49, near the town of Clear Spring in northern Maryland, a two-hour drive from D.C. Built in the 1830s, this ample brick house faces the Potomac

and four, now-waterless locks with walls of cut stone and surrounded by trees. The boys hardly seemed to notice the absence of indoor bathrooms and running water or that the only place to wash dishes was a dry sink, a wooden cabinet with a metal-lined basin on top.

Having no proper kitchen, we opted to eat at nearby restaurants. But at night, with the lights out, we heard and saw nothing of the modern age—just the woods, black sky, and stars.

As we strolled entirely alone along the towpath the next day, we tried to sort out the remains of this nearly forgotten mode of transportation. From books in the house and various Park Service plaques, we learned that when a boat entered the lock, the keeper (or a member of his family) would close the gates at both ends, then open small portals in one end to raise or lower the water level.

I couldn't resist bellowing a song I had learned in elementary school: "I have a mule, his name is Sal, fifteen miles on the Erie Canal."

"Was the mule on the boat?" Charley asked.

"No," I said.

"So where was it? In the water?"

Michaela said that the mules walked on shore, pulling the boat with a long rope.

"So wouldn't the boat just hit the bank?" Henry asked. "Unless there were two mules, one on either side?"

Pointing out that there was just one towpath, I explained that someone would steer the boat.

Charley shrugged and went back to collecting sticks, but Michaela and I exchanged a hopeful look: Had something dawned?

After a stopover in the town of





← Henry and Charley investigate the workings of a novel style of lock, left. Below, the boys and Nat on the towpath.

screened porch and flipped through a 1930s cookbook, seeing who could find the most disgusting recipe. (Henry claimed victory with ham covered in butter-cream frosting.)

And we strolled for miles on the towpath toward D.C., the kids fantasizing about which of the cyclists and dog walkers we occasionally passed might be spies hiding secret messages in the trees. On the way back, Charley pointed at a mysterious collection of levers and gears at the mouth of one lock and said, “Look! This one is different.”

He was right. According to the Park Service plaques, this lock featured a new and improved lock gate called a drop gate, which could be operated more easily.

Charley rushed around, reading signs and examining the gears, until he was explaining it to his older brother: “These levers and cranks right here,” he said, “open and close the trapdoors below the drop gate. Then this cable must have been for cranking down the gate. It was better, because it was faster.”

“Wow, Char,” I said. “You seem really interested in this.”

He shrugged. “I like figuring stuff out,” he said. “It’s fun.”

Henry smiled. “See Dad? Charley isn’t so mysterious after all.”

➤ meet the family



Nathaniel Reade and his family live in western Massachusetts, where they are at work on the fourth and final book in their *Pencil Bandits* series.



Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, where John Brown famously tried to arm a slave rebellion, we drove down to Lockhouse 10, about nine miles from D.C. This sturdy structure, with thick stone walls, has the Potomac and the canal on one side and a parkway on the other—three different transportation routes from three different eras.

The 1830 house has been decorated to honor the Civilian Conservation Corps workers who fixed parts of the canal during the Depression, and was equipped with running water, a vintage icebox, and an electric stove, which allowed us to make coffee and reheat a store-bought quiche. Although an easy drive from suburban Bethesda, with its many restaurants and take-out food options, this lockhouse also felt quiet and secluded.

Without a TV or wireless connection on hand, we amused ourselves the way families used to. Michaela led us in card games, which she invariably won. We sat on the

IF YOU GO

Canal Quarters rents six lockhouses with varying amenities for \$100 to \$150 a night. Visit canaltrust.org for details, booking calendars, and information on events, programs, and area attractions. More on C&O Canal history can be found on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historic Park website (nps.gov/choh).



TO LEARN MORE

For more information about canals around the country, check out the free American Canal Guides at americancanals.org.