

Canal History¹

- The Erie Canal, built between 1817 and 1825, threatened traders south of New York City, who began to seek their own transportation infrastructure to link areas west of the Appalachian Mountains to mid-Atlantic markets and ports. As early as 1820, plans were being laid for a canal to link the Ohio River and Chesapeake Bay.
- In March 1825, President James Monroe signed the bill chartering the construction of the C&O Canal as one of the last acts of his presidency.
- Two sections were planned: the eastern section from the tidewater of Washington, D.C., to Cumberland, Maryland; and the western section over the Allegheny Mountains to the Ohio River or one of its tributaries.
- Free from taxation, the canal company was required to have 100 miles in use in five years, and to complete the canal in 12 years.
- The canal was engineered to have a 2 mph water current, supplying the canal and assisting mules pulling boats downstream.
- In October 1826, engineers submitted the study, presenting a proposed canal route in three sections. The eastern section comprised Georgetown to Cumberland; the middle section, Cumberland to the confluence of the Casselman River and the Youghiogheny River; and the western section from there to Pittsburgh.
- Construction of a 184.5-mile canal began in 1828 and ended in 1850 with the completion of a 50-mile stretch to Cumberland.
- Rising and falling over an elevation change of 605 feet (184 meters), the canal required 74 locks, 11 aqueducts to cross major streams, more than 240 culverts to cross smaller streams, and the 3,118-foot Paw Paw Tunnel.
- The planned section to the Ohio River at Pittsburgh was never built.
- Groundbreaking was held on July 4, 1828, attended by U.S. President John Quincy Adams. The ceremony was held near Georgetown, at the canal's eventual 5.64-mile mark near Lock 6, the upstream end of the Little Falls skirting canal, and Dam No. 1.
- At the time, there was still argument over the eastern end of the canal. The directors thought that Little Falls was sufficient since that literally fulfilled the charter's condition of reaching the tidewater, but people in Washington wanted it to end in Washington, connecting to the Tiber Creek and Anacostia river.
- The Little Falls skirting canal, which was part of the Patowmack Canal, was dredged to increase its depth from four to six feet, and became part of the C&O canal.
- In November 1830, the canal opened from Little Falls to Seneca. The Georgetown section opened the following year.
- The first president of the Canal, Charles F. Mercer, insisted on perfection since this was a work of national importance. During his term, he forbade the use of slackwaters for navigation or the use of composite locks or reduction of the cross section of the canal prism in difficult terrain. This reduced maintenance expenditures but increased construction costs. In the end, two slackwaters (Big Slackwater above Dam #4, and Little Slackwater above Dam #5) and composite locks (from Lock 58-71) were built.
- At first, the canal company thought to use steamboats in the slackwaters, since without mules, the canal boats had to use oars to move upstream, having no motive power. After

¹ All material sourced from NPS materials and Wikipedia

many complaints of delays and dangers, the company provided a towpath so that the mules could pull the boats through the slackwaters.

- In 1828, the C&O Canal and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (B&O) began fighting for sole use of the narrow strip of available land along the Potomac River from Point of Rocks to Harpers Ferry. After a Maryland state court battle that involved Daniel Webster and Roger B. Taney, the companies agreed to share the right-of-way.
- In August 1829, the canal company began importing indentured laborers to Alexandria and Georgetown. These workers were promised meat three times a day, vegetables, and a "reasonable allowance of whiskey", plus wages.
- In 1832, the canal company prohibited liquor in a bid to improve the speed of construction, but soon repealed its ban.
- In August or September 1832, an epidemic of cholera swept through the construction camps, killing many workers and leading others to throw down their tools and flee.
- By 1833, the canal's Georgetown end was extended 1.5 miles eastward to Tiber Creek, near the western terminus of the Washington City Canal, which extended through the future National Mall to the foot of the United States Capitol. A lock keeper's house at the eastern end of this Washington Branch of the C&O Canal remains at the southwest corner of Constitution Avenue and 17th Street, N.W., at the edge of the National Mall.
- In 1834, the section to Harper's Ferry opened and the canal reached Williamsport.
- In March 1837, three surveys were made for a possible link to the northeast to Baltimore: via Westminster, via Monocacy-Ligamore, and via Seneca, but they were all deemed impractical due to lack of water at the summit level.
- As the canal approached Hancock, more construction problems surfaced. Limestone sinkholes and caverns caused the canal bottom to cave in multiple places. Costly were done by 1840.
- The Canal reached Dam #6 (west of Hancock) in 1839.
- In 1843, the Potomac Aqueduct Bridge was built near the present-day Francis Scott Key Bridge to connect the canal to the Alexandria Canal, which led to Alexandria, Virginia.
- In April 1843, floods damaged much of the finished portion of the canal between Georgetown and Harpers Ferry, including the Shenandoah river lock. One flood suspended navigation for 103 days. The company raised the embankments around Little Falls, and made a "tumbling waste" near the 4-mile marker.
- Building the last 50-mile segment proved difficult and expensive. Locks (70-75) to Cumberland were completed around 1840. That left an 18½ mile segment in the middle, which would eventually require building the Paw Paw tunnel, digging the deep cut at Oldtown, and building 17 locks.
- Near Paw Paw, the engineers had no good solutions. If they followed the river, they would have to cross over to West Virginia to avoid the cliffs, and an agreement with the B&O railroad was that the canal would avoid the south side of the river, unless it was a place where the railroad would not need it. So they took the more expensive decision to build a tunnel through the mountain.
- The canal was opened for trade to Cumberland on Thursday, October 10, 1850.
- By 1850, the B&O Railroad had already been operating in Cumberland for eight years. Debt-ridden, the company dropped its plan to continue construction of the next 180 miles (290 km) of the canal into the Ohio Valley.

- The canal deteriorated during the Civil War. In 1869, the company's annual report said, "During the last ten years little or nothing had been done toward repairing and improving lock-houses, culverts, aqueducts, locks, lock-gates and waste weirs of the Company; many of them had become entirely unfit for use and were becoming worthless, rendering it absolutely essential to the requirements of the Company to have them repaired."
- The early 1870s were particularly profitable. The company repaid some of its bonds. It made many improvements to the canal, including the installation of a telephone system. Yet there were still floods and other problems. By 1872, so many vessels were unfit for navigation that the company required boats to undergo annual inspections and registration.
- The trip from Cumberland to Georgetown generally took about seven days.
- Following the disastrous flood of 1889, the canal company entered receivership, and was acquired by the B&O, primarily to keep the right of way from falling into the hands of the rival Western Maryland Railroad.
- After 1891, the canal principally transported coal, and sometimes West Virginia limestone, wood, lumber, sand, and flour.
- Boatmen came down to lock 5, called "Willard's lock" or "Waybill Lock", whereupon the locktender would sign the waybill, and report it to the office. If they did not get orders at that lock, they waited near the aqueduct bridge in Georgetown, until orders came through. A tugboat on the
- The last known boat to carry coal returned to Cumberland on November 27, 1923. The only boats recorded to operate in 1924 were five boats that carried sand from Georgetown to Williamsport to construct a power plant.
- The flood of 1924 caused major damage to the canal. Most of the railroad and canal bridges near Hancock were destroyed, opened a breach in Dam #1, and much damage to the banks and masonry of the canal.
- After the flood damage of 1924, the railroad only fixed the part of the canal serving Georgetown, since they sold water to the mills there, leaving the rest of the canal in disrepair. In 1928-1929 there was some talk of restoring and reopening the canal from Cumberland to Williamsport, but with the onset of the Great Depression, the plans were never realized.
- This winter flood in March 1936 caused even more damage to the abandoned canal. This flood led to the highest water mark the Potomac River had ever had thus far, destroying lockhouses, levels, and other structures. There were some efforts at restoration, mainly to the Georgetown level so that the factories could have their water supply. Due to inattention of the B&O railroad, the canal became a "magnificent wreck" and would need intense repairs and reconstruction throughout many areas destroyed by the floods.
- In 1938, the abandoned canal was obtained from the B&O by the United States in exchange for a loan from the federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation, and is now the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal national historic park.