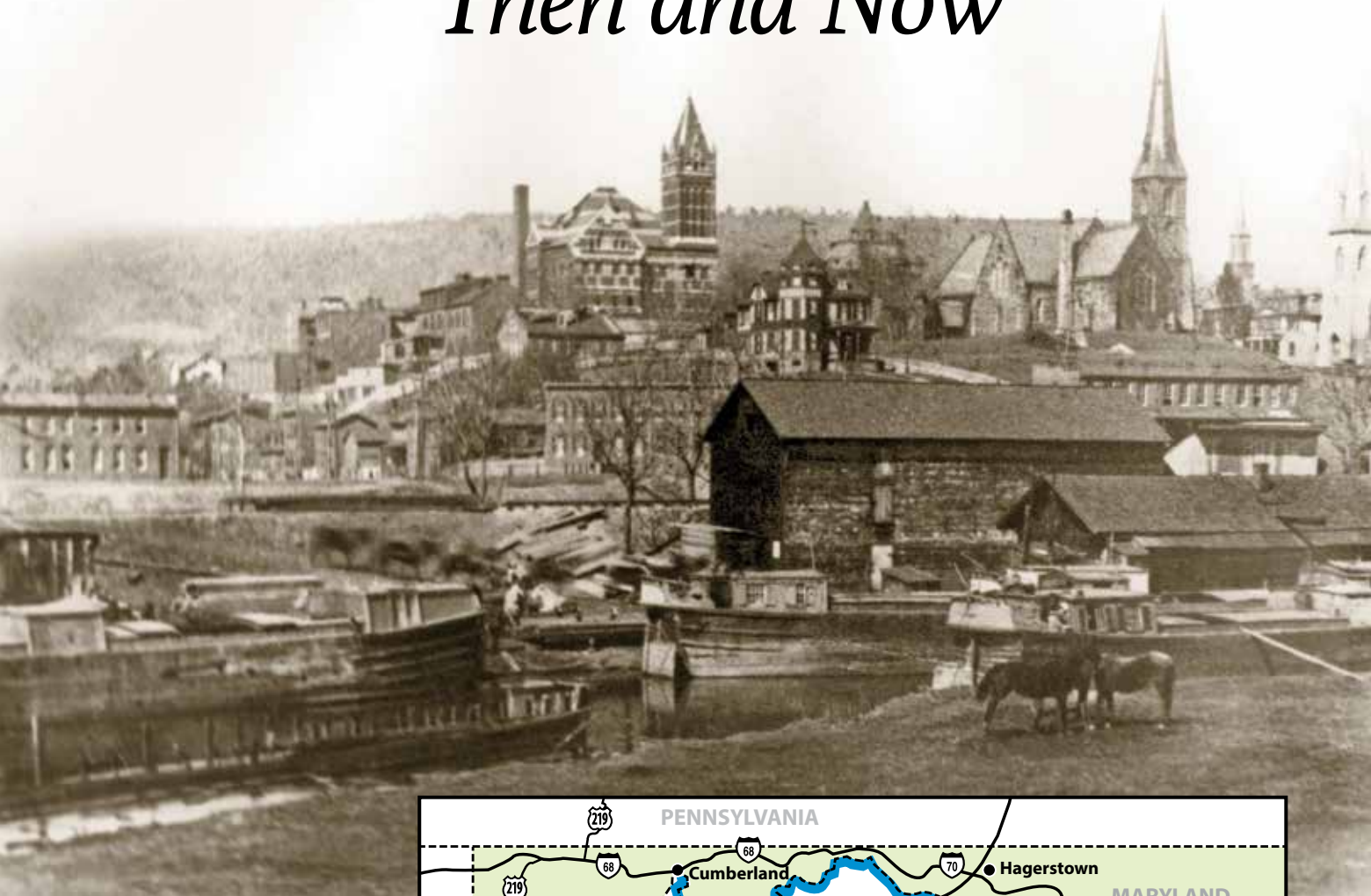


Chesapeake & Ohio Canal *Then and Now*



Above: C&O Canal terminus, Cumberland, Maryland. The canal reached Cumberland in 1850 serving customers to and from Georgetown.

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The Chesapeake & Ohio Canal is marking an important date this year. The transportation system that served customers from Georgetown to Cumberland, MD, came to a disastrous ending 100 years earlier in 1924, when floodwaters swept across the region causing millions of dollars in property damage. Despite efforts to restore the waterway, its demise came nearly a century after construction began, thereby ending employment for workers who plied the famous towpath. A look back at the landmark reveals a remarkable evolution from commercial enterprise to recreational destination.



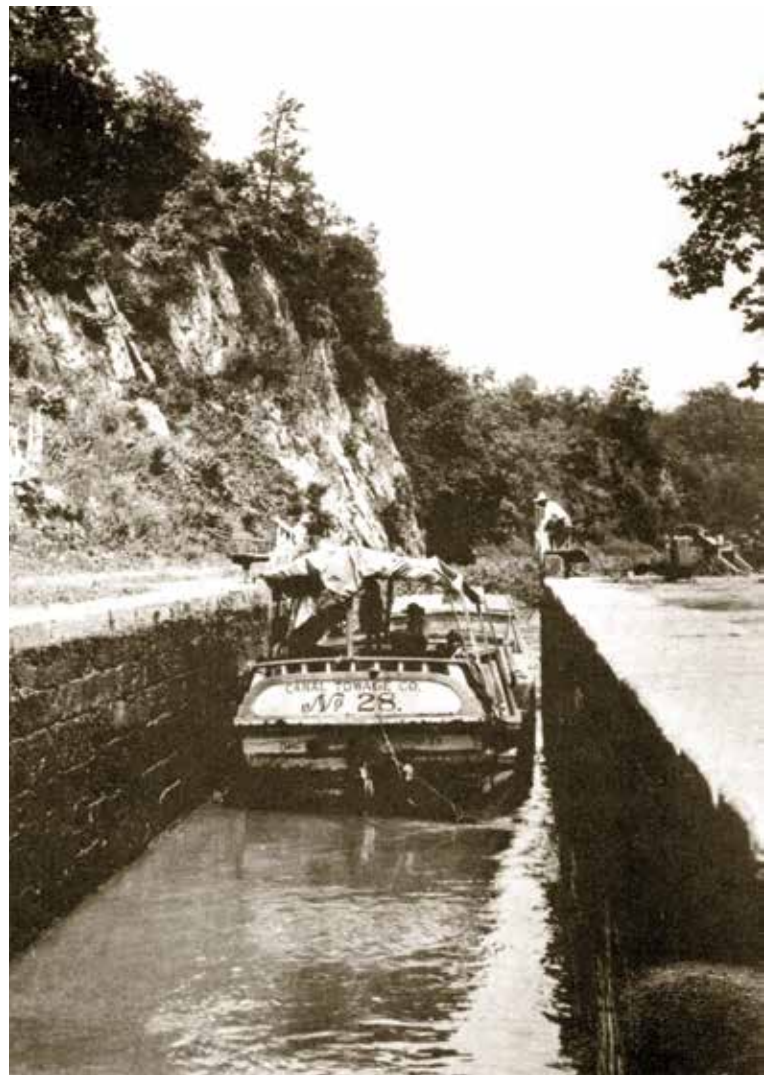
Above: C&O Canal boats waiting to be loaded with coal from Cumberland & Pennsylvania hopper cars.

Right: C&O Canal boat traveling through one of the 74 locks on the way to Tidewater, June 23, 1904.

PHOTO BY ROBERT SHRIVER; COLLECTION OF ELEANOR LEFEVRE HOLZSHU.

The C&O Canal's purpose was to connect the tide-waters of Georgetown with the headwaters of the Ohio River in western Pennsylvania. Commercial purposes prompted the plans. Massive coal deposits along the George's Creek valley in western Maryland were difficult to access and transport—conveyance was primarily limited to carts for roads and small wooden boats navigated by pole wielding men on the Potomac River. It was believed that a canal connecting coal deposits with the eastern seaboard would be financially rewarding. The promising future faced obstacles soon after President John Quincy Adams turned the symbolic first shovel of dirt in 1828.

The canal shared a starting date with the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, a carrier that came to be a chief competitor. Initial difficulties came not from the railroad, but with working conditions and engineering challenges. Engineers faced a 605 foot incline over the proposed 184½ mile conduit. To overcome those challenges, 74 locks, 11 aqueducts, more than 250





Baltimore Street, downtown Cumberland, Maryland, during one of the 1924 floods. DAN WHETZEL COLLECTION

culverts, and the Paw Paw tunnel were completed. Continuing problems surfaced when difficult working conditions caused labor shortages. The employment of Irish and German immigrants was intended to address the shortages, but backbreaking work meant that accidents and deaths took a toll on the labor force throughout the entire enterprise. Delays and money shortages also continued to plague construction as it progressed from Georgetown to Cumberland.

Celebrations accompanied the first canal boat entering Cumberland in 1850. Finally, coal was loaded into Cumberland & Pennsylvania Railroad coal hoppers that interchanged with the C&O basin located at the confluence of Will's Creek and the Potomac River. Typically, the loaded canal boats would be pulled by mules for one week until arrival in Georgetown.

Promises of prosperity seemed to be realized into the 1870s as the canal proved to be a viable carrier—coal shipments to the east and assorted goods on the return



trips. But problems began to surface with flooding, particularly in 1889. Engineers designed the canal to be within 100 yards of the Potomac River, a necessary source of water. The proximity of river and towpath came to a catastrophic conclusion in the spring of 1924.

Newspaper reports described the March flooding in graphic terms. While the entire region endured high water, the most damaged sections occurred between Williamsport and Cumberland as streets turned into rivers, pavement disappeared from roadways, and miles of the towpath collapsed

Irish workers were recruited by canal company agents who made deceptive promises about employment. Low pay and miserable living conditions disillusioned the immigrants upon arrival at the work sites. Working conditions became so bad that Irish American newspapers warned their European brothers not apply for canal positions. This monument located at Canal Place in Cumberland, Maryland, is dedicated to those Irish laborers who died building the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal.



Views of another flood on May 12, 1924, at Cumberland, MD — Potomac River (above) and Mechanic and Pershing Streets (below) eventually led to the unofficial end of the Canal. DAN WHETZEL COLLECTION

into the raging waters. The Cumberland basin was particularly hard hit when high water from Will's Creek converged with the swollen Potomac at the work station. A guard wall between the river and canal basin suffered major damage causing water and sediment to flow freely into the area and downstream along the towpath.

An initial report from a C&O official proved to be prophetic. The *Cumberland Evening Times* reported on April 4, 1924, that I.G. Nicholson, general manager, consulted with local contractors and concluded there was no assurance the canal would be restored. Editorial comment added the canal had suffered from diminished importance and the cost of restoring would be prohibitive. The reference to diminished capacity was primarily a result of B&O Railroad service that outpaced the slower boats to Georgetown. Despite the damage and contrary to some references, the C&O Canal did not simply walk away from its operations.

Efforts to repair major damage at the Cumberland basin began when waters receded. A report on April 7, 1924, noted the Vang Construction Company was hauling stone to repair the guard wall. Farther downstream repairs were underway around Williamsport.





Now a National Historical Park, the C&O Canal and towpath is a great outdoor space for hiking, biking, family fun and exercise, as well as other recreational activities at canal towns. PHOTOS BY LANCE BELL



Repairs were necessary not only for canal operations, but also because nearby Kelly-Springfield Tire Company required millions of gallons of water each day to maintain production. A dam located adjacent to the canal basin suffered damage, thereby threatening to lower the water level below intake pipes. Vang Construction dropped ballast into the breach using a steam powered derrick.

In a disastrous turn of events, another flood occurred in May 1924. Newspaper reports described additional damage to the already weakened canal infrastructure. “Flooding in the last 30 days probably destroyed the first inland waterway built in the country.” Another report stated that miles of canal walls between Harpers Ferry and Georgetown were destroyed.

Despite the destruction, Vang Construction continued work in late May, 1924, by utilizing a steam shovel to remove sediment from the Cumberland basin and canal. It was apparent the repairs at various points made possible limited shipping in 1924, but a continuous journey from Cumberland to Georgetown was not possible.

It is unclear when reclamation work ceased, but an announcement in the *Cumberland Evening Times* on August 1, 1924, seemed to mark an unofficial end to business. “The C&O Canal...will not be reopened this year.”

The canal’s future was the subject of speculation over the next several decades. The B&O Railroad that had acquired a majority of canal bonds by 1903 expressed no interest in financing the canal company’s work, so the “Grand Old Ditch” languished. The federal government purchased the canal in 1938 and made limited progress in creating recreational areas, but no efforts were directed to canal trade. The promising outdoor activities took a dark turn when federal officials decided a better use for the towpath would be highway construction—an idea that upset a number of outdoor enthusiasts and environmentalists, including United States Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas.



The C&O Canal terminus in Cumberland, MD, is a busy place where the towpath, Canal Place, Western Maryland Scenic Railroad, and the Western Maryland Station meet the Great Allegheny Passage (a hiking, biking 150 mile rail trail between Pittsburgh, PA, and Cumberland). *PHOTOS BY LANCE BELL*

A highly publicized 8-day walk on the towpath by Douglas and more than 50 friends was largely responsible for turning the political tide from a roadway to national park. In January 1971, the canal was designated a National Historical Park.

The transformation of the C&O Canal from commerce to national park has been remarkable. Five million visitors annually enjoy more than 1,000 historical structures and sites, rare species of plants, wildlife, bicycling, and related enterprises found at “Canal Towns.” The Cumberland terminus has become a major travel destination with the National Historical Park Cumberland Visitors Center hosting interactive displays and programs at Canal Place. Canal attractions also blend with the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad service, Shops at Canal Place, the Great Allegheny Passage, and Allegany Arts Council programs.

Few people surveying the flood damage in 1924 could have imagined what a success the C&O Canal would become a hundred years into the future. Thoughtful planning not only saved the canal, but increased its importance and utility. From canal boats and mules in the 19th century to mountain bicycles and trails in the 21st century, we can reflect on the C&O Canal’s heritage while celebrating its future!

Can you imagine?

The Chesapeake & Ohio Canal’s planned destination never materialized. In 1850, Cumberland became the C&O’s terminus and remained so until operations ceased in 1924. So, what did the original owners have in mind when planning the canal?

A key to reaching the Ohio River headwaters lay in conquering the Allegheny Mountains of Garrett County, Maryland. Engineers would have to design a lock system sufficient to raise boats nearly 2,000 feet from Cumberland’s basin to branches of the Youghiogheny River, a stream that wound its way into the Monongahela, Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.

The watershed summit was found to be at the location of today’s **Deep Creek Lake**. Small streams, including one called Deep Creek, and the Youghiogheny River would provide a sufficient water supply to keep canal locks operational.

The paths of the canal and Deep Creek Lake never crossed. In fact, work on the lake started in 1925, a year after the canal went out of business. It remains interesting to imagine canal boats crossing Deep Creek Lake on their way to Pennsylvania.