

The Cumberland Narrows: Portal to the National Road

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*T*he Cumberland Narrows has played an important part in Western Maryland history, as it provided a natural break in the Appalachian Mountains that stretched north/south through the region. Formed thousands of years ago, the Narrows is a one mile water gap dominated at the lowest elevation by Will's Creek and transportation arteries, while its higher elevations feature the spectacular beauty of Tuscarora and Juniata sandstone rock formations. According to a geological report filed in 1978, it was speculated the Narrows resulted from forces generated in the formation of the Eastern Appalachian Mountains. A stream began eroding the water gap across Will's Mountain and surrounding weaker rocks were eroded into the valley, thereby causing a 900- foot deep gorge. While visitors and local residents today appreciate the Narrows for its natural beauty, significant

events that occurred there have dimmed with the passing of time. Cumberland's Narrows is unique because it combines natural history with political, economic, and military events that have determined the course of our nation since 1755. To trace those recorded events, we need to turn back the clock to early European explorers and entrepreneurs who established themselves in lands formerly occupied by members of the Shawnee Tribe.

Topography and abundant natural resources were key reasons Europeans migrated to Western Maryland during the mid 18th century. The Ohio Trading Company constructed a significant settlement in the area, a storehouse about one mile from the Narrows, at the confluence of Will's Creek and the Potomac River. The successful trading post soon became a key point of interest in a larger conflict between France and England, as they struggled for



colonial supremacy in North America during the French and Indian War (1756-1763). To project British presence in the area against increasing French and allied Indian forces, Fort Cumberland was erected on a hill near the Ohio Trading Company facility now occupied primarily by Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Cumberland. British forces, under command of General Edward Braddock, arrived at the fort in 1755, to prepare for the conflict against French forces located at points west.

Traveling westward from the fort would be a difficult task for troops because the existing route over Haystack Mountain, called Nemaquin's Trail, was a steep and rugged path not suitable for heavy artillery or large wagons. Difficulties troops must have encountered in pulling the grade have been highlighted in recent years by resident Bob Bantz, who identified the location of Nemaquin's original trail and subsequent alterations to it. Information provided from the journal of Robert Orme, aid de camp who was present during the journey over Haystack, stated that 600 men left Fort Cumberland on May 30th, 1755, at 7 a.m., with two field pieces and 50 wagons. "It was night before the whole baggage had got over the mountain, about two miles from the camp. The ascent and decent were almost perpendicular rock. Three wagons were entirely destroyed, many more were extremely shattered."

One of General Braddock's officers is credited with recommending an alternative road be constructed through the Narrows that would provide easier travel for wagons than the steep and obviously dangerous incline of Nemaquin's path. A hundred men completed construction through the gap in two days, as a road was cut, dug, and blasted between the creek and rocky ledges.



Top photo: The Narrows stone bridge was built in 1834 and used until 1932. Photo circa 1910.

Photo above: Donald Paupe views the Narrows, circa early 1940's.

Although crude in form, the Narrows title as “Gateway to the West,” was born of military necessity. Subsequently, the bulk of Braddock’s Army marched from Ft. Cumberland through the Narrows on its trek westward. The route through the Narrows saw an impressive array of military might on June 8-9, 1755, including: 200 wagons, 1,500 pack horses, a train of artillery, and 2,100 men. Despite Braddock’s confidence, his force was soundly defeated at Braddock Field on July 9, 1755, having been forced into a guerilla style battle for which he and his troops were unsuited. Remnants of his shattered force returned to Fort Cumberland weeks later amid general concern the garrison would be overrun. Despite fears of a major disaster, the fort remained intact, and the fledgling settlement around it survived. Within a half-century, military purposes of the corridor were surpassed by economic and other domestic needs of a growing Allegany County and expanding nation.

Increased settlement of western lands placed demands on a rudimentary road system that stretched from the eastern seaboard to the Appalachian Mountains. Recognizing the need for road improvements that would facilitate commerce and bind western lands with population centers of the east, the U.S. Congress decided to appropriate money for a National Road. Cumberland was recognized as a logical point to begin the federal project, the first road to be financed by Congress. President Jefferson signed the bill into law in 1806, and The National Road was born. The federal road followed a steep incline over Haystack Mountain, generally the course of Braddock Road today, before changes were made in 1833-34, which routed it through the Narrows, although the Haystack Mountain road continued in use. Re-routing required an act of the Maryland Legislature. Another significant improvement was construction of a stone bridge across Will’s Creek, in the same area as the Route 40 bridge that exists today. One can still see remnants of old stone abutments.



Cumberland Narrows, early 1940s.

The National Road experienced a tremendous increase in traffic as the region and nation expanded. It was reported that, by 1835, stagecoaches, Conestoga Wagons, horses, mules, and foot traffic poured through the Narrows day and night. Cumberland became a staging ground for pioneers moving westward as coach businesses, lodging facilities, and city commerce prospered as never before. A diverse mix of people poured through the Narrows, each one dreaming of a better life in a new land, or seeking to escape the old one. Whatever the case may have been, the Narrows beckoned, and it witnessed the famous,

infamous, and unusual, during years before the Civil War. John Quincy Adams, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, Henry Harrison, James Polk, Davy Crockett, and Henry Clay were hosted by Cumberland before passing through the corridor. President Taylor was so impressed by the Narrow’s natural beauty, he requested the driver halt the stage so he could observe surroundings. Horace Greeley, no doubt, delivered himself of impressive oratory before moving west. Unusual but popular visitors witnessing the Narrows were Tom Thumb and “Old Whitey”, President Taylor’s horse. By 1849, the California Gold Rush enticed easterners to pack up belongings and migrate west. Cumberland’s Narrows welcomed thousands of gold seekers and their creaky wagons on a western journey over the next several years. The amount of wagon traffic before the Civil War cannot be physically observed on site today, as all remnants of the original road have been obliterated, but a large stone on nearby Savage Mountain, worn by thousands of wagon wheels over the years, dramatically illustrates the importance the Narrows and National Road made in the lives of ordinary citizens during the migratory movements. It was truly a “people’s road.”

Traffic through the Narrows before 1850, was by foot or horse-drawn wagon. Some of the traffic after that date included a new form of transportation that transformed



Wills Mountain Inn overlooked the Narrows. The facility opened in 1899 and was later converted to a sanitarium. Fire destroyed the structure in 1931.

the regional economy and provided an economic boom to workers. The Maryland and New York Iron and Coal Company, located in Mount Savage, Maryland, set in motion events that would cause the Narrows to witness change when it constructed a 10-mile railroad from Mount Savage to Cumberland in 1845. The company's iron furnace and rolling mill facilities required a connection with the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad in Cumberland, so the rail line through the Narrows was built using Mount Savage "U" rail, the first iron rail rolled in the United States. Chugging and hissing of steam locomotives, complete with passenger coaches and rolling stock, supplemented foot traffic that had passed through the valley for nine decades.

Railroads also complemented the fledgling coal mining industry of George's Creek. The only efficient way to mine coal and transport it to major markets was by rail, and rail carriers eagerly entered the area in search of profits. In 1846, the Maryland Mining Company built a railroad from Eckhart, Maryland, to the Narrows where it connected on the north side with the newly constructed Mount Savage

Railroad. Consolidation Coal Company, that maintained a strong presence in the George's Creek Basin, also desired rail service through the Narrows where it could connect with a sympathetic business partner, the B&O Railroad. The race for rail space in the Narrows was on, and it wasn't always mannerly.

The Cumberland and Pennsylvania Railroad (C&P), owned by Consolidation Coal Company, acquired the best trackage through the Narrows, as it started in the north end of Cumberland and ran along Will's Creek west side. C&P Railroad, being a unit of the Consolidation Coal Company, offered reduced shipping rates for company-owned coal mines along George's Creek, thus placing competitors at a disadvantage. Affected mining companies sought partners that would break C&P's control of shipping in the region. An opportunity arrived when the Pennsylvania Railroad decided to make a connection with Cumberland, via Ellerslie, through the Narrows. The Pennsylvania Railroad in Maryland, commonly called Penn Line, would provide competition and possibly lower



Oil well sank in the Narrows (near Fruit Bowl). Well was sunk in July 1903 and by September was producing three barrels of oil per day (\$100. per annum for any oil produced). Abandoned shortly afterwards. Owned by the Tuscarora Oil Co., Incorp. in West Virginia, part of Narrows land leased to Atlantic Refining Co.

shipping rates to Cumberland's key rail facilities and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. Penn Line reached the Narrows in May 1879, believing a deal had been negotiated with the C&P, allowing right of way through the gap. When Penn Line was nearly through the Narrows, its workers found a C&P locomotive blocking a key crossing point. Penn workers also observed C&P locomotive engineers backing away when "friendly" train service passed through the Narrows but quickly returning to their spots after it passed; the Penn Line was stymied. Events heated up when a Penn watchman, Tom Gunning, was approached by a mob on a rainy night in August. Gunning was quickly overpowered, stripped of his pistol, blindfolded, and bound. A second Penn guard, Joe Arrington, noticed the intruders advancing "like a regiment." Arrington remarked he previously had participated in 13 pitched battles and knew how to retreat, "so I slid off the plank of the bridge, in the dark, and into Will's Creek to get to the other side of Jordan." Arrington's Biblical reference indicated serious business, as a pistol shot rang out in the rainy darkness. The railroad battle was on.

Mr. Arrington splashed across Will's Creek, losing his umbrella in the melee. After scrambling up the bank to Centre Street "like a drowned rat," he ran to the Cumberland Hose Company (a structure still standing) to ring the fire bell. Hundreds of residents rushed to the station to learn about the assault on Gunning.

Following Arrington's escape and "crossing of Jordan," intruders proceeded to tear up Penn Line track. As news of the incident spread, there was a convergence of citizens on the east bank of Will's Creek, directly across from the intruders who were equipped with torches to aid their handiwork. The east side group shouted and threw stones but was prohibited by darkness from an amphibious assault across Will's Creek. Shots rang out that encouraged the west side crowd to retreat via the western end of the Narrows, thus escaping harm. Casualties were not reported.

Subsequent accounts indicate the perpetrators assembled in Mount Savage and used a C&P locomotive, with gondola, to make the 10-mile journey to Cumberland. Another unsubstantiated report implicated residents of

Pompey Smash, a small community now known as Vale Summit. In any event, one would suspect the group was associated with the C&P Railroad, as its headquarters and shops were located in Mount Savage. Fortunately, Mr. Arrington remained unscathed in the incident while his umbrella remained undamaged, recovered, and returned the next day. Mr. Gunning also survived the ordeal.

Penn Line directors decided to change tactics by engaging the C&P in a courtroom battle. Meanwhile, newspaper reports indicate the Pennsylvania affiliated railroad was able to continue pouring concrete and laying rails. In December 1879, the first Pennsylvania Railroad train successfully passed through the Narrows and into Cumberland.

Railroad battles continued on a new front when the same partners that had formed the Pennsylvania Railroad in Maryland, directly challenged the C&P by proposing a short line railroad be constructed via the west end of the Narrows, through LaVale, over Pompey Smash, into coal rich George's Creek. Sixteen miles of rail line would support seven locomotives, rolling stock, and passenger coaches from Cumberland to Lonaconing. C&P was not pleased

and tried to block or slow construction. Despite setbacks, the George's Creek and Cumberland (GC&C), as the new railroad was called, reached Lonaconing in 1880. Railroad historian, Dr. Harry Stegmaier, noted the situation reached a boiling point when the GC&C discovered its tracks were barricaded not far from the Narrows on George's Creek Boulevard. A two-hour shootout occurred. Perhaps the reported liquid refreshments supplied by local taverns affected the combatant's marksmanship, as no casualties were reported in the incident. The GC&C broke the stalemate by running the barricade with a locomotive.

By the 20th century, the Narrows needed to accommodate another means of transportation, trolley cars of the Cumberland and Westernport Electric Railway. Through agreements with the Cumberland Electric Railway, a city of Cumberland street car system, trolley service was available from the intersection of Baltimore and Centre Streets to popular Narrows Park, a resort and amusement park located in lower LaVale. Holiday events and Sunday outings were within easy reach of city residents. Further up the line, near present day McDonalds Restaurant in LaVale, Crystal Park offered amusement rides and picnic facilities.



Also dating from that time period were two unusual sites, an operating oil well that pumped crude from a location near today's Fruit Bowl, and a stone quarry that operated a loadout near the Western Maryland Bridge that crosses Route 40. By the end of the first decade of the 20th Century, the Narrows had become a crowded transportation artery. Along the southwestern bank of Will's Creek ran the old National Road and trolley line between Cumberland and LaVale. Higher up the hillside on Haystack Mountain were dual tracks of the Western Maryland Railway, which had recently acquired Penn Line and the GC&C Railroad. Along the opposite bank of the creek were twin tracks of the B&O Railroad's Pittsburgh-Cumberland line and a single track used by the C&P, going from Cumberland to Mount Savage and eventually to Piedmont, West Virginia.

During the 1920's, the Narrows was a strategic artery for rail and increasing automobile traffic. The National Road designation, while remaining in popular usage for some time, was officially changed in 1926, to U.S. Route 40, as part of a national highway numbering system. Gasoline powered vehicles surpassed horse drawn wagons as the preferred means of personal transportation and a new layer of road-related businesses sprung up after the turn of the twentieth century. Gasoline stations, a car dealership, a snack bar, a sanitarium, restaurants, and bulk oil storage facilities, added to development of the corridor.

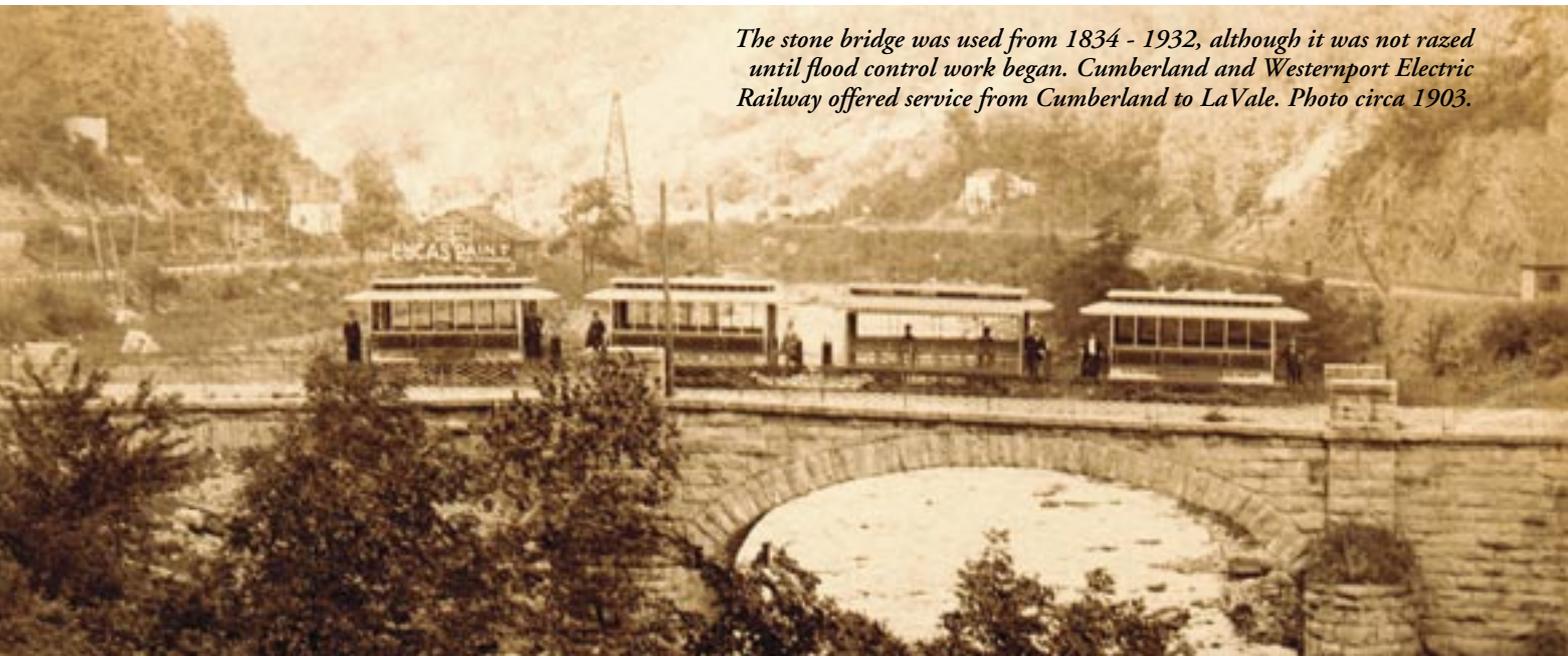
The purpose of travel also changed by the early twentieth century. It wasn't necessarily associated with migratory movements or journeys; instead, shorter trips became commonplace as workers began to live distant from their jobs. The commuter age was born as the development of LaVale increased traffic through the Narrows.

A significant impact on the Narrows occurred when the city of Cumberland and the United States Army Corp of Engineers embarked upon an 18.5 million dollar flood control program during the 1950's, the most costly public works project in city history. Disastrous floods ravaged Cumberland over the years, particularly in 1924, 1936, and 1942, and the Army Corp of Engineers was called upon to design a system that would prevent property damage caused by high waters. It began just upstream from the Route 40 Bridge and called for paving the bottom of Will's Creek, constructing concrete walls along its banks, and implementation of a sophisticated pumping system that effected a regional watershed. The work took a decade to complete, being finished in 1959.

The Cumberland Narrows, which had witnessed the progress of American transportation for 200 years, was now ready to be part of America's space travel program. Allegany Instrument Company, overlooking the Narrows on Will's Mountain, was formed for the purpose of building specialized metal products, including precision scales and metal stands to hold test rockets. Each holding device had to withstand one million pounds of thrust. Harry Stern, owner, located his business in a small building that was originally used as a restaurant and nightclub in the late 1940's, expanding it as required by contracts. In later years, the firm would move to Mexico Farms Industrial Park and be known as Allegany Technology.

The Will's Mountain facility was purchased in 1966, by resident, Art Morgan, when he expanded Artmor Plastics Corporation, a firm specializing in products to the textile industry. During the 1960's, Mr. Morgan became involved with Operation Gateway, a local organization dedicated to promoting local history, in general, and the

The stone bridge was used from 1834 - 1932, although it was not razed until flood control work began. Cumberland and Westernport Electric Railway offered service from Cumberland to LaVale. Photo circa 1903.



Cumberland Narrows in particular. Much energy was directed to those efforts when land was purchased on the south side, opposite Artmor Plastics and overlooking Will's Creek. Ground was cleared, picnic facilities purchased, and a well-attended dedication ceremony conducted in May 1971. It was also at that time a cable car system was discussed, connecting south and north sides of the corridor. *The Baltimore Sun Magazine* described the ambitious cable car plan in a 1969 issue.

Mr. Morgan continues to visualize how the Narrows could fit into a logical and useful State of Maryland presence in the corridor that would showcase its beauty while highlighting history. Not one to wait on government plans; he has generated a number of ideas and incorporated some of them into his company headquarters. An auditorium and scenic overlook, dedicated to his late wife, “show the usefulness of the site as a viable attraction,” according to Mr. Morgan. As one who has traveled to over 50 countries on trade missions and business expositions, Mr. Morgan believes the Narrows offers an opportunity for the state to capitalize on a unique geological and historical treasure that would attract visitors.

More recent developments that stand out in residents' memories are Hager's Fruit Market, now the site of The Fruit Bowl, M-G-K Nash Car dealership, later Diehl's Esso, and Knieriem's Lover's Leap restaurant and gas station. Kline's Restaurant began in 1955, when Lloyd Kline opened a small restaurant that has expanded over the years but remained under family ownership. The Kline family is making preparations to celebrate its 50th anniversary. Since 1989, a steam-powered tourist train, operating as the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad, has been passing through the Narrows. Each year about 30,000 train passengers enjoy the scenic views of this natural wonder.

Not all stories about the Narrows are so well documented and at least one of them has defined the site over the years. Lover's Leap, a term based on a local love story and also a synonym for the Cumberland Narrows, has been recounted many times with different twists. One written version recounts a romantic relationship between resident, Jack Chadwick, and an Indian chief's daughter. The chief was unwilling to permit the marriage of his daughter to Chadwick, so a fight ensued. During the confrontation, Chadwick accidentally killed the chief. The daughter was distraught, as she loved her father dearly, but could not live with Chadwick because he had killed her father. “Then let us leap off the cliff together and end our troubles,” said Jack. The legend ends with the twin burial of the bodies in a local cave.

The last significant event affecting the Narrows occurred in 2002 when the U. S. Department of Transportation officially designated The National Road one of our country's “All-American Roads.” According to the Maryland Office of Tourism, the federal government “had to be satisfied that the road's scenery, culture and history are nationally and internationally significant. The application was submitted after several years of work with byway stakeholders—those citizens who live or conduct business along the road—to research the route's historic value, identify strategies for historic preservation and a plan for increased tourism.”

No doubt, additional changes will occur in the Narrows; change is a constant that we all live with. And while future development remains speculative, one point is certain; the Cumberland Narrows has witnessed 250 years of recorded history that shaped our region and nation. Perhaps no other location has so much heritage and natural beauty to offer residents and visitors.

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Lover's Leap, the Narrows.