

CAROL STUART WATSON

*The Beall-Dawson House, c. 1815
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MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S BIG DITCH AND THE IRON MONSTER

By: Mrs. Neal Fitzsimons

They almost have a sound of camaraderie, the C & O (Chesapeake and Ohio Canal) and the B & O (Baltimore and Ohio Railroad), but they were bitter rivals. The struggle lasted nearly a century before the canal met its demise, not only by the hands of nature and a war, but also by economic usurpation by the railroad.

1828-1870

Construction and Initial Operation

Like two runners toeing the mark, work on both the canal and the railway began on the same day, July 4, 1828, scarcely 40 miles from each other. With great ceremony and with President John Q. Adams manning the shovel, the canal was dedicated by a monument in Georgetown. Turning the spade for the railway, whose dedicatory monument was

a cornerstone in Baltimore, was the aged Charles Carroll, sole surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence. Although the ultimate destination of both the B & O and the C & O was the great Ohio River Valley and the untapped riches of the Northwest Territory, the immediate destination was the coal mines in Cumberland, Maryland. In 1828, Montgomery County residents probably felt the same way about the approaching canal construction as they now feel about the pending Metro construction; new transportation was badly needed but it would cause a lot of changes.

Engineers had constructed the first inter-basin canal in America in South Carolina c. 1800, but it was the overwhelming success of the Erie Canal, which opened in 1825, that was causing a nation-wide craze for canals. The first apparatus resembling a railway was at the Quincy Quarry near Boston. Built about 1795, it consisted of three miles of wooden rails laid on stone ties over which small flange-wheeled gondola cars carried granite to the Neponset River for the building of the Bunker Hill Monument. The first steam locomotive was introduced in America by John Stevens in 1825. His miniature engine operated on a circular track and was primarily a tinker's demonstration which attracted little notice.

George Washington's enthusiasm for canals had made a great impact on this area. The navigable sections of the Potomac had been used as a fur trading route with the Indians. In 1749, with Washington a member, a trading company called the Ohio Company had been established. It flourished until 1756, a year after the French and Indian War began. When George Washington, with his knowledge of surveying, made known his visions of the Potomac as a great trading route, he was supported with ardor by both Maryland and Virginia, and both states invested in his Patowmack Canal Company.

Most of the Patowmack Company's funds and energies were expended in bypass locks at Little Falls on the Maryland side, and seven miles higher up the river at Great Falls on the Virginia side. Although a slackwater navigation was the general plan, those two great waterfalls had to be overcome by canals using locks of the most expensive character. The work was of such magnitude that the successful completion of those two bypasses is considered one of the engineering triumphs of that age. Great Falls had a descent of 76 feet and two of the locks had to be cut out of solid rock. Little Falls had a descent of 37 feet, which was overcome by a set of four locks.

George Washington had been dead for twenty years when, in 1819, the Patowmack Canal Co. became bankrupt. Thus when the C & O bought out the Patowmack Canal Co. in 1823, it received not only a series of bypass canals but also the legacy of Washington's popular appeal and political prestige. That reputation stayed with the canal for years to come. Some historians cite that as the reason the C & O was victor over the B & O in their early legal entanglements and battles over right-of-way.

However, in 1823 the businessmen in Baltimore were unhappy that the Potomac River was receiving so much attention. After surveys had shown that a canal between Baltimore and the Potomac was unfeasible, Baltimoreans believed that their prosperity lay in the direction of the Susquehanna. They were also upset that Maryland representatives from the Potomac area had voted against the Baltimore location as the nation's capital. Retaliating in the state legislature by forming an alliance called the Chesapeake ticket, they were able to impede Maryland's immediate financial support of the canal. The Potomac representatives, not to be outdone, created the Potomac ticket which claimed that Baltimore, having only one vote in the senate and two in the assembly, was not properly represented. (The Potomac area had two senate votes and four assembly votes). Thus, while the Potomac ticket enabled the Maryland legislature to vote its millions on behalf of the Potomac River improvement, Baltimore's Chesapeake ticket caused the postponement of the equally important vote of financial aid of the Virginia legislature. The canal promoters, discouraged at the delay, asked for federal aid.

President Monroe had shown some signs of yielding on the constitutional issue over national aid to internal improvements. A convention composed of delegates from Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania met in Washington in 1823 and advocated the immediate construction of a canal from Georgetown to the coal mines of Cumberland. In 1824 President Monroe waived the constitutional objections of long standing and encouraged the appropriation of \$30,000 for surveys and estimates on canals and roads. More than half of this amount was spent in surveys for the Potomac route.

The Federal estimate of \$22,375,427.69 (\$8,177,081.05 was for the eastern section which involved Montgomery County) caused the canal's promoters to reel; it was five times the previous estimates. The promoters retrenched; held another meeting in 1826, and called for new studies and estimates. By decreasing the canal size to a width of 40 feet and a depth of four feet and reassessing labor and materiel costs, an unrealistic - but widely hailed - bid of \$4,500,000 (eastern section) was accepted. Part of the promoters' financial irresponsibilities start from this point, for in the 1829 Stockholders Proceedings, it was decided to use the Federal engineer's proposed larger measurements of 60 feet width and six feet depth. Nothing was mentioned as to how the increased costs would be covered. The promoters apparently felt that the sheer popularity of the canal would bring investors.

By 1830, two years after the ground breaking ceremony, 20 miles of the canal construction was finished and ready for navigation, from Georgetown to Seneca.

Two years after its ground breaking ceremony, the railroad had progressed 13 miles. On granite sleepers, the tracks extended from Baltimore to Ellicott's Mills. However, at that time the B & O had neither the popularity nor the federal aid of the C & O.

The B & O began with a capital of \$5,000,000 and with the state of Maryland and the city of Baltimore as its prime supporters. Even though Congress had turned down the appeal for financial aid, it provided technical aid for the railroad route surveys. Many people still thought of the train as a toy. Unlike the C & O, which had engineers from the Erie Canal as mentors, the B & O, with its borrowed military engineers untrained in railroading, found that everything was guesswork. Those early B & O engineers did not, at first, contemplate any motive-power except horses and gravity. (An experiment, using sails for propulsion, was abandoned). Helpful and curious citizens along the route contributed stone and wood. Passengers who rode that first 13 miles out of Baltimore had to be a hardy lot when gravity hurtled them downhill after horses had pulled them uphill.

The legal feuds between the B & O and the C & O had taken place almost before the ground-breaking occurred. Firstly, the C & O obtained an injunction to restrain the B & O from acquiring title to lands on the proposed railway route. Then the B & O countered in the same manner against the C & O.

The legal battles are the leit motif throughout all the old canal/railway records, but the B & O used those legally enforced delay periods shrewdly. The railroad, perforce, welcomed inventors and innovators. The B & O promoters offered prizes for ideas, sent engineers to England for consultation with their railroad engineers, and welcomed experimentation. The famed Tom Thumb locomotive was a B & O sponsored demonstration. Thus the company solved the problem of the inclined plane and used wood, and later coal, to produce steam. By dismissing lethargic leaders and hiring far-sighted and energetic promoters, the B & O built a firm and steady organization.

By 1831, progress by the B & O was startling. Seventy miles of track had been laid as far as Frederick. The route crossed a ridge just north of Parr's Spring at the northwestern tip of Montgomery County.

Frederick, in fact, was so anxious to secure the benefits of the railroad that it gave the B & O the land for its station, and some of the land for the right-of-way was granted by private citizens. People were no longer laughing at the little "toy". It had become the Iron Monster and it drew crowds of spectators when it pulled into towns. Investors were clamoring at its cabooses.

While the momentum of the railroad construction surged forward in the early 1830's, canal construction was progressing poorly. The C & O had been plagued with a shortage of labor. Because of dampness, canal work was not thought to be very healthful. The C & O decided against using slaves to solve its labor shortage and used indentured European workmen, especially Irish, who were reputed to be expert stonecutters. But the C & O had the misfortune to hire two opposing clans from Ireland and time was lost in personal fights, absenteeism and strikes, not to mention defection to work for the railroad. However, the worst misfortune to strike was a cholera epidemic. There are records of mass graves in Montgomery County that contain those unfortunate sons of Erin. One is said to be at St. Mary's Church in Barnesville. Many of the workers fled.

1832 was also the year of the most fierce of the court battles. It concerned Point of Rocks, the threshold to the Potomac Valley, and the most difficult point of construction. The Catoctin Mountains meet the Potomac and form a notch of stone cliffs, barely 40 feet wide, and that bit of territory was regarded with jealousy by both the canal and the railway. The C & O had always taken the stand that since it took over the old Patowmack Canal Co., it should be able to operate under its charter, which stipulated right-of-way through Montgomery County, Point of Rocks, and beyond. However, the railroad had made surveys along the same precious 40 foot passageway and the canal questioned the legality of the survey.

The canal was hurting in many ways in that year of 1832. It could not operate along the line above Seneca until the feeder at Harper's Ferry, twelve miles from Point of Rocks, was completed. Putting forth a peace feeler, the C & O drew up a proposal for joint construction with the B & O. The court, sanctioning that proposal, and granting the original Patowmack charter rights to the C & O, made it possible for the two adversaries to work together for the first time. It was also the first time the canal became financially indebted to the railroad as the B & O purchased 2,500 shares of the C & O stock.

By 1832, the canal had to face the fact that it was broke. Even the shocking twenty two million dollar estimate that the federal engineers had made proved to be too low. The unexpected success of the railroad caused the Virginia legislature and the federal government to disavow further interest in the canal. Baltimore, having executed an amendment to correct its weak legislative representation of 1823, threw its influential support to the railroad. So the onus of the canal fell on the state of Maryland. In 1836, Maryland passed an internal improvement bill, called the Eight Million Dollar bill, with \$3,000,000 each to the B & O and the C & O and the remainder allotted to three other railroads and one other canal.

With the state of Maryland as its guardian, canal work progressed slowly but with more regularity than in the past. Attention became focused on the warring clans of Irishmen. Problems between two intractable clans, the Corkonians and the Longfords, simmering in the past, became open warfare between the years 1834-37. The canal area at times took on the appearance of an armed camp. Killing and maiming took place and at one point, the militia as well as federal troops from Fort McHenry were called upon for help. The late 1830's was also the period of manifold lawsuits and land-damage claims. Taking advantage of the right-of-way tug of war between the B & O and the C & O, many land owners made monetary gains.

In 1842, the toy that grew into the Iron Leviathan whistled into Cumberland, eight years before the canal. The owner of the Cumberland coal mines had raised the capital to build the railroad to them. In contrast, the canal was again facing bankruptcy. Over \$16,000,000 had been spent. Some of that amount was used to repair damage caused by floods, ice freshets, droughts and the rioting Irishmen.

By 1842, the C & O officers came to the decision that they would have to sell the canal. However, there were no bidders, even with the tempting reward of the coal mines just 18 miles away. In 1844, the canal came greatly under the financial domination of the railroad, when the B & O bought a heavy share of canal company bonds. A severe flood in 1845 was a portent of others to come, causing the suspension of construction as well as navigation on the completed sections until the devastation could be repaired.

As the canal progressed up the river, miniature boom towns sprang up, especially at the temporary termini. The Seneca terminus was for a time called Rushville in honor of Richard Rush, Secretary of the Treasury under President Adams. (Mr. Rush was responsible for the "Holland" loan, made in behalf of the canal in 1832 after a refusal from English investors). However, the population of Seneca expanded only temporarily and soon moved on up river. Nor was the settlement at Great Falls a success. It was to be named Crommelin for the Dutch bankers who had handled the Holland loan. For about 10 years, the Great Falls Tavern (now the Great Falls Museum) was known as the Crommelin Tavern.

The 1849 Board of Directors report of the B & O mentioned exciting plans to extend their railway network into several other states. Forgetting the dream of connecting with the Ohio River, the C & O concentrated on just reaching Cumberland. Measuring 184.5 miles, of which 37 ran through Montgomery County, the canal reached Cumberland in 1850. It had taken 22 years to build the Big Ditch. Young workmen who had started out with the canal were, by 1850, middle-ages and the middle-aged were maundering old men. The Erie Canal measured 365 miles and it had taken only eight years to complete. The woes that befell the C & O's long period of construction ran the gamut from execrable workmanship, political and legal feuds, and bankruptcy to assaults by floods, droughts, and freezes. Finally, construction averaged about 8.03 angst-filled miles per year.

From 1850 to the Civil War, the canal was really laying the groundwork for its so-called Golden Age that was to come in 1870. Navigation kinks were worked out and the poorly constructed sections were redone. That period also realized the political spoils system at its peak when nearly all levels of personnel were replaced with favored party workers. Much time was spent repairing the damage from droughts in the summer and floods in other seasons. A flood of 1852 was particularly vicious, and that was followed by four minor ones in 1857. In fact, the canal records reveal that from 1852 until its demise, damage from flooding was barely mended before another flood would strike.

Despite the set-backs, the canal carried on an active agricultural trade, with flour hauling bringing in a substantial revenue. Although both the B & O and the C & O had constant competitive revenue battles, it was the coal hauling that caused the most throat-cutting.

Both the railroad and the canal suffered injury during the Civil War but the Potomac was a military objective and the canal received the heaviest damages as both armies marched and countermarched across the river. For the first time the canal had to contend with ravages wrought by war in addition to the caprices of nature. On occasion, battles raged so close to the canal that its property was used for hospitals and morgues. It took nearly five years, 1865-1870, to repair the damages of war, to

replace the boats and mules that had been confiscated and destroyed, and to turn once again to peace-time operations.

1870-1924

The Golden Age and the Demise

1870-1890 has been called the Golden Age of the canal. 1870-73 were the most prosperous years for commerce, with a peak of 968,827 tons processed in 1871. The post-Civil War depression of 1873-76 affected both the canal and the railroad.

During the canal's Golden Age, a potpourri of events occurred: 1870, serious damage from a minor freshet; 1871, a strike of boatmen and dock laborers followed by a severe drought; 1873, a flash flood followed by an epidemic that killed many of the canallers' mules; 1874, the mules sank so deeply into the clay surface on the towpaths that the Monocacy division had to be macadamized (tractors were used to replace mules in 1890 but were discontinued because of the expense); 1875, a state election resulted in the "Canal Ring" forces defeating the railroaders; 1876, steamers for the first time navigated the canal (they were discontinued in 1890 because of the scour damage they caused; 1877, a major flood of such intensity that the canal operated only 161 days that year; 1878, the rate-cutting was so severe between the B & O and the C & O that the state legislature passed an act curbing the competitive action; 1879, telephone lines were installed along the waterway (43 stations) and it was the longest single line in existence.

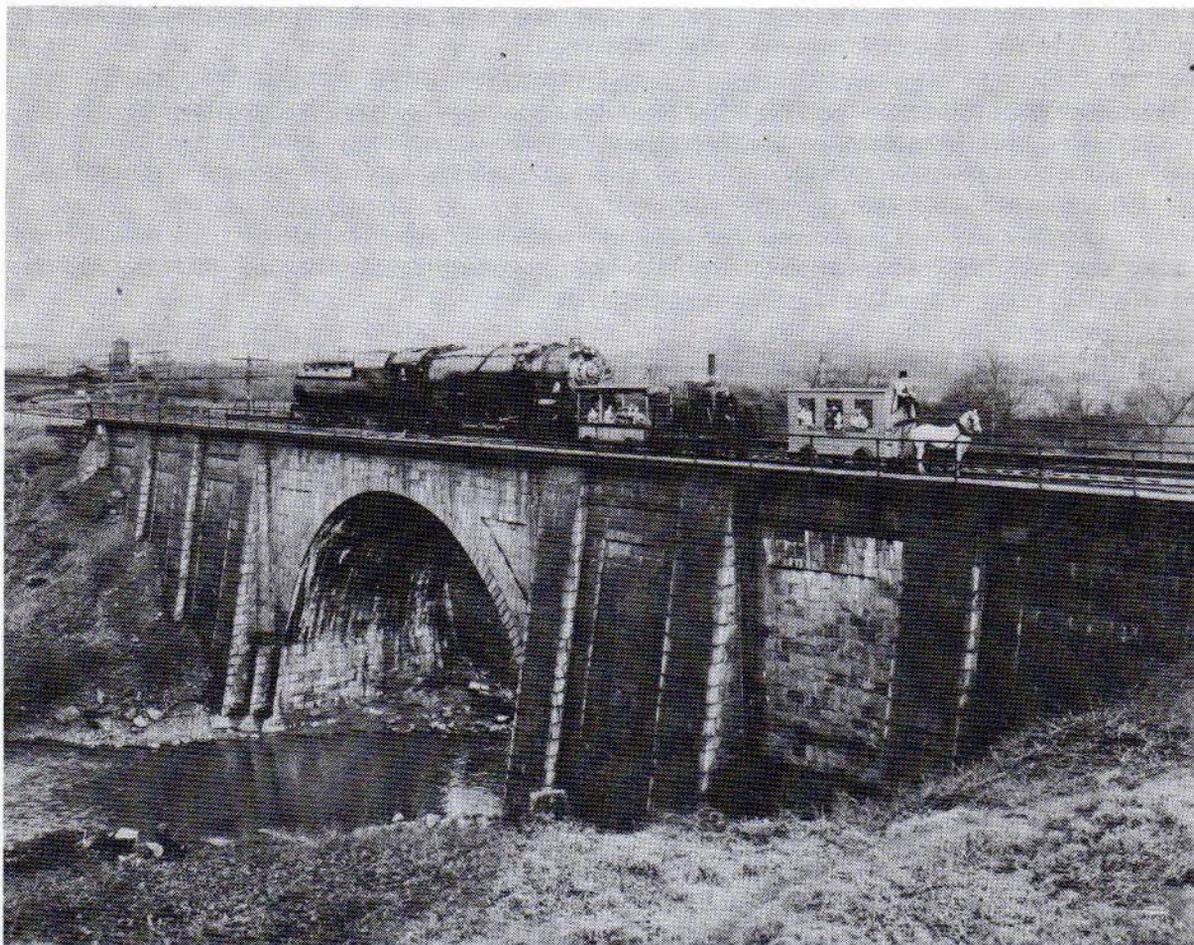
Despite the nostalgic memoirs of canal passengers, the railroad offered much more in service. George Pullman designed the first dining car in 1868. He christened it Delmonicos, after the eminent restaurant. In contrast, the canallers' favorite offering was a rabbit stew made from the unfortunate animals that strayed too close to the towpaths and were shot by the boatmen.

A strange kind of one-way trip became quite popular. In a makeshift boat hulled from a tree, the voyager would sail down the canal, disembark at Georgetown with his "instant" boat, and sell it for firewood.

The C & O came to have the reputation of being frequented by Irish "rowdies". The use of alcohol reached such proportions that Carrie Nation was needed to lecture the locktenders turned bartenders. The lockkeepers became so notorious for selling alcohol to the bargemen that passed through the locks that the canal company passed strict prohibition rules. However, Montgomery County was spared most of the revelry which usually took place in Cumberland at the loading docks and in Georgetown while the boats lined up to unload. Nevertheless, those colorful bargemen and their families, who made their main homes on the water, were unlike any other social unit of that time. They generally intermarried and avoided other social groups. Even their winter quarters were isolated from the villages and townspeople.

W. S. Sanderlin, political historian, sums up what best describes the effect the canal probably had on Montgomery County: "Road networks were keyed to it [the canal], just as they were elsewhere to the turnpikes and the railroads. The canal provided companionship and rivalry for the farmers and canallers, performing to an even greater extent the function of the country road and crossroads store in rural America. It was the setting of all the drama associated with the workaday occurrences on the old ditch. It became, in fact, part of the folklore and legend of the valley, celebrated in song and story."

Changes wrought by the railroad's epochal technology and travel overshadowed river life. Land values changed as remote pastures became prized terrain. Entrepreneurs, as well as politicians, followed the path of the rails. If the railroad caused the demise of the canal, in Montgomery County it also affected the toll roads. Toll houses were displaced by suburban train stations when the B & O's Metropolitan Line cut through the county in 1873. But the railroad's heyday ended after World War II when the automobile and the resulting modern highway system eclipsed railroad life in Montgomery County.



*The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad's Centennial Celebration,
December 21, 1929. (Horse Car of 1829-30 and Tom Thumb
Locomotive with the Lord Baltimore, a 330 ton locomotive)*

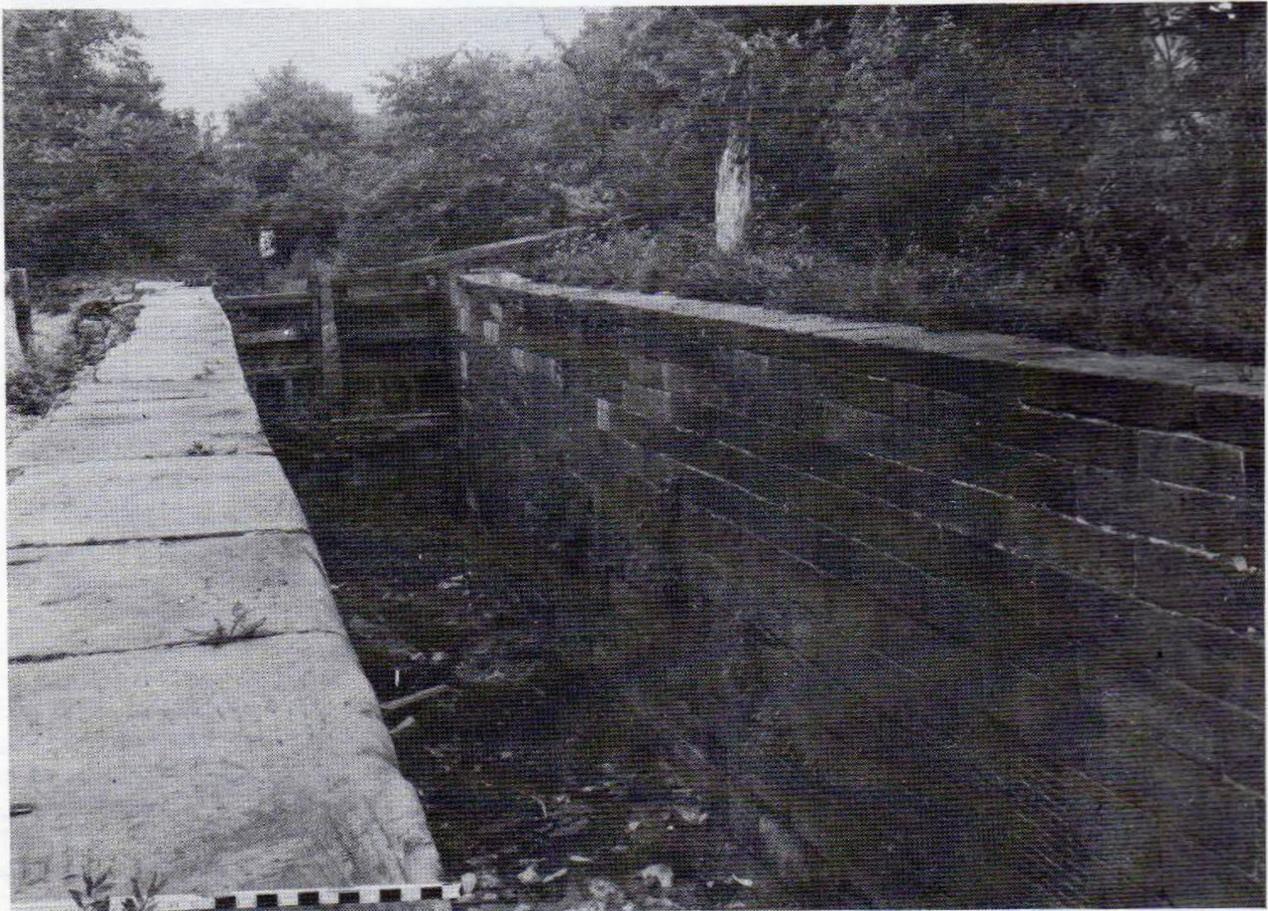
The canal had a respite from floods in the early 1880's but a major one hit in 1886 and almost before that could be cleaned up, another struck in 1889. Many of the canallers, viewing the 1889 havoc and taking into account those repeated maelstroms, decided to abandon the canal and seek work elsewhere. Despairing of its future and without sufficient money to undertake repairs, the canal company offered the watery wreck for sale. The B & O, afraid that a competitor railway would make a bid for the canal, agreed to underwrite its repair.

After 1890, as the prosperity and romance of rails soared, the canal activities declined. The mills and factories which had sprung up along the canal banks were

abandoned for railroad spurs. After 1890, the canal showed no profit. In 1907, Maryland sold the remainder of its interest in the canal to the B & O. For the old-timers around who had witnessed the battles between the canal and the railroad and who had been partial to the canal, it must have been a humiliating act. World War I stirred up some activity and the canal hauled coal for the government. It was becoming apparent that the coal mines in Cumberland, purported to be inexhaustible, were being rapidly depleted, and a miners' strike in 1922 helped sound their death knell.

The canal lost its main source of revenue when the coal trade diminished but the coup de grace came in 1924 in the form of a fifth major flood. The irreparable and widespread devastation wrote its epitaph and the Old Ditch was abandoned by all.

For a while the neglected locks, rotted canal barges, stagnant waters, and abandoned lock-tenders' houses pointed up the ignominious end of the Big Ditch. Little Falls, Great Falls, and Seneca were to hear no more the "Hey-y-y, Lock" of the canal-ers as they signaled their approach to the lock-tenders.



*The Chesapeake & Ohio Canal locks, Great Falls.
View from southeast.*

1924-1973

The Big Question

The memory of John Adams and George Washington focused attention on the future of the canal at its Centennial Celebration in 1928. It lay unattended and neglected during America's big depression. The Roosevelt administration in 1933 envisioned a boulevard to replace the Old Ditch but nothing came of it, despite the popularity of the automobile.

In 1938, the B & O sold the canal property to the U. S. Government. Again George Washington's ardor for the canal was remembered and in the 1939 celebration of his birthday, the Interior Department dedicated the canal property as a public park. In 1940, the canal was restored as far as Seneca but in 1942, as if to show that nature still held the upper hand, another flood returned it to the deplorable condition of 1924.

The future of the canal has been the subject of unending discussion and studies for Congress by the U. S. Army Engineers and by its direct care-takers, the National Park Service. Legislative Bill 91-664, which became public law in 1971, designated the canal a National Historic Park. A short stretch of the carrier was made operable for excursion barges but Hurricane Agnes in 1972 caused such extensive damage that even those had to be discontinued.

A bill before Congress at the present date requests \$1,300,000 to repair damages from Hurricane Agnes. The canal and its property need repair to prevent further destruction to its battered remains. Further, legislation is being proposed to purchase land at the Cumberland terminus which does not belong to the National Historic Park.

Whatever is decided for the Old Ditch, a park area with the existing problems is probably much more preferred by county residents than another boulevard for automobiles.

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