

George Washington's Dream – Making the Potomac River Navigable – The Potomac Company

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The Potowmac River then, is the centre of the Union. It is the River, more than any other, in my opinion, which must, in the natural progress of things, connect by its inland navigation . . . the Atlantic States with the vast region which is populating (beyond all conception) to the Westward of it. It is designated by law for the seat of the Empire; and must, from its extensive course through a rich & populous country become, in time, the grand Emporium of North America. George Washington, December 5, 1791, Letter to British agricultural expert Arthur Young

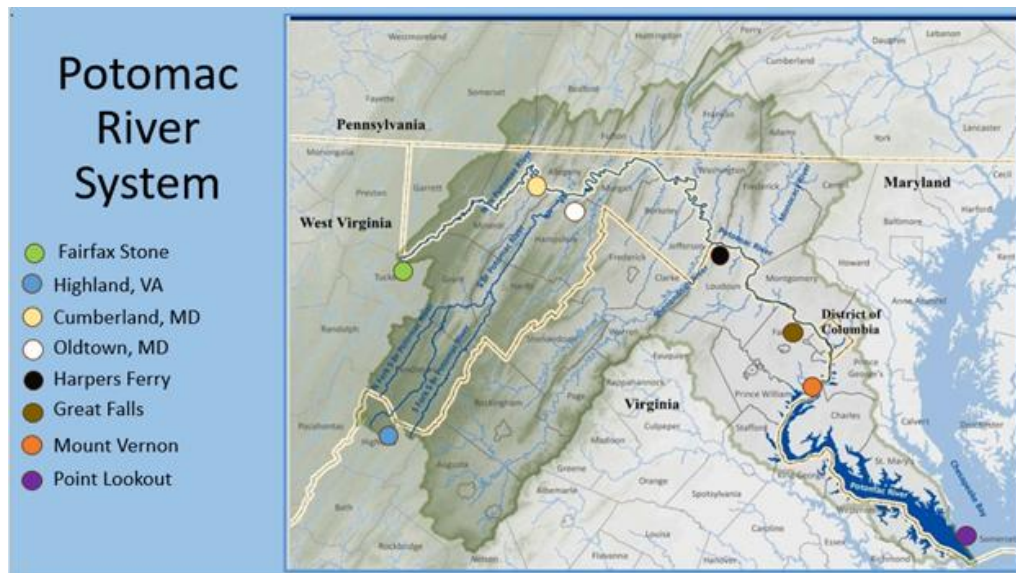
I live in Leesburg, Virginia. A few minutes away from my home flows the mighty Potomac River, stretching over 400 miles past important sites in American History: the Antietam battlefield, John Brown's Fort, the former great ports of Georgetown and Alexandria, Washington, D.C. and Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington.

In my area, the river is quite beautiful and seemingly undeveloped. Great sycamore trees line the shore, leaning over the river, their branches dipping into the water. Bald eagles are commonplace, hovering and, then, in an instant, swooping down, talons first, seldom missing their prey. Long-legged and even longer-necked great blue herons have a different fishing method. They stand without movement in the shallows, waiting for an unsuspecting fish to swim by, then seize it with their long beaks, lift their head and swallow. Occasionally, you will see hundreds of roosting cormorants. They fish by diving under the water, sometimes for as long as two minutes, with a great success rate. Canada geese, ducks and numerous species of songbirds also abound.

The water in the river is clear and you can usually see to the bottom unless there has been a storm, in which case it becomes brown and muddy. Under the water are large carp and catfish which often school in the thousands. Small-mouth bass, known to anglers as "smallies," are the favorite game fish, but there are also walleyes and muskellunge, if you know where to look.

Occasionally, you will see an angler or two in small boats trying their luck, or a group of canoers paddling down the river. There are many small islands, and a family with a boat can claim one of these islands for the day, sometimes with a sand beach and water perfect for wading.

It is difficult to believe that this bucolic river, this pastoral scene, was once the course for bustling trade in wheat, whiskey, coal and more. In fact, between 1785 and 1830 more than 200,000 tons of freight floated down the Potomac River, worth over \$350,000,000 today. My Maryland friends will immediately interrupt my story at this point and say, "Oh, you mean the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal," that masterpiece of engineering which runs from Georgetown to Cumberland, 184 miles along the Maryland shore of the river. No, this was years before the C&O Canal and years before railroads. So, let's start at the beginning.



Map courtesy of the Interstate Commission for the Potomac River Basin.

I am sure all of my readers have visited George Washington's home, Mount Vernon. If not, it is your patriotic duty to do so, especially in this semiquincentennial anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. In the rear of the great house is a 96-foot-long piazza or portico with 8 wooden pillars, 18 feet high. Quite impressive! Sit down on one of the green painted Windsor chairs, thoughtfully provided by the Mount Vernon's Ladies' Association, and what do you see? You see the Potomac River, which is now, as it was in the 18th century, one mile wide.



Mount Vernon's portico. (Photo: PSK)



View from the portico. (Photo: PSK)

When Washington sat on his portico before the revolution what did *he* see? He saw small boats being poled to the major port in Alexandria about 10 miles up-river, carrying the products of his and neighboring plantations. This tobacco, wheat, and other grains were to be loaded on ocean-going vessels heading down-river to where the now 11-mile-wide Potomac flowed

into Chesapeake Bay. Another 90 miles, and these ships entered the wide Atlantic Ocean. Their destinations varied, to the Caribbean sugar islands to feed the enslaved and to Europe to satisfy the tobacco craze and provide some food security to that unstable continent subject to constant war.

There were also large ships coming up-river, headed to Alexandria. These contained finished goods – clothes, furniture and even shackles, those items the “mother” country prohibited Americans from producing themselves, all purchased for the same plantation owners by their factors in New York City. So, Washington not only witnessed the typical colonial looting, raw materials in exchange for finished goods, but saw that the Potomac River was navigable by the largest ships of the day past Alexandria and all the way up to Georgetown another 10 miles up-river. There, at the fall line, where the coastal plain gives way to the Piedmont, Little Falls and Great Falls blocked the way to the inland. A future problem that he had no doubt American ingenuity would solve.



Washington the surveyor. (Photo: public domain)

The Young George Washington

Surveying was interesting and well-paid work for a healthy youngster who enjoyed the outdoors and had a talent for mathematics, geometry, maps and other detail-oriented tasks.

First Entrepreneur, Edward G. Lengel, page 17.

Surveying was interesting and well-paid work for a healthy youngster who enjoyed the outdoors and had a talent for mathematics, geometry, maps and other detail-oriented tasks.

In 1748, at the tender age of 16, Washington was invited by his neighbor, Lord Fairfax, to join a surveying party in western Virginia. As soon as he returned, he found his father’s old surveying instruments, dusted them off, and went into business for himself. By the age of 19 he had provided more than 200 surveys of over 60,000 acres. Because his surveys were seldom challenged in a litigious age, he was well paid.

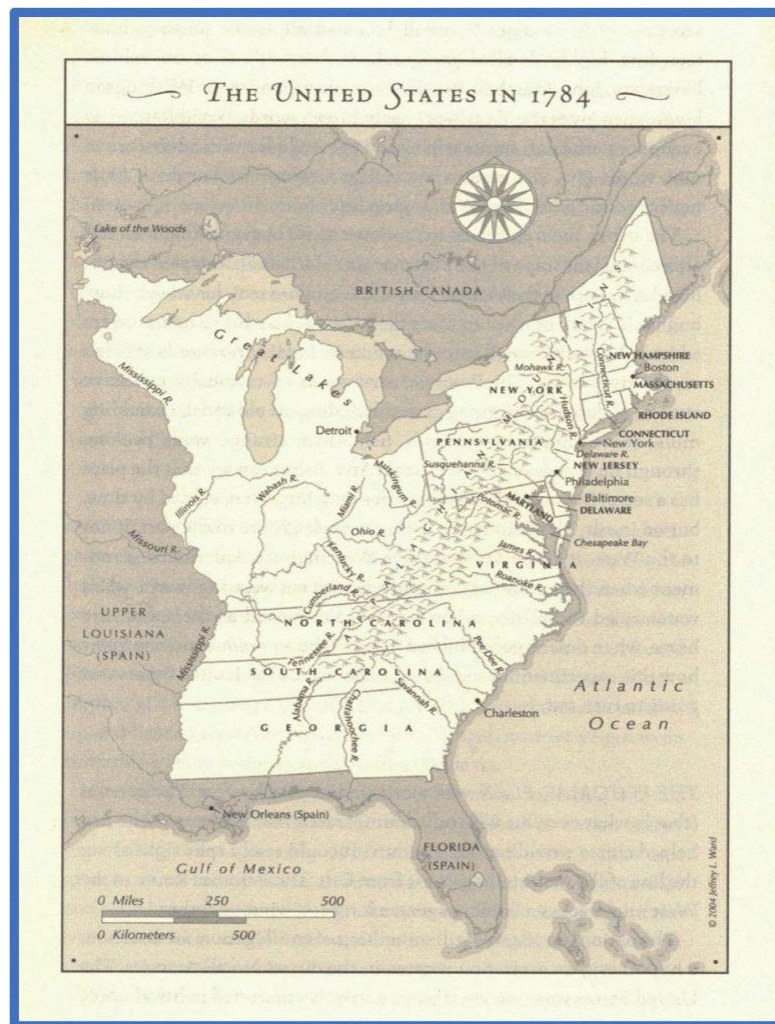
In 1752 at the age of 20, he quit the surveying business for two reasons. First, the colonial governor had declared, arbitrarily and without reason (as colonial governors are apt to do) that one-sixth of all income from surveying must be taxed to support the College of William and Mary. The second, and more important reason was that with the death of his brother, Lawrence, Washington was now the owner of Mount Vernon and, although surveying was a good living, it was not quite the job that a member of the upper gentry in Virginia should be doing. So, Washington got himself appointed the Adjutant for Southern Virginia and was soon embarked on a two-and-a-half-month trek to the Ohio Valley to warn the French about encroaching on British-claimed lands.

In 1754, at the age of 22, with the opening of the French and Indian War, Washington, in search of the best routes to supply the British army that was marching west, canoed down the Potomac River from Cumberland, Maryland over 170 miles to Great Falls. To his delight, he discovered that he could paddle from Cumberland for over 120 miles until he ran into his first obstacles, House Falls, The Spout, Bull Ring Falls and Payne's Falls, a series of rapids in the Harpers Ferry area. Clearing these rapids, he was then able to paddle another 20 miles until he reached Seneca Falls and then a few more miles until Great Falls. Washington had paddled 170 miles and found only a few impediments, which he believed could easily be overcome. This idea, that the impediments to in-river navigation in the Potomac could easily be overcome, except for Great and Little Falls, never left his mind and, years later, as soon as the 1783 peace treaty was signed in Paris ending our Revolution, and the new nation's existence assured, Washington began consistent lobbying for in-river navigation of the Potomac.

The United States "Are"

Economically, the various states had different currencies, tax systems, tariffs and even this: during the Revolution Washington had been careful to keep troops from different colonies separated because they had different immunities to disease! The question of whether these former colonies would ever form a unified state was up in the air. As Washington put it in a letter to Jacob Read of South Carolina on November 3, 1784,

There is a matter which tho' it does not come before Congress wholly, is in my opinion, of great political importance, and ought to be attended to in time. It is to prevent the trade of the Western territory from settling in the hands, either of the Spaniards or British. If either of these happen, there is a line of separation at once drawn between the Eastern & Western Country. The consequences of which may be fatal. To tell any man of information, how fast the latter is settling – how much more rapidly it will settle, by means of foreign emigrants, who can have no particular predilection for us; of the vast fertility of the Soil – and the population the Country is competent to, would be futile – and equally nugatory to observe that it is by the cement of interest only, we can be held together. If then the trade of that Country should flow through the Mississippi or St Lawrence – If the Inhabitants thereof should form commercial connexions, which lead, we know, to intercourse of other kinds – they would in a few years be as unconnected with us, indeed more so, than we are with South America; and wd soon be alienated from us.



The United States in 1784. (Map: public domain)

Washington had many adventures on this month-long journey. Most importantly, he discussed river navigation with everyone he met along the way. Written after he returned home, his October 1 diary entry is a 15-page review of everything he had learned from those he met regarding the course of the western rivers – the Youghiogheny, Cheat, Kanawha, Monongahela and the Allegheny.

Look at the map of the Potomac River. Its westernmost town is Cumberland, Maryland. This is the town where Washington began his 1754 canoe trip, which convinced him that besides Little Falls and Great Falls, there was no great impediment to in-river navigation. But how do you reach Cumberland from the Ohio River? The future president also knew the answer to this question. For many years ago, during his Virginia Adjutant days, he had served with the unlucky General Braddock, who decided to build a road from Cumberland, Maryland to Fort Duquesne, the future Pittsburgh. This road was to be used to move his army across the wilderness to attack the French. The expedition failed and Braddock was killed, but the road survived. A part of the route is still known as Braddock's Road, while a more westerly section was incorporated into the National Road (today's U.S. Route 40) from Cumberland to Ohio, in the early 19th century.



Braddock's Road – Cumberland to Fort Duquesne.

(<https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/major-general-braddocks-march-on-fort-duquesne>)

Thus, Braddock's Road was one option for getting from the Ohio River to Cumberland, but land travel was notoriously slow, filled with hazards and many times more expensive than traveling on water. Would it be possible to find a water route from the Ohio to Cumberland? This is what Washington was searching for. The Youghiogheny River seemed like a real possibility. Notice in the map below that the river or its tributary crosses Braddock's Road three times. It seemed as if freight could travel from the Ohio River to the Monongahela River and then to the Youghiogheny, and from there it was a short portage to Cumberland. Once in Cumberland, it would be clear sailing (actually clear poling) down the improved Potomac River.

Returning from his western journey at the beginning of October of 1784, Washington began an incredible lobbying campaign to get work going on the Potomac River improvement. Remember as I describe this campaign, that there was no email, telephones, texting or even telegraphs in those days. Organizing a meeting meant sending a messenger on horseback or horse-drawn carriage. It took a full day to ride from Mount Vernon to Annapolis, the capital of Maryland. The messenger would then have to spend the night and ride a full day back. So, two days for each message.



The Youghiogheny River flows into the Monongahela, which joins the Allegheny to form the Ohio River. (Map: Wikipedia)

Washington's lightening campaign to begin Potomac River improvements

- October 4, 1784 – Washington returns from the West and writes an enthusiastic 15-page diary entry on the Potomac & Ohio Rivers, recording every bit of information he picked up on his trip west on possible water routes connecting them.
- December 2, 1784 – An anonymous article in favor of the Potomac Project appears in the *Maryland Gazette*.
- December 13, 1784 – Washington meets with Virginia legislators.
- December 22, 1784 – Washington meets with Maryland legislators.
- January 16, 1785 – Both legislatures pass enabling acts to create the Potomac Company, whose purpose is to improve the Potomac River for navigation.
- **February 8, 1785** – The Potomac Company opens its books, 241 years ago.
- May 1785 – Over £40,000 subscribed, or over \$10,000,000. Washington invests £2,400 of his own funds.
- May 1785 – George Washington is appointed President of the Potomac Company at 30 shillings per year.
- July 14, 1785 – James Rumsey is appointed Superintendent (see the box, below).

The Potomac Company and the United States Constitution

With the Potomac Company established on February 8, 1785, commissioners from Maryland and Virginia met in Alexandria to discuss governance of the future works. The Potomac River had been given to Maryland in a royal grant to Lord Baltimore in 1632 with Virginia maintaining the rights to free use and navigation. Maryland had different taxes, laws and currencies from Virginia which was building a new transportation system on the river, which was Maryland's territory. There was much to discuss.

The meetings continued for about four days until Washington intervened. He offered the commissioners use of his Mount Vernon estate for continued discussion, no doubt under his careful observation and direction. The commissioners agreed on tariffs, tolls and currency and all agreed that interstate cooperation was imperative. They called for a meeting with all 13 states in Annapolis. This call was named the Mount Vernon Compact.

The Annapolis Convention took place on September 1, 1786. As there were thirteen states, seven were needed for quorum, but only five showed up. Even though two delegates were on the road, the attendees decided to call for a new convention to adjust the Articles of Confederation.

That new convention took place on May 21, 1787. This was the Constitutional Convention whose work product was the United States Constitution. Ratified in June of 1788, it replaced the unworkable Articles of Confederation and cemented the union for over seventy years. After the Civil War, its flexibility provided the framework for a reunited nation to this day.

Potomac River Navigation

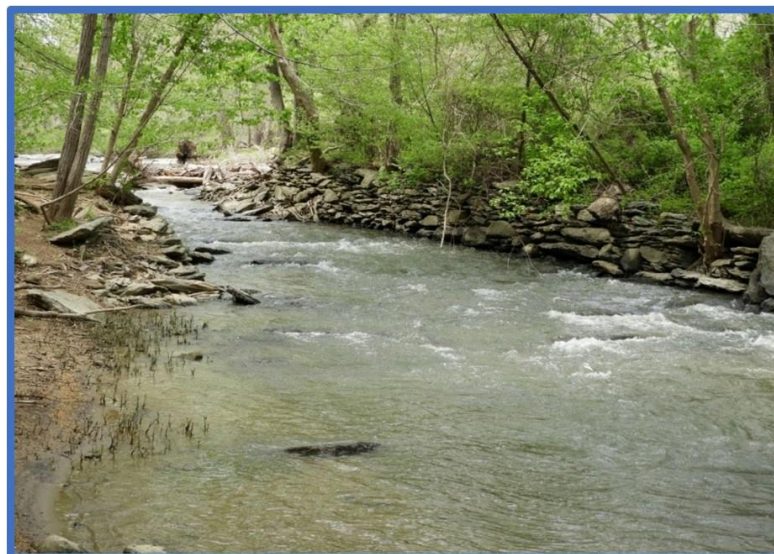
His company established, in August of 1785 Washington and the Potomac Company board of directors took a closer look at the two locations he knew from previous journeys were problem areas: Harpers Ferry and Seneca Breaks (Seneca Falls). They had three choices of technologies they could employ.

1. Stillwater canal – This has great advantages, in that you can go both up and down the river. The problem was that it was very expensive and there was no one in the United States at that time who knew how to build locks. Remember, it is 1785, the C&O Canal was not begun until 1828 and the Erie Canal in 1825, both a generation later than the Potomac Company's work.
2. Dam and lock – This method involved building multiple dams along the river, creating a series of lakes. To move from one lake to another, the boat would go through a lock to the next level. Once again, there was no one who knew how to build locks at that time in the United States. Also, the maintenance would be enormously costly as floods would, no doubt, damage or destroy dams each spring, requiring reconstruction.
3. Sluice and bypass – This last method did not involve locks. Instead, channels called sluices were carved out of the river bottom, and water was directed into the sluices by dams. In those areas where a sluice was not possible, a bypass would be dug, which is a canal without locks. This was also the cheapest method, but it did not provide for easy up-river transport.

The Board decided on the Sluice and Bypass method, and sent two groups of fifty workers each to begin work at Harpers Ferry and at Seneca Breaks. They were deliberately trying to get the “easy work” out of the way, knowing that eventually they would have to tackle Little Falls and Great Falls further down river. In the interim they installed an inclined plane at Great Falls. Shippers would unpack their boats above the falls, roll them down the inclined plane and then reload the boats.

The various rapids at Harpers Ferry amounted to only a three-foot drop, so the one-mile-long Long Canal was constructed on the Maryland side of the river, without locks. This Long Canal was eventually incorporated into the C&O Canal in the 1830s and can still be seen today.

At Seneca Breaks there was only a seven-foot drop, so once again a three-quarter-mile-long bypass canal was created with no locks. This Seneca Bypass Canal can still be seen today at Seneca Regional Park in Fairfax County.

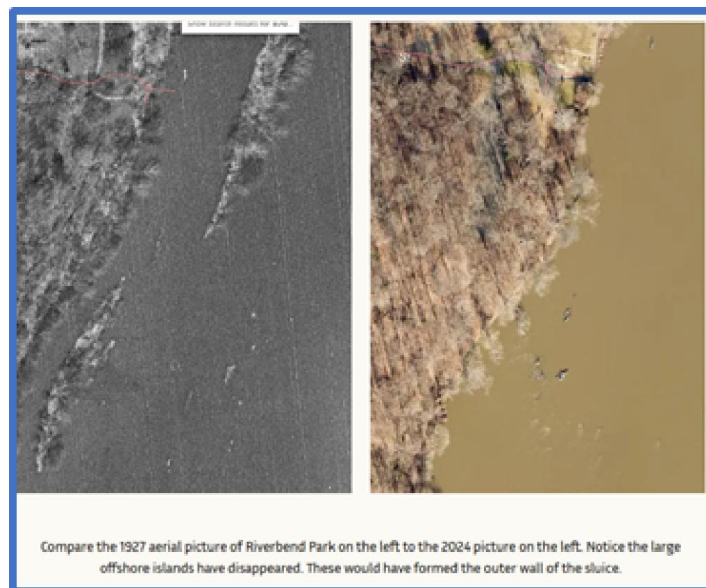


The Seneca Bypass Canal in Fairfax County, Virginia. (Photo: PSK)

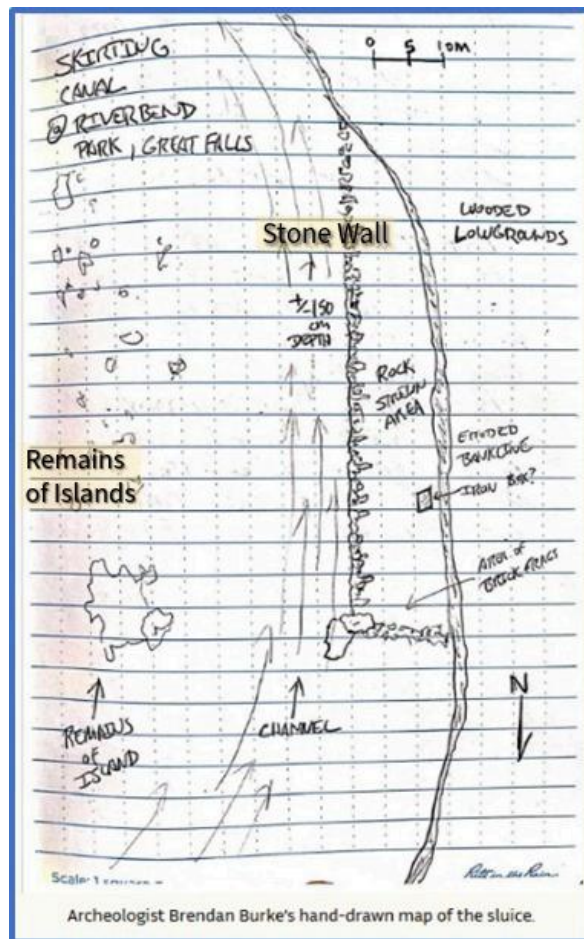
The two work gangs also constructed smaller sluices up and down the Potomac River, sometimes not even documenting them. I discovered one such sluice in Riverbend Park, which is between Seneca Regional Park and Great Falls Park. What remains of this sluice, amazingly, is a stone wall under the water, along the shore, which has survived 240 years of Potomac River floods. As you can see in the picture, the workers, a combination of enslaved, indentured servants and free men, built the wall with overlapping stones like fish scales. The outside wall of the sluice was an island which the river has washed away, but in arial photography from 1927 you can still see it.



Remains of sluice wall at
Riverbend Park. (Photo: PSK)



When I discussed my “discovery” with Brendan Burke, Virginia’s underwater archeologist, he told me he had examined the remains a few years earlier and drew a map of what he believed the original sluice looked like. This hand-drawn map is below.



Burke's map

When I “discovered” this ancient wall, I couldn’t help musing on what Robert Frost would think about this, who, reflecting on his New England stone walls, wrote:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,

And spills the upper boulders in the sun;

And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

Apparently, this southern crew of laborers and enslaved men knew something that the Yankee farmers did not – the secret of building a wall which lasts forever!

Little Falls Canal, 1791-1795

With the “easy part” completed, the Potomac Company began in 1791 to tame Little Falls and Great Falls. Engineers were found who knew how to construct locks, and the Little Falls canal was completed in 1795. Its characteristics were:

- 16 miles long
- 38-foot drop
- 3 wooden locks
- 6 feet deep
- 20 feet wide at the bottom and 25 feet wide at the top.

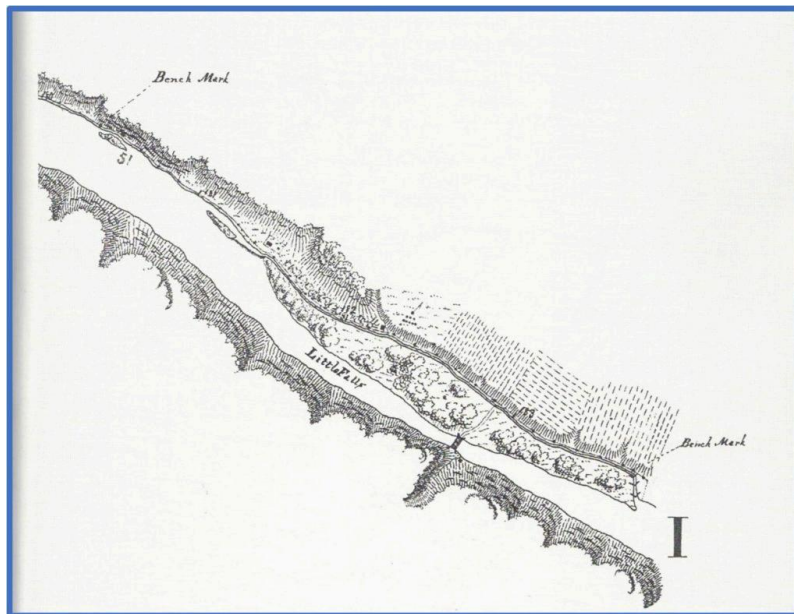
The Company learned a great deal from the various failures of this canal. Wooden locks failed and eventually had to be replaced by stone ones. There was no guard gate to keep the flotsam and jetsam of the river from clogging up the canal. Instead of providing a culvert to lead a local stream under the canal, the stream flowed into the canal. This resulted in sedimentation buildup, which had to be mitigated on a regular basis. Nevertheless, it worked and boats were able to bypass Little Falls.



Little Falls. (Photo: Wikipedia)



Great Falls. (Photo: PSK)



Little Falls Canal. (Diagram: National Archives)

Great Falls Canal, 1786-1802

The great masterpiece of engineering by the Potomac Company was the Great Falls Canal. The river drops 77 feet in the 0.68-mile length of the canal, which required 5 locks and cutting through 4,300 cubic yards of solid metamorphic rock by hand using hand drills and black powder. This amount of rubble would fill 50 modern truckloads!

The canal was 6 feet deep, 25 feet wide at the top and 20 feet at the bottom. Although the canal ceased operating 200 years ago, there are significant ruins which allow you to imagine what it looked like while operating. These are best described by the pictures below.



The entrance to the Great Falls Canal. (This and the following eight photos: PSK)



Great Falls Canal, heading to the locks.



The remains of Lock 1.



Close-up of Lock 2. It is constructed of red sandstone, which was available at the Seneca sandstone quarry just 10 miles up-river.



The remains of a lock gate.



A cut through metamorphic rock for Locks 3, 4, and 5.

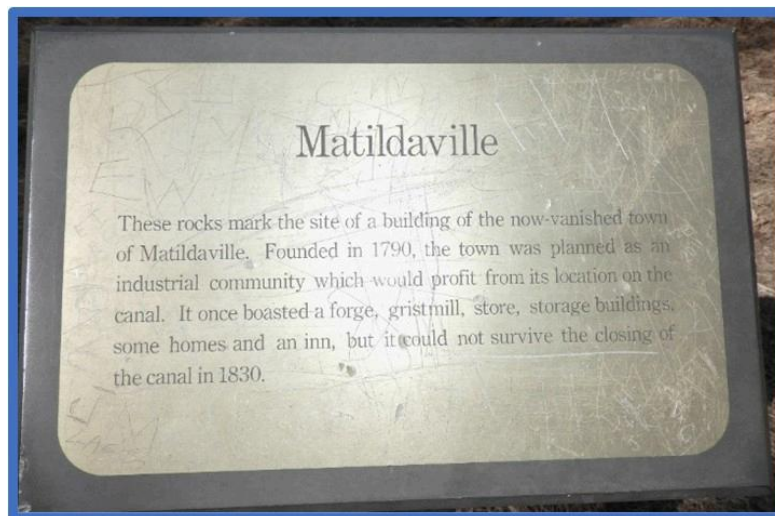
The last three locks which led down to the river were quite dramatic. Lock 5 was 20 feet high, Lock 4, 11 feet high and Lock 3, 15 feet high.



Over 200-year-old iron wedge stuck in the lock wall.

But the Great Falls Canal was more than a mode of transportation. It was an industrial complex whose power derived from the moving water in the canal. Among the industries relying on this power were a sawmill, grist mill and iron works.

To house the workers and provide for the industry, a town was built named Matildaville.



Matildaville Plaque

The land for Matildaville was developed by Revolutionary War officer Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee, III, whose wife, Matilda, died in 1790. It was built on 40 acres leased from its owner, Lord Fairfax. The town prospered as long as the canal operated, but now there is nothing left but some ruins.



The ruins of Matildaville.

Workers of the Potomac Company

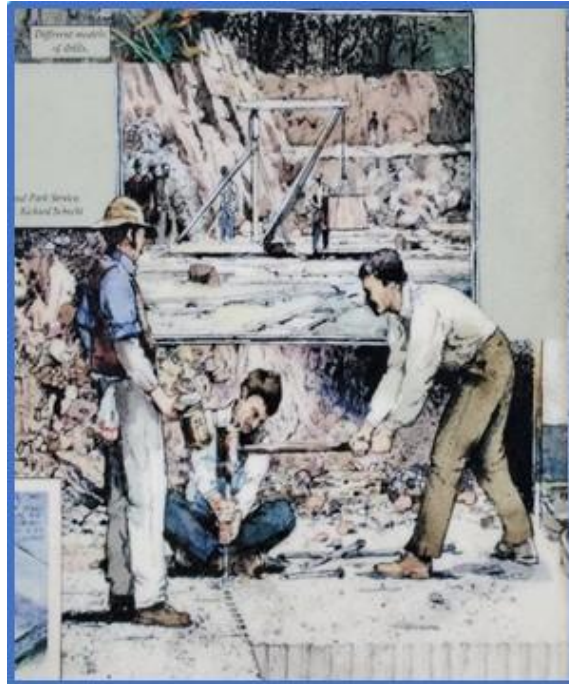
The directors of the Potomac Company were on a constant search for adequate labor. In 1785 they contracted to bring indentured labor from Europe, but found that more than one-third ran away within two years. By 1794, of the Company's 100 workers, 67 were enslaved men, rented from their "owners". The workers were expected to work 16-hour days, six days a week with Sunday off. The work year extended from March 1 to December 31. One of the items which may have made this work schedule tolerable was the whiskey ration provided; for example, a carpenter received 3 gills, or 12 fluid ounces, of whiskey per day.



Top left – start drills and deep hole mud spoon (Courtesy of Mary Gage and James Gage, www.stonestructures.org); top right – deep hole mud spoon; bottom left – star drill tip. (Photos: PSK)

How were the locks carved from solid rock? Borers used a star drill and 8-pound sledgehammer to punch holes in the stone. A star drill is so named for its boring tip, which looks like a star. A boring team consisted of one or two “jacks” and a “shaker.” If there were two men with hammers, then they were said to be “double jacking.” The shaker held the star drill and the jacks commenced hammering. After each set of blows, the shaker would turn the star drill by one-third. This continued until there was a dust buildup in the hole. At that point the shaker would remove the star drill and blow out the dust. Then the hammering would continue. When the hole got too deep to blow out the dust, the shaker would use a narrow spoon with a long handle called a “deep hole mud spoon.”

When the appropriate number of holes had been drilled, the “blower” would fill each hole with black powder. They did not use dynamite, which is much more stable, because Alfred Nobel would not invent it until 1867. (Not only is dynamite more stable, but it is supersonic when exploding, while black powder is subsonic. Not for nothing is the later explosive so named, as *dynamis* in Greek means power). Once all the holes were filled and the black powder tamped down, the holes would be covered with wax or clay. A thin metal pile was then inserted to make a hole for the fuse. They did not use safety fuses, which would not be invented until 1831. Safety fuses burn at a determined speed which allowed “blowers” to escape the consequences of the blast. Instead, they used paper dipped in bacon grease from their morning breakfast! The “fuses” were lit, and if everything worked out, the stone would be blasted apart and the jacks and shakers could begin the process again.



Borers double-jacking the star drill. The shaker turns the drill after every blow. Notice the series of holes already drilled. (Drawing: National Park Service)

Borers were paid the salary of a laborer (those who were free men) – \$6.66 per month (£2) plus 1 penny per inch drilled. They were expected to drill 60 inches per day. The blowers were paid the same as laborers, despite all the danger, and dangerous it was, with all kinds of egregious accidents reported.

I should note here, that the star drill is part of American folk history. For example, in the song “John Henry”:

John Henry said to his captain,

“A man ain’t nothing but a man,

But before I let your steam drill beat me down,

I’ll die with a hammer in my hand. Lord, Lord!

I’ll die with a hammer in my hand.”

What's going on here? The company has brought in a new steam drill and John Henry is determined to demonstrate that he and his star drill are faster.

Here is the second verse:

John Henry said to his shaker,

"Shaker boy you'd better start to pray,

'Cause if my twelve-pound hammer miss that little piece of steel,

Tomorrow'll be your burying day, Lord, Lord,

Tomorrow'll be your burying day."

This is my favorite verse because it answers the question we are all asking, "What happens if the guy with the hammer misses?" Now John Henry, if he existed, was probably working tunnels for the B&O railroad in the 1870s. But he was using the same star drill as our Potomac Company workmen and, indeed, as is still used today.

Boats, Boatmen & Freight

The canal boats, also called bateaux, were about 70 feet long and nine feet wide, with a very shallow draft. Barrels of flour and other agricultural products, or coal, were piled high on the boat and covered with a canvas cloth to keep the product dry. It was said that the boats resembled floating Conestoga wagons. Each boat had four men with poles – one each in the front and the back, and one on each side. When the river was high enough, the current carried the boat from Cumberland to Georgetown in about three days. When the river was low, as it often was, and the sluices were too shallow, the loaded boats sat at the shoreline and waited. According to historian Robert Kapsch, these Potomac rivermen developed their own folk culture, their own songs and games as they waited for "freshets" – for the water to rise.

When the water did rise, off they would go. Now, I have been fishing the Potomac River for over 25 years and I can tell you, when the river is high it is fearsome. The water moves at great speed and is filled with floating trees and other dangers. The courage of these rivermen was extraordinary as they tore down the swollen river, navigating only with poles, searching for hidden sluices, perhaps marked by a small buoy, bypasses and canals. If they missed any of these, it is likely they would be shipwrecked and their cargo lost, not to mention their lives.

Once they arrived at their destination, Georgetown or Alexandria, and their cargo was off-loaded, they had a choice. They could sell off their boat for firewood and walk (yes, walk) home, often hundreds of miles, or they could pole the boat back up-river, up the bypasses and up the sluices. Although in many places the Company provided iron rings embedded in the rocks along the shore and capstans to help these boatmen drag their boat upstream, it was an unimaginably onerous journey.

What were these boats carrying? In a typical year, flour, tobacco, whiskey, pork and iron. The quantities varied depending on the fluctuations in the water levels in the river. The year that the Great Falls canal opened in 1802, 17,250 barrels of flour, 370 barrels of whiskey and 4,800 pounds of bacon passed through the locks. The flour was bound for the international

market, in particular the sugar island plantations of the Caribbean to feed their tens of thousands of enslaved workers. Flour also went to Europe, as revolutions and the Napoleonic wars disrupted the normal supply lines.

The Company also worked on sluices and bypasses on most of the tributaries of the Potomac. It and other companies did extensive work on the Shenandoah River, which passed through the very productive Shenandoah Valley. The ability of farmers from the whole Potomac River system and its tributaries to get their product out to ports later expanded, with the appearance of the C&O Canal and the B&O Railroad. These great projects allowed the farms of the Potomac River valley and its tributaries to become the breadbasket of the world before the Civil War.

The End of the Potomac Company

When the Potomac River levels were right, the Potomac Company's sluices allowed boats to shoot down the river and through its canals. But when the Potomac River levels were too low, freight shipments came to a halt. Unfortunately, the notoriously fickle Potomac River was "right" only about 60 days a year. As the years went on, there was great dissatisfaction with the Company, which faced complaints that it had not fulfilled its charter guaranteeing in-river navigation.

In 1822 a team of Virginia and Maryland commissioners was assigned to inspect the Potomac River. Beginning at Cumberland, Maryland, they canoed 185 miles downstream. They reported that they ran into obstructions every half mile, as sluices were obstructed by floating debris or often fish traps built by locals. They concluded that the Potomac Company works allowed navigation on the river only about 33 to 45 days a year! Their recommendation was its replacement by a stillwater canal.

In 1826 a convention was held with delegates from Virginia, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Washington, DC. This motion resulted in the funding for the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal (C&O), built on the Maryland side of the river. Groundbreaking occurred on July 4, 1828 with a speech given by President John Quincy Adams. Two months later, the officers of the Potomac Company signed surrender documents and the C&O Company took over all of its assets and obligations. After 43 years, from 1785 to 1828, the Potomac Company ceased to exist.

Epitaph for the Potomac Company

Ironically, I think it was John Quincy Adams during his C&O Canal ground-breaking speech who best crystalized the importance of the Potomac Company's work:

It is one of the happiest characteristics in the principle of internal improvement that the success of one great enterprise instead of counteracting gives assistance, to the execution of another—May they increase and multiply till in the sublime language of Inspiration, every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, the crooked straight, the rough places plain...and in the Virtues and Fortunes of our posterity the last shall prove the noblest Empire of Time.

Let us consider George Washington, the general who defeated the most powerful empire, now home at Mount Vernon, ready to take on something bigger than the British fleet: nature itself. Despite lacking the methods and technology to be really successful, he organizes (almost single-handedly) the resources to begin knitting together the rapidly growing nation. Doing much of the necessary exploration by himself, he has a vision. The products of the new West, over the mountains, along with the ever-increasing bounty of the Piedmont will travel by the Potomac River and its tributaries from the Ohio Valley to the

East. Georgetown and the new city of Washington will become great industrial and trading centers, processing this agricultural bounty and shipping it to the world. The new city would become not simply a place of politicians and poor people, but a city of manufacturing and distribution. Most important, a city of free labor, and so, perhaps, the beginning of the end of slavery.

The work begins and for the rest of his life and 29 years after his death, the works of the Potomac Company provide a route to the East. But it is just as John Quincy Adams said, “It is one of the happiest characteristics in the principle of internal improvement, that the success of one great enterprise, instead of counteracting, gives assistance to the execution of another.” And so, in 1828 at Little Falls, the C&O Canal was launched and on the same day the B&O Railroad was initiated in Baltimore. History, of course, is filled with ironies; it was the B&O railroad which reached the Ohio River, while the C&O never went farther west than Cumberland. As a result, it was neither Georgetown nor Washington DC that became the great industrial and trading city, but Baltimore, Maryland.

The great “empire” of Washington began to be realized after his death in 1799. In 1803 the Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the United States and secured control of a much, much bigger river, the Mississippi. This was a river whose tributaries spanned thousands of miles through rich farmland. The 1804-1806 Lewis and Clark Expedition revealed other huge river systems, as the nation extended to the Pacific Ocean. With railroads and canals like New York’s Erie Canal, stretching into the Ohio Valley and beyond, suddenly the Potomac River began to decrease in importance. It was no longer the “centre of the Union” but a regional river of decreasing local importance.

Would George Washington have been disappointed by the “failure” of his Potomac Company? No, I don’t think so. He would have been satisfied by the role it played in turning the United States into the “rich & populous country” it became.

The Interesting Case of James Rumsey

On the fourth day of his 1784 journey of exploration, Washington stopped at Bath, now Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. Naming itself after the famous elegant English town of Bath, with its Roman baths built in 60 AD, the town was America’s first spa. Washington stayed at an inn owned by James Rumsey. During the evening the conversation led, inevitably, to the possibility of navigating the Potomac River.



Portrait of James Rumsey by
George William West, 1790.
(Photo: public domain)

Rumsey confided in Washington that he had invented a boat that could go upstream without human intervention. This was quite an exciting idea because until then, boats moved upstream by poling, which was particularly difficult when the current was strong, as it often was in the Potomac River.

Rumsey offered to demonstrate a model of the boat at a nearby stream. Washington accompanied him and was amazed that the boat worked! Rumsey had not invented a new technology, but a way to move poles using the stream's current. Instead of men poling the boat, it essentially poled itself.

The future president was astonished and wrote the following recommendation for Rumsey!

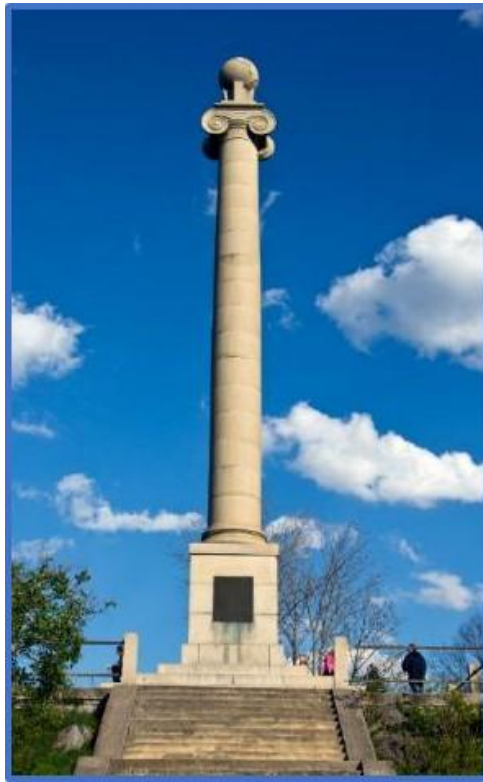
CERTIFICATE TO JAMES RUMSEY

Town of Bath, County of Berkeley in the State of of Virga., September 7, 1784.

I have seen the model of Mr. Rumsey's Boats constructed to work against stream; have examined the power upon which it acts; have been an eye witness to an actual experiment in running water of some rapidity; and do give it as my opinion (altho' I had little faith before) that he has discovered the Art of propelling Boats, by mechanism and small manual assistance, against rapid currents: that the discovery is of vast importance, may be of the greatest usefulness in our inland navigation, and, if it succeeds, of which I have no doubt, that the value of it is greatly enhanced by the simplicity of the works which when seen and explained to, might be executed by the most common Mechanics.

Remembering how impressed he was with Mr. Rumsey, Washington later appointed him Superintendent of the Potomac Company.

Rumsey went on later to invent a steamboat and West Virginia proclaimed him the inventor of the steamboat raising a magnificent memorial to him in Shepherdstown overlooking the river where his steamboat astounded overlookers along the banks. Now, I am not going to pass judgement on whether West Virginia's James Rumsey or Pennsylvania's Robert Fulton or Connecticut's John Fitch should get credit for the steam boat invention. Rather I recommend, if you are interested to read James Flexner's book "Steamboats Come True" before you make up your mind.



Memorial to James Rumsey in
Shepherdstown, West Virginia. (Photo: PSK)

A note on sources:

This essay was based on the following sources:

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