

# Chesapeake & Ohio Canal

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historical Park  
DC, MD, WV



## Message from the Superintendent

Over the past fifteen years, visitation across Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park has steadily increased from around 3 million to over 5 million visitors each year. The Great Falls (MD) area, located approximately 15 miles northwest of Washington, D.C., is the most visited site within the park. Scenic views of the Great Falls of the Potomac River offer visitors a stunning display of speed and force as the river rushes over a series of steep, jagged cliffs and flows onward through the Potomac Gorge. Visitors can experience the spectacular falls from the Olmsted Island Overlook, a 10-minute walk from the Great Falls Tavern Visitor Center, or enjoy other areas of the park by paddling the river or canal, walking or biking along the towpath, or meandering through towering hardwood forests on a variety of hiking trails, including the increasingly popular Billy Goat Trail Section A.

An engineering marvel, the historic canal is one of the most intact and impressive surviving examples of the American canal-building era. When the park was created in 1971, much of the canal infrastructure was in poor condition. Today, the remnants of the C&O Canal route, the spirit of its builders and operators, and a legacy of outdoor recreation and educational opportunities endure. Annually, millions of history enthusiasts, hikers, bicyclists, and runners enjoy the canal's towpath, originally built for mule travel. Watered sections of the canal provide further recreational access for canoeists, boaters, and anglers. The Great Falls (MD) area is also home to several historic buildings from the industrial past. Visitors to Great Falls (MD) experience the rich history and natural resources of the Potomac River Valley.

With an abundance of globally rare plant communities and rich cultural history, Great Falls (MD) is an extraordinary destination. The site offers a wide range of experiences to a diversity of visitors, and its popularity creates management challenges such as traffic congestion, strain on existing trails and facilities, visitor safety issues, and an overall diminished quality of visitor experience. It is essential that the National Park Service (NPS) take a comprehensive management approach to maintain Great Falls (MD) as a remarkable and enjoyable destination for this and future generations.

We want to hear about your experiences at Great Falls (MD) and desires for its future. Your comments will help us shape management strategies for the site. As we explore different management approaches, I invite you to stay connected and be an active participant in this important planning process. In this newsletter, you'll find ways to contact us and get more information. With your continued help, we will develop a plan that provides opportunities to recreate while protecting the extraordinary resources at Great Falls (MD). Thank you for your interest and participation. We look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Tina Cappetta

Superintendent



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## Why is a Plan Needed?

Great Falls (MD) is an incredible place that draws people to visit and experience it time and time again. The NPS wants to ensure that people and the amazing nature and history they come to see are well cared for. A thoughtful planning process will help us facilitate safe and enjoyable experiences for generations to come.

This plan will explore management strategies that create a healthy balance for visitors to enjoy the beauty of the park and for the natural environment to thrive. Through this planning process, we hope to:

1. Identify management strategies that promote the long-term stewardship of park resources;
2. Continue to offer visitors safe access to high-quality national park experiences;
3. Provide an appropriate range of park facilities and services; and
4. Proactively engage key park partners, stakeholders, and the public.

## Great Falls Planning Area



The planning area located in Montgomery County, Maryland, is bounded by the Anglers Parking Area to the south, MacArthur Boulevard to the east, the Potomac River to the west, and Swains Lock (Lock 21) to the north. These lands are administered by the National Park Service (NPS) via Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park, with a portion of the lands co-owned by the NPS and The Nature Conservancy. Park lands along the southern shore of the Potomac River located in Great Falls, Virginia, are administered by George Washington Memorial Parkway and not included in this effort.

## Key Planning Issues and Opportunities

The NPS has outlined a preliminary set of issues and opportunities to be addressed in the planning process and is seeking feedback from the public on these issues and about other critical issues and opportunities.

- Visitor Experience
- Resource Management
- Safety
- Parking and Traffic
- Use of Historic Structures
- Accessibility



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## Visitor Experience

Great Falls (MD) is one of four gateways to Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park and is one of the park's primary interpretive and educational centers. Located approximately 15 miles northwest of the District of Columbia, the area is close to more than 6 million residents of the Washington-Arlington-Alexandria metropolitan area. The park operates a mule boat tour and hosts educational programs for K-12 field trips. Visitors, who may initially be drawn to the park for recreation, can learn about the area's natural, cultural, and historic resources. Through the appropriate preservation of the canal and iconic buildings such as the Great Falls Tavern, visitors can experience the history of the area.

Annual visitation to Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Park is around 5 million. The Great Falls (MD) area is the most heavily visited site in the park. Visitation remains high throughout the year but is highest between March and October. Most visitors come to the area seeking recreation. The Billy Goat Trail Section A can draw more than 2,000 visitors a day during the peak season. A falls viewing area is located about a 10-minute walk from the Great Falls Tavern, also drawing significant visitation year-round. Visitors can stay overnight in the Swains hiker-biker campground or the partner-operated Canal Quarters Lockhouse 21. Multi-day thru-hiker and biker visitation has increased significantly over the past 15 years. There have been more large, organized groups for tours and events. Demand for recreational services such as boating outfitters for kayaking and rafting, climbing outfitters, and bicycle tour groups and rental operations has increased. Cumulatively, visitation to the Great Falls (MD) area has increased steadily in the recent past and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The plan will evaluate visitor activities, use and capacity of facilities and infrastructure, and types of visitor services offered. The plan will also evaluate whether to make social trails and informal river access points official or to close them, existing and new concessions, management of camping and overnight lodging, and other strategies that support exceptional visitor experiences.



*A group of visitors board a canal boat tour*



*Two kayakers paddle through rapids along the Potomac River*



*A line of visitors queue to climb a rock face on Billy Goat Trail Section A*



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## Resource Management

Bear Island, home to Billy Goat Trail Section A, contains more than 100 rare, threatened, and endangered plant species and globally rare plant communities, making this area one of the most biologically diverse in the national park system. High and increasing visitation creates stress for endangered species, natural habitats, paleontological resources, and geologically sensitive areas, which have been degraded by visitor trampling, off-leash dogs, and crowding. Erosion caused by heavy foot traffic is worsened by more frequent and severe flooding. Erosion has caused parts of the Billy Goat Trail A to slough off into the river, and temporary or permanent trail closures have been necessary for visitor safety. Trail repairs have been made in some areas but not comprehensively. Options to re-route trails are limited because of the locations of wetlands, cultural resources, and endangered species.

The Great Falls (MD) area contains an array of remarkable cultural resources including canal-era structures such as the historic canal, towpath, lockhouses, and lift locks, as well as the Engineer's house and Great Falls Tavern. The NPS has undertaken major efforts to restore historic structures, including repairs to the canal and towpath, major stabilization projects, as well as routine maintenance of the towpath, trails and historic buildings. Although canal infrastructure and historic buildings are stable, continued maintenance and routine repairs are critical.

The plan will develop strategies to improve natural ecosystems and maintain biodiversity, address maintenance issues comprehensively, increase resiliency of infrastructure, maintain a watered and functional canal, preserve and occupy historic buildings for park operations and visitor services, and make educational programs more inclusive of the shared national heritage of the area.



*A lizard suns itself on a rocky outcrop*



*View of canal and Great Falls Tavern*



*Sign indicates trail is closed due to flooding*





## Safety

There are many safety risks within the Great Falls (MD) area. There have been over two dozen fatalities in the Great Falls (MD) area since 2001 and numerous serious injuries resulting in hospitalizations from heat exhaustion, drowning, jumping into the canal or river, medical conditions triggered by overexertion, and car accidents. The Billy Goat Trail System sees approximately 150 trail evacuations and approximately 50-75 medical calls per year. Visitors, particularly along the popular Billy Goat Trail Section A, can be unprepared for the strenuous hike or the heat or both. Swimming and wading are strictly prohibited at Great Falls (MD) because of the swift and potentially deadly river current. Despite warning messages along the shore, visitors continue to enter the water, particularly on warm days, and there are many water rescues each year. There have also been serious injuries and fatalities caused by conflicts among pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicles along MacArthur Boulevard.

The plan will consider management strategies to improve safety, including increased education about safety risks, trip planning resources to increase the preparedness of recreational users, potential operational or engineering strategies, and increased access for timely emergency response and search and rescue.

## Parking and Traffic

Traffic congestion is common at the Great Falls Tavern Visitor Center parking area, the Anglers parking area, and the Swains Lock parking area on most weekends during the peak visitation season. The Great Falls Tavern Visitor Center parking area is completely full approximately 25 days annually. During the busiest days, visitors can wait 45 minutes to get to the entrance station. As a result, park staff must actively manage traffic in the parking area and crowding throughout the trails, towpath, and walkways to mitigate safety risks. Illegal parking in the Anglers Parking area has delayed emergency access to the water for rescues.

The plan will explore strategies to improve parking, traffic congestion, and related safety issues.



*Safety message sign along Billy Goat Trail Section A*



*Emergency response vehicles access the Potomac River near Anglers Parking Area*



*Uncontrolled parking near Anglers Parking Area*



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## Use of Historic Structures

The project area includes historic structures such as a watered section of the historic canal for the boat operation, working locks, lockhouses, the Great Falls Tavern, the Engineer's house, the mule barn, and more. While the Great Falls Tavern currently functions as a visitor center, other historic structures are vacant or are not being used to their full potential. Availability of food services and drinking water has been inconsistent in the past 10 years.

The plan will explore suitability to house visitor amenities and park operations within historic structures consistent with historic preservation mandates and educational program goals.



*Visitors outside of Canal Quarters Lockhouse 21*

## Accessibility

Many facilities in the Great Falls (MD) area were historically constructed in ways that make it challenging to provide physical accessibility to visitors today. These conditions range from the composition and width of the towpath to entering and circulating through historic structures. The NPS is required to provide access pursuant to the Architectural Barriers Act (1968) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973). The NPS's responsibility to provide accessible experiences to visitors and employees will be balanced with cultural and natural resource management. In situations where achieving physical accessibility would be in direct conflict with other Federal law (including, but not limited to, the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Historic Preservation Act), programmatic accessibility can ensure visitors are afforded a comparable experience.

This plan will evaluate ways that the park can achieve both physical and programmatic accessibility to core visitor experiences and locations throughout the Great Falls (MD) area. The NPS remains committed to ensuring and increasing accessibility throughout this popular area of the park.



*Bicycles and hikers share towpath*



*Students at Great Falls Overlook*



## Where are we in the planning process?

The NPS has identified a preliminary set of issues and opportunities to be addressed through this planning effort. We are seeking ideas from you on the activities, facilities, and services that would make you feel welcome or satisfied with your experience, and issues that most interfere with your desired experience. Public participation is vital to the planning process, and your input will inform the park's management strategies.

- Begin public engagement >>**we are here**<<
- Use public input to develop preliminary management strategies
- Invite agencies, Tribes, and partners to review preliminary management strategies
- Invite public input on management strategies >>**public meeting and comment period**<<
- Use public input to develop draft concept plan
- Publish final concept plan >>**plan released**<<

You are invited to **provide comments** about your experiences in this area of the park and ideas for the future from **August 28 through September 29**. In the coming months, the NPS will share potential management strategies along with a public meeting and an additional opportunity to provide comments.

## How to Comment

The NPS wants to hear from you as we begin to develop management strategies for the Great Falls (MD) area. We're seeking your feedback on the following questions:

1. What activities and experiences do you seek in the Great Falls area?
2. What facilities and/or services would make you feel welcome or satisfied with your experience?
3. What issues most interfere with your desired experience?
4. Do you have other thoughts you would like to share with the project team?



To provide comments online or get additional information on the project, visit:

<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/GreatFallsMarylandDevelopmentPlan>



If you prefer to mail your comments, make sure they are post-marked by **September 29, 2023** to receive consideration.

Superintendent  
Attn: Great Falls Development Concept Plan  
National Park Service  
Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park  
142 West Potomac Street  
Williamsport, MD 21795



**Please Note:** Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment – including your personal identifying information – may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.