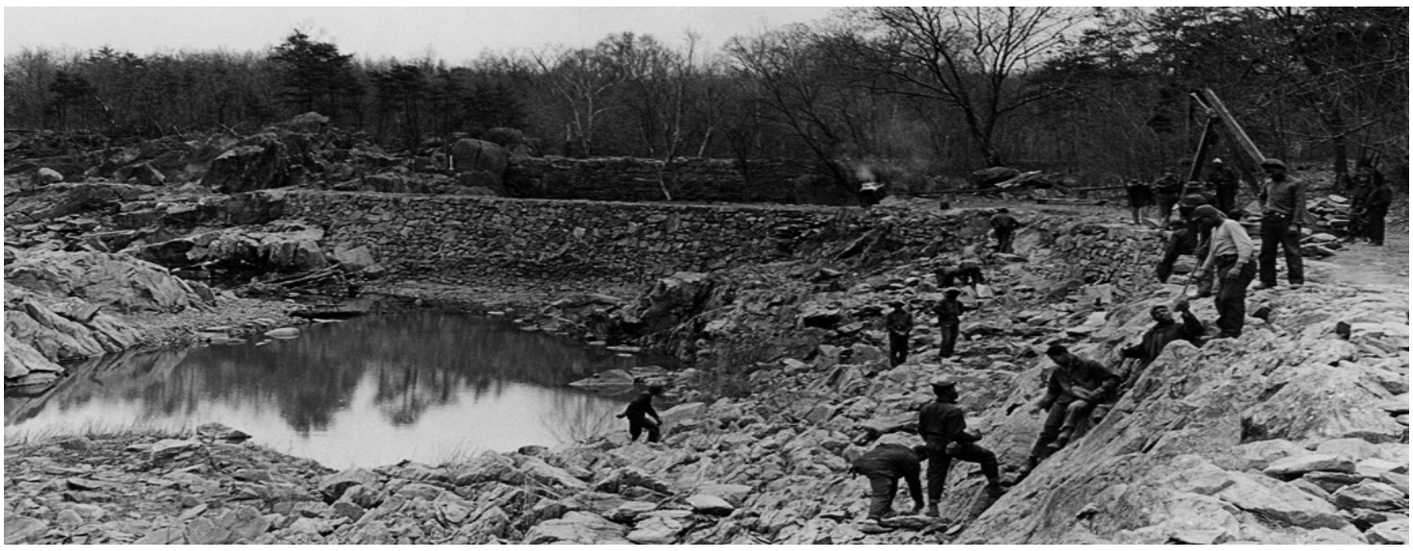
Lockhouse 10

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal
National Historical Park

A New Deal for the C&O Canal



US Government Purchases Canal

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was abandoned following two devastating floods in 1924. It decayed for over a decade, until a new owner could assign a more current identity. The National Capital Parks and Planning Commission had been interested in obtaining the canal for many years to preserve the historical and natural features of this "ancient waterway." Deteriorating finances amist the Great Depression prompted the B&O Railroad to sell the canal to the Federal Government and National Park Service in 1938 for $2 million.

Reimagining the Waterway

Initially, there was no clear vision for the future of the C&O Canal. The Park Service had a strong desire to preserve the historical qualities of the canal, but also contemplated constructing a parkway to follow the Potomac River to Cumberland. The first restoration effort took place between 1938 and 1942, focusing the historic preservation on the first 22 miles of the canal.

Transforming the Canal

Three New Deal programs transformed the C&O Canal from an defunct transportation system to a viable recreational park. Unemployed architects were hired by the Historic American Building Survey to document the canal's historic structures. The Public Works Administration provided skilled workers to undertake the masonry repair on the locks. Two Civilian Conservation Corps companies served the necessary unskilled labor to clean out the canal prism and restore the towpath. These three groups also worked together on the documentation of Great Falls Tavern and several lockhouses and the repair of lockhouses such as Lockhouse 10.

"Clean up and grading of the old Canal would provide ideal relief work. Landscaping and reconstruction of locks and canal bridges would be excellent projects for C.C.C. camps to undertake."- Frederic A. Delano, chairman of the National Capital Parks and Planning Committee and President Franklin.D. Roosevelt's Uncle.

CCC Legacy

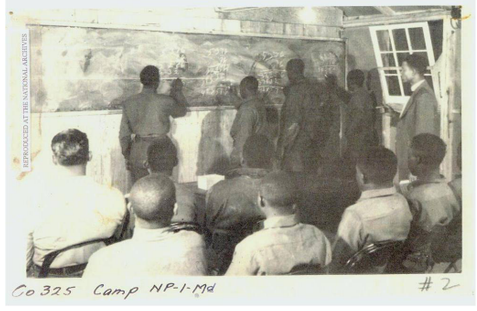
In an effort to put people back to work during the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) operated from 1933-1942. In total the CCC employed 2.5 million young men to undertake over 62 different types of conservation projects. Fondly referred to as "soil soldiers" in Roosevelt's "tree army", CCC enrollees became increasingly involved in historic preservation projects. They restored 3,980 historic structures, including many along the C&O Canal. Enrollees were paid $30 a month, and all except $5 was sent back to their families. Enrollees also received valuable on the job training and could attend educational classes at night.

African Americans in the CCC

The two CCC companies assigned to the C&O Canal were African American. African Americans faced discriminatory practices despite an amendment in the legislation that said "no discrimination shall be made on account of race, color, or creed." The proportion of African Americans that were selected for service often did not reflect the number of African Americans on public relief rolls. Once in the CCC, African American enrollees were placed in segregated camps and sometimes faced hostility from white officers and local communities. CCC companies could be moved or dissolved if the local community was not supportive. In later years, African Americans were placed in leadership positions, but never for white companies. Despite discriminatory practices, approximately 250,000 African Americans enrolled in the CCC and received its benefits.

CCC Camps at the C&O Canal

CCC Company 325-C arrived at Camp NP-MD-1 at Carderock in June 1938, and Company 333-C arrived at Camp NP-MD-2 at Cabin John in October 1938. These companies had approximately 200 men each and often worked together as one unit. Both camps expended a sum of 158,700 man hours from 1938 to 1942. The bulk of the work went towards the rehabilitation of the canal prism and towpath. They cleared 200 acres of vegetation from the canal bed, excavated 50,700 cubic yards of earth from the canal prism, and restored 22 miles of towpath. This work alone formed the core of the canal's rehabilitation and transformation into a recreation entity. They were involved in other historic preservation work, including demolishing two undesirable frame structures at Great Falls. They also assisted in the rehabilitation several lockhouses, including Lockhouse 10.



Establishing a Precedent

World War II diverted funding and manpower away from public work projects, including the development and maintenance of the C&O Canal. A flood in 1942 undid much of the work completed by New Deal relief workers. However, the investment in the first 22 miles of the C&O Canal set a precedent for the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park which was established in 1971. Much of those 22 miles remain watered today, while most of the remaining 162 miles have been reclaimed by nature.