Williamsport: Canal Walking Tour

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal
National Historical Park

The confluence of the Potomac River and the Conococheague Creek has long been used for transportation – first by American Indians and later by European settlers who moved into the area. In 1787, Revolutionary War hero General Otho Holland Williams founded Williams Port. Realizing that these two waterways created the ideal opportunity for commerce, Williams concentrated on promoting his town as a transportation hub. The arrival of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal in 1834 brought a period of prosperity and provided a new trade route between Cumberland and Georgetown. Commerce thrived here with two warehouses built along the canal, making Williamsport an important coal transfer point. Though Williamsport's time as a transportation hub and industrial center has passed, the town continues to retain its character today as a classic canal town.

Walk the C&O Canal Towpath as it passes through Williamsport and visit the remaining canal features. Starting in the Cushwa Basin and walking to Lock 44 and back is a walk of one and a half miles that along the way provides a glimpse into the history of this Canal Town.

Cushwa Warehouse

Pre-dating the canal, this warehouse was built between 1790 and 1810 for the merchandising of flour and feed. When the canal opened, the warehouse was expanded with the addition of the brick portion of the building. Operated by Victor Cushwa and his descendents, the Cushwa Warehouse dealt in coal, brick, flour, iron, cement, and plaster which supported the economy of Williamsport and surrounding Washington County. The coal transferred from here to Hagerstown and further inland during the canal years made Williamsport a prosperous community.

Trolley Barn Power Station

With the arrival of electricity in the late 19th Century, engineering and scientific ingenuity led to new forms of transportation. In 1896, the first trolley line in Washington County, Maryland was built running from Williamsport to Hagerstown. The water supply from the Conococheague Creek made this location ideal for a steam-powered generating station. After only one year, the popularity of the trolley required more cars and more power. In 1897, a larger power plant was built in Hagerstown to meet this demand. This building was then used as a warehouse.

Conococheague Aqueduct

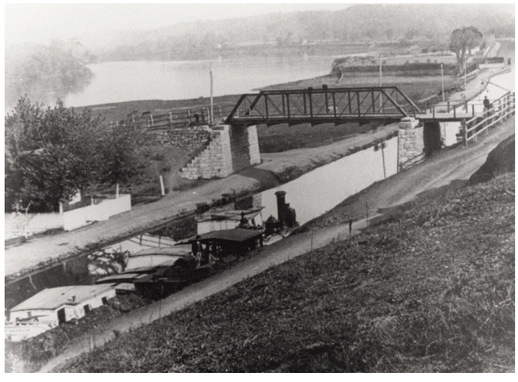
C&O Canal aqueducts are “water bridges” that carry canal boats over creeks and rivers that flow into the Potomac River. Built from 1833 to 1835, the Conococheague Aqueduct is the fifth of eleven such “works of art” on the canal. In August 1863 Confederate soldiers damaged the Conococheague Aqueduct in an effort to stop the canal’s transportation of coal to Georgetown where it was used by the Union. Repairs took four days and the canal returned to operation. Unfortunately, in April 1920 a canal boat broke through the upstream wall of the aqueduct, shutting down the canal for over four months. Repaired with a timber wall this aqueduct functioned until two 1924 floods closed the canal for good.

Railroad Lift Bridge

Built in 1923 by the Western Maryland Railway, the railroad lift bridge is one of several one-of-a-kind features on the C&O Canal. Operating like an elevator, this structure lifted the railroad tracks to allow canal boats to pass beneath. The tracks, for transporting coal, led to the power plant between the river and the canal. In 1924, the C&O Canal closed making the lift bridge unnecessary.

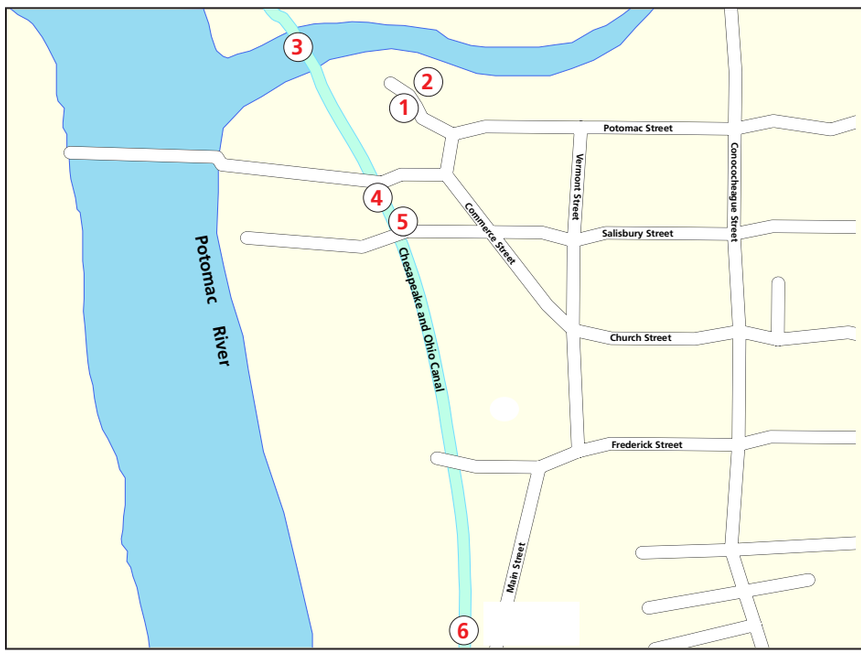
Bollman Bridge

In the late 19th Century bridge designs were changing. New materials such as iron and steel made it possible to design stronger lighter bridges. Civil engineer Wendell Bollman, a pioneer in engineering of iron bridges, built this bridge in 1879 using the Pratt Truss design. This is the only bridge over the canal built by Bollman and is one of the few surviving works by him in America. Today, it stands as a testament to 19th Century engineering achievements.



Lock 44 & Lockhouse

On call 24 hours a day, lock keepers helped maintain traffic flow on the canal by safely and efficiently getting boats through the locks. Locks lower and raise boats to the next level. One of 74 locks along the C&O Canal, Lock 44 is an example of the gate mechanism used to operate the boat-locking system. The lockkeeper was given a salary, a rent-free house by the lock and an acre of land for livestock and a garden. Lockhouse 44 is one of little more than a dozen surviving lock houses on the C&O Canal and remains as evidence of a bygone way of life. Listen closely and you may hear a boat horn calling for the lock keeper to work the lock.



Williamsport
Canal Walking Tour

1. Cushwa Warehouse
2. Trolley Barn Power Station
3. Conococheague Aqueduct
4. Railroad Lift Bridge
5. Bollman Bridge
6. Lock 44 and Lockhouse

For more information, contact
Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park Williamsport Visitor Center at (301) 582-0813