

Exploring Transportation Legacy

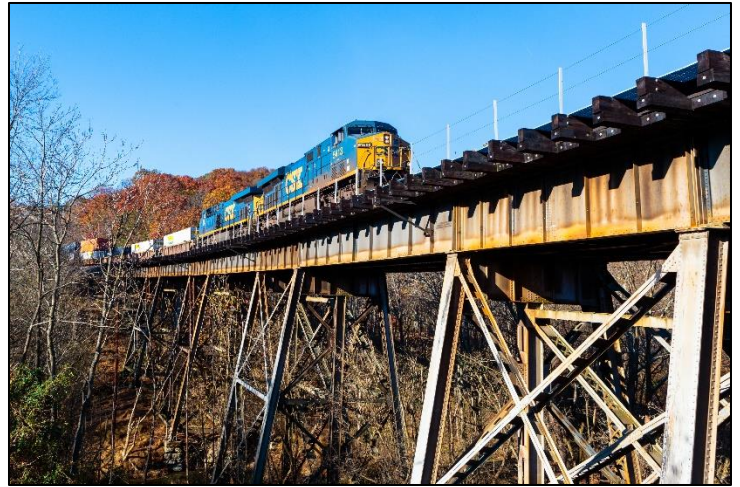
June 24, 2020

Answer this next question honestly. Have you ever heard of or referred to the C&O Canal endeavor as obsolete?

As the story goes, on July 4, 1828 the Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) Canal Company broke ground for construction, and on that same very day, just a ways northeast, the Baltimore & Ohio (B&O) Railroad Company broke ground on a project as well. Fiercely competitive from the start, both companies sought to develop routes of

transportation to aid in westward expansion. The B&O pursued the novel steam engine and railway technologies, whereas the C&O planned to engineer a lengthy, watered canal conducive to boat travel. Both endeavors advanced relatively neck-to-neck in the coming years, but tension persisted alongside progress.

Construction of the canal was stymied every so often by naturally occurring flood events, and the subsequent damages to the canal's infrastructure routinely plunged the C&O into financial hardship. Try as the Canal Company might, their construction venture sputtered to a stop in 1850. The C&O Canal – deemed to be in its “finished” state – stalled several hundred miles premature of its original Ohio River destination, in the humble mountain town of Cumberland, Maryland. By 1851 the B&O Railroad caught up with the C&O's westward progress, and swiftly surpassed it. Both the Railroad and Canal Companies did relatively well for themselves throughout the 19th century, although railroad transportation became increasingly popular and more readily available with the rise of the Industrial Revolution. In 1924 the C&O Canal Company was permanently swept under – quite literally by floodwaters, and ultimate bankruptcy.



Above: CSX 5413 crossing at McCoys Ferry, Maryland. Photo by VIP Steve Dean.



Above: Railway Crossing the C & O Canal near Paw Paw. Photo by VIP Steve Dean.

The C&O Canal's failure as a business is the singular reason for which it has earned the label “obsolete;” however, the greater entity of the C&O Canal retains its intrigue and significance, and lends itself splendidly to recreational uses in modern times. Having been designated a unit of the National Park Service in 1971, C&O Canal National Historical Park continues to preserve the physical space, resources, and stories that began to develop in tandem with the canal nearly two centuries ago. The park's relevance is constantly being reinterpreted through the eyes of contemporary visitors, who come seeking personal refuge and intrinsic meaning. Furthermore, the C&O Canal has had developmental influence in the countless communities it sidles through. Those whose lives and lineage have been touched by the C&O can still greatly identify with its roots.

In as much as it is tempting to assess the C&O Canal's fate through the lens of pure success – and in as much as it may be tempting to consider the railroad a malicious entity in this tale – the feats of both parties have been integral to the development of the Mid-Atlantic region as we know it. Without the rivalry between the two industries and the ultimate triumph of

the railroad, C&O Canal National Historical Park may not have come into existence as the sanctuary we know and love today. In spite of the historic struggle between them, the canal and railroad now join in partnership to share their legacies in unison.

In 2012, C&O Canal National Historical Park became a host site of the Trails & Rails Program, an offering of the greater National Park Service existing through a partnership with Amtrak. C&O Canal's Trails & Rails Program takes place aboard Amtrak's Capitol Limited, traveling between Washington, D.C. and Cumberland. The park recruits volunteers to train and serve as narrators for Trails & Rails, imparting knowledge and excitement for the incredible natural and cultural history of the Potomac River valley to hundreds of annual passengers. The park's Trails & Rails program encapsulates all of the wondrous components of both the canal and railway in a most unique, truly submersing experience.

Trails & Rails Programs are hosted at numerous sites throughout the National Park Service, and consistently seek to engage the public on the topic of railroad transportation legacy in America. The Trails & Rails Program is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2020. In its fullest scope, the Trails & Rails Program is beautifully representative of the ties, themes, and forward movement that the American people share. In its interpretation, the Trails & Rails Program additionally shines light on the necessity of change and shift in the process of advancement. The C&O Canal's connection to the railroad, and perseverance in spite of it, further distinguishes it as an exceptional figure of American heritage.