

The Ghost Town of Four Locks

By Trent Carbaugh

When we go walking along the canal today many of us are there to get out and enjoy nature. We watch the birds, enjoy the trees and exercise, but it is easy to forget that the place was once a commercial transportation corridor. In its day it was a modern wonder built by creative engineers, skilled craftsmen and a lot of cheap labor. It was operated, like most 19th century industries, on a combination of hard work, long hours, sweat, whiskey, and tobacco. All these folks had to live somewhere and needed supplies, post offices and schools for their children.

When you get off the beaten towpath, so to speak, you can find some interesting things.

Ghost towns, or abandoned settlements, if you prefer, evoke images of crumbling western settlements in remote places among aspen groves and mountains. The miners, gamblers, cowboys, and all the other folks that made up these communities show up in the small traces of themselves they left behind. But the reality is: ghost towns are everywhere.

In the area of the C&O Canal there are the remains of free towns (discrete settlements built by emancipated slaves after the Civil War) just across the Potomac from the C&O in Virginia. The industrial town of Weverton, Maryland was washed away by a flooding

Potomac River. These are just two examples of other small towns, villages, and mill sites that rose up from economic necessity and disappeared when conditions changed. Most of these places are nothing more than hints of foundations or the occasional freestanding chimney. Many of these places are completely lost or only vaguely documented. A dot on an old map or a fading memory remembered as a place name is often all that survives.

Fortunately some of these places are a little better known, and the lost town of Four Locks is one of them.

There are plenty of good works about the building of Four Locks, much better than I could ever write. Please see the sources at the end of the article for some of these should you want to know more. This is more of a tale of looking in the odd, out of the way places and the things that may be found there.

Some little snippets of history will help to understand this place though. Four Locks (Milepost 108) is located close to Clear Spring off of Md. Route 56 at the end of Four Locks Road. The Potomac River makes a tight, four mile bend in this area and it was expedient to cut across the “neck” to create a half mile shortcut.



*We shall start a short photographic tour heading west on Four Locks Road, to the Berm Road and then over to the river side of the canal.
All photos by Trent Carbaugh*



View from lock 49 looking east. Construction of Lock 47 began in February 1836 and by May 1839 all four locks were completed.



Construction on Lock House 49 was started in 1837 and completed in 1839. The lock house is larger than many lock houses as it was intended to support all four locks. The lock house is now part of the Canal Quarters Program managed by the C&O Canal Trust.

The land in Prather's Neck is made up of undeveloped National Park Service land, Prather's Neck Wildlife Management Area (Maryland Department of Natural Resources), and private land. The wildlife management area is open, with a few (very) unimproved walking paths, for birding, hiking and other activities, although I would recommend avoiding the area during hunting season. A walk in Prather's Neck is good way to see what the wild Potomac shoreline looked like before the canal was built. It can be quite rough in this place, with limestone outcrops and with much of the southwestern section being cliffs dropping eighty or ninety feet to the river's edge.

Four Locks gets its name from the fact that four steps of 8.25 feet were needed to raise the level of the canal above



Foundation remains of the Fernsner House located just to the east of Lock House 49.



Two houses were located in the spot now occupied by the Four Locks parking area and boat ramp.

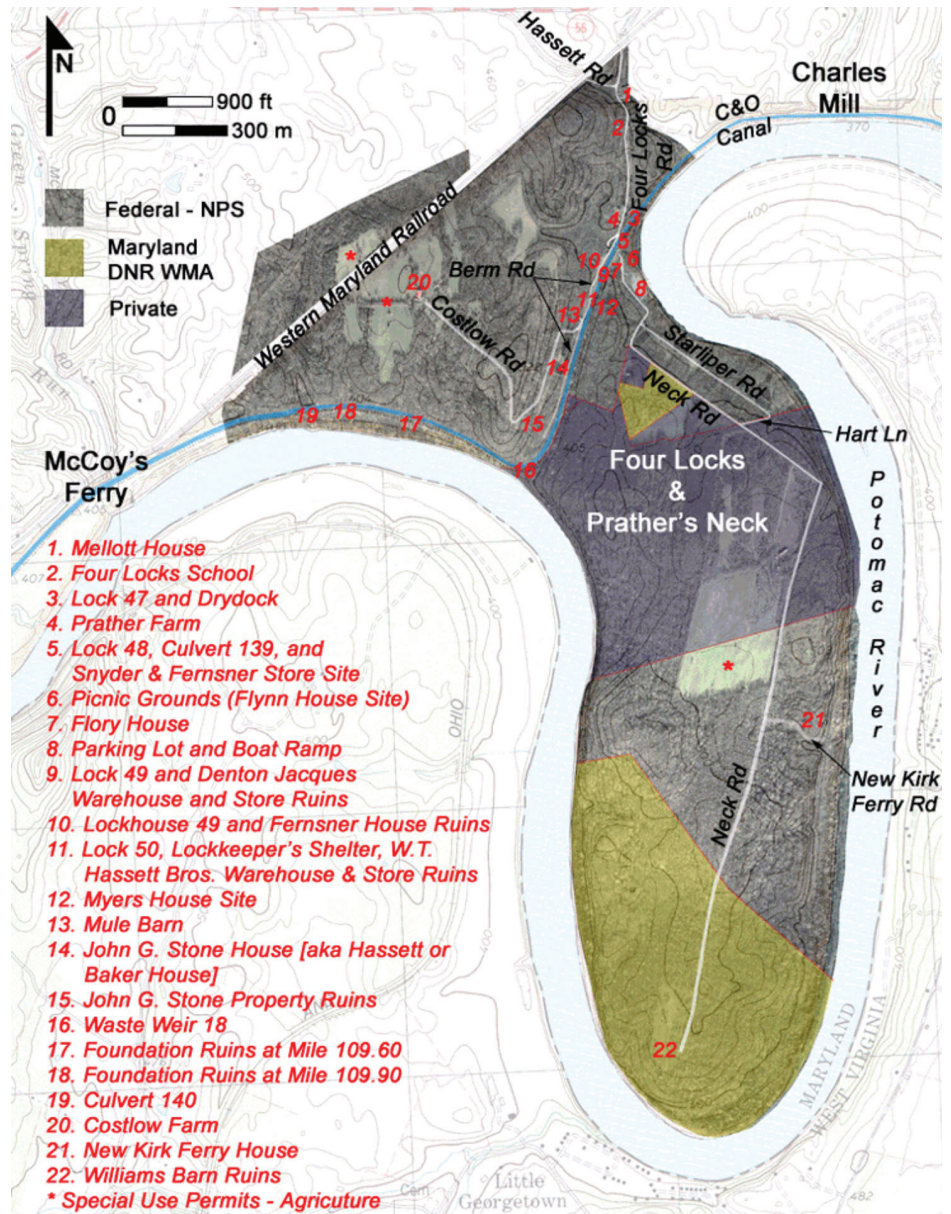


The Four Locks Schoolhouse, on Four Locks Road, was built sometime around 1859. The school was known both as Four Locks School and as Cedar Grove School. In 1877 it appears on the Washington County Atlas as School #8.

Along the Towpath, December 2020

the subterranean limestone ridge underneath the path of the canal shortcut. It was deemed cheaper to build four lift locks rather than cut through the underlying stone to produce a deeper canal prism. The view looking downhill from Lock 50, the uppermost of the four locks, is quite spectacular.

As the area around Four Locks was growing into a sizable village that supported the canal, as well as local farms and associated endeavors, more local transportation was needed. In 1844 the government of Washington County built a road from Williamsport to Four Locks and then on to Hancock to help with local economic growth. This road also connected to a ferry, later known as New Kirk Ferry, which was out on Prather's Neck proper and provided access to Virginia (later West Virginia) across the river. The road did have the effect



Overview map from National Park Service Cultural Landscapes Inventory, Four Locks, Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park, 2008. This booklet is an outstanding resource if you are interested in more than a casual look at Four Locks.

intended; the Village of Four Locks got its own post office in 1858. Sometime around 1859 a schoolhouse was built. Warehouses, a dry dock for canal boat repair, and log houses were springing up for local canal workers and boat crews wintering over, along with facilities to board mules over the winters.

The town of Four Locks, along with the canal, survived repeated damaging floods, the Civil War, the 1889 flood and subsequent Canal Company bankruptcy, and rising competition from the railroads. Like most of the canal, the town proper didn't survive long after the disastrous flood of 1924, but many of the houses were occupied into relatively recent times.

Four Locks is not just the remains of an industrial area; as nature has returned to this place with a vengeance. On a walk west from Four Locks to Big Pool, via McCoy's Ferry, you have a chance to see most of the wildlife that lives along the canal. I have seen everything from bald eagles to a black bear in this area. The trees are magnificent as are the limestone outcroppings that abound in this place. It is well worth a visit to this section of the C&O at any time of year.

The study of our past is a matter of perspective. This perspective includes different disciplines. In a perfect world historians, archaeologists anthropologists, and sociologists all



The impressive stone house of the Prather Farm is surrounded by the remains of a bank barn and an unidentified foundation along with some still standing sheds.

In 1838 Irish laborers at Prather's Neck decided to "liberate" some gunpowder from the Canal Company stores and threatened to destroy their own work unless they were paid the back wages they were owed. The local militia was called up, saw the harshness of the situation, and promptly decided not put down the uprising and sided with the laborers. Residents of the growing village of Four Locks even supplied the Irish families with provisions on credit. Eventually two companies of militia from Hagerstown and Smithsburg peacefully "un-liberated" the gunpowder while describing the workers and their families as being "in suffering and deplorable condition."

work together to give us an accurate, well thought-out picture of the past. For various reasons this process often fails. Ongoing research, new archaeological discoveries, re-examination of existing information changes the interpretation of the past as well as changing the ways in how we see it. This also has

an effect on how we accept those changes in an evolving modern societal context.

In the grand scheme of things, in that flowing and interlocking tale of people and events we call history, we often focus, almost to exclusion it seems, on the large events. The reality, though, is that history is most often made up of small events, often forgotten or relegated to minor occurrences of seemingly little importance. Often overlooked, these small events taken

together add up to important parts of the fabric of history. The above mentioned scholarly and scientific disciplines are the study of humanity. A place like Four Locks is a magnificent cross section of 19th and early 20th century culture. This place was subject to social conflict, natural disasters, war, feats of transportation engineering, and small town folks just helping each other out, which to my thinking is the most important part and an example for us today. But, we should never overlook the fact that attitudes and behavioral norms were very different in the past and things should always be looked at in the context of their times.



Improvisation and use of the environment are often overlooked in examining the lives of our predecessors. I really like this wall; a natural outcropping was neatly added to the fieldstone to create a higher wall.

When visiting Four Locks you don't really need to work your way into the weeds and thorns. Much of what you see in the accompanying photographs is easily visible from the roads or from the towpath. If you should choose to go off trail, my usual warnings apply. These places can be dangerous; open wells, sinkholes, and pits for cellars are all over this area. Don't fall into one, and try not to travel alone. When around abandoned buildings do not enter or get too close to them; most are very unstable. This protects the building and you from damage. Always err on the side of caution when in such places.

References:

Thomas F. Hahn, *Towpath Guide to the C&O Canal (revised edition)*, Harpers Ferry Historical Association, 2015

Perry C. Wheelock, *Farming Along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, 1828-1971: A Study of Agricultural Sites in the C&O Canal National Historic Park*, 2007, National Park Service

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Neck Road going into Prathers Neck to the remains of the New Kirk Ferry and the Williams Farm.



Heading west on Four Locks Road you come to a barn that was built to house mules over the winter.



A mostly standing small barn or shed looks like it may at one point housed pigs and definitely chickens.



The John G. Stone house, built sometime shortly after 1860. Also known as the Hassett or Baker house.



Unattributed log house, possibly originally another John Stone-owned house. This house can be seen from the towpath.



Random remains of a metal roof peak repaired with a recycled Royal Crown Soda sign. It is easy to forget that many things were often reused multiple times.



The overgrown and barely discernible Berm Road that travels west from Four Locks Road.



A sunken road bed that travels uphill from the Berm Road to Costlow Road.



Crossing back over to the towpath side just by the parking lot you will see the well preserved Denton Jacques warehouse.

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Nature Notes (Continued from previous page)

the skunk cabbage an early start in the competition for pollinators. Skunk cabbage can be found in wet, marshy areas as early as February.

Did you ever wonder about the round, brown objects that are common along the towpath from late fall through the winter? They are the seed heads of sycamore trees, trees that are abundant along the Potomac River. These persist during the winter, either on tree branches or on the ground. Over time the seed heads desiccate and release seeds. Sycamore trees are easily recognized by their bark. The lower bark is the typical brown color, but higher up on the tree the bark turns white. The color difference occurs because sycamore trees have very rigid bark. This prevents a tree from being able to accommodate new growth in a flexible manner. As a result, the bark flakes off as the tree grows, revealing the distinctive white color on the upper branches.

The beech tree is another common tree in our area. Its winter bud is very distinctive, especially since it is one of the few buds that may appear in the winter and continue through the season. The slender form is hard to miss. Inside the bud is a curled up leaf waiting for better weather to unfurl and bloom.

Finally, there is one more aspect to winter, the barren trees give us views of wildlife that we might not see at other times of the year. It's a particularly good time to see birds.

There are two reliable places to look for eagles along the towpath: one at Conn Island near Great Falls and another between Point of Rocks and Nolands Ferry. Both have nests that have been used for several years. Nest building (or repairing) begins sometime in November. By late January through early February eagles in our area complete the mating cycle and lay eggs. From the time the eggs are laid to the time they hatch, the adults take turns sitting on the nest. The incubation period is about 35 days. February and March are good months to see one eagle in the nest and perhaps the other sitting on the branch of a nearby tree. You may also see the adults flying back and forth with food for hungry chicks.

Not so spectacular as eagles, but equally impressive in size, are the vultures that are commonly seen along the towpath. These birds seem to be completely accustomed to people. In winter I've seen them walking along the towpath, resting against a tree after a meal or just sitting in a tree. With few people walking along the towpath, you never know what you will see.

Four Locks (Continued from page 21)



To the west of the Denton Jacques warehouse, after fighting through the thorns and weeds, you can find the foundation remains of the Flory House and garage built into the river-facing hill.



Starliper Road, where one of two modern communities were planned just south of the Four Locks parking area. This was a never-realized land development project.



A surface artifact, a shovel, by the Flory house remains. You have to wonder what this shovel did; who used it? How do you explain why it was abandoned. A mystery we will never solve.



The insidious multi-flora rose, bane of all wanderers along the C&O Canal.



Locks 49 and 50.



The canal prism above Lock 50.