

Pedal, Paddle and Hike

By Trent Carbaugh

Not all who wander are lost – J.R.R. Tolkien

Adventures With the Wild Mary

One of the more interesting things you learn if you study history or archeology is that people throughout time pick particular places to live or work. There are a variety of reasons for this but the most important are availability of water, food, security, and transportation. A more modern house, say a 19th century farmhouse, in all probability has an older colonial house, Native American occupation, etc. way back into prehistory underneath it or close by.

Until modern times, when intensive land modification has become common, people always made an effort pick the best spots in which to live according to nature's dictates. This also transferred into industrial applications. Rivers were good ways to move goods, especially downstream; constructing canals worked better as they were level and allowed travel upstream as well as down.

With the advent of steam power, railroads became possible but it was still much easier to follow a river in most cases as the terrain around rivers was usually flatter than surrounding areas, lessening the number of complex engineering feats needed to build a rail line. This effect is particularly evident along the Potomac River where you can see remnants of early river travel, the mostly well preserved C&O Canal, and remains of old rail lines as well as modern, still working, railroads.

The area described in this article has a long history of occupation and use. Pre-contact Native Americans, early colonists and fur traders, soldiers of three different wars, the C&O Canal, and the Western Maryland Railway all occupied the area. Surrounding all of these grand historical events were workers, farmers, and all of the craftsmen who made the local economy work. If you look hard enough and in the right places you can see the remains of all of these activities.

History is written by historians, but plain, ordinary, everyday people make it. The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and the Western Maryland Railway were built and operated by ordinary everyday men, women, and children; all of those folks were interconnected in various ways. The Canal Company and the railroad, though competitors for a relatively brief time, were intertwined in ways that are hard for us to imagine in these modern times. Some of those men that worked on the Western Maryland Railway, impressed by the scenic wild mountainous terrain, affectionately called the railroad "The Wild Mary."

A Very Brief History of the Wild Mary

The Western Maryland Railway (WMRY) operated from 1852 to 1983. In 1973 it was purchased by the Chessie System Holding Company but continued independent operations until 1975. After 1975 many of the WMRY lines were abandoned in favor of the more modern Baltimore and Ohio



Locomotive crossing the bridge at McCoys Ferry – All photos by Trent Carbaugh

Railroad (B&O) line that ran parallel to the WMRY mostly just across the Potomac River in West Virginia. In 1983 it was merged fully with the B&O Railroad and the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad and then into the Chessie System in 1987 which has now been renamed CSX Transportation.

The WMRY main line ran through Maryland generally along the Potomac River connected to side routes in Maryland, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Most of the side routes connected to coal mining areas. One of these side lines into the West Virginia coal mining areas, the Blackwater Canyon line, was one of the steepest rail grades in the nation. The spur line went in a large loop from the Brunswick, Maryland area up through Pennsylvania to Shippensburg and then back down through Maryland to reconnect to the main line at Grantsville in western Maryland.

The WMRY mostly carried coal to the Port of Baltimore and local freight but did also have a small scale passenger service operation.

The section of the WMRY from Fifteen Mile Creek to just past Cumberland crossed the Potomac River eight times and included five tunnels and for its time was considered an engineering marvel.

The Area in Question

The areas described below are between the Four Locks area heading west towards Big Pool, though they were not explored in order from east to west. Winter, early spring and late fall are the best times to see the remnants of the line described below, as the area is overgrown with some impassable spots along the way (even in winter). This section of the WMRY was in operation starting in 1906 and what is left is of normal construction for a railroad using steam locomotives. Surface artifacts, unless they are obviously modern, indicate a date of around 1900/1910. These are mostly the trash left by workers and travelers but in one case there are remains of a cook stove with a manufacturer's date of 1908.

For the most part these are neither easy nor safe areas, combining steep slippery hills, wetlands/swamps, open wells around old farmsteads, and the ever present acres of multi-flora rose. Should you choose to see these areas for yourself, use extreme caution. Most of these places are on NPS land or on Maryland Department of Natural Resource property though there are some places that are on private land. Please do not trespass and always follow Leave No Trace principles. Keep in mind I am by no means an expert on railroads, though I have learned a bit. I just enjoy exploring places.

A Possible Remnant Road Between McCoy's Ferry and Big Pool –

Just west of Green Spring Run (about Mile 110.5) there is what appears to be a somewhat crude milestone and what looks like remnants of an old road. This continues for two miles with two other milestones heading towards the Big Pool/Fort Frederick area where it looks like the remnant road route merges with the Canal towpath (most likely the Canal was built over it?). This road averages about eight to ten feet below the towpath on the river side.

This road looks to be more substantial than just a farm road; there are some old locust fence posts along the road in spots marking the fields that were in the area.

According to some Civilian Conservation Corps workers that I talked to in the early 1990s about the 1932/34 restoration of Fort Frederick, the fields, used mostly for grazing, were planted in pines for flood control in 1932 or so. I was never able to verify this from another source, though the trees are about the correct age for this.



Letters from a Lieutenant Reilly (the officer in charge of building Fort Frederick) of Maryland Forces to Maryland Governor Sharpe reference travel on a well-used path in this area in the 1750s during the French and Indian War. This path was used for travel between Fort Frederick and the ferry at Williamsport where the colonial armies of Maryland and Virginia's patrols linked up to keep tabs on the upper Potomac River. River travel was the preferred way to get around but in the winter walking was the only way to travel this route. This path could have been along the river, and later evolved into a more substantial road for civilian use. But what is more likely was this path was on the ridge tops to the north as was common practice in frontier warfare to get longer sight lines and avoid ambush.

Three similar stones standing upright at almost exactly a mile apart seems a bit too much to be chance. This, along with what looks very much like a roadbed, would indicate that there was some kind of road here prior to the building of the C&O Canal.

Traveling East to West from Four Locks to Big Pool With Some Backtracking and Random Wandering

A note: the areas described are mostly on a straight line from Hassett Road near Four Locks to where the remnants disappear at the upper Big Pool parking area. For the navigational inclined, the rail line runs relatively straight on an azimuth of 68° ENE (248° back azimuth) with the azimuth corrected by 12° west declination. The normal declination here is 11° west but there is a large magnetic anomaly centered near Fort Frederick, (deep iron ore deposits). The anomaly can throw off compass readings by up to 5° west or east depending on geomagnetic conditions. Twelve degrees west seems to be a good average declination for the area.

Starting at Hassett Road and Moving East to West

From the side of Hassett Road just before it goes under the current CSX line it is possible to see a stone bridge abutment to the east and a more extensive wood and stone crib built abutment to the west. On the current CSX line just off the east abutment it is possible to make out where the old line meets the new right of way in a very gentle curve. All of the land around this area is private or CSX property, this makes following the line west somewhat problematic.

The easiest way to try to figure out where the line ended up was to get good azimuth readings with my trusty Brunton compass and move west to McCoy's Ferry. Due to

the verticality of the terrain and the preponderance of small streams and creeks in the area, there are choke points where there is only one good place, from an engineering standpoint, to put a rail bridge. Green Spring Run is one of these places (Canal Culvert 143, Mile 110.43).

The current modern rail line crosses this valley on a steel trestle bridge supported by cut, well laid limestone foundations. These foundations could be old enough to have supported the original wood trestle bridge that crossed here when the original line was under construction in 1902 or '03. The land to the north and east, towards Four Locks, is owned by the NPS on either side of the CSX tracks to within about a quarter mile of the previously mentioned Hassett Road. About 200 yards to the east of the bridge if you look carefully, you can see what looks like an old road going off at a slight angle to the north. This is in reality the end of the original WMRY right of way. This travels on public land almost to Hassett Road. The amount of work that went into this is quite amazing; two long causeways, with box type stone culverts, were built to go over small stream valleys and limestone. Outcroppings were neatly cut through to keep the line as level as possible. The old rail line forms the boundary between NPS land and private property to the north.

Back to Greenspan Run traveling west, towards Big Pool, the remnant of the old line picks up again. In the winter, the line of the old right of way is visible in some places



Western bridge stone and timber bridge abutment near Hassett Road



Steel trestle bridge across Greenspan Run at McCoy's Ferry



Right of way cut through a limestone outcropping



Old line meeting new CSX line just east of Hassett Road.



Limestone box culvert under the railroad grade



Buried box culvert

from the towpath downhill about thirty-five or so feet from the current CSX line. The old path can be followed to the valley of the unnamed creek that passes through Canal Culvert 144 (Mile 110.83). Just to the east of the creek there is an old farm that appears to have been built directly to the north side of the rail line.

There are indications of a house foundation, with a decorative iron wire fence still standing in places, barn remains on the south side of the tracks, and what look like foundations of some outbuildings. There is also an open stone lined well on the north side of the house foundation. After a quick look into local records, I could not locate any information about this property; more research needs to be done.

To the west, towards the stream that uses C&O Canal Culvert 144, there are remains of what once was an impressive timber bridge crossing the stream valley. The rail bed continues on a slight causeway three to four feet high to the west until the area becomes impassable due to thorn growth.

By some dint of serious effort, circular wandering (and wading, with a bit of crawling under the really thick bits of bushes), and some blood loss from thorns, I was able to get into some areas of the rail line in between Culvert 144 and Fort Frederick. It is a surprisingly beautiful spot with small swampy pools with gray and blue herons hanging about and a supporting cast of other birds. The rail line itself continues on

as before on a three to four foot high causeway with the occasional pile of removed and abandoned sleepers to one side or the other. The line continues straight on the same compass azimuth first measured at Hassett Road by Four Locks.

Next, I thought to go to Shanktown Road which follows the eastern boundary of Fort Frederick State Park and dead ends at the current CSX rail line. If you follow the road through the brush where it once crossed the CSX line it will take you to directly to the WMRY line. I made a valiant effort to travel east towards the area mentioned above. The rail bed is level with the ground surface here and I made it about 300 yards till the multi-flora rose bushes decided to gang up on me again and forced me to retreat to safer ground. I cleaned my wounds and returned to my starting point and hit one of those rare history jackpots.

Fort Frederick State Park has a managed, one-day, lottery deer hunt in December every year and I happened to get there when access to hunting stations was being expanded to the south end of the park. This, fortunately, meant that they were driving a tracked earth moving machine on the old right of way exposing the original surface of the rail line. This process also exposed surface artifacts, coal and ash, and large gravel, about #2 size, commonly used as bedding for wooden sleepers. All of the surface artifacts pointed to an early 20th century date.



Elevated causeway across a small stream valley



Eastern end of the timber bridge abutment



Remains of a Furst McNess Co. bottle, early 20th century



Exposed rail bed just off of Shanktown Road, note the ever present wild tire



The valley of the long timber bridge



Wood/coal cook stove lids

At the end of Shanktown Road, to the west, are the remains of what appear to be a farm directly to the north of the rail line with a barn foundation and possibly a house a little further north. The barn remains could also have been a temporary warehouse for storing produce for loading on freight cars. There are some other unspecified building remains, one of which may be an above ground cistern, (possibly for steam engine use?) close to the barn remains.

The right-of-way continues on a built-up causeway until this line intersects the upper parking lot at Big Pool. At the far end of the parking lot the line continues briefly and merges with the current active line which at some point crosses the CSX line to become the Western Maryland Rail Trail about three quarters of a mile to the west. This may be an indication that the original line made a slight "S" curve to go around Big Pool but the terrain has been modified so much that this difficult to discern.

This section is visible from the canal towpath and C&O Culverts 145, 147, and 148 pass under the canal and through disconnected limestone box culverts under the rail line. This area is similar to the section of canal west of the Paw Paw tunnel where the rail right of way forms the berm side of the canal prism.

Conclusion, So Far ...

From the above, aside from my fun in exploring this area, it is obvious that much more research into the history of this short little area needs to be done. Most of the knowledgeable folks I talked to about this section of abandoned rail line had no idea that it even existed. Small scale maps, near as I can determine, either do not exist or are lost to the effects of time and shifting ownership. Right-of-way records are notoriously difficult to locate as most railroad companies considered them to be confidential information. Admittedly, this kind of academically

oriented research is not my particular strong point either. I'm good at finding physical remains and interpreting material culture, not pouring over old records and such.

The WMRY line continues from Fort Frederick State Park as the Western Maryland Rail Trail to just past Fifteen Mile Creek where it crossed the Potomac into West Virginia.

Should you want to see what remains of the Western Maryland Railroad without the steep hills, swamps, and acres of thorns, a visit to the Western Maryland Rail Trail may serve. The WMRT is 26 miles long, paved, and offers some magnificent views of the C&O Canal from a higher elevation.

If you are feeling a bit more adventurous, the Blackwater Canyon Trail, in Monongahela National Forest follows 10.5 miles of the branch line of the WMRY that hauled coal and timber out of West Virginia. This is a steep single track dirt and gravel trail for mountain bikes, hiking, and cross country skiing in the winter. There are some outstanding views of waterfalls and mountain terrain though the trail can be rough.

The Western Maryland Rail Trail c/o Fort Frederick State Park 11100 Fort Frederick Road Big Pool MD 21711 Contact: 301-842-2155

Blackwater Canyon Rail Trail Monongahela National Forest 200 Sycamore Street Elkins, West Virginia 304-636-1800 www.fs.usda.gov/mnf

Reference:

Western Maryland Railway, A Pictorial History of the Men, Women, and Machines That Made it Famous 1872-1999, Carroll F. Spitzer, privately published.

Resources:

The Western Maryland Railway Historical Society
www.westernmarylandrhs.com

Hagerstown Roundhouse Museum info@roundhouse.org



Decorative wire fence close to house foundation, this kind of fence was in use from the late 19th century until relatively recently.



Small stone building foundation



Open stone lined well, about four feet in diameter