

# Pedal, Paddle and Hike

By Trent Carbaugh

## Exploring Big Pool *Mile 112.50 to 113.94*

Wandering about in odd places where others tend not to go is sort of a compulsion for me. I'm also one of those people who prefer to be alone in wild places; you often can see more of the nature around you by being quietly alone. I also like to get to know an area well, to learn its secrets, the remains of its history, and its wildlife.

Many users of the park limit themselves to walking or bicycling on the towpath and use it just for the joy of movement, watching nature, or time with friends and family; these really are the primary activities in the park. But always keep in mind that the human habitation of the Potomac River watershed extends back into prehistoric times. The section of the C&O from Four Locks to Hancock had pre-contact Native American settlements and a strong colonial history. It also has a massive amount of transportation history with the C&O Canal and the Western Maryland Railroad (WMRR), which later became the Western Maryland Railway.

The Big Pool area is one of those places that you can just about get everything that the park offers. You can travel by foot, bicycle, or by watercraft. The area is a haven for wildlife: birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians can all be seen, often at close range, along the towpath and in the adjacent Fort Frederick State Park. The park is on both sides of the C&O Canal and offers one of the best preserved colonial era forts on the east coast and abounds with nature. There are walking trails and fire roads in the park's forest and there are regular

historic events held in the fort. The Western Maryland Rail Trail starts at the village of Big Pool and follows the original WMRR line to beyond Fifteen Mile Creek about 26 miles to the west. On the rail trail, you can see the remains of railroad history as well as structures used to load apples, the main agricultural produce of the area, onto rail cars.

### Towpath Side

The towpath along Big Pool was built by connecting a series of natural low ridges between the Potomac River and a low marshy area. The work involved some serious earth removal that caused the marsh on the berm side to transform into a long narrow lake. A stop gate at the downstream end of the "pool" was closed at the end of the boating season to retain water to assist in re-filling the canal for use when the ice melted. Locals often sawed the frozen water into blocks for use in sawdust-insulated ice houses to preserve food in the warm months. Just east of Big Pool, the geology changes from hard sandstone to limestone with the associated caves and sinkholes. Sinkholes in the canal prism were a big problem that needed to be fixed as soon as discovered. The stop gates located along the canal at Big Pool, McCoy's Ferry, Mile 114.15 to the west, and the lock complex at Four Locks, could isolate sections of the canal prism to allow quick repairs with minimal loss of water and time.

At Mile 113.48, there is an impressive 121-foot long stone waste weir/overflow that controlled the water level in Big Pool. The mules walked through the shallow water that flowed over the towpath and foot traffic used an elevated plank walkway on the river side of the structure. If you continue to the west you will pass under a steel and timber trestle of the



*The very green towpath along Big Pool – All photos by Trent Carbaugh*



*Some turtles seem to be taking their log out for a spin*



WMRR that leads to a steel bridge that crosses the Potomac to connect to the Baltimore & Ohio mainline at Cherry Run, W.Va. This is effectively the end of Big Pool.

### **The Northern Shore**

Traveling by water gives you a way to spend some time on the northern shore of the pool, which is a long triangular, very wild, stretch of woodland between the lake and the current CSX system rail line. The wide end of this triangle is to the west and there are the remains of some unidentified stone structures hiding in the underbrush throughout this area. There was once a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) camp located about two-thirds of the way along the shore to the west in the 1920s. There were cabins, a dock and the entire infrastructure associated with such places. Some large concrete foundations can be seen from the water. Somewhere along the eastern end of the shore was a small calcium carbide light plant for the town of Big Pool, which I unfortunately have not been able to locate. Calcium carbide, a chemical

compound, produces acetylene gas when water is dripped on it. The gas was piped to houses and businesses and used for efficient lighting and heating. This same technology was also used for vehicle lights and headlamps for work and mining.

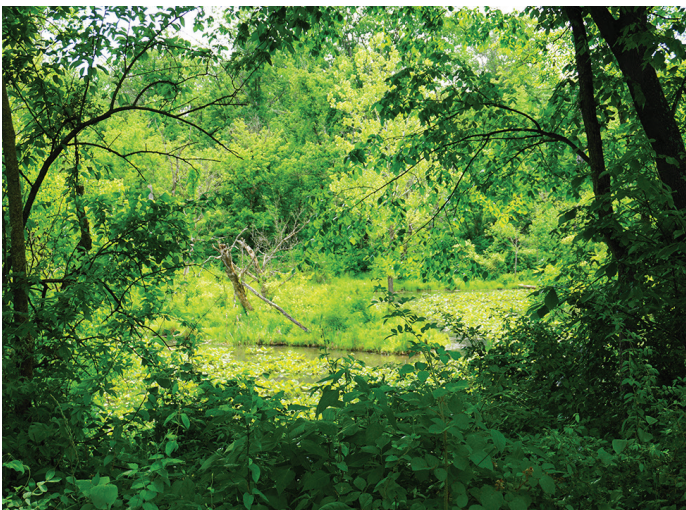
With a population of 200 to 300 hundred people, Big Pool was a bustling town for Western Maryland. There were amenities for canal workers and railroaders such as stores, a hotel, and churches in the town, now village, of Big Pool, which is located near the eastern end of the pool opposite the towpath. There were docks for canal boats to tie up and a dry dock was available for boat repair. Like Hancock just to the west, Big Pool lay in an area that was a major producer of apples and tomatoes, and the town had a small tomato cannery. Big Pool was the first terminus of the WMRR, which was rapidly expanding west. Remnants of the original route of the WMRR, which roughly parallels the modern CSX line, can be seen from McCoy's Ferry to the eastern end of Big Pool with a little adventurous hiking.



*Formal overflow/waste weir at Mile 113.48*



*Steel and timber rail bridge at the western end of Big Pool*



*The Fort Frederick beaver pond area as seen from the towpath*



*Looking towards the eastern end of Big Pool*





*A well-made limestone wall probably that is probably associated with the Western Maryland Railroad original line*



*The western end of Big Pool from the water; the rail bridge is in the distance*



*Remnant road in the wilds of the north shore of Big Pool*



*Broken country on the north shore between the railroad and Big Pool*



*Concrete ruins of the YMCA camp*



*More YMCA ruins seen from the water*



Please note that the north shore of Big Pool is not an easy place to travel by foot. It is barely possible to walk from either end if you don't mind getting wet crossing the feeder streams, some of which are quite deep. The underbrush is thick, with plenty of multi-flora rose thorns to negotiate. Improvements to modernize the CSX rail line dramatically altered the terrain here obscuring the original landscape. The rail line is active and dangerous and should not be trespassed on. If you choose to walk in this area, winter is your best option or when the water is very low in the late summer and early fall. Traveling by kayak or canoe is the best way I have found to enjoy this area.

### Recreation

Big Pool's eastern end is accessed from Fort Frederick State Park, Md. via Fort Frederick Road. There is a boat ramp with trailer access to Big Pool for canoes, kayaks, and fishing boats

(electric motors only) just before you cross the towpath. Parking is available at either end of the access road both for Big Pool and the towpath. Fort Frederick Road crosses the canal on a timber bridge that crosses the stop lock at the end of Big Pool. Crossing the bridge takes you to the Beaver Pond area and a little further to the Fort Frederick Campground (contact Fort Frederick State Park for information; contact information is at the end of this article). The Beaver Pond area is an excellent place to observe wildlife. Birds and turtles are plentiful in and around this small body of water. Unfortunately, getting to the Potomac is rather difficult here.

A very popular feature in the area is the Western Maryland Rail Trail, which is the original route of the Western Maryland Railroad. The rail trail starts in the village of Big Pool and travels west to the WMRR trestle just beyond Fifteen Mile Creek.



*Raccoon tracks in the water at Big Pool*



*A nice large sycamore tree on the north shore*



*A fine specimen of a turtle who looks as if he singing his song for all to hear*



*Sycamores and Big Pool*