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The Challenge of the C&O

FINDING FUNDING FOR THE C&O CANAL NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK

BY DAN D'AMBROSIO

The C&O Canal, running 184.5 miles from Washington, DC, to Cumberland, Maryland, was George Washington's idea, although Washington didn't live to see the waterway built. Work on the canal began in 1828, 29 years after Washington's death.

"It really goes back to George Washington's vision to create this highway of commerce in the wilderness of Ohio," said Kevin Brandt, superintendent of C&O Canal National Historic Park.

Washington knew the area well, said Brandt. Working as a surveyor in his younger days, Washington had traveled up the Potomac River, which the canal parallels, all the way to present-day Ohio, surveying land and natural resources.

Although the canal could not be considered a commercial success over its 96 years of operation before closing in 1924, it was the federal government's first real infrastructure project.

"The dollars the federal government invested were equivalent in today's dollars to the Apollo moon mission project," Brandt said. "This was an incredibly large undertaking, which today would literally run into the billions of dollars."

And, if the canal was something of a commercial flop, George Washington might have taken solace in the fact that it has become an unqualified recreational success as a unit of the National Park System. The C&O Canal National Historic Park is the ninth-most visited unit in the system, drawing 5.1 million visitors last year. That's more visitors than Grand Canyon National Park, Yosemite National Park, Yellowstone National Park, and more than twice the number of visitors to Glacier National Park.

Furthermore, the majority of those visitors are cyclists, according to Brandt.

"I would say the bicycle is the primary mode of enjoying the park," Brandt said. "Back in the 1960s through the 1980s, it was probably walking the tow path, but I would say today more people come out to bicycle the tow path than travel by foot."

A flat-out beautiful ride

Mike Mitchell, president of the board of directors of the C&O Canal Trust, lives in Potomac, Maryland, 15 miles northwest of Washington, DC. With the towpath less than a mile from his house, Mitchell can be riding in a matter of minutes.

"And it's just a flat-out beautiful ride," he said. "I've done a lot of riding across the country, and to have one of my favorite trails less than a mile from my house is pretty special."

Mitchell, who worked in the aerospace industry for many years and now has his own consulting company, was a history major in college, which makes the C&O Canal even more appealing for him to ride.

"The park brings together the early history of the country in terms of commerce," Mitchell said. "During the Civil War, this was the border between the North and the South. For anyone with an interest in history, the park is a gold mine."

"Then you have the beauty of the place. When you're riding out there in the fall and you see the colors on those banks going from the Piedmont to the mountains, it's extraordinary."

Endless need

The C&O Canal Trust was formed



Riding alongside the canal provides regular scenic photo opportunities.

ROY SEWALL, COURTESY OF THE C&O CANAL TRUST

in 2007 as the official nonprofit partner of the C&O National Historic Park, dedicated to working with the National Park Service and local communities along the route of the towpath to raise money to preserve and improve the park. It needs the help.

Brandt, who has been superintendent for 11 years and has been involved with the park for nearly 20, has seen his budget and staffing continually cut by Congress. Over the last five years, his budget has gone from \$10 million annually to \$9 million.

"Because of that, we've lost 20 people on staff," Brandt said. "We went from 95 full-time equivalents to 75 full-time equivalents this year."

The best Brandt believes he can hope for in the future is stable funding, without further losses.

"Nobody in Congress is talking about increasing funding," he said. "We're just hoping the budget is stable. Twenty people can do a lot of work. A lot of work that was getting done in 2010 is not getting done in 2015. That's why we're having to turn to partners like the C&O Canal Trust to raise money for specific projects."

Robin Zanotti, president of the C&O Canal Trust, is well aware of the magnitude of the challenge the 184.5-mile-long, heavily used park presents, given the necessary

maintenance and the multitude of problems that crop up over such a distance with a dwindling staff.

"We're raising around \$400,000 to \$500,000 each year, but it's not filling the gap," Zanotti said. "There's really an endless need for additional resources. Even the budget five years ago was not sufficient."

In addition to maintaining the towpath, which is subject to flooding from the nearby Potomac, the park has many historic structures that need hundreds of thousands of dollars of repair and renovation. There are more than 1,000 structures altogether, counting lockhouses, culverts, and aqueducts.

The potential of these historic structures is evident in the 40-something lockhouses still standing. The C&O Canal Trust has prioritized restoring six of those lockhouses, with a seventh in the works, available for rent for up to eight people.

"They're interpretive experiences. You stay there as if you lived in that era," Zanotti said. "We have two with full amenities, whereas others are rustic, without running water and electricity."

Zanotti said the lockhouses are very popular, especially with cyclists.

"What we're trying to create for bicyclists is a hut-to-hut experience," she said.

The C&O Canal/Great Allegheny Passage is unique in American cycling, a dedicated pathway rivaling European bike trails, said Ginny Sullivan, Adventure Cycling's director of travel initiatives.

"It's the closest thing in the U.S. that I've ever seen to a tourism trail on the scale of what you get along the Rhine River or the Danube," Sullivan said.

Unfortunately, the C&O Canal portion of the trail does not offer the kind of riding experience you'll find along the Danube or on the Great Allegheny Passage, for that matter.

"People often get tumbled off their bikes if they get going too fast. There are roots and rocks," Sullivan said. "One of our tour participants broke a collarbone a couple of years ago, and the trail continues to deteriorate."

Then you hit the Great Allegheny Passage and its smooth surface of crushed limestone.

"Granted, the two trails are on two

different surfaces," Sullivan said. "The Great Allegheny Passage is on an old railroad bed, and the C&O Canal is on an old mud road, a towpath. You don't have that base layer. That's really what's needed, to put down a base layer for the C&O Canal section, but they don't even know how much that would cost. The first step is an engineering analysis."

A legacy project

The coalition of local grassroots groups that ultimately put together the Great Allegheny Passage spent a total

several railroads. By the time the trail-building effort reached Pittsburgh it would have 320 miles of completed trail behind it, pushing toward completion.

The trail reached Pittsburgh in 2008 after more than 20 years of work. The alliance of various trail groups that had unified their efforts in 1995 under the Allegheny Trail Alliance had reached Pittsburgh just in time for that city's 250th anniversary. To celebrate the anniversary, city leaders were looking for legacy projects that incorporated not just Pittsburgh, but also the region.



The C&O Canal National Historic Park sees huge numbers of visitors — 5.1 million last year — more than Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Yellowstone, or Glacier national parks.

of \$80 million getting the job done, an utterly unattainable amount of money for the C&O Canal National Historic Park.

Linda McKenna, who was president of the Allegheny Trail Alliance for 19 years before stepping down last year, was at the forefront of a remarkable fundraising effort for the Great Allegheny Passage that included the CEO of U.S. Steel and other major companies in the Pittsburgh region.

McKenna employed a strategy worthy of Hannibal when she started on the eastern end of what would become the Great Allegheny Passage, connecting first to the existing C&O Canal National Historic Park before heading west to Pittsburgh along railbeds abandoned by

"The completion of the Great Allegheny Passage became one of three legacy projects," McKenna said. "We got the CEO of U.S. Steel, Allegheny County executives, and lots of CEOs of other companies all ganging up on obstacles, saying, 'We have to get this done.'"

"U.S. Steel gave us a bridge we'd been begging them for for a decade."

Even the Norfolk Southern Railroad came around, allowing the Great Allegheny Passage to build flyover bridges on two of Norfolk Southern's bridges on its main line into Pittsburgh, a proposal that had previously been rejected out of hand.

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sponsorship of the ride through a private foundation, but the foundation didn't need publicity. "It's boring to say XYZ foundation," said Scott. In a split-second decision, he told his friend, "We're going to be the J & L Pie Company." Recently, when he asked CAF's paratriathlete team if they minded being sponsored by a pie

company they told him, "No. Everyone wants to know how we got a pie company to sponsor us."

Whether he's cross-country touring or riding his eBike to the grocery store, it comes down to the same motto for Scott: "You can't have fun if you don't participate. You have to go in with an open mind because you can't

guarantee anything. Some of the most fun you have is at the most unexpected times. So you just participate, kind of trust yourself and you hope that it ranks high on the fun meter." **AG**

April Cypher is Adventure Cycling's Development Coordinator. She always says yes to pie.

LIFE MEMBERSHIP

A lifetime of benefits and long-term support for bicycle travel.

Funds from the Life Membership program are put into a special account to provide long-term support for Adventure Cycling Association. In the past, these funds have helped us purchase and update our headquarters building, saving us thousands of dollars in interest payments.

If bicycle travel is an important part of your life, please consider making a lifetime commitment by joining as an Adventure Cycling Life Member. To find out more, visit adventurecycling.org/membership or give Julie Huck a call at 800.755.2453 x214.

Thanks to these new life members who recently joined with their support:

- Betsy Adams, Bernville, PA
- Dave Belak, Amherst, NH
- Greg Cermak, Battle Ground, WA
- Mike E. Ciesielski, Eugene, OR
- Michael T Dance, San Carlos, CA
- Raymond Ginther, New York, NY
- Whitney Gonsoulin, Lafayette, LA
- James E Horn, La Puente, CA
- Charles Inglefield, Charlotte, NC
- Jerome Juday, Anchorage, AK
- Jon C Kuczynski, Durham, NC
- Richard W. Manning, Allentown, PA
- Matt Moritz, Providence, RI
- Bonnie O'Donnell, Flagstaff, AZ
- Frank Peters, Portland, OR



- Michael Quinn, Yoru, PA
- Raymond N. Satter, Denver, CO
- Jim Serne, Raleigh, NC
- Chip & Kathy Sterling, Oakland, CA
- Maureen & Monty VanderMay, Salem, OR
- Tom Wade, Lakewood, CO

MICHAEL CLARK

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 49 THE CHALLENGE OF THE C&O

"Before they said, 'Go away — we don't want to be encumbered by trails,'" McKenna remembered. "Then the CEO of U.S. Steel called them and said, 'If they meet your safety regulations, let them do this.'"

Funding is a problem

This kind of entrepreneurial trail-building is not in the cards for the C&O National Historic Park, however, which must adhere to the red tape and regulations of the National Park Service. Also, unlike other national parks, which are able to charge an entrance fee, C&O

National Historic Park is free.

Brandt proposed an entrance fee last year and got nowhere with it.

"Funding is a problem," he said. "This past winter the public made it very clear they didn't want to pay a fee to use the canal. I can understand that and respect it. I withdrew the proposal."

Brandt understands that reluctance to pay comes from a sense of ownership felt by those living and working along the length of the canal.

"I've worked in a lot of different national parks, Yellowstone among them," Brandt said. "I don't

remember anyone telling me long before Yellowstone became a national park that their great-grandfather was a trapper there. But I go to small towns and meet people who tell me, 'My great-grandfather was born on a canal boat. My great-great-grandfather was a lock tender.'"

That leaves the C&O Canal Trust to raise the money the canal needs. Adventure Cycling and the Allegheny Trail Alliance want to help. The first step is to hire an engineer to help park staff figure out what needs to be done and how much it's going to cost. They know that, like the painters on the Golden Gate Bridge, work on the C&O Canal will never be completed.

"The canal has such huge potential if we could improve the quality for bicyclists — and hikers as well — but particularly for cyclists," Brandt said. "That way, many more people would get out and enjoy it. We would love to maintain it in better condition." **AG**

Dan D'Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist magazine.



Forty or so lockhouses still stand along the Canal, a few of which have been restored to accommodate overnight guests.

COURTESY OF THE C&O CANAL TRUST