

The Canal Park's 40th Anniversary

Drawing Up the General Plan (1971-76)

by James H. Gilford

The General Plan for the Chesapeake and Ohio National Historical Park is a grand example of adaptive reuse, a favored technique for saving obsolete historic structures. Never has it been practiced on such a large scale or more successfully as that which was planned and implemented for the C&O canal.¹

Legislation that established the Chesapeake and Ohio National Historical Park contained a mandate for the National Park Service to provide for the enjoyment of the park's resources in such a manner as to leave them unimpaired for future generations. It also provided for a 19 member advisory commission with which the Park Service could consult on general policies and specific matters related to the administration and development of the park.²

The Advisory Commission was sworn in on December 20, 1971 by Interior Secretary Rogers Morton. Immediately following the swearing-in ceremony, Russell Dickensen, Director, National Capital Parks, asked the Commission to advise the Park Service on two pressing issues related to the canal: one was land acquisition procedures and techniques, and development of a master plan for the park. "Those are the two most pressing items we need your advice on as quickly as we can get it," he told the Commission.³

Creating a master plan for the park as quickly as possible was indeed a pressing matter. An approved master plan was needed to assure protection as well as appropriate and orderly development of the canal's resources. And when asking Congress to approve funds for developing the resources of the canal, a plan was needed to show how the Park Service would use the requested funds.

The use of a commission to advise on developing and managing a national park was not a new idea at the time the park was established. Although some NPS managers still were not comfortable with the notion of involving

"outsiders" in their decision-making process, the Advisory Commission was viewed as a suitable forum for involving the public in developing a master plan for the park.

By the time the Advisory Commission was sworn in, Park Service planner John M. Kauffmann had already prepared an ambitious master plan for developing the long and narrow park and its many fragile resources. That plan was presented to the Advisory Commission at its initial meeting on December 20, 1971. In making the presentation, Kauffmann advised the Commission that it was going to be a very difficult task to develop and administer the park wisely and properly for the type of uses that could be expected of this urbanized region in the future.⁴

Although his plan was conceptual, it was not well received. The plan provided for restoration of several aqueducts, locks and lock houses. But it was also heavily weighted in favor of amenities to accommodate an expected increase in visitation and demand for recreational use. Among other features, the plan called for 25 boat-launching facilities, 31 group camps with a total capacity of 6,000 and nearly 3,000 picnic sites. These and other developments, some accessible by car, were designed for a day-use visitor capacity of 53,000.⁵

The Commission was critical of the plan, particularly the heavy recreational use, boating activity, vegetation removal and re-watering envisioned for the Park. Commission members also wanted more attention given to protecting the canal's historical resources. In keeping with that concern, the Commission adopted a motion to give priority to aqueduct restoration; that motion was made by Justice Douglas who attended the meeting as a special advisor to the Commission.

Also present at that meeting was Assistant Secretary of the Interior Nathaniel Reed.



View from Lookout Point west of Little Orleans The C&O Canal hugs the Potomac River below along the scenic Paw Paw Bends. Protected under the General Plan the natural beauty of the area remains unmarred by unwanted intrusions. (Photo by Steve Dean)

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Afterwards, he shared his reaction with Kauffmann: "My reading of the Advisory Board meeting was that the priority is to protect the canal and the locks. Repair the damage and last and least construct visitor facilities . . . Unless I am wrong, the canal should not be developed for heavy-use recreation. Bicycling, walking, canoeing, limited low development, low density camping are the features the Advisory Board wants. Unless your Master Plan reflects this objective, there will be years of strife ahead."⁶ For its part, the Advisory Commission urged the Park Service to encourage greater public involvement and input in developing a plan for the park that would be more in keeping with the desires of the public and more in line with regional planning efforts and the resources of the canal.

*Faced with the need to rethink how the canal and its resources should be developed and managed, the Park Service turned to John G. Parsons, a landscape architect and planner at National Park Service Regional Headquarters, to devise a plan for the canal that would be acceptable to the Park Service, the public and the Advisory Commission. The Advisory Commission's chairman, Nancy Long, immediately appointed a Resource Planning and Study Committee to work with Parsons by offering advice and providing input as he developed a new master plan. At least one commission member from each of the four Maryland counties along the canal served on that committee, providing a sounding board for the concerns and desires of the general public, local residents and the Commission.*⁷

Early in the planning process, the Advisory Commission had reason to recall Secretary Morton's remarks during the swearing-in ceremony. He told the Commission, "The thing we are most anxious to do is to preserve the natural beauty, the assets of the park, a job which will become increasingly difficult as user pressure becomes greater, as more people not only visit the park but expect more from the park. What I want to preserve is the whole spectrum, the experience of the park visitation itself. I hope you will feel yourselves trustees of the visitation experience."⁸

In May and June 1972, the Park Service held five meetings, with many of the Advisory Commission members in attendance, to discuss the ongoing planning effort with local officials and the public; one of the those meetings was held in Washington D.C. and one in each of the four Maryland counties bordering the park. At the same time, a draft "study plan" for the park was made available for public review and comment.

Opposing views regarding planning of the park surfaced at those public information meetings and again at the Advisory Commission meeting in July.

Alan Franklin and Carl Linden, speaking for the C&O Canal Association, opposed recreational activities not directly related to the canal such as drive-in campgrounds and picnic areas accessible from parking lots. "It should be a park developed for those who are willing to walk into it," Franklin said. On the other side, Harry Rinker, then president of the Pennsylvania Canal Society, favored development that would cater to visitors from other parts of the country; he wanted more vehicle access for visitors who might lack the time or ability to hike long distances.⁹

Recognizing the limitations of the park's narrow configuration, the uneven distribution of the canal's natural and structural resources, and the social and cultural differences in the urbanized and rural areas bordering different sections of the canal, Parsons devised a plan for the park based on a unique zoning concept to accommodate the concerns of area residents, the different interests of park visitors and the expected increase in park visitation. He saw the canal as lending itself to a sectional delineation to satisfy the interests of the various user groups.¹⁰

With the support of the planning committee, the zoning concept gained favor with the Advisory Commission in September, 1972. And in January, 1973, the Commission endorsed a draft master plan for the canal, based on the zoning concept. Copies of the draft plan were widely distributed. Special briefings and open meetings again were held to give local officials and the public time to review and an opportunity to comment on the draft plan.

Guided by comments received through the extensive review of the draft plan and with the advice and input from the planning committee, Parsons crafted a General Plan for developing and managing the resources of the canal. That plan was endorsed by the Advisory Commission in July of 1975 and officially approved in January 1976 by National Capital Parks Director Jack Fish.

The General Plan calls for stabilizing and partially restoring the canal and its structures, preserving its natural setting and interpreting the many historical and natural values of the canal. It also provides for outdoor recreation, but only as much as can be made available without intruding on

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or impairing the resources which the park was established to protect. In the context of the General Plan, the role of the park is to offer visitors a natural and historic environment in which to enjoy such pursuits as hiking, biking, canoeing, camping, horseback riding, fishing and boating.¹¹

The zoning in the plan divides the park into 32 sections, each assigned depending upon its character resources and make-up, to one of the following five zoning categories: National Interpretive Zone, Cultural Interpretive Zone, Short Term Recreation Zone, Short Term Remote Zone and Long-Term Remote Zone. Parsons created those zones based on an analysis of their respective visitation patterns and visitor interests relative to the canal's resources.

Implementing that particular provision of the General Plan, along with the requirement for section specific Development Concept Plans, made it possible for the Park Service to carry on the task of developing and managing the park and maintaining the continuity of the towpath in a timely and orderly manner. The Advisory Commission recommended inclusion of the priority provision early in the planning deliberations and, with a few exceptions, was able to use it effectively in advising the Park Service to reject special-interest proposals to develop new facilities or amenities for the park before completing efforts to stabilize and restore the canal's historic resources.¹²

For the past 35 years, the needs of the Park Service have been well served by the General Plan in meeting the mandate to provide for the enjoyment of the park's resources in a manner that leaves them unimpaired for future generations. The management philosophy and priorities established by the plan assured that preservation and protection of the canal's historic structures would be attended to first. In spite of development limitations imposed by the long, narrow configuration of the park, the zoning concept devised by John Parsons made it possible for the plan to accommodate diverse uses of the park and the expected volume of visitation. The decision by Commission chairman Nancy Long to actively engage the Commission in planning the park by appointing a committee to advise Parsons during the planning and approval process assured fair and balanced input from the public.

A number of planning efforts, prior to and following the legislation that created the park, preceded and contributed in some degree to the development of the Chesapeake and Ohio National Historical Park General Plan. An historical review of those early planning activities is contained in "C&O Canal: The Making of a Park", by Barry Mackintosh. pp. v, 5 – 21, 31-80, 119-132.

Notes

1. Mackintosh, Barry. C&O Canal: The Making of a Park. History Division, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, DC. 1991. p. v. (This publication is available as a PDF file and in html format at www.nps.gov/history/history, C&O Canal National Historical Park.)
 2. Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park General Plan, District of Columbia/Maryland. January 30, 1976. p. 1
 3. Minutes of the C&O Canal Advisory Commission meeting, December 20, 1971.
 4. Mackintosh, p 122. John Kauffmann moved on to other assignments, eventually serving effectively as chief planner for two other national parks during his 20- year tenure with the Park Service.
 5. Ibid., p. 121
 6. Ibid., p. 123
 7. Ibid., p. 123
 8. Minutes of the C&O Canal Advisory Commission meeting, December 20, 1971.
 9. Transcript of C&O Canal Commission meeting, July 8, 1972, pp. 50-50
 10. General Plan, p. 21
 11. Ibid., p. 2
 12. Ibid., p. 24. The General Plan requires that Development Concept Plans (DCP) be devised for each section of the canal prior to development of that section. Those plans are to determine the number and location of visitor facilities in a given section.
- Editor's note: Jim Gilford is a long-time member of the canal advisory commission and member of the C&O Canal Association. Dr. Gilford took an active part in the deliberations on the general plan.*