

# C&O Canal Towpath Bike Trip

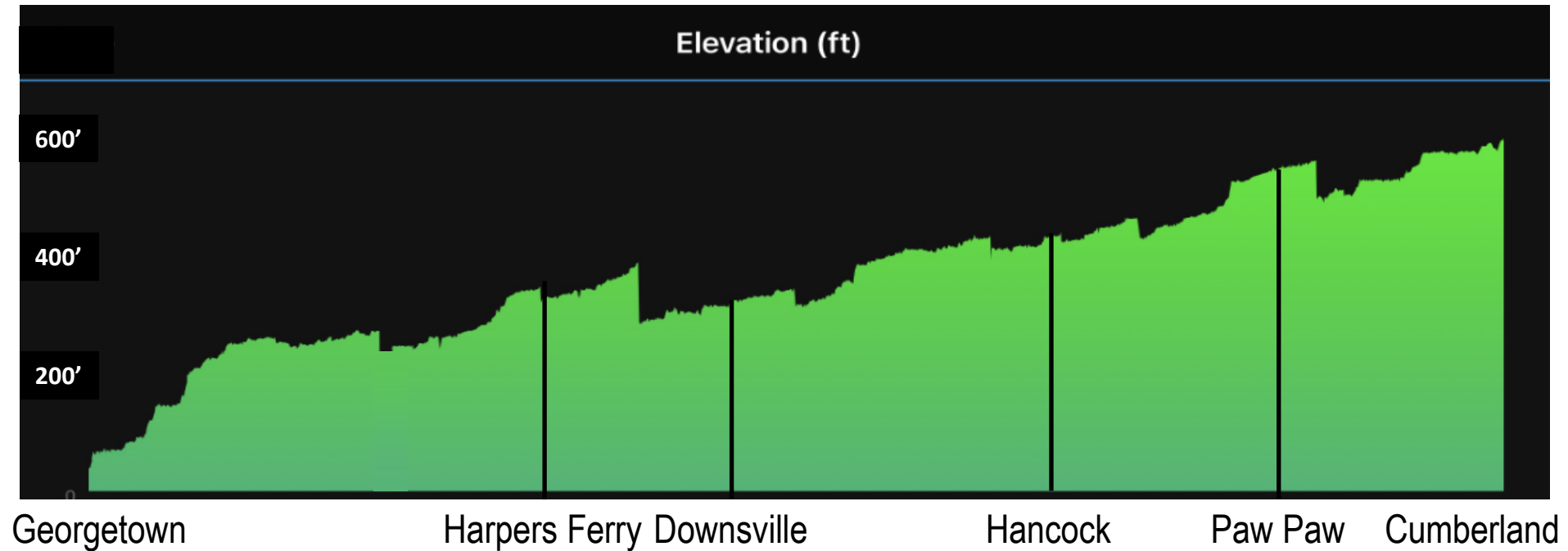
Dennis Freeman - July 12-16, 2021





# Elevation Profile: 605' climb

(Garmin Bike Computer)



Sudden climbs and drops at locks, aqueducts, and campsites.

# Amenities



- 31 Hiker/Biker Campsites
  - free, no reservations
  - Potable water (hand pumps & iodine treated)
  - Picnic tables
  - Grills/Fire Rings
  - Serviced chemical toilets
  - Trash-free – pack it out
- Poor/No cell coverage in sections
- No power

## Nearby Towns:

- Poolesville
- Point of Rocks
- Brunswick
- Harpers Ferry
- Sharpsburg/Shepherdstown
- Williamsport
- Hancock
- Cumberland

# Trail Conditions



Resurfaced from Violette's Lock (Mile 22.1) to Ferry Hill (Mile 72.5) (ongoing phase continues to Mile 86.5)



Some typical conditions on un-resurfaced trail in western sections.

A few detours too. Check NPS website.

[www.nps.gov/choh/planyourvisit/conditions.htm](http://www.nps.gov/choh/planyourvisit/conditions.htm)

# Bike/Gear:

Aluminum road (&trail) bike w/ rack & fenders (~70 lb w/gear)

Garmin (GPS) Cycle Computer

### Tube top case:

- snacks, electrolyte tablets, TP, Phone

### Under seat case:

- spare tubes, tools

### Handlebars:

- Camera case
- Tent
- Joby Gorillapod

### Frame:

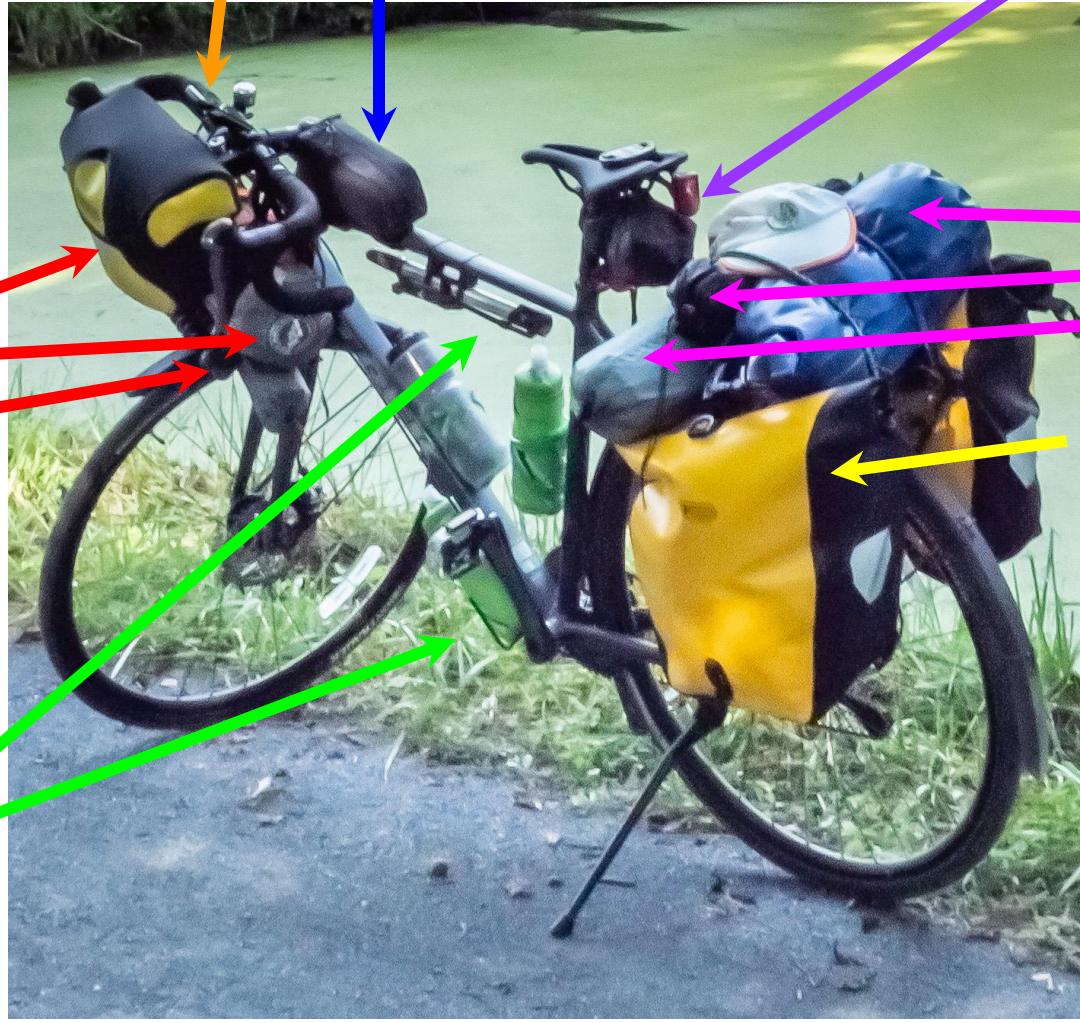
- Air pump
- 3 water bottles

### Rack:

- Sleep quilt
- Camp chair
- Sleep pad

### 2 Panniers:

- Food
- Stove/Pot/Fuel
- Clothes
- Rain jacket
- Toiletries
- Batteries
- Chargers & cables
- misc



# Olympus OM-D E-M1 Mark II (micro 4/3)

- 12-100mm f/4 = 24-200mm full-frame

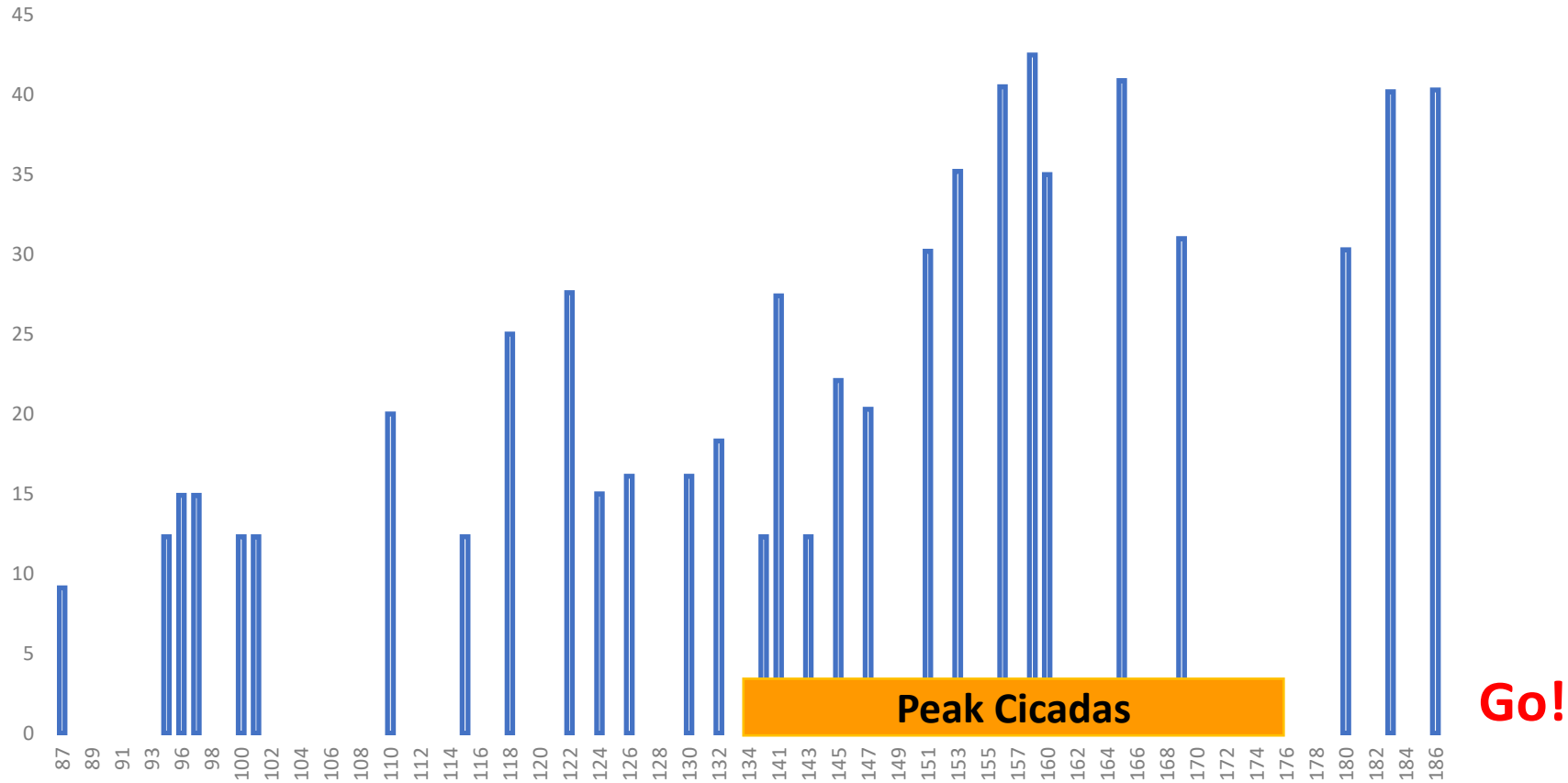
**Case: ~1.6 lb**  
**Camera: ~3.0 lb**



# Trained 687 Miles in 3+ Months

Wanted 5 days of clear weather predicted after cicadas.

Training Mileage



Mar 28

Jul 5



Go!





## Day 1: July 12

- ★ Depart  
Mile 0: Georgetown  
(Thompson's Boathouse)
- ▲ Arrive  
Mile 42.4: Indian Flats Campsite

Rode: 42.4 Miles

Heat Index: 100° F



## Mile 0

Mouth of Rock Creek where it flows into Potomac. Tide Lock hidden behind me.

Thompson's Boathouse, Georgetown



The canal "towpath" is a jumble of brick sidewalks, very narrow gravel paths, people, street crossings, etc for ~1.0 mile to Key Bridge



“9  
MILES  
TO  
W. C.”

(Washington City)  
- Not far from Beltway



Great Blue Heron  
- Near Carderock



Potomac Gorge from Mary's Wall

Great Falls





Kayakers heading down Seneca Creek to the Potomac – photo from Aqueduct.

McKee Beshers sunflower fields – a bit early



White's Ferry  
- Grounds are good place for picnic



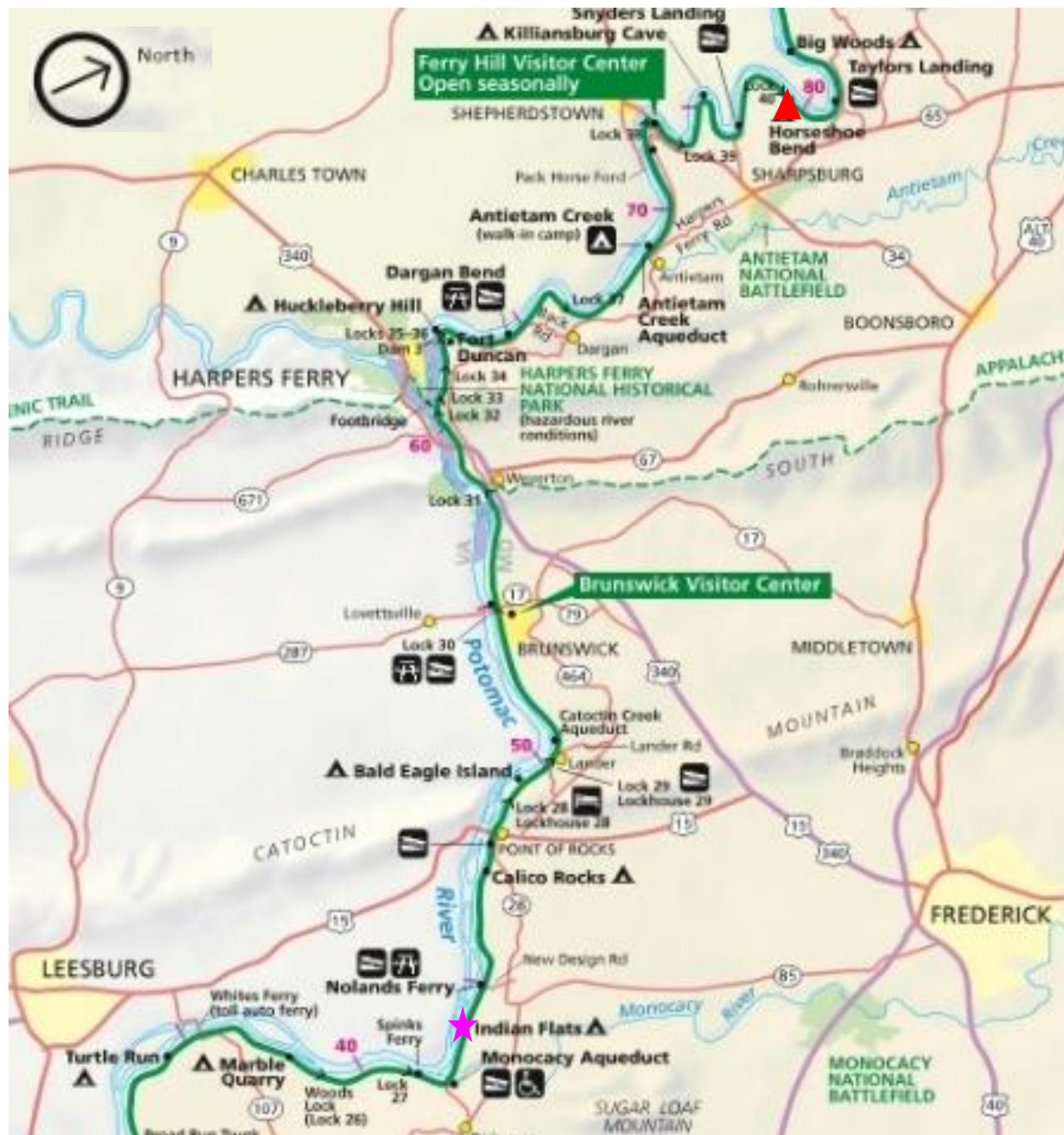
Dickerson Power Plant just pops out of the trees. Saw a beaver here a few minutes before.

Indian Flats Campsite



Saw wild turkeys just before the Monocacy Aqueduct





## Day 2: July 13

★ Depart  
Mile 42.4: Indian Flats Campsite

▲ Arrive  
Mile 79.9: Horseshoe Bend  
Campsite

Rode: 37.5 Miles

Heat Index: 99° F

Resurfaced trail ended at Mile 72.5, Ferry Hill, near Shepherdstown.

Brief thunderstorm – refuge under Route 34 bridge to Shepherdstown, WV



Highway 15 Bridge, Point of Rocks

Catoctin Creek Aqueduct, north of Brunswick







Lock House: Lock 31, north of Brunswick

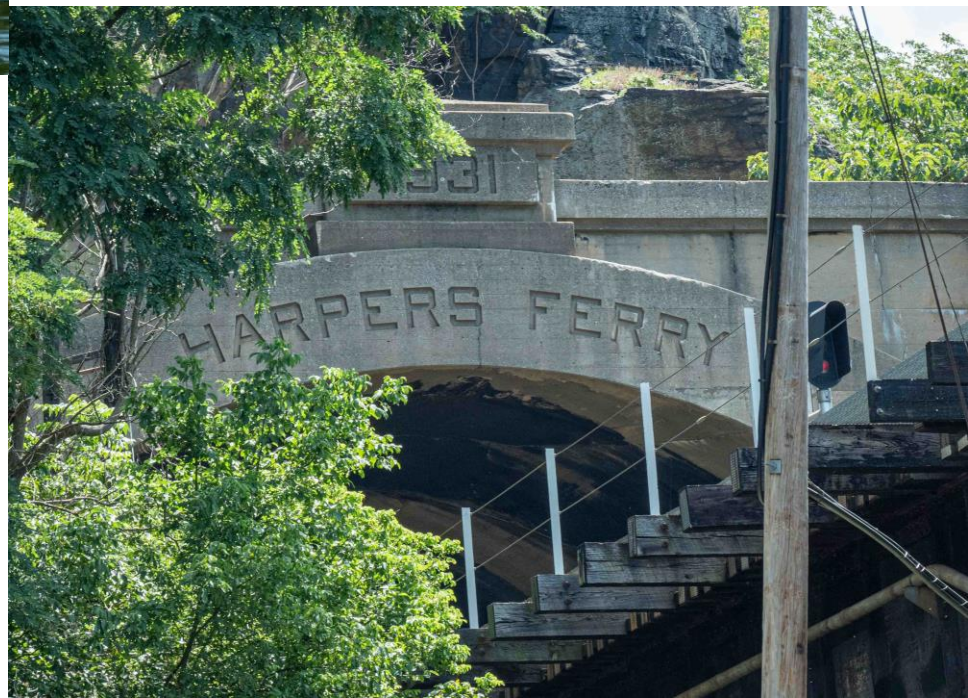
Railroad bridge, north of Brunswick

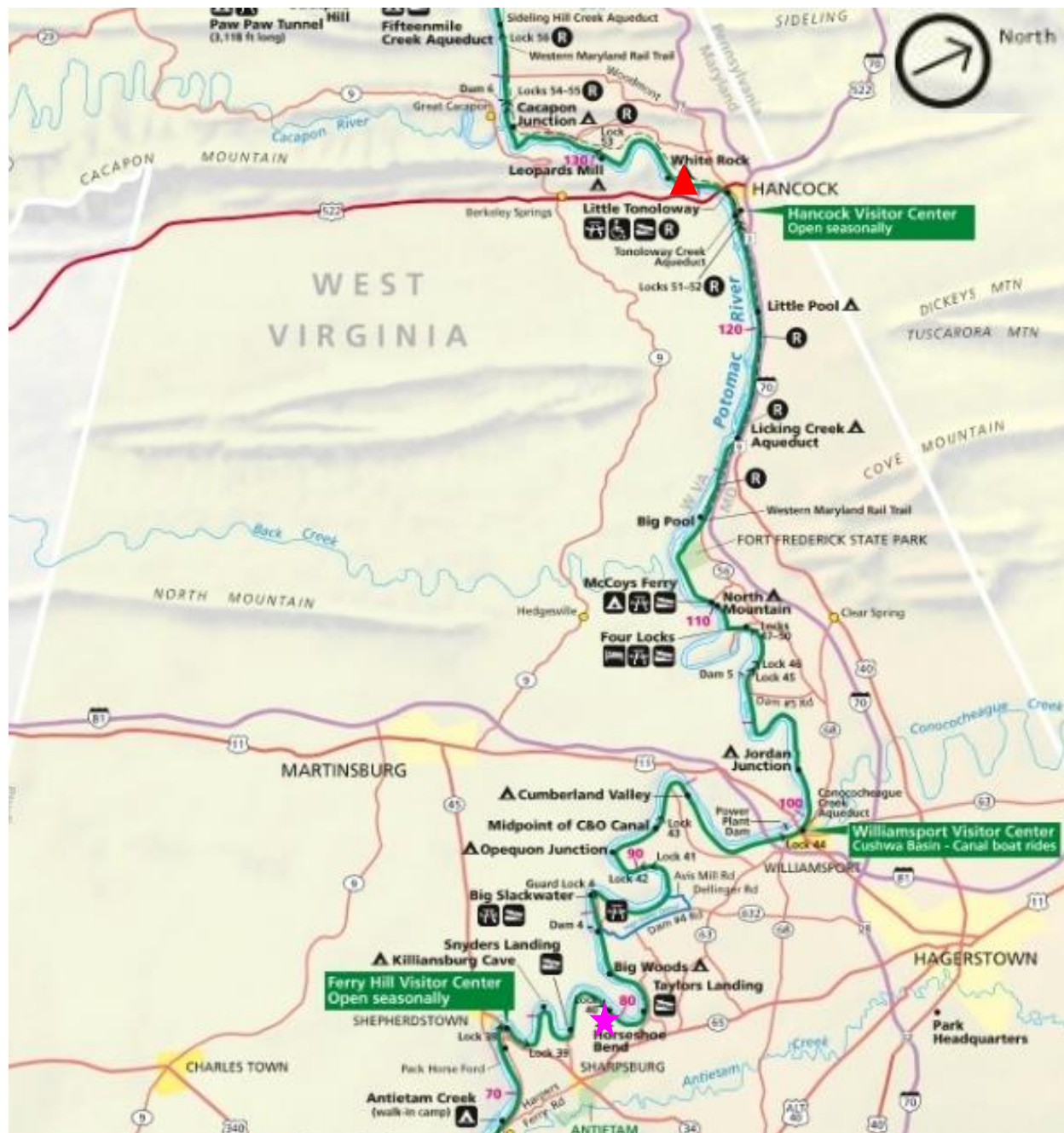




Tubers, east of Harpers Ferry

Railroad tunnel, Harpers Ferry





## Day 3: July 14

★ Depart  
Mile 79.9: Horseshoe Bend  
Campsite

▲ Arrive  
Mile 126.4: White Rock  
Campsite

Rode: 46.5 Miles

Heat Index: 95° F

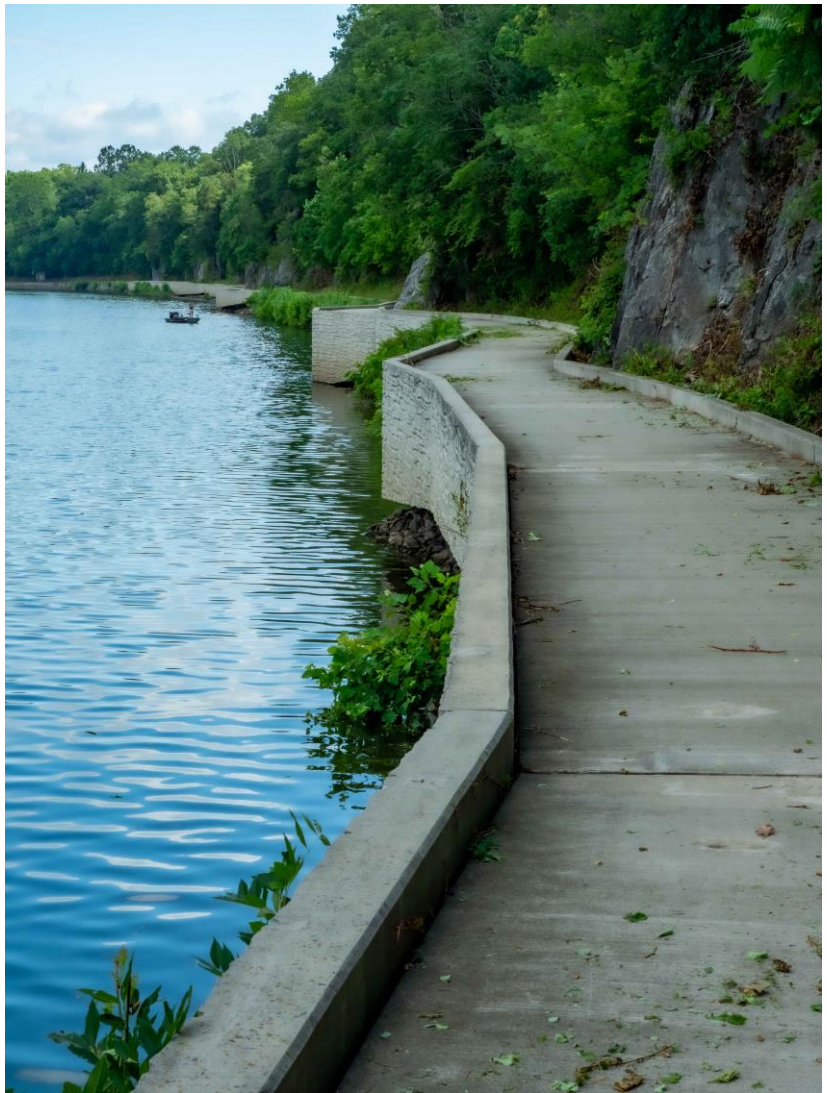


Dam 4

Dams were built across the Potomac at several places to divert river water into the canal. Downstream from Williamsport, Dam 4 backed up the river for about 13 miles, creating a deep, smooth stretch called Big Slackwater.

Here, canal boats passed through a lock into the river. They were pulled by mule from a towpath along the riverbank for  $3\frac{1}{4}$  miles before reentering the canal through another lock.

Bike path along Big Slackwater





McMahon's Mill marks the upstream access point to Big Slackwater.



Williamsport:  
Lockhouse 44, restored & rewatered.  
In 1862, the Confederates burned the lock gates and eleven canal boats here.





Coal was loaded directly onto barges



## Day 4: July 15

- ★ Depart  
Mile 126.4: White Rock Campsite
- ▲ Arrive  
Mile 164.8: Potomac Forks Campsite

Rode: 38.4 Miles

No Cell Coverage from  
Little Orleans to Paw Paw

Heat Index: 95° F



Round Top (limestone) Cement Mill Ruins - 8 kilns on right. 1838 – 1909. Put out of business by Portland cement.

Lots of black snakes.





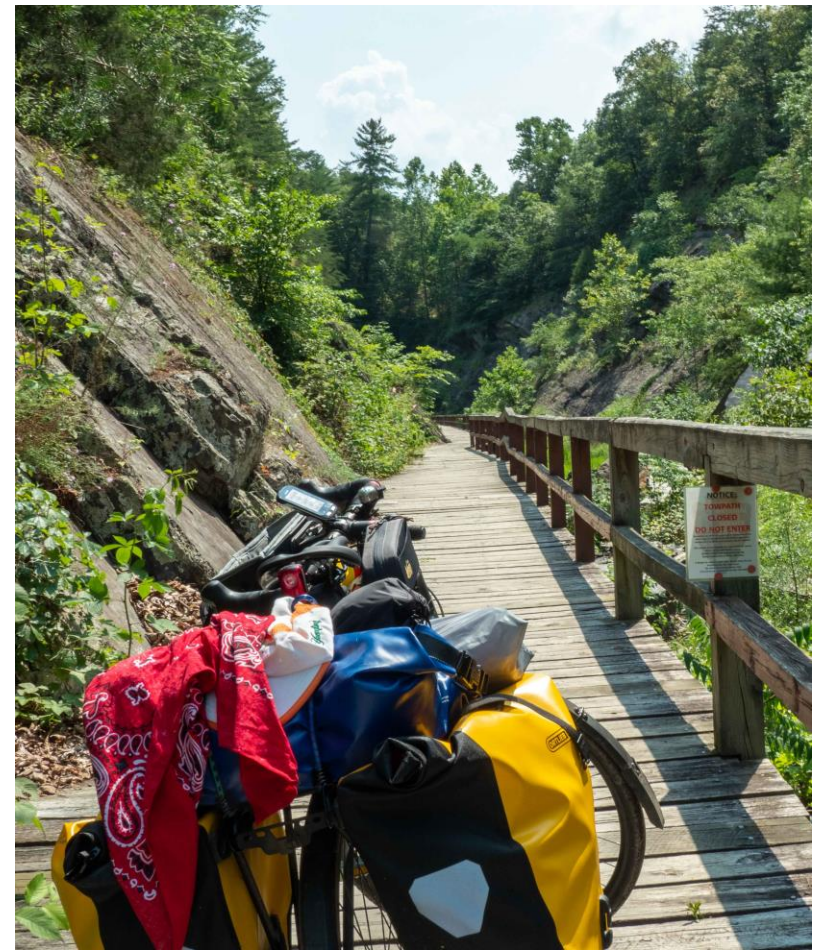


At the approach to the Paw Paw Tunnel:

The detour is a distance of approximately 1.5 miles of steep and strenuous trail. Follow signs carefully and stay on the trail. Those using the trail should do so with extreme caution.

400' climb in 0.5 miles. 95° heat index. 70 pound bike.

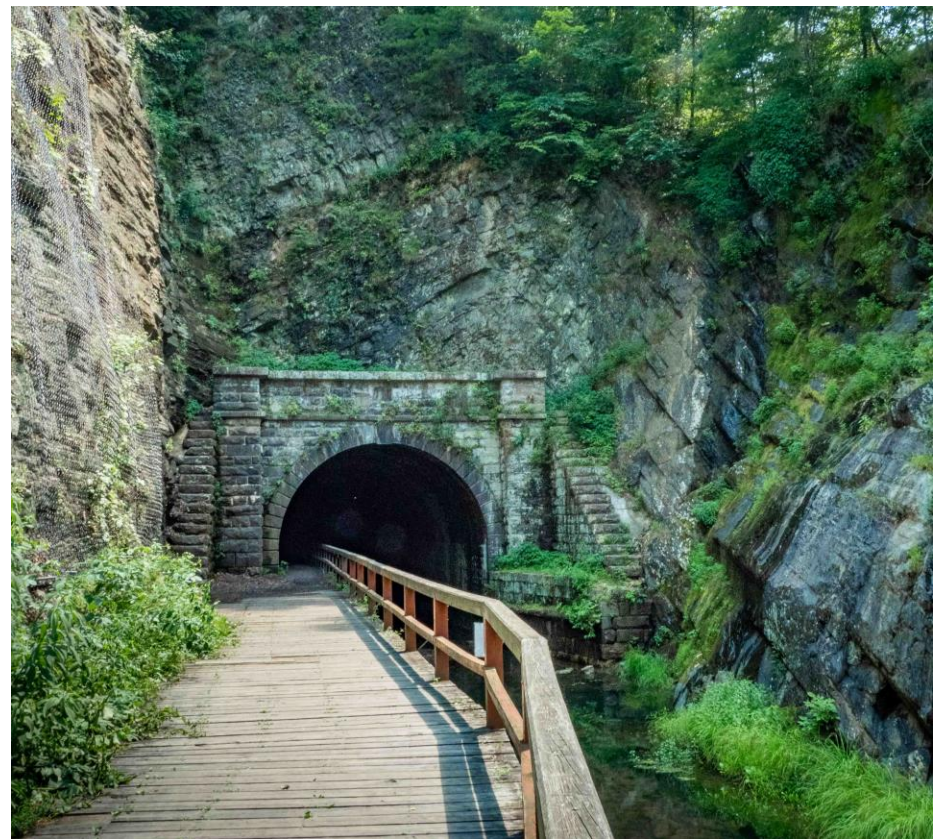
*Are you kidding? Forget that!*



And right after this pic is when I saw the 20 NPS staff and contractors in hard hats coming towards me...

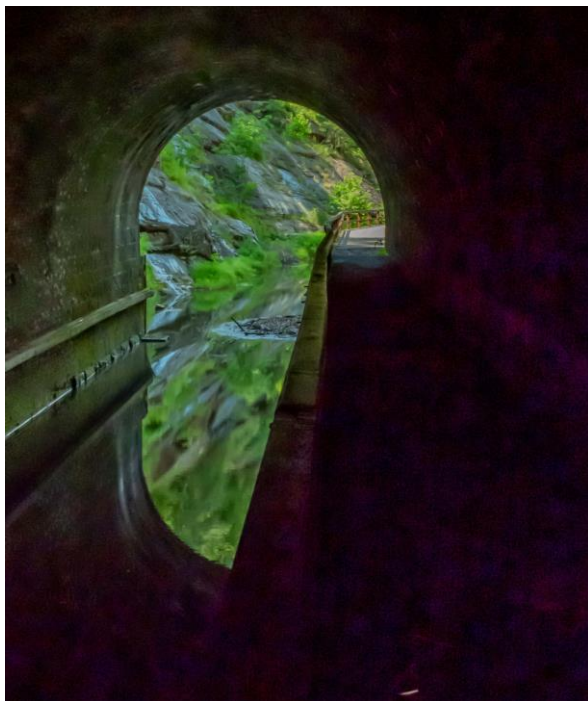


Wow. It held, I'm here to say.



Paw Paw Tunnel.

0.6 miles of rock removed in 12 years.



Walked my bike sans flashlight.



## Potomac Forks Campsite

Great except for the 1,000,000 mosquitos, 1000 croaking frogs, and passing trains behind the trees.



## Day 5: July 16

★ Depart  
Mile 164.8: Potomac Forks  
Campsite

▲ Arrive  
Mile 184.5: Cumberland

Rode: 19.7 Miles

Heat Index: 96° F



Approaching the mountains.



Tiny Potomac.



Sewage Treatment Plant.



Cumberland – The End

# Next! Great Allegheny Passage

150 miles - Pittsburgh to Cumberland: Aug 6-10

Fully supported – Great American Bike Tours



# More Info?

- I have lots of reference links and resources for planning bike rides on the C&O towpath or Western Maryland Rail Trail.
  - [dennisfreeman4510@msn.com](mailto:dennisfreeman4510@msn.com)
- "Down the Old Potomac" On the C&O Canal; A Thomas Edison Film (1917), is a silent, black & white film, depicting the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal, back in the days (1831-1924) when it was operational, with water, locks, gates, towpath, and boats.
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZCw0gcn2r0>



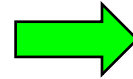
Backup

# Brief C&O History

- George Washington founded the Patowmack Co. in 1785 to clear a river channel and build skirting canals to make the Potomac navigable.
- 1795-1802: locks at Harpers Ferry, Seneca, Little Falls and Great Falls constructed, allowing keel boats to float downriver from Cumberland to Georgetown loaded with pig iron and “Potomac Marble”. Depended on good river conditions. Difficult to return boats upstream.
- July 4, 1828: Ground broke for the C&O Canal at Little Falls (& first spike of the B&O Railroad in Baltimore ... )
- 1831: C&O begins operating
- 1828-1832: Legal battle for C&O vs B&O right of way at Point of Rocks. C&O won.
- 1850: C&O completed – 184.5 miles from Georgetown to Cumberland.
- 1861-1865: Union & Confederate forces used C&O towpath as a road and crossed it multiple times. Confederates attacked canal and the boats.
- Somewhat profitable in 1870’s (coal, flour, iron, limestone). Railroad went faster/further.
- Major Floods: 1829, 1854, 1889, **1924** - Last year of operation
- 1930’s: Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) restored the lower 22 miles
- Post-WWII plans: dam the Potomac in 14 places and flood the canal (and Harpers Ferry), or build a parkway on it, like Skyline Drive.
- 1954: Justice William O. Douglas led a 184.5 mile hike to save the canal.
- 1971: President Nixon signs into law C&O as a National Historic Park

# Lessons Learned

- Wait for cooler weather!
- Better electrolytes



1 per water bottle

- Double check mattress pad for leaks
- Reduce weight (eliminate items)
- Lighter/Smaller Camera system
  - Olympus OMD EM1 II / 24-200\* mm F4 (3 lb)
  - Sony RX100 VII: 24-200\* mm F2.8-4.5 lens & viewfinder recess into body (10.7 oz)

\* full frame equivalent



Pocket size  
(when collapsed)



# Lessons Learned Part 2

- Improve bike components to mitigate saddle soreness
  - Could ride ~40 minutes before 5 minute standing breaks.

- Step 1, mid-July:

Replace seat post

w/ REDSHIFT Shock Absorbing Seat Post

**Comfort improved to 90 minutes!**

- Step 2, early August:

Replace saddle with Brooks B17 leather saddle

(invented during 19<sup>th</sup> Century C&O Canal operations)

Break-in under way (~300 miles)

