

Mary Shaw, Anne Marschik and Roy Weil's trip in 1997, before the corridor was named the Great Allegheny Passage, was the starting point for Mary and Roy's terrific *Linking-Up* guide to the system. For more photos of the trip, check out their trip website: <http://spoke.compose.cs.cmu.edu/fwe/trips/sep97.htm>

Trip Report, Washington DC to Pittsburgh

*Via C&O Canal Towpath, Allegheny Highlands Trail,
and Yough River Trail*

Mary Shaw, with Anne Marschik and Roy Weil

September 1997

The Trip

The great dream of Pennsylvania-Maryland trail development is a traffic-free route between Pittsburgh and Washington DC. Good news: it's 85% there. In late September we largely realized the dream by biking from Washington to Pittsburgh along the C&O Towpath, fragments of the Allegheny Highlands Trail, and the Yough River Trail. We had to ride only a few road segments where there are gaps in the trail, and we used a car for the Big Savage Mountain crossing. Roy and I swapped the tires on our mountain bikes to a less aggressive tread. We couldn't put front racks on these bikes, so we got a Bob trailer to avoid putting the entire load over the rear wheels. Anne rode a hybrid bike; after some experimentation, she found a manageable load distribution. This equipment was entirely suitable for the conditions on these trails.

We rode mostly self-contained, using hiker-biker campsites on the towpath and commercial campgrounds (plus Anne's house in Confluence) for the remainder. As we look back on the trip, this was the right way to go, as it preserved the continuity of experience with minimal disruption from cars, crowds, and commercialism.

The towpath officially begins at the Potomac River in Washington near Thompson's boathouse, but there's no distinct trail until you cross under the Whitehurst Freeway and turn away from Rock Creek. Here the towpath begins as a brick sidewalk nicely blended with the neighboring businesses of highly gentrified Georgetown. One of the two operating canal boats docks at the Visitor Center here. Just under a mile past the visitor center, the trail crosses the canal on a footbridge with a flight of stairs on each side. We avoided this by dropping down to Canal Rd and riding the paved Capital Crescent trail to Fletcher's Boathouse (MP 3.2).

Just above Fletcher's the canal is pinned between the Clara Barton Parkway and the river. At Seven Locks (MP 8.4-9.4), the character of the canal emerges, as the canal climbs about 60' in a mile. At the last of the seven (Lock 13, MP 9.4), I495 passes directly overhead; a triumph of preservation left the canal remains more-or-less intact. As the towpath runs northwest along the Potomac, it grows gradually wilder and more remote.

Widewater, just below Great Falls Tavern, was originally a channel of the river. When the Potomac floods, it tries to reclaim this channel. The canal wall near Old Angler's Inn (MP 12.3) was blown out (again) in the January 1996 flood. The gap has now been graded, but a quarter-mile or so of towpath near Lock 15 (MP 13.6) is still a rough boulder path that would require us to carry the bikes and loads. We chose the Berma Road detour, which only forced us to portage down a flight of stairs. The detour did give us a different view of the canal and a good look at the Washington Aqueduct.



Why you should take the Widewater detour \

The Washington end of the canal required the most extensive construction because it had to climb quickly around Great and Little Falls. It has the largest concentration of structures still visible and draws the largest crowds. Consequently, the 16 miles from Tidelock on the Potomac to Swain's lock have the most interesting diversions, and we found it a better area to loiter and look than to cover distance. We stopped to admire the canal stonework, lock mechanisms, weirs and flumes for handling water in the canal, the fish ladder at Olmstead Island, a heron, and numerous turtles.

Beyond Great Falls, signs of modern life diminish. The canal and the nearby river became our companions. After admiring the aqueduct at Seneca with its connected lock (MP22.7), we hit the roughest part of the towpath. For about 5 miles the surface was clay, with frequent puddles and soft damp spots. This was a vast improvement over the rocks, roots, ruts, and washboard we found there earlier in the summer, but it was still slow going. We look forward to more improvement before the next time we ride this stretch.

From Whites Ferry (MP 35.5) to Dam 4 (MP 84.5), the towpath is packed two-track, like a country lane. The canal is intermittently watered. Occasional small towns lie at intervals along the route, connected to the towpath by bridges; we stopped about every other day for supplies or ice cream. For the most part, though, the towpath runs through a

green leafy tunnel punctuated occasionally by a lock and lockhouse. We watched Canadian geese perched on one of the shallow ridges just at water level in the Potomac, a heron hunting for dinner, a few deer in the canal bed, and more geese learning to fly in V-formation. There weren't as many ducks and turtles as we've seen on other trips. We saw few other people, even fewer the farther we were from Washington.

Between Dam 4 and McMahon's Mill (MP 88.1), the towpath is impassable. The detour goes up a steep hill for a tenth of a mile, with a Pepsi machine standing improbably in someone's driveway at the end of the steep climb. From there, the detour runs about 4.6 miles through rolling farmland before rejoining the towpath. After the detour, the towpath runs on a ledge at the base of a cliff. In this area the river was dammed, and canal boats ran in the resulting slackwater.

The city of Williamsport (MP 100) is reconstructing a section of the canal. We watched a crew rebuilding Lock 44, then visited the reconstructed turning basin that once formed the business district. After Williamsport we returned to the woods until Big Pool (MP 112.1), but then the canal, the railroad, and noisy I70 all squeeze together until Hancock (MP 124.1). This marks the entry to the Appalachian Mountains. Fortunately, the highway turns away at Hancock, leaving the railroad as our companion. Now that the canal is climbing through the mountains, locks are more frequent. The grade on the towpath remains gentle as the river makes great sweeping loops, but the hills rise steeply on both sides of the river and civilization is farther away than ever.

At Sorrel Ridge (MP 154.1) the towpath turns away from the river, headed for Paw Paw Tunnel. This 3/5-mile tunnel is the most popular feature of the western end of the canal. This trip we chose to walk, lighting the walls as we went. Even on a September Tuesday, we saw quite a few people. The approach to the tunnel lifts the canal most of the way to the level of Cumberland — there are only nine locks in the remaining 30 miles, three of them at Oldtown.



Paw Paw Tunnel



Great Blue Heron

Near Cumberland, the countryside opens up into farmlands and suburbs. We still saw another heron and a few turtles lined up like sequins on logs. A mile or two from Cumberland the towpath becomes a dike along the river with no tree cover. This is sunny and hot in the summer, but we enjoyed the views of Cumberland as we rode into town.

We made this a leisurely trip, with overnights at Swain's Lock (MP 16.7), Brunswick (MP 55.0), Opequon Junction (MP 90.9), and Indigo Neck (MP 139.2) for four and a half days on the towpath. You can ride it much faster, but at the cost of stopping to appreciate the history.

We're glad we decided to camp instead of leaving the canal each night for a B&B. The spirit of the towpath gradually seeps into your soul, and each encounter with modern business breaks the spell a little. By the time we reached Cumberland, we had succeeded in setting current concerns aside, and it was a bit of a shock to return to the world – and staying in town broke the spell of the towpath.

We ate well, too. Dinners were typically canned chicken or seafood over rice or noodles, augmented with a sauce, garlic, onion, ginger, or a fresh vegetable. Most notably, Anne came with a zucchini the size of my forearm, and we carved off chunks for a few days. Breakfast was pancakes for Roy and me, cereal for Anne. We gave up our ultra-light backpacking stove that's only good for boiling water in favor of one with control over the heat. We added to the cook kit a decent frying pan and a perforated plate that serves as a vegetable steamer as well as a pasta strainer. This added a little weight but opened vast new culinary horizons.

It turned out to be convenient to have the van in Cumberland. We had considered putting the bikes on the Scenic Railroad to Frostburg, then riding over Savage Mountain. However, when we got to Cumberland on Tuesday evening 9/23, we found ourselves distinctly uninterested in cranking up Savage Mountain with a full load of gear. So we rode the scenic railroad to Frostburg and back, bought fresh groceries, then drove west on Alt US40 and north on MD546 to the Mason-Dixon Campground, right on the MD/PA state line. The views from the scenic railroad are terrific, and we look forward to completion of trail there.

From Frostburg, the trail will someday go along the east flank of Big Savage Mountain and pass under the mountain through a tunnel. This tunnel is unsafe, and the trail isn't open yet, so we used paved roads on the west flank of Big Savage Mountain. The road from the campground to Meyersdale is mostly downhill and has little traffic. We didn't find a good road alternative to US219 between Meyersdale and Garrett; things will be much better sometime next year when that section of the Allegheny Highlands Trail opens.

At Garrett, we picked up the completed part of the Allegheny Highlands trail, using it and more roads to work our way to Confluence. Just outside of Confluence, we joined the Youghiogheny River Trail, which is open all the way to Boston.

On this side of the mountain, the trail is on railroad grades rather than a canal towpath. The feeling is entirely different. Obviously, the canal prism is gone. In addition, there's always a little gradient (downhill!) rather than levels and short hills at locks, and the cut-and-fill pattern has a subtly different feel. There are many fewer remnants of buildings and structures from the railroads, even though they stopped operating much more recently than the canal. These rail-trails don't lose contact with the rivers, though: we followed the Casselman and Youghiogheny Rivers down through Laurel and Chestnut Ridges.

As we worked our way down from Confluence, we started in the mountains and gradually re-entered the 20th century. Only Ohiopyle interrupts the first 25 miles of this trail. This is one of the most scenic trails in the country, with deep gorges through Laurel and Chestnut Ridges and great views of the Youghiogheny River. The approach to Connellsville is marked by a water plant, a power station, and a trestle over the Wheeler Bottom zoo and auto junkyard.

At Connellsville the river and trail leave the water gap through Chestnut Ridge and enters the farm and mining lands in the valley. The character of the river changes from whitewater to flatwater, and the setting changes from near-wilderness gorge to rural mining towns.

Connellsville features the only traffic light on the trail, where the bike lane crosses PA711. After a few blocks on a separate bike lane in town, the trail passes through a park and climbs a paved ramp to rejoin the railroad grade. The only convenient camping below Confluence is at Adelaide, 3 miles beyond Connellsville. Finished trail continues for 3 miles beyond the campground, to Dawson.

The 13.5 miles from Dawson to Smithton is open for travel, but almost completely undeveloped. Years of ad hoc vehicle traffic have smoothed it out a little, but it's rough at best and loose ballast at worst. The first 7 miles, to Layton, are seriously isolated. After that, there are occasional small mining towns. In a few places we used local roads to avoid some of the jouncing.

The bridge at Smithton is a welcome sight, because it means that the remaining 20 miles are on finished trail and it's only two more miles to real plumbing at Cedar Creek Park. At Cedar Creek we also found Katherine Lynch, who rode up to meet us and ride the last part of the trip with us -- and to shuttle us back to our cars. From here on in to Boston, we passed through many small company towns and found much more traffic on the trail. Even with this gradual re-entry, we were not really ready to quit when we reached Boston and Katherine's car.

All in all, this turned out to be a wonderful trip. The weather was with us, we had virtually no equipment or medical problems, we ate well, we had no problems with trail-finding, and we picked a pace that suited us and allowed us to appreciate the route. We look forward to riding the trip again, with some of the current gaps filled in, and we recommend it to other people looking for a week's bike camping trip away from traffic.



Finished!

Logistics

We decided to ride westward from Washington to Pittsburgh rather than eastward from Pittsburgh. The major reason was the difference in gradient between a towpath and a railroad grade. The C&O towpath is nearly level except for 8-10' rises at the locks; we don't think it's noticeably easier to ride down than up. Along the Youghiogheny River, on the other hand, the gradient is a steady slope; we find that we ride a gear or two lower going up than going down. So we decided to ride the Yough downhill, which meant riding from Washington. If you're committed to riding over Savage Mountain, you might prefer to ride the opposite direction: The Pittsburgh side of the mountain is on low-traffic roads with rolling hills; the Washington side of the mountain is on a steep, busy road. You might prefer to ride down steep, busy Alt US40.

To ride from Washington to Pittsburgh, we had to get ourselves, our bikes, and our baggage to Washington. We decided to drive to Washington and get someone to drive our van back to Cumberland. That would permit us to resupply from the van, make it possible to retrieve the car from Pittsburgh in an evening, and allow some of us who had to be at work 9/29 to stop early if we got delayed. It turned out to be fairly hard to find a driver for this purpose, but we eventually got offers from both Allegheny Expeditions of Cumberland and Catoctin Tours of Thurmont. We chose the former; we picked up Laurie and Homer in Cumberland early on Friday 9/19 and turned the van over to them in Georgetown a little before noon.

We retrieved the van when we got to Cumberland on Tuesday evening 9/23 and used it to hopscotch down to Confluence. The happy consequence of this change of plans left it in Confluence, where we had a relatively easy retrieve the day after we got to Pittsburgh.

We were able to use our own vehicle to avoid riding over Savage Mountain. Clearly we'd rather ride through on railroad grades, but the Big Savage Tunnel is in a dangerous state of disrepair and partially collapsed. Until that tunnel is repaired, a shuttle service from Frostburg to MD546 would make this wonderful ride feasible for many, many people who wouldn't consider it if they have to ride over the hill. By next fall, with the planned 1998 trail construction complete, a shuttle out of Frostburg would close the missing link in the Washington-Pittsburgh connection.

Statistics

Schedule

Fri 9/19		Stage shuttle from Confluence via Cumberland to DC
Fri 9/19	mp 16.7	DC --> Swains Lock (odo 18.4, 18.4 mi)
Sat 9/20	mp 55.0	Swains Lock --> Brunswick (odo 60.2, 41.8 mi)
Sun 9/21	mp 90.9	Brunswick --> Opequon Jct (odo 97.6, 37.4mi)
Mon 9/22	mp 139.2	Opequon Jct --> Indigo Neck (odo 147.2, 49.6 mi)
Tue 9/23	mp 184.5	Indigo Neck --> Cumberland (Holiday Inn, odo 192.7, 44.9 mi)

First half: 192.1 mi 4 breakfast, 5 lunch, 4 dinner on trail

Wed 9/24	0.0 mi	Scenic RR --> Frostburg, drive to Mason-Dixon Campground (rest day)
Thu 9/25	43.1 mi	Mason-Dixon Campground --> Confluence (odo 235.2, 43.1 mi)
Fri 9/26	mp 55.1	Confluence --> Adelaide (odo 266.9, 31.7 mi)
Sat 9/27	mp 19.1	Adelaide --> Boston (odo 302.6, 35.7 mi)

Second half: 110.5 mi 2 breakfast, 4 lunch, 2 dinner on trail

Total: 303.7 mi 6 breakfast, 9 lunch, 6 dinner on trail

Mechanical Problems

1 broken seat	rail detached from seat back, fortunately in front of Fletcher's, which had a shop
1 broken pannier	attach bracket came off, retaining strap broke; screw recovered and repair effected
1 falling mirror	periodically fell off handlebar, retrieved each time