

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Parks: our best idea**

by Peggy Dennis, MCCF President

This past month saw the celebration of National Public Lands Day on September 26, and the airing of Ken Burns' great documentary series on our National Parks. My husband and I chose to build our home across the road from the C&O Canal National Historic Park (NHP) at Great Falls. We walk on the trails, take visitors to see the falls, and canoe out on the Potomac River. We even volunteer to help with maintenance to keep the trails safe and walkable. I am frequently amazed by the number of people who live in Montgomery County and don't know that we have a major national park here, or who are vaguely aware of the fact but have never visited the park, one of the most heavily used in the country.

This past week, we took the time to get to know the entire park – all 184 miles of it. With two cars, four bicycles and my brother and sister-in-law from England, we drove west to Cumberland. Over eight days we aging baby boomers cycled the full length of the Canal from Cumberland to Georgetown. Was it tiring or grueling? No. Was it a great escape? Yes. Was it exhilarating, tranquilizing, soothing, fascinating and fun? Definitely!

The C&O NHP is as much a historical park as a nature park. We started our trip at the Visitors Center in Cumberland – a sweet little museum in its own right. Then, as we cycled we stopped to read the scores of informational message boards along the way. We learned about Civil War battles that took place close to the river; the system of canal locks and their keepers; aqueducts, dams, and the ruins of mills and other extinct industrial enterprises. We walked our bicycles through the Pawpaw Tunnel, and spent a half day at Harper's Ferry where the 150th anniversary of John Brown's raid is being commemorated. I had never heard of Fort Frederick, a "gem" among our state parks located just west of Hagerstown, which was built during the French and Indian Wars and was important to the first wave of western expansion. We enjoyed looking at the paddling canal that uses the hot water outflow from the electrical plant at Dickerson to allow expert white water paddlers to train year round. And we relaxed and watched the little "Jubal Early" at White's Ferry carrying early morning commuters across the Potomac. All in all, we took in an enormous amount of history as we traveled.

The park is also a green, serene escape from the stress of life in Montgomery County, and cycling is a great way to discover hidden and extraordinary things. We spent sunset at a scenic overlook admiring a breathtaking view of a perfect horseshoe bend in the Potomac River near Little Orleans in Allegheny County. This overlook is rated as one of the best views in the country by National Geographic, yet it's on an obscure dirt road. It does not show up on any of our Maryland maps, and there are no signposts directing visitors to it. Only a local like Steve, our B&B host for our second night, would think to tell you, "you've got to go see this place!"

We saw lots of wildlife: deer, rabbits and squirrels (just like here in MoCo), great blue herons, green herons, pileated woodpeckers, humming birds, several sleek black rat snakes, a flock of wild turkeys and painted turtles by the dozens. Three otters swimming in different spots were most enchanting.

The fat, complacent couple sitting on the far bank on their broad, flat tails and wearing beaver coats looked for all the world like founding members of the Cumberland Chamber of Commerce. A raccoon four feet up a tree beside the tow path lunged out at me, hissing and growling at me as I cycled past. I must have startled him out of his warm, afternoon nap!

Do I recommend this adventure for everyone? You bet! Mobility issues? Tell that to the guy who makes his living by driving his electric wheelchair 6 miles up the towpath to Harper's Ferry every day to sell chilled bottled water to thirsty hikers. And plenty of folks are cycling the towpath with toddlers in tow or on carrier seats. Young children can easily ride for many miles on this virtually flat and very safe trail. If touring the entire towpath seems too daunting, try a day trip in Montgomery County starting at White's Ferry and ending at Georgetown. To help plan a ride like this, pick up a book about bicycling the C & O Canal Towpath at the Old Tavern at Great Falls or at a local sporting goods store. Or visit the website: [www.bikewashington.org/canal](http://www.bikewashington.org/canal) and look for the C & O Canal Bicycling Guide. But whatever you do, don't look for excuses to avoid or postpone this wonderful adventure!

And please, volunteer to help out in a county, state or national park convenient to you. So many different kinds of assistance are needed with a number of different organizations from "weed warriors" to stream monitors, from docents to hiking guides and helpers at special events. An excellent website to learn about volunteer opportunities in our many parks is: [www.trailvoice.com](http://www.trailvoice.com). And don't limit your park time to just your most convenient local park. Explore other local, state and national parks to enrich your life in the simplest, most fundamental of ways – reconnecting with nature, our past and our very roots.

*The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to [theelms518@earthlink.net](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*