

An Astonishingly Invisible Grand Idea: Washington's Potomac Water Way to the West

"And yet even as all history saturates the landscape, it has an astonishing ability to remain invisible," Joel Achenbach reflects while driving across the Potomac River on the American Legion Memorial Bridge (keeping eyes on the road!)¹. Upriver the Great Falls roils the water as it tumbles down 76 feet of rock and squeezes through Mather Gorge. Above, climbers test their skills on steep cliffs. Downriver the Little Falls are skirted by a kayak slalom course, marking the division between the Appalachian Piedmont and the Atlantic Coastal Plain. The river then opens to a wide, placid expanse, lazily gliding past the nation's capital. Who would imagine that the 400-mile river was once considered a possible water highway to Ohio?

At Colvin Run Mill we explain that George Washington valued his land where the mill now stands on "Account of the Mill seat – quantity of Meadow land – contiguity to the Great Falls (where a town is erecting)," as wrote to his nephew in 1793. A dry as toast chronicler, he reveals no hint of his "grand idea" to make the Potomac River a water way to the west. Matildaville, the town to which he refers, was three miles from Colvin Run, a small cluster of buildings housing workers chipping their way through solid stone to construct a canal, the first in America, to bypass the Great Falls.

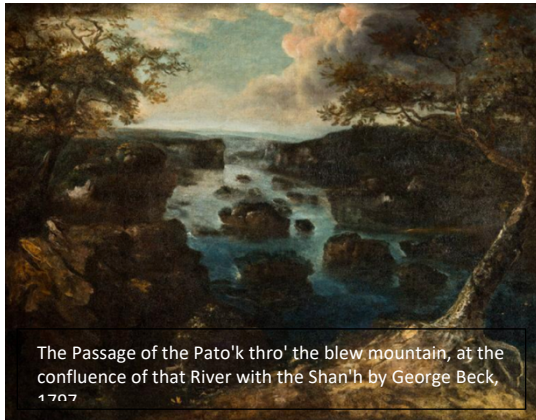


Washington's friend Henry Lee had invested a bundle on the promise of Matildaville, named after his deceased first wife, Matilda Ludwell Lee (yes, cousins). Asked by James Madison to assess Henry's investment, Washington uncharacteristically enthused that produce of the far west, Maryland, and Pennsylvania would travel down the Potomac to the Great Falls, opening "a field almost too extensive for imagination: and will induce the Merchants of Alexandria, George Town and perhaps other places, to establish advanced Posts at the Falls to catch the produce on its passage." There it was, in all its glory: his "grand idea."

Washington, a savvy map reader, viewed the Potomac as a western river. The forks of the Ohio River, present day Pittsburgh, are closer to Alexandria than to Philadelphia. Thomas Jefferson, inspired by the view from the rock that bears his name on the heights of Harper's Ferry, rhapsodized that "The passage of the Patowmac through the Blue rides is perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in nature... [where the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers] "rush together against the mountain, rend it asunder and pass off to the sea." Providence had "dealt her favors to us with so profuse a hand," echoed Washington. Not one to theorize, Washington

¹ [The Grand Idea: George Washington's Potomac and the Race to the West](#), Joel Achenbach. Simon & Schuster 2004. Discussed at Colvin Run Mill Park book club January 24, 2023.

decided to investigate the practicality of his “grand idea.” The year was 1784. The victorious General had time on his hands.



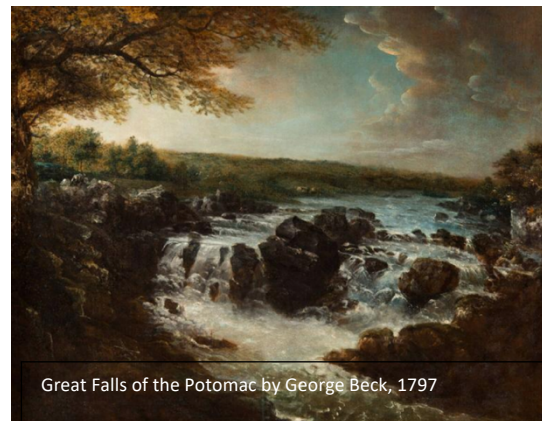
The Passage of the Pato'k thro' the blew mountain, at the confluence of that River with the Shan'h by George Beck, 1797

Transport on the Potomac River was not a new idea. Twenty years earlier two ambitious Scots, John Ballendine and John Semple, who were uncharacteristically loose with their finances, envisioned floating iron products from Harper’s Ferry to Alexandria. Washington was moved by their vision to support passage of the Navigation Act of 1772 in the House of Burgess to fund canals or channels around or though the Shenandoah, Seneca, Great, and Little Falls. Maryland, which owns the entire river courtesy of a 1632 land grant, was unenthusiastic. Canal building would have to wait

until after the revolution.

Jefferson’s and Washington’s vision of the river was much grander than to provide mere transport. Rather, they imagined it would “cement” the developing west with the established east. After the revolution, the newly formed states were bordered by the British to the north and the Spanish to the west. New frontier settlements could easily be picked off by the Europeans or even form new entities with questionable alliances.

But more than nature and nation building were at play. Competition with other states prodded the Virginians to move quickly. As the most populous and wealthiest newly minted State, Virginia strove to retain its primer position. Jefferson foresaw competition between “the Hudson, the Patomac and the Mississippi” for routes to the west.



Great Falls of the Potomac by George Beck, 1797

Virginia would press its advantage by having the new nation’s capital placed on the shores of the Potomac, a proposition the Senate approved in July 1790. Washington’s “grand idea” loomed ever larger: “There is such an intimate connection in political and pecuniary considerations between the federal district and the inland navigation of the Potowmac, that no exertions, in my opinion, shoud’d be dispensed with to accomplish the latter. For in proportion as this advances, the City will be benefited.”

” The last or perhaps the first factor behind the “grand idea,” was personal financial gain, which Washington downplayed. Land claims in the far west made by himself and on his behalf by fellow surveyor and brother-in-arms, William Crawford, totaled nearly 42,000 acres. Some of these were made in defiance of the 1763 British proclamation that declared that lands west of

the Appalachian Mountains belonged to Indian tribes. Washington regarded the proclamation as ridiculous, temporary, and a reason not to trust the British. He shrewdly assessed that increase river trade would drive up the value of his holdings.

Washington was uniquely qualified to explore a possible western waterway. Five times military exploits and curiosity had propelled him to travel to close to the Forks of the Ohio and, on occasion, beyond. The 1784 trip was a journey down memory lane, but he chose not to reminisce. His purpose was much grander.

On September 1, 1784, Washington set out from Mount Vernon with a small entourage and “proceeded to Difficult Bridge and lodged at one Sheppard’s Tavern,” less than a mile from the current Colvin Run Mill. Intelligence gathering continued at Harper’s Ferry and up to the Forks of the Ohio. Returning through Morgan’s Fort, Andrew Ice ferried him across the Cheat River (a roadside memorial marks the spot south of Interstate 68 at Cheat Lake). He endured a storm without shelter in the mountains and worked his way south through Harrisonburg back to Mount Vernon. Thirty-four days, 680 miles on horseback.



More convinced than ever, he sketched out a possible route: From the Ohio River down the Little Kanawha at Parkersburg to Bulls Town, portage nine and a half miles to the west fork of the Monongahela River, float downstream to the Cheat just north of Morgan’s Fort (a year later would be incorporated as Morgan Town), then paddle upstream on the Cheat to Dunkard’s Bottom, portage over the mountains to the North Branch of the Potomac, and onward down to the Tidewater.



Enthusiasm bubbled. Money flowed. George Washington, now the president of the newly established Patowmack Company, frequently toasted to the “success to the navigation of the Patowmack.” A hands-on fellow, he canoed around Seneca and Shenandoah Falls, conceding that rocks and occasional “crooked passages” presented challenges. Black powder used to blow up rocks was inefficient and fickle. (Dynamite would not be invented until the 1860’s by Swedish scientist Alfred Noble – he of the peace prize). Progress was excruciatingly slow.

Washington kept his “grand idea” in sight: two scenes that were “great subjects for paintings,” rendered by George Beck, graced Mount Vernon’s New Room after he retired as the nation’s president. Maltidaville was beginning to thrive with mills, an inn, market, and a few houses.

Cargo was transferred from upstream to downstream boats as canal locks were completed. People travelled for miles to witness the canals being built, the “greatest engineering feat” in America.

Washington’s “grand idea” was taking shape but only “limpingly” so (his word). He would not live to see the first boat clear the Great Falls canal in 1802, the only year the Patowmack Company made a profit as revenues overwhelmed expenses to keep the river navigable.

Canal craze would fade with the introduction of the National Road and the onslaught of the iron horse. In one of history’s ironies, on the same July 4, 1828, the first spadefuls of dirt were dug for the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal (on the Maryland side of the Potomac), while forty miles north in Baltimore a stone was dedicated that marked the beginning of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The B&O would reach Cumberland, Maryland in fourteen years; the C&O eight years later. The C&O would go no further, but train tracks would go to Ohio and beyond, spreading like spider webs over the country.



Ruins of the Company House, Matildaville

The Washington estate would not see the value of its western lands increase, Henry Lee would go bankrupt, Matildaville would eventually vanish, and the Federal City would be a sleepy, southern city for years to come. New York City and Baltimore would become major ports, gateways to the west. The nation would be bound together, not with water, but with sturdier stuff - iron.

Ideas for converting the C&O canal to a scenic highway started and ended with the Clara Barton Parkway. Damming the river, as proposed by the Army Corps of Engineers that was littering the west with concrete walls and artificial lakes, never took hold. What remains is one of the nation’s wildest urban rivers, as scenic as when Washington and Jefferson stood in awe of its magnificence, where sightseers, hikers, climbers, kayakers, and canoers enjoy nature in a place saturated with history, and where Washington’s “grand idea” is astonishingly invisible.