



# *Hiking* **VIRGINIA**

**by Bill & Mary Burnham**

## **Great Falls Park**



GUILFORD, CONNECTICUT  
HELENA, MONTANA

AN IMPRINT OF THE GLOBE PEQUOT PRESS

This eTrail Provided  
in Partnership with



**Trails.com**™

## 8 Great Falls Park

---

Land and history are interwoven throughout Great Falls Park—the spot where George Washington championed a canal to skirt the Potomac River’s 77-foot “great falls.” This may be metropolitan D.C., but beyond the crowds, you can find small reminders of a time when our nation’s capital was a tidal backwater and our country’s survival wasn’t assured. Stones in a restored canal wall bear inscriptions unique to the masons who built it. Ruins of old chimneys and homes in Matildaville mark the boomtown that lived and died on hopes that the Patowmack Canal would succeed. For a time it did succeed, ferrying farm goods from western lands to eastern seaports. Then it went bankrupt, leaving us with canal ruins, inspired views over Mather Gorge, wildflowers that bloom spring through fall, and a moment of solitude.

---

**Start:** From the park visitor center.

**Distance:** 3.4-mile loop.

**Approximate hiking time:** 2 hours.

**Difficulty rating:** Easy; well-traveled trails with a few short, steep sections along the Potomac.

**Trail surface:** Rocky cliff tops, dirt footpaths, dirt roads, riverside trails, hardwood forests, and marsh.

**Land status:** National park.

**Nearest town:** Great Falls, VA.

**Other trail users:** Joggers, cross-country skiers, equestrians, mountain bikers, and rock climbers.

**Canine compatibility:** Dogs permitted.

**Trail contacts:** Great Falls Park, Great Falls, VA, (703) 285-2966, [www.nps.gov/gwmp/](http://www.nps.gov/gwmp/)

grfa. Great Falls is one park in a series under the umbrella of the George Washington Memorial Parkway. Other spots worth visiting are Turkey Run Park, Theodore Roosevelt Island, Arlington National Cemetery, and Dike Marsh Wildlife Preserve.

**Schedule:** Open daily, sunrise to sunset, except Christmas.

**Fees/permits:** Entrance fee, \$5.00 (\$3.00 by means other than a vehicle, i.e., bike, horse, motorcycle, on foot) good for three days and access to Maryland’s C&O Canal National Historical Park. A state fishing license is required to fish in the park.

**Maps:** USGS maps: Vienna, VA; Falls Church, VA.

**Finding the trailhead:** From I-495: Take exit 13 and turn left onto Georgetown Pike/Virginia Route 193. Go 4.3 miles and turn right onto Old Dominion Drive and enter the park. From the park boundary, drive 1.2 miles to the visitor center parking lot. *DeLorme: Virginia Atlas & Gazetteer*: Page 76, A3.

### The Hike

---

Canal Cut, the final descent on the Great Falls skirting canal, drops 76 feet through solid rock in Mather Gorge. Considered an engineering marvel in its time, the canal—and especially this last passage—evolved painfully. Dynamite was a discovery some eighty years away, so workers on the Patowmack Canal hand-drilled bore-



*Great Falls on the Potomac.*

holes, poured in black powder, and ignited the volatile mix. If dust particles exploded prematurely, few within range survived. It took sixteen years to construct the canal around Great Falls; all but one year was spent blasting Canal Cut.

George Washington believed the Potomac River would serve as a great unifier for a young nation. He wasn't the first or the last to view it as a means to an end. From the day Captain John Smith ventured up the Potomac to Little Falls (near present-day Georgetown) Americans have had their way with this river. Explorers, canal-builders, farmers, miners, theme-park promoters—each has left a mark. Today various agencies, commissions, and nonprofits pursue watershed protection and monitor stream pollutants. Industries and farms situated in the Potomac's massive four-state, 15,000-square-mile river basin discharge pollutants into its tributaries daily. Along the southern shores of the middle Potomac, Northern Virginia grows an estimated 70 square miles every year. Housing subdivisions gobble up land on such small tributaries as Bullneck Run, Pimmit Run, and Difficult Run.

But as Washington's Patowmack Canal illustrates all too well, the river has the final say. Despite Herculean efforts, seasonal fluctuations in water levels made the

canal operable only a few months during the year. It declared bankruptcy in 1828, some twenty-six years after completion.

On a spring afternoon, an eagle soars above craggy Potomac river rocks below Great Falls, a 70-foot vertical drop of thunder, mist, and frothing water. The raptor dips and alights on the south wall of Mather Gorge. Upended boulders show distinct layers of compressed rock that built the gorge millions of years ago. Spleenwort ferns grow thick here, where the River Trail cuts dangerously close to the cliff edge. Lined with pink spring beauties in May, this mile-and-a-half route follows an up-and-down course, eventually reaching river level at the far southern end of the park. It gets heavy use, with side trails leading to gorgeous overlooks of the waterfalls. Beyond these points, however, foot traffic dwindles and the River Trail becomes a nice conduit to the less crowded areas in the park's southern reaches.

It should be expected that a park 20 miles from the nation's capital attracts a large number of visitors. Kayakers frolic in the surf below the falls. Rock climbers dangle off Birds Nest, one of twenty-plus mapped climbs on the cliffs of Mather Gorge. Joggers use the wide Matildaville Trail and Old Carriage Road. Painters set up easel and palette along Falls Overlook Trail. Picnickers lounge in grassy fields under shady red oaks.

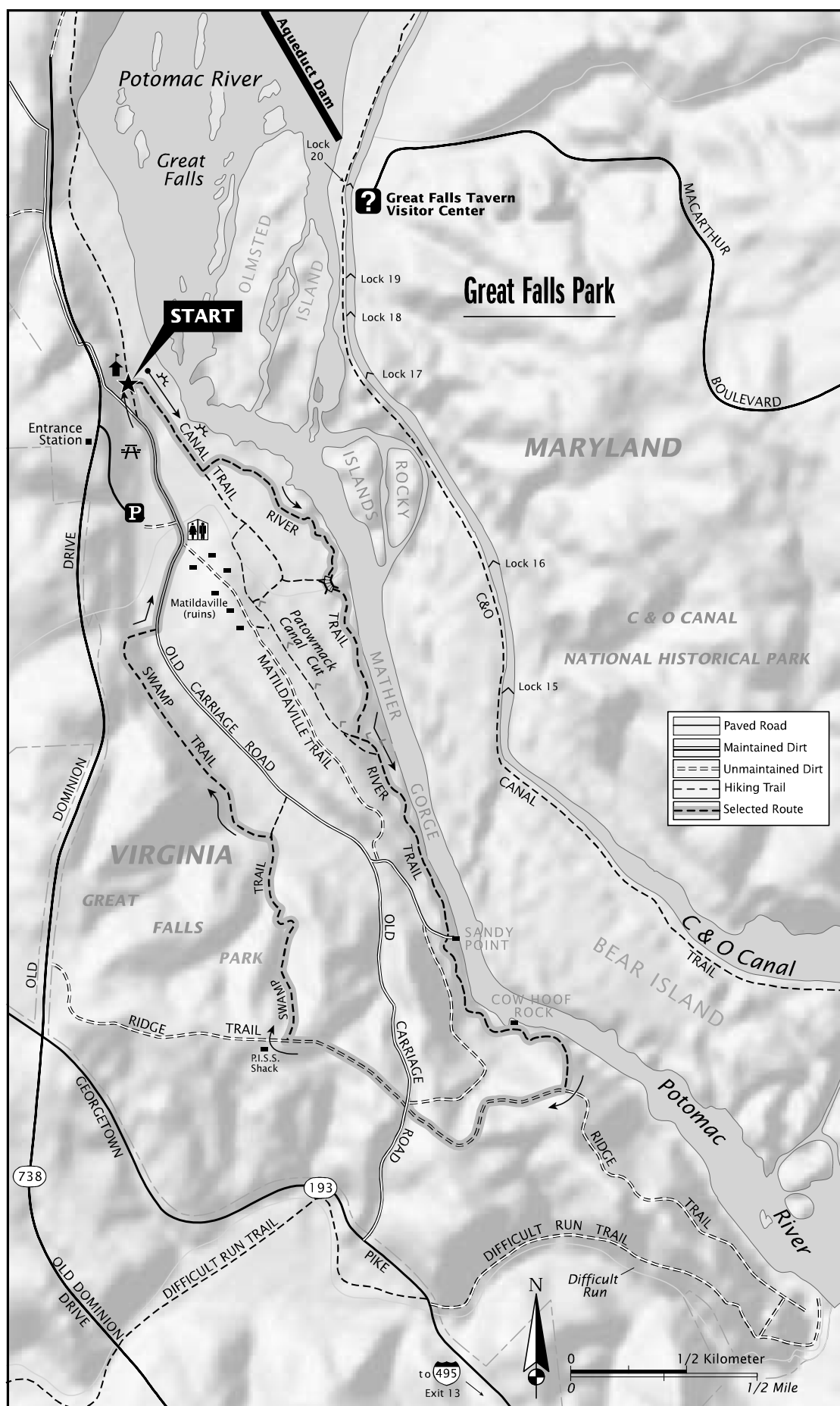
All the activity makes the Swamp Trail—in the southern section of the park—that much more attractive. It's a hiker-only path that branches off the Ridge Trail. From a slight hill, it drops through a forest of tulip poplar and beech and reaches a swampy confluence of unnamed streams. Sluggish and meandering, the streams sup-

port a lush undergrowth of wood fern and wild-flowers. Concave green trillium leaves spread across a widening forest floor. It's unusual to see this wild-flower in such great numbers east of the Blue Ridge, but it thrives in these wet conditions nonetheless. In fact, on this brief stretch of trail, plant life approaches the variety typical of an Appalachian cove—a forest type defined by its wet,

sheltered climate and diversity of trees and plants. Eastern hemlock, white basswood, tulip poplar—with a little sleuthing, you'll find representatives of each tree along the Swamp Trail.

The priceless scenery we enjoy today was viewed by James Rumsey as merely supplies. Rumsey came to Great Falls in 1785 as the overseer of construction on the Patowmack Canal, hand-picked by Washington and carrying tremendous expectations. From hophornbeam trees, workers fashioned tool handles. White oak trees fell to make planks for supply boats. Masons carved canal walls out of the bedrock. They inscribed finished blocks with a unique symbol to ensure they could document their work for pay. Unfortunately, money proved a sparse commodity during construction and the weather was unpredictable and uncooperative. It was a recipe for disaster.

**FYI** Masons carved canal walls out of bedrock. To ensure payment, they inscribed finished blocks with a sign identifiable only to themselves.

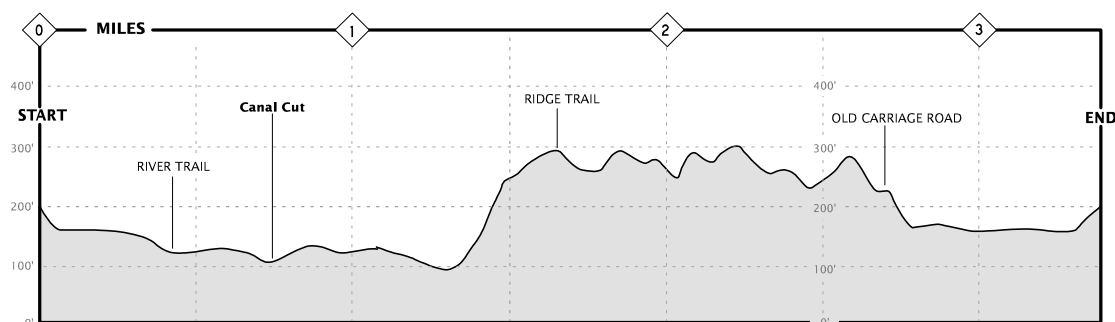


Rumsey quit after only one year on the job (he would later resurface in a dispute over who “owned” the patent for the modern steamship). After Rumsey, six different men oversaw the Great Falls project before the canal opened in 1802.

For twenty-six years, the Great Falls Canal moved thousands of pounds of flour, corn, livestock, and farm goods from western territories to eastern ports. Each boat that passed through finished its journey by dropping through Canal Cut, past bore marks made by workers who blew solid rock away with black powder. This same passage today bears little resemblance to its heyday. Trees cling to the hard-hewn cliff walls. Weeds grow everywhere. And beyond it all, the Potomac, America’s river, keeps on rolling.

## Miles and Directions

- 0.0 START** at the Great Falls Park visitor center. Follow a gravel sidewalk across restored parts of the Patowmack Canal, falls overlooks, and picnic area.
- 0.3** Bear left onto a dirt footpath, the start of blue-blazed River Trail. (Note: Use caution. Footing is tricky and the trail runs close to the edge of Mather Gorge, named in honor of Stephen T. Mather, director of the national park system from 1917 to 1929.)
- 0.7** Descend to a boardwalk that spans a stream. A footpath along the right cliff wall leads to an opening on the river.
- 0.8** Cross the Canal Cut.
- 1.2** Cross a paved road that sweeps left to a boat landing on the Potomac River at Sandy Point. Beyond the road, the trail passes through American beech, hophornbeam, oak, and pine as you climb and descend short, steep hills before topping out at Cow Hoof Rock. (FYI: American beech is a tree often recognizable for the initials folks carve in the tree’s thin bark. Resist the temptation.)
- 1.6** River Trail ends at the Ridge Trail. Turn right onto the Ridge Trail. **Sidetrip:** A left turn onto Ridge Trail takes you to Difficult Run Trail in a half mile and, beyond that, another river overlook. Difficult Run follows its namesake stream outside park boundaries.
- 1.9** Cross over Old Carriage Road on the Ridge Trail.
- 2.0** Split rail fencing on the left, parallel to the Ridge Trail, marks an unblazed path that leads to the park boundary on Old Dominion Road. Continue straight on the Ridge Trail.
- 2.1** Turn right onto Swamp Trail. There is a fenced enclosure and metal shack here, part of the Potomac Interceptor Sewer system. (FYI: If you’ve noticed a particularly obnoxious



smell during any part of the hike, this intercept system is likely the culprit.) The Swamp Trail is a footpath through dense oaks, tulip poplar, and maple.

- 2.4** Bear left and continue walking along a flat, wet trail.
- 2.7** After a 90-degree turn, the Swamp Trail intersects with Old Carriage Road. Turn left onto Old Carriage Road to return to the visitor center.
- 3.0** Old Carriage Road and the Matildaville Trail meet in a forked intersection. Turn left to return to the visitor center. **Sidetrip:** A right turn brings you to the Matildaville ruins.
- 3.3** Veer right on the trail as it approaches the visitor center.
- 3.4** Hike ends at the Great Falls Park visitor center. (FYI: For an extended hike, follow the streamside path upriver to Riverbend Park.)

## Hike Information

---

### Local Information

**Fairfax County Convention & Visitors Bureau**, Vienna, VA, (703) 790-3329, [www.visitfairfax.org](http://www.visitfairfax.org).

**Fairfax County Visitor Center**, (800) 732-4732.

### Local Events/Attractions

**Reston Concerts on the Town**, Saturday evenings in June, July, and August, Reston, VA, (703) 707-9045, [www.restontowncenter.com](http://www.restontowncenter.com). Sit back and enjoy a variety of musical entertainers under the stars.

**Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts**, Vienna, VA, (703) 255-1860, [www.nps.gov/wotr/](http://www.nps.gov/wotr/). National park dedicated to performing arts. Three different facilities offer year-round performances. The Theater in the Woods is geared especially toward children.

**Columbia Pike Blues Festival**, May (the Sunday before Mother's Day), Columbia Pike, VA, (703) 892-2776, [www.uptownarlington.com/thepike](http://www.uptownarlington.com/thepike). A one-day free music festival featuring national and local blues acts, food, and vendors.

### Lodging

**The Arlington and Alexandria Bed & Breakfast Network**, (703) 549-3415, (888) 549-3415, [www.aabbn.com](http://www.aabbn.com). Assists with reservations for thirty area bed-and-breakfasts.

### Restaurants

**Serbian Crown Restaurant**, Great Falls, VA,

(703) 759-4150. Authentic Serbian and Russian food.

See also, Restaurants, page 60.

### Hike Tours

Park staff lead nature and historical tours all year. Call (703) 285-2966 for information.

### Organizations

**Fairfax Trails & Streams**, (703) 821-0975, [www.fairfaxtrails.org](http://www.fairfaxtrails.org). Champion of the Pimmit Run Trail and Fairfax Cross-County Trail, with links to other Northern Virginia hiking and preservation efforts.

**Capital Hiking Club**, c/o Susan Klein, (301) 229-5816, [www.capitalhikingclub.org](http://www.capitalhikingclub.org). Hikes and trips in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

**Center Hiking Club**, c/o Duncan Thompson, (703) 527-2349, [www.centerhikingclub.org](http://www.centerhikingclub.org). Hikes and trips in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

**Wanderbirds Hiking Club**, c/o Herb Cooper, (301) 460-3064, [www.wanderbirds.org](http://www.wanderbirds.org). Hikes in George Washington National Forest and Shenandoah National Park.

**Washington Women Outdoors**, Germantown, MD, (301) 864-3070, [www.washingtonwomenoutdoors.org](http://www.washingtonwomenoutdoors.org). Outdoor adventures for women, including hiking, kayaking, rock climbing, and biking.

**Northern Virginia Hiking Club**, Arlington, VA, (703) 440-1805, [www.nvhc.com](http://www.nvhc.com).

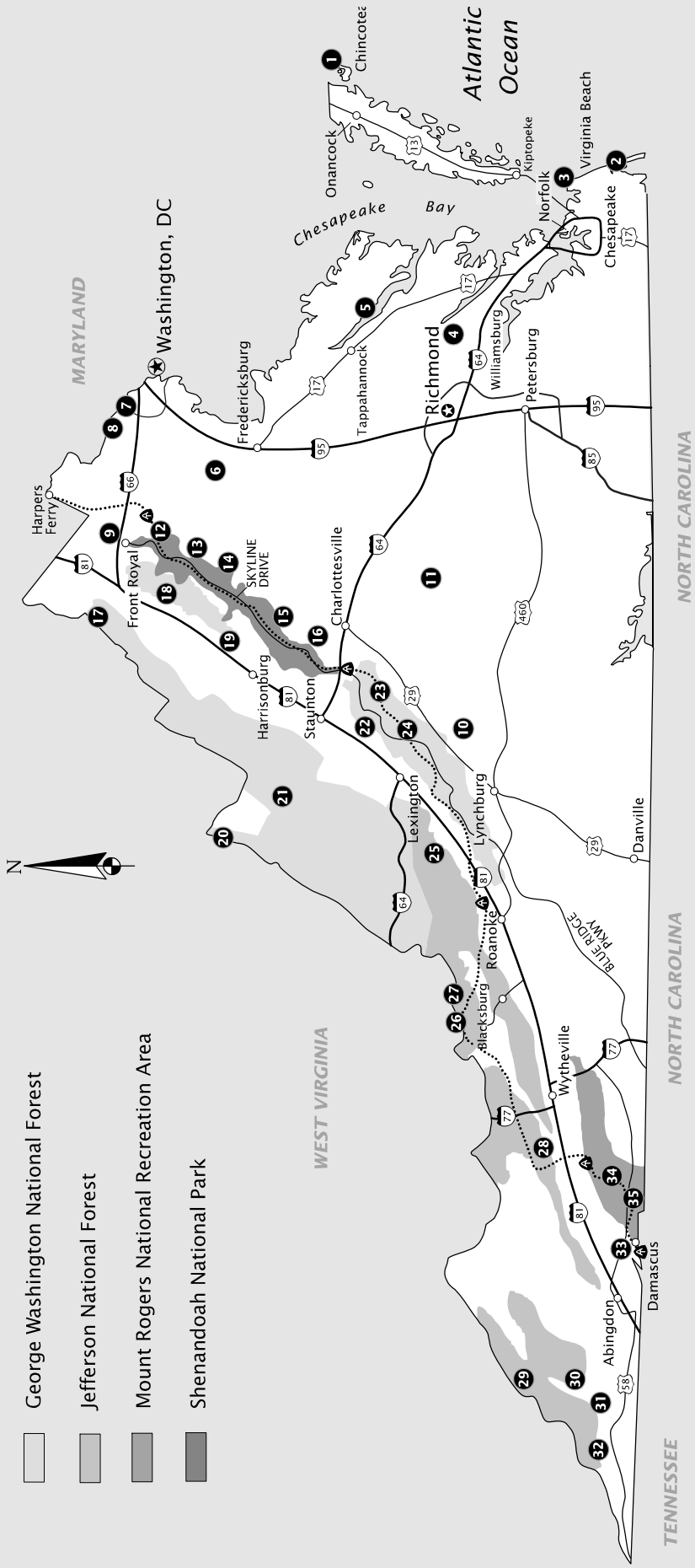
## **Other Resources**

**Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park**, Sharpsburg, MD, (301) 739-4200, [www.nps.gov/choh](http://www.nps.gov/choh). The C&O Canal along the Potomac River in Maryland succeeded where Washington's Patowmack Canal failed by linking farm markets west of the Appalachians to eastern seaports.

**Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC)**, Vienna, VA, (703) 242-0693, [www.patc.net](http://www.patc.net). PATC Map D covers Great Falls and vicinity. Call for maps, book orders, cabin rentals, scheduled hikes, and membership.



## Virginia



## Map Legend

	Interstate Highway
	U.S. Highway
	State Road
	County Road
	Township Road
	Forest Road
	Paved Road
	Paved Bike Lane
	Maintained Dirt Road
	Unmaintained Jeep Trail
	Singletrack Trail
	Highlighted Route
	Nat'l Forest/County Boundaries
	State Boundaries
	Railroad Tracks
	Power Lines
	Special Trail
	Rivers or Streams
	Water and Lakes
	Marsh

	Airfield		Hiking Trail
	Airport		Lighthouse
	Bike Trail		Mine
	No Bikes		Overlook
	Boat Launch		Parking
	Bridge		Picnic
	Bus Stop		Quarry
	Campground		Radio Tower
	Campsite		Rock Climbing
	Canoe Access		School
	Cattle Guard		Shelter
	Cemetery		Spring
	Church		Swimming
	Covered Bridge		Train Station
	Direction Arrows		Wildlife Refuge
	Downhill Skiing		Vineyard
	Fire Tower		Most Difficult
	Forest HQ		Difficult
	4WD Trail		Moderate
	Gate		Easy
	Golf Course		

# **A FALCON GUIDE<sup>®</sup>**

Copyright © 2004 by The Globe Pequot Press

The previous edition of this book was published in 2001  
by Beachway Press Publishing, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act or in writing from the publisher. Requests for permission should be addressed to The Globe Pequot Press, P. O. Box 480, Guilford, Connecticut 06437.

Falcon and FalconGuide are registered trademarks of The Globe Pequot Press.

All photos are by the authors.

ISSN 1547-3406

ISBN 0-7627-2747-0

Manufactured in the United States of America  
Second Edition/First Printing

The Globe Pequot Press assumes no liability for accidents happening to, or injuries sustained by, readers who engage in the activities described in this book.