

# 7. SENECA SANDSTONE BIKING TRAIL



## Bicycling through the Seneca Countryside

Seneca once the land of Indians; then, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, of frontiersmen and farmers; and for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of canallers and quarrymen. Today, the famous canal and sandstone quarries that put Seneca on the map have long been abandoned, and the community survives as a country store on River Road, and as scattered homes and cottages around the creek.

For thousands of years, early peoples moved through the Seneca area to fish, hunt and camp along the Potomac, followed, in time, by the historic "Indians" who planted maize and lived in palisaded villages. A 1712 map calls Seneca Creek the "Riviere de Senecards," noting its use as a canoe route by the Senecas, an Iroquois tribe from western New York State. Others derive the place name "Seneca" from Iroquois words meaning "plenty of stone."

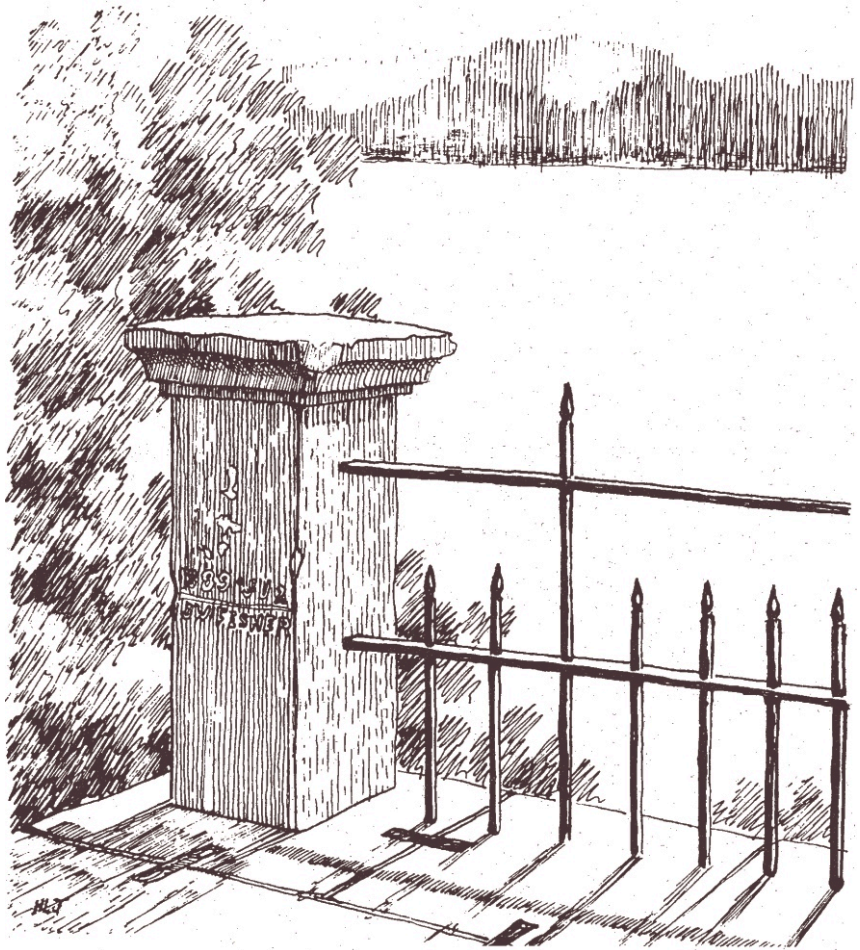
As the wilderness gave way to the axe and plow in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, tobacco became the cash crop around Seneca, but eventually depleted the soil. It was followed, in the next century, by an era of grain and livestock farming that survives even today.

In the 1790's Seneca stone was quarried and rafted eight miles down the Potomac to Great Falls, Virginia, where it was used in a "skirting canal" that enabled river boat men to bypass the falls. Construction of the C&O Canal in the 1830's made the stone even more valuable, and the canal gave it easy

passage to markets in Washington and Georgetown. With the shift to grain and the coming of the C&O Canal and the growing demand for "Seneca sandstone," Seneca entered its industrial heyday. Grist mills and warehouses were built, a store and hotel erected to serve canal traffic, and scores of men set to work in the local quarries. For years, Seneca-built and operated grain boats carried wheat and flour down the canal to Georgetown, and larger craft, including a steamboat, hauled the sandstone. When first cut, Seneca stone is relatively easy to work, but hardens on prolonged exposure to the air. These qualities, plus its proximity to the canal and the popularity of "brownstone" architecture in the Mid-1800's led to its extensive use. Seneca "brownstone," as it was called, built the Smithsonian "Castle" on the mall in the 1840's, the Washington, DC Aqueduct in the 1850's, and much of Washington's post-Civil War architecture.

By the mid-1920's, a century later, Seneca's industrial era was over: its inferior stone and a change in architectural taste had closed the quarries; floods and railroad competition overcame the canal. Even the local grist mill closed shop in the 1930's leaving Seneca to its old families and, in recent years, to pleasure boaters and fishermen, for whom many of the present facilities have been developed.

Proposals to develop historic interpretation programs on federal and state parklands at Seneca may bring still another era.



The Seneca Sandstone Biking Trail follows several threads of a complex tapestry: the development of local canal structures from Seneca sandstone, and the milling and shipping of sandstone made possible by the canal. From the canal, a longer loop trail branches out to explore the stone's use in homes and farms around Seneca Valley. The trail begins at the parking lot at Violet's Lock. You will see the first six stops as you ride the C&O Canal towpath.



### **1. Violet's Lock**

Named for Ab Violette, the last locktender, whose house has disappeared. As you face west toward Seneca, Violet's Lock is on the right, a "liftlock" that raised or lowered canal boats about eight feet. The lock on your left is a "guard Lock," through which local grain boats were admitted to the canal. The guard lock is still used to water an eighteen mile section of restored canal, the flow of water regulated by small "wicket gates" at the bottom of the larger lock gates. Both locks were built of Seneca sandstone. North of the locks was once the small village of Rushville, where thirsty canallers and quarrymen purchased moonshine whiskey from "Aunt" Priscilla Jenkins.

### **2. Dam #2**

Slanting across the Potomac River to Virginia at the head of the Seneca rapids are the remains of a 2500 foot rock dam, built by the C&O Canal Company from quarry waste about 1828. Now mostly rubble, it still impounds a five mile pool (known as "Seneca Lake") which supports heavy recreational use. Water from the pool is fed into the canal through guard lock #2, as it was during the canal days.

### **3. Canal Ditch**

Around Seneca the ditch was kept at 60 feet wide and 6 feet deep and could handle boats carrying 120 tons of cargo. From Violet's Lock to Georgetown the canal has been restored by the National Park Service, but above has been mostly left to nature since 1924 when commercial operations ended.

### **4. Riley's Lock and Lockhouse (also called Seneca Lock)**

Canallers boated day and night, sometimes shouting or blowing a horn to alert the locktender. Old timers recall "old man Johnny Riley," the last locktender at Seneca, as one who was never caught napping: "I didn't care what hour of the night it was, any hour of the night you went to his lock and holler ... there was the lantern waving you ahead."

The parking lot below the lockhouse was once a large basin where boats took on grain and flour from adjacent warehouses. Seneca stone is in the lock, lockhouse, and the remnants of a basin retaining wall at the northeast end of the parking lot. Informal re-enactments of the period are frequently performed at this site.

### **5. Seneca Aqueduct**

This is the first of eleven aqueducts between Georgetown and Cumberland, Maryland. In boating days, the trough was full of water and carried canal boats over the creek. On the north wall of the lock and aqueduct, look closely for the marks of the stone masons who built the aqueduct in 1829-30.

Also look for rope marks along the parapet, worn there by generations of mules and towlines. In September, 1971, a bad freshet on Seneca Creek collapsed the aqueduct's west arch. Flood marks from the historic Potomac floods of 1899 and 1936 can be found on a sandstone post on the southeast corner of the parapet. Now take the path to the north of the canal to the turning basin.



## 6. Canal Turning Basin

Here boats tied up to load stone from the nearby mill. Since canal boats were over 90 feet long, occasional basins like this one were the only places to turn around. Stone shipped from this basin went to docks in Georgetown, or up canal to Point of Rocks for trans-shipment on the B&O Railroad often carried on a steamboat especially adapted for the canal, called the "Aunt Chercy." Continue north from the turning basin (away from the River) and follow the path to the shell of the stone-cutting mill, located at the southern end of Tschiffely Mill Road.



## 7. Seneca Stone Mill



Built of Seneca sandstone about 1837, and used to cut and dress stone from the quarries just west of here. Freshly cut stone reached the mill on a narrow gauge railroad, in mule drawn gondola cars. Water from the turning basin powered a large turbine which ran the mill's machinery. By charging the mill rent for water from the turning basin, the Canal Company turned a small profit: in 1893, its bill to the Seneca Stone Company came to \$833.33. Just west of the mill are a series of overgrown quarries, developed from the high, sandstone bluffs. This deposit, which underlies most of western Montgomery County, is Triassic Age (about 200 million years ago) and is part of a larger formation that runs erratically from Connecticut to the Carolinas. Now cycle up Tschiffely Mill Road (dirt) to the site of the Tschiffely Mill at the River Road bridge.

## 8. Tschiffely Mill Site (pronounced Shif-fay-lee)

Mills on this site date back to 1780, about the time local farmers began to experiment with wheat. The last mill was run by the Tschiffely family from 1900-1931, and was obliterated by construction of the new highway bridge in the 1950's. Foundation stones were from the quarry. A narrow gauge railroad took flour and other mill products from the mill to grain boats ties up farther down on Seneca Creek. You will find the overgrown Tschiffely Mill race about 100 feet east of Poole's Store, the next stop.

## 9. Poole's General Merchandise Store

Thirsty? Cross River Road and stop in Poole's store for a refreshing drink. Can you picture counters on either side of the room and a pot-bellied stove in the middle? The store's interior looked exactly like that until remodeled in 1963. The store was built in 1901 by Frederick A Allnutt who previously owned a store along the canal in Seneca. This is an authentic general store, and a vital part of the rural community. Now follow Old River Road west. All the houses you will see are privately owned, so please stay on the public roads.



## 10. Allnutt House

This large white frame house was constructed in 1855 by Upton Darby, a prominent figure in the Seneca area. The Frederick Allnutt family purchased the home from Darby in 1990. Turn right off of Old River Road onto Montevideo Road. At the first bend in Montevideo Road you will see the Rockland-Mann Farm on your right.

## 11. Rocklands



At the turn of the century, this house was the showplace and social center of the prosperous agrarian community. It is an excellent example of local sandstone use, showing fine joining of the sandstone. Rocklands was built in 1878 for Benoni and Emily Allnutt, members of two old and influential families (Allnutt and Dawson). The large two-story residence of Italianate design has five bays, a hip roof and two flush gable chimneys at each end. A smaller wing with a gallery porch is attached. Seven of the original outbuildings remain on the farm: corn crib, bank barn, slave quarters, blacksmith shop, smoke house, spring house and large shed. Rocklands is one of the very few fine houses of the period that can still be seen unaltered in any way. It was described in 1882 as “a handsome architectural specimen” and it remains so today.

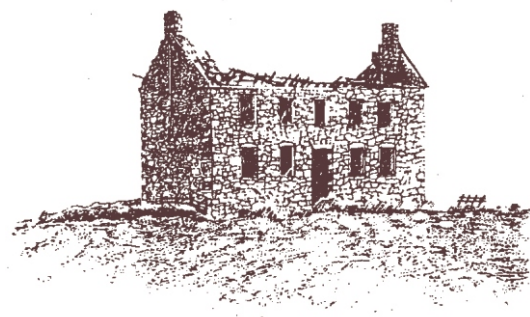
## 12. Bank Barns

A number of bank barns, similar to the one on the Rockland-Mann farm, exist in the area. A bank barn is a structure built into the side or slope of a hill, thus providing direct access to both the upper and lower levels. The upper level was usually used to store animal feed and equipment. The lower level housed the animals.



## 13. Stone Wall

A vivid example of one use for Seneca sandstone will be on your left before the next bend in Montevideo Road. Now turn left onto Sugarland Road and left again onto Partnership Road.



## 14. Dawson House

This house built in 1808 by Robert Dawson carries an interesting story. Apparently Dawson and his family never lived in the house. Rumor speculates that Dawson's children did not appreciate his second wife and refused to live there. Has the Dawson House ever been occupied? That question remains unanswered today. The house was a two-story fieldstone structure of symmetrical design. What is left of the wood interior trim shows that it was constructed with a great deal of skill. Continue down Partnership Road and turn left onto River Road. Ride carefully, staying on the shoulder, because of high-speed traffic on this road.

## 15. Sandstone School House

This one-room school house (to your right), built of Seneca sandstone, was constructed in 1863. The school house consists of two sections: the front vestibule was used for the storage of coats and lunch buckets; the larger room served as the classroom. The school ceased operation in 1900 with the opening of Seneca Mills School. Stones next to the school house are from the remains of Tschiffely's mill house. Seneca School House is owned by Historic Medley District, Inc.



## 16. Montevideo

In 1825, Mr. J.P.C. Peters, the great grandson of Martha Washington, built this house (on your left far down a private driveway.) The Peters



owned the Seneca sandstone quarry and numerous tracts of farmland in the area. The house provides a beautiful example of federal style architecture.

### **17. Overseer's House**

Built in 1935 of Seneca sandstone, this structure housed the overseer of the Peters' estate. The small building north of the house was the slave quarters and is used today as a youth hostel. Continue down River Road and turn right again onto Violet's Lock Road.

### **18. C.M.E. Church**

On the hilltop to your left off Violet's Lock Road, the weathered clapboard shell was built about 1900 to serve the local C.M.E. (Colored Methodist Episcopal) Church congregation. The African American community at Seneca was established as much as 125 years ago by ex-slaves who worked in the sandstone quarries. Modern descendants live on nearby Berryville Road, where they have established a new church.

N. and R. Roselli, E. Wesely 1978

S. Benedict, A. Prichard 1997

John Menke 2010

