

Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission

Landmarks Nomination Report: Little's Falls Lock

Physical Description:

Little's Falls Lock is located adjacent to Little's Falls in the Shenandoah River in eastern Jefferson County, West Virginia. The lock is approximately three miles south of Harpers Ferry, up stream of the Millville Hydro Station and Snyder Hill Dam.

Historic Description:

The property that contains the lock was originally purchased by John Carlyle, a merchant in Alexandria, Virginia, from Jost Hite. Carlyle sold the land to William Little Sr. In 1798, during Little's ownership, the Virginia General Assembly passed "An Act for opening and extending the Navigation of Shenandoah River." The plans were part of a larger scheme for river navigation in the western counties of Maryland and Virginia pursued by the Potowmack Navigation Company initially headed by George Washington. In January 1802, the Potowmack Company was authorized to begin the construction of locks etc. on the Shenandoah River (Hennings Statutes of Virginia). William Little, Jr. who inherited the land from his father in 1802, initiated plans for milling at Little's Falls on the Shenandoah River, perhaps in response to the canal construction. In 1807 the William Little, Sr. heirs sold a 2 ½-acre mill seat to Michael Dorsey. Dorsey constructed a mill at that location as early as 1804 under an agreement with William Little, Jr., using water from the canal to power the wheel.

"...one water Grist Mill & Mill seat adjoining Littles Falls...containing two acres & thirty two poles" – "a Mill seat adjoining the canal upon Shanandoah River at Littles Falls...with the exclusive right to all the surplus water of the said Canal...together with two & one half acres of Land adjoining the said Mill seat and on the north east side of the road leading from Vestals Ford to said Mill of said Dorsey erected on the said canal aforesaid."

From 1807 to 1812, the lock at Little's Falls was manned by John Grove, according to the journal of Thomas Harbaugh, official "Toll Gatherer" for the Potomac Company. An 1808 report by John Mason, Esq. to the Secretary of the Treasury, entitled Potowmack Company, included a description of the lock at Little's Falls:

On the Shenandoah (a Branch of the Potomack) which comes in at Harpers Ferry in descending, 1st. Canal on the left Bank round Little falls (8 miles above the junction of the Shenandoah with the Potomack distance by the Canal) including a Bason [sic] and one Lock, one hundred and eighty yards...differences of level between the two extremities 10-6/12 feet...length 100 feet, width 12 feet, lift 8 feet, contents 13200 cubic feet, construction walled with granite and free Stone near the Gates, and an Bason immediately above and adjoining the Lock, 130 feet from Gate to

Gate, and 150 feet across, lift 2 feet, the upper Gate Serving as a guard Gate, walled as the Lock.

The Basin ensured that boats could load or unload directly at the adjoining mill properties. With his developing interests at the canal lock, William Little, Jr. constructed the house (now called Hopewell) overlooking the site. The canal was used to unload boats at both the woolen mill and flour mill until the demise of those mills in the 1920s.

Historic Resources:

The Little's Falls Lock is the only remaining lock on the Shenandoah River. The unusual oblong design of the lock is unique not only to this river. The Little's Falls Lock may be the only existing lenticular lock in the United States. The gate wall is constructed of sawn ashlar sandstone, which remains in good condition today. The retaining walls, about five feet high, are laid in a random rubble fashion.

Nomination Criteria:

The JCHLC nominates this site under Criteria A & C for inclusion on the list of registered county landmarks. Criteria A states that a site may be nominated if, in the opinion of the Landmarks Commission, it is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history. Criteria C states that a site may be nominated if, in the opinion of the JCHLC, it embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or possess high artistic values. Owner, Sally Moulton, has agreed to have the property listed as Jefferson County Historic Landmark.

Nomination Action:

The JCHLC voted unanimously to add Little's Falls Lock, under Criteria A and C, to the rolls of registered Jefferson County Historic Landmarks on July 15, 2009.