



LEHIGH CANAL & TOWPATH BETHLEHEM TO ALLENTOWN Trail Guide

The towpath is easily biked, jogged or walked, for a distance of approximately 5 miles, in each direction. Or, park at either end, and do shorter distances. There is no intermediate access. Suggested start is at the Ice House, on Sand Island, in Bethlehem, where there is parking and access, via Lehigh St. Restrooms and drinking water are next to the tennis courts. See also the Monocacy Trail Guide for details on Sand Island, and a similar guide for the towpath to Freemansburg. Copies are available at the Ice House.

The canal is navigable by canoe for the entire distance, with a take-out at Lock #41. The Wildlands Conservancy runs events where you can canoe downriver from Allentown to Bethlehem, then bike back to Allentown on the towpath. The trail is mostly compacted gravel, and rather open, to Lock #41. Thereafter, it becomes mostly compacted dirt, but it is easy to bike or walk.

Before starting out, check out Lock #42, immediately behind the Ice House. Partially restored, it includes a dam which serves to keep water in the canal, all the way to Lock #41. It also includes an interesting aqueduct, to carry canal water over the Monocacy Creek. Sand Island also has many other recreational facilities, and is part of the Bethlehem parks system.

Lock #41, located at approximately 16th Av, in Bethlehem, has been made into a dam, which keeps the canal full of water, all the way to Allentown. With water above and below the lock, it is easy to see how these locks might have once functioned. Canal boats had to be lowered (or raised), by opening or closing the gates in the lock, to the level of the water on the other side. There is a grassy picnic area in this area, and another one, with a shelter, about ¼ mile further. The city line is marked by two concrete posts, at approximately 2.2 miles.

At 2.8 miles, one encounters “The Hump”, a gravity incline which the railroad uses to roll freight cars to the correct branch of track in the freight yard, for making up whole trains with a common destination. It is fascinating to watch, but the screeching brakes may be a bit overwhelming. Just a little further, there is a slight depression in the towpath, which once served as a water overflow, from the canal to the river.

At 3.5 miles, there is a small fishing pier, and at 4.3 miles the Allentown boat house comes into view. This includes a small parking area, but there is considerably more parking, a bit further, and up the small hill, to the left. On the hill, there is a pavilion, with drinking water and restrooms. On the Lehigh River side, there is a boat launch. The Little Lehigh Creek enters the Lehigh River on the far shore. Lock #40 is located here, at Canal Park, in Allentown, and it has also been made into a dam, and it keeps water in the canal, all the way to the Hamilton St bridge.

At the bridge that crosses the canal, one can either continue along the towpath (under the RR bridge), for another half mile, to the Hamilton St bridge, and Guard Lock #7 (and the Hamilton St dam), or, one can cross the auto bridge, and take the paved road (left only) under the RR underpass, to the same destination. Try taking the road first, then returning via the towpath. There is a footbridge across the canal, just below the Hamilton St bridge. It is also possible to walk past the fish ladders, negotiate a small (dry) concrete ravine, and get back on the towpath, directly under the bridge.

“Guard Lock #7”, at the Hamilton St bridge, serves to admit water into the canal, from the river, at an inlet just above the dam. Every dam had a ‘guard’ lock, to control water flow to the canal. This lock once functioned to lower the canal boats, from river level to the operating level of the canal. There is a fish ladder at the dam, to allow fish to swim upstream, past the falls. Sometimes, in Spring, one can see fish resting along the walls, or fighting the current in the ladders.

Highlights along the path are noted on the map, but additional small secrets reveal themselves to the observant person, especially in the natural world. There are many excellent views of the Lehigh River, and one is close to the water at all times. Have a wonderful time exploring the towpath.

Participating partners: City of Bethlehem, Charlie Brown, Parks & Recreation; Delaware & Lehigh Navigational Canal Heritage Corridor; Monocacy Creek Watershed Assn; Trail Guide prepared by: Bernie Kita