

Ed Quigley and two friends made the trip from Pittsburgh to DC in May 2004. Here is a shortened version of their trip. Check out their website for more information and photos. <http://www.thirdwave-websites.com/bike/0405biketrip.cfm>

2004 Bike Trip Report, Pittsburgh PA - Washington DC

3-person self-contained bike trip from McKeesport PA to Washington DC via ATA Trail/ Great Allegheny Passage and C&O Canal, in May 2004 by MC, DA, EQ

Fundamental Decisions As identified by [Mary Shaw and Roy Weil](#), the **primary decisions** are: direction, duration, support / luxury level.

Support/Luxury Level: We will not have a support vehicle. We prefer to ride the entire trip rather than use shuttle services. We'll be staying in motels and eating in restaurants, which we've seen referred to elsewhere as "credit-card-touring". In a perfect world we'd like to find hotels with hot tubs and broadband near interesting restaurants, but the reality is small basic motels and food from Sheetz.

Duration: Although one of us (me) would have planned this as a four-day trip, the group preferred three-days, which has some virtues: less time away from work/home, saves one night's lodging, but - primarily - avoids having to put your sore posterior on the bike seat on a fourth day. The notion is that it's less painful to do an extra 25 miles a day for three days than to do a fourth day.

Direction: We originally planned to ride westbound, from DC to Pittsburgh. We noted that the people who do this every year in the [Yockatomac rides](#) always go DC-Pitt (westbound), and we thought we'd follow their example. We anticipated that we'd be able to use the Savage Tunnel. Our initial assumptions fell apart.

Original Plan Our intention was for the three of us plus one spouse to drive down to DC the night before Day1, and get an early start on the trail while the spouse returned to the Burgh. We each blocked 5 days on our schedules, so that if it's raining hard we can delay without losing the schedule window. Our initial plan was Day 1: Georgetown to Hancock, 125 miles. Day2: Hancock to Meyersdale, 101 miles. Day3: Meyersdale to McKeesport PA, 103 miles. Our original plan didn't last too long. They usually don't.

Plan Evolution

Our plan evolved in response to our inquiries about the Meyersdale-Cumberland no-trail gap; we've ridden every other segment of the ride before. We had an epiphany when we plotted the altitudes for the on-road detour from the info available at:

<http://spoke.compose.cs.cmu.edu/fwe/trips/cue.htm#cue-east>, and our chart suggested that the eastbound ride was a more acceptable climb over the Continental Divide than the westbound. We found that the phrase "*Eastern Continental Divide*" focused our attention.

The Savage Tunnel is closed, and we learned that the folks who ride westbound annually use the Train/Shuttle option. Our assumptions were unraveling, so we made a [Meyersdale-Cumberland reconnaissance trip](#), which convinced us to ride eastbound with a better plan.

Our plan for Day 1 is McKeesport-Meyersdale, 103 miles. This is a segment [we did last year in one day](#), and it contains most of the climbing to get up the Eastern Continental Divide. Details include sunrise at 5:29, major break at Connelsville (43 miles), brief stop at Ohiopyle (61 miles), major break at Confluence (71 miles, last civilization at the foot of the climb), minor break at Rockwood (86 miles), stop at Meyersdale (103 miles) with Sunset at 8:16. Last year it took us four hours from Confluence to Meyersdale. Our *stretch goal* for Day1 is to continue into Frostburg. It's an extra 19 miles that I expect will take us 1.5 hours.

Our plan for Day 2 is Meyersdale-Williamsport, 116 miles for the day, 219 miles total. This is the longest distance of the three days, but Meyersdale-Cumberland (33 miles) is paved, and so is the 23 miles of the [WMRT](#) around Hancock. The details include Breakfast at Meyersdale's "GI Dayroom", Sunrise at 5:29, use of the [published road detour](#), into Frostburg (quick break), major rest stop at Cumberland, quick stops at OldTown General Store, and Bill's Place in Little Orleans. At MP 134.0 at Lock 55 we'll switch to the paved WMRT, Major Break at Hancock (MP125), depart WMRT and and rejoin the C&O at MP 114-ish, end at Williamsport (MP100). Sunset at 8:16.

Our plan for Day 3 is Williamsport-Georgetown, 101 miles for the day, 320 miles total. Sunrise at 5:28; At MP 88.1 we'll take the on-road detour, rejoining the trail at 84.4. Sharpsburg, seems a likely stop; Brunswick (MP55) looks like a Major Stop at C&O Canal Bicycling; at MP48.2, quick stop at B&S MiniMart, MP47, Point of Rocks, has 2 shops if needed; MP36, Whites Ferry, looks like a Major Stop. Detour between MP 13.7 and MP 12.6. Sunset at 8:16

Then we'll pedal over to Washington National / Reagan Airport to pick up our SUV rental and drive back to Pittsburgh. In the event of significant rain on Day3 our contingency plan is to complete the trip on the roads rather than slogging across the wet trail.

Our Bikes

All three of us rode bikes we'd bought from the [Ambridge Bike Shop](#). Mike and I rode older mountain bikes, Mark rode a year-old mountain bike with a front-fork suspension. We all used hybrid tires (generally 1.5 to 1.75 inches wide with mini-tread) as opposed to the standard wide, knobby mountain bike tires. Road bikes would not be appropriate. You don't need a leading-edge technology bike for the trail, but you do want a reliable bike that you've put some miles on.

As the trip approached and I started paying more attention to [weather.com](#) and the Washington Post online, we discovered that our trip coincides with the 17-year cicada

cycle of Brood X. There's supposed to be quite a lot of these things on the trail when we're there.

Starting

We drove to McKeesport in heavy rain, but the weather forecast promised it would be clearing shortly. Arrived in McKeesport just before sunrise to find Al waiting to ride the first segments with us, and after loading up the bikes, taking a picture, etc. we pushed off at 0555. My wife had driven to the start with us and returned home with the wheels.



Mike had three way-cool technogizmos: he had a cell phone that would transmit pictures back home; his cyclometer had an altimetry function that provided altitude data; and he had a shoulder-mounted GPS unit that fed a display in his wrist-watch that gave us time/distance info. Very Borg.

I packed about half of what I packed last year, and still had too much stuff, and the weight you carry clearly affects the work you have to do-- that's why work's measured in foot-pounds. I started off wearing cold-weather clothing which I didn't need after a few miles. I carried calories (Power Bars) for three days, which was way too much.

First Day

Just as we started off, the rain abated and it looked like we might get lucky. The trail surface was wet but not soggy, as you can see in this picture of Al and Mark. The wet conditions made a really good argument for front fenders (for yourself) and rear fenders (for the guy behind you).

Before we traveled too far, my right-rear pannier came partially off the rack. One of the clips that held it in place dropped off, somehow Mark saw it fall and retrieved the clip, and Mike had a bungee cord I could use until I could scrounge a bolt.

We rode by the ATA Trail offices in Boston well before they opened, it would be interesting to see what's in there. We saw a ringed-neck pheasant, some geese and a few ducks.

We arrived at Cedar Creek Park just as the snack bar was opening at 0800, got some drinks, very nice minor stop with rest rooms. We'd had a timely email from [Kevin Geiselman](#) who rode a few days before us warning about a mudslide near I70, he even sent us a way-cool map of the detour (which was extremely nice of him), but the previous night we'd had a phone report that the mudslide was cleared, so we tried our luck and found the trail was repaired. Somebody had done a lot of work and did a nice job.

Each day of our ride we saw recent evidence of storm damage- mud slides, uprooted trees, falling rocks- that had obviously been cleaned up very quickly. Along each of the trails somebody's doing a very good job of keeping the trails usable.

As we approached Connellsville we met Al's father, who was going to give him a ride back to the start. Pulled into Connellsville for a major break, and it's always a pleasure to ride a bike into that town. Major restrooms at the trail head, as you ride through town there's actually a bike lane with concrete dividers- you don't even see that in DC - and I stopped in [Connellsville's famous bike shop](#) looking for a bolt and locknut for my bag, they had just what I wanted and they wouldn't take any money for the hardware- even gave me an extra set in case another one came loose, so my hat's off to [Bikes Unlimited](#)-- very nice people. While I was in there Mark and Mike met a gentleman on a recumbent (Andy Munster) pulling a bob-trailer going to Hagerstown to visit his daughter.

In Connellsville we stopped at the Sheetz for supplies. In his guidebook to the C&O Canal, [Mike High](#) refers to the chain of Sheetz convenience stores as the logistics chain for riding the towpath, and he was right. Everywhere we went if they had a Sheetz we relied on it for quick turnaround, Gatorade, water, power bars, sandwiches, and Starbucks Double-Shots.

After Connellsville we rode to Ohiopyle, nice trail in good condition. A deer bounded across the trail right in front of Mike, probably passed about eight feet in front of him. We came across a black snake that Mark felt compelled to move off the trail. There's some beautiful scenery along this section. We saw another deer bounding up a steep hillside. Whereas last year we made a major stop in Ohiopyle, this year we made a quick visit to the train station (best rest rooms on the trail!), and a quick stop at the convenience store, then got back on the trail for Confluence where we planned a major break. Whenever you're around Ohiopyle you'll see crowds of people and some bikers who may do things you don't expect them to do.

In Confluence we went into town and ate at Sister's Cafe, the food was good, reasonably priced, bike friendly. As we were leaving we saw our recumbent friend pulling in to spend the night in Confluence. We made cellphone calls to our loved ones because there's no cell coverage east of Confluence.

We left Confluence riding uphill into Rockwood. Although for the first part of the day we'd been talking quite a bit, the conversation minimized as we started climbing. We stopped by the Rockwood [trailside B&B](#) for a mini-break; it looks very nice and one of these trips we've got to stay there. We continued to Meyersdale, it's a tough ride but at least we'd seen it last year so we knew what we were facing. Shortly after we saw the first windmills we came upon the Salisbury Viaduct, which is a marvelous view.

When we crossed the Salisbury Viaduct we found an unpleasant surprise. We knew the [trail is closed east of the viaduct](#), but our briefing was that you could use the viaduct, take a left and then access Route 219 Business into Meyersdale. We found a major ditch across the path to the road, which was tantalizingly right below us; our bikes were quite

heavy, the hill was steep, and there was no right way to get down there. It was about 8pm and we were not eager to reverse course to Garrett and return via the roads, so we ended up making our way through but it was not very elegant. *I'm told that the path to 219-Business is restored, and this temporary ditch was a one-time snafu..*

We entered Meyersdale at 8:20 tired and happy to be off the trail. There was really no way that we could execute the stretch goal of continuing to Frostburg in daylight. A-R Details: Mckeesport PA at 05:55 am, Meyersdale PA at 8:20 pm. (102 miles, 9:11 pedal time, avg speed 11.1)

First Overnight

For our first overnight we'd made reservations at Yoder's Motel. When we entered town we went into Yoder's to tell them we'd arrived, then we went to a new restaurant for dinner- nothing remarkable but it was clean and filling- then we signed in at Yoder's Motel. The rooms were quite nice - in fact, nicer than we'd expected - and these were excellent accommodations. We took our bags off the bikes and then locked the bikes in the basement. The rooms were clean and well appointed- it was better than I thought Meyersdale would offer and they were quite bicycle-friendly. No credit cards, so bring cash or checks.

Second Day

Wakeup came very early. We had breakfast at Meyersdale's "GI Dayroom" (highly recommended!), then set up our drinks at Sheetz and headed out of town. We had previously rode the published detour to Frostburg and Cumberland, but before our departure we'd had a suggestion of a different routing via Route 160/36 which saves 8 miles. So we choose to try the new route rather than the published route in hopes of saving 8 miles.

On the published detour there's not a lot of up-and-down, you generally just go up to the peak once; on the 160/36 route you go up and down a few times. It was a friendly suggestion, but for us it was a mistake. Having gone both ways now, we recommend sticking with the [published detour](#).

Stopped at a Sheetz four miles north of Cumberland, food and drinks and canned Starbucks. Rode into Cumberland, found some other bikers just about to depart, learned there was a first-floor C&O Trail Visitor Center in addition to the second-floor Train Station Visitor Center; the first-floor C&O center was more trail focused and more familiar with the real-time conditions of the trail. We took some pictures with the burro statue and got back on the trail. On the east side of the train station there are some new shops including a coffee shop that looked pretty interesting, but on our timetable we really didn't have time for exploring.



Conditions along the C&O were decent, but the C&O surface just isn't as nice as the ATA trail. The picture of

Mark and Mike gives an idea of what the trail looks like just south of Cumberland; closer to DC it turns into double-track. The C&O was wet and had muddy stretches pretty often, so it was difficult to maintain a decent average speed and we spent a lot of time maneuvering to find the best line through the mud. My feet were getting pretty soaked.

As we rode further south the sound of cicadas became noticable, then quite noticable, and at times it was unnervingly loud. We'd go through patches where they were everywhere and then places without any. If you stopped they'd land on you, and in fact we each picked up a few while we were riding. They make a shrill little noise when you take them off of you.

Again, our conversation gave a clue to the perceived difficulty; when we started climbing out of Meyersdale we were quiet, during the descent into Cumberland and on the early C&O we were talking, when we started getting tired we went mute. I was bonking hard and I had to stop and take a nap; I got a 15 minute snooze while Mike and Mark patiently hung out. I suspect my snoring drowned out the cicadas. It was also a chance to dry out my feet and put on dry socks, which I ended up doing a few times today. I was very glad to have bug spray and dry socks in my bags; I ended up using 8 pair for 3 days of riding.

The Paw-Paw Tunnel was as impressive as always. A small flashlight or headlight is absolutely necessary for passing through. There could be a flashlight vending machine there. The southeast (DC) side of the tunnel has always struck me as marginally dangerous; there's a lot of places where you're awfully close to the canal without a barrier, if you're inattentive you might take a nasty fall into the stagnant water.



Stopped in Oldtown (MP167) for the promise of a store that was torn down a few years ago, but we were pleased to find Shirley's Deli operating in the old school building 1/4 mile past the post office. (19210 Opessa St, Oldtown MD 21555 301-478-5008). Coming out of Oldtown we met a solo rider who was enroute from Richmond to Pittsburgh, said he'd figured it was 500 miles. We exchanged details about the conditions behind us and it stuck me that trail use is so novel that you'll easily discuss it with strangers - like two early VW owners in the early 50's- you'd never have that sort of conversation with someone you met in a highway rest stop.

Stopped in Little Orleans (MP141) at the world famous Bill's, the folks at the bar gave us a friendly greeting. I got some cold Gatorade and water and took advantage of the trash can to unload some unnecessary stuff I was carrying. We met Wayne and his party travelling northbound, we'd exchanged emails during the previous week and it was cool to meet somebody we'd had contact with on the trail.

We wanted to transition to the Western MD Rail-Trail (MP134) and make use of the paved surface, and even though we had directions we passed the connection and had to come back and find it. If you want to get on the WMRT southbound don't go past Lock

55; stop and look for a path up the hill that takes you up to the other trail. The WMRT was great and the surface let us make some time.

This second day called for 116 miles and we realized that we would not make Williamsport before sundown, so we tried to make some great time on the paved WMRT trail. We formed a paceline for the length of the WMRT and really whipped right through there. I'd never done that before but Mark led us through it. Hancock, which was supposed to be a major rest stop, was a quick blur as we pressed on.

At the south end of the WMRT, the transition back to the C&O Trail was not obvious and we spent some time figuring out how to get there. We rode to Ft. Frederick and moved toward the Potomac and we ended up on the trail.

Sunset was at 8:16. The skies were fairly clear and there was a half-moon, but with the heavy canopy overhead it started turning dark on the trail before sunset, and serious darkness was upon us pretty quickly. We'd agreed to walk the bikes out if necessary, but found that with Mike's headlight we were able to keep riding. It was a bit dicey in the dark, the headlight against the trees was a bit surreal and we surprised a group of kids along the trail that we stumbled upon. We exited the trail at Williamsport MD at 9:25, having ridden 115 miles in 10:39 for an average speed of 10.7 mph.

Second Overnight

We stayed at Williamsport's Red Roof Inn, the AAA rate was reasonable. As we rode uphill into town in the dark we stopped at the ubiquitous Sheetz for dinner (sandwiches and drinks), then continued up the hill to the hotel. The hotel staff saw our bikes and switched us to first-floor rooms, which was great. We had our sandwiches together then retired to clean our bikes and get some rest.

Third Day: Friday May 28th

The morning of the third day started with breakfast at the Waffle House, followed by a drink stop in Sheetz as we left town. As we joined the trail at 0615 we met another rider, Eric, who was going down to Antietam. He rode with us until the McMahons Mill detour, where we stopped for a break and he kept going.



The McMahons Mill - Dam 4 Detour (aka the Slackwater detour) is pretty straightforward, there's a map as you leave the trail and small orange signs to lead you along the way.

When the trail crosses an aqueduct they have cool signs warning you about not riding your bike across. I blew them off, rode across and ended up clutching at a railing to avoid falling while thinking, "oh that's what they meant".

The scenery north of Harper's Ferry is remarkably beautiful. A lot of Civil War history and movements happened on both side of the C&O. We saw a flock of turkey vultures

about a mile north of Harper's Ferry, I'm glad they weren't circling around us. It's unfortunate that Harper's Ferry was built on the wrong side of the river, and also that there's no Gatorade/Water vending machine along the trail there.

Five miles south of Harper's Ferry, stopped in Brunswick looking for the Bike Shop, which is apparently only open on weekends. Enjoyed a great lunch at the Pacific Cafe. There's no convenience store in town, but the folks at the Pacific Cafe were kind enough to fill our water bottles. I've read good things elsewhere about Mommer's Diner at Potomac and Maple on the main drag, 301-834-7200.

We met four cyclists who'd come up northbound; they strongly recommended we avoid an extremely muddy area between MP45 & MP35 -which included some large ballast gravel we'd heard was causing a lot of sidewall flats- by exiting the trail at MP48.2 at Route 15, crossing the Potomoc, and using Route 15 to get to Leesburg, then White's Ferry back across to rejoin the trail.

We'd planned a drink stop at the MP48.2 B&S MiniMart anyway (great stop), and we decided to try the Route 15 detour. **Big Mistake.** Beside the climb, Route 15 is busy, has little or no shoulder, and the cars and big trucks are doing 60+ whenever they can (it's DC traffic). This was not a smart way to go; Mark described it as harrowing. After our return I had an email from Steve Wershbaile telling me that in 2003 four cyclists were killed on that section of Rt.15.

The ride across the Potomac on White's Ferry was interesting (\$1 for bike and rider, tandems also just \$1), and the ferry office/store was another planned drink stop.

We rejoined the trail at MP34, feeling like success was within reach but the trail was even more wet and muddy. You'd get going and hit a mud patch, it'd slow you down and just as you'd get back up to speed you'd hit another one. They'd slow you down like flypaper.

We met several groups of riders coming out of DC northbound (it was now 4-ish on Friday afternoon) and we told them, it's pretty muddy where you're going. They replied, *it's pretty muddy where you're going too*, and they were right. This was the wettest, sloppiest part of the trail.

The Potomoc is beautifully wide and the scenery is some of the prettiest I've ever scene. One place near Great Falls looked like it belonged in a Lord of the Rings Movie.

We met some of Mark's family at MP11 and his sister Garnet joined us. We took advantage of the opportunity and unloaded our bags into her car, which would meet us at the end of the trail. It was luxurious to ride without the weight of the baggage.



As we continued southbound and crossed MP10 the skies opened up in heavy rain which persisted through about MP4, when a rainbow appeared and then the skies cleared. We continued into Georgetown. There's a spot where staying on the trail means taking a footbridge across the canal, your clue will be that the ramp up to the bridge is filled with dirt. The Georgetown section of the trail is a lot like San Antonio's RiverWalk.



We arrived in Washington DC at 8:15 pm, pedaling 104 miles, 9:42 pedal time, avg speed 10.7 mph. The trip overall covered 321 miles in 29 hours 32 minutes of pedaling, from 5:55 am Wednesday till 8:15 pm Friday.

The bikes did very well, the equipment all held up, and we didn't have any flats or crashes.

Getting Home

Mark was going to stay in DC with his family for a few days; Mike and I needed to get back to the Burgh. Mike stayed with the bikes and bags in Georgetown while I went over to the Reagan Airport, picked up a Hertz SUV and drove back, which took about two hours. We loaded two bikes and our gear into the SUV and then started home. We arrived in Beaver County PA at 0315 Saturday morning.

The rental SUV cost \$111 (plus fuel) and I think that was the most effective way for us to get back home. I was a little concerned that they might decline to hand over the keys given how unkempt I was, but it wasn't a problem.

Summary

- The maps and online info were excellent
- The trails were very well maintained
- The trail was muddy and wet due to recent heavy rains
- Day One: Mckeesport PA at 05:55 am, Meyersdale PA at 8:20 pm. (102 miles, 9:11 pedal time, avg speed 11.1)
- Day Two: Meyersdale PA at 06:00, Williamsport MD at 9:25 pm. (115 miles, 10:39 pedal time, avg speed 10.7)
- Day Three: Williamsport MD at 0615, Washington DC at 8:15 pm. (104 miles, 9:42 pedal time, avg speed 10.7)
- The trip overall covered 321 miles in 29 hours 32 minutes of pedaling, from 5:55 am Wednesday till 8:15 pm Friday (62.3 hours)
- This was an excellent adventure.

Lessons Learned

- 103 miles is about all you can do during daylight on trails with laden mountain bikes.
- Dry socks are very important.
- Stick with the published detour Meyersdale-Cumberland
- Avoid Route 15 north of Leesburg.
- Sheetz is the supply store; they have everything but inner tubes.
- Avoid last minute route changes unless you're really really sure.
- We spelled ache management: "800 mg. Motrins"
- Anything a driver tells you about short distances or little hills is wrong.
- This was a difficult trip to accomplish in three days because of the constraints of daylight hours and the location of motels.
- I started off carrying four boxes of PowerBars which was unnecessary; they were heavy and Sheetz carries them. Next year I'm going to carry less stuff.
- For most of this ride we needed to carry 6-8 water bottles per bike to get to the next supply.

Recovery

- I walked around like Frankenstein for two days- actually, moving wasn't bad, but the transition from sitting to standing (and vice versa) was a bit ungainly.
- All three of us suffered tingling, numbness, and loss of dexterity in our little- and ring-fingers, which is apparently an indication of [handlebar palsy](#) caused by compression of the ulnar nerve. We're expecting this to get better.