Men digging by hand cleared the original course of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal of 1829, but they could not dig deep enough to create a sea level route all the way across the Delmarva Peninsula. They had to construct four locks to raise the ships entering from sea level to the higher inland canal and back down again. The locks at Delaware City and St. Georges had a lift of 6 to 8 feet and, in the two locks at Chesapeake City, the lift was 14 to 16 feet. Originally, each lock was 100 feet long, 22 feet wide, and 10 feet deep. In 1854, because of the increasing size of vessels using the canal, the company enlarged the locks to 220 by 24 feet, with a depth of 10 feet.

In 1927, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, using steam-powered dredges, widened and deepened the canal into a sea level waterway over its entire length, making the locks unnecessary. The Corps also relocated the canal’s eastern entrance to Reedy Point, two miles south of Delaware City. This single surviving lock was preserved in place, a remnant of the canal’s earlier days. In 1975, the Department of the Interior placed the Delaware City lock on the National Register of Historic Places and in 1985 the American Society of Civil Engineers named it an Historic Civil Engineering Landmark.