

The Patuxent River Water Trail

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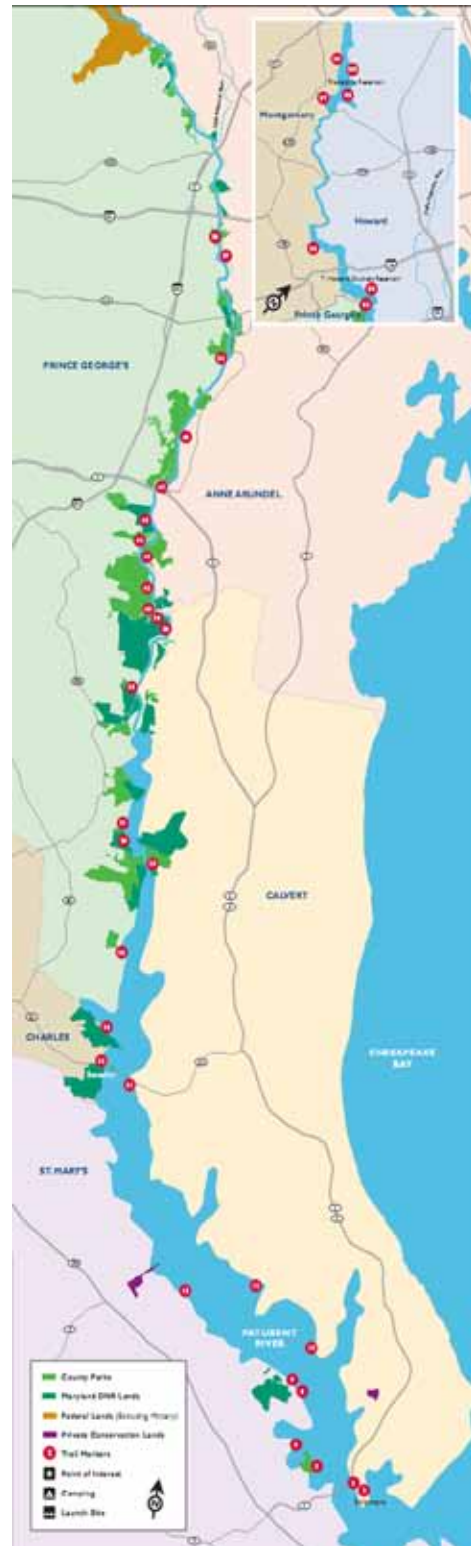
The Patuxent just below Queen Anne.

One of the first trips I made when I began sea kayaking was the inaugural Sojourn on the Patuxent River in 2002. Sojourns are multi-day trips on major tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay organized by the Chesapeake Bay Alliance and are intended to bring the community at large down to the rivers and the Bay. That first Patuxent Sojourn was a five-day camping trip from the old colonial head of navigation at Queen Anne 55 miles to the mouth at Solomons Island, with camping at designated spots along the way. The Sojourn was very attractive because at that time, very few opportunities for paddle-in camping existed along the river.

Today, the situation is much improved because of the establishment of the Patuxent Water Trail. Water trails are extremely popular because they take so little financial support. Print a map, put up a few signs and bingo - you're a water trail. But a trail that is actually usable from the water is a dif-

ferent proposition. That requires a chain of launches and paddle-in campsites that are spaced approximately one paddling day apart, with no significant gaps requiring car portages or inconvenient shuttling.

While the Patuxent is navigable by kayak for nearly all its length below Rocky Gorge Reservoir, your journey begins at the historic head of navigation at Queen Anne. Today, it is hard to credit the fact that ocean-going sailing vessels made their way on the tide as far as Queen Anne's Town, established in 1706 by an act of the colonial Maryland legislature. As forests were cleared in the Piedmont, the soil eroded and silted in the deep channel of the Patuxent so that now, sand bars and mud banks rise up toward your kayak bottom. Patuxent River Park's Queen Anne Canoe launch floating dock, however, puts you in deep water right away and the current from upstream often rushes strongly, especially in spring after a good snow pack melts off



Patuxent Water Trail Map. For more detail, go to patuxentwatertrail.org/navigate.html



Mount Calvert.

and the rains raise the river level.

Just below Queen Anne, the river is a narrow, flowing stream below high banks and, in early spring, tunneling through overhanging new, tender green foliage. There is almost no development along this stretch of the river, and what little there is sits back from the river to avoid the floods

that used to plague these bottoms before the Tridelphia and Rocky Gorge dams above were built in the 1950s.

Little development appears on the river until you reach Waysons Corner, a small community perched on a high bluff where the river now bends to the west around the vast Back Channel marsh, where the old



Iron Pot Landing Campsite.

West Channel runs just below Spyglass Island. In the bend at Waysons Corner is Scorpion Creek, where in 1814 Commodore Joshua Barney scuttled his fleet of rowing cannon-galleys, including the flagship, *Scorpion*. Barney had played mouse to the British lion's cat when the invasion fleet sailed up the Patuxent. He escaped from what appeared to be certain destruction in the Battle of St. Leonard's Creek, but was finally forced to abandon the boats and march his men and cannon overland. Underwater archaeologists are currently excavating the Barney fleet and you can see artifacts at the Jefferson Patterson Park Museum downriver in Calvert County.

Passing under the Hills Bridge at MD Route 4 (there is a launch here, as well), the Patuxent widens out to marsh and the current is barely perceptible, overshadowed by the push and pull of tides. The river sweeps around broad bends through Galloway Marsh to the east and Billingsley Marsh to the west. At Mount Calvert, the Western Branch joins the Patuxent at a site that has been home to people overlooking the river from the high mound for thousands of years. Mount Calvert is now a public park and archaeological site, so land and climb up the hill. If the museum is open, you can get a birds-eye view of 10,000 years of history in a few rooms, and have a pleasant chat with knowledgeable staff about how the river you are paddling has flowed through time. Your first campsite is up the Western Branch about 0.8 miles at Iron Pot landing, nestled below Billingsley Point, dating from 1740. All the water trail campsites have a gravelly landing, some flat area, a picnic table and fire ring, and a porta-potty in season.

Paddling out of Western Branch past Mount Calvert and turning downstream to the right, you'll pass a large concrete caisson mid stream. That was the center pivot for a turnstile bridge used by the Chesapeake Beach Railroad, which carried beachgoers out of steamy Washington D.C. from the 1890's through the 1930's. On the high bluff to your right just downstream is the Patuxent River Park headquarters at Jackson Landing. The nature center here is a valuable resource (air conditioned, too), and a source of maps and books, and

the Patuxent Rural Life Museum is worth a look, as are the nature trails through the Black Walnut Branch nature study area. If needed, you can rent kayaks and canoes here, as well.

The broad, shallow expanse of Jug Bay widens out below Jackson Landing on the left. Just where Selby Marsh pinches off the lower end of Jug Bay, on the right, is the second campsite, the Selby Canoe Camp at Half Pone Landing. A long floating dock shows the location, which is not very easy to spot otherwise in the thick vegetation. If you use this campsite, walk up the access road and out onto Riverside Field, all that remains of Columbia Air Center, the first Black-owned and operated airport on the eastern seaboard. John W. Greene, Jr., the second African-American person in the U.S. to be licensed to fly commercial airplanes, ran it from 1941 to 1956.

Just below Selby Landing, Mattaponi Creek (yes there are a lot of creeks in Maryland and Virginia named Mattaponi) joins the river from the south and then turns west. A couple of bends in, the third campsite at White Oak Landing appears on the left. This is a former house site and one of the largest campsites, with a grassy field that could support 100 tents. Paddling up the Mattaponi, you'll find a near-pristine fresh water marsh. A short ways above the campsite the creek is crossed by a wooden bridge that is the route of the Patuxent Critical Area Drive, a one-way auto tour only open to the public on Sundays. You can walk it from the campsite anytime, and the bridge is a good place to look out over the creek and marsh.

Leaving White Oak Landing and the Mattaponi, at the east end of the large bend, Lyons Creek enters the Patuxent from the east. Lyons is another creek well worth exploring, and offers a nice mix of meanders through the marsh and heavily shaded creek.

A few miles below Lyons Creek, you'll pass all that remains of Nottingham, one of the lost towns of the Chesapeake memorialized in Donald G. Shomette's book. Once a busy port and customs point for tobacco being shipped out, and goods from around the world going to rich Maryland planters, it is



Selby Landing Put-in.

now a collection of quaint old houses and rambling docks. Just across the river to the south is Ferry Landing, a public landing and once the turn-around for steamboat traffic on the Patuxent after upriver ports silted in. Get out and stretch your legs up the road, which is deeply incised into the hillsides leading up from the landing. Nottingham's

road is a remnant of the old "rolling roads" on which tightly packed hogsheads of tobacco were rolled down to the landings for shipment around the world. From here on south, the twin stacks of the Chalk Point Power Plant 11 miles downriver are visible almost everywhere along the river.

Downstream a quarter mile on the right,



Sunrise from Selby Canoe Camp.



Chalk Point Power Plant.

a small peninsula juts out into the river at the mouth of Spice Creek. A fourth campsite is just upstream a hundred yards. The campsite occupies the site of Wosameus, one of the many Native American villages mapped by the intrepid John Smith on his second voyage in 1608. Nearly all of the Spice Creek watershed is protected, so the water that flows past your campsite is clear and clean and makes for a wonderful swim-

ming hole. The river here is completely undeveloped, and it is easy to imagine yourself camped in 1607 before any European set foot on this ground. Just opposite Spice Creek and a little south is Hall Creek, another beautiful creek for side trips off the river.

Downriver from here, you follow a meander to the west around Sneaking Point, possibly known for the difficulty in



Campsite at Indian Creek.

sailing upriver around it against the wind. Just beyond Sneaking Point, the river narrows and currents can be strong at the dock in Lower Marlboro, the old colonial capital on the eastern bank. Below Lower Marlboro on the west bank is the Clyde Watson boat ramp at Magruder Landing, which is a good place to leave a shuttle car. The fifth paddle-in campsite is a quarter mile downriver at Milltown Landing, part of a wildlife management area on an old farm and once site of the Native American village of Pacatamough. While Spice Creek has an undeveloped feel to it, the river throbs with activity here in summer, probably due to the Clyde Watson boat ramp and the county park at Kings Landing, just downriver on the eastern bank.

Below Milltown Landing, the river widens out to a true estuary. The Patuxent River Park's Cedar Haven area on the west bank is a good place for a stretch break, and the nearest launching point for Hunting Creek, another meandering tributary coming in from the east. Just below the mouth of Hunting Creek on the west bank is the massive Chalk Point power plant, a coal- and oil-fired generating plant that supplies most of southern Maryland. Swanson Creek, on which the plant is located, was the site of a 140,000 gallon oil spill in April 2000 when a pipeline running under the creek ruptured, fouling the water and killing hundreds of fish, turtles, frogs, and muskrats in the marshes up Swanson Creek. Little evidence of the spill remains, although some oil remains in the bottom sediments. The power plant paid for cleanup and undertook restoration activities, including a sturgeon hatchery intended to restore the species to the Patuxent and other Maryland rivers, and two of the paddle-in campsites. The south bank of Swanson Creek, in from Teague Point, is the site of the sixth paddle-in campsite at Maxwell Hall Park.

Below Chalk Point, MD 231 crosses the river at Hallowing Point, only the second bridge across the river below Queen Anne. The boat ramp at Hallowing Point has restrooms and is the local HQ for MD Dept. of Natural Resources. Just below the bridge and the town of Benedict on the west bank is the seventh paddle-in campsite at Indian

Creek, a wildlife area and site of the village of Wasapokent. Indian Creek is part of a wildlife management area and the campsite is located behind a screen of shoreside trees in an old, brushy pasture. The one time I camped here, it had just been brush-hogged and the stubs of young shrubs were sticking up everywhere. The resort town of Golden Beach is just across Indian Creek from the campsite, and on most evenings you hardly know it's there, but on the 4th of July, it has its own fireworks display, and home-grown celebrations go into the wee hours.

Five miles below Indian Creek, Battle Creek flows into Patuxent and was the site of the river's namesake, the Native American village of Pawtuxunt. You might be forgiven for thinking that Battle Creek is where Commodore Barney's fleet of gun galleys faced off against the British in 1814, but that is actually St. Leonard Creek, five miles farther downriver. Instead, Battle Creek is home to the Battle Creek Cypress Swamp Sanctuary. These majestic southern species can be seen from boardwalk trails, but alas, cannot be reached from the water.

Between Battle Creek and St. Leonard Creek is Broomes Island, jutting into the river from the east bank. Broomes Island is the home of former State Senator Bernie Fowler, who brought a common-sense waterman's perspective to Chesapeake Bay water quality issues with his annual Patuxent wade-in. Senator Fowler remembered being able to wade into the river up to his neck as a boy at Broomes Island and see his white sneakers on the sandy bottom. With increasing erosion and nutrient pollution from sewage treatment plants and suburban septic tanks, the Patuxent grew murkier, so that Bernie's tennies became impossible to see in even three feet of water, although things have improved in recent years.

At the mouth of St. Leonard Creek is Jefferson Patterson Park, the former home of a wealthy gentleman farmer and diplomat and his wife who donated it to the State of Maryland in 1983. It is now a park and museum of the river and much else, and home to the Maryland Archeological Conservation Laboratory. The lab is a world-class marine conservation facility that has preserved remains from many important

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underwater discoveries, including the turret and guns of the U.S.S. Monitor of Civil War fame, recovered off the North Carolina coast in 2002. The park is accessible from a landing at Kings Reach Field and is well worth an hour or two visit. As you paddle downriver from the park, be sure to look for the summer house on Petersons Point. It was Mary Marvin Patterson's favorite place and is now an environmental education center.

Directly across the river from Jefferson Patterson Park is the eighth paddle-in campsite at Greenwell State Park. Tucked in a cove up Hog Neck Creek, you really need to check your GPS coordinates to find this one, which perches in the woods atop a steep bluff. Once camped there, follow the broad paths around the mown fields to the park proper. Also worth considering is Sotterley Plantation, around the peninsula to the north on Sotterley Creek. Built in 1703, this historic establishment is now shown by a private foundation dedicated to preserving colonial history.

From Greenwell State Park to the mouth of the Patuxent is a nine-mile paddle. You pass along the beach of the Solomons Naval Reserve recreation center and round Point Patience, which has depths of up to 20 fathoms (120 feet). It is truly odd to round the point in water shallow enough to touch bottom with your paddle and have large cabin cruisers cut the point within yards of you in water deeper than their length. It was no accident that the U.S. Navy established a torpedo research station here during World War II, and there are rumors that a German sub was intentionally sunk in the depths off Point Patience to provide a sonar target for training purposes (it is actually the *Black Panther*, U-1105, sunk off Piney Point on

the Potomac River 12 miles south).

Stick close to shore (but not too close to the Navy facility there) as you pass under the soaring Thomas Johnson Bridge, which carries MD Route 4 across the river. Beyond the bridge to the left lies Solomons Island, a sailing capital for Southern Maryland and home to the Calvert Marine Museum. You can land on the beach just opposite the Star of the Sea church (home of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association Pirates of the Patuxent) and walk along the main street there, or enter the channel beyond Sandy Point to paddle into Back Creek and the museum's dock, home to the relocated Drum Point screw pile lighthouse. The museum has a wealth of information and exhibits on all things Chesapeake and Patuxent, from the ice age to the jet age. A particular focus is the Patuxent Small Craft Center and workshop. After your culture fix, you can cater to your more prosaic appetites at the Tiki Bar or one of the other restaurants in Solomons.

The actual mouth of the Patuxent is marked by Drum Point (minus its namesake relocated lighthouse) on the north, and Hog Point, on the Patuxent Naval Air Station facility to the south. Whatever your preference, from the leafy greenness of the narrow upper Patuxent near Queen Anne, the slowly meandering marshy bends of the middle Pax from Jug Bay to Lower Marlboro, or the broad estuary running out to the Bay at Solomons, you'll find it all on the Patuxent Water Trail.

Resources

Queen Anne Canoe Launch: www.pgparcs.com/Things_To_Do/Nature/Queen_Anne_Canoe_Launch.htm

Jefferson-Patterson Park and Museum <http://www.jefpat.org/1812war.html>

Shomette, Donald G., 2000. *Lost Towns of Tidewater Maryland*. Cornell Maritime Press/Tidewater Pblshers, Centreville, Md

The Patuxent Water Trail Home Page: <http://www.patuxentwatertrail.org/>

Ralph Heimlich last wrote "Paddling The Platinum Coast – Matthews County, Virginia" in *ACK* July/August 2010.