

The Potomac Passagemakers' Tour

By Ralph Heimlich



Washington DC from Columbia Island Marina. Photo by Suzanne Farace.

The paddling world is full of water “tribes”: There are sea kayakers and whitewater paddlers, racers, those out for an hour or two (lily dippers), those interested in rolling and rescues (kayathletes), those with no hip joints (SUPers), those who just want to get close to the fish (kayanglers), those out to change the world (causeyakers), and a small group out to see the world from the water (kayak tourers). I’m one of the latter. As an ideal, I’d like to pack up my gear and a week’s worth of food and paddle along from one water-side campsite to another, taking in all the natural and cultural sites along the shore as I pass. I like to think that John Smith would, in a different time, also be a kayak tourer. What would he think of the National Historic Water Trail named after him along the Potomac River?

To find out, I proposed a series of ten trips that would cover the entire 136 miles from Columbia Island Marina in Washington to Point Lookout, Maryland, where the Potomac empties into Chesapeake Bay.

Columbia Island Marina to Belle Haven Marina and Return

Thirteen Chesapeake Paddlers Association (CPA) paddlers and I began the first leg

in the heart of the nation’s capital May 9, 2015. We launched at the busy Columbia Island Marina, paddled underneath the traffic stalled on the George Washington Memorial Parkway, down past the Washington Monument, Jefferson Memorial and the Capitol, and the vast noise of jets over Reagan National Airport. We detoured into the launch ramp at Dangerfield Island for a brief break, tangled with the sailing school launching from the Washington Sailing Marina, cut across the touristy Alexandria waterfront, underneath the Wilson Bridge, by the Chesapeake’s shortest lighthouse at Jones Point, and down to the crowded tip of Belle Haven Marina’s green-carpeted landing. All that urban scenery was packed into a mere 8.5 miles, so to minimize the amount of shuttling, most of us did this paddle with a return up river, timed to make use of the tidal current.

After a lunch and cold watermelon at the marina, we swung over to the Maryland shore for the return, passing close to the ferris wheel and Oz-like National Harbor development. The gaggle of construction cranes working on the new casino there looks from the water like a machine-age heron rookery. We dodged the wakes of the various power boats and deep-draught tour

boats who livened up the paddle by giving us some wakes to surf.

John Smith would have been agog at the sights along this modern, urban riverfront, and worse, would have had to check into a hotel in Alexandria or National Harbor for a night’s stay, but would have to have a limousine (or at least a taxi with a kayak rack) to get there. Unfortunately, there are no accommodations for kayak tourers on this section of the river, and given the lack of public parks, there may never be any. One would think that the most powerful city on the planet could somehow enable us to pursue our primitive journey even in this urban landscape, but the answer would seem to be, “No!”

Belle Haven Marina to Leesylvania State Park, Virginia.

Our second leg resembled real kayak touring a bit more than the first, with one night of camping. Because of the many links in this chain, the corresponding car shuttle was necessarily complex. We endured the Friday morning traffic from Belle Haven down busy Route 1 to leave a couple of vehicles at the car-top boat launch at Pohick Bay Regional Park, then battled back with the commuters to Belle Haven. Launching, we glided down the Virginia shore alongside the George Washington Parkway to the choke-point on the river where the steep-walled Fort Washington (on the Maryland shore) stopped the British fleet from sailing up to Washington during the War of 1812. Passing Piscataway Creek and the National Colonial Farm on the Maryland shore, and Fort Hunt on the Va. side, we rounded Mount Vernon’s tour boat dock as one of the large cruisers maneuvered to tie up and coasted to a lunch spot on the beach just downriver from Washington’s home. After lunch, we crossed the mouth of Dogue Creek, rounded Whitestone Point and Fort Belvoir, and paddled up Gunston Cove to the beach at Pohick Bay RP, completing

12.1 more miles of our passage.

Pohick Bay Regional Park is a wonderful facility for recreation in Northern Virginia and provides nice campsites for many on a summer weekend, including our three. We couldn't help thinking, however, how nice it would have been if a small part of the shoreline of the park just up Gunston Cove from the car-top boat launch were set aside for a paddle-in campsite where we could just haul up the boats and set up camp. Kayak tourers don't need much: a little cleared level ground under some trees, a porta-potty and maybe a fire-ring not too far from the beach. Instead, we loaded up the boats and drove the 1.5 miles to our campsites, set up camp and chilled out. One of our "must sees" on this stop was the pirate mural painted for the park by Ben Larsen. We thought the pirate captain looked suspiciously like Ben's father, Al, a fellow paddler, admittedly with one less leg.

After a restful night, we awoke early, broke camp before nearly anyone in camp was awake (what do all those RV "campers" actually DO in camp all day?), left the boats at the landing and shuttled a car down to Leesylvania State Park for the Saturday portion of the trip. We launched and set off into the sun around Mason Neck, catching slack tidal current at Hallowing Point. (It can run at over a knot on ebb and flow at this constriction.) We pulled into Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge and lunched on the beach at the ruined dock and boathouse before launching for a 2.5 mile crossing of the mouth of Occoquan Creek. South winds of long fetch were aggravated by the wakes of many large power boats making fast time out of the marinas on Occoquan Creek. We left High Point behind us and spent a somewhat anxious time peering over our right shoulders for approaching boat traffic (one nearly nailed Greg before the operator woke up and realized he was bearing down on us) and dealing with some of the steep chop churned up by wind and boats. The biggest wave (something over 2.5 feet) carried us onto the shallows in front of the Leesylvania State Park marina, augmented, no doubt, by a passing cruiser.

Rounding the marina, we passed into Powell's Creek and beached at the canoe launch at Brushy Point, completing another 13.1 miles of our passage.

Leesylvania State Park in Virginia, has no "regular" camping, but has a very nice group camp site at Brushy Point right by the canoe launch that they will reserve for adult groups (unusual for group campsites). A portion of this site has been set aside for paddle-in campers. This would be a perfect setup for kayak touring, but at 25.2 downriver miles from Belle Haven Marina, wasn't very useful for us on this leg. If a paddle-in campsite could be developed at Pohick Bay (or across the river at Maryland's Chapman State Park, or on the National Park Service's Piscataway Creek Park near the Marshall Hall boat ramp), a feasible touring run could be done from there to Leesylvania State Park, Virginia's Widewater State Park (where a new paddle-in site is scheduled for construction this season or next), to Caledon State Park paddle-in sites dedicated last year, to the existing paddle-in campsite at Maryland's Chapel Point, a roughly 70-mile stretch. While not strictly speaking part of the Potomac Passagemaker Tour, on Sunday May 31, Marla Aron, Greg Welker, and I joined Linda Witkin and Mike Cohn for his paddle from Marshall Hall to Pomonkey Creek on the Maryland shore of the Potomac. The shoreline was beautiful, and Pomonkey Creek is a nearly unspoiled tidal creek leading up into woods and swamps that John

Smith would feel right at home exploring. We ventured farther downstream and landed at Maryland's Chapman State Park, featuring the colonial mansion at Mount Aventine. The commanding views from the ridgetop on which the house was built in 1840 sweep down across a treed meadow that was dotted with native prickly pear cactus in bloom, an exotic sight somewhat unexpected in mid-Atlantic Maryland.

Smallwood State Park to Mallows Bay

The third leg was a simple day trip. We shuttled cars down and then launched from Smallwood State Park's ramp (Maryland mile 93), paddling out of Sweden Point Marina and Mattawoman Creek onto the Potomac. This stretch of the Potomac is familiar to many of us because for years it was the closest approach to the Ghost Fleet at Mallows Bay. Now that Charles County has opened the Mallows Bay Park, with a ramp and kayak launch, access to the remains of the WWI wooden ships abandoned there is so direct that even rank beginners can paddle to them.

The shoreline from Mattawoman Creek to Mallows Bay appears nearly undeveloped, but there are military installations and private homes up on the bluffs and back from the water. At Chickamuxen Creek (Maryland River Mile 90), there are two paddle-in campsites that are among the earliest established on the Potomac by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources on the Chickamuxen Wildlife Management



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An arrival to Reagan National. Photo by Bob Shakeshaft.

Area.

We took a side paddle up Eagle Creek (Maryland mile 86), whose entrance is partially blocked by an old wreck and a large snag, making it a great creek for kayakers to explore since larger boats have difficulty accessing it. After exploring, we lunched on the beach at the creek's mouth.

We approached Mallows Bay (Maryland mile 83) in the afternoon, skirting the major wrecks both offshore and inshore and exploring the basin. We packed up the boats and shuttled back to Smallwood State Park, having covered ten miles, one of our easier days on the river.

Camping for kayak touring could be done at Smallwood State Park since the campground is joined to the marina by a footbridge over the creek, but it would be a long carry for gear and kayakers would need to be secured at the ramp. Smallwood would better serve as a basecamp (say for a Friday night start) and a place to leave cars. The Chickamuxen paddle-in sites (managed by Cedarville State For-

est) would be a logical next stop on a trip extending from Leesylvania State Park in Virginia, but are only about four miles from Leesylvania (with a river crossing) and three miles from Smallwood State Park. Mallows Bay Park is under consideration as a National Marine Sanctuary, a designation sought by Charles County government. I do not believe such a designation would hinder development of a paddle-in campsite at this location, probably out toward Liverpool Point where Mallows Creek comes into the river. This would be at a critical point on the river since there is little accommodation for kayak touring on the Maryland shoreline below here.

Mallows Bay to Chapel Point

The fourth leg of our passage most resembled what kayak touring is all about. We launched from Mallows Bay with fully-loaded kayakers, embarking on what was intended to be a three-day kayak camping trip covering nearly 30 river miles. Again, the Maryland shoreline was nearly undeveloped, with high cliffs covered with mature forest, only occasionally broken by single homes looking out over the water. We were escorted nearly the entire way by families of bald eagles that nest in the forest along this stretch. Purse State Park, a Maryland undeveloped state park (at mile 80, directly opposite Virginia's Wide Water State Park), was our lunch spot. We spent awhile combing the beach sands for fossils leached out of the buff-colored cliffs lining the shoreline. Paddling down toward Maryland Point, where the Potomac makes a gigantic bend to the east, we passed the

starkly futuristic antennae of the Maryland Point Observatory. We headed out from Camp Merrick on the Maryland shore toward the large platform lighthouse marking Maryland Point, surprising some fishermen in boats bobbing around the rocks guarding the lighthouse from ice and flotsam. We then continued on to the Virginia shore, making a landfall at the upstream boundary of Caledon State Park, and then coasted along the park's shoreline to the paddle-in campground (Virginia river mile 82.5).

Caledon State Park has the best paddle-in campsite in the area. There are three groups of camping pads (timber framed and filled with sand and pea gravel), a portapotty on a concrete pad, a pay station to allow reservation-less camping, and a small pavilion overlooking the landing beach for chilling out after a long day's paddle. The State of Virginia has also constructed a similar paddle-in site below the cliffs at Westmoreland State Park (too late for this year's trips), and is planning another upriver at Wide Water State Park.

We packed up and got an early start to cross the river back to the Maryland shore once again the next morning. We skirted Blossom Point, where the Army Proving Ground restricts access, and came ashore at Kings Creek (Maryland mile 64.5), the border of Maryland's Cedar Point Wildlife Management Area. After a short break, we paddled into the Port Tobacco River and bade goodbye to Madeline and Tom, who had parked at Goose Bay Marina, and swung to the north bank to Chapel Point State Park landing (Maryland mile 60) to meet Suzanne Farace.

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We had originally intended to camp at Chapel Point State Park's paddle-in campsite, just down from the landing, and continue our paddle to Popes Creek next day. However, the weather forecast convinced everyone that another night of camping was not a good idea, so nearly everyone decided to shuttle the cars up from Popes Creek, pack up, and depart.

A few of us opted for a bit more paddling. We went down the Port Tobacco River, out onto the Potomac hugging the Maryland shore, and paddled downstream another few miles. We passed the historic Mount Air mansion high on the bluff, surrounded by what were once tobacco fields worked by slaves. We pulled in to a small beach at the base of a cliff at about Maryland mile 56 and spent another half-hour sifting sands and gravels looking for more fossilized shark teeth. Finally, we turned back up the river and returned to Chapel Point State Park, having covered another 27.5 miles of the Potomac in 2 days.

Popes Creek to Chaptico Wharf, Md.

For the fifth leg of our passage, we did another day trip, from Captain Billy's Crab House on Popes Creek (Maryland mile 55.5) down the Potomac and up the Wicomico River to Chaptico Wharf (about 5.7 nautical miles upstream from Maryland mile 39). There is no opportunity to camp legitimately anywhere on this stretch of the river on the Maryland shoreline. The Potomac is so wide from here to the mouth that the prospect of crossing to camp at the newly-developed Westmoreland State Park is pretty daunting, adding a couple of miles for each crossing even if the weather is good, and being unsafe if the wind kicks up or thunderstorms threaten.

We parked at a small gravel lot opposite a tiny beach just upstream from the mouth of Popes Creek, just beyond Captain Billy's parking lot. Launching, we immediately focused on the Harry Nice (Rt. 301) bridge spanning the Potomac, our guidepost for the next three miles.

Approaching the bridge, we passed the Aqualand Marina and the Morgan-



Lunch stop at Purse State Park, Wades Bay. Photo by Ralph Heimlich.

town Electrical Generating Plant clustered about the bridge's landfall on the Maryland shore. We stayed well clear of the cooling water intake and outfall pipes, and set our course for Lower Cedar Point. Rounding the point, we coasted down with the tide and decided to lunch at the mouth of Picowaxen Creek (Maryland mile 49). After lunch, we skirted the mouth of Cuckold Creek (an old designation of unknown origin), and ran out to Swan Point, rounding a long, narrow sand bar cluttered with Saturday boaters rafted out to swim and party. This nearly pristine beach area, protected by well-designed terrapin riprap bars, is the site of a long-running battle between U.S. Steel, which acquired the property in 1969, and Charles County officials. Various development plans have come and gone, been approved and postponed over these 40 years, but the beach has remained a natural wonder. Current plans are for a marina and piers, but wetland issues and beach access remain contentious issues. We all commented that the isolated woods and sand spit at the end of Swan Point would make an awesome paddle-in site, but there doesn't seem to be much prospect of that in the future.

Leaving the beach behind, we swung wide to clear the breakwater above the Cobb Island channel and paddled along the

heavily developed shoreline, coming to a pause under the mainland bridgehead. After a brief rest, we headed out of the channel onto the Wicomico River and turned north along the shore. We set a course for the high bluff of White Point bar and crossed the Wicomico against a stiff chop. After another brief rest, we paddled up the east shore of the Wicomico. We landed at Chaptico Wharf ramp, finishing another 22 miles of paddling along the Potomac.

On an earlier trip, we'd intended to have a seafood dinner at Captain Billy's Crabhouse, but the weather forecast had postponed those plans. Now, as we shuttled cars back to Popes Creek, we intended to try again. The packed parking lot made us wary, but we were ushered right in and enjoyed some good Maryland seafood and a couple of pitchers as a reward for one of our most ambitious paddling days.

Chaptico Wharf to Newtowne Neck

By the sixth leg of our journey, I'd hoped to get back to camping, perhaps asking for special permission to camp on St. Clements Island (as we have done in the past) or at Newtowne Neck State Park. The problem down here is that kayak touring is limited to day-tripping because there is currently no overnight camping near the water.

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Eight CPA paddlers joined me for a day trip, launching from the county ramp at Chaptico Wharf. This time we kept to the eastern shore of the Wicomico and paddled down across Bushwood Cove, taking in the views of imposing manor houses, like Ocean Hall built in 1703, and the historic Quade Store, which is still a great place to get a soft-shell crab sandwich.

The shoreline along the west side of Colton Point is known by many kayakers as “The Saints” for the string of islands stretching from privately-owned St. Margaret to the west, St. Catherine Island marking the outside of the St. Catherine Sound, tiny Bullock Island, and St. Clements to the east directly opposite Colton Point. St. Catherine Island is home to The Jefferson Islands Club, a bipartisan getaway from Washington since 1931 when FDR and Truman played poker there. The owner of Bullock Island is fighting a losing battle with erosion and sea level rise, shown by the break-water materials in play and the front-end loader deployed in the center of the island. We landed briefly at the northeast point of St. Catherine, then returned to St. Clements.

St. Clements Island (administered by Point Lookout State Park) is the site where the *Ark* and *Dove*, sent by Cecilus Calvert (the second Baron Baltimore) to colonize his land grant, first landed on March 25, 1634. It is now home to a restoration of the historic Blackstone Lighthouse, on the Potomac from 1851 until destroyed by fire in 1956. We landed at the excellent beach on

north across the Heron Island bank, now submerged, but noted for the herons on it in colonial days. There are fish traps on Heron Island and off Kaywood Point. A few days before our paddle, a local fisherman checking his nets found a ten-foot Bull Shark inside, which must have been quite a shock. Everyone was joking about this, when TWO fins popped up between the kayakers, typical of the cow-nosed ray who curls the ends of his “wings” to startle paddlers.

Newtowne Neck is a new Maryland state park with great promise for kayak touring. The recent planning process identified a need for three paddle-in campsites to be developed and relocation of the existing kayak launch to two sites near the HQ complex and onto St. Clements Bay. While this is certainly a welcome development, it still leaves a stretch of 30 nautical miles on the river between here and the Chapel Point State Park paddle-in site upriver, and 30 nautical miles to Point Lookout State Park downriver with no paddle-in camping. Even with the addition of a paddle-in site at Westmoreland State Park in Virginia at mile 50.4, there is a gap of 27 nautical miles to Chapel Point State Park on the Maryland shore, and 33 nautical miles to Caledon State Park on the Virginia shore upriver, to say nothing of the iffy river crossing where the Potomac varies from 1.6 to 6.5 nautical miles wide.

We landed at the existing kayak launch in St. Nicholas Creek after logging 17 nautical miles and, after sprucing up a bit, drove

the southeast end of the island and lunched under the small gazebo at the head of the dock. After lunch, we climbed the lighthouse and got a great view of the surrounding river and bays from the top. St. Clements is the home of the Colton Point Jazz Festival each July 4th.

Back on the Potomac, we paddled

up to Fitzie’s Restaurant, within site of the landing, for a well-earned seafood dinner.

Newtowne Neck S.P. to Piney Point

Because we had no place to camp, the next leg was also a day trip, starting at our last landing and paddling down to Piney Point, a 14-nautical-mile paddle. I had been contacted by the St. Marys County tourism agency about how to increase use of the launch at the Piney Point Museum, so I had shifted my destination here from the more usual landing at the St. Georges Island causeway ramp.

We launched from the existing Newtowne Neck State Park launch and paddled down Breton Bay to the Potomac, around Huggins Point, then downriver along a shoreline I’d never paddled by before. This shore curves in a long arc 14 nautical miles with no public land along the way, but interrupted by the mouths of several very nice creeks, including Flood Creek, Poplar Hill Creek, Blake Creek, Herring Creek, and Piney Point Creek. These all have sand bar beaches at their entrances that can be used as rest stops for the kayak tourist.

We had nearly a dead calm starting out, and the beautiful beaches and clear waters made one feel almost Caribbean, rather than autumn in the Mid-Atlantic. Adding to that illusion were the large shoals of two-foot-long Atlantic needlefish (*Stromyglura marina*) that worked the gentle surf at the creek mouths for smaller fish and looked like sinuous ribbons of light darting through the clear, shallow water. I grew up in Florida, where these are common, but had never seen so many in one place before on the Chesapeake.

We lunched at the bar on Flood Creek, then paddled off as the wind from the west picked up in the afternoon. We poked into Herring Creek, took a look at Tall Timbers Marina, and eventually made our way down to Piney Point. I’d originally planned to land at the beach in front of the lighthouse, but the rising wind urged us to enter Piney Point Creek and use the mechanical kayak launch at the museum. We blundered around Piney Point Creek for a while with

no signs pointing to the landing, until a closer look at the chart revealed a dug canal leading to it up close to the barrier island.

The Piney Point launch is a perfect example of what well-meaning but inexperienced park planners inflict on serious kayakers. It is a floating dock with an indentation about eight feet long and a steel grab rail overhead. This may be fine for short, stubby recreational kayakers (although I have my doubts), but is totally useless for a 16-foot sea kayak because our cockpit is out beyond the dock, and the grab handle is out of reach. I suspect this thing is compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but it seems a mistake to accommodate a very small percentage of users and totally discommode the majority of kayakers. It is hard to improve on a simple beach launch, but if a floating dock launch is necessary, it should be at least 20 feet long and the surface should be no more than four to six inches off the water surface. To add insult to injury, the gate to the dock (why is there a gate AT ALL?) was locked, so we couldn't have used it anyway.

We managed a very messy landing along the bulkhead and had to manhandle our boats over the rope fence around the launch, but all got ashore safely. In retrospect, I wish we'd have continued on to the beach, even though it entailed a longer carry up to the parking area. We shuttled back to Newtowne Neck State Park and descended on Fitzie's Restaurant, one of my favorites in St. Mary's County.

St. Jeromes and Smith/Jutland Creeks

The finale to this series of paddles was supposed to be a three-day weekend camping trip to Point Lookout State Park to paddle the last stretch of the 136-mile Maryland shoreline and maybe some other pretty creeks in the area. I was joined by six CPA paddlers, but the winds on the Potomac were so strong that we couldn't paddle the last stretch of shoreline. Instead, we took advantage of the weather to duck into some of the more interesting creeks in the area. Unfortunately, when you are focused on covering a lot of miles along a large water

body like the Potomac River, you merely pass by a lot of inviting side creeks. The Chesapeake Bay Program estimates the Bay and tributary shoreline at 11,684 miles, but by kayak and including all the little creeks and inlets, it is probably three or four times that long.

A couple of us camped over at Point Lookout at the end of September and were there for the super moon and eclipse. I have never seen the park so inundated by the high tides as occurred that weekend.

The shoreline had dried out quite a bit by the next weekend, so we paddled on St. Jerome Creek, launching at Buzz's Marina just a few miles above Point Lookout. St. Jerome Creek is very pretty and protected, divided into southern and northern branches by the Airedale peninsula. We decided to venture out onto the Bay and up to Point No Point.

It is nearly always true on the Chesapeake that if your Plan A is messed up by high winds, there is another Plan B paddle you can adapt in more sheltered waters. Even though we would have had a hard time with the ten- to 15+-knot winds gusting to 20 on the Potomac, paddling close to shore in the Bay was protected to the west of us.

We ducked back into the creek and explored a bit, lunching at a wooded site. Then we went back out in the Bay, but the wind

had risen, so we decided it was too rough.

Next day, we drove up to the St. Marys County Ramp at St. Inigoes to paddle Smith and Jutland Creeks. This is also a great launch for paddling out on the Potomac and west around Kit's Point to the newly-acquired beaches along the St. Inigoes State Forest.

There are also excellent sites for another paddle-in campsite at this location which should be developed to make touring from Newtowne Neck to Point Lookout doable with an average 15-mile paddling day. The State Forest here extends around into Smith Creek nearly all the way up on the western side of the creek.

We enjoyed paddling these smaller water bodies and getting closer to shore. It made us wonder how many other neat little tributary creeks we should paddle next season.

The Potomac Passagemaker Tour of 2015 was just one series of trips along the river, mainly restricted to the Maryland shore. In 2016 I'm planning a series that will use the new paddle-in sites at Leesylvania, Caledon, and Westmoreland State Parks in Virginia and possibly other new sites at Newtowne Neck State Park in Maryland. For those of you who have never ventured out onto the Potomac, come and dip your paddles in. You'll enjoy it.



Madeline at the Maryland Point Light. Photo by Ralph Heimlich.