



the
PATUXENT
Water Trail

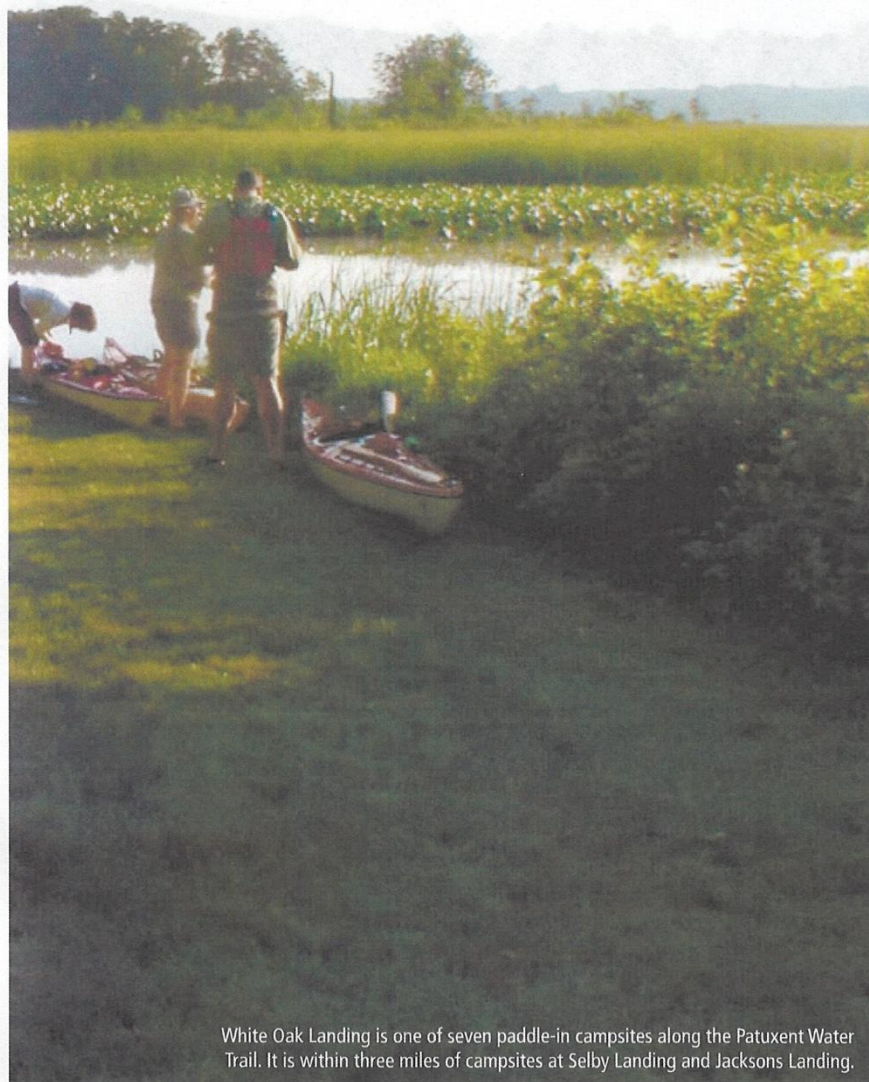
BY RALPH E. HEIMLICH

I arrived at the Queen Anne Canoe Launch on the Patuxent River about a half hour after dawn on a cool Friday morning. Wild turkeys gobbled from the woods and a slight mist rose in tendrils off the still, cool water, wetting the green spring foliage. An owl called from the far bank and hermit thrushes called in the woods behind me. Unlike some years, the landing was fairly dry as I backed down and unloaded the boat and gear.

Calvert County occupies the Calvert Peninsula, a long finger thrust southward into the Chesapeake Bay. Route 4 can be busy with traffic as it meanders up Calvert's spine and off the peninsula to Washington, D.C., Baltimore and northern Virginia, but this wasn't always the case. In the 17th century, the busy thoroughfare was the Patuxent River. The narrow, muddy riverbank at Queen Anne was the head of navigation on the river, reachable by ocean-going sailing vessels. As the forests were cut and the fields cultivated, sediment choked the river and the port of entry had to be moved farther and farther downstream. Ultimately, commercial traffic left the Patuxent entirely and today the river is quite peaceful.

History surrounds the Patuxent. Many of the battles of the War of 1812 were fought on the Chesapeake Bay and in Maryland, and the Patuxent was the stage for much of the action. While it is common knowledge that the British burned Washington during the war, few people know that the British fleet avoided the artillery of Fort Washington on the Potomac River by sailing up the Patuxent and landing without resistance at Croom. Few traces of these events remain, but the National Park Service and the State of Maryland are hard at work unearthing artifacts related to Maryland's role in the war. This year's bicentennial observation of the War of 1812 has included reenactments of the war's important events. More are scheduled to run through spring of 2015.

At 115 miles, the Patuxent River is the longest Maryland river wholly contained within the state. The Patuxent Water Trail starts at mile 62 (counting up from mile 0 at the river mouth at Drum



White Oak Landing is one of seven paddle-in campsites along the Patuxent Water Trail. It is within three miles of campsites at Selby Landing and Jacksons Landing.

Michael MacWilliams

Point), at the Priest Bridge launch site on Route 301 (Crain Highway). For sea kayakers, the canoe launch at Queen Anne (mile 53) is the more practical start of the Patuxent Water Trail because the river above here is shallow, rocky and often littered with blowdowns. For a taste of the upper stretch of the river before you set out on the water trail, paddle the up-

a necklace of access points and scenic vistas along this placid river.

The Patuxent changes character as the waters gather with every mile downstream. Pushing off from the floating dock at Queen Anne, you'll join the narrow river's moderate current sweeping downstream through a deep green tunnel of lush vegetation—tall red oaks and

until May) for an annual trash cleanup. Chip Walsh, a Roughneck who frequently paddles the river, enlisted the help of the Capital Off-Road Enthusiasts (CORE) to winch out several old car bodies, refrigerators and other junk dumped carelessly in an old gravel pit along the river here.

As you paddle down with the current, the river widens and slows. At mile 48 you'll pass Spyglass Island. It was there in 1814 that Commodore Joshua Barney's sailors kept an eye on the British fleet landing at Benedict for the march on Washington, as well as on the mouth of Scorpion Creek (mile 47), named after the USS *Scorpion*, Barney's 49-foot oar- and sail-propelled floating cannon battery. The *Scorpion* was burned to prevent it from falling into British hands, and it is now the subject of an underwater archaeological excavation at the foot of the bluff at Waysons Corner.

The Patuxent has shifted its channel in the 200 years since the War of 1812; you'll pass a back channel on the right bank that was the main channel in Barney's day. Paddling beyond Waysons Corner, you'll cruise under the Hills Bridge at Route 4 (mile 46). Fishermen often cast from the platform under the bridge. Here, Patuxent Wetland Park has

a launch for hand-carried boats, providing good access to the upper part of the river.

As it passes through the park, the river assumes the wide, marshy character that it will maintain for the next 24 miles. At the confluence of the Western Branch (mile 43.5), it will be worth your while to take out at Mount Calvert for a break. Mount Calvert sits above the river on a high bluff that has seen human habitation since 7500 B.C. It is now home to a museum for the artifacts unearthed by Prince George's County archaeologists. At Pig Point, across the river on the Anne Arundel County side, archaeologists have found Clovis spear points and other artifacts dating back 10,000 years. Up Western Branch is the first paddle-in campsite, Iron Pot Landing, nestled under a bluff that bears a colonial house, Billingsley Point, settled in 1740.



BELOW: Chip Walsh and Fred Tutman winch up a car at the Great Patuxent Trash Out, 2010

stream reservoirs, Triadelphia and Rocky Gorge. Each provides roughly 800 acres of flat water ideal for day trips (there is no camping allowed). You can launch from Triadelphia Lake Road, Big Branch, Pig Tail Area, Greenbridge, Browns Bridge, Scotts Cove or Supplee Lane. Below Rocky Gorge, the river winds through Laurel and the Laurel Park horse-racing track, through the heavily wooded North Tract of the Patuxent National Wildlife Refuge and down through the old and new towns of Bowie. Paddling this stretch is better suited to whitewater kayaks than sea kayaks; these sections of the river are generally only navigable in the spring when the runoff is high.

Unlike many existing water trails, the Pax Trail, as it is known, is more than signs and a map; it has a chain of seven paddle-in campsites that are the gems on

tulip poplars, sweetbay magnolia and sassafras and an understory of paw-paw. Bright yellow prothonotary warblers flit across the river in the early morning shadow and woodpeckers drum in the deep woods bordering the river. The river is tidal shortly below this point and brackish water fouls most water filters, but you can replenish water supplies (with a good filter) from the river at the landing.

Along this stretch of the river (about mile 51), the dense vegetation can hide a multitude of sins. In April of the last seven years, members of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association, the Greater Baltimore Canoe Club and the Patuxent Roughnecks have coordinated with Fred Tutman, the Patuxent Riverkeeper, to take advantage of the high water and lack of vegetation prior to spring growth (the understory usually doesn't thicken up

Continuing downstream from Western Branch, you pass the concrete caisson that was the pivot of a swing bridge for the Chesapeake Beach Railway, built in the late 19th century to carry passengers from Washington to Chesapeake Beach. A line of trees marks the old rail causeway that carried the train across the river.

At Jackson's Landing (mile 42), the river abruptly widens into broad, shallow Jug Bay. This is the headquarters of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission's Jug Bay Natural Area, and home to a nice (air-conditioned) museum, the Patuxent Rural Life Museum, restrooms and water supplies. Just downriver from Jackson's Landing and above the boat ramp at Selby Landing (between miles 41 and 42) is the second paddle-in campsite, the Selby Canoe Camp. Mattaponi Creek enters the river just below Selby Landing, and about a mile up the creek on your left, the paddle-in campsite at White Oak Landing sits on a grassy bluff above the river. From a trip-planning perspective, it is less than ideal that the first three camps are within three miles of each other, but the upside is that it's more likely you can use one of the three for your trip.

White Oak Landing has a football field-sized grassy area for camping, a picnic table, fire ring and porta-potty. Located on the site of the Native American village Captain John Smith recorded as *Mattpament*, there is as little development in sight as when Smith's shallop rowed up. You can hike from White Oak Landing out to a road used for an environmental driving tour (open to cars only on Sundays for a one-way loop through the wild area),

turn right and cross the Mattaponi on the wooden trestle bridge, through the woods to the wide-open remains of Riverside Field. The airfield, opened in 1941, was the first black-owned commercial airfield in the country. The 450-acre potato field was leased by The Cloud Club, a group of black pilots from Washington, D.C., and led by John Greene Jr., a pioneer in black aviation. After World War II, it was operated as the Columbia Air Center until 1958. You can also turn left from the camp and hike east out to an observation tower for a panoramic view of all the river you've paddled; the wetlands spread out like a jewel-green carpet divided by the broad arc of the river and braided channels of blue water. Flocks of ducks, geese and cormorants cruise about and ospreys wheel overhead for the last fish of the day.

It is near here that the tides start to rule the river current, and you can use the ebb to wring a bit of help on your way downstream. In the spring, the waters are still chilly but the warming days create mists on the river as herons start their daily hunt and the nocturnal beaver and muskrat scurry home.

Following the broad arc of the river, you'll come to a narrows at Nottingham (mile 37). Once the official customs port and head of steamboat navigation on the Patuxent, Nottingham is memorialized in Donald G. Shomette's book *Lost Towns of Tidewater Maryland*. Along with some more modern homes, there is only an old house and some rotting pilings left to mark the landing. At Queen Anne, Nottingham and Lower Marlboro the river silted in over a century as the land was settled, forests were cut for tobacco and wheat fields and the soil

ran off to the sea. However, Nottingham is the new home of the Patuxent Riverkeeper and will be developed into another launch and paddle-in campsite. Just downstream of Nottingham on the Calvert County shore is Ferry Landing, the terminus of one of the colonial "rolling roads" used to transport hogsheds of tobacco. Instead of transporting the large barrels by wagon, an

The wetlands spread out like a jewel-green carpet divided by the broad arc of the river and braided channels of blue water. Flocks of ducks, geese and cormorants cruise about and ospreys wheel overhead for the last fish of the day.

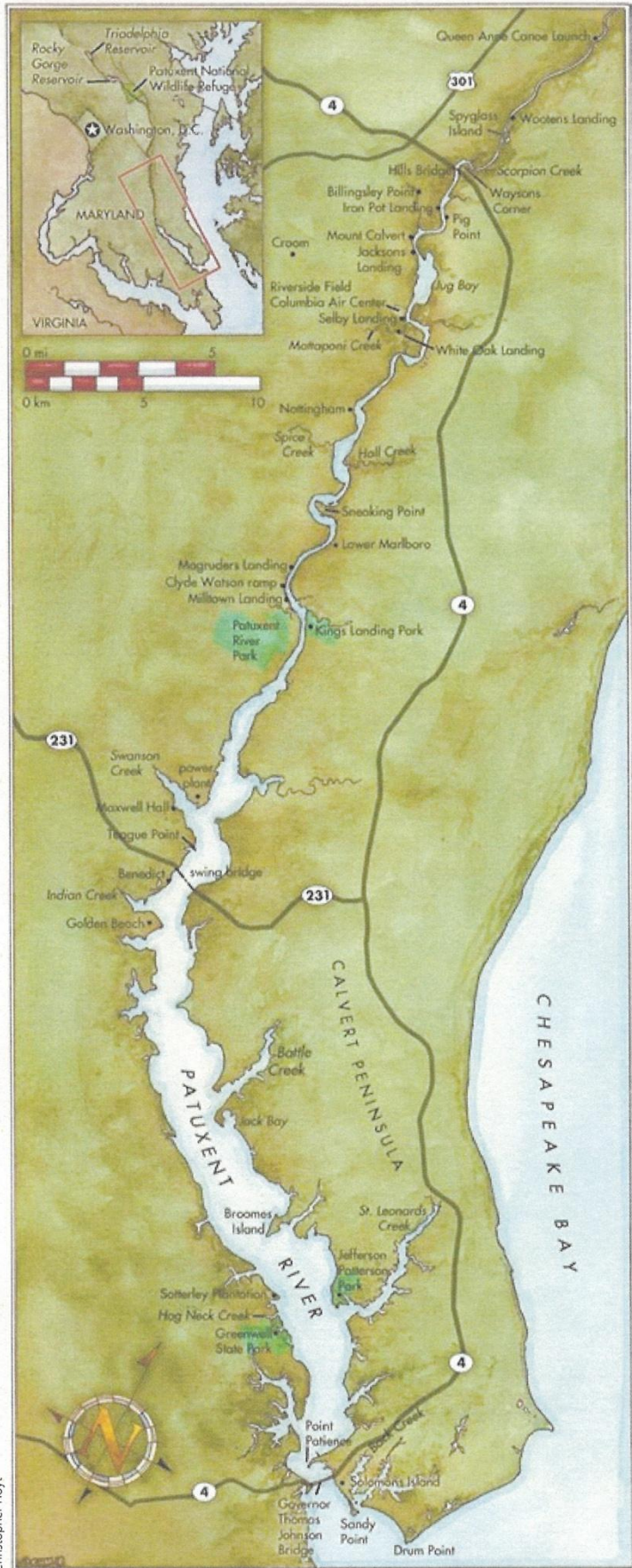
STELLAR Kayaks & Surf Skis *Light-Weight, Fast, Stable & Durable Kayaks, Surf Skis and Paddles.*

Stellar 18' Surf Ski (S18S) The Next Generation of Performance

The Stellar 18' Surf Ski (S18S) is an entry level surf ski with great top end speed from the S18R hull design, along with the stability that you have come to associate with a Stellar. With 2 dry storage compartments, the S18S is not only a Surf Ski, but also a capable touring kayak. As a standard feature, the S18S is outfitted to accept a kick-up rudder for those who paddle in shallow areas. The S18S also meets the specifications for the USCA Fast Sea Kayak division if you wish to race.

New for 2012!
S18S

For more information on our complete line of Kayaks, Surf Skis and Paddles, please visit us at www.StellarKayaksUSA.com



Christopher Hoyt

axle fixed through the center of a barrel allowed it to “roll” the road behind oxen or mules. This stretch of the Patuxent is almost completely devoid of development; a high bluff of erosion-resistant rock drops off as Hall Creek meanders off to the east, and a paddle-in campsite at Spice Creek leads off the river to the west (mile 35). Spice Creek is one of the prettiest campsites on the river with heavy tree cover, a view out over undeveloped Tanyard Marsh and a good swimming area at the mouth of Spice Creek. Spice Creek’s drainage is largely encompassed by a wildlife and water-quality protection area.

Sneaking Point’s (mile 34) name may reflect the difficulty colonial sailboats had negotiating this turn and the narrows funneling the tide at Lower Marlboro just below it at mile 32. The river narrows here and when the tide is just beginning to run out, the current can pick up a bit, but it’s nothing to alarm kayakers. Another mile downstream is a good river access point, the Clyde Watson boat ramp at Magruder’s Landing (there is a private landing by the same name just upstream of the public landing at mile 31), which has restrooms and ample parking. Another paddle-in campsite at Milltown Landing faces across the river to Calvert County’s Kings Landing Park (mile 29), which has water, facilities and other amenities. There is a public swimming pool, but who needs one when you have the river?

Below Kings Landing, the cooling towers and stacks of the Chalk Point power plant mark the mouth of Swanson Creek and are visible along the river for miles. Passing the power plant, paddle into Swanson Creek (mile 24) and search its south shore for the Maxwell Hall paddle-in campsite.

Swanson Creek was the site of a 140,000-gallon oil spill in April 2000 when a pipeline supplying the Chalk Point plant 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 lingers in the bottom sediments. The company operating the power plant paid for cleanup and undertook restoration activities, including funding and hosting a sturgeon hatchery intended to restore the species to the Patuxent and other Maryland rivers, as well as creating two of the seven paddle-in campsites, including Maxwell Hall. There are several places to land here that look like campsites, but the actual one has a metal sign (site #23) and a fire ring.

Leaving Swanson Creek and rounding Teague Point, at the town of Benedict you’ll see the Route 231 bridge, only the second on the river. The river broadens out here to a mile or more in width, and the wind across the broad Patuxent—a true estuary here—will make your choice of which bank to paddle strategic. On the eastern shore, you can squeak through a narrow cut at Jack Bay Marsh (mile 15) at the mouth of Battle Creek and coast down the shore to the western end of Broomes Island (mile 12). Broomes is the site of waterman and former Maryland state senator Bernie Fowler’s annual wade-in, where he has used his white tennis shoes to measure the Patuxent’s clarity since the 1960s.

Just below Benedict on the western shore, an-



Ralph Heimlich

You'll find the Indian Creek campsite just below the town of Benedict.

other paddle-in campsite lies on Indian Creek, part of the Indian Creek Wildlife Management Area. This area is just across the creek from Golden Beach, a former summer community which is now occupied year-round and can be noisy in the summer.

On the eastern shore lies Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum (mile 10). Named for a prominent diplomat who bought the land and established a model farm in the 1930s, this park is also an important archaeological site. It occu-

pies the location of the Patuxent village identified by John Smith as *Quomocac*, and is now the site of the Maryland Archaeological Conservation (MAC) Laboratory, a world-class research facility, conservation lab and museum that houses over eight million artifacts recovered from land and underwater projects. Kayakers have their own landing beach with "terrapin" riprap located offshore, designed to create sandy coves to encourage nesting by the protected diamondback terrapin, Maryland's state

reptile and the University of Maryland's mascot. It is a short walk between the site of an archaeological dig of a colonial homestead, a recreated Patuxent longhouse and the main area of the park, which includes water supplies, restrooms and the park museum.

Leaving Jefferson Patterson Park, you'll paddle past the mouth of St. Leonards Creek, where Commodore Barney outsmarted the British in June 1814, dodging near-certain destruction by escaping up the creek, which was too shallow for

TIDERACE 

www.tiderace.seakayaks.co.uk



PACE 18  SEA KAYAK RACING

PERFECT FOR FITNESS TRAINING, FAST LIGHTWEIGHT TOURING

XCAPR • XPLORE • XCITE • XTREME • XTRA • PACE 18

British ships. The park property was the site of an American artillery battery that supported Barney's fleet during the battle. A recreation of the battle is staged at the park every September.

Across the river to the west is the Sotterley Plantation at Greenwell State Park. The plantation, built in 1703, is older than Mount Vernon and Monticello. The state park also hosts the final paddle-in campsite on the Patuxent Water Trail, tucked into a bluff on Hog Neck Creek. The campsite is isolated from the rest of the park, but a walk south will take you over to the park's main facilities and Rosedale Manor, an 1880 Victorian house.

The river below Greenwell State Park is heavily used, with power boats traveling the channels on either side as you approach the long, narrow finger

of Point Patience, which constricts to a passage about a third of a mile wide. The water off Point Patience is charted as deep as 122 feet, and the bottom around the point falls away at such a steep angle that as you paddle around it, you may find one end of your paddle in the sand and the other only feet from a massive cabin cruiser. The U.S. Navy's Solomons Recreation Center occupies the entire shoreline of the point, and landing is restricted, particularly at the remaining facilities in Third Cove, which housed the Naval Mine Warfare Test Station during World War II.

The final bridge on the Pax is the most impressive. The Governor Thomas Johnson Bridge at mile 3.5 rises 135 feet over the water to allow large sailboats and naval vessels to pass under Route 4. At the northern foot of the bridge is the Pepper Langley boat ramp, another access to the river. Solomons Island is a bustling watermen's and tourist town at the mouth of the river, and is home to the Calvert Marine Museum. Located on Back Creek just a mile from the Patuxent, it has many exhibits on the history of the Patuxent River and Chesapeake Bay, a wooden boat museum and workshop, and nature ex-



Ralph Heimlich

Sunrise from Spice Creek campsite.

hibits. The historic Drum Point Light, one of only three remaining screw-pile lighthouses, was relocated here in 1975. You may see tourists at the museum or on the water, daytripping on the Calvert Marine Museum's converted bugeye buy boat, *William B. Tennison*.

You can paddle around Sandy Point and into the Narrows behind the island to land at the museum, but it is far easier to come in at the beach on the riverside along Solomons Island Road, where there is public access and free parking (right in front of the Star of the Sea Church). After you're all loaded up, take some time for a cocktail with an umbrella in it from one of Solomons' other landmarks: the Tiki Bar on Charles Street.

The 55 miles of river from Queen Anne to Solomons Island is less than half of the Patuxent's length, but for sea kayakers, it is the best part of a river steeped in history, still endowed with natural beauty, and a key waterway in eastern Maryland and the Chesapeake Bay. **SK**

Ralph Heimlich has been canoeing since age 10 and kayaking since 2000. He is an active member of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association, leading trips and editing their newsletter, The Chesapeake Paddler.

RESOURCES

PATUXENT WATER TRAIL WEBSITE:
www.patuxentwatertrail.org

WATER TRAIL MAP BY CPA MEMBER DAVE LINTHICUM:
www.shopdnr.com/patuxentriverwatertrailguide.aspx

CAMPSITE RESERVATIONS:

Jug Bay office (for any of Prince George's County sites)
www.pgparcs.com/Things_To_Do/Nature/Patuxent_River_Park.htm

Maxwell Hall campsite:
 Charles County, 301-932-3470

Indian Creek campsite:
 Maryland Department of Natural Resources
 301-743-5161

Greenwell State Park:
 301-872-5688.

CHECK TIDES

www.dnr.state.md.us/fisheries/tides/index.asp