

“There is a kind of wood we called Cypress, because both the wood, the fruit, the leaf did most resemble it; and of those trees there are some near 3 fadome [18 feet] about at the root, very straight, and 50, 60, or 80 foot without a branch.”

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH



Maryland's Longest River

EXPLORING THE PATUXENT FROM SOLOMONS TO JUG BAY

The Patuxent is the longest river wholly within the borders of Maryland. In early August 1608, after his encounters with the Massawomeck, Tockwogh, and Susquehannock Indians at the head of the Chesapeake, Captain John Smith and his crew turned their *Discovery Barge* south. Sailing along the eastern shore of what is now Maryland, they passed and mapped Kent Island, Sharps Island, Tilghman Island, the mouth of the Choptank, and James and Taylors islands. Then they crossed the Bay, “fell with the River Pawtuxunt,” noted that its mouth was six fathoms deep (36 feet, enough for a ship), and followed it north.

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH ON THE PATUXENT

Smith hardly mentions the *Discovery Barge's* trip up the Patuxent in his journals, but it's easy to figure out where he and his crew went from the details on his map. It shows the Indian leader's town at Pawtuxunt, at the head of today's Battle Creek. The town's people there probably took advantage of the area's cypress swamp that provided them with game, edible plants, and rot-resistant tree trunks for dugout canoes.

In his *True Relation*, Smith writes that the Pawtuxunt chief and his people treated him and his crew kindly. Based on how Smith described other similar encounters with tribes who treated him well, it's probable they threw a feast for the Englishmen and briefed them about what they would find upriver.

John Smith and his men spent only two-and-a-half days on the Patuxent before heading down to the Rappahannock, but they clearly got to know it well. Smith's map tells the story. It shows more than a dozen local Indian towns. It also provides uncanny detail of the Patuxent's meanders up to today's Lyons Creek, which forms the boundary between Calvert and Anne Arundel counties on the east side of the river, and to Mattaponi Creek on the west (Prince George's County) side just upstream.

EXPLORING THE PATUXENT TODAY

The uppermost towns on Smith's map are Mattapanient, on the high ground at the base of a large marsh, and Quactataugh on the opposite side, at the mouth of Lyons Creek. Mattapanient today is the Merkle Wildlife Management Area of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Upstream is Jug Bay, a broad and shallow body of water whose wooded shores are protected by Prince George's County's Patuxent River Park on the west side and Anne Arundel County's Jug Bay Wetland Sanctuary on the east.

This part of the Patuxent is still affected by the river's tides, but it is far enough upstream to be freshwater in all but the severest droughts. Because of the work of the counties and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, the Patuxent still offers some excellent “John Smith views”



PHOTO BY SARAH ROGERS

Shorelines of scenic Jug Bay, near the headwaters of the Patuxent River, are protected by the Patuxent River Park and the Jug Bay Wetland Sanctuary.

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Bald cypress trees, such as these growing in the Patuxent's Battle Creek Cypress Swamp Sanctuary, were favored by the Chesapeake's Indians for making canoes.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION *Chesapeake Bay Gateways*

The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail is part of a much larger story of the Chesapeake Bay—a story with rich historical, natural, and environmental chapters for your discovery and enjoyment. Throughout the Bay watershed a variety of parks, wildlife refuges, maritime museums, historic sites, and trails tell their part of the Chesapeake story. These special places are part of the National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network. Visit them to experience the authentic Chesapeake.

Many of these Gateways to the Chesapeake are located along the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. Those with boating access to the water trail are noted throughout this Boater's Guide. Others await your exploration by land. You can make virtual visits via the Gateway Network's website at www.baygateways.net where you can find sites by name, location, activities, or themes. As you travel the Patuxent River, learn more about important Chesapeake connections at the following Gateway sites and attractions.

CHESAPEAKE GATEWAYS ALONG THE PATUXENT RIVER

Myrtle Point Park • California, MD

Solomons Visitor Information Center • Solomons, MD

Calvert Marine Museum • Solomons, MD

Chesapeake Biological Laboratory • Solomons, MD

Greenwell State Park • Hollywood, MD

Sotterley Plantation • Hollywood, MD

Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum • St. Leonard, MD

Battle Creek Cypress Swamp • Prince Frederick, MD

Kings Landing Park • Huntingtown, MD

Merkle Wildlife Sanctuary • Upper Marlboro, MD

Patuxent River Park, Jug Bay Natural Area • Upper Marlboro, MD

of water, marsh, and forest. Access is excellent for Captain John Smith Chesapeake Trail explorers in a variety of watercraft. Even better, there are interesting things to see and do in all but the coldest weather. It's hard to believe that this well-preserved network of protected woodland and marsh is only 25 miles due east of Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., but that proximity makes it all the more valuable to people seeking natural areas in the busy Baltimore-Washington urban/suburban corridor.

Downriver, the Patuxent remains pastoral and largely agricultural, with a scattering of old villages like Nottingham and Lower Marlboro, most of them on the sites of local Indian villages that later became colonial American towns. The river was the corridor for a major running naval battle in the War of 1812. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the wharves of those river towns held depots and warehouses for the steamboat lines that ran to Baltimore. Since the boats stopped running in the 1930s, commercial traffic on the river has subsided. Now the river's proximity to Washington guarantees plenty of weekend boaters.

Below Benedict, the Patuxent widens considerably, with a number of large old estates along the banks, interspersed with suburban developments owned by people who commute either to Washington or to the huge Patuxent Naval Air Station at the river's mouth. On the north side of the river's mouth is the busy harbor of Solomons Island, which has made a century-long transition from seafood packing and boatbuilding to recreational boating services, charter fishing, and scientific research.

The tidal Patuxent is still a lovely, fascinating place, but it is a river under considerable pressure from heavy suburban development along its headwaters in the busy Baltimore-Washington corridor. It has plenty of champions, but restoring its health remains an ongoing challenge.



PHOTO BY SARAH ROGERS

Good Vessels for Exploring



PADDLE CRAFT (CANOES AND KAYAKS)

Canoes and kayaks are excellent for exploring the shorelines of Jug Bay, and for paddling up Mattaponi Creek, which is bordered on one side by the Patuxent River Park and on the other by the Merkle Wildlife Management Area. The marsh creeks downriver around the Clyde Watson Boat Ramp at Magruder's Ferry and Kings Landing are also worth exploring. Below Benedict, the river itself is large and powerful, with considerable traffic from recreational boats on weekends in warm weather.

If you're an experienced and physically fit sea kayaker, explore any portion or all of the area, but take precautions to stay safe. If you're a novice or intermediate paddler, keep to shorter trips like Mattaponi Creek, launching at the Patuxent River Park's Selby's Landing. It's a classic.

SKIFFS AND RUNABOUTS



Outboard skiffs and runabouts of 14- to 20-foot length can explore both tidal creeks and the river's main stem. Skippers of these boats should carry push-poles to access marsh edges and make sure that they are equipped to deal with mud flats and submerged logs.

Above the town of Benedict, there aren't many people to call if you get stuck, break down, or run out of fuel. Below there, the main river's broad, open waters can get surprisingly choppy. It pays to be prepared, and to keep your itineraries within your skills. Even short trips can reveal beautiful, fascinating places along the Patuxent and its tidal creeks.

CRUISING POWERBOATS, TRAWLERS, AND SAILBOATS



Cruising sailboats and powerboats of all sorts routinely travel the lower Patuxent, especially if they are equipped with seaworthy dinghies and canoes or kayaks. St. Leonard Creek is an especially popular anchorage.

Unfortunately, the river offers no marina services above Benedict. Thus, cruisers are completely on their own. The river carries plenty of depth, but the unmarked channels wind and twist, with shallow shoulders that are all too easy to run aground on. They are also narrow, with strong currents. Choosing an overnight anchorage means making sure that there is enough water to swing as the tide and current change.

If, in view of these difficulties, spending the night up the river sounds too challenging, consider anchoring off Benedict one evening—or tying up there—then taking a day trip the next morning, traveling up the river and back. The upper Patuxent is a lovely, interesting river, and much of it looks similar to what Captain John Smith and his crew saw.



PHOTO BY CHRIS SPIELMANN

A 200-foot fishing pier and a canoe/kayak launch at King's Landing Park provide access to the middle Patuxent River.



PHOTO © MIDDLETON EVANS

The marshes of the Jug Bay Natural Area of Patuxent River Park include some of the largest stands of wild rice in Maryland.



Many places on the Patuxent still look much as they did to Captain John Smith.

Trip Itineraries

CANOES & KAYAKS ON MATTAPONI CREEK EASY TWO-WAY TRIP, ABOUT 3.5 MILES



Launch at the Patuxent River Park's Selby's Landing, at the lower end of Jug Bay. Paddle downriver a quarter-mile and turn right into Mattaponi Creek.

This meandering waterway looks very much as it would have during Captain John Smith's time. Thanks to the Patuxent River Park, which owns the right bank, and the Merkle Wildlife Management Area (Maryland DNR), which owns the left, the watershed of the creek is still almost all wooded, providing the kind of "great green filter" that made the Chesapeake's tidal waters so rich 400 years ago.

Paddling upstream, you'll find the first mile of the creek to be marshy on both sides. These are rich, diverse tidal fresh marshes. The high land that begins to appear on the Merkle side was the site of Mattapanient Town, a Patuxent Indian settlement. If you look at a map, you'll notice that it looks out over a very large marsh that lies on the inside of the river's curve opposite Lyons Creek, with commanding views both up- and downriver and landings on both the upstream and downstream edges. In fact, you will soon come to tiny White Oak Landing, now part of the management area, which has probably been in use by humans at least since the time of Smith's visit in 1608. All that is there today is the end of a dirt road, but it remains a good place to stop and stretch your legs.

From White Oak Landing up, Mattaponi Creek winds back and forth between marsh and woods, gradually getting shallower, with increasingly large beds of underwater grasses. You may not like the way they slow down your boat, but they provide habitat and food for fish and birds. You'll pass under the wooden bridge for the park's Critical Area Driving Tour, but otherwise the creek will look much as it must have when the residents of Mattapanient hunted, fished, and foraged on and around it.

On the return to the creek's mouth, if the weather is fit and you have enough energy and skill, consider paddling downstream a half-mile, around the first curve (opposite Lyons Creek, where Captain John Smith mapped the town of Quactataugh) and exploring up into one of the marsh guts that extend into the Merkle/Mattapanient marsh. Bank-side stands of seven-foot-tall cordgrass make you feel as though you're paddling up a tunnel. In the fall, you may surprise flocks of mallard and black ducks that rest and feed there—and they'll surprise you as they explode off the water right in front of your boat.

SKIFFIN' DOWN TO NOTTINGHAM AND BACK EASY TWO-WAY TRIP, ABOUT 12 MILES



If you're running a 14- to 20-foot skiff or runabout equipped with a push-pole, you can take much of the same trip up Mattaponi Creek, though you may not make it past White Oak Landing unless the tide is well up. Note: this is not a good place to be marooned by a falling tide.

The speed of a skiff is useful for getting a broader view of the river itself. Launch at either Jackson's Landing (by the Patuxent River Park Office) or at Selby's Landing. Traveling easy at 13–17 knots (15–20 mph), you can make it downriver to the 17th-century colonial tobacco port of Nottingham and back, with time out for a picnic on the water. Going downriver, you'll skirt the whole of the Merkle/Mattapanient marsh, go through Deep Turn (the lower landing for Mattapanient), and run down the next reach to the curve at Nottingham. If you've equipped your boat with a depth sounder, notice the depths at the landings, several of which are more than 40 feet. You'll also notice swirling eddies in those spots if the tide is running strongly.

The landing at Nottingham is private, so stay in your skiff. On the way back upriver, pay close attention to the marked channel going through Jug Bay. It'll give you 4–6 feet of depth, but the flats immediately outside it are shallow and soft—very difficult to pole away from if the wind is against you. Be courteous of anglers and boats as you enter the narrows by Jackson's Landing.

Captain John Smith mapped the Patuxent Indian town of Wasameus at the site of Nottingham when he visited. The location became an important colonial tobacco port in the mid-17th century, when mariners were still navigating the Patuxent using Captain John Smith's map. The town remained a tobacco port into the 19th century, although after the Civil War it became primarily a landing for the steamboats that connected communities along the Patuxent with Baltimore and other ports.

MAGRUDER'S FERRY AND KING'S LANDING TWO-WAY, 2–5 MILES



A dozen miles or so downstream of Mattaponi Creek is Magruder's Ferry, on the Prince George's County (west) side, part of the Patuxent River Park. Another mile on is Kings Landing Park on the Calvert County (east) side. As is typical on this river, both facilities are on the outsides of curves, with firm, sandy banks for launching. The Magruder's Ferry facility (named for longtime riverman and conservationist Clyde Watson) also has a concrete launch ramp for skiffs and runabouts.

In a powerboat, explore the river up and down as you might have out of Jackson's Landing (near the Patuxent River Park Office). In paddle craft or a skiff with a push-pole, spend some time exploring either Chew Creek, which winds back through a broad marsh on the Calvert County side opposite the Clyde Watson facility, or Cocktown Creek, a short distance upstream of Kings Landing.

The Patuxent is just beginning to turn brackish here, and you may find some crabs, as well as salt marsh plants along the river. Up in either creek you'll find a transition to freshwater marshes. Smith mapped the towns of Pocatamough and Tauskus here. Chew and Cocktown creeks feel very much as they might have 400 years ago. As you make your way up these creeks, you may wonder if a canoe of Pawtuxunt fishermen will appear around a corner.

For Cruising Boats

TRAVELING THE PATUXENT (TWO-WAY, 5–20 MILES)

Launch a skiff or runabout either upriver at Hallowing Point, opposite Benedict, or at Solomons, under the Thomas Johnson Bridge. In a cruising boat, begin your exploration of the Patuxent in Solomons Harbor.

Besides St. Leonard Creek, the lower river offers plenty of additional creeks and coves for exploring, from Island Creek at Broomes Island and Hellen Creek downriver of St. Leonard—both on the Calvert County side (the latter where Captain Smith mapped the village of Opanient)—to Cuckold Creek on the St. Mary's County side. Just be aware that the lower Patuxent is broad, with plenty of fetch where a strong wind can build formidable waves.





No longer accessible by boat, Battle Creek Cypress Swamp merits a visit by land to appreciate the Patuxent watershed's diversity.



A SHORE-BASED BOARDWALK TOUR OF Battle Creek Cypress Swamp


The Pawtuxunt chief lived at the head of today's Battle Creek. It is difficult to get up there now in any boat, but it is possible to visit the Battle Creek Cypress Swamp Sanctuary (another Calvert County park) by land. This is a superb facility, with exhibits that describe bald cypress trees and the ways this swamp supplied the needs of the Pawtuxunt and the English settlers who followed them.

TRAILHEADS ON THE PATUXENT



Patuxent River Park
301-627-6074, www.pgparcs.com/places/parks/patuxent.html
(ramp fee)


Jackson's Landing and Park Office  
38° 46' 23" N, 76° 42' 33" W



Selby's Landing  
38° 45' 09" N, 76° 41' 59" W

Clyde Watson Boat Ramp, Magruder's Ferry  
38° 38' 24" N, 76° 41' 39" W

King's Landing Park 
38° 37' 32" N, 76° 40' 33" W
410-535-2661, www.calvertparks.org/Parks/KingsLanding/KLPhome.htm

Hallowing Point Boat Ramp  
38° 30' 38" N, 76° 39' 53" W
www.dnr.maryland.gov/boating/boatramps.asp
(Search under Calvert County.)

Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum 
38° 24' 00" N, 76° 30' 27" W
410-586-8501, www.jefpat.org

Solomons Island Boat Ramp  
38° 19' 43" N, 76° 28' 04" W
www.dnr.maryland.gov/boating/boatramps.asp
(Search under Calvert County.)

NOTE: River maps indicate trailheads as either private or public. All launch sites are open to the public. Those listed as private are part of privately owned businesses. Public trailheads are located on local, state, or federally managed properties. Fees may be charged at any of the launch sites and are subject to change. Contact the site directly for the latest information.

JEFFERSON PATTERSON PARK AND MUSEUM TWO-WAY PADDLE, 2–10 MILES



Just north of the mouth of St. Leonard Creek, Captain Smith mapped the village of Quomocac, which lay on a broad, wooded plain next to the river. Today that land is part of the Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum, administered by the Maryland Historical Trust. The site houses the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory and offers a great riverside park experience to the public.

If you'd like to paddle the shores here, check in at the park's visitor center. The staff will advise you on where to unload your boat and park your car.

The river shore offers several nearby pocket beaches, set inside of living shoreline projects. Visit the park's website and click on "Environmental" to learn more about these projects, which were designed to protect the park's considerable archeological resources from storms and rising sea level. If you feel like paddling further after you visit the easternmost project, turn left to explore St. Leonard Creek. If the weather is too rough to paddle this stretch of open river, walk the two-mile trail loop along the shore that visits each of the living shoreline projects.



Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum has 2 ½ miles of shoreline where the Patuxent River meets St. Leonard Creek.

Patuxent River

SECTION MAP



-  TRAILHEAD (PUBLIC)
-  TRIP ITINERARY
-  CBIBS (NOAA BUOY)
BUOY NAME

LINKS TO ONLINE MAPS	CLICK SOURCE ▼
Clyde Watson Boat Ramp	GOOGLE NOAA
Hallowing Point Boat Ramp	GOOGLE NOAA
Jackson's Landing	GOOGLE NOAA
Jefferson Patterson Park	GOOGLE NOAA
King's Landing Park	GOOGLE NOAA
Selby's Landing	GOOGLE NOAA
Solomons Island Boat Ramp	GOOGLE NOAA

