

“We passed; many shallow creeks, but the first we found Navigable for a ship, we called Bolus [Patapsco], for that the clay in many places under the cliffs by the high water marke, did grow up in red and white knots as gum out of trees.”

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH

The Deep Patapsco

EXPLORING BALTIMORE'S RIVER HARBOR

It takes more imagination to follow in Captain John Smith's wake on the Patapsco than anywhere else in the Chesapeake. Smith's map drew Maryland colonists to this great natural harbor in the late 17th century. It has been an important international port since the early 18th century, when Baltimore merchants first shipped barrels of flour to the West Indies. It was also the hub for regional shipping by sail and steam in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Over time, development has hardened most of the tidal shoreline of the Patapsco and its various tributaries. From the huge commercial wharves at the Dundalk Marine Terminal and the condominium/marina developments in the Inner Harbor to the suburban communities on Marley, Stony, and Rock creeks on the river's south shore and on Old Road Bay to the east, commercial and residential growth has impacted the shorelines. Even so, there is still plenty to explore in the Patapsco, including surprising natural pockets.

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH ON THE PATAPSCO

Captain John Smith and his crew spent only two and a half days on the Patapsco River, but he managed to map it with amazing accuracy. On June 12, 1608, after a very long sail up the Bay from Cove Point, they anchored the *Discovery Barge* for the night off Bodkin Point, at the south side of the Patapsco's broad mouth.

They saw no one on land. Some historians believe this part of the western shore was a buffer area between the Indian tribes to the north and south and the Massawomeck who lived in Western Maryland. That tribe was said to have conducted raids on Upper Bay villages by paddling down the Potomac and up its Monocacy tributary, portaging their birchbark canoes to the Patapsco's headwaters, and paddling down to the Bay.

The next day, Smith explored the river up to modern-day Elkridge, where he planted a cross. As elsewhere, the shallop crew planted Maltese crosses to mark the extent of their explorations. Smith's 1612 map includes areas beyond the crosses, which he filled in based on information provided by Indians he met.

The crew found two kinds of clay in the Patapsco's banks, bole armoniac and terra sigillata, which the English believed had medicinal qualities. Smith named the river Bolus flu after the former. They spent the afternoon exploring and mapping the Gwynns Falls, the Jones Falls, and Old Road Bay, where they spent the night.

It had been four long, hard days since the explorers had left the Nanticoke River and the good food urged on them by its people. Now they were tired, hungry, and in several cases, sick, with most of their on-board food spoiled. They begged Smith to turn south to Jamestown to restock supplies. He responded with an inspiring speech that revived their spirits, but that evening and the next day, the weather shut in on them in Old Road Bay. After a day and a half of rain and wind endured in the open *Discovery Barge*, Smith relented, and they headed south on June 15.

“Regaine therefore your old spirits for returne I will not (if God please) till I have seene the Massawomeks, found Patawomeck, or the head of this water you conceit to be endless.”

— Captain John Smith, 1608

RESOURCES & CONTACTS

BALTIMORE VISITOR CENTER

410-659-7066

<http://baltimore.org/visitor-center>

NATIONAL AQUARIUM AT BALTIMORE

410-576-3800

www.aqua.org

MARYLAND SCIENCE CENTER

410-685-5225

www.mdsci.org

BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF INDUSTRY

410-727-4808

www.thebmi.org

FORT MCHENRY NATIONAL MONUMENT AND HISTORIC SHRINE

410-962-4290

www.nps.gov/fomc



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Skipjack on the Patapsco River near Baltimore.

PHOTO COURTESY VISIT BALTIMORE

EXPLORING THE PATAPSCO TODAY

With over four centuries of intensive human activity, the tidal Patapsco has grown choked with gravel, sand, and mud from tobacco farming, timber cutting, and all sorts of development. The watersheds of its Middle Branch and Inner Harbor tributaries, the Gwynns Falls River and the Jones Falls River, respectively, are almost entirely covered by rooftops, roadways, and parking lots. Today, the water in Baltimore's harbor and the Patapsco is cleaner than it was before the Clean Water Act of 1972 began regulating the discharges of sewage and industrial waste. Strong storms, however, still pour pollutants down the harbor's stormwater systems, and the sediments are still heavily polluted with organic toxins and heavy metals—legacies of the city's industrial past.

For the past 30 years, the City of Baltimore and the counties surrounding it (Baltimore and Anne Arundel) have recognized the value of this urban waterfront. Former industrial sites now hold condominium/office/marina communities with

plenty of 21st-century amenities, interspersed by world-class institutions like the National Aquarium at Baltimore, the Maryland Science Center, the Baltimore Museum of Industry, and the University of Maryland's Center of Marine Biotechnology. An attractive, well-landscaped, and lighted walkway around the Inner Harbor makes it easy for visiting boaters to tie up at one of the marinas and visit any of these attractions.

There is always something interesting going on in the Patapsco, from tugs docking big ships to events at Fort McHenry that commemorate the War of 1812 and Francis Scott Key's writing of "The Star-Spangled Banner." And there are a few pockets of natural shoreline, such as a wetland restoration project located just west of Fort McHenry, built over the past ten years by staff and volunteers from the National Aquarium. Explore further and you'll find a few natural spots like Tanyard Cove at the junction of Curtis and Marley creeks.



PHOTO ©MIDDLETON EVANS

Both land- and water-based visitors will find plenty to see and do in Baltimore's Inner Harbor.

Good Vessels for Exploring



PADDLE CRAFT (CANOES AND KAYAKS)

Canoes and especially kayaks are popular vessels for exploring the Patapsco today. Some marinas allow launching them from floating docks in the Inner Harbor, as does the Canton Park launch ramp on Boston Street. Just be aware that these open waters can kick up rough. There is also a great deal of boat traffic, from water taxis and the Living Classrooms Foundation's 70-foot pungy schooner, *Lady Maryland*, to huge commercial ships which have a difficult time seeing kayaks.



SKIFFS AND RUNABOUTS

Skiffs and runabouts are a bit more visible and seaworthy than paddle craft, but it still pays to exercise caution and give careful attention when operating anywhere in the Patapsco. They make good platforms for day trips around the Patapsco.



CRUISING POWERBOATS, TRAWLERS, AND SAILBOATS

Captain John Smith turned into the Patapsco and paid it close attention as the first Chesapeake upper western shore tributary "we found navigable for a ship." Today, it is made to order for exploring by cruising sail- and powerboats. Be aware of the traffic and read your charts carefully to avoid shallow areas in the upper sections of the river.



There are surprising pockets of nature along the Patapsco's developed waterfront, such as this wetlands restoration project at Fort McHenry where school groups study birds and plants.

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 Patapsco River, learn more about important Chesapeake connections at the following Gateway sites and attractions.

CHESAPEAKE GATEWAYS ALONG THE PATAPSCO RIVER

Baltimore Visitor Center • Baltimore, MD
 Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine • Baltimore, MD
 Baltimore Museum of Industry • Baltimore, MD
Pride of Baltimore II, Baltimore, MD
 USS *Constellation* Museum, Baltimore, MD
 Lightship *Chesapeake* and 7-Foot Knoll Lighthouse • Baltimore, MD
 National Aquarium in Baltimore
 Frederick Douglass-Isaac Myers Maritime Park • Baltimore, MD
 Fell's Point Historic District • Baltimore, MD
 Patapsco Valley State Park • Ellicott City, MD
 Jones Falls Trail • Baltimore, MD
 Gwynns Falls Trail and Greenway • Baltimore, MD



TRAILHEADS ON THE PATAPSCO RIVER



BALTIMORE MARINAS

Search "Baltimore Marinas" online for a list of nearly a dozen commercial facilities in various parts of the Harbor.

PUBLIC LAUNCH RAMPS

Visit the online Boating Access Guide of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Click on the Baltimore City and Baltimore County reference maps.
www.dnr.state.md.us/boating/boatramps.asp

The easiest ramp for the Inner Harbor is:
Canton Park
39° 16' 36" N, 76° 34' 21" W  
(located on Boston Street, no launch fee)

For the outer Patapsco:
Fort Armistead Park
39° 12' 31" N, 76° 31' 57" W  
(no launch fee)

NOTE: Trailheads indicate access points for the suggested itineraries. 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.

Trip Itineraries

HARBOR CIRCUMNAVIGATION ONE-WAY, 50 MILES



You'll travel about 50 miles to circumnavigate the Patapsco and Baltimore's Harbor from any convenient starting point. It's probably not a great kayak project, and making the trip entirely under sail would be challenging, but it's an interesting full-day exploration in a cruising boat, a good-sized skiff, or a capable runabout. Take it at one time or cut it into shorter segments. These include:

- A complete circle of the Inner Harbor;
- A quick look into the Middle Branch (Gwynns Falls) and the Patapsco's silted-in main stem at the Hanover Street Bridge;
- A run out to the mouth of Curtis Bay, on the south side of the Inner Harbor;
- A round trip up into Curtis Creek, past the U.S. Coast Guard Yard to Tanyard Cove and back;
- A run out under the Key Bridge to Bodkin Point;
- A ride across the Patapsco into Old Road Bay on the north side and around the old steel mill at Sparrows Point;
- A careful run past the Dundalk Marine Terminal, with its giant cranes; and
- A good look at the Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine on the way back into the Inner Harbor.

TANYARD COVE TWO-WAY, 11 MILES



Launch at Fort Armistead and run west, under the Key Bridge, into Curtis Bay and then up Curtis Creek to its junction with Marley Creek. The shoreline will be thoroughly industrial until you pass under the Interstate 695 (Baltimore Beltway) and railroad bridges and clear the Coast Guard Yard. Then, remarkably, you'll find a natural wooded shoreline on the east side of the creek, with lovely Tanyard Cove inviting you to enter. Though shallow, the cove offers three to four feet of water far enough in to allow anchoring for a picnic. Turn left coming out of Tanyard Cove, and Marley Creek offers a similar channel south for two miles. The west side is full of houses, but the east side remains wooded for most of its length.






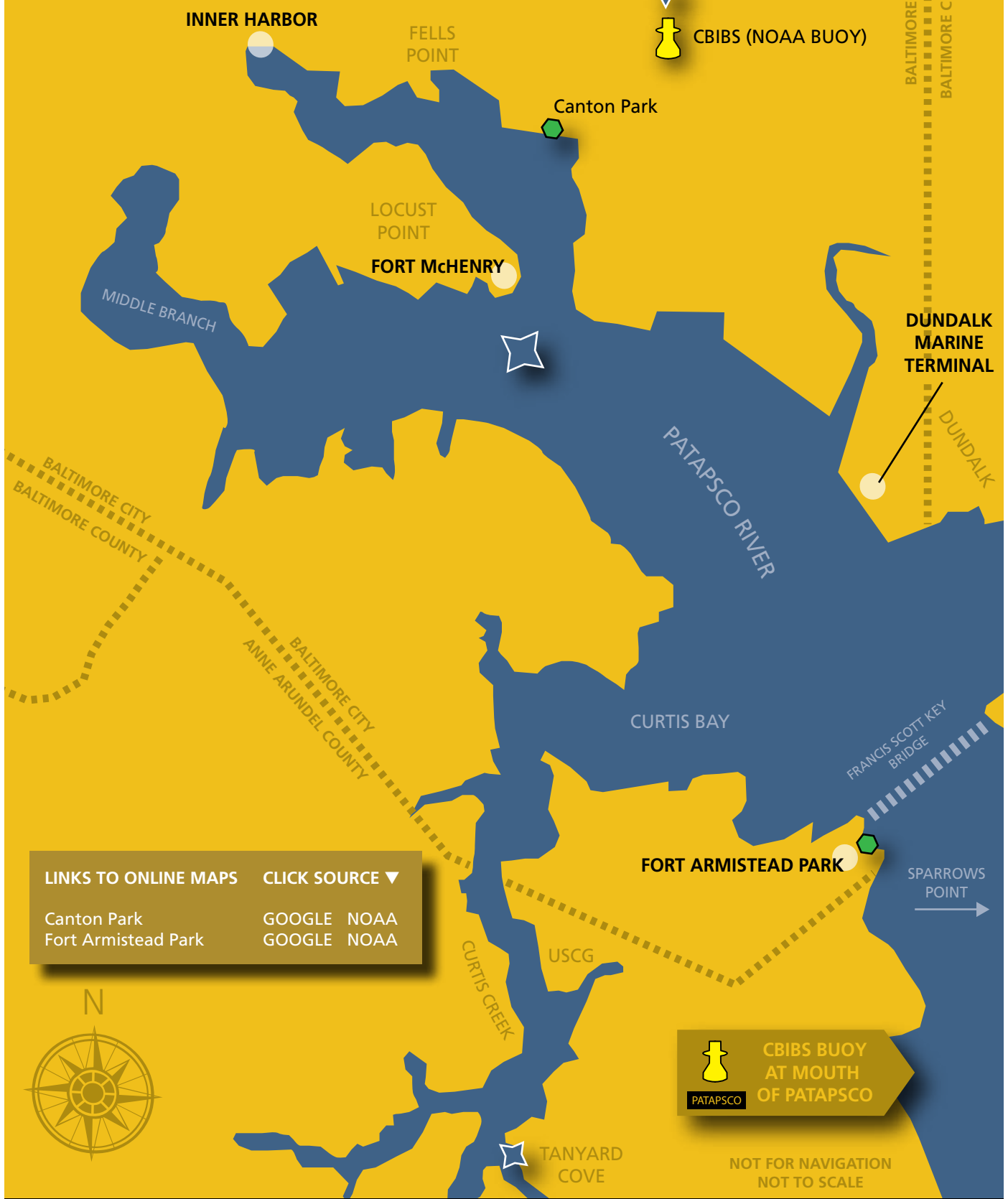
PHOTO BY SARAH ROGERS

A trip to Baltimore is not complete without visiting Fort McHenry National Monument. Private vessels cannot dock there, but visitors can come by water taxi from the Inner Harbor.

Patapsco River

SECTION MAP

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



LINKS TO ONLINE MAPS	CLICK SOURCE ▼
Canton Park	GOOGLE NOAA
Fort Armistead Park	GOOGLE NOAA

 CBIBS BUOY AT MOUTH OF PATAPSCO

NOT FOR NAVIGATION
NOT TO SCALE