



*“We went not much further before we might see the bay to divide in two heads, and arriving there we found it divided in four. . . . The best [river of the four] cometh northwest from among the mountains, but though canoes may go a day’s journey or two up it, we could not get two miles up it with our boat for rocks.”*

CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH



## Finding the Source

### EXPLORING THE HEAD OF THE BAY

Captain John Smith's exploration of the head of the Chesapeake was important for several reasons. He mapped it with his usual amazing accuracy, firmly establishing the link between the Susquehanna River and the Chesapeake Bay. He reinforced that link by inviting the Susquehannock chiefs to come down to the tidal part of the river to parley on Garrett Island, cementing the tie between the people of the uplands that would become Pennsylvania and the people of the tidal waters in what would become Maryland. And when the rapids that he named Smith's Falls stopped the *Discovery Barge* from going further, he established once and for all that the fabled Northwest Passage to the Orient did not exist in the Chesapeake.

Ironically, Smith caused confusion that persists today by drawing a distinction between the Susquehanna and the Chesapeake. In reality, they are two sides of the same coin. The Chesapeake's main stem is actually the Susquehanna's tidal basin. Efforts to restore the health of the Chesapeake would be much easier today if more people in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia saw the river and the Bay as a whole.

Smith's map of the Chesapeake and its tributaries drew English settlers to the region as early as the late 1620s, when his friend William Claiborne established a Virginia Company trading post on Garrett Island (then named Palmer's Island). Forces from the Maryland colony shut down Claiborne's enterprise there ten years later, but members of that colony soon spread to the area, founding multiple settlements that endure today.

This part of the Chesapeake, fed by massive amounts of freshwater from the Susquehanna, forms a stark contrast with the Bay's saltier lower reaches. It is an ecosystem with features and a human culture all its own.

### CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH AT THE HEAD OF THE BAY

After being frustrated by weather on their first trip up the Chesapeake in June and early July of 1608, Captain John Smith and crew set out from Jamestown a second time on July 24, making Kecoughtan at the mouth of the James River by evening. By this time, they had learned how to sail the *Discovery Barge* efficiently to take advantage of favorable wind and current.

Adverse wind kept them at Kecoughtan for a couple of days, but then they caught fair wind and current and made the 200 miles to the mouth of the Susquehanna in four days. That is very good time indeed for a 30-foot boat of any sort, much less a heavy working vessel of early 17th-century shape and sail plan. Smith may have received his captain's commission on a battlefield, but he had become a skillful small boat sailor too.

Smith and crew worked their way up the Susquehanna to the rapids that he named for himself (the only time he did so), then anchored the *Discovery Barge* for the night. The next morning, they tied their vessel off to the west (Harford County) bank and walked up to a knoll in what is now Susquehanna State Park to plant one of their brass crosses.



PHOTO BY CINDY ROSS

A slice of life on the Susquehanna Flats at Havre de Grace on the Upper Bay.

### PREVIOUS PAGE

A pleasant anchorage at Turner's Creek Park and the Sassafras Natural Resource Management Area.

### 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](http://www.baygateways.net) where you can find sites by name, location, activities, or themes. As you travel around the head of the Bay, learn more about important Chesapeake connections at the following Gateway sites and attractions.

#### CHESAPEAKE GATEWAYS ALONG THE HEAD OF THE BAY

Gunpowder Falls State Park • Baltimore, MD  
 Marshy Point Park • Baltimore, MD  
 Susquehanna State Park • Havre de Grace, MD  
 Susquehanna Museum at Havre de Grace • Havre de Grace, MD  
 Concord Point Lighthouse • Havre de Grace, MD  
 Havre de Grace Maritime Museum • Havre de Grace, MD  
 Havre de Grace Decoy Museum • Havre de Grace, MD  
 Skipjack *Martha Lewis* • Havre de Grace, MD  
 Elk Neck State Park • North East, MD  
 Mount Harmon Plantation • Earleville, MD  
 Sassafras Natural Resource Management Area and Turner's Creek Park • Kennedyville, MD  
 Schooner *Sultana* • Chestertown, MD  
 Geddes-Piper House • Chestertown, MD  
 Chesapeake Bay Environmental Center • Grasonville, MD  
 Chesapeake Exploration Center at Ferry Point Park • Chester, MD  
 Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge • Rock Hall, MD  
 Chesapeake Country Scenic Byway • Chester, MD

Afterwards, they traveled back down the river and around the Susquehanna Flats to the east, visiting Furnace Bay and carefully mapping both the North East River (where they planted another cross) and the west side of Elk Neck.

As they rounded Turkey Point, they met a party of Massawomeck who had just raided the chief's town of the Tockwogh on the Sassafras River. Each group regarded the other cautiously, as they met just above the mouth of the Sassafras. They talked (in sign) and traded. The English spent the night anchored there, expecting to talk more with the Massawomeck in the morning, but the Indians left silently during the night.

The next morning, the English sailed up the Sassafras to the Tockwogh village. The native people were at first suspicious of the English, but seeing Massawomeck shields and spears on the *Discovery Barge* (gained by trading), the Tockwogh apparently concluded that the English had fought and beaten their enemies. They hailed the English as heroes, and Smith cannily did not disabuse them of that notion.

Finding one Tockwogh who could speak the Virginia Algonquian language, Smith inquired about the Susquehannock (whom he had learned about from the Nanticoke chief). Smith asked the interpreter, along with another Tockwogh tribesman, to go up the river to ask the Susquehannock chiefs to come down and talk. The Tockwogh agreed to do so, noting that the task would take several days.

Smith and crew took the two Tockwogh across the Flats to the big river's mouth and set them ashore at the foot of the long path upriver, in what is today the Town of Perryville. While they made their way to the Susquehannock Town (at the site of today's Washington Boro, Pennsylvania), the English crossed the Flats again to explore the Elk River, planting a cross on "Peregryns Mount" (today's Iron Hill, in the town of Elkton).

Several days later, they met the Susquehannock in the river's mouth (probably on Garrett Island). After some conversation and trading, five of the Susquehannock chiefs asked to cross the Flats with Smith aboard the *Discovery Barge*. They did so, arriving for a feast at the Tockwogh village.

The next day, Smith and crew left the Tockwogh village, despite repeated entreaties to stay and protect the people from the Massawomeck. Smith promised to return the next year, though he never did.

The English sailed the *Discovery Barge* across the Bay into today's Bush River, thinking to follow the Massawomeck, and planted another cross. They explored the Gunpowder and Bird rivers, planted a cross on the Bird, crossed the mouth of Middle River, and then returned to the Eastern Shore, spending the night at the town of the Ozinie chief on Swan Creek by the present town of Rock Hall. The following day, they left the Upper Bay, sailing south to the mouth of the Patuxent River.

#### EXPLORING THE HEAD OF THE BAY TODAY

Today, the head of the Bay shows how successfully Captain John Smith's map attracted people from Europe. This region is rural bordering on suburban, the result of being almost equidistant from Baltimore, Wilmington, and Philadelphia. It is the broad-based home of the so-called "Pennsylvania Navy" of boaters who keep their vessels here, tow them to area launch ramps, or seek out soft landings for canoes and kayaks.

Over the centuries, agriculture and population growth have caused many of the region's harbors to silt in badly, and the Susquehanna in flood carries a great deal of sediment. However, the combination of rolling land and broad fresh waters still makes the region beautiful to explore. Garrett Island and Elk Neck State Park still look as they have for centuries, if you can ignore the two large bridges that cross the former. Multiple access points and facilities make exploration of the Upper Bay easy, and a growing number of on-shore facilities like the Havre de Grace Maritime Museum offer exhibits on Captain John Smith that complement the on-the-water experience.

## Good Vessels for Exploring



### PADDLE CRAFT (CANOES AND KAYAKS)

The waters around the head of the Chesapeake are made to order for exploring in self-propelled vessels, but the Susquehanna River itself is large and powerful, with regular tug/barge traffic and strong currents. The Susquehanna Flats can kick up a short, steep chop on a north or south wind. If you're an experienced and physically fit sea kayaker, explore all or part of the area, but take appropriate precautions.

Note that the Elk River regularly carries ships up to 700 feet in length to the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal. In that narrow channel, they have the right-of-way even over a kayak, and it is very difficult for their skippers to see small craft. Give them a wide berth.

If you're a novice or intermediate paddler, keep to shorter trips like a circumnavigation of Garrett Island or an exploration of the upper Sassafras River. There's plenty to explore.



### SKIFFS AND RUNABOUTS

Skiffs and runabouts make great vessels for day trips at the head of the Bay. They'll also serve well in places like Furnace Bay and the Elk River, provided they are equipped to deal with mud flats and submerged logs.

Note that the Susquehanna Flats, seemingly a vast, amorphous bank of mud and sand, is actually cut with multiple channels, many of them referred to generically as "shad ditches." Some of these are 6- to 10-feet deep, but most of them have blind ends that can strand a skiff on a falling tide. The Flats demand respect. Until you learn your way across them, stick to the marked channels, especially in adverse weather with low tides.

The caution noted above for kayaks also applies for other small craft. The Elk River regularly carries ships up to 700 feet in length. Steer clear of them. In that narrow channel, they have the right-of-way even over a skiff, and it is very difficult for their skippers to see small craft.

The lower Susquehanna, North East, Elk, and Sassafras rivers offer plenty of marina facilities with service shops, tow boat companies, and emergency services. Even so, it pays to be prepared, and to keep your itineraries within your skills. Even short trips here can reveal beautiful, fascinating places.



Elk Neck State Park, located on a peninsula where the Elk River, North East River, and Chesapeake Bay meet, is a favorite destination for outdoor fun in the Upper Bay.



PHOTO BY CINDY ROSS

Kayaking under the Susquehanna River Bridge near Havre de Grace.





PHOTO BY SARAH ROGERS

Turner's Creek Park offers a public boat launch for access to fishing and boating recreation.



### CRUISING POWERBOATS AND TRAWLERS

Cruising powerboats like trawlers and cruisers with Chesapeake or Downeast workboat hulls are excellent choices for exploring the rivers at the head of the Chesapeake, especially if they are equipped with seaworthy dinghies and canoes or kayaks. Seven knots is an excellent cruising speed at which to see this water, with a low wake to protect sensitive shorelines.

For these vessels, the biggest issue is keeping to the marked channels, especially around the Susquehanna Flats. Also, because of commercial ship traffic, don't plan on dropping anchor for the night in the Elk River. Otherwise, there are plenty of anchorages, as well as marina facilities available for docking and services.



### CRUISING SAILBOATS

Cruising sailors can explore this part of the Chesapeake too, but the narrow channels around the Susquehanna Flats will require much travel under power. The first railroad bridge in the river between Havre de Grace and Perryville has a vertical clearance of 52 feet, but there are excellent marina facilities below the bridge in Havre de Grace.

## Trip Itineraries

### GARRETT ISLAND CIRCUMNAVIGATION ONE-WAY, 3–8 MILES



If Jamestown is the southern anchor of the Captain John Smith Chesapeake Trail, Garrett Island can qualify as its northern anchor. The island is literally the transition point between the Susquehanna River and the Chesapeake Bay. The rocky northern end of the island faces the gorge of the Susquehanna toward Pennsylvania, while the sandy southern end, with its thick beds of underwater grasses, looks out to the Susquehanna Flats and the Chesapeake's main stem stretching through Maryland and Virginia to the Atlantic.

Three-and-a-half miles upriver from here, the Susquehanna's bed reaches sea level, marking the head of navigation for the big river and its Bay. The rapids here (Smith's Falls) form the only point in the Chesapeake that Captain John Smith named for himself. These rapids squelched the English explorers' hope for the Northwest Passage to the Orient through the Chesapeake.

However, in meeting the Susquehannock chiefs at what was probably Garrett Island, Smith also firmly reinforced the link between the Chesapeake and the Susquehanna uplands that had developed over centuries between Indian tribes. Formerly a volcano, the island offered a 100-foot-high lookout point in all directions and protected shores for landing in all weather. Some scholars believe that the tribes in the region kept it a neutral meeting point for trading and negotiation.

Today, Garrett Island is administered as part of the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge and is managed by the Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge. Only a small portion of it is currently open to the public for landing by boat, but future plans may include a hiking trail around the island.

## RESOURCES & CONTACTS

EASTERN NECK NATIONAL  
WILDLIFE REFUGE  
410-639-7056  
[www.fws.gov/northeast/easternneck](http://www.fws.gov/northeast/easternneck)

ELK NECK STATE PARK  
410-287-5333  
[www.dnr.maryland.gov/publiclands/central/elkneck.asp](http://www.dnr.maryland.gov/publiclands/central/elkneck.asp)



In the meantime, circumnavigating the island in any vessel is an interesting trip. There is plenty of deep water for cruising boats (including a slot 80-feet deep on the Perryville side). Depending on the starting point, the trip covers three miles (from Perryville) to eight miles (from Lapidum). Paddlers should take careful note of barge traffic from the quarry on the Havre de Grace side, just below the Interstate 95 bridge.

### TURKEY POINT EXPLORATION TWO-WAY, 6–15 MILES



From the Rogues' Harbor launch ramp in Elk Neck State Park, explore the shoreline of Turkey Point, following it around from the Elk River to the west side, which faces the Susquehanna Flats. Choose your distance based on your vessel of choice (paddle craft, skiff, runabout, or cruiser) and the weather conditions.

The views are spectacular from the water, as well as from the Turkey Point Lighthouse, which shines out over the upper Chesapeake from a 100-foot-high bluff in the park. Try to see Turkey Point as Smith and his crew saw it in 1608, and imagine their excitement on spying the Massawomeck tribesmen in their birch-bark canoes paddling out of the Sassafras River.

### SUSQUEHANNA FLATS EXPLORATION TWO-WAY, 7–15 MILES



If the weather is fit for a kayak or skiff, venture out onto the Flats from Tydings Park in Havre de Grace, Perryville's Community Boat Ramp, or Rogues' Harbor. If possible, wear clothing that will allow you to get out of the boat if necessary in shallow water. In an out-board skiff, carry a push-pole.

The Susquehanna Flats form a fascinating delta where sediment coming down the big river settles as the channel widens out and the flow slows down. Historically, the Susquehanna Flats grew huge, thick beds of underwater grasses that formed prime fish habitat in warm weather and waterfowl habitat in winter. The flood from Hurricane Agnes in 1972 smothered most of the beds in sediment, but in recent years they have begun to recover handsomely.

### SASSAFRAS RIVER EXPLORATION TWO-WAY, 7–14 MILES



From Turner's Creek Park, paddle or run your skiff up the Sassafras River, exploring its creeks and coves. Archeologists believe that the Tockwogh village Smith and his crew visited was on one of the next two peninsulas on the south (Kent County) bank. Both are now private property.

The Sassafras sees considerable powerboat traffic in warm weather. Be careful of boats and their wakes. There are several large marinas

## For Cruising Boats

### TRAVELING THE HEAD OF THE BAY

Cruising boats, both power and sail, regularly make the trip up the Chesapeake into the Elk River, and through the C&D Canal to the Delaware Bay. If they linger, they tend to do so at the marinas on the Sassafras River.

There is, however, a lot more to see, but doing so requires careful attention to narrow channels, research about Smith's travels here, and some imagination. The latter involves thinking hard about what it was like sailing and rowing a 30-foot open boat when this area was wilderness. Consider, too, how the Tockwogh and Susquehannock lived—how they chose the sites for their villages; how they fished, farmed, foraged wild plants, and hunted; how they made and traded for their tools; and with whom they built alliances.

Take that point of view and travel around the Susquehanna Flats, learning what you can by visiting Havre de Grace, Port Deposit, Perryville, North East, and the Sassafras. If you go to Havre de Grace, plan to visit the museums there that are part of the National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network. Note that the Havre de Grace Maritime Museum features an exhibit focused specifically on Captain John Smith's explorations of the Upper Bay and the native population at the time.






PHOTO BY CINDY ROSS



Tydings Park in Havre de Grace is home port for the historic skipjack *Martha Lewis*.





## TRAILHEADS AT THE HEAD OF THE BAY

### SUSQUEHANNA RIVER

Lapidum Landing, Susquehanna State Park  
Havre de Grace, MD    
39° 35' 50" N, 76° 07' 39" W  
410-734-9035, [www.dnr.state.md.us/boating/boatramps.asp](http://www.dnr.state.md.us/boating/boatramps.asp)  
(Search Harford County.) (ramp fee)

Jean Roberts Park, Havre de Grace, MD   
39° 33' 11" N, 76° 05' 27" W  
(ramp fee)



Tidewater Marina, Havre de Grace, MD    
39° 32' 46" N, 76° 05' 05" W  
410-939-0950, [www.tidewatermarina.com](http://www.tidewatermarina.com)


Tydings Park, City Yacht Basin  
Havre de Grace, MD      
39° 32' 16" N, 76° 05' 26" W  
410-939-1525 or 410-939-1800 (ramp fee)


Port Deposit Launch Ramp    
39° 35' 58" N, 76° 06' 38" W  
(ramp fee)

Perryville Community Boat Ramp    
39° 34' 01" N, 76° 04' 44" W  
410-642-6066, [www.perryvillemd.org/parks\\_recreation.html](http://www.perryvillemd.org/parks_recreation.html)



### NORTH EAST AND ELK RIVERS

Charlestown Boaters' Pier    
39° 34' 17" N, 75° 58' 19" W  
(ramp fee)


Jackson Marine Sales   
39° 33' 34" N, 75° 58' 08" W  
410-287-9400, [www.jacksonmarinesales.com](http://www.jacksonmarinesales.com)



Rouges' Harbor Boat Area, Elk Neck State Park   
39° 27' 53" N, 75° 59' 09" W  
410-287-5333  
[www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/central/elkneck.html](http://www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/central/elkneck.html)  
(ramp fee)

### SASSAFRAS RIVER

Turner Creek Public Landing    
39° 21' 28" N, 75° 58' 59" W  
(ramp fee)

### BUSH RIVER

Flying Point Park    
39° 26' 25" N, 76° 15' 34" W  
(ramp fee)

Otter Point Creek Boat Ramp    
39° 26' 45" N, 76° 15' 59" W  
(ramp 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.

in the twin villages of Georgetown (Kent County side) and Fredericktown (Cecil County side) at the Route 213 bridge, but the Sassafras is much more pastoral upstream. From the bridge, it is about 4½ miles up to the Route 301 bridge, near the site of the 17th-century village of Sassafras. This is an interesting trip because the upper reaches look somewhat the way they did in the 17th century. It also showcases how much soil erosion has occurred in the intervening years. Prepare for considerable shallow water.

### BUSH RIVER EXPLORATION TWO-WAY, 5–6 MILES







After leaving the Tockwogh, Captain John Smith directed the *Discovery Barge* to “a rocky river where the Massawomecks went up” and named it after his home town of Willoughby in England. He planted a cross on what is now Bush River Point, roughly near the eastern end of the Amtrak railroad bridge.

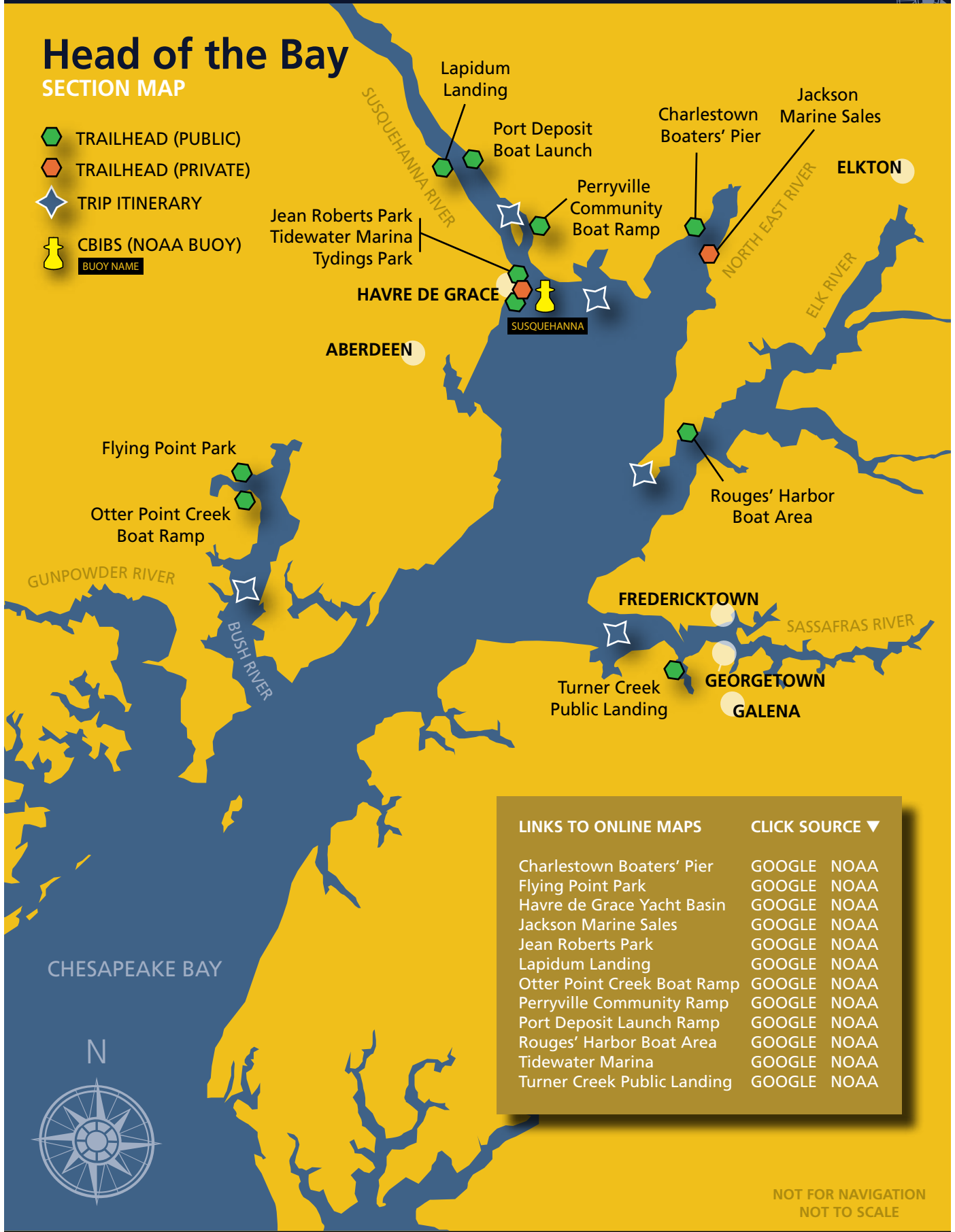
This river, today known as the Bush, was probably not the one the Massawomeck used, and it is no longer rocky. Some scholars think that the Massawomeck lived in Western Maryland, perhaps on the land that is today Garrett County. If so, they would have paddled down the Potomac and up its Monocacy River tributary (near today's city of Frederick). From there, they would have portaged their boats a relatively short distance to the headwaters of the Patapsco and followed it downriver to the Chesapeake.

Meanwhile, the Bush has accumulated a great deal of sand, gravel, and mud over the past 400 years. Its headwaters are Winters Run and Bynums Run, streams that begin in the higher, rolling lands of Maryland's Piedmont around the town of Bel Air. They flow quickly to Otter Point Creek (a Bush River tributary) and the head of the Bush, respectively. Since the time when Smith visited, both Otter Point Creek and the Bush have developed marshy deltas built on soil from those headwaters. They are interesting places to visit in canoes and kayaks from Flying Point Park and the Otter Point Creek boat ramp, but they no longer reflect what Smith saw.

# Head of the Bay

## SECTION MAP

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



**LINKS TO ONLINE MAPS**

**CLICK SOURCE ▼**

Charlestown Boaters' Pier	GOOGLE	NOAA
Flying Point Park	GOOGLE	NOAA
Havre de Grace Yacht Basin	GOOGLE	NOAA
Jackson Marine Sales	GOOGLE	NOAA
Jean Roberts Park	GOOGLE	NOAA
Lapidum Landing	GOOGLE	NOAA
Otter Point Creek Boat Ramp	GOOGLE	NOAA
Perryville Community Ramp	GOOGLE	NOAA
Port Deposit Launch Ramp	GOOGLE	NOAA
Rouges' Harbor Boat Area	GOOGLE	NOAA
Tidewater Marina	GOOGLE	NOAA
Turner Creek Public Landing	GOOGLE	NOAA



NOT FOR NAVIGATION  
NOT TO SCALE