

Chesapeake Paddler



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The Launches of St. Mary's County

By Ralph Heimlich

St. Mary's County sticks down into the Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River at the end of Maryland's western shore, and is separated from Calvert County by the Patuxent River, thus is surrounded by water on three sides. Many of St. Mary's launches are long familiar to CPA paddlers: Point Lookout, Colton Point, Abell's Wharf among them. My wife Beth and I spent a recent weekend exploring St. Mary's County and looking for new and less well-known put ins.



Beth on the beach at St. Clements Island, with the 50 foot cross, photo by Ralph Heimlich

We started out at one of the more familiar ones, launching our tandem SOT at the museum on Colton Point (park in the grassy lot beyond the paved museum lot and it's porta-potty) and paddling quickly over the half-mile separating us from St. Clement's Island. St. Clements (also known as Blackistone Island) was the site of the original landing of the Calvert expedition in 1634. The beach on the southeast shore of the island is one of the most welcoming on this part of the Potomac, and we landed amongst power boaters and jet skiers who also were making holiday. Now reduced to only 62.5 acres from the original 400 acres, St. Clements once boasted a lighthouse at its southeastern tip, built in 1851. Beth and I found a new, replica lighthouse had sprung up phoenix-like, and this time it was open for business. We climbed the spiral staircase of the central cupola and looked out on the 50 foot memorial cross erected in 1934 to commemorate the Calvert landing and the reconstructed bell tower with an original light house bell used to signal shipping when fogs settled in. St. Clements Island also has a large picnic pavilion in a grove of trees at the northeast corner, a walking path and promenade of trees planted to restore the original woodsy character of the island, and pit privy.



Replica Blackistone Lighthouse photo by Ralph Heimlich

Paddling back from the island, we spent an interesting hour in the St. Clement Island museum at Colton Point, looking at Native American artifacts, a large mural of the Calvert landing, various family trees of the Calvert's and English royalty that

granted the colony, and more. We also peaked into the red one-room schoolhouse moved from elsewhere in the county, luxuriating in something the bygone school kids could only dream of: air conditioning.



Approach to new Leonardtown Wharf photo by Ralph Heimlich

From our lodgings in Leonardtown, the next spot we investigated was kayak launch at the recently renovated Leonardtown Wharf, down at the end of Washington Street. Parking is a little tight just now, but there are plans for parking expansion. The wharf is a pleasant paved walkway, carving a semi-circle along the waterfront. The kayak launch is a black plastic floating gizmo, with a channel that you lay your boat in and ropes you pull for a seal launch down the ramp. Not my favorite, but it will get you in the water and the outboard edge is low enough to do a paddle-braced butt transfer and exit. I ran into CPA member Ken Druce at the wharf and we talked about this and other area launches.



Ken Druce on the Leonardtown Wharf "launchpad" photo by Ralph Heimlich

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The Launches of St. Mary's County (Continued from page 3)

One of my reasons for coming to St. Mary's County was the wonderful beaches at the end of the Newtowne Neck peninsula, between Breton Bay and St. Clements Bay on the Potomac facing St. Clement's Island. We'd stopped there paddling back from St. Clement's Island in May, and I'd heard rumors that the State of Maryland had recently acquired that part of the peninsula for a new state park. We drove down Newtowne Neck Road (Rt 243) the previous night, turning at Fitzies Marina for a wonderful seafood dinner. On Sunday, we retraced our route and drove further down the road, past historic St. Francis Xavier Church and the site of the first capitol of Maryland, and saw a sign welcoming us to the future Newtown Neck State Park. In the lot behind the sign, we met an Amish family out for a swim, and found a small sign indicating a primitive kayak/canoe launch. From this little cove, one can launch and be out through the Breton Bay narrows more quickly than by launching at Abells Wharf (on the east side of Breton Bay), and it would be an ideal launch to get at the south-facing beaches on the tip of Newtowne Neck. Driving further down the road, the center of the peninsula is lush corn fields, and likely to stay that way even under park management, but numerous wooded lanes led off to the water, barred by metal gates. I suspect future development of the State Park will focus in this area.



Canoe launch sign at Newtowne Neck State Park photo by Ralph Heimlich

Driving back up Rt. 243 from Newtowne Neck, we stopped at another launch area, which shares a parking lot with Maryland's newest native winery. The McIntosh Run launch is currently a sandy area just downstream from the Rt. 5 bridge, a short hand carry down steps from the parking lot. I talked with Jim Beazley, who operated McIntosh Outfitters at this location and at the new Leonardtown Wharf. He informed me that Leonardtown plans to develop the winery site, including an upgraded kayak/canoe launch, a foot bridge over McIntosh Run, and a water trail between the two (see site plans). McIntosh Run looks like a nice, cool, shady paddle on these hot summer days, and leads down into the upper reaches of Breton Bay.



Site plans for Leonardtown Wharf (completed) and Port of Leonardtown (under way)

We drove down Rt. 5 to St. Mary's City, checking out the new St. Mary's College boat-house, right on the St. Mary's River just before the road climbs up to Historic St. Mary's City. The Maryland Dove was underway out on the river. While it was under construction, Bill Dodge and our crew launched from their beach, after first locating a college policeman who told us where we could park. This was after the college closed for the summer, and your chances of making this work may vary.

Heading back toward Leonardtown on Rt. 5, we turned left on Adkins Road and drove down past the trailer park to a small turnaround just before a private road. This rustic ramp is a St. Mary's County public launch called Great Mills and launches you out on the headwaters of the St. Mary's River. Parking is in the field near the turnaround.

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Back toward Leonardtown, we turned left on Rt. 249 past Valley Lee and continued to the Piney Point Lighthouse. Be sure to drive slowly past the many beachfront houses on lighthouse road, especially on weekends. There is a new county Potomac River Maritime Exhibit, and a kayak launch next door. The launch is a short hand carry down a ramp and through a metal gate to a pair of floating docks with overhead "handlebars" to help you steady yourself as you launch. While they might be useful for some shorter boats, our 18 footers would put you too far forward to make them practical, but a pier launch is possible along either side or at the end. The launch is out on a lagoon between the lighthouse and the mainland through which the NuStar pipelines move petroleum products to the storage tanks inland. Access to the Potomac is west beyond a series of new "turtle" beaches behind rock groins.

Further out Rt. 249 is a launch at the Piney Point recreation area, a boat ramp on the mainland side of the channel separating St. George's Island. While the sandy area on the island side looks more inviting for a kayak launching, it is private property and posted. On the island itself is the Evans Seafood Restaurant, marked by a silo-like structure (good eats).



Piney Point launch approach *photo by Ralph Heimlich*

Out on the island is the Chesapeake Bay Field Lab and the landing for the Skipjack *The Dee of St. Mary's*, currently undergoing restoration. You can ask permission to launch here.

Going back out Rt. 249, we made a left at Tall Timbers Road, following it down to the Tall Timbers Marina. There is a small St. Mary's County public launch at the sandy area just to the right as you drive in, but not much parking, especially on weekends. The launch is out to McKay Cover on Herring Creek, and then into the Potomac.



Kayak launch at Piney Point Lighthouse area *photo by Ralph Heimlich*

We ended our exploring weekend with Sunday dinner at Rips on Rt. 3 in Bowie. Not much paddling, but we

found a wealth of new launch spots in old St. Mary's County.

Here are some links to info on these and other launches in St. Mary's County.

Canoe and Kayak launches in St. Mary's County: <http://www.co.saint-marys.md.us/recreate/facilities/paddling.asp>

Public landings in St. Mary's County: <http://www.co.saint-marys.md.us/recreate/facilities/publiclandings.asp>

Leonardtown attractions: <http://leonardtown.somd.com/attractions/attractions.html>

Colton Point and St. Clement's Island: <http://www.co.saint-marys.md.us/recreate/museums/stclementsland.asp>

Paddle Quest Maryland: <http://paddlequestmaryland.com/>



Overview of Piney Point Lighthouse launch area *photo by NuStar*