

Chesapeake Paddler



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Queen Anne to Solomons Island on the Pax

By Ralph Heimlich

The Patuxent River is my back yard, literally and figuratively. I live in Howard County near where the Little, Middle and main channel of the Patuxent come together, but my heart's backyard is the stretch from the once-bustling town of Queen Anne (just below Route 214) and the mouth of Maryland's longest self-contained river at Solomons Island. A decade ago, I took my first sea kayaking trip with the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay on a week-long sojourn and first met some CPA members (Dick Rock and Mike Hamilton, safety boating for Atlantic Kayak). With the development of the Patuxent Water Trail's many paddle-in campsites, I've spent many weekends paddling and camping along the Pax's shores.

The fourth weekend in June was another chance to experience John Smith's fifth "faire river" (See Robert De Gast, *Five Fair Rivers: Sailing the James, York, Rappahannock, Potomac, and Patuxent*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). Unless you have enough time to paddle back UP the river (easily done if you pay attention to the tides), you have to set up a shuttle to do the 50 miles of the navigable lower river. We had a complicated plan for cars coming from Virginia and Maryland to drop boats and gear at the launch site, travel down the peninsula that is Calvert County and park cars at the takeout, picking up one of our members on the way, all before our intended launch time of 9 AM. Friday traffic and other travails put us off our schedule, but eventually we had three vehicles at the public beach lot opposite the Star of the Sea church, had picked up Dan Wells at his home in Calvert County and were squeezed into Dick's car heading back to the launch.

Queen Anne Canoe Launch (at river mile 53 counting up from the mouth) is an adjunct of the Patuxent River Park operated by the Prince George's County Department of Parks and Recreation out of their HQ at Jug Bay. Access is gated and you can get permission (and the combination) by calling the Park. When we arrived, the other participants (Sue and Rich Stevens, Suzanne Farace, Jim Allen, Jen Bine, Yvonne Thayer) were packed and waiting. Dick Rock, Dan Wells, Bela Mariassy, Al Larsen and I finished loading our boats and by 10 AM, we were launched from the floating dock and headed down the green tunnel of the river.

The Patuxent is narrow and the current can be swift at the launch. It is very difficult to believe that Queen Anne was the official port of embarkation for the Pax in 1706, with ocean going ships making their way this far up the river. As the interior was settled and forests were cut for farm fields, silt clogged the once clear waters of the Patuxent and Queen Anne was gradually abandoned as a port. The last ocean-going ship left Queen Anne in 1790.



Heading down the Pax from Queen Anne Canoe Launch photo by Ralph Heimlich

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The Lower Patuxent is a tidal river, and the tides begin to be felt just below the launch at Queen Anne. We arranged our paddle for a time of year when high tides occur at about 8 AM (daylight saving time). This allowed us to catch the falling tide, and with the addition of the downstream current, we made good time along the green, forested banks. We passed Spyglass Island, Scorpion Creek, and the Back Channel (which was formerly the main channel of the Pax), all important sites in Commodore Barney's gunboat resistance to the British invasion of the river exactly 198 years ago (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joshua_Barney). The Patuxent was thrust into prominence because the British fleet dared not risk the heated shot fired from Fort Washington on the Potomac. The Pax offered them an end run, landing troops along the river that marched overland to Washington.

We saw few boats of any kind until we reached the Route 4 (Hills) bridge. The Friday commuters were gone by now, and nobody was fishing off the platform beneath the bridge except the occasional Great Blue Heron. We passed Pig Point (http://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2011/04/amazing-artifacts-unearthed-at-pig.html#.T_OBmvWDI8F), a site continuously inhabited for at least 10,000 years, with carbon dated artifacts from 8500 B.C., and longhouse postholes dating from the 3rd century. As little remains of their civilization as will likely remain of ours in 10,000 years.

We pulled into another formidable and long-occupied site for lunch at Mount Calvert (river mile 44), just up the mouth of Western Branch (further up which is another paddle-in campsite). Mount Calvert is all that remains of another bustling colonial town established in 1684 (see http://www.pgparcs.com/Things_To_Do/Nature/Mount_Calvert_Historical_and_Archaeological_Park.htm). The house, built originally in the 1780s and added to in the 19th century, was substantially damaged in last year's earthquake and is undergoing extensive renovations. We lunched in the shade of large old trees down at the floating dock, then packed up and headed downriver again.



Lunch stop at Mount Calvert photo by Dan Wells



Campsite at Spice Creek photo by Suzanne Farace

In the heat of the day, with the tide slackening, we paddled across the bronze-hot waters as the Pax spread out into mud and marsh. Past Jackson Landing (Jug Bay), Selby Landing, and the mouth of Mattaponi Creek (river mile 40.5) up which is located another paddle-in campsite). We paddled along what was once the waterfront of yet another Patuxent town abandoned as the river silted in. Nottingham (river mile 37) is one of the forgotten towns in Donald Shomette's book (see http://www.amazon.com/Towns-Tidewater-Maryland-Donald-Shomette/dp/0870335278/ref=pd_sim_b_2). As we rounded a bend at Ferry Landing on the Calvert County side, we left all development behind and gratefully paddled into the mouth of Spice Creek for our nights campsite.

Spice Creek (at river mile 35) is the least developed of all the paddle-in sites, with no development visible from the campsite at all. You might as well be 1,000 miles from anywhere, instead of nearly at the heart of the Washington metro area. Paddle-in campsites are clearly marked with a large metal sign indicating their name and location in river miles. They are generally equipped with a fire ring, picnic table and often a porta-potty. There is limited space for tents in some sites, so keep the numbers in your party

down (10 or less). We put up a group tarp over the table in view of the forecast thunderstorm, quickly pitched our camp, took a quick refreshing dip in the creek, and started on the evening meal.

CPA teaches kayak safety and rescues, and we've even had a wilderness first aid course, but little did we realize that boiling water would be the main hazard on this trip. Al Larsen suffered 2nd degree burns in a very sensitive location as someone else's (guilty party unnamed, pursuant to the "witless" protection program) pot of boiling water slid off the stove and table and nearly landed in his lap.

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Some say it was justice for the quality of puns Al subjected us to, but most of us thought there must have been a Native American village torched near the site and a vengeful *poltergeist* because the same stove had a second boiling water melt down shortly after the first. Thanks to the Wilderness First Aid class, Jen had her Red Cross kit and quickly administered ice (giving up cooling our white wine, no less!) and first aid. We ate and had a brief, refreshing shower accompanied by rumbles of thunder and flashes of lightning in the distance. The storm, such as it was, only served to leach the humidity from the air and cool us down. The temperatures moderated, but the chorus of frogs and cicadas tuned up as we settled in for a restful night.

Dawn came early and we were up and packing to catch the outgoing tide for our second day. We breakfasted quickly (taking care NOT to sit near the boiling pots), and were packed up and on the water by 7:30 AM. The weather was clear, but cooler than Friday as we paddled away from Spice Creek, rounded Sneaking Point and Sycamore Landing and passed the last official port of entry on the Pax at Lower Marlboro (river mile 32). This town was more substantial and longer-lasting than its predecessors upriver, and has many historic buildings on display (see <http://calvert-county.com/communities/lowermarlboro/lowermarlboro.html>). We cruised by on the onrushing tide, passed Magruder landing and the Clyde Watson boat ramp (a good launch and shuttle point), and the Milltown Landing paddle-in site at river mile 30. We pulled into Kings Landing Park on the Calvert side (river mile 29) to top up our water supplies, giving the early Saturday fishermen a show as 10 boats cruised up to the beach.

As we pulled out of Kings Landing, we could clearly see the tall stacks of the Chalk Point power plant 6 miles downriver, marking our day's destination. The Pax broadens out to a true estuary below Kings Landing. With the tide, we made good time, as the stacks grew larger and larger in our sight. We pulled into Swanson Creek and called up Rich Stevens, our scout, who always seems to paddle ahead of the group. He'd located the Maxwell Hall campsite and we zeroed in on his boat and waving signal. In previous years trips, we had camped at "unofficial" sites along the creek since the map has the campsite incorrectly located. The "official" site is a locust-shaded point 0.6 miles west of Chalk Point (N38 32.352 W76 41.645) with a loop of the equestrian trail circling it and many small tent sites cut out like *cul-de sacs*. This site is maintained by the Charles County Parks and Recreation and lacks a porta-potty, but is spacious, breezy and very attractive. It is also directly across from the Chalk Point power plant, but the steady drone of the plant soon drops into the background (except for random PA outbursts in the early morning shift changes).



On the equestrian trail at Maxwell Hall photo by Ralph Heimlich

boaters.

Our lunch stop was at Jefferson Patterson Park's new kayak beach, behind the turtle breakwaters at river mile 10. This park, located at the mouth of Saint Leonard Creek (where Commodore Barney's battle DID take place) has good facilities, lots of interesting programs, an excellent museum, and houses the Maryland Archaeological Conservation laboratory, a world-class marine conservation facility (see <http://www.jefpat.org/>). Pressed for time on our long paddling day, we ate and used the porta potty, but didn't have time for the considerable hike to the museum, and so launched again.

We steered for the middle of the river, despite the now larger number of boats out on this sunny Sunday. We were aiming to hit the beach at the Solomons Naval Recreation Center on Point Patience a little south of the fishing pier to set up for rounding the point. John Smith noted that

"The fifth river is called Patuxent, of a less proportion than the rest but the channel is 16 fathoms deep in some places. Here are infinite skulls [schools] of divers kinds of fish more than elsewhere"- Captain John Smith, 1612 (see <http://johnsmith.psu.edu/code/ExhibitDB.aspx?s=8>)

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But he was a little off—the river is as much as 104 feet deep off Point Patience. Navigation is a bit tricky because the deep water is less than 20 yards off the end of the point, so you can have one paddle resting on a sandy beach and the other nearly touching large cabin cruisers rounding the red channel marker. If two or more are in train rounding the point, their wakes can create 3 foot rollers that can carry you up on the beach. A good place to stay alert and paddle with purpose.

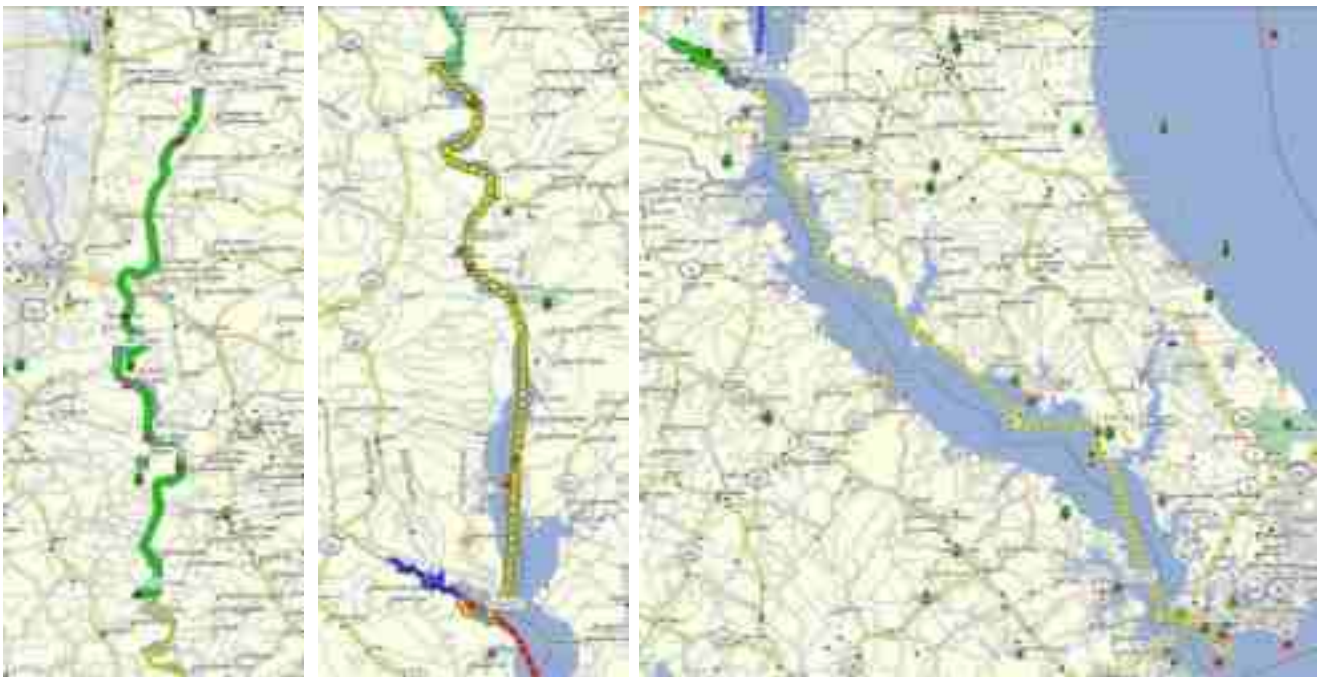
Once around Point Patience, we approached the third bridge of our trip, the Governor Thomas Johnson (Rt. 4/2) Bridge soars 135 feet over the channel to admit Navy ships. There is a public boat ramp under the bridge at the Calvert (north) end, so kayakers need to keep watch for power boats entering and leaving across the channel. Just as we were passing under the bridge, the historic oyster buy boat Wm. B. Tennison, built in 1899 did her turn taking passengers from the Calvert Marine Museum out to Drum Point and along the Solomons Island waterfront (see <http://www.calvertmarinemuseum.com/exhibits/tennison-history.php>). We took pictures of the Tennison, and her passengers snapped pics of kayakers paddling with “sticks”.

We pulled up to a busy beach, packed with waders, paddle boarders, and one lady landing a sea kayak (turned out, she was a CPA member, too). Sue Stevens was there (as were our three parked cars), and Dan called on his wife and kids to come down. Soon we had all the gear out of the boats, boats loaded, and even sluiced down from the Sun shower stowed in my pickup bed to warm (thanks for the tip Greg W.). Car shuttles packed up and headed up the long drive back to Queen Anne to retrieve our cars. Fifty miles on the road was a lot less eventful (and less fun) than 50 miles on the Patuxent, from Queen Anne to Solomons Island.

If you go, consult the excellent Patuxent River Water Trail Guide (see <http://shopdnr.com/patuxentriverwatertrailguide.aspx>) compiled by CPA member David Linthicum. See http://bayweekly.com/old-site/year10/issue_25/lead_1.html. Also, check the Patuxent Water Trail website at <http://www.patuxentwatertrail.org>.



Wm. B. Tennison under the Governor Thomas Johnson Bridge, Solomons Island photo by Dan Wells



Patuxent GPS track, days 1 (green 17.9 statute miles), 2 (yellow 13.9 miles) and 3 (pale yellow 22.6 miles) GPS track by Rich Stevens