

On the Trail

The two national trails that pass through Delaware allow residents and visitors to discover Delaware's past while enjoying its present

STORY AND PHOTOS BY THERESA GAWLAS MEDOFF

Last year marked the 50th anniversary of the National Trails System Act, which called for the establishment of scenic, historic and recreational trails. Delaware has two such trails passing through the state: The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail in western Sussex County and the Washington–Rochambeau National Historic Trail in New Castle County. While both trails recognize historic events, they also provide ways to get out and explore the First State's natural resources.

Following in John Smith's wake

As we motored along the Nanticoke River toward the Maryland border, Jim Blackwell, a board member of the Seaford Museum, pointed toward undeveloped land on both sides of the river. "Most of this is the Nanticoke Wildlife Area," he said. "There are thousands of acres of state land, of public land, and there's very little development. There's a barn here and there [on private land], and then you go into Maryland and there's the little

towns of Sharptown and Vienna. That's it. There's nothing much else," all the way to the Chesapeake Bay.

The land surrounding the Nanticoke, Blackwell notes, likely looks much the same as it did in the summer of 1607, when Captain John Smith first set out from Jamestown, Virginia, in a shallow to explore the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. By 1609, Smith and his crew had mapped nearly 3,000 miles of bay and rivers, a route that was recognized by the creation of the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic

Trail, which includes the James, Potomac, Rappahannock, Susquehanna and Nanticoke rivers, among other waterways.

Thanks to Smith's "amazingly accurate maps," Blackwell noted, we know that Smith and his crew came far enough up the Nanticoke River to make it into what is now Delaware, where, according to Smith's journals, he encountered the people we know as the Nanticoke Indians.

The Captain John Smith Trail, the first all-water historic trail in the country, was developed in part in collaboration with Sussex County and the Department

Markers along the nation's first historic water trail help boaters navigate the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail.



Left: A monument at Phillips Landing in Sussex County's Nanticoke Wildlife Area tells the story of John Smith's exploration of the Chesapeake Region, which brought him up the Nanticoke River into Delaware.

of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, working in concert with other entities and the National Park Service, notes Dan Parsons, historic preservation planner for Sussex County.

The all-water trail provides an enjoyable way for the boating community to explore history, whether by paddling or power boat. Ten “interactive buoys” on the water trail allow boaters to use their cell phones and Wi-Fi to learn more about Smith’s explorations and what he might have seen some 400 years ago.

Today’s explorers can access Broad Creek and the Nanticoke River by boat at Seaford or at Phillips Landing in Laurel, which is within the Nanticoke Wildlife Area. At Phillips Landing, visitors will see both a sign marking the John Smith Trail and a monument to Smith and his fellow adventurers. Phillips Landing is well known for its bass fishing, bird-watching and beautiful views of pristine natural areas. More than 4,400 acres of the Nanticoke Wildlife Area also affords opportunities for hiking on primitive trails, another way to connect with the scenery as John Smith might have experienced.

In addition to the waterway and surrounding wildlife area, there’s more to see in Delaware related to the trail. The Seaford Museum has a small exhibit on Smith and his travels, which includes an enlargement of the map Smith drew showing his foray into Delaware. History buffs can also visit the Laurel Heritage Museum, the Bridgeville Historical Society Museum, Governor Ross Plantation, and even take a ride across the Nanticoke – on foot or with their car – on the Woodland Ferry near Seaford, which was established in the 1740s.

For more information on the John Smith Trail, visit www.nps.gov/cajo

Journeying through Revolutionary history

The next time you’re driving down Philadelphia Pike through Brandywine Village and Wilmington along Maryland Avenue (Route 4) through Newport and Stanton, or on Christiana-Stanton Road heading west to Old Baltimore Pike as it crosses into Maryland, try to imagine how it looked in 1781. For nearly a week that September, thousands of ragged, battle-weary Colonial militiamen and allied French soldiers walked these roads



Prothonotary warbler at the Nanticoke Wildlife Area.

ANTHONY GONZON



Top: Above are items on display at historic Hale-Byrnes House in Stanton, where George Washington held a war council on September 6, 1777, after the Battle of Cooch’s Bridge.

Right: Kim Burdick, National Board Chairman of W3R-US, shows off the new signs that are going up now in Delaware and other states to mark the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail.



with wagons, horses and oxen, as they journeyed to Yorktown, Virginia, and a decisive victory over Britain that ultimately led to America’s independence.

The soldiers, most of them on foot, had come from as far as Rhode Island,



“The more visitors can see and touch and smell history, the better they understand it.”

—Kim Burdick, resident manager
Hale-Byrnes House

Above: Bright red, white and blue signs along the road mark the way for travelers following the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail.

gathering reinforcements along the way as they trekked through the hot summer months. Other soldiers and sailors journeyed by water, including down the Delaware and Christina rivers in Delaware, as they made their way toward the Chesapeake Bay.

The 26 miles that the soldiers strode through Delaware on this historic march are part of the 700-mile Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail that passes through nine states and Washington, D.C. Officially mandated by the U.S. Senate in 2009, it is the only national land trail that passes through Delaware.

The trail is managed by the National Park Service, but the national non-profit association that lobbied for designation of the trail, W3R-US, remains an active partnering organization. The W3R-US is led by Delaware's Kim Burdick, resident manager of historic Hale-Byrnes House in Stanton, one of numerous Revolutionary War sites in Delaware.

You see, the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route is not just a line on a map; it's a driving route that people can follow from New England to Virginia, making stops at historic sites along the way.

“Traveling this National Historic Trail brings history to life and reminds us that the Revolutionary War is more than a 4th of July story,” says Burdick, a college history instructor and the author of

Revolutionary Delaware: Independence in the First State.

While the route follows the long, arduous journey taken by troops under General George Washington and French General Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau, its intent is to bring attention to America's long-time friendship with France and to America's Revolutionary War history. In addition to Hale-Byrnes House, sites in Delaware that are part of the route include the 1723 Robinson House in northern Delaware, where George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette once stayed; Brandywine Village; the Wilmington Riverfront; Canby Park; Christiana Historic District; the New Castle County Court House Museum; New Castle County's Iron Hill Park, where Continentals camped in 1781; and Cooch's Bridge, site of a 1777 battle.

“The more visitors can see and touch and smell history, the better they understand it,” Burdick says. “Using your five senses makes history come alive, and that's why exploring sites along the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route is so important.”

To increase tourism, add variety to a tour, and encourage enjoyment of already existing natural resources, the National Park Service and the W3R Association plan to point tourists and locals to natural areas on or near the route as well.

Bellevue State Park is already included in National Historic Trail materials, as its property along Route 13 overlooking the Delaware River had been farmed as far back as Colonial times, and gives visitors the chance to see what much of northern

Delaware looked like nearly three centuries ago.

Another natural site in Delaware that the soldiers would have seen is the 212 acres of freshwater tidal marsh along the Christina Riverfront in Wilmington, known as the Russell W. Peterson Wildlife Refuge. While there, travelers on the route can birdwatch, perhaps get a glimpse of river otters or beavers, and visit the Delaware Nature Society's DuPont Environmental Education Center.

Locals and tourists can walk or bike the newly christened Jack A. Markell Trail that passes through the refuge as it connects the Northern Delaware Greenway to Battery Park in New Castle. They might kayak on the Christina River, or take a cruise on the Kalmar Nyckel when it's docked in Wilmington or New Castle. White Clay Creek State Park in Newark presents hiking and biking trails and opportunities for freshwater fishing.

Although they are detours from the federally specified route, other natural areas of interest include Battery Park in New Castle and Bombay Hook Natural Wildlife Refuge in Smyrna, as well as Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge and Cape Henlopen State Park in Sussex County.

More information on the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route can be found at www.nps.gov/waro and www.w3r-us.org. **OD**

DELAWARE RESIDENT THERESA GAWLAS MEDOFF IS A LONG-TIME FREELANCE WRITER WITH SPECIAL INTERESTS IN TRAVEL, THE OUTDOORS AND BRINGING POSITIVE ATTENTION TO HER HOME STATE.