

A Draft

# Concept Plan

For the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail  
In Virginia's Lower Potomac Region

March 2006

A Report from the Northern Virginia Regional Commission to the  
Northern Neck Planning District Commission and the  
Rappahannock Area Economic Development Commission

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# An Opportunity

The lower Potomac River counties of Stafford, King George, Westmoreland and Northumberland have an historic opportunity to re-invigorate and re-imagine the National Trails System through implementation of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail. No where else in the United States is there a comparable concentration of heritage sites and scenic landscapes that embody the birth of democracy and development of the Nation as is found in the Northern Neck, Fredericksburg and Stafford County region of the Potomac River watershed. With a modest commitment of time, energy and resources, and with the inclusion of Richmond and Lancaster counties in the planning, the Potomac Heritage Trail (PHT) could become the thread from which a vibrant environmentally-based economic development strategy could be woven, tying together such existing historic and natural resources such as Stratford Hall, George Washington's Birthplace and his boyhood home at Ferry Farm in Stafford County, Westmoreland State Park, Caledon Natural Area, Fredericksburg, Government Island, and amenities such as the Steamboat Era Museum in Irvington.

## Scope of This Report

The Northern Virginia Regional Commission was contracted to recommend an implementation concept plan for the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail within the counties served by the Rappahannock Area Development Commission and the Northern Neck Planning District Commission.

The report recommends priority actions for funding consideration that are compatible with the Trails Act. The actions are designed both to move the project forward and to demonstrate the trail's potential, thereby attracting new sources of funding.

In keeping with the authorizing legislation, the National Trails System Act (see below), this report focuses primarily on the counties with Potomac shoreline. However, on the Northern Neck, the heritage of the Potomac is inextricably bound to the heritage of the Rappahannock River. With this in mind, we recommend allowing the counties of Richmond and Lancaster to participate in the project to the extent that they desire.

# Summary Recommendations

This report focuses on developing a long-term concept plan for the Potomac Heritage Trail. Further, it recommends focusing on the area from Washington's Birthplace through northern Stafford County (this might be referred to as the Phase 1 project area).

Over the long term, we recommend development of blueways, or water trail segments, along the Potomac and in selected tributary streams. This paddling experience, unique among all national scenic trails, would be complemented by an off road trail bicycle trail and a hiking trail (or, as in other parts of the PHT, a hiker/biker trail).

Over the next few years, we recommend emphasis on developing the water trail and bicycle route from Washington's

Birthplace, to his boyhood home, to Mount Vernon. We also recommend priority projects within this Phase 1 area.

These are clear avenues of opportunity to implement the Potomac Heritage Trail. Given the historical role of these waterways for transportation, food and recreation, the opportunity is worthy of pursuit. To take advantage of this opportunity, local planners must move quickly to ensure that the PHT is fully considered as the region undergoes anticipated population growth in the coming years. And more importantly, the concepts outlined within this plan should be translated into actual policies that should be adopted by the local governments and incorporated into their respective comprehensive and/or transportation plans.

# The Long-Term Concept

The Potomac Heritage Trail should be developed as a world-class outdoor recreation experience to explore the role of waterways as transportation systems and the significant contribution of the region's natural resources in the development of the nation's capital and other regions of the Potomac River.

The interpretive ideas that perhaps best represent this heritage are:

## George Washington



George Washington's life journey spans from Wakefield to Ferry Farm to Mount Vernon to the Forks of the Ohio. Few stories capture the transition from seaboard colonies to a continental nation as effectively and compellingly as Washington's own. This icon should inform the entire interpretive concept of the PHT corridor.

era represented by the Northern Neck and Stafford County. Together, each region's distinctive heritage combines for a nationally significant story.

## Working Lands and Waters



From Aquia sandstone to menhaden fleets, from timber to shellfish, the bounty of the area has provided sustenance to communities in the Potomac and beyond. The distinctiveness of this region complements other regions of the PHT corridor: the Piedmont as the former breadbasket of America and a place of water-powered industrial innovation; and the Alleghenies as a center for coal, timber and manufacturing.

## The Steamboat Era



Within the entire PHT corridor, the 19th century is represented by three transportation stories: The railroads of the Allegheny Mountains; the canal era, represented by the C&O Canal; and the steamboat

The trail experiences that represent these heritage values are:

### **Blueways**

In this region of Virginia, water trails—on tributary streams and, where feasible, along the shorelines of the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay—should be recognized as primary segments of the Potomac Heritage Trail. Such “blueways” should be developed for and marketed to people at levels of experience, from family-friendly paddling to challenging open water kayaking. In tributary streams, steamboat landings should be a priority. Trails should be developed as self-contained loops--Aquia Landing to Government Island is one example. Further,



developing water trail segments in Rappahannock tributaries in Richmond and Lancaster counties is feasible and desirable. All of these trails should be designated as National Scenic Trail segments.

### **Bikeways**

Bicycling lanes alone do not meet the scenic and recreational criteria of the National Trails System Act. However, the scenic rural roads of this region are compatible with and complementary to the blueway concept: A specific route for bicycling between northern Stafford County and the Town of Reedville (in Northumberland County), with extensions to Caledon Natural Area and to Irvington, should be designed

ated a “connecting route” to the blueway, the primary route of the Potomac Heritage Trail. Annual and seasonal bicycling



events will demonstrate the value of such routes, as well as opportunities to make connections to and among additional resources--all contributing to a world-class experience of place.

### **Backpacking and Hiking**

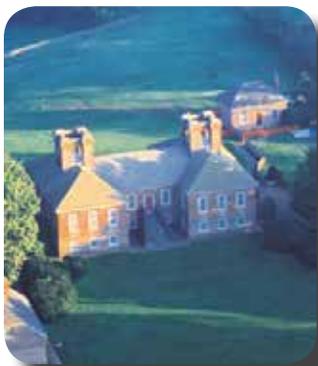
The forests and farms here have scenic and recreational values that rival those of any National Scenic Trail. While this report does not recommend a specific route, a hiking trail should be included as part of a long-term vision, with coordination among local governments provided by the regional commissions. Private sector interests should also be included in the process: For example, throughout the United States there are numerous instances where timber companies are cooperating



to provide rustic, backcountry recreational opportunities in which users are invited to learn the practice of forestry and trails and shelters are maintained by volunteers.

# Discussion

The counties of Stafford, King George, Westmoreland and Northumberland have an historic opportunity to re-invigorate and re-imagine the National Trails System through their



Stratford Hall



Caledon

implementation of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail. Nowhere else in the United States is there a comparable concentration of heritage sites and scenic landscapes that embody the birth of democracy and development of the Nation as is found in the Northern Neck region of the Potomac River watershed. With a modest commitment of time, energy



Washington's Birthplace

and resources, and with the inclusion of Richmond and Lancaster counties in the planning, the Potomac Heritage Trail (PHT) could become the thread from which a vibrant environmentally-based economic development strategy could be

woven, tying together such existing historic and natural resources such as Stratford Hall, George Washington's Birthplace, Westmoreland State Park, Caledon Natural area, Fredericksburg Government Island, and such as amenities as the Steamboat Era Museum in Irvington.

This conclusion might run contrary to conventional wisdom because national scenic trails typically are planned as hiking trails, primarily through public lands. Indeed, planning for the PHT in other jurisdictions has followed the model. In the counties that are the subject of this report, the public-land base is not large enough for a finding of feasibility to implement a nationally significant long-distance hiking trail *at this time*. Nor has a constituency for this type of public investment yet been identified in the region. This is not to surmise that such a constituency cannot be developed over time—it can, over time with adequate encouragement from local jurisdictions.

However, robust opportunities do exist to establish the PHT along the shorelines of the Potomac River and its tributaries. These areas are exemplary examples of the nationally significant landscapes the National Trails System Act seeks to conserve for public enjoyment. Their

scenic, historic and natural values are extraordinary. Together they provide an opportunity, for the first time within the Trails Act, to focus on the development



Westmoreland State Park

of blueways, or water trail segments, as major elements of a National Scenic Trail.

What's more, George Washington's Birthplace at Wakefield in Westmoreland County and his Boyhood Home at Ferry Farm in Stafford County, together with Washington's Mount Vernon Estate about 40 miles north of Fredericksburg, create a connectivity of theme and experience that alone seems worthy of national recognition.

Further, focusing on water trail segments in these four counties (with additional blueways in Richmond and Lancaster counties) is appropriate to the Trails Act, which cites rivers as an example of the natural and cultural features to be represented by national scenic trails. The Trails Act also cites "surface water activities" as a viable use. The blueways concept also is fitting to the PHT, which explores the American experience, both past and present, as an ongoing journey through the landscape of the "Nation's River."

The absence of a direct water connection between Wakefield and Ferry Farm is immaterial to the concept. More important

is that this vision evokes the regional historical connection between people and waterways that flourishes still. As a practical matter, the Wakefield—Mt. Vernon connection via the river supports the interpretive concept of the blueway. [And certainly, it is possible to utilize the Rappahannock or to imagine a private-sector led effort to connect Rappahannock and Potomac tributaries via a portage parkway.]. Moreover, since the Potomac River served as the primary transportation corridor during the early years of our nation, the creation of a water trail will recreate, in a much more accurate manner than a land trail, the original experiences of the first settlers and inhabitants to this region. The Piscataways, Algonquins and the first European settlers to the region used the river as the "main street" of their communities. A water trail could help recreate the original impressions and could provide a nationally, if not internationally, unique trail experience.

This recommendation does not suggest abandoning a land route as a part of PHT implementation in the region. PHT constituents throughout the corridor, including state and local governments and

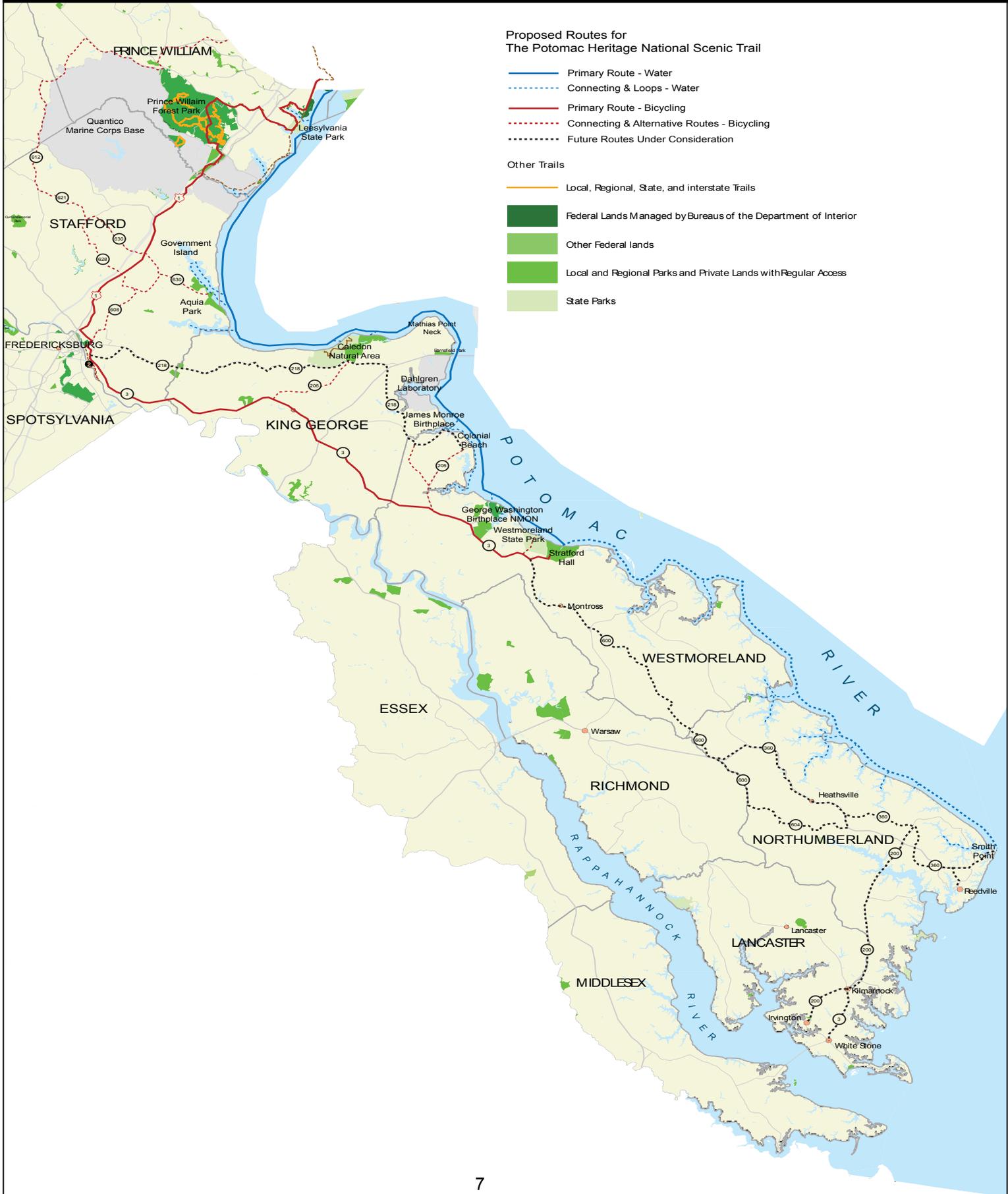


Ferry Farm, George Washington's Boyhood Home

volunteer organizations, have embraced the concept of a braided trail network. According to this model, the PHT might have multiple, complementary routes and

# The Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail Lower Potomac Concept Plan

## Virginia Corridor



segments, depending on the needs and wishes of local jurisdictions.

In these counties, the land route could feasibly be addressed in two ways:

1. In the interim, by the establishment of “connecting trail route” by developing pedestrian/bicycle facilities along rural road networks between Wakefield and Ferry Farm consistent with the interpretive concept.
2. In the long-term, planning for a hiking trail could begin by encouraging citizen groups and nonprofit organizations to assist. Also, in the long-term, an off-road bicycle trail and hiking trail could be one in the same.

This recommendation is accompanied by a note of caution. Because there is an implicit commitment to preserving the scenic values through which a National Scenic Trail passes, bicycle/pedestrian lanes on roadways rarely provide the quality, extended recreational experience that would warrant designation as a nationally significant trailway. Typically, they serve as connecting or interim routes. However, provided local jurisdictions are committed to developing a recreational bikeway worthy of federal investment and national recognition, the



Paved shoulders and signage improve safety along designated on-road bike routes.

concept of the bicycle connecting route seems a compatible complement to the blueway. Although a route is proposed for consideration in this document, all of the jurisdictions on the Northern Neck should initiate planning exercises to research and designate a road-separated through route for the PHT.

To be sure, designation of water trail segments as part of the PHT must mean more than merely conceptually connecting existing recreational amenities. Developing a national scenic trail is an act of community involvement in landscape conservation. And it entails a commitment to developing recreational amenities through which the public can experience and enjoy the trail corridor. In brief, it means engaging the private and public sectors to expand recreational access to the shoreline of the Potomac and selected tidewater tributaries. It means developing and supporting a plan for the acquisition of waterfront parkland. Importantly, it means upholding the values of the water trail experience in future planning decisions.

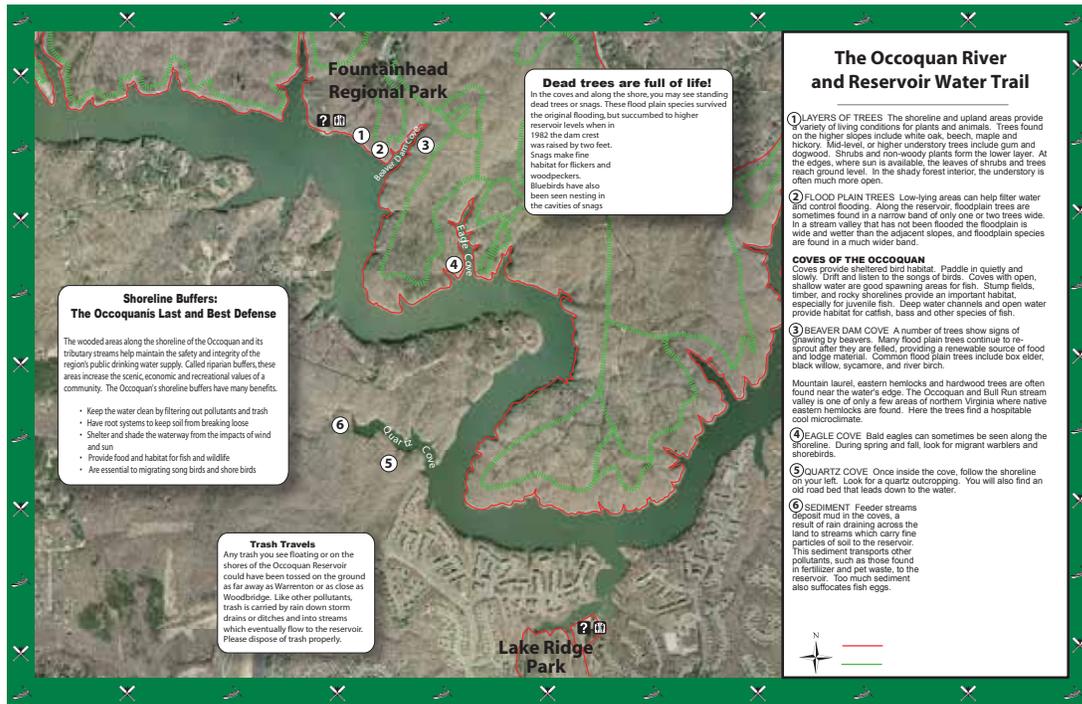
On the other hand, the commitment to shoreline conservation and recreational development in no way implies restricting the use and development of private land in these counties. Rather, the Potomac Heritage Trail offers a vision that can inform and enhance private and public development efforts. It offers residential and commercial developers a planning tool to improve marketability while conserving the visual heritage of the Potomac’s shoreline. And it offers local recreation and tourism planners a variety of models with which to promote public recreational access whenever private developers wish to provide those amenities. At the very least, it could serve as an excellent tool to promote public-private partnerships within the region that would enhance the economic viability of both commercial and

public amenities on the River.

Successful water trails provide more than mere long-distance paddling opportunities to travel from point to point. In fact, successful water trails are built on a foundation of short, self-contained paddling experiences that can be enjoyed by people of all abilities. For experienced, self-reliant paddlers who wish to travel farther on open water, the Potomac is there for them—provided long-term plans do envision adequate landing sites for such travel. In this way, the tidewater PHT is similar to other regions: On the C&O Canal, for example, day-use visitation within a short distance far outnumbers long-distance and overnight use. Example of water trails are described in Appendix A;

the Mathews County Blueways Water Trail is an example that should be examined.

It is important to note the role of the National Park Service in administering the PHT project. According to the authorizing legislation no federal land can be purchased specifically for the PHT. The role of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail office is to promote coordination and provide technical assistance in planning and identifying potential sources of public funding. This provision for technical service may be extended where appropriate to private sector entities who wish to make the PHT a consideration in their planning processes.



Detailed water trail maps, like the example above, can highlight and guide users to natural features, historic sites, or facilities such as boat launches, marinas, camping and restaurants.

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# Immediate Opportunities and Priority Projects

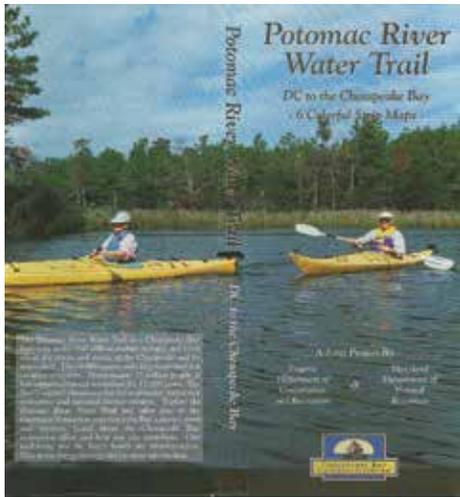
1. Adopt a long-term concept plan for the Potomac Heritage Trail that is consistent with the Northern Neck Heritage Trail in Northumberland, Westmoreland, King George, Stafford, Lancaster and Richmond counties.



Interpretive signs explain the unique history of an area and add continuity to the trail users experience.

2. Develop the “blueway” (water trail) and a bicycling route from Washington’s Birthplace to Ferry Farm to Mount Vernon. With endorsement from relevant local governments and others, apply to the U.S. Department of Interior for designation of the water trail alignment along the Potomac between Wakefield and Mount Ver-

Blueway (Stafford); Fredericksburg to Lands End Water Trail (King George); Monroe Bay Blueway, incorporating James Monroe Birthplace (Westmoreland); Hughlett’s Point to Dameron Marsh Kayak Trail (Northumberland); and Cat Point Creek (Richmond).



Example of a self-guided water trail map.

3. As part of the 2007 commemoration of Captain John Smith’s voyage, develop the following water trail segments as demonstration projects: Aquia Creek—Government Island

4. Designate and post signs along the bicycling route by summer 2007.
5. Plan and construct bicycling connections among Wakefield, Westmoreland State Park and Stratford Hall using Route 3 as a demonstration project.
6. Fund the development of a parking lot, trails, and interpretive signs at Monroe’s Birthplace in Westmoreland County.
7. Secure funding to complete bicycle facilities, according to AASHTO guidelines, on Route 3 between State Route 214 (Stratford Hall Road) and Ferry Farm and along S.R. 206 be-



Existing public park lands, such as Westmoreland and Widewater State Parks, offer good opportunities to establish primitive camping for the water trail.

area along the shoreline within Westmoreland State Park.

8. Explore scenic alternatives for development of a multi-use trail route between Ferry Farm and the Potomac River waterfront attractions in Westmoreland County.
9. Develop a long-term blueways plan for PHT water trail segments that includes recommendations for “landing zones” (areas every several miles that might be incorporated into local and state parkland acquisition plans).
10. Incorporate the long-term concept in local comprehensive plans.
11. Assess the accessibility of former steamboat landings in tributary streams and on the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers.
12. Develop water-to-land access between Stratford Hall Plantation and George Washington’s Birthplace National Monument.
13. Develop a canoe/kayak camping area along the shoreline within Westmoreland State Park.
14. Assess the feasibility and suitability of water-to-land access in the vicinity of Caledon Natural Area.
15. Develop a “Profits from the Trail” marketing program that encourages marinas, bed and breakfasts and campgrounds to participate in the trail project.
16. Provide opportunities for local and regional citizens groups to become involved in the project.
17. Welcome and support the efforts of nonprofit organizations to plan events connected to the trail.
18. Submit applications to designate bicycling routes as scenic byways.
19. Work with Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation to ensure that considerations for both land and water access for the PHT are included at Widewater State Park.

# National Trails System Act

## Background

The National Trails System Act was enacted in 1968 to provide for a national network of trails and pathways. Among the category of trails described in the legislation is the National Scenic Trail. In all there are nine national scenic trails, of which the Appalachian Trail is perhaps the best known in the eastern United States. The Potomac Heritage Trail is a national scenic trail.

The Trails Act describes national scenic trails as:

extended trails so located as to provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass. National scenic trails may be located so as to represent desert, marsh, grassland, mountain, canyon, river, forest, and other areas, as well as landforms which exhibit significant characteristics of the physiographic regions of the Nation.

Each of the other eight national scenic trail has been intended as primarily a backpacking and hiking trail. Some allow equestrian use on part or all of the trail, others not at all. There are segments on other national scenic trails that allow bicycle travel, but these are typically brief sections of co-alignment in which no other alternative route could be found for the hiking trail.

This fact is not meant to recommend that bicycle travel is incompatible with planning for a national scenic trail. For its part, the PHT was authorized by

Congress to include the C&O Canal and the Mt. Vernon Trail, both of which provide for bicycle travel—the C&O also allows equestrian use. More important are the following three principals:

**1. Non-vehicular travel offering an outstanding recreational experience.**

A national scenic trail is more than a collection of local trails. Although locally planned and managed, trail segments should together create an outdoor recreation experience worthy of national recognition. That said, most NSTs, particularly those still under development, include “road walk” sections or convenient connections through ball fields and industrial parks. Still, according to the intention of the Trails Act, the quality of the experience is more important than the guarantee of uninterrupted connectivity.

In planning terms, this means focusing on a route that offers the best potential for “maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant” values, understanding that there will be segments that merely provide route connectivity.

As stated above, the development of blueways encompassing tributary streams and the Potomac provide an exciting implementation strategy that is both compatible with the Trails Act and an appropriate representation of the region’s outstanding recreational values.

In general, bike lanes along roadways to not meet the criteria of providing for outstanding recreational experiences for two reasons. First, the proximity to

motorized travel diminishes the natural values of the recreational experience. Second, unless the land through which the road passes is managed for its conservation values, one cannot reasonably assume that those values won't change over time.

Bicycle trail segments, however, do meet the criteria of the Trails Act. They can be managed primarily for their recreation and scenic values—even where private development exists adjacent to the trail corridor. In these circumstances, a trailway can be viewed as *linear parks*, with management plans and public involvement similar to other state or local parks. With this in mind, acquisition of the rail line between Dalgren and Fredericksburg for use as a trail is recommended.

## **2. Continuity of experience that is physically represented by the trail.**

Washington's Birthplace at Wakefield is a compelling site along the PHT. This is due only in part to the restoration of the built environment there. Just as significant for the PHT experience is the context of land as it is sited adjacent to Popes Creek and the Potomac. Visitors to the site are awestruck by the isolation and the realization that, at the time of Washington's birth, all communication and transportation was oriented toward the river. It is easy to conjure images of ships and small boats creating a highway of the river. In that context, this site is vital to the experience of the entire trail corridor.

Every site along the PHT cannot provide the drama of Wakefield, nor must every site represent the era of George Washington. However, the travel experience can be designed to represent the distinctive relationship the Region's people have with their tidal waterways and the role of the Region in the ongoing American experience.

Steamship landings provide another important link because they further the interpretive story of the Northern Neck, providing a thematic thread from early Colonial times into the 20th century. Interestingly, many of these landings already are held by public agencies and could be adapted for use in the blueway.

For example, the Ice Age NST in Wisconsin represents the geologic landforms left by the last two ice ages. In evaluating opportunities to add trail segments, the trail's planners and managers focus on trail connections that support this vision. For the PHT in these four counties, it will be helpful to agree upon an intended experience.

The key is developing the trail in such a way as to acknowledge and represent its nationally significant values.

**3. Desired Future Conditions.** It is important to have a clear long-term vision for what the trail will be, then to develop short- and long-term strategies to achieve it.

## **Common traits among National Scenic Trail projects**

Each national scenic trail is a unique project, subject to, among other things, the particularities of a trail's authorizing legislation, the existence of public recreation lands in the corridor, proximity to populations centers, and regional attitudes toward outdoor recreation. For example, range of federal involvement varies with each trail. The PHT's authorizing legislation clearly places responsibility for trail development, acquisition and management in the hands of local and state jurisdictions. So there are no hard-and-fast rules determining development. Still, upon examination, there are a few notable considerations:

**1. Commitment to a high-quality outdoor recreation experience above mere connectivity.** Citizen trail proponents can become impatient regarding the development of trail alignments in according to provisions of the Trail Act. This is understandable—they want trail on the ground. However, as the effort matures, so does the understanding that the Trails Act creates a high standard that protects the integrity of the National Trails System. Quoting again, the Trails Act authorizes long-distance trails that provide for

“maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass.”

According to the Trails Act, a series of “road walks” connecting outstanding scenic areas is preferable to a longer contiguous pathway that does not meet the standards described.

In practical terms, sometimes this results in the selection of interim routes that can be improved over time by being taken “off road.” It also recognizes that certain segments might be selected and managed to create connectivity—but that the overall trail aspires to standard of national significance.

**2. A constituency for the trail that identifies with the entire trail corridor and supports local agencies.** As with any public project, having public support and a volunteer base is important. The strength of a national scenic trail project is that local segments gain recognition and support from being part of a much larger effort. It pays for localities to engage the community supporting the trail.

So it is also important to have local leadership that participates in Trail-wide

information sharing. For example, if federal funding for a project on the Northern Neck is to be sought, trail supporters along the entire corridor can assist.

There also is a momentum that derives from being a part of the corridor-wide effort. The North Country Trail runs from upstate New York to North Dakota by *co-aligning* with several trails along the way. The project has become more successful as the *community* supporting the trail has recognized the significance of the entire corridor—whether their segment is in Ohio or Minnesota.

The amount of volunteer activity on the PHT varies from region to region. It will be important for local governments to encourage the emergence of locally based groups who support the project. It will be equally important to welcome technical assistance from Potomac-focused organizations that promote outdoor recreation throughout the corridor.

**3. Recognition and support from local, state and federal legislators.** Not much explanation is required here, but one fact is worthy of note: There is a House Trails Caucus, open to every member of the House of Representatives. A priority among other PHT regions is getting each Representative whose district contains the PHT to join the Caucus.



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