BOOKER T. WASHINGTON NATIONAL MONUMENT

Jack-O-Lantern Branch Heritage Trail

The native plants, trees, animals, and aquatic life found along Jack-O-Lantern Branch Heritage Trail were used by our ancestors as food, meat, and medicine. The trail loops 1 and 1/2 miles from the tobacco barn through many acres of the original Burroughs property.

In order for the fragile ecosystems to remain intact, please do not remove or disturb any plants or animals. Ticks, snakes, stinging insects, and poisonous plants may be found in this area. Please use caution as you walk the trails.

Remember to leave the land as you found it. Follow the map and guide and enjoy your walk.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. Department of the Interior

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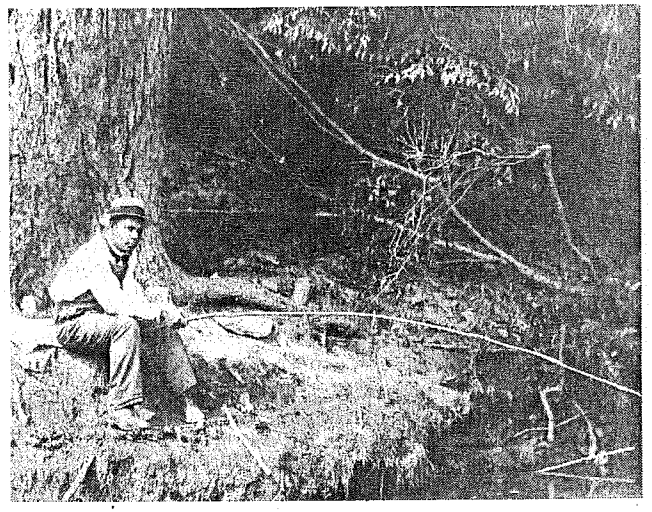
Guide to the Jack-O-Lantern Branch Heritage Trail



"...go...for an hour or more...on Sunday afternoons into the woods, where we can live for a while near the heart of nature, where no one can disturb or vex us, surrounded by the pure air, the trees, the shrubbery, the flowers, and the sweet fragrance that springs from a hundred plants, enjoying the chirp of the crickets and the songs of the birds. This is solid rest."

Booker T. Washington National Monument
12130 Booker T. Washington Highway
Hardy, VA 24101

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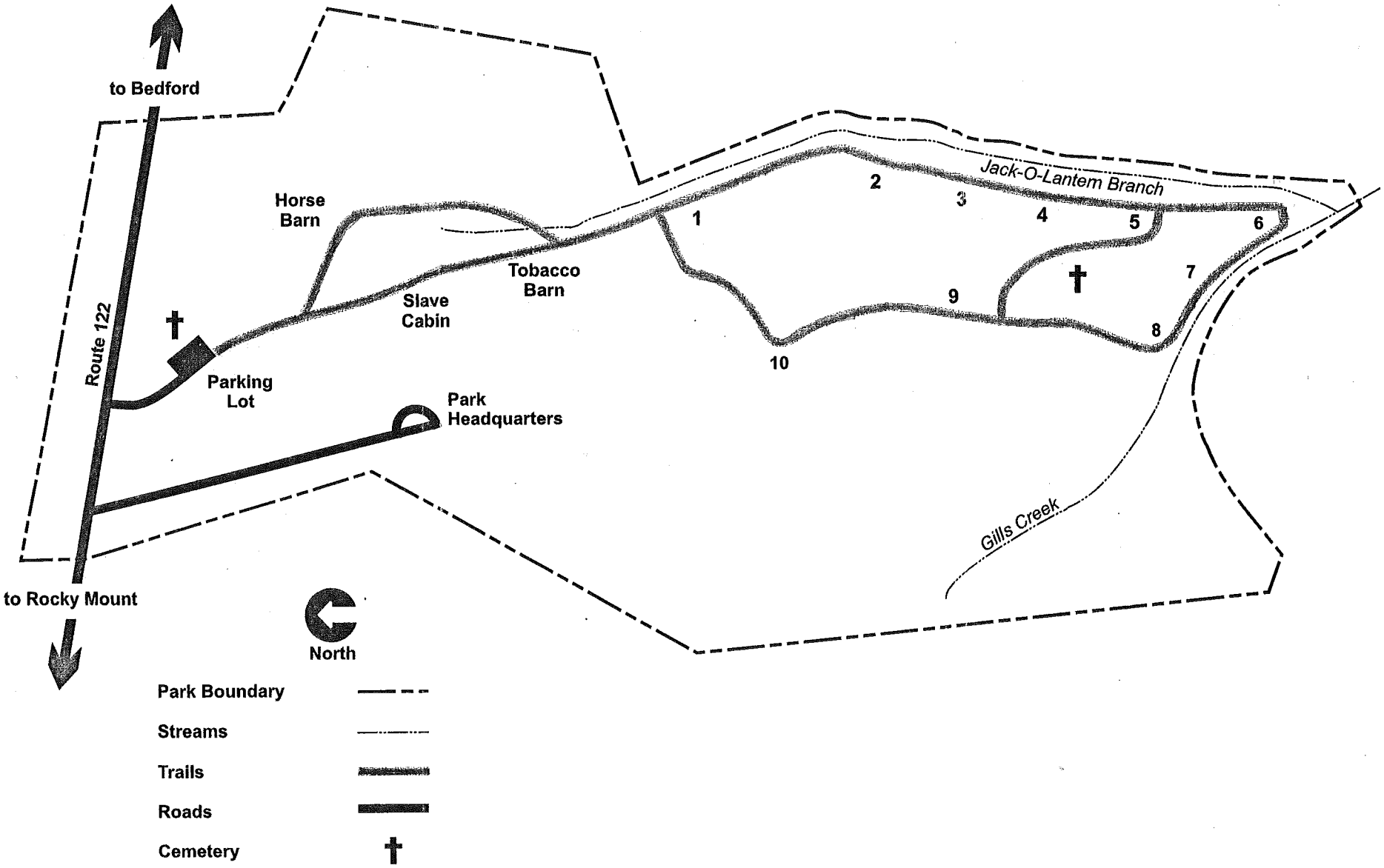
JACK-O-LANTERN BRANCH HERITAGE TRAIL



STOP 1

In their writings, slave owners did not acknowledge foraging, hunting or fishing as common slave activities. However, archeological evidence gives direct testimony of the constant presence of wild resources in the slave's diet.

In the 1860 census, only half of the 207 acre Burroughs farm was recorded as cultivated land. The remaining acreage was regrowth forest of varying age and ecosystem type.

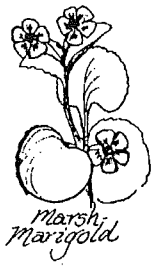
This small stream trickling by is Jack-O-Lantern Branch. It originates in springs in the historic area of the park and has served as one boundary of this property since at least 1818, long before it became the Burroughs farm.

The origin of the name "Jack-O-Lantern Branch" is lost to folklore. Perhaps it was named for the Jack-O-Lantern mushroom (Omphalotus olearius) which can be found here in the fall of the year. This orange, poisonous mushroom emits an eerie glow on moonless nights.

Perhaps the name is derived from the African American folktale about a boy named Jack and his encounter with the devil. This tale is one of many devil tales about individuals who deal with the devil for personal gain, only to end up worse off for the association. In this tale, Jack is too much for even the devil and ends up doomed to wander the earth with a little light or lantern. Jack's light is often called "will-of-the-wisp," and stories about this mysterious light are many and varied.

STOP 2

This riparian ecosystem through which you are walking provided slave and master with food, meat, and medicine. During the spring months, slaves would have foraged in this moist environment for edible plants. One food of the spring season is the morel mushroom (Morchella species), a choice edible fungi. Another was the marsh marigold (Caltha palustris). The shiny kidney-shaped marigold leaves were gathered and cooked like spinach.



During the summer months, this cool forest was a haven to escape from both the heat and the master's watchful eye. Year round, the forest provided slaves with a secluded place for social gatherings, religious meetings, singing, and dancing.

Summer was the time to gather the completely ripe fruits of the mayapple or American mandrake (Podophyllum peltatum). These fruits were eaten by Native Americans, European settlers, and African slaves. The leaves and roots of these plants, while toxic in very small amounts, were also used for both magic and medicine.

STOP 3

It was in swampy areas such as this that the male slaves would select the Yule log for the next Christmas season. Of this custom, Washington wrote: *"On many plantations in Virginia it was the custom for the men to go out into the swamps on the last day of the Christmas season, and select the biggest, toughest and greenish hardwood tree they could find, and cut it in shape to fit the fireplace in the master's room. Afterwards this log would be sunk into the water, where it would remain the entire succeeding year. On the first day of the following Christmas, it would be taken out of the water; the slaves would go into the master's room before he got out of bed on Christmas morning, and, with a song and other ceremonies, would place this log on the fireplace of the master, and would light it with fire. It was understood that the holiday season would last until this log had been burned into two parts."*

Do you see a tree that might make a Yule log?

STOP 4

As you climb the slope in front of you, you will be leaving the riparian ecosystem and entering a regrowth oak and hickory forest on the drier ridge top. When Booker explored these woods, the dominant tree on the ridges would have been the American chestnut (Castanea dentata). In the early twentieth century, these trees were all but destroyed by a virulent fungus disease (Endothia parasitica).

In his autobiography "Up From Slavery," Washington compared the roughness of his flax shirt to the prickliness of a chestnut burr. These burrs contained edible nuts, food for both man and beast.

Chestnut

It was one of Booker's late fall chores to find and pen up the Burroughs' hogs, so they could be fattened for slaughter. But before being rounded up, the hogs would have feasted on these nuts. During his search for the hogs, Booker may have gathered chestnuts for his family to roast and enjoy.

STOP 5

This old farm road along the ridge leads to a second Burroughs' tobacco barn site. This barn was used to cure tobacco grown on the bottomland along Gills Creek. From this point the trailheads down hill to that bottomland.

STOP 6

Gills Creek is named for Thomas Gill, one of the early settlers in this part of Franklin County. It flows into what is now Smith Mountain Lake and is subject to overflowing its banks during periods of heavy rain. Look for debris in the shrubs and trees to see how high the water rose during the last flood.

Streams such as this provided slaves with an opportunity to add fish to their diet. Fish bones are commonly found in archeological evidence from slave quarters. As an adult, Washington enjoyed the relaxation of fishing. In 1915, the year of his death, Washington enjoyed a fishing vacation on Mobile Bay. About the experience he wrote: *"Aside from hunting and horseback riding, nothing rests me more and delights my soul more than to get on some stream near an old-fashioned swimming pool, with the root of a tree close by and to spend as many hours as I can in fishing with the old-time pole and line."*

STOP 7

On the frequently flooded banks of streams like Gills Creek grows a medicinal plant native to North America, goldenseal (Hydrastis canadensis). Formerly abundant, it has been extensively harvested and is now listed on state and federal lists of threatened plants. The rootstock was used by Cherokee Indians to treat arrow wounds. It became an essential element of American folk medicine as well as a dye plant used to dye cloth yellow.

STOP 8

As you ascend the hill to return to the ridge top, you will pass the "Sparks" Cemetery. The origin of the "Sparks " name is lost in oral tradition. The simple fieldstones used to mark the graves do not tell us much about those who may be buried here, but slaves frequently used forested ridges like this for their cemeteries.

When the death of James Burroughs was recorded in the county courthouse in July of 1861, the death of a male slave, age 22, was also recorded. He had died in May, and, like James, he died of "lung disease." That his death was recorded two months late illustrates the casual attitude regarding slave records; had there not been a death in the owner's family, it is possible that no one would have bothered to record the slave's death at all.

STOP 9

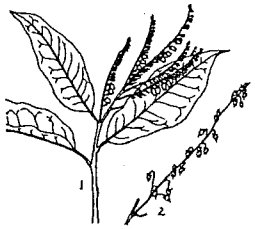
As you continue along the trail look closely at the trees. This forest is different from that along Gills Creek. The trees here favor dry soils. Many are Virginia pines (Pinus virgiania) with some beech (Fagus grandifloria), oak (Quercus species), and hickory (Hicoria species).

Virginia Pine

A forest of small pines such as this is usually the result of man's recent clearing of the land. In the 1950s the trees in this area were cut for timber. The clear-cut area was left to grow back naturally.

To the right of the entrance to the former Youth Group Campground notice the sourwood tree (Oxydendrum arboreum). The elliptical shiny leaves turn a brilliant bright red in the fall. In June and July its white fragrant flowers remind one of lily of the valley (Convalliara majalis), a spring blooming garden ground cover. Sourwood flowers are attractive to honey bees that seek them out and make the esteemed sourwood honey.

While there is no evidence indicating that James Burroughs kept bees, bees were essential for pollination of fruit trees and other crops. Honey produced by bees was a natural sweetener and an important medication. Slave narratives contain many references to slave prowess at "bee lining." Bee lining was the art of baiting and then following wild honeybees to their colonies, usually in a bee tree. Once the tree was felled, honey and bee's wax would be harvested. During the Civil War when sugar became a scarce commodity, honey was used as a substitute, but supply could not meet demand. On the Burroughs farm, Booker remembered that sorghum molasses was grown and used as a sugar substitute.



Sourwood

STOP 10

Here where the man-made field and natural woods meet, grasses and low shrubs provide shelter for deer, rabbits, birds, and other animals. These were prime hunting grounds for foraging slaves.

The brick building in the distance is the park headquarters building. It was built in the 1950s as a segregated elementary school for African Americans. It operated from the fall of 1954 to the spring of 1966.

To complete your walk, re-enter the woods and follow the trail as it loops back to the tobacco barn.

We hope that this walk has added to your appreciation of the natural area around you.

Nature is a never-ending source of enjoyment and education. Please return often.