The Choptank and Tuckahoe Rivers

Welcome to the Choptank & Tuckahoe Rivers Water Trail. A project of the Choptank River Heritage Center in West Denton, the Trail runs through the heart of a Chesapeake Bay region rich in natural, historical, and cultural treasures.

The Choptank is the longest river on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The Tuckahoe is its primary tributary. The Trail runs for nearly 80 miles through a diverse and vital natural landscape, with access available at more than 30 public landings.

This is one in a series of six maps devoted to different sections of the water trail.

Section I/Mouth of the Choptank

The mouth of the Choptank is a broad river section offering stunning, wide-open views of the Chesapeake Bay and its shores. The river spans nearly four miles across as it empties into the bay. Today, the river's mouth is framed by Tilghman Island on the north and Taylors Island on the south. Tilghman Island was once connected to these two, but it eroded over the centuries and finally disappeared in the 1940s.

Some of the most productive oyster beds in the Chesapeake lie here where the river meets the bay.

The stories of the rough-and-tumble trade of oyster-filling books have been written about "oyster pirates" and "oyster wars." (A major issue facing the Chesapeake environment today involves how to revitalize oyster population that has been devastated by deadly diseases.)

This section of the river boasts a rich commercial history. Tilghman Island offered a protected harbor where sailing ships could wait safely for favorable winds. The island's maritime traditions are still alive today at Dogwood Harbor. Scenic Oxford along the Miles River was once Maryland's first port town; it later became a center of the oyster trade. Today, it's a sailing hub where races often feature traditional "log canoes."

For more information about the many historical and cultural sites in this and other sections of the river, visit www.riverheritage.org or call the River Heritage Center at 410-479-4930.

Choptank River Vista

History

Captain John Smith: Smith's extraordinary Voyages of Exploration through the Chesapeake region began in 1608. But the famed mariner missed the Choptank entirely, never suspecting that anything of interest might lie beyond the 700-acre Sharps Island that then obscured his view of the mouth of the river.

Michener's Chesapeake: Writer James Michener lived along the Miles River while working on his famous novel, which follows four families through three centuries of Chesapeake history. His fictional Devil's Island site where Sharps Island used to be.

Colonial Monarchs: The impressive estates along both sides of the river here speak to the rich Colonial history of the Lower Choptank. Some of these estates lie their histories to land grants awarded in the mid-1600s.

Colonial Settlements: Both shores of the river here offer a plethora of historic sites and National Register properties. Interestingly, the two shores developed in different ways during the settlement and early contact periods and have distinct stories to tell about life in those days.

The north shore is in Talbot County, which was curved out of Kent County in 1662. Here, a peace treaty enacted early on with the Native Americans created a peaceful, fortifying settlement in the mid-1600s by the wealthy grants, including such figures as Edward Lloyd, Captain Robert Morris, and Richard and Samuel Tilghman.

The Dorchester side was much more of a frontier environment marked by strained relations and frequent clashes between settlers and Native Americans. Key settlers on this shore included such figures as Henry Sewall of Warwickshire, Henry Hooper, Colonel Thomas Eastall, Anthony LeCompte and Stephen Cary. 
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Section 2/Lower Choptank

Here on the Lower Choptank, the river starts its 'Great Bend,' meandering a full 180 degrees (from Cambridge to Frazier Neck Point) while widening from one mile across at the Warwick River to three miles across at the Tred Avon River. Some extraordinary history lies along this bend of the river. This is where the last reservation of the Choptank Indians was located. It was also once home to a legendary Chesapeake shipyard at Jamaica Point.

Cambridge, the seat of Dorchester County, is a city thick with sea farming heritage and maritime lore. The Richardson Maritime Museum is located downtown. The skipjack, Nathan of Dorchester, conducts public sails off of Long Wharf. Historical exhibits and information about these Chesapeake Bay gateways and other nearby attractions are available at the Sailwinds Visitors Center.

For more information about the many historical and cultural sites in this and other sections of the water trail, visit www.waterheritage.org or call the Chesapeake River Heritage Center at 410-479-4950.

The steamboat Joppa plied the Eastern Shore transporting passengers, livestock and trade goods to and from the port in Baltimore from 1885 until 1926. The Joppa shown second from the left, at Light Street docks in Baltimore. Also shown are the Enoch Pratt, Avalon, Cambridge and No -- all steamboats which traveled the Eastern Shore.

An aerial view of the Choptank River.
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Section 3/Lower Middle River

At Dover, the Choptank is one-fourth of a mile wide, but it broadens to more than a mile across by the time it reaches the Warwick River. In centuries gone by, the plantations and small towns in this area relied upon the river as the commercial “super-highway” of their day for trade and travel. Before the railroad came along, the many wharves along the shores also served the inland canneries that processed fruits and vegetables from local farms for far-off markets.

An aerial view of Hunting Creek

The river also played an important role in the Underground Railroad, which many enslaved African-Americans followed to freedom in the years before the Civil War. Black maritime workers and dockhands were an essential part of a network that passed along news and information, connecting Eastern Shore slaves with the outside world. The famed Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman was active in this area; she engineered one of her most famous escapes from the spot called Poplar Neck.

For more information about the many historical and cultural sites in this and other sections of the river, visit www.riverheritage.org or call the Choptank River Heritage Center at 410-479-4950.
Map Legend

- Boat Ramp
- Parking
- Phone
- Restroom
- Picnic
- Gas
- Canoe Launch
- Nautical Mile Marker

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Section 3 - Planned river guide trips: a detailed itinerary for an excursion focused on the Underground Railway is available at www.riverheritage.org.

Credits: Sponsorship - Old Havre Town Heritage Center, Funding - Maryland Historic Trust & Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network
Research & Cartography: Carl Schieffel Jr.
Design: S.L. Rogers Design
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Section 4/Upper Middle River

Remnants of the river's maritime history abound on the Upper Middle Choptank. The many old wharves and landings along these shores date to the days of schooners and steamboats. Some of the first large estates and plantations of colonial times sprung up in this area. The region's rich farmland supplied goods to the numerous canneries that flourished on this part of the river in the early 1900s.

Here, too, lie the hardwood and pine forests of Martinak State Park, a great bird watching spot. The Choptank's deepest waters are found at the river's confluences with the Tuckahoe (40 feet) and Kings Creek (50 feet). These are two of the many interesting tributaries along the Upper Middle Choptank. Locals call the smaller of these channels "guts," an odd-sounding name for streams so often lined with beautiful swaying grasses and awash in vibrant wildflowers.

The Nature Conservancy owns and protects 250 acres of important marshland at Kings Creek Preserve. The public boardwalk and observation deck at the preserve are accessible from the river, one-half mile up Kings Creek.

For more information about the many historical and cultural sites in this and other sections of the river, visit www.riverheritage.org or call the Choptank River Heritage Center at 410-479-4950.

A schooner passing through the bridge at Dover, circa 1946. Many sailing ships were converted to steam power in the 1800s and operated well into the 20th century.
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Section 5/Tuckahoe River

A river unto itself, the Tuckahoe has a natural beauty all its own. Narrower than the Choptank, it carves this way and that and then back again through banks of tall grasses and reeds. A journey on the Tuckahoe tends to be peaceful and isolated, the silence broken only by birdcalls and the rustling of leaves.

Things were not always so quiet on the Tuckahoe. This river had its steamboats and shipyards, and its shores were dotted with canneries and wharves all the way up to the towns of Hillsboro and Queen Anne. The Tuckahoe narrows sharply above Hillsboro and soon starts running under a thick canopy of trees. Native Americans used to hunt in these forests. Today, the forests are accessible along trails at both Adkins Arboretum and Tuckahoe State Park.

For more information about the many historical and cultural sites in this and other sections of the river, visit www.saverheritage.org or call the Choptank River Heritage Center at 410-479-4950.

The steamboat Minnie Wheeler

The remains of a wharf

History

Wheeler Transportation Line: In the age of steamboats, only one line was based on the Eastern Shore. It was founded by Caleb Clark Wheeler, an illiterate entrepreneur who ran a fleet out of Hillsboro that included the Easton, the Chesapeake, and the Minnie Wheeler.

Stoney Point Landing
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Section 6/Upper River

Here on the Upper Choptank, more than 40 miles from the Chesapeake Bay, the river follows a narrow course through dense forests where Native Americans once hunted. Historically, this stretch of the Choptank has been an important spawning ground for perch, rockfish, shad and herring.

In Colonial times, the Upper Choptank was a vital transportation link. Waterborne trade from points south met up with overland routes to Philadelphia at Greensboro, the northernmost navigable point on the river for commercial vessels in the 1700s. Today, Greensboro is a town of 1,600 residents, boasting a riverside park and streets lined with Victorian homes.

Denton, the seat of Caroline County, was established in 1781. A thriving port town through the early 20th century, it now has 3,000 residents. The town’s maritime history is on display at the Choptank River Heritage Center & Joppa Steamboat Wharf Museum in West Denton, located right on the river opposite the Town of Denton. In town, the Museum of Rural Life celebrates agricultural traditions that have developed in Caroline County over three centuries.

For more information about the many historical and cultural sites in this and other sections of the river, visit www.riverheritage.org or call the Choptank River Heritage Center at 410-479-4959.

History

St. Joan’s Path: Maryland Route 480 follows the route of St. Joan’s Path, an ancient Native American trail used by the Choptank and Nanicoke tribes.

Shaded Passage: The forests that form the canopy of trees over the river above Greensboro supported a flourishing fur trade among early European explorers. Later, they served as an important source of timber for shipbuilders and railroad companies.
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Section 6 - Planned river guide trips: detailed itineraries for Tobacco Courthouse, Pirates Treasure and Joppa Overnight Run are available at www.riverheritage.org.

Credits: Sponsorship-Old Hartford Town Heritage Center Funding: Maryland Historic Trust & Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network Research-Carl Schufeld Jr. Design-S. L. Rogers Design