



# Celebrating the National Park Service Centennial: Washington County, Maryland



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Scenic photography courtesy Visit Hagerstown &  
Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau

PHOTO BY SCOTT CANTNER

On September 6, 1776, Washington County, Maryland, separated from neighboring Frederick County and became the first county in the United States to take the name of our nation's first president. Today it is home to five national parks highlighting the area's historic legacy and scenery: Antietam National Battlefield and Antietam National Cemetery, the Maryland Heights portion of Harpers Ferry, and sections of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, C&O Canal National Historic Park, and Potomac River National Scenic Trail.

"This is where America happened," says Dan Spedden, president of Visit Hagerstown & Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau. "Some of the best historic and recreational sites and scenery in the U.S. are here. Within a few days, visitors can hike the Appalachian Trail, bike or hike the C&O Canal, paddle the Potomac River Trail, hike to view Harpers Ferry from the Artillery sites in Maryland Heights, and tour the Antietam Battlefield."

With its proximity to the DC/Baltimore Metro area and short driving distances between its national parks, Washington County offers visitors a rich and varied park experience.

**Four National Parks are visible in this photo taken from the Appalachian National Scenic Trail — Potomac River National Scenic Trail and C&O Canal National Historic Park (bottom of photo, along river) and Harpers Ferry (top of river at bridge).**

In just a few days, visitors can experience a sampling characteristic of the entire National Park System. The Civil War legacy, race relations, transportation challenges, and early industrialization are themes that played out on the Washington County stage amidst a stunning backdrop of hills and valleys, mountains and rivers. Everything that happened there affected the entire nation.

"Europeans are fascinated by the Civil War," Spedden says. "Many are genealogy fans in search of relatives, including ancestors in the United States."

The Antietam National Battlefield and Cemetery commemorates the bloodiest one-day battle in American history, the culmination of the Maryland Campaign of 1862. On September 17, Confederate General Robert E. Lee led the Army of Northern Virginia in its first invasion of the North, engaging in savage combat with the Army of the Potomac

under the command of Major General George B. McClellan. Of the 100,000 soldiers engaged in battle, 23,000 died, were wounded, or went missing. More than 500 cannons fired more than 50,000 rounds. One survivor described the battle as “a savage, continual thunder that cannot compare to any sound I have ever heard.” Lee’s loss at Antietam ended his invasion and led the way to President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.

It was the beginning of the end for the Confederacy. Today Antietam is one of the most unspoiled battlefields in the country, where visitors can drive, bike or walk the 8½-miles of road through the park, with 11 stops. Burnside Bridge and Bloody Lane are reputed to be among the most haunted Civil War sites. The final stop is the Cemetery where Clara Barton, founder of the Red Cross, nursed wounded soldiers amidst the chaos. A monument stands in honor of her heroism.

Meanwhile, before and after the devastating battle at Antietam, Maryland Heights found itself in the crosshairs of Confederate forces determined to invade the North. Given its 300-foot elevation across the Potomac River from Harpers Ferry, at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers, the mountain was viewed as a strategic prize by the Confederates in their quest to entrap the Union garrison in Harpers Ferry. The Battle of Harpers Ferry at Maryland Heights, from September 12 – 15, was the first battle between Confederate and Union troops on Northern soil. After a nine-hour battle on September 13, hard-pressed Union forces abandoned their positions. The Confederates took control and cut off escape routes for Union troops. Two days later, the U.S. garrison in Harpers Ferry surrendered. On September 19, two days after Antietam, Union forces re-occupied Maryland Heights. General McClellan ordered the construction of extensive fortifications that helped the Union prevail after the Confederacy’s third and final invasion of the North failed, despite a four-day effort led by the determined Confederate Major General Jubal Early. While Early spent four days fruitlessly



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



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**The Antietam National Battlefield and Antietam National Cemetery commemorates the bloodiest one-day battle of the Civil War, September 17, 1862.**



trying to evict Union forces from fortifications in Maryland Heights, McClellan sent reinforcements to Washington, a move that helped save the nation's capital. The Union occupied Maryland Heights until June 30, 1865.

Today Maryland Heights is part of the Harpers Ferry National Park. Visitors can learn more about the town's role in local and national history by visiting the Harpers Ferry Historic District. Highlights include displays describing John Brown's famous attack on slavery and an impressive collection of munitions. A high level flood marker by the Hardware Store indicates the Lower Town's vulnerability to flooding. Those able and willing to hike up Maryland Heights can follow trails leading past what was once the Naval Battery to the Overlook Cliff Trail. Hikers who opt for a strenuous uphill climb to the top will be rewarded with remnants of the breastworks and Stone Fort, plus spectacular views of Harpers Ferry and its surroundings. After visiting Harpers Ferry in 1783, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "The passage of the Patowmac through the Blue Ridge is perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in Nature."



PHOTO BY LANCE C. BELL

**Top photo:** Harpers Ferry National Park viewed from Maryland Heights in Washington County, Maryland. Also at the bottom of the photo is the C&O Canal National Historical Park and Potomac River National Scenic Trail.

**Bottom photo:** Hiking is fun for the whole family — popular day hikes include Annapolis Rock and Black Rock, Washington Monument, and Weverton Cliffs, ranging from moderate to difficult.

Trail hiking is one of the best ways to take in the scenery that Jefferson so much admired. Washington County is home to sections of two National Park trails – the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and the Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) Canal National Historic Park.

Maryland's 41-mile section of the Appalachian Trail (A.T.), running along the backbone of South Mountain, lies completely within Washington County until it reaches the Mason-Dixon Line. With a 1,650 elevation gain from 250 feet at the Potomac River near Harpers Ferry to High Rock at 1,900 feet, this segment is considered pretty easy by Appalachian Trail standards, with few steep climbs and rocks to negotiate. Washington County is near the A.T. halfway point and headquarters in Harpers Ferry.

“We’re at the epicenter of the Appalachian Trail,”

says Spedden. “It’s the closest A.T. site to the airports so this area sees the most visitors from overseas.”

The entire trail runs 2,180 miles over the Appalachian Mountains from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Maine’s Mount Katahdin. Conceived by forester/philosopher Benton MacKaye and completed in 1937, the Appalachian Trail became the first national scenic trail within the national park system in 1968. Today, A.T. management is a collaborative effort involving the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, numerous state agencies and thousands of volunteers. Hikers can choose day trips to scenic overlooks and historic sites, or a four-to-five day backpacking adventure to complete the entire Maryland segment of the Appalachian Trail. Campgrounds and shelters are located about a day’s hiking distance apart. Popular day hikes include the following destinations:

- Annapolis Rock (elevation 1,700 ft.) and Black Rock near Greenbrier State Park, 2.2 miles, rated moderate difficulty, with views of Greenbrier Lake and the Cumberland Valley.

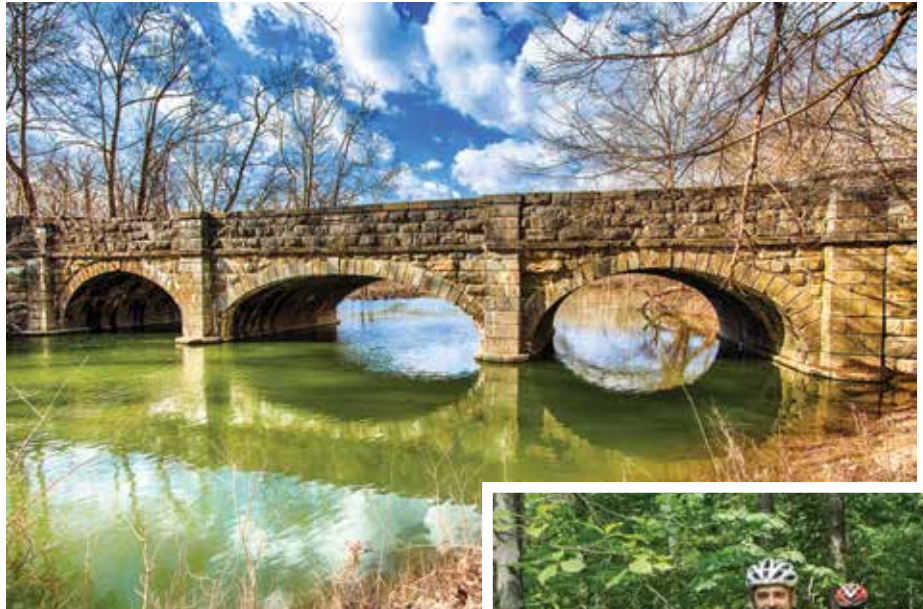


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**Top: C&O Canal Antietam Creek Aqueduct.**

**Above: Camping is allowed in designated sites along the C&O Canal. Locations, fees, and regulations may be viewed at [www.nps.gov/choh/planyourvisit/camping](http://www.nps.gov/choh/planyourvisit/camping).**

**Right: Biking is a favorite pastime along the C&O Canal towpath.**

- Washington Monument (elevation 1,600 ft.), 3 miles, rated moderate difficulty, featuring the first monument dedicated to the first U.S. president, with views to the east and west.
- Weverton Cliffs (elevation 750 ft.) in Gathland State Park, 6 miles, rated difficult, with views of the Potomac River and Harpers Ferry.

Like the Appalachian Trail, the C&O Canal Towpath welcomes hikers and campers. In addition, visitors can ride bicycles or horses, access the Potomac River for swimming and paddling, and enjoy birding and wildlife. George Washington, after surveying the river, concluded that the northern



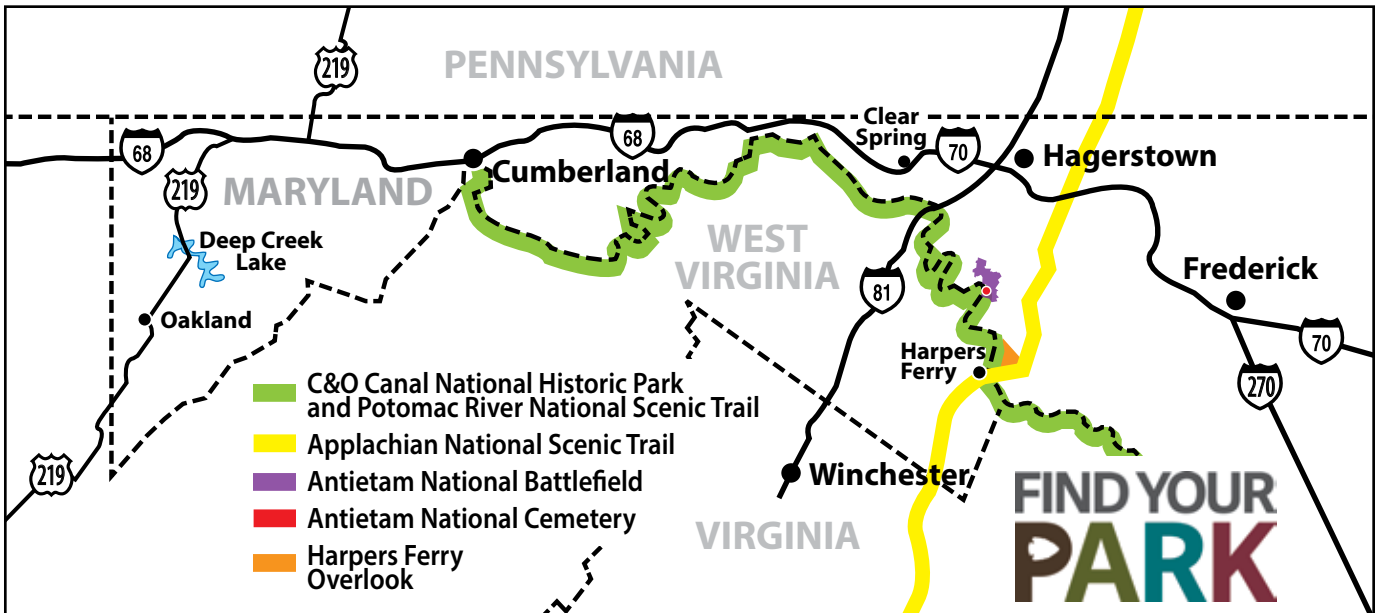
Maryland's 41-mile section of the Appalachian Trail lies completely within Washington County.

section should be developed as a primary corridor for trade and commerce that would tie the nation's capital region and Eastern seaboard to the western territories. He viewed developing this corridor as a strategic move that would prevent foreign powers from seizing control of the western region and thus imperiling the new American republic. Years later, this unique trail was constructed between 1828 and 1850 as a towpath where horses and mules pulled barges loaded with lumber, coal and agricultural products down the canal to markets downstream. For about a century, the towpath was a lifeline for communities and business along the Potomac River until the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, with its greater

speed and reliability, eventually captured almost all of the canal's trade. Periodic flooding frequently plagued the towpath. A devastating flood in 1924 dealt the final blow to the canal's commercial operations. After World War II, a plan surfaced to transform the towpath into a parkway for vehicles. Opposition from environmentalists and a much-publicized eight-day hike by late Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas in 1952 resulted in the towpath's transformation to a national park by 1971. Its floodplain of forest and wetlands contributes to the conservation of the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Today more than five million people visit this canal trail with its unique story – a compelling mix of U.S. canal and transportation history, environmental conservation and rustic natural beauty. The former towpath comprises about half of the popular 141-mile Great Allegheny Passage between Washington, D.C., and Pittsburgh. Washington County's 64-mile stretch represents about a third of the towpath's 184.5 miles. The County's towpath visitor centers include Hancock, Ferry Hill near Shepherdstown, and Williamsport, where a launch boat offers Potomac River rides on a replica of a canal launch boat. Visitors can also tour Lock House 44 and view a lock demonstration.

The Potomac River flows through Washington County for more than 100 miles, a significant portion of its 383 miles through a region rich in early American history. In recognition of "The Nation's River," the Potomac River National Scenic Trail was established as a trail network uniting places and communities along the corridor passing



through the District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Virginia. The trail follows paths once explored by George Washington, who hoped that the Potomac would serve as a commercial highway and food source supporting the development of the early American colonies. When completed, this evolving network of locally managed trails will extend 830 miles through five geographic regions, serving as a continuous route connecting the Chesapeake Bay through the nation's capital to the Laurel Highlands of Pennsylvania. Along the way, visitors can learn about the origins and continuing evolution of our nation by exploring historically significant places marking encounters between Europeans and Native Americans, Civil War battlefields, the National Road and the nation's capital.

The Potomac River National Scenic Trail is rich with recreational opportunities. Favorites include hiking, running, bicycling, boating, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, rock climbing, birding, and exploring plants and animals along the way. Washington County's eight state parks serve as connecting greenways to its National Parks and offer visitors opportunities to further enrich their experience of the area. These parks include Fort Frederick State Park, Fort Tonoloway State Park, Gathland State Park, Greenbrier State Park, Washington Monument State Park, Sideling Hill State Park, South Mountain State Park, and the Western Maryland Rail Trail.

This year marks the Centennial of the National Park Service. Visiting its parks is one of the best ways to celebrate and show support for its stewardship. Washington County's mix of history and natural beauty makes it an excellent choice for a Centennial National Park Tour.

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