

Description

The Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail is a developing network of locally managed trails between the mouth of the Potomac River and the Allegheny Highlands, and is one of 30 congressionally designated scenic and historic trails in the national trails system. The designated Trail corridor embraces portions of five physiographic provinces and four states, the nation’s capital, and 20 other units of the national park system. The Trail intersects with other national trails, which provides opportunities for cooperative trails development, resource conservation, partnerships, visitor services, interpretation, and sustainability. Trails within the network offer a means to explore the origins and continuing evolution of the nation. As a whole, the national scenic trail designation is being used locally and regionally as a catalyst to provide economic and health benefits, expanded nonmotorized transportation options, improved educational and interpretive experiences, and connections among communities, historic sites, wildlife areas, and parks.

The concept for the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail combines outdoor recreation with educational opportunities in a “braided” network of locally managed trails. Legislation for the Trail—a 1983 amendment to the National Trails System Act—authorizes the designation of trail “segments” outside the boundaries of federally managed lands through formal agreements; the legislation precludes designation of trail segments in West Virginia.

The National Park Service has delegated responsibility for administration of the federal interest in the Trail, provides coordination among agency and organization partners, and assists with some technical and financial support for Trail-related projects. Partnerships permeate all aspects of Trail-related planning, management, interpretation, and promotion.

As the population along the Trail corridor increases and land uses change, the trail designation provides an institutional frame work—among volunteers, government agencies at all levels, nonprofit organizations, and business interests—for conservation and development of outstanding outdoor recreational experiences. In addition to resource conservation, outdoor recreation opportunities are increasingly recognized as an important component of local, regional, and state economies. From diverse regional perspectives, residents and visitors can explore a variety of historic and natural landscapes within the Trail corridor. Sites and features include working farms and orchards, canal systems, vineyards, historic home sites, museums, tidewater marshes, stream valleys, forested ridges, wildlife refuges, battlefields, and cemeteries. The concept of a “braided” trail network, with multiple trails intersecting and diverging at various points, provides the opportunity to promote different kinds of nonmotorized experiences including hiking, bicycling, horseback riding, paddling, and cross-country skiing.

Potomac Heritage Trail Network



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE • U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



Foundation Document Overview

Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail

District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia



Contact Information

For more information about the *Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail Foundation Document*, contact: phnst@nps.gov or 304-535-4014 or write to: Superintendent, Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail, P.O. Box B, Harpers Ferry, WV 25425

Purpose



Significance

Significance statements express why Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- The corridor designated for the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail expresses George Washington’s vision of a “great avenue into the Western Country.” The first president’s association with the Potomac River strengthened his life-long goal of “the practicability of an easy and short communication between the Waters of the Ohio and Potomac.”
- Increased environmental awareness in the second half of the 20th century has led to cleaner rivers and streams in the Trail corridor, with the Potomac River recognized nationally as a model of successful restoration and an ongoing challenge for sustained ecological health.
- The great national conflict of the Civil War is reflected in microcosm within the Trail corridor, with the Potomac River often acting as a boundary between North and South.
- The Trail provides outstanding opportunities for people to explore the connections and contrasts between and among diverse landscapes and the history and communities in five physiographic provinces.

The POTOMAC HERITAGE NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL designation provides a means to establish an interconnected trail network between the mouth of the Potomac River and the Allegheny Highlands and offers—through partnerships with and among agencies and citizen groups—exceptional hiking and other nonmotorized recreational and educational experiences rich with geographic, ecological, historical, and social diversity.



Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **The Ecological Value of the Potomac and Youghiogheny River Corridors.** The Trail corridor embraces a variety of important natural resources. Specifically, the corridor spans two major watersheds—the Potomac (the second-largest tributary to the Chesapeake Bay) and the Youghiogheny in the Upper Ohio River basin—and also includes portions of five physiographic provinces: Coastal Plain, Piedmont, Blue Ridge, Valley and Ridge, and Appalachian Plateaus. Three national wildlife refuges and a network of other wildlife management areas are also included in the corridor.
- **A Trek through America’s Heritage.** Important historic sites, cultural and natural resources, and other attractions are within the Trail corridor that offer residents and visitors opportunities for outstanding educational and recreational experiences. Prominent features include the birthplaces of George Washington and Robert E. Lee, Westmoreland Cliffs, the National Colonial Farm, the City of Alexandria Historic District, Civil War battlefields and fortifications, national natural and historic landmarks, 20 units of the national park system, historic canal and tunnel systems, the Great Falls of the Potomac, the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers at Harpers Ferry, the Great Allegheny Passage rail-trail, and the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail following Laurel Ridge. Together, the experience of these resources reflect stories related to the founding and continuing evolution of the nation, as well as the tension in American society between conservation and exploitation.
- **Outstanding Recreation Opportunities.** The Trail provides opportunities for nonmotorized recreation in diverse settings ranging from a paved river trail through dense urban and suburban landscapes to a secluded footpath winding through forested lowlands and rocky hills. These recreation opportunities encourage people to explore nature, connect with history, find adventure, exercise, relax, and recharge.
- **Community and Agency Partnerships.** Continued development of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail depends on productive and mutually beneficial partnerships among a variety of parties including municipal, county, regional, state and federal agencies; community groups; nonprofit organizations; volunteers; and business interests. Collectively, the whole of investments in the trail concept is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- **Meeting Ground of Ideas.** The Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail relies on a network of mutually beneficial partnerships to develop and sustain a system of trails and associated resources for recreation, transportation, health, and education between the Chesapeake Bay and the Allegheny Highlands. Among its users and stakeholders, the Trail serves as a national meeting ground of ideas and practices, reflecting a desire for the conservation of lands and waters, for educational opportunities combined with outdoor recreation, and for a celebration of regional diversity and distinctiveness.
- **Natural History and Human Ecology.** Between the Chesapeake Bay and the Allegheny Highlands, the Trail corridor includes portions of five distinct physiographic regions. Each region, in different ways, has inspired and shaped hundreds of human generations with beauty, abundance, and utility.
- **Nation-Building / Nurturing a Nation.** Routes connecting the Potomac River with the Forks of the Ohio River provided an essential context for the development of the US republic, and now connect Trail visitors and users with the places and stories related to the founding and continuing evolution of the nation.
- **Boundary, Corridor, and Crossroads.** As a boundary between north and south and an east to west route into the North American interior, the Potomac River has been a crossroads of opportunity, diversity, and conflict.

