



[Oh, say you can see: Geocache through history](#)

The Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail combines geocaching, a techie game of hide-and-seek, with the upcoming 200th anniversary of the War of 1812. A couple of the hiding places are in our own backyard.

Oh, say you can see: Geocache through history

By [Diane Tennant](#)
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Ann Walters turned her car into Hoffer Creek Wildlife Preserve, next to a historical marker about the War of 1812.

She parked on the gravel lot, walked west toward the lake, turned left and - well, you have to figure the rest out for yourself.

In a secret location within the preserve, near the spot where a British invasion was repelled by Virginia militiamen, Walters hid a plastic box roughly the size of a paperback novel.

At 1 a.m. on Feb. 27, GPS coordinates of the stash were posted on the Internet and, within hours, three people had discovered it.

They were among the first to hit the Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail, a sort of high-tech treasure hunt with stashes hidden in



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HOW TO PLAY

Information about the Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail and how to earn a “geocoin” are at www.friendsofchESAPEAKEgateways.org.

To play, register for free at www.geocaching.com. Download the coordinates for the geotrail onto a handheld GPS. Choose any location on the trail and follow the signals to locate the cache. Depending on weather and tree cover, the coordinates should get you to within a 10-foot radius of the hiding spot.

Use the clues given on the Web site for each cache to narrow down the location – size, ease of access, difficulty rating. The cache name may also provide a clue to its location.

Once the cache is located, sign and date the logbook. Take a picture as further proof, then put the cache back in its hiding place for the next player to find. Upload photos to www.geocaching.com (instructions are given on the Web site) and post comments to let armchair cachers know of your success or failure.

35 significant locations in Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia.

To find the Hoffler box, they had to tread the site of a 19th century battleground, a 20th century vegetable farm and a modern-day nature preserve.

Oh, what a sneaky history lesson.

The Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail combines an activity called geocaching (pronounced GEO-caching) with the upcoming 200th anniversary of the War of 1812. Designed by three organizations, each with slightly differing motives, the geotrail encircles the Chesapeake Bay and, at one point, pops out to Tangier Island.

Basically, here's how it works: Someone hides a cache in a location significant in the War of 1812. The coordinates of said cache are posted online, along with a few clues such as size, level of difficulty and ease of access. A handheld GPS unit will get players within about 10 feet of it, and then they have to hunt. After they find it, depending on what kind of cache it is, they sign the logbook inside it, take a trinket, leave a trinket, photograph themselves at the site, and announce their success to the world.

Coordinates for all the caches on the Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail were posted at the same time, and dedicated hobbyists were waiting for them. Scott Anders of Virginia Beach was the first to find the stash at Hoffler Creek, early in the morning, and he beat by only a few minutes a team known as "Eddie and Eddie." Others have followed in the days since.

Organizers hope that, while they were there, they read the historical marker titled "The Battle of Craney Island":

"On the morning of June 22, 1813, during the War of 1812, British naval and marine forces... landed here at Hoffler Creek. American armed militia... blocked the British advance.... Norfolk, Portsmouth and the Gosport Navy Yard, now the Norfolk Navy Yard, were saved from capture."

"It was a big victory for the U.S. forces," said Eleanor Mahoney, a spokesperson for the geotrail. "In this region, all over the place, everywhere you look, the British were there, especially along the rivers and communities along the Bay. Because we have the Civil War that was so prominent in Virginia and Maryland, people forget that this other conflict took place. It's really a fascinating story."

The geotrail was organized by the National Park Service, the Maryland Geocaching Society and the Friends of Chesapeake Gateways, which is a support group for a network of sites that collectively tell the story of the Chesapeake Bay.

The trail was designed to lure visitors to national and state parks, and to gateways such as museums, battlefields, ships, forts and preserves, so they can learn about today's Bay and its history, as well as the War of 1812. It aims to get nature lovers into historic venues, and history buffs into the great outdoors, Mahoney said.

"It's a great way to get people to visit our gateways," she added.

In Virginia, the geotrail caches are at Hoffler Creek in Portsmouth, Fort Boykin near Smithfield, Kiptopeke State Park on the Eastern Shore, Stratford Hall on the Northern Neck, Mason Neck State Park in Lorton, Caledon Natural Area in King George County, Carlyle House in Alexandria and on Tangier Island.

All played a role in the War of 1812. Tangier Island, for example, was called Fort Albion by the British, who stationed 12,000 men there for easy access to the Potomac River and the upper reaches of the Bay, according to Mahoney, who wrote historical snippets for each geotrail location:

"Legend holds that on the eve of their departure for the Battle of Baltimore, (the Methodist pastor Joshua) Thomas gave a powerful 'Thou shalt not kill' sermon and predicted the British would fail in their attempt to take the city. His prediction proved accurate."

Geotrail organizers hope their prediction also comes true - that geocachers will flock to the historic trail. The hobby is growing in popularity. As of March 11, www.geocaching.com said 1,003,085 caches are active worldwide.

"It's definitely an adventure," said Walters, a local geocacher who was asked to hide the Hoffler Creek stash. "Every cache has a logbook in it. When you find a cache, you sign and date the log. In the bigger geocaches, there are trade items, or SWAG -Stuff We All Get."

Trade items are usually small toys or objects of little value. They cannot be dangerous, and they cannot be food, because hungry animals might disturb a cache. Players who take a trade item are expected to leave something of equal or greater value in its place for the next player to find.

Some trade items have trackable numbers or codes. Players move such an item from one cache to another. The code and its location are posted online each time the item is moved, so the original owner can follow its travels.

The first 400 persons to find caches at 20 of the sites on the Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail will earn a geocoin - a token described by trail organizers as "collectible" and "coveted." To play, download a trail passport and record the secret code from each cache. (See "If You Want To Play" for details)

"It's extremely fun and rewarding," Walters said. "It's a very kid-friendly sport."

Fort Boykin contains a mystery geocache. The online coordinates take players to a clue instead of the final cache, and they must then follow a series of clues that will make them tour the entire fort and read all the interpretive signs.

It was designed by Anders, who in the past has created his own geotrail of puzzle caches based on the board game Clue.

"I didn't really want people to just go in with the coordinates," he explained. "Most people would have just gone there and left. I wanted them really to kind of wander around to check it out."

Fort Boykin was built in 1623 by early English Colonists.

"During the War of 1812, Fort Boykin was rebuilt into the shape of an irregular seven-pointed star. The British attempted only one landing at Fort Boykin; however, they were beaten by the local militia.... This marked the last time British forces would attempt an incursion so far up the James."

So far, based on the comments posted online, the Fort Boykin cache has done just what organizers hope all the Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail caches will do.

"I don't think we would ever have found this place if it wasn't for caching!" one player wrote. "This is a great place."

Diane Tennant, (757) 446-2478, diane.tennant@pilotonline.com