



To Thoroughly Explore the Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail, You'll Need to Bring Your Boat

Posted December 3rd, 2009 by Bob Janiskee



Fort M'Henry's garrison flag, an iconic link to our national anthem, flies 24/7 and never at half staff. NPS photo.



The new [Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail](#), which traces the Chesapeake Campaign of the [War of 1812](#), commemorates a British invasion that captured Washington in August 1814, burned the White House, and inspired our national anthem. Several segments accessible only by watercraft add a novel twist to the trail's complex route system.

The [National Trails Systems Act of 1968](#) authorized the creation of a National Trail System consisting of three categories of trails: national recreation trails, national scenic trails, and national historic trails. Today the National Trails System totals some 52,000 trail miles and consists of 1,050+ national recreation trails, 11 national scenic trails, and 19 national historic trails.

The national scenic- and national historic-designated trails are the flagship trails of the National Trails System. Whereas a national recreation trail is comparatively easy to establish (the Secretary of Interior or the Secretary of Agriculture may designate them), a national scenic trail or national historic trail must be created by an act of Congress and administered or co-administered by Federal land management agencies. The National Park Service currently administers or co-administers 21 national trails, including all 19 of the national historic trails created to date. For a complete listing of NPS-administered national trails, see the National Park Index 2009-2011.

The National Trails System Act spelled out the role of the national historic trails in SEC. 3. [16USC1242] (a) (3) when it stipulated that the national system of trails shall be composed in part of:

National historic trails, established as provided in section 5 of this Act, which will be extended trails which follow as closely as possible and practicable the original trails or routes of travel of national historic significance. Designation of such trails or routes shall be continuous, but the established or developed trail, and the acquisition thereof, need not be continuous onsite. National historic trails shall have as their purpose the identification and protection of the historic route and its historic remnants and artifacts for public use and enjoyment

The same section of the Act prescribed the limits of Federal protection for national historic trails:

Only those selected land and water based components of a historic trail which are on federally owned lands and which meet the national historic trail criteria established in this Act are included as Federal protection components of a national historic trail. The appropriate Secretary may certify other lands as protected segments of an historic trail upon application from State or local governmental agencies or private interests involved if such segments meet the national historic trail criteria established in this Act and such criteria supplementary thereto as the appropriate Secretary may prescribe, and are administered by such agencies or interests without expense to the United States.

Via the Consolidated Natural Resources Act , which dates to May 8, 2008, Congress designated the Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail to commemorate the Chesapeake Campaign -- the War of 1812 British invasion that captured Washington, burned down the White House, and inspired our national anthem. The Star-Spangled is just once removed from being our newest national historical trail. (The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail was authorized in March 2009.) In fact, the Star-Spangled Banner Trail is so new that actual trail segments haven't even been defined yet.

A map of the trail is available at [this site](#). Even the most cursory glance at this map will show that this is not so much a trail as it is a roughly 290 mile-long system of routes originating at the Chesapeake Bay anchorage of the British invasion fleet and leading to Washington and Baltimore, the two strategic targets of the British invasion in this least-remembered of American wars. As any student of American history can tell you, the British managed to capture Washington, DC and put much of it to the torch (including the Presidential Mansion), but failed to take Baltimore (thanks in large part to the defense of Fort McHenry at the Baltimore Harbor entrance).

The Chesapeake Campaign can be efficiently described in terms of a half-dozen water and overland routes extending from Tangier Island, Virginia, through southern Maryland, the District of Columbia, Chesapeake Bay, and the Baltimore vicinity. These routes pertain to:

- The British water advance and withdrawal on the Patuxent River
- A diversionary feint on the Potomac River to Alexandria
- A diversionary feint toward the head of Chesapeake Bay
- The British land march and withdrawal from Benedict to Bladensburg to Washington
- The Battle of North Point and Defense of Hampstead Hill near Baltimore
- The approach up the Patapsco River and Defense of Ft. McHenry

The Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail overlaps with Maryland's Star-Spangled Banner Scenic Byway and the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. The Scenic Byway connects many sites associated with the War of 1812 along a route extending through southern Maryland into downtown Baltimore. The Captain John Smith overlaps the Star-Spangled along the axis of Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac, Patuxent and Patapsco Rivers.

The vital role of multiple waterways is a feature that sets the Star-Spangled Trail sharply apart from the other 18 national historic trails. If you wanted to follow all six of the Chesapeake Campaign routes, you'd have to use

watercraft for four of them.

The National Park Service is in the process of establishing and coordinating the trail's land and water routes, some of which will remain vaguely defined. Meanwhile, you're encouraged to learn more about the "forgotten" War of 1812 and visit the associated historic sites. The National Park Service invites you to:

- Visit sites and experience trails in the Chesapeake Gateways and Water Trails Network -- water trails, parks, museums, and wildlife refuges, among others -- provide learning and access opportunities.
- Visit Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine to learn about the Battle of Baltimore.
- Get your NPS Passport stamped at five locations along the Trail.
- See the recently restored Star-Spangled Banner at the National Museum of American History.
- Spend the day picnicking and exploring at Jefferson Patterson Park.
- Float along the Patuxent River from Mount Calvert to Lower Marlboro.
- Drive Maryland's Star-Spangled Banner Byway from Solomons to Baltimore.
- Take an off-the-beaten-path bicycle tour through North Point.
- Venture out to Caulk's Field or Tangier Island on the Eastern Shore.

Public boat ramps and docks are available if you want to follow the water routes the British ships navigated on Chesapeake Bay or in the Potomac, Patuxent and Patapsco Rivers.

Postscript: You can get your national parks passport stamped at the NPS Chesapeake Bay Office (in Annapolis), Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine Visitor Center, Fort Washington Park Visitor Center, Tangier History Museum and Interpretive Cultural Center, or the White House Visitor Center.

Traveler Trivia, no extra charge: The Battle of Bladensburg, which took place near Washington on August 23, 1814, was the only battle in American history where the President, the Secretary of War, the Secretary of the Navy and the Secretary of State were all present. They were almost captured too, but managed to flee the battlefield and scatter into Maryland and Virginia.