



July/August 2010 Volume 20 - Number 5

Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail's troves are gateways to treasured memories

Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network / By Lara Lutz

Treasure hunters are swarming the Chesapeake watershed.

They hunt alone and in groups, canvassing the woods and boating across the Bay. They search near lighthouses and museums, inspect old gravestones and explore the grounds of historic homes.

According to Jeff Holland, director of the Annapolis Maritime Museum, they are easy to spot.

"You can tell who they are because they are always looking down at their hands and wandering around," Holland said. "They seem to be a very devoted bunch."

He's right. These folks are "geocachers"-participants in a new hobby that combines modern technology with a good old-fashioned quest. They stare at their hands because they are tracking their location through satellite coordinates on a handheld GPS (Global Positioning System) device that leads them to a hidden container called a cache (pronounced "cash").

The cache typically holds a log book and small items like magnets, pins and "geocoins." Geocachers take one item from their find and, in the spirit of fair play, leave a new one behind. Some items have trackable tags so their movement can be followed through an Internet log as it travels from cache to cache.

For most players, the journey itself is the reward.

Geocaching began 10 years ago with 75 cache sites and an experimental website to coordinate the game. Today, there are more than 1 million caches and an estimated 4 million to 5 million geocachers across the globe.

Now the Chesapeake region is breaking new ground for geocachers and providing a unique opportunity to showcase the cultural and environmental riches of the area with The Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail, which was launched in February. The trail includes 37 caches hidden in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia.

Each site was chosen because of its ability to tell the story of the Chesapeake Bay and the War of 1812, the war that inspired the national anthem. While themed trails are still unusual in geocaching, the Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail has gone a step further by crossing multiple states and involving many public parks.

The Friends of Chesapeake Gateways, the National Park Service and the Maryland Geocaching Society organized the trail.

"The geotrail is a vehicle to connect resources across a vast landscape and to foster new experiences as people journey from place to place," said Suzanne Copping, a program manager for the National Park Service who specializes in the War of 1812.

The War of 1812 is a difficult story to tell. Both the cause and the outcome were messy. The United States was struggling to take shape, barely 30 years after gaining independence. Britain was testing its power by dominating the waters of the Eastern seaboard, including the Chesapeake Bay, and by opposing U.S. expansion to the west and the north.

"The British felt they had ownership of our waters," Copping said. "They tried to control our trade and shipbuilding, and we were pushing back. We were quite upset with British taking Americans off boats and forcing them into their crews."

But Americans argued bitterly about whether or not it was wise to make war. There were riots, fires and arrests. Civic leaders in Baltimore who protested the war were confined at Fort McHenry.

In the end, the War of 1812 settled little except for an agreement to end the fight. "Britain didn't win it, and we didn't win it. We all signed a truce," Copping said.

But before the guns fell quiet, the British wreaked havoc along the Chesapeake Bay. Their ships formed a blockade to stop commerce. Troops came ashore at will and destroyed homes, plantations and businesses on the largely undefended landscape. Author Christopher George calls it "terror on the Chesapeake."

Eventually, the British crossed the Anacostia and marched into Washington. They burned the nation's capital as President James Madison and his wife Dolly fled to safety.

With the war's centennial just two years away, the Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail will revive colorful stories of local heroism and highlight the many ways in which the region's security was tied to the Bay and its rivers.

As geocachers navigate their way to caches, they'll encounter a huge range of sites-urban and rural, groomed parks and peaceful forests, large national parks like Fort McHenry and quiet contemplative spots like the Captain Salem Avery House in southern Maryland.

There's also a cache on Tangier Island, which must be reached by boat or airplane. The British used Tangier Island as a base for 12,000 men, including hundreds of African men who had escaped slavery and agreed to join British forces.

"We didn't want to focus just on sites that had a battle, but to include the whole landscape of the Bay that was affected by the war," said Eleanor Mahoney of the Friends of Chesapeake Gateways. "For example, there's a cache at the Caledon Natural Area in Virginia. There wasn't a battle there, but you can stand on the shore of the Potomac and imagine this huge fleet passing by."

The trail sites and cache coordinates can be found at www.geocaching.com, the online hub for geocaching worldwide. Each listing includes background on the significance of the site to the War of 1812.

Comments and photos from geocachers are posted there, too. They have logged more than 4,200 visits on the Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail since it was launched in February. The number of participants is actually much higher, because geocachers often travel in groups. Many say they would never have visited the cache sites—even those near where they live—if it hadn't been for the geotrail.

According to Holland, the trail has delivered a whole new audience to the Annapolis Maritime Museum. On the morning the trail coordinates were first announced, geocachers from Pennsylvania and Delaware arrived while Holland was still hiding the cache.

"I was skeptical at first. I didn't think it would draw much attention," Holland said. "But now I'm sold on it."

The trail has cross-pollinated interest groups by introducing geocachers to the Chesapeake's regional heritage and introducing Bay buffs and history lovers to geocaching.

"People are coming from up and down the East Coast," said Susan Kelly of the Maryland Geocaching Society. "We've even got a stronghold of cachers out of the Northeast taking three- and four-day vacations to come down here. They're giving us rave reviews."

Geocachers are excited that so many public parks and museums are official participants. Virginia parks have embraced geocaching for some time, but others are more cautious. Their administrators worry that geocachers will hide containers in places they shouldn't or that foot traffic will damage historic or ecological resources.

Ranger Sammy Zambon has guidelines for geocaching at the Caledon Natural Area and reports no problems. "Generally, the ethics of most geocachers are pretty high," he said. "They aren't looking to degrade the resources because that would ruin it for everyone."

In fact, geocachers are regular volunteers at some Virginia parks. Groundspeak, the company that manages www.geocaching.com, also sponsors a program called "Cache In Trash Out,"

which encourages the collection of litter at cache sites and organizes cleanup days for their local geocaching communities.

The first 400 geocachers to document their visits to 20 caches in the Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail will receive a specially designed "geocoin" that commemorates the trail's opening. Approximately 200 are still available. But with summer travel at hand, the coins might go fast. Even in February, with snow on the ground, some geocachers visited 20 sites on the opening weekend.

Many cachers will leap at the geocoin challenge. Trail organizers hope that the pleasures of Chesapeake country, and a deeper sense of heritage, will be among the treasures they uncover on the way.

Geo-what?

Geocaching (pronounced geo-cashing) is a high-tech, outdoor treasure hunting game using coordinates from the Global Positioning System (GPS). Anyone can hide a container, called a geocache, and list its location on www.geocaching.com using GPS coordinates. Download the coordinates to a handheld GPS device, and the hunt begins. When someone finds a cache, they take one item from the container as a souvenir and leave a new one in its place. Participants are invited to share their experience with on-line comments and photos.

Learn how to get started and read about the ethics of geocaching at www.geocaching.com. It's free.

Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail

The Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail is a themed collection of geocaches at locations that delve into Chesapeake heritage and provide lots of opportunities to walk, picnic, or take to the water. For general information on the trail and geocaching, visit www.friendsofcheseapekegateways.org. Choose "Projects" and follow the links under "Geocaching." For a detailed list of sites and coordinates on the Star-Spangled Banner Geotrail, visit http://bit.ly/SSB_Geotrail.

One can also download the coordinates-and explore the worldwide list of geocaches-with a free user account at www.geocaching.com.

Sites on the Star-Spangled Geotrail include:

- Congressional Cemetery: Washington, DC
- Dumbarton House: Washington, DC
- Bladensburg Waterfront Park: Bladensburg, MD
- Chesapeake Bay Environmental Center: Grasonville, MD
- Fort McHenry: Baltimore, MD
- Jefferson Patterson Park & Museum: St. Leonard, MD
- Carlyle House: Alexandria, VA

- Kiptopeke State Park: Cape Charles, VA
- Stratford Hall Plantation: Stratford, VA
- Tangier Island History Museum & Cultural Interpretive Center: Tangier Island, VA

Lara Lutz is a writer and editor who lives on the South River in Mayo, MD. Read [more articles by this author](#).