



## The History of the Potomac River: Region by Region

### **Teacher Instructions**

Cut out each regional description below along the dotted lines. Provide each group with the description corresponding to its assigned stretch of river.

The below information is reprinted with permission from the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin. Refer to <http://potomacriver.org/history/regions/index.htm> for these histories and additional information about each region and the history of the Potomac River watershed.

#### **Group 1: Fairfax Stone to Westernport**

Near the base of Backbone Mountain in West Virginia, the Potomac River trickles out of a spring 3,140 feet above sea level. Marked by the Fairfax Stone, the spring is not much more than a slow moving puddle. From here the river begins its swift decent through the highlands of West Virginia and Maryland, joined by other streams flowing quickly off the steep slopes. By the time it is joined by the Savage River forty-six miles from the source, it has already dropped 2,000 feet in elevation.

For more than 150 years, coal has been mined from rich seams in the horizontally bedded **sedimentary** rocks. **Acidic drainage** flowing from coal mines in the area has left the river mostly devoid of **aquatic** life for much of recent history, but efforts to **buffer** the water draining from active and abandoned mines has reduced the acidity considerably and fish have begun to return. The North Branch now supports a naturally reproducing trout population. The area's growing reputation as a trout fishery has helped to ease the economic hardship of closed industries.

The small towns in the area were born from the coal and timber booms that began at the end of the nineteenth century and continued through the early twentieth century. Demand for the region's coal began a precipitous decline in the late 1920s and by the 1950s many of the mines had closed, leaving towns like Kempton and Kitzmiller nearly deserted. The "Tri-towns" of Luke and Westernport, Md, and Piedmont, W.Va., are the only towns along this stretch of the Potomac that can count their combined population in thousands. This community is supported predominantly by employment at the Mead/Westvaco Corporation paper mill in Luke.

The area is filled with a sense of untamed wilderness. It is a paradise for hikers and birders with nearby Potomac Highlands Park and other natural areas to explore.



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### **Group 2: Keyser to Spring Gap**

By Keyser, the Potomac has left the Allegheny Plateau and moved into the second geologically distinct area of its passage, the Ridge and Valley Province. Here, the river begins to take on a different character. Slower moving and wider, the river's navigability increases dramatically. Early European explorers in the 1700s found Shawnee and other Native Americans already using the river as a path for trading. European settlement followed a similar path, first by boat along the river and by path beside it and then by canal boat and railroad car.

Instead of mining, towns along this stretch of river were born from trade. As early as 1749, traders of the Ohio Company established a post at Wills Creek, which joins the Potomac at what is now Cumberland. The town of Keyser took its name from William Keyser, first vice president of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and remains an important point in the CSX Railroad system.

The area continued as a major trade and transportation center throughout the 1800s, and transportation opened the way for industry. Cumberland became the dominant industrial town of the area, attracting numerous mills and factories. But by the later part of this century most of that industry had moved to other areas of the country, leaving the town with few jobs and a shrinking population. Today, Cumberland is seeking to capitalize on its past by creating Canal Place and other connections to its past.

### **Group 3: Oldtown to Hancock**

Just two miles south and east of Oldtown, the South Branch joins the North Branch and the Potomac completes its transformation from high mountain stream to a wider, slower-moving river.

Further on, the river moves into a series of sharp turns referred to as the Paw Paw bends. Here the C&O canal company built the Paw Paw Tunnel. An impressive engineering accomplishment, the tunnel covers a little over a half-mile of canal and took over 12 years to build. This saved the canal company from building 5 miles of canal to follow the river's turns through the Paw Paw bends, but ultimately formed a bottleneck during the canal's busiest years since there was no room for passing or turning. One story tells of two captains heading opposite directions meeting in the middle of the tunnel. For several days neither captain would give way and blocked all traffic until canal workers finally succeeded in smoking them out by lighting a fire at the downwind end of the tunnel.

Small towns built during the heyday of the Canal and Railroad remain a point of interest and are well worth exploring. A ford across the Potomac at what is now Oldtown, MD led to establishment of early Indian settlements in the area. In 1740, early explorer Thomas Cresap built a residence on the site to trade with the Native Americans and the importance of the area as a trading station grew. Similarly, the town of Hancock, MD developed from a 1730s settlement of hunters and trappers called Northbend Crossing Settlement. Most of the towns have grown smaller since the river lost its importance as a main corridor for transportation, including Little Orleans, MD where little remains beyond a grocery store and campgrounds.



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### **Group 4: Little Pool to Antietam**

Winding from Little Pool to Antietam, the river moves out of the more mountainous areas of the Ridge and Valley Province and into the Great Valley, sometimes considered a separate province. Here the river meanders through the valley, embraced on its sides by both the railroad and the canal.

Approximately 20 miles wide, the Great Valley is known by many names: the Appalachian Valley, the Cumberland Valley (Maryland) and the Shenandoah Valley (Virginia). But even as the river crosses the Valley, the river itself lies hundreds of feet below the valley floor, the product of the river's geological past. Geologists tell us that the Potomac is older than the mountains—its channel was cut before the surrounding land rose to its present elevation. Over eons, as the land rose, the river cut deeper into its channel.

The area includes a series of reminders of a violent past. Fort Frederick, a stone fort with walls 17 feet high, was built in 1756 during the French and Indian War as part of a series of forts along the Allegheny Mountains. Later the fort was used to hold Revolutionary War prisoners and as an outpost for a Union troop garrison in the Civil War. Just a few miles downstream, Antietam National Battlefield was the site of the “bloodiest day” of the Civil War. On September 17, 1862 the battle between the forces of Confederate General Robert E. Lee and Union General George McClellan produced more than 23,000 casualties. It still remains the most bloody day in American history.

For those interested in learning more about the C&O canal, the town of Williamsport is among the best destinations along the river. Here the canal has been rewatered and there are several displays, including the C&O Canal Museum.

### **Group 5: Harpers Ferry to Point of Rocks**

The Shenandoah River joins the Potomac at Harpers Ferry and together they rush through the Blue Ridge Mountains. Of the overlook above this gap, Thomas Jefferson wrote in Notes on the State of Virginia: “The passage of the Potomac through the Blue Ridge is perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in nature. You stand on a very high point of land. On your right comes up the Shenandoah, having ranged along the foot of the mountain a hundred miles to seek a vent. On your left approaches the Potomac, in quest of a passage also. In the moment of their junction they rush together against the mountain, rend it asunder, and pass off to the sea... “...You cross the Potomac above the junction, pass along its side through the base of the mountain for three miles, its terrible **precipices** hanging in fragments over you, and within about twenty miles reach Fredericktown, and the fine country round that. This scene is worth a voyage across the Atlantic.”

The confluence of these two rivers and the geology of the nearby mountains also lead to the area's use for industrial and military purposes. It was here a national armory was established and here also that John Brown staged the raid that historians credit as the event that ultimately launched the Civil War.

Past Harpers Ferry, the historic towns of Brunswick and Point of Rocks were both important canal and railroad towns. At Point of Rocks the canal and railroad companies fought a legal battle for right-of-way along the river that lasted for several years. The canal ultimately won the right to use the shoreline, but was held up for several years by the **litigation** and ultimately lost the race to Cumberland to the railroad in part because of the delay.



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### **Group 6: Monocacy to Great Falls Tavern**

East of the Blue Ridge, just below Point of Rocks, Maryland, the Potomac enters the Piedmont Province. This picturesque land is filled with rolling farmland, wooded upland and narrow stream valleys, but is seeing a great deal of new development as well. While about half of the area remains under cultivation, the area is increasingly struggling with issues surrounding new development.

The area is also home to one of America's first examples of sustainable development. After seeing the soil exhaustion created by the farming practices of Tidewater farmers, John Binn of Loudon County, Virginia developed the Loudon system based on a three field rotation between wheat, cattle and clover.

At White's Ferry the General Jubal Early operates as the only regularly operating ferry on the Potomac River. A few miles further south on the Virginia side of the river is Balls Bluff National Cemetery, where the battle of Ball's Bluff took place in October 1861. For the Canal enthusiast, the town of Seneca makes an interesting day trip. When the canal was first opened to traffic in 1831, Seneca was the "head of navigation" until the construction continued further west.

### **Group 7: Great Falls to Georgetown**

Here the Potomac begins a precipitous drop toward the Coastal Plain. The river drops 60 feet in less than a mile and then travels through a deep gorge, flows over Little Falls then drops to the level of tidewater as it flows on to Georgetown.

While the C&O canal remains the best known canal on the Potomac, the Patowmack Company, headed by George Washington, made an earlier attempt at creating a navigable Potomac. Washington's company dealt with the challenges of Great Falls and Little Falls by creating skirting canals to take boats around each of these falls. Although never very successful, these canals made way for the later effort to create the C&O canal. Remains of the Great Falls skirting canal can still be seen today on the Virginia side at Great Falls Park.

Georgetown, where canal boats from the C&O were lowered down an incline plane and back into the Potomac, formed the first major port on the Potomac. This was as far up the river as truly seaworthy vessels could travel. Tobacco and other products brought down along the canal and railroad were transferred for final delivery up and down the coast and across the ocean to Europe. Later, the Aqueduct Bridge was constructed to carry canal boats over the Potomac to a canal on the Virginia side that led them on to the port of Alexandria.

Water for the District of Columbia water system is taken from the Potomac at Great Falls, where it enters the Washington Aqueduct. This structure, built in the 1860s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, is still carrying much of the area's drinking water today.



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### **Group 8: Rock Creek to Alexandria**

Immediately below Georgetown, Rock Creek joins the Potomac after flowing through Suburban Maryland and Rock Creek Park. Here the river has truly entered its tidal range. At times pushing back against the waters rushing down over Little Falls and at others flowing down as the tide drains toward the Chesapeake, the river takes on a new rhythm. Striped Bass are often caught beneath the area's bridges and even the occasional Blue Crab follows the tides this far from the Chesapeake Bay.

George Washington chose the head of the Potomac River **estuary** as the site for the nation's capital, calling the river "the centre of the union." Initially a swampy wilderness, the federal city grew slowly during its first century. As commerce on the river increased and populations grew, the Washington we know today replaced the swamp. As navigation to Georgetown grew difficult due to increasing sedimentation, Alexandria became the major port on the river. After World War II, the population increased quickly and spilled over into the adjacent towns and counties. Bridges carried populations back and forth over the river and the river's role in commerce diminished.

Today's dense population causes significant stress on our environment. Efforts are underway to clean up the Anacostia River, Rock Creek and other smaller **tributaries** that run through our urban neighborhoods. At the same time, many greenways and parks along the river remain. A wealth of **migratory** birds still pass through each year and many resident species are common in areas like Rock Creek Park and Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens. In the shadow of the Washington Monument, Osprey are seen gliding over the river and water fowl forage in the wetlands of Roosevelt Island.

### **Group 9: Wilson Bridge to National Colonial Farm**

Downstream of the Wilson Bridge, the river continues to widen and the **salinity** increases. Here the river becomes wilder with less visible development along the shores, more wetlands and expansive coves and inlets. Jones Point Lighthouse provides a visual reminder of the Potomac's past importance as a commercial shipping center carrying tobacco and other agricultural products to other U.S. ports and Europe.

Further along the river, the Dyke Marsh is one of the best birding areas in the D.C. area and a reminder of what much of the Washington area's shoreline looked like before development so drastically affected our shorelines.

On the Maryland side of the river, Fort Foote and Fort Washington were sited on high bluffs to offer commanding views of the river, and were constant threats to hostile ships heading for Washington.



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### **Group 10: Mount Vernon to Aquia Creek**

Below Washington, the river grows, settles into its tidal range and broadens. The Coastal Plain is a broad, flat landscape, with great floodplains and wetlands.

As the river passes on beyond Washington, nature makes a greater claim to its shores. The view from the lawn behind Mount Vernon remains relatively unchanged from what George Washington saw over 200 years earlier. Close by, a hike along Woodmarsh and Great Marsh trails at the Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge may yield the sight of a Bald Eagle. Across the river, Piscataway Park is home to the Accokeek Foundation which offers cultural and educational programs to connect visitors and school children to the natural and cultural heritage of the Potomac.

The Occoquan River, a major tributary along this stretch, is the principal source of drinking water for 750,000 Northern Virginians. Many towns in the area trace their beginnings back to early cultivation of tobacco. Dumfries, the oldest continuously chartered town in the Commonwealth of Virginia, was once a major transshipment point for tobacco from the uplands.

Other historically important sites include Gunston Hall built by George Mason, one of the most important writers of the Revolutionary period, and Woodlawn Plantation.

### **Group 11: Potomac Creek to U.S. 301 Bridge**

Between Potomac Creek and Port Tobacco River, the Potomac turns northeasterly for approximately 20 miles. As the river moves toward the Chesapeake the salinity of the water continues to increase.

Nanjemoy Marsh is home to one of the largest colonies of great blue herons on the East Coast. Across the river, Caledon Natural Area State Park is a home to one of the East Coast's largest populations of summering bald eagles.

The Port Tobacco area was once one of the most important Tobacco Ports on the river. While the Port Tobacco River was once easily navigable, it is now primarily marsh. This was caused by the “**slash and burn**” agriculture employed in the early cultivation of tobacco. Once the land was left bare, rains **eroded** the soil and the **runoff** slowly filled in the river.

Below Port Tobacco, Zekiah Swamp at the **headwaters** of the Wicomico River harbored John Wilkes Booth after his assassination of President Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington. After escaping Washington, Booth fled through the swamp in an attempt to elude the authorities. He crossed the river twice more before his ultimate capture in Caroline County, VA.



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### **Group 12: Lower Cedar Point to Stratford Hall**

Throughout the area, **salinity** continues to rise and blue crabs and oysters become more plentiful. On the Maryland side, Charles County continues its rapid growth as a suburban extension of the greater Washington area. Historic sites are plentiful along this section of the river, particularly on the Virginia side.

The area also includes the birthplace of George Washington, now marked by the George Washington Birthplace National Monument that includes a building with exhibits and a living colonial farm. Further down the river, Stratford hall, the ancestral home of the Lee Family of Virginia, provides insight into the early life of Confederate general Robert E. Lee and other well known members of the family including two signers of the Declaration of Independence.

The town of Colonial Beach, Va, includes the second largest beach front in the state of Virginia, and the summer population grows to nearly 15,000. Prior to 1958 Charles County, MD allowed slot machines and crafty entrepreneurs on the Virginia side of the river built piers into the Maryland waters and claimed their establishment was in Charles County so that they could allow gambling.

Westmoreland State Park offers canoeing areas, hiking trails and unusual **geological** formations including Horsehead Cliffs. These cliffs rise 150 feet above the Potomac shoreline. They were formed from sediments that fell to the sea floor. As a result, continuing erosion regularly leads to the discovery of shark teeth, whale bones and even teeth and pieces of skeleton from sea crocodiles.

### **Group 13: St. Clemens to Smith Point**

The Potomac River swells to a width of 11 miles at its mouth. At Point Lookout Park you can look across the river's wide mouth and out into the Chesapeake Bay beyond. Here the salinity has reached the level of the Chesapeake and the fish life is primarily the same. This area of the river offers some of the best fishing for Rockfish in the entire Chesapeake region.

This was the first area of the river settled by Europeans. After John Smith's exploration in 1608, colonists arrived at St. Clements Island in 1634 and then settled on the St. Mary's River. Today you can explore St. Mary's City and learn about the life of early settlers. The Maryland Dove, a full-scale replica of the ship that carried supplies for the 1634 expedition, is an active part of the historic displays.

A mile offshore from Piney Point, MD, a World War II-era German submarine lies at the bottom of the Potomac. After surrendering to the British at the end of WWII, the U-1105 Black Panther was selected by the U.S. Navy as a target for explosives testing and sunk in 1949. Rediscovered in 1985, the submarine was designated as an historic shipwreck preserve in 1994 and provides one of the more interesting scuba diving sites along the Potomac for advanced divers.

Across the River, Reedville is located near Smith Point at the Virginia side of the Potomac's mouth. The town's Main Street was once known as "Millionaire's Row" because of the Victorian mansions built by wealthy fishermen who made their fortunes from the menhaden that were plentiful in the Potomac and Chesapeake until the early part of this century.