

Paddling the Curtis Creek Ship Graveyard

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Shipwrecks, ghost fleet, boat ruins, ship graveyard, boat scrapyards. Regardless of the choice of words, these all conjure up images of large decaying watercraft from years past. Many are visible only to divers when water clarity is good. But in the Chesapeake Bay area, there are a few spots where some can be seen above the waterline. Many kayakers are familiar with [Mallows Bay](#) and its nearly 200 known vessels dating back to the Revolutionary War and World War I. But even at low tide, only the tops of most of those relics are visible. In contrast, the lesser-known ship ruins at Curtis Creek, while far fewer in number, are much better exposed for viewing.

I've been visiting the Curtis Creek ship graveyard since at least 2010. I typically launch from Solleys Cove, just southeast of the American Legion building at 7376 Carbide Road in Curtis Bay, Maryland. You'll have to carry your boat about 120 feet to a very small beach. One can launch for free but there are no public facilities. From there, it is about a two-mile paddle north to the main ships located east of Walnut Point and just inside the Baltimore Beltway (Highway 695). Alternatively, you can pay to use the boat ramp at Jaws Marine (6100 Chemical Road, Curtis Bay, Maryland). This will put you literally a stone's throw from the ships and give you restroom access.

The ruins near Walnut Point are most impressive. Here you will find at least seven old boats, including one made of concrete. A concrete boat?! Yes, that might sound crazy, but at one time, people thought making a ship out of steel was just as ridiculous. The tallest of these decaying hulks juts more than 20 feet out of the water! As you paddle through this "ship museum," you will see an old rudder, hawseholes (holes through which anchor cables pass), decaying hulls, steel reinforcements, and hundreds of metal rods, some of which may be submerged. Because of the latter, paddle slowly as you approach these ships. Otherwise, your kayak, canoe, or stand up paddleboard (SUP) may be one more vessel to add to these ruins.



What is the history of this ship graveyard? According to Kent Mountford of the Bay Journal:

A number of these ships, described by Robert Keith as a wartime "river of wood" flowing into Baltimore shipyards, were bought by the Davison Chemical Company immediately after the First World War to transport pyrite (a sulfur-rich compound with iron) from Cuba. Davison... produced a lion's share of the world's industrial sulfuric acid. (The site today is an industrially active, landscaped subsidiary of W.R. Grace.)¹

Each of the boat ruins tell a story. But identifying them is challenging. I've been told that this graveyard contains WWI freighters named *Fort Scott*, *Dover*, and *Ashland*. Unlike Mallows Bay, which is listed on the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places and contains ships that are well documented at [Map of Mallows Bay](#), the ship graveyard at Curtis Creek has no such status. Thus, if this sounds like a place you'd like to explore, don't put it off too long. There were at least four similar wooden ships about half a mile south of Walnut Point near Stahl Point (east of the swing train bridge). Some protruded at least 15 feet out of the water back in 2015. But these have since been imploded and now look more like piles of debris.

Even though there is only about a foot of tidal fluctuation, I suggest visiting at low tide so you can maximize your viewing pleasure. Tidal information for this area can be found at [Curtis Creek US Coast Guard Station tide times and tide charts](#).

If launching from Solleys Cove, check out the modern ships at the Coast Guard Station on your way to Walnut Point. If you time it right (check out the [Eagle's schedule](#)), you'll also be able to see the 295-foot-long U.S. Coast Guard Cutter (USCGC) Eagle. This is a traditionally-rigged sailing ship built in 1936 and currently used as a training vessel for future Coast Guard officers.

Despite the industrial feel of the area, birds and natural beauty are nearby. Just south of the Coast Guard Station is a wooded section where I've spotted bald eagles. Less than a half mile north of Walnut Point on the east side of Curtis Creek is Cabin Branch Creek which starts out with industrial views but eventually turns natural once you paddle east of Pennington Avenue. Here I've spotted numerous great egrets. Continuing upstream on Cabin Branch Creek, you'll find a narrow tunnel that passes under a train bridge and takes you to a

¹ (Mountford 1999)

place that, although too shallow for venturing much further, will make you forget all about the man-made scenery that you passed just a quarter of a mile back.

There are some things one should be aware of before paddling in this vicinity.

1. Anywhere there are boat ruins (there are more than just the places I mentioned), one should also expect underwater debris. It may be metal lying just inches below the surface. Therefore, paddle cautiously in such areas. If you have a choice between boats, bring one that can take some abuse.
2. On the east side of Curtis Creek just south of the swing train bridge is an Army facility. Posted signs caution boaters to maintain a designated distance.
3. I was told by Coast Guard personnel that on Friday and Saturday evenings, power boat traffic can be particularly dangerous near the Beltway.

If you enjoy both history and paddling, then you'll surely love seeing the ship graveyard at Curtis Creek. It's like taking a step back in time. Some folks consider these wrecks to be an eyesore. But it all comes down to perception. "One man's trash is another man's treasure."

References

1. Mountford, Kent. 1999. *Bay Journal - Ghosts of industrial heyday still haunt Baltimore's harbor, creeks*. May 1. Accessed June 5, 2019.
https://www.bayjournal.com/article/ghosts_of_industrial_heyday_still_haunt_baltimores_harbor_creeks.