

Hiking through History near Daniels Dam in Patapsco Valley State Park

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Figure 1: Daniels Dam on the Patapsco River

One of my favorite local destinations for outdoor recreation is the Daniels Area of [Patapsco Valley State Park](#) in Maryland. Rich in history, its network of hiking trails in both Howard and Baltimore counties are centered around the ~27-foot-high Daniels Dam, which backs up the Patapsco River, creating a deep, wide area that is popular with both paddlers and anglers.

Now functionally obsolete, Daniels Dam was used in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to divert water via a millrace to power a mill and generate hydroelectricity in a town that underwent various names. The original settlement in the Daniels Area dates back to 1810, when Thomas Ely built a textile mill and called the area Elysville. Elysville was later purchased by the family of James S. Gary in 1853 and given a new name, Alberton, in honor of his son, Albert Gary. The dam for the mill eventually failed in 1866 and was rebuilt; the result may be the current Daniels Dam (I have not been able to confirm this). This name, Daniels, originates from the C.R. Daniels Company, which bought and renamed Alberton in 1940.

Eager to see some of the ruins of the Daniels Area, I did an easy 4.5-mile round trip hike from Alberton to Daniels Dam on the north side of the river. Late fall or winter is the ideal time since most foliage will die back, exposing old relics and views that are hidden in the warmer months. After parking at the [Alberton Road](#)

[Trailhead](#), I headed west on Alberton Road, a paved, level, but unmaintained path that once supported the historic town.

After about 0.6 mile, I came to Alberton Rock, a popular rock climbing area that offers many beginner and intermediate climbs up to 65 feet high.



Figure 2: Climbing at Alberton Rock, photo courtesy of Adam Smith

Continuing my hike, I found the decrepit and vandalized [Pentecostal Holiness Church](#), built in 1940.



Figure 3: Pentecostal Holiness Church

Keeping an eye out for ruins, I saw a few rusty vehicles before arriving at an old stone and mortar construction. What might have stood here? Had it not been for Hurricane Agnes which brought severe flooding to the area in 1972 and shut down mill operations, this structure might still be operational.



Figure 4: Stone and mortar construction in the Daniels Area

After reaching Daniels Dam (shown in the top photo), I started heading back. A slight detour took me to the must-see stone ruins of the Gothic-style [Saint Stanislaus Kostka Catholic Church](#). Designed in 1878, this church stood until it was hit by lightning around 1926.



Figure 5: Stone ruins of the Saint Stanislaus Kostka Catholic Church

Just north of the church lies a graveyard containing several headstones listing dates ranging from the late 1800s to early 1900s.



Figure 63: Headstones at the Saint Stanislaus Kostka Catholic Church Cemetery

A few years prior, I did a 5-mile winter hike on the south side of the Patapsco River that took me from the [Daniels Road parking lot](#) west to the [Eureka Train Bridge](#) and back.

From the lot, I could see the [Gary Memorial United Methodist Church](#), built in 1879 and named for a member of the same Gary family associated with Alberton. Resting high atop a hill, it is easy to see, but the best views, in my opinion, are from the cemetery which lies to the south.



Figure 7: Gary Memorial United Methodist Church

Residing about a quarter mile due south from the church, is [Camel's Den Cave](#)...more of a shallow rock shelter than a cave. Comprised of highly crystallized white metalimestone known as Cockeysville marble, it was formed during the Cambrian to Ordovician periods (541 to 443.7 million years ago). The origin of the cave's name is unknown, but some theorize that early settlers thought the arched entrance resembled the shape of a camel.



Figure 8: The entrance to Camel's Cave

Walking west, I passed through shady parts of the valley which housed impressive ice formations where water thawed then refroze. In one place, I stood mesmerized watching water and air flow under transparent sections of ice.



Figure 9: Ice formation

Although there wasn't much wildlife to see during my hike, there was plenty of evidence. Near the river, several trees exhibited fresh beaver gnaw marks, the only evidence I tend to find from these primarily nocturnal creatures.



Figure 10: Beaver gnaw marks on trees

Arriving at my destination, the still-operational Eureka Train Bridge spanning the Patapsco River, I noticed how it is bounded by Dorsey Tunnel on the east in Baltimore County and Davis Tunnel on the west in Howard County. Both tunnels and the bridge were built around 1904 as part of the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Old Main Line, the first commercial railroad in the United States. This construction, which ushered in an age of westward expansion from Baltimore to the Ohio River, began in 1828 and included a stop in the Daniels Area.



Figure 11: Eureka Train Bridge

Undoubtedly, the most distinctive feature of the Daniels Area is the dam...the last of four remaining on the Patapsco River, with the others, Union, Simkins, and Bloede dams, having been removed in 2010, 2011, and 2018, respectively. River restoration experts claim these dams blocked passage for migratory fish, changed the river habitat, and created hazards for swimmers and boaters. Although the future of Daniels Dam is uncertain, what is certain is that this is a wonderful outdoor destination.

For more information, see

[Chesapeake Bay Program – With fewer dams, a river near Baltimore flows more freely](#)

[American River – Removing Bloede](#)

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources – Patapsco River Dam Removal Study](#)

[The Urban Historians – Daniels, Maryland](#)

[Patapsco – Daniels \(Alberton | Elysville\)](#)

[LiveJournal – DynamicSymmetry - "Memory, native to this valley": Exploring Daniels, MD](#)

[Mountain Project – Alberton Rock Rock Climbing](#)

“60 Hikes within 60 Miles” by Allison Sturm

[Maryland Historical Trust – Gary Memorial Methodist Church](#)

[Geocaching – The Camel’s Den](#)

[TrainWeb – B&O Old Main Line](#)

[FrogRail – The Baltimore & Ohio Railway](#)