

Mount Calvert Historical and Archaeological Park – Prime Real Estate

Saki

Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

May 14, 2023



Figure 1: Daphne ready to launch at Mount Calvert Historical and Archaeological Park

Built on top of a hill at the confluence of the Patuxent River and its largest tributary, Western Branch, [Mount Calvert Historical and Archaeological Park](#) boasts a lovely waterfront view at the end of a quiet, rural road. Some might call it prime real estate; many have for nearly 13,000 years. It attracted Algonquin-speaking tribes like the Patuxent, Mataponi, and Piscataway, and later, early colonists, farmers, and businessmen. Designated the first seat of Prince George's County, Maryland in 1696 and named "Charles Town," this location was home to several taverns, shops, and a courthouse, then a large tobacco plantation worked by slaves back when "sotweed," as it was once called, was king. Today you're more likely to see kayakers, paddleboarders, and canoeists launching from or taking a break at the bucolic soft launch and pier just downhill from the big brick house, built around 1789. The wealth once associated with commerce in this area has since given way to a different kind of richness...beauty in nature.



*Figure 2: View of the Patuxent River from Mount Calvert*

I have been kayaking in the waterways surrounding Mount Calvert for well over 20 years and this is still one of my favorite places. It is also the first spot I think of when I take beginners or novices because it is fairly sheltered, there is a high concentration of interesting things to see, and it is logistically easy to get out on the water.

About a mile downstream lies [Jacksons Landing](#) at [Patuxent River Park](#), where one can launch and [rent kayaks and canoes](#). In this area, you'll find parking for 30+ vehicles, restrooms, picnic tables, a visitor center, and an observation tower. From here, folks often paddle upstream on the Patuxent River, passing Mount Calvert, and then head up Western Branch to the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) water filtration plant, a roughly five-mile round trip.

If you have your own boat, you can put in at Mount Calvert, which, in my opinion, puts you at the center of the best sights. You can drive right up to the soft launch and drop off your boat at the beach, but you'll have to return back to the top of the hill to park and then walk 800 feet on the gravel road back down to the water.

Since fishing is not allowed and trailered boats cannot launch here, Mount Calvert tends to be less busy than Jacksons Landing. Unlike Jacksons Landing, Mount Calvert does not rent boats or have restroom access unless their building is open. At the time of this writing, the building is being restored and no date has been projected for its completion and reopening, but the grounds and launch site are open.



*Figure 3: Daphne at the Mount Calvert building*

At Mount Calvert, there are three directions one can paddle.

---

Heading downstream on the approximately one-mile section between Mount Calvert and Jacksons Landing, you'll find a large beaver lodge on the west side of the river that has changed very little since the first time I saw it. If you're lucky, you'll see a beaver, though muskrats are more commonly seen. Both are generally nocturnal so the best time to see them is near dawn or dusk.



*Figure 4: Beaver lodge on the Patuxent River near Mount Calvert*

Perhaps the most unique feature on this portion of the river is an old bridge pivot, a remnant of a swing-span bridge that supported a railway which linked Washington, D.C. to Chesapeake Beach, Maryland. In 1899, Mount Calvert was an official stop in this line, which also passed through [Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary](#) on the appropriately named “Railroad Bed Trail.” Today, the pivot looks like a small, overgrown, man-made island where one might find nesting waterfowl.



*Figure 5: Old bridge pivot with perched duck*

---

Heading upstream on Western Branch, it is 1.6 miles from Mount Calvert to the water filtration plant. On the east side of the branch, you'll see another historic structure in the distance, Billingsley House Museum, built in the 1740s. In this vicinity, archaeologists have recovered thousands of indigenous artifacts and found evidence of a major settlement between 2,000 and 4,000 years ago.



*Figure 6: Billingsley House Museum*

Just over a mile upstream on Western Branch lies [Iron Pot Landing](#) (site 44A) on the east. This paddle-in campsite features a porta-john, picnic table, fire ring, pier, and floating kayak/canoe launch. Reservations are required for camping, but if unoccupied, it also makes a great rest stop.



*Figure 7: Daphne at Iron Pot Landing*

The Western Branch is my favorite segment because there are numerous trees further upstream, less powerboat traffic than the Patuxent River, fabulous scenery, and lots of wildlife.



*Figure 8: Beaver dam on creek flowing into Western Branch*



*Figure 9: Baby eastern painted turtle on Western Branch*

Wildlife is usually a good thing, but sometimes things get out of balance. At various points on the Patuxent River and its tributaries, such as Western Branch, you'll find fenced enclosures to protect wild rice plants from resident (non-migratory) Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*). In May 2023, I interviewed Greg Kearns, principal naturalist for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, to learn more about this award-winning project. The problem stems from the resident Canada geese that were introduced to Maryland as early as 1935. In the 1990s, the population of these geese exploded, resulting in the wild rice marshes, which many migratory birds depend on, becoming decimated. The solution was a multi-prong management process consisting of replanting the wild rice, hunting to reduce the population of the resident Canada geese, and installing numerous fenced enclosures. This ongoing project has since yielded great success, increasing the wild rice acreage eight-fold between 1999 and 2022.



*Figure 10: Fence enclosure on Western Branch to protect wild rice from resident geese; Mount Calvert in background*

On good days when the water is high, I've gotten as far as 0.7 mile upstream of the water filtration plant, but this very scenic stretch can also be cluttered with downfalls which might be challenging for beginners.



Figure 11: Great blue heron upstream of the water filtration plant on Western Branch

---

A mile upstream of Mount Calvert on the Patuxent River is a spot called [Pig Point](#) near where [Commodore Joshua Barney](#) destroyed his Chesapeake Flotilla to avoid its capture by the British during the War of 1812. Shortly after, the British landed about 500 troops at Mount Calvert who then marched to Upper Marlboro to support their main invasion force while Barney and 400 American flotillamen rushed across land to defend Washington, D.C. and fight at the [Battle of Bladensburg](#).

Whatever happened to Barney's ships? While the guns and other valuable equipment were salvaged in the months following the battle, his boats were silted over and remained untouched and mostly forgotten until 1980. Since then, at least one wreck has been found, and as of 2010, archaeologists think it could be the USS Scorpion, the flagship of the flotilla. Information signs at Mount Calvert and upstream at [Patuxent Wetlands Park](#) recognize Barney's heroism but today, Pig Point looks no different than many other parts of the Patuxent River with its fields of spatterdock lining the shallow waters.



*Figure 12: Spatterdock on the Patuxent River at Pig Point*

Between Mount Calvert and Pig Point lies the north edge of Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary, Mondays Creek, and Railroad Creek, all natural areas worth exploring.



*Figure 13: Daphne and I on the Patuxent River near Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary*

---

Mount Calvert Historical and Archaeological Park and the places that surround it are highly treasured by paddlers, naturalists, birders, environmentalists, archaeologists, and historians. Many still consider it prime real estate and strive to keep it that way. Middle school kids plant wild rice, Patuxent River Park organizes trash cleanups, Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary leads canoe trips to promote environmental awareness, and Mount Calvert Historical and Archaeological Park arranges archaeology-themed kayak trips. The Mount Calvert we know today may have little in common with the 18<sup>th</sup> century Charles Town, but one thing that remains constant is that it continues to be valued by many.



Figure 14: Greg Kearns transporting volunteers for a Patuxent River Park trash cleanup

For more information see

[The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission \(MNCPPC\) – History – Mount Calvert Historical and Archaeological Park](#)

[MNCPPC – Outdoors – Mount Calvert Historical and Archaeological Park](#)

[Birder’s Guide to Maryland & DC – Patuxent River Park – Mount Calvert Historical & Archaeological Park](#)

[Mount Calvert Historical & Archaeological Park – A Confluence of Three Cultures](#)

[Environmental Law Institute Recognizes Five National Wetlands Award Recipients](#)

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources – Maryland Birds – Canada Goose](#)

[The Historical Marker Database – Joshua Barney's Barge and the Chesapeake Flotilla](#)

[War of 1812 Archaeology – The Saga of the Scorpion, Part I: The Patuxent's Lost Flotilla](#)

[National Park Service – Archeology: Discovering Hidden 1812 History](#)