

The Patuxent Branch Trail – Connecting the Industrial Past of Guilford with the Present

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Figure 1: Cross-country skiing on the Patuxent Branch Trail near Highway 95

In 1963, the place where Columbia, Maryland is located was mostly farmland. Over the ensuing years, the town's developer, James Rouse, worked to transform the area into a "balanced, planned community" consisting of nine villages, which today are renowned for their [walking and biking paths](#). Due to their recentness, few of them have a story to tell. One exception to this is the 4.6-mile-long Patuxent Branch Trail, which runs from [Lake Elkhorn](#) to [Savage Park](#).

I have hiked, biked, and cross-country skied on the Patuxent Branch Trail numerous times. It can be accessed from many locations, but one of my favorites is the [Lake Elkhorn parking lot](#) in Columbia, near the trail's northern terminus. From here, one can travel under Broken Land Parkway and, after about a fifth of a mile, start following the scenic Little Patuxent River, which meanders alongside the trail for the rest of the trip.

Walking this route one cold December morning, I noticed many people and dogs moving briskly to keep warm. As I stood and watched a great blue heron across the river, I thought about how non-migratory native birds deal with the cold. Getting closer, I noticed this heron was "unipedal resting," meaning it was standing on one leg to keep warm.



*Figure 2: Great blue heron "unipedal resting" along the Little Patuxent River*

Further south, I found several turkey tail mushrooms growing on a decaying log. Reminiscent of a wild tom turkey displaying his plumage to attract a mate, this common fungus has been brewed as a Chinese medicinal tea for thousands of years and is currently being studied to help treat cancer patients.



*Figure 3: Turkey tail mushrooms*

After about two miles, I came to an area known as the Guilford Industrial Historic District. Here, the most obvious landmark is the 83-foot-long Pratt Through Truss Bridge, built in 1902 to carry the Patuxent Branch of the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad over the Little Patuxent River to serve the Guilford quarries operated by the Maryland Granite Company and the Howard Granite Company. Created by Caleb and Thomas Pratt, a father-and-son team from Boston, this iron bridge design was popular due to its low-cost construction. Eventually abandoned, in 2002 it was adapted by Howard County Department of Recreation and Parks to carry the Patuxent Branch Trail across the river.



*Figure 4: Pratt Through Truss Bridge*

Standing on this bridge and looking east (downstream), I saw the stone remains of the Guilford Mill. Dating back to the mid-1700's, this wheat, saw, and then eventually cotton mill burnt down in 1890. Looking west, I tried to imagine the dam which once diverted water via a now overgrown race to power the mill.



*Figure 5: Stone ruins of Guilford Mill*

Guilford was once well known for its granite quarries, which lasted from the 1830's to around 1908. As Baltimore and Washington, D.C. grew, granite was needed to create buildings, monuments, railroads, bridges, curbstones, and cobblestones. Many workers were needed to complete this task, and while physically demanding, it was one of the best paying jobs for African American laborers, who were not allowed to work in the nearby town of Savage.

South of the bridge, I found a large block of granite that was cut by drilling several small holes. An information sign along the trail informed me that these holes “were made by striking the top of a foot-long ‘jumper drill’ with a hammer. As each blow was struck, the drill rebounded slightly, enabling the man holding it to rotate it a fraction of an inch before the next blow. Into the hole, two ‘feathers’ were inserted - tapering pieces of iron that were rounded on one side and flat on the others. A ‘plug’ or steel wedge was placed between them and driven in with a sledgehammer until the rock split.”



*Figure 6: Granite cut with “jumper drill”*

Though much of the Guilford Industrial Historic District lies in ruins, it is not forgotten. In fact, some of the locals are working to preserve its past with a Guilford Quarry and Mill Area Walking Tour, which, if created, will incorporate part of the Patuxent Branch Trail.

The Patuxent Branch Trail is considered a rail-trail, a multipurpose public path created from a former railroad corridor. Here, a footprint of the B&O, the oldest railway in the United States, is most obvious on the 1.5-mile section between Guilford and Vollmerhausen Road that passes under Highway 95, the southeastern border of Columbia. I always look forward to racing across this straight, flat, wide stretch on my cross-country skis after a big snowstorm.

At Vollmerhausen Road, the trail jogs southeast along the road for about a fifth of a mile, resuming on the opposite side of the river behind Patuxent Valley Middle School. It continues an additional 0.7 mile from Vollmerhausen Road to Savage Park, just north of the Savage Mill Historic District.

Over 50 years since Columbia, Maryland was first founded, the vision to link communities, recreational areas, businesses, and historic places via walking and biking paths has grown in popularity. In Savage, some residents are encouraging Howard County to construct two pedestrian bridges which would allow one to walk from the southern terminus of the Patuxent Branch Trail to the Wincopin Trails and the Savage Mill Trail. Connecting already existing trail systems would increase usage and awareness of the rich industrial history of the region. Though it may seem counterintuitive, perhaps the best way to preserve a trail for future generations is to ensure it gets lots of use.

For more information, see

- [Smithsonian Magazine - James W. Rouses Legacy of Better Living Through Design](#)
- [Wikipedia – Columbia, Maryland](#)
- [Howard County, Maryland – Patuxent Branch Trail](#)
- [Good Morning Gloucester – Why Do Herons Stand on One Leg?](#)
- [Bastyr University - FDA Approves Bastyr Turkey Tail Trial for Cancer Patients](#)
- [Maryland Historical Trust Application – Guilford Industrial Historic District](#)
- [The Historical Marker Database - The Pratt Through-Truss Bridge](#)
- 2020 calendar created by the Savage Historical Society titled "Savage-Guilford History, Between the Bridges"
- [Wikipedia – Guilford, Maryland](#)
- [Friends of Guilford Industrial Historic District](#)