

Weverton Cliffs to Gathland State Park – Stunning Views at Either End

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Figure 1: Clear view at Weverton Cliffs

In my opinion, the best view you'll find on the [Appalachian Trail](#) in Maryland is at Weverton Cliffs. From this overlook, one can see the [Chesapeake and Ohio Towpath](#), the Potomac River, and beyond that, Virginia. To the southeast, Colonial Island and several smaller islands dot the Potomac, while to the west, I can pick out [Sandy Hook Bridge](#) almost two miles away.

It was a hot, humid, summer day when I first did this trip, climbing about 500' over 0.8 mile starting at the [Weverton Cliffs parking lot](#). The switchback ascent was a little strenuous, so I was glad to finally reach the sign pointing me to the spur trail that led down to the overlook. From here, I stood atop a ledge of quartzite-based sandstone with a 180-degree view, peering across the river and into the valley below. I was smarter on subsequent trips, planning them during the winter months, and taking breaks to rest and appreciate my surroundings. Although the hike is easier in the cold, the scenery is no less impressive...in fact, it is often better since cooler air tends to hold less moisture. On a really clear, sunny day, you can even see the Shenandoah River over three miles away!





*Figure 2: Group photo at Weverton Cliffs*

On my most recent winter visit, I organized a seven-mile car shuttle hike from the Weverton Cliffs parking lot (~350' elevation) north to [Gathland State Park](#) (~920' elevation). The highest spot along this trail is 1232', and the climb to this point takes place within about the first two miles. By Maryland Appalachian Trail standards, this is rather steep. Only 40 of Appalachian Trail's 2190 miles pass through Maryland, ranging from a low point at the Potomac River (250' elevation) to a high point at the aptly-named High Rock (1900' elevation), all contained within [South Mountain State Park](#).

After enjoying the vista from atop the cliffs, we headed north along the South Mountain ridgeline. As the trail leveled off, we appreciated the rays of warm sunlight filtering through the bare trees, a stark contrast to the pockets of snow lying in shady areas along the trail. Looking west, the woods partially blocked our view of a gently rolling patchwork of idyllic-looking farms, while to the east, large grey boulders sheltered us from the wind. Some segments of trail were highlighted by white veins of quartz embedded in rocks.





*Figure 3: Vein of quartz*

Green vegetation was sparse, but I did notice ferns, moss, mountain laurel, and the occasional pine tree. Many of the rocks hosted patches of light green or gray-colored lichen. Like plants, lichen uses photosynthesis to obtain nutrients, but lichen is actually a dual organism, comprised of fungus living in a symbiotic relationship with algae or cyanobacterium (or both in some instances).





*Figure 4: Lichen*

Near the halfway point, we arrived at our lunch stop, the Edward B. Garvey Memorial Shelter. This beautiful backcountry shelter is named after a conservationist who dedicated much of his life to preserving the Appalachian Trail. I climbed a ladder to the upper level where plexiglass allowed the morning sun to warm things up. If I were a winter backpacker, this is where I'd want to sleep. Around the shelter, I found several campsites, a privy, trash receptables, and a tall metal post for hanging food out of bears' reach. I expect this location must fill up with backpackers during the warmer months, but we had the whole place to ourselves. There are more than 250 backcountry shelters located along the Appalachian Trail, spaced, on average, about eight miles apart and available on a first-come, first-served basis.





*Figure 5: Taking a break at the Ed Garvey backcountry shelter*

Continuing north, we began our descent into Crampton’s Gap, where hundreds of lives were lost on September 14, 1862 during the Battle of Crampton’s Gap. This, along with Turner’s Gap and Fox’s Gap to the north, comprise the [Battle of South Mountain](#), the first major battle of the Civil War fought north of the Potomac River, and the only place where the Appalachian Trail intersects a major Civil War battlefield. According to historian John Hoptak, while “Antietam was the culmination of [General Robert E.] Lee’s first invasion of Union soil, it was at South Mountain where the tide turned in favor of the Union, making it the pivotal moment of the tremendously consequential Maryland Campaign.”

Finally, we arrived at our destination, Gathland State Park, named for George Alfred Townsend, who was known by his pen name, “Gath.” Born in 1841, Gath was one of the youngest war correspondents of the Civil War. Later, he became one of our nation’s most prominent journalists and novelists of the Reconstruction Era. Gath built his estate on the property that now serves as the state park, where in 1896, he unveiled the fifty-foot-high National War Correspondents Memorial, also known as the Civil War Correspondents Memorial



Arch, which was dedicated to his colleagues, both Union and Confederate, who reported on the Civil War. This impressive structure, resembling a medieval castle wall, contains three Roman arches representing Description, Depiction and Photography, along with symbolic terra cotta statuettes of Mercury, Electricity and Poetry.



Figure 6: National War Correspondents Memorial

Our hike ended similarly to how it started...with a stunning view. Gazing at the monument built to honor the people who reported on the Civil War, I thought about how our country might have ended up divided had the Battle of South Mountain resulted in a decisive Confederate victory. If so, my view at Weverton Cliffs

could have been looking across the Potomac into a separate nation. This easily-accessible snapshot of the Mid-Atlantic region straddles important natural and historic legacies that are well worth a visit.

For more information, see

- Hiking Maryland: A Guide for Hikers & Photographers by Scott E. Brown. Published by Stackpole Books, 2014
- [MD-DNR – Explore: South Mountain Recreation Area 2019 Edition](#)
- [MD-DNR – Gathland State Park History](#)
- [Live Science – What are Lichens?](#)
- [Ed Garvey](#)
- [Appalachian Trail Conservancy - Shelters](#)
- [Maryland Historical Trust - Crampton's Gap Historic District](#)
- [American Battlefield Trust - The Pivotal Moment of the Maryland Campaign](#)
- [The Civil War Correspondents Memorial Arch](#)