

Hiking the South Mountain State Battlefield – Washington Monument to White Rocks

Saki

Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: View from White Rocks Overlook

On the winter solstice in Maryland, the day lasts roughly 9 hours and 24 minutes. That may not seem like much, but it is still plenty of time to get out and get in a good hike...the kind where you feel like you've burnt off a few of the extra pounds from the holiday feasts, stretched your legs, and accomplished something worthy of posting on social media. That's just what 10 of us, from the WatersEdge Kayak Club, did in December 2021. Led by Suzanne Farace and John Sweeney, we completed a scenic and informative out-and-back trek on the [Appalachian Trail](#) (AT) from [Washington Monument State Park](#) to White Rocks. This gave us the opportunity to explore South Mountain State Park and visit several Civil War sites from the Battle of South Mountain.

Though primarily focused on sea kayaking, the 1800+ member WatersEdge Kayak Club also brings people together for other outdoor activities, such as hiking, especially when some members have put away their paddling gear for the colder months. I've paddled with Suzanne and John on numerous trips they've led and knew that if they put as much effort into planning this hike as their kayak outings, we'd be in good hands.

We met at Washington Monument State Park, which opened promptly at 10am. If we wanted to make better use of daylight and start earlier, we could have parked just southeast of where Washington Monument Road meets Old National Pike (alternate U.S. 40) at [39.484083, -77.620000](#). Though this spot appears to be part of the Old South Mountain Inn lot, there are some designated spots for AT hikers. Another potential starting point is where the AT meets Reno Monument Road at [39.470556, -77.617639](#).

The first 2.7 miles of our journey took us through three of the four designated South Mountain State Battlefield points of interest: Washington Monument State Park, [Fox's Gap](#), and [Turner's Gap](#). One can include the fourth battlefield point of interest, [Crampton's Gap](#) at [Gathland State Park](#), by turning this out-and-back route into a ~10 mile car shuttle hike, ending at this location. Historians have written that the Battle of South Mountain was perhaps the most decisive part of Confederate General Robert E. Lee's failed first attempt to invade the Union – and perhaps one of the most decisive events in the American Civil War.

At Fox's Gap, we passed the [Major General Jesse Reno Monument](#), dedicated to the commander of the Ninth Army Corps at South Mountain and built at the place of his mortal wounding.



Figure 2: Major General Jesse Reno Monument

Slightly north of this is a [monument to the 17th Michigan Volunteer Infantry Regiment](#), also known as the “Stonewall Regiment.” Of these 500 men who fought and captured the stone wall held by the Confederates, 27 were killed and 114 wounded, many mortally. Much of this fighting took place at a location called Wise's Field, now owned by the Central Maryland Heritage League.

From the Reno Monument, we walked about a quarter of a mile south on the General Garland Trail, a slight detour just west of the AT. Named for Confederate Brigadier General Samuel Garland, who also



perished at South Mountain, this path took us to the [North Carolina Monument](#), a beautiful life-sized bronze figure of a wounded soldier clutching a shredded battle flag. This statue, built on a base of polished black granite, was erected in 2003 and dedicated to all the North Carolina troops who fought at South Mountain.



*Figure 3: Daphne and I at the North Carolina Monument*

Not all the historical sites we saw were related to the Civil War. At Turner's Gap, we paused and admired the beautiful [Dahlgren Chapel](#), built in the English Gothic Revival style. Dating back to 1881, it was consecrated as the Saint Joseph's Chapel of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 1884.





*Figure 4: Dahlgren Chapel, photographed by Marilyn Fisher*

A little south of the chapel is a place bearing the same name, the [Dahlgren Backpacker Campground](#). This free site is a popular destination for backpackers, especially thru-hikers. Here, one can take a hot shower, pitch a tent, and walk about two tenths of a mile to a hiker-friendly restaurant. Bathrooms are closed in the winter but a porta-john is available.

Continuing our hike, around mile four, our group took a 0.22 mile detour to [Rocky Run Shelter](#), where we ate lunch.





*Figure 5: Our group at Rocky Run Shelter*

Near the shelter is a moldering privy composting toilet like the one near [Annapolis Rock](#). But unlike that one, this is elevated off the ground and has three walls with no door, so you're a little exposed when doing your business.

A little sustenance was just what we needed before continuing south on the AT another 1.8 miles, mostly uphill, to our destination at [White Rocks Overlook](#). During this stretch, the elevation changed from 1000' to 1740' before descending to the overlook (elevation ~1625'), where we had an unobstructed view to the south.





Figure 6: Looking south at White Rocks Overlook



Figure 7: View from White Rocks Overlook



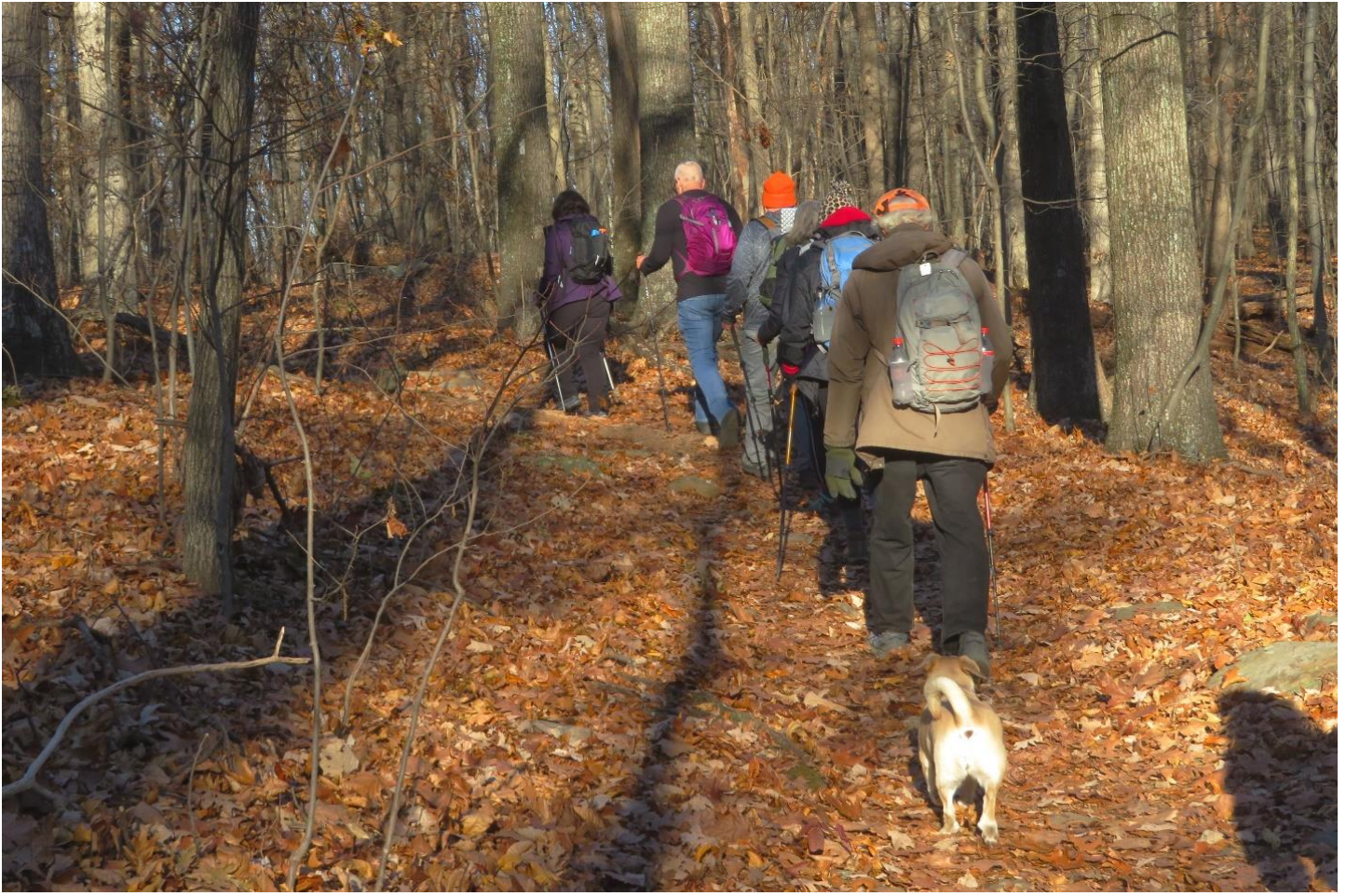
It was a good day to bask on the rocks in the bright sun, but we still had 5.4 miles to cover on the return trip before Washington Monument State Park closed at 4:40pm. We figured that if they were as prompt about closing as opening, then we'd better not be late.



*Figure 8: Enjoying the scenery from White Rocks Overlook*

Hiking back, I appreciated how the leaves on this well-maintained section of the trail were compacted and mostly broken, making it easy to follow. Had it been a month or two prior, much of the freshly fallen foliage would have obscured the trail and covered potentially ankle-twisting rocks.





*Figure 9: Daphne bringing up the rear*

Walking past Dahlgren Chapel one last time, I stopped and gazed southwest towards Middletown, founded in 1767, through which both Union and Confederate troops passed on their way to fight at South Mountain. There were over 5,000 casualties on that fateful day, September 14, 1862. Three days later, most of the survivors would fight again at the Battle of Antietam, where 23,000 soldiers were killed, wounded, or missing on what would be called the bloodiest day in American history.





*Figure 10: Looking west from the AT near Dahlgren Chapel*

We finished our ~12 mile hike with time to spare before the park closed their gates. It was good seeing the South Mountain State Battlefield sites and getting out with folks that I normally just see on the water.



For more information, see

[WatersEdge Kayak Club – Baltimore’s Sea Kayaking Club!](#)

[Maryland Department of Natural Resources \(DNR\) – South Mountain State Park](#)

[Maryland DNR – The Battle of South Mountain](#)

[Explore 2021 - South Mountain Recreation Area and Fort Frederick State Park Complex](#)

[National Park Service – Jesse L Reno](#)

[Central Maryland Heritage League](#)

[Civil War Blog – Visiting South Mountain Battlefield](#)

[Wikipedia – Dahlgren Chapel \(Maryland\)](#)

[Wikipedia – Middletown, Maryland](#)

[National Park Service – Antietam](#)