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# Saving the Places We Love

## Patapsco Valley State Park

By Max Buffington

*“Most of us do not have the time, the money or the bandwidth to save the planet, a concept far too abstract and daunting. But our homes and neighborhoods, and places where we go on vacation, are real to us...As we get to know these marvelous spots, we want to protect them so we can keep coming back and eventually pass them on to our children. We develop a bond with them...and therein lies the key to saving special places, our country, our planet and, finally, ourselves.”*

—Ned Tillman

From *Saving the Places We Love: Paths to Environmental Stewardship*

The Patapsco River rises from small springs in Maryland’s Piedmont region and flows eastward through a lush valley into Baltimore’s Inner Harbor. For much of its length, it lies within Patapsco Valley State Park, where its clear water is bound by forested ridges so steep that it is often labeled a gorge.

### The Park We Love

This Park became a special place for me gradually over a lifetime. Many of my fondest memories were made there: tubing with my kids at Avalon, bicycling the Old Main Line Trail, paddling from Sykesville to the Harbor with buddies, relaxing with coworkers at office picnics at McKeldin and Pickall, celebrating my wife’s retirement at Hollofield, and taking my grandchildren for an adventure at the Orange Grove Swinging Bridge.

While many Marylanders share my love for this Park, not everyone knows how badly the Valley was mistreated by its past industrialization or the effort that was

required to restore it to its glory. It is easy to note the beauty of water splashing over the Park’s dams, but harder to remember to connect them to the Valley’s past, when railroads, farms and mills dotted the River. One might believe the river and forest appear today much as they would have to Captain John Smith on his first visit in 1608; however this is far from the case.

Located between two great metropolitan areas, it would have been nearly impossible for such prime real estate to remain undeveloped for 400 years. In fact, soon after English explorers discovered the Patapsco River, its development began.

### Shipping and Manufacturing

In the 1700s, it was a water link between English merchants and Maryland’s great colonial plantations —tobacco was shipped out and trade goods were shipped in. The river quickly filled with sediment washing in from the stripped ridges, and additional sediment came from tributaries

near tobacco plantations. Before loading their cargoes, English merchant ships dumped ballast into the river.

Easily exploited ore and trees for fuel led to the development of iron furnaces, which played a significant role in Maryland becoming one of the world’s largest iron producers...for a time. The area’s dense forest was the first to be destroyed as ridges were cleared to fuel this production.

These human activities combined to choke the Patapsco River.

### Railroads and Resources

By the early 1800s, the 15-foot high falls and the town of Elkrige Landing’s deep water harbor had both disappeared.

Energy and transportation also changed industrial development in the Valley during this time. Water was captured and channeled by nearly 30 wooden and concrete dams to provide cheap energy. Low-cost transportation was provided by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which had laid its first tracks through the area on

its route to the new western states of Ohio, Indiana and Illinois.

Inexpensive transportation also fostered the abuse of the valley’s mineral resources. Granite, marble, soapstone, potash, asbestos, chromium and iron ore were mined or quarried from the Valley. More than 30 textile, grist, paper and saw mills along with their dams, company towns, and mill workers and their families were located along the river to exploit these resources.

### A Changing Dynamic

The 1900s saw waterpower give way to electricity. Wooden dams prone to destruction or heavy damage from frequent flooding were replaced by larger concrete ones producing electricity. Even so, the Patapsco Valley, with a combined industrial output that once rivaled more famous towns of the American Industrial Revolution, began to wane.

By the 1970s, the last of the textile and paper mills had closed, leaving only a few in operation. Today, the only Patapsco mill still in business is a gristmill in Ellicott City. Indeed, there are few artifacts left of the former mills — iron furnaces, wooden dams and company towns — as their sites were scoured by floods or purposeful demolition.

The Patapsco Valley paid a heavy price for four centuries of industrialization.

### A River Close to Ruin

The Patapsco was nearly destroyed by pollution. In the 1970s, Maryland’s water quality agency described the River as

*“When they had dye in the dye house, the dye come out of them kettles, went into the river and when it come up by that turbine down there, it made the whole river green, red, all different colors. And the fish couldn’t live in it. They was jumping clear out the water...People was eating them with that dye in them, yeah.”*

—Wallace Earl “Bunky” Merryman, Millworker at W.J. Dickey and Sons  
From *Patapsco: Life Along Maryland’s Historic River Valley*

“grossly polluted.” It carried agricultural waste from canneries in western Howard and Carroll Counties, dyes and industrial chemicals from the mills, and spent mash from distilleries in nearby Arbutus.

Mill towns like Oella and rural communities like Sykesville were among the last in Maryland to replace their outhouses with modern public sanitation systems, adding to pollution. Many visitors today are surprised to learn that as late as the 1980s the community of Oella had no public sewer system and that Park Rangers had to keep swimmers and boaters out of the river.

### A 100-Year Effort

Federal, State and local government organizations, however, joined to rebuild the Park, starting in the early 1900s, before they even knew they were rebuilding. A forest preserve was established in 1907 to begin its reforestation. As a result, Patapsco Valley evolved into Maryland’s first State Park.

In the 1930s, the State’s environmental initiative was advanced by 400 young men from the Civilian Conservation Corps, who planted trees as well as built trails and shelters. State and federal governments attacked water pollution following the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972,

aggressively forcing Patapsco industries to cease dumping waste into the river and to fund public sanitation systems.

Like most successful efforts, government agencies partnered with the public to make a difference. Citizen volunteers devoted thousands of hours of labor to the restoration effort. Responding to conscience, calls for community service and love for the area, they have planted trees, removed debris and litter, attacked invasive plants, and rehabilitated worn trails.

### Patapsco Today

Approximately 750,000 people now visit Patapsco Valley State Park annually. Yet, despite its present idyllic appearance, the river faces ongoing environmental threats. Storm run-off pushes a heavy load of sediment and pollution in the form of plastic bags, water bottles, lawn chemicals and pet waste from nearby commercial and residential developments into the water.

Park visitors leave behind litter and diapers. The forest is stressed by too many deer, and an explosion of invasive plants and animals like the wavy leaf basket grass and emerald ash borer beetle. In the not-too-distant future, warmer temperatures and rising Chesapeake water levels will bring more changes to Patapsco’s flora and fauna.

But hope still remains that we can preserve this beloved Park. While Patapsco can’t be everyone’s special place, for me, maintaining the beautiful clean river and thick green forest is non-negotiable. I’m optimistic that citizens will not only *Leave No Trace*, but will also consider joining the volunteer ranks to ensure that our children, and theirs, can continue to enjoy this amazing piece of history. ■

[dnr.maryland.gov/publiclands](http://dnr.maryland.gov/publiclands)

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At the Swinging Bridge at Orange Grove, park visitors enjoy the clean water and forest trails where a wooden dam and millrace once stood.