

The Upper Mon Water Trail



by Tim Terman and Michael Workman

The Upper Mon Water Trail, which opened in June 2003, is Pennsylvania's first interstate water trail, and the first that readily accommodates both powered and unpowered watercraft. Nearly half the trail is in Pennsylvania, starting at Point Marion, Fayette County. The trail includes a 65-mile section of the Monongahela River from Fairmont, WV, north to Rices Landing, PA. It's confusing, even for residents along its banks, but the "Mon," as they call it, flows north.

The river is picturesque in many areas and is certainly rich with history. Because of a series of dams built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Mon today is deep enough for commercial traffic including tow boats with barges. In its natural state, though, the river would be much shallower.



Flatboats (foreground) were used to send goods downriver. Later, keelboats (background) traveled upriver and downriver, propelled by crews that pushed these boats with long poles.

Historic trail

Archaeological evidence indicates that Native Americans occupied the Monongahela riverfront from about 8000 B.C. There were no permanent settlements when the first European settlers arrived, but Shawnee and people of other tribes claimed and used the Upper Mon region as a hunting ground. Native Americans named the river "Monongahela," which means "river with crumbling or falling banks."

Indian traders and outcasts from colonial settlements along the coast came to the Upper Mon as early as 1694, when a small, temporary settlement was purportedly made near present-day Rivesville, WV. Several attempts were made to establish permanent settlements along the Mon during ensuing decades, but hostile tribes destroyed them in defense of their own claims. The first permanent settlements came shortly after the end of the French and Indian War (1763), but the Upper Mon remained a bloody frontier for three more decades. Indeed, relations between the pioneers and the Native Americans were generally hostile. The pioneers built many forts to protect themselves during the "bloody season," the summer months when attacks were most likely. Pricketts Fort, just north of Rivesville, WV, accessible from the Mon, is a reconstruction of such a fort. Two of the early settlements were at Dunkard Creek (near Point Marion, PA) in 1757 and at Decker's Creek (Morgantown, WV) in 1758.

Trail of commerce

As settlements along the Mon grew, pioneers needed to send goods downriver to Pittsburgh and ports in the South, even as far away as New Orleans. At first, they built flatboats, rectangular vessels about 15 feet wide and 50 feet long that could carry up to 50 tons of cargo. Many settlers traveled farther west on such vessels, which were also called "Kentucky boats" because of their destination.

Flatboats could go only downriver. They were often sold at their destinations as lumber, or they were used to build settlers' new cabins. Keelboats were built later. Between 40 and 80 feet long and about 10 to 15 feet wide, these vessels traveled both downriver and upriver, propelled by a crew that pushed the boat with long poles. Mike Fink, of Pittsburgh, was a legendary keelboat character.

In 1814 near Brownsville, PA, Daniel French and Henry Shreve built and launched the *Enterprise*, a ship that would revolutionize navigation and open the nation's vast heartland to commerce. Equipped with a



nearly flat hull and high-pressure steam engine, the *Enterprise* was the forerunner of all western steamboats. It was the first steamboat to make the journey down the Monongahela, Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans, and to return.

System of locks and dams

In the 1840s locks were built on the Lower Mon, and by 1894 locks were added on the Upper Mon. You can see the first West Virginia cut-stone lock built in 1879 at Hoard, a few miles south of Point Marion, PA. You can also see remnants of locks built in the early 1900s at various locations.

A system of locks and dams for “improving” the Mon by maintaining a constant water level (slackwater) proved just as important as did the *Enterprise* in launching the steamboat era. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, tow boats transported coal barges filled with millions of tons of cargo for the steel mills in Pittsburgh and power plants along the Ohio River, and then they traveled on to New Orleans for international distribution. Today, most coal is transported by rail on the west banks of the river, but a towboat pushing coal may pass you as you explore the Mon.

View from the trail

Much of the Mon’s riparian (shoreline) land is forested with oak, catalpa, willow, sycamore, cottonwood and other mainly deciduous species. In the trees and flying over the river you may see stately blue and green herons, chattering kingfishers, many types of waterfowl, soaring ospreys, hawks, vultures, owls and an assortment of songbirds and darting swallows. The Monongahela is also home to beavers, and you might also see white-tailed deer, foxes and squirrels.

Fishing

Since enactment of the Clean Water Act, the river’s fish population and species numbers have increased. Sauger, bass, catfish, walleyes, muskies, drum and carp are now plentiful. You must have a valid fishing license to fish in the Monongahela River. Recently, paddlefish have been reintroduced. This fish grows to 6 feet and hasn’t been seen in the Mon since the 1800s. Now more than 100 types of fish



Water trails are routes suitable for watercraft. Like conventional trails, water trails are recreational corridors between specific locations. Water trails include access points, boat launches, day use sites, and, in some cases, overnight camping areas. Each water trail is unique, a reflection of Pennsylvania’s diverse geology, ecology and communities.

Pennsylvania includes 16 officially designated water trails. Water trail guides show “trail heads” (boat launch and take-out points), and they provide information about the scenic, historical and geological points of interest along the way. Water trail guides also include information on fishing, wildlife watching and camping. Pennsylvania water trails embrace the “Leave No Trace” code of outdoor ethics, which promotes the responsible use and enjoyment of the outdoors.

The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission designates official Pennsylvania water trails. The Commission offers a full range of technical support to local water trail partners. For more information, contact the Commission at 717-705-7807, or email thoford@state.pa.us. Visit the Commission’s web site water trail pages at www.fish.state.pa.us.



populate the Mon. Discover much more Pennsylvania fishing information at www.fish.state.pa.us.

Points of interest in Pennsylvania

Rices Landing. W.A. Young Foundry and Machine Shop was designated by a curator emeritus of the Smithsonian Institute as one of the greatest of its kind in the nation. It greets you on the riverfront of this small town, founded in 1792. Kayakers and canoeists may want to use the public access ramp on Pumpkin Run (camping at the park, call 724-592-6055). Larger boats can tie up on the old lock wall. Stop by the Lock Six Museum (724-592-6184), housed in one of the old lock houses, and Bank of Sweets cafe and ice cream shop, and gazebo park, overlooking the river. Restrooms are available. Contact Norma and Murray Kline, 724-592-6184.

Greensboro. This small historic pottery town on the riverfront is currently working on developing a public river access at the firehouse. Until then, you can use the old ferry landing in Greensboro, across the river from Georges Creek. Upriver, the historic Lock 7 building holds the last of its kind in the world, and tours can be arranged. Mon View Park is downriver, and includes a swimming pool, picnic pavilions, ball fields, playground and parking. Services in town include a small grocery store.

Friendship Hill National Historic Site. Administered by the National Park Service, Friendship Hill was the home of Albert Gallatin during America's early republic. Gallatin, a Swiss emigrant, served his adopted country in public service for nearly 50 years. Most notably, as secretary of the treasury under presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, Gallatin reduced the federal debt and arranged financing of the Louisiana Purchase, the Lewis and Clark expedition and the National Road. For more information, visit www.nps.gov/frhi or call 724-725-9190.

Point Marion. This town is at the confluence of the Cheat River and the Mon. There is a boat ramp at the riverfront park, as well as picnic pavilions, ball fields, a playground and parking. The Mon River Rail-Trail will soon be developed in this area.

Points of interest in West Virginia

WVU Core Arboretum. The 91-acre Core Arboretum, owned by West Virginia University, is mostly old-growth forest on steep hillsides and the Monongahela River flood plain. Some 3.5 trail miles provide access to densely wooded areas and three acres of lawn planted with specimen trees. Best known for its "spring ephemeral" wildflowers, the Arboretum is a great place to study, observe and enjoy trees, plants and birds.

Seneca Center in Morgantown. This restored historic glass factory now hosts an indoor shopping mall, visitors center, bike shop, farmers market and glass museum.

Mon River and Caperton Rail-Trail. This 51-mile rail-trail follows the Mon River and Deckers Creek. Some sections are still under construction. Non-motorized uses are allowed.

Pricketts Fort State Park. This park features a reconstruction of a fort used in the 1700s. It has a boat launch, picnic area, visitor center, restrooms and parking. ☐

PADDLING SAFETY TIPS

All boaters should observe the following considerations:

- **Paddling with a group.** Group size and paddling skills are a consideration in choosing a waterway. The recommended minimum number of boats is three. No one should paddle alone. Each person has specific responsibilities in the overall group organization. The safety of the group depends on everyone carrying out responsibilities.
- **Wear your life jacket.** Almost 80 percent of all recreational boating fatalities occur when the victims are not wearing life jackets. One wearable Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device (PFD, or life jacket) in serviceable condition and of the appropriate size is required for each person in your boat. Life jackets must be worn by children 12 years and younger on all boats 20 feet and less in length while under way (including drifting boats). Children 12 years and younger must also wear a life jacket when on board any canoe or kayak.
- **Planning a float trip.** Before starting out, consult maps, guidebooks and people knowledgeable about the river. Check water levels at www.usgs.gov.
- **Alcohol and boating.** Drinking and boating don't mix. It is illegal to operate a boat, including unpowered boats like canoes and kayaks, while under the influence of alcohol or a controlled substance.
- **Hazards on the water.** Hazards to boaters appear in many forms. They include dams, submerged objects, cold water, fast-changing weather, sunstroke and current. Hazards aren't always obvious. Boaters need to recognize dangers and be prepared to avoid them at all times.
- **Launch legally.** All motorboats must be registered. Non-powered boats such as canoes and kayaks using PA Fish & Boat Commission properties must either be registered or display a valid launch permit.
- **Mon River commercial traffic.** Beware of towboats, barges and other commercial traffic. Mon River navigation charts are available from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Pittsburgh District, at (412) 395-7425.

For more details on boating rules, regulations, safety considerations, boat registration and launch permits, see the PA Fish & Boat Commission's *Boating Handbook*, available from Commission regional offices and license-issuing agents, and online at www.fish.state.pa.us.