



# French Creek Water Trail

*by Marilyn Black*

My favorite water trail in Pennsylvania, hands down, is the French Creek Water Trail.

Originally called Venango River by the Seneca nation, French Creek winds through northwestern Pennsylvania and part of New York before joining the mighty Allegheny River at Franklin. French Creek earned its current name following young Lt. George Washington's 1753 trek from what is now Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, to Fort LeBoeuf, Erie County, to deliver letters to the French Commandant instructing the French military to vacate contested lands.

While French Creek is fed by some of Pennsylvania's largest wetlands (Geneva Marsh, Cussewago Bottoms and the Erie National Wildlife Refuge on the Sugar Creek system) and several impoundments (Union City Reservoir, Edinboro Lake and Woodcock Creek Lake), it is the 78-mile main stem that is designated by the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) as the French Creek Water Trail, thus stretching from the Union City Dam to the confluence in Franklin.

The overwhelming majority of adjoining acres are forests and agricultural lands, with multiple stretches lined by seasonal cottages that are increasingly being upgraded to year-round homes as residents gravitate to this beautiful stream. Custaloga Town Scout Reservation on its west banks downstream from Carlton celebrates the very qualities that make this a well-balanced water trail. Most of the adjacent towns consider themselves "Creek Towns."



photos -Dart Black

*John Wilpula releases a Smallmouth Bass that he caught while fishing from his kayak back into French Creek.*

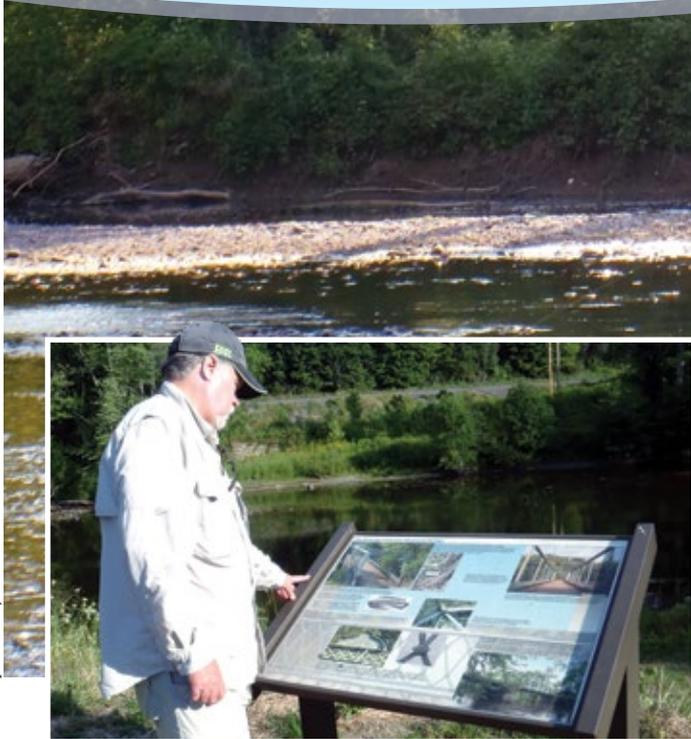


photo-Marilyn Black

*Darl Black reads one of the colorful interpretive panels at Cambridge Springs that have been installed at many of the access sites along French Creek.*



photo-Marilyn Black

*Darl Black fishes while wading a portion of French Creek near Saegertown.*

## Easy access

Most of the free access sites along French Creek consist of unpaved parking, a grassy slip to the water's edge for kayaks and canoes, a colorful outdoor interpretive panel or informational kiosk, and if you're lucky, a seasonal portable toilet. More amenities are found at Meadville's Bicentennial Park and Franklin's Riverfront Park.

Access points (starting at the upstream tip of this water trail) are found at the Union City Dam Recreation Area, PFBC access at Cambridge Springs, confluence of Conneauttee Creek, PFBC access at Saegertown, PFBC access at Cussewago Creek mouth upstream of Meadville,

Bicentennial Park in Meadville, PFBC access at Wilson Shute just west of Route 322, PFBC access at Shaw's Landing, a new access installed this year at Cochranon thanks to bridge replacement work, Utica access maintained by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, Riverfront Park in Franklin, as well as Franklin Third Street Access on the Allegheny River.

Depending on how much fishing you wish to do along the way, this is either a three or four-day float. Lodging is available at Cambridge Springs, Meadville and Franklin. The United States Geological Survey maintains a water gage at Meadville. Its historical and instantaneous data about level and flow rates can be viewed at <http://waterdata.usgs.gov/pa/nwis>. A reading of at least 2.0 feet is considered canoeable.

Presently, only one outfitter with kayak and canoe rentals is active within this water trail. Outdoor Allegheny River Services (O.A.R.S.), [www.oarsontheallegheny.com](http://www.oarsontheallegheny.com), based in Franklin offers shuttle services, outdoor gear rentals, special event and group trip packages, and cabin rental in Utica in combination with French Creek Farm.

The French Creek Conservancy has published a pair of detailed brochures with complete maps, GIS coordinates and more—"Upper French Creek Water Trail" and "Lower French Creek Water Trail." These free brochures are available at [www.frenchcreekconservancy.org](http://www.frenchcreekconservancy.org) or by calling (814) 337-4321. In addition, water trail guides are available at [www.fish.state.pa.us/watertrails/trailindex.htm](http://www.fish.state.pa.us/watertrails/trailindex.htm). Jack Susco has authored a brand new publication entitled "French Creek Canoe, Kayak and Camping Guide." This spiral-bound, 48-page book can be purchased by e-mailing [hanzersusco@yahoo.com](mailto:hanzersusco@yahoo.com) or by calling (724) 525-7013.



photo-Darl Black

*Marilyn Black caught this Walleye from French Creek.*



During the annual Rock in River Festival in Franklin's Riverfront Park, participants try out various kayaks at the south end of French Creek Water Trail.

## Fish and fauna

The Nature Conservancy in 1993 named French Creek watershed "one of the Last Great Places" based not only on its natural beauty and convenient access for paddlers, but primarily because it harbors the richest diversity of native freshwater mussels and fish in the Northeastern United States. To date, 28 species of native mussels and 86 species of native fish have been documented in French Creek.

Prior to the most recent Ice Age, French Creek flowed north from present-day Franklin to the Lake Erie shoreline, thus connecting with the Great Lakes fish and mussel populations. But, when the most recent Wisconsin glaciers blocked that flow, the Allegheny River cut a new channel from Franklin to below Foxburg, where it joined the Clarion River, linking with the aquatic species of the Ohio and Mississippi drainages. So, both sets of species have co-existed in French Creek's good water quality for about 10,000 years.

Anglers seek Smallmouth Bass, Walleyes, Northern Pike, Muskellunge and an assortment of panfish. Successful fishing techniques include casting lures and using live bait (especially bait collected from French Creek itself). My family loves to cool off on steamy, summer days by wading riffle sections of French Creek while we pursue its aquatic inhabitants. Paddlers who want to improve their catch rates are advised to pull their kayaks or canoes up on creek islands and thoroughly fish the heads and tails of the riffles. ☐



This pair of paddlers is within the City of Franklin on French Creek Water Trail.



This young Smallmouth Bass is being gently released back into French Creek.

photo-Marilyn Black

photo-Kimberly Cobley-Harris

photo-Darl Black