

Great Falls National Park, Virginia

Despite having grown-up in the area, I had not seen Great Falls until I was near an adult. I used to think places like Great Falls only existed someplace else that you went to go on vacation to see. Some are still undecided on whether I'm an adult or not but I sure feel fortunate to have Great Falls so close by. The waters tumble 76 feet over the space of about half a mile. The drop confounded people like George Washington who dreamt of transportation and commerce on the Potomac River. The dreamers of his day did something about it by building canals on both sides of the river; at Great Falls, and in other places. The longer and more famous Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was built in Maryland. The Potowmac Canal was built on the Virginia side of the river and passes through Great Falls. The Potowmac Canal was active from 1785 to 1828 but it wasn't completely finished until 1802. Restoration efforts have been underway to reset the lock stones on the eroded hillsides. If you have time, hike the River Trail. It's much too rocky to consider running it, but you'll get great views of Mather Gorge, an east coast equivalent of a canyon. The rock walls drop vertically 50-100 feet straight into the river while the river is compressed to a width hardly more than 100 feet across in some places. Climbers and kayakers of all skill levels take pleasure on the walls and in the water (sometime both). Great Falls is very busy on weekends and there is a modest fee to enter the park. Come early to ensure that you can get in. North and adjacent to Great Falls National Park is Riverbend Park, a Fairfax County park. You can watch the river tumble over lessor boulders there but also find quieter places for contemplation.

Getting There

From the Capital Beltway, I-495

Take Exit 13, for Georgetown Pike, Rte. 193, west. After four and a quarter miles, turn right at the stoplight onto Old Dominion Dr. and into Great Falls National Park. Near the bottom of the long hill, pay the entrance fee and continue straight. Park in the lot one-tenth of a mile ahead on the right, near the Visitor Center. Start from the crosswalk on Old Dominion Dr.

Area Routes

Old Carriage Road (3.0, 1.8 or 2.8 miles, II, I, or II)

For a quick introduction to the area, follow the bluestone path along Old Dominion Rd toward the entrance gate. Bear left with it as it curves away from the paved road and widens. Where it leaves the road, is where the Old Carriage Rd. begins. There are many branching trails going to and from parking lots and the fall view points. Stay along the widest path and generally keep straight. Follow the signs toward the restrooms, then bear right after them at the intersection with the Matildaville Trail on the left. You're still on the Old Carriage Rd. at this point. Options to shorten the route are at left turns at the next two intersections with the Matildaville Trail (no bikes). If you go to the second left turn, you'll be able to see a little of the Mather Gorge, some of the remains of the Potowmac Canal, a quarry. The shorter and longer return routes on the Matildaville Trail pass by the ruins of Matildaville itself, an old settlement that the park brochures describe as having been sponsored by Lighthorse Harry—a revolutionary war hero and friend of George Washington. Preservation efforts are underway for Matildaville. The longest

route skips the Matildaville Trail altogether. Instead it climbs moderately on the Ridge Trail to Old Dominion Drive and returns on the road. There are no shoulders to the road so you'll need to keep an eye and ear open for traffic. The 3 mile version of this route can be ridden by mountain bike.

Weant Drive (2.65 miles, II)

Going past the end of the paved Old Dominion Drive, you leave the national park on a gravel road going into River Bend Park. Several park trails branch off along this road. At the top after a climb of 150 vertical feet in seven tenths of a mile, turn right at a T-intersection onto Weant Drive. The quiet drive descends the 150 feet in less than half a mile to the river. Where it reaches the water can be seen Conn Island. Though the island has a name that makes it sound like the latest blockbuster, its fame was a factual drama. A park placard indicates President James Madison having sought refuge there on August 25, 1814. He took a ferry there from Montgomery County while trying to flee the British who had set to burning the Capitol. The way to run back from here is on the Potomac Heritage Trail. Pass the aqueduct dam that is the means of withdrawing much of Washington, D.C.'s and Arlington's drinking water from the Potomac. The trail gets rocky near the dam. Follow a bumpy gravel road back to Old Dominion Drive and the Visitor Center parking area.

Riverbend (5.2 or 3.95 miles, V or IV)

Less explored than in Great Falls National Park but not less fun for running on, are the trails in Riverbend Park. Most important of these is the Potomac Heritage Trail (PHT). This long dirt trail along the river has a start in Rosslyn. There are gaps in parts of it but the whole piece through Riverbend Park is in good shape. Even north of Riverbend the PHT can be followed but it gets harder as it climbs hills at and beyond some pipeline crossings. You won't get that far on this route however.

Start by heading north along the river. A rough gravel road will give way to a dirt trail. Near the aqueduct dam, the footing will get rocky but this only lasts a short while. The trail then stays close to the water where you get good views of Conn Island. People fish along here a lot. During the drought of 1999 you could see why. The rocks normally hidden underwater revealed almost a reef of nooks, pockets and other places for fish to hide. The water was low enough when measuring these routes in 1999, that you could almost rock hop your way across the river and stay dry. In the cold winter of 2004, ice floes hid it all. Ignore the side trails that climb away from the water until you reach the Visitor Center (see below) in Riverbend Park. Water and restrooms are available there. At this point you can shorten the route rounding the visitor center and heading across the parking lot to the Center Trail. The road-like natural surfaced Center Trail climbs a little to the Upland Trail. Skipping this, go further another three quarters of a mile along the river. The PHT is over loose sand at one point but this ends soon. The Paw Paw Passage Trail begins your route back. Identify it by a gravel road with a blue blaze that splits off to the left, away from the river. It passes next to Black Pond in the woods. Eventually get to Jeffery Road and take the Center Trail to the Upland Trail. After having been warmed-up on the flats, the Upland Trail is where you'll get your workout. It rolls and turns through the woods. Some hills are a little steep. The trail is well marked. Return on the PHT to Great Falls. Within Riverbend Park, mountain bikes are allowed on the PHT, the Center Trail, and the Upland Trail.

Probably because of the rocks near the aqueduct dam, the National Park Service asks people not to ride bicycles on the PHT inside Great Falls National Park.



Icy View from the PHT, 2004



Riverbend Visitor Center

Nearby and Connecting Zones

Difficult Run
C&O Canal, Great Falls, Virginia

Lewinsville Park
Reston

What to do Afterward

Food and Drink

Indigo At Great Falls - 703 759-4650
Old Brogue Irish Pub - 703 759-3309
Kabob Place - 703 757-7788
Romantica Deli & Pizzeria - 703 757-1791

Entertainment and Edification

Great Falls National Park - 703 285-2965
Riverbend Park Nature Center - 703 759-9018
Great Falls Grange & Old Schoolhouse - assembly hall & one room school house - 703 938-8835

Old Carriage Road

Distance: 3.0, 1.8 or 2.8 miles

Rating: II, I, or II; bluestone, gravel or dirt trails; shady; one hill on the longest route

3.0 Mile Route

- 1.0 Matildaville Trail on L (no bikes)
<**
- L 0.0 from the parking lot on bluestone trail along Old Dominion Dr
- L 0.1 Old Carriage Rd (unmarked)
- BL 0.25 at trail X; follow signs to restroom
0.35 trail X and restrooms
- BR 0.4 to stay on Old Carriage Rd;
Matildaville Trail on L (no bikes)
0.55 Swamp Trail on R
0.85 Swamp Trail on R
- R 1.35 Ridge Trail (unmarked)
1.5 trail X on L
1.6 trail X on R to Carriage Trail (no bikes)
- R 2.0 Old Dominion Dr (! unmarked and no shoulder)
2.85 entrance gatehouse
- R 3.0 xwalk at Visitor Center parking
- <*
-

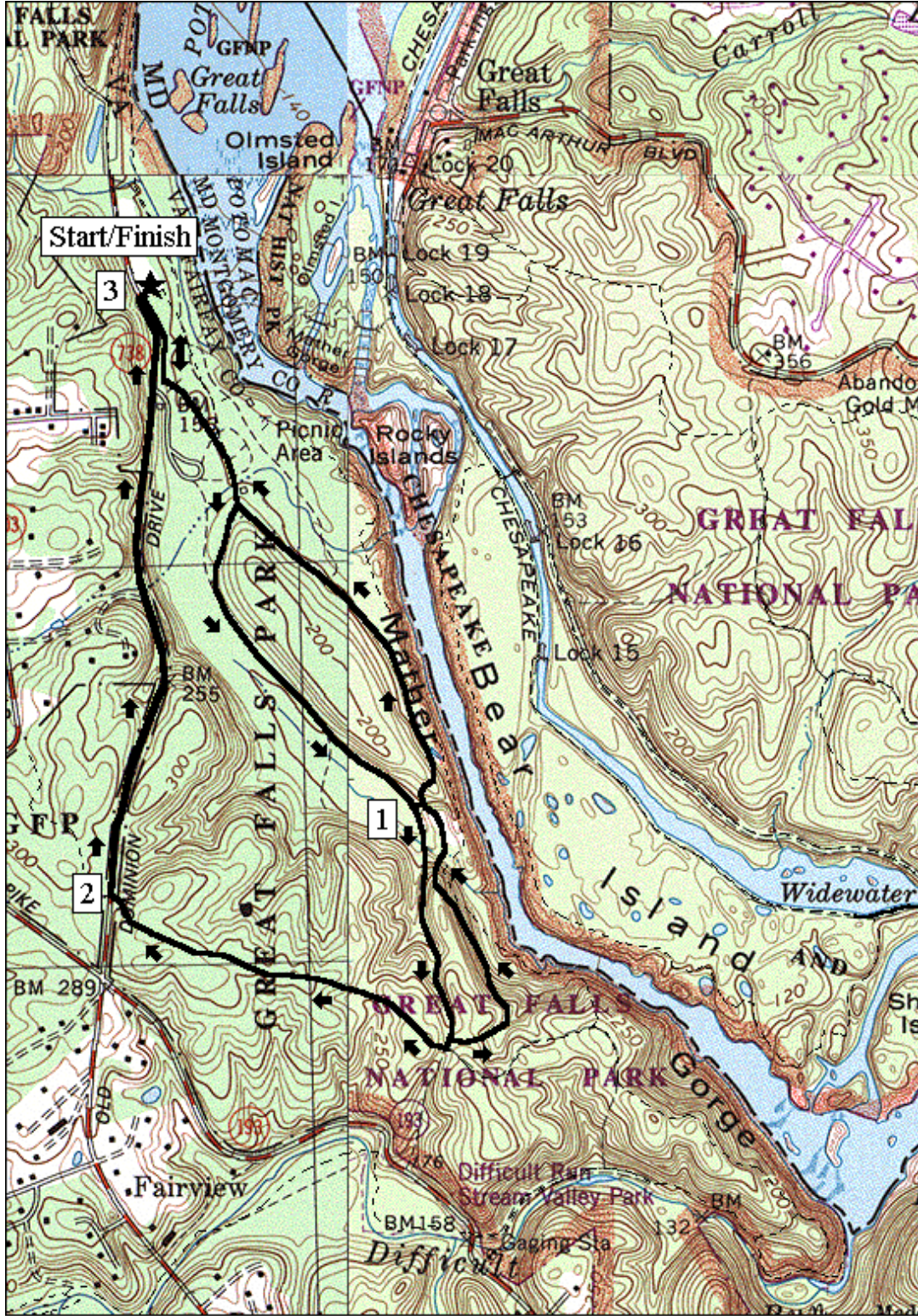
*1.8 Mile Route

- L 0.85 Matildaville Trail; quarry is L/R (pickup cues at mile 2.25 on 2.8 mile route)
-

**2.8 Mile Route

- L 1.35 Matildaville Trail
1.6 trail X on R to River Trail
- L 1.7 at T near canal after small wooden bridge over stream
- R 1.8 trail X after quarry; Carriage Rd on L
>*
- 2.25 gravel road on R merges; Matildaville ruins
2.4 Carriage Rd at restrooms; follow wide path toward Old Dominion Rd
- BR 2.7 trail along Old Dominion Rd
- R 2.8 Visitor Center parking

Old Carriage Road



MN TN
10 1/2°

0 1/2 1 MILE
0 1000 FEET 0 500m 1000m

Printed from TOPO! ©1999 Wildflower Productions (www.topo.com)

Weant Drive

Distance: 2.65 miles

Rating: II; shady gravel roads and dirt trails; parts are rocky and there is one big hill

R 0.0 from parking lot ; Old Dominion Dr

0.15 Mine Run Trail on L

0.3 follow road up the hill
past the gate; last parking
lot is on R

0.5 Mine Run Trail on L

0.65 River Bend Trail on L

0.8 gravel trail on R

0.95 trail on R under
telephone lines

R 1.05 Weant Dr; pass gates
(blue blazes)

1.2 trail X on L; private drive
on R

1.3 Upland Trail

1.4 trail X on L at
switchback

R 1.5 Potomac Heritage Trail
(PHT); river

1.7 Upland Trail on R

1.95 aqueduct dam; rocks (!);
GF Nat Park

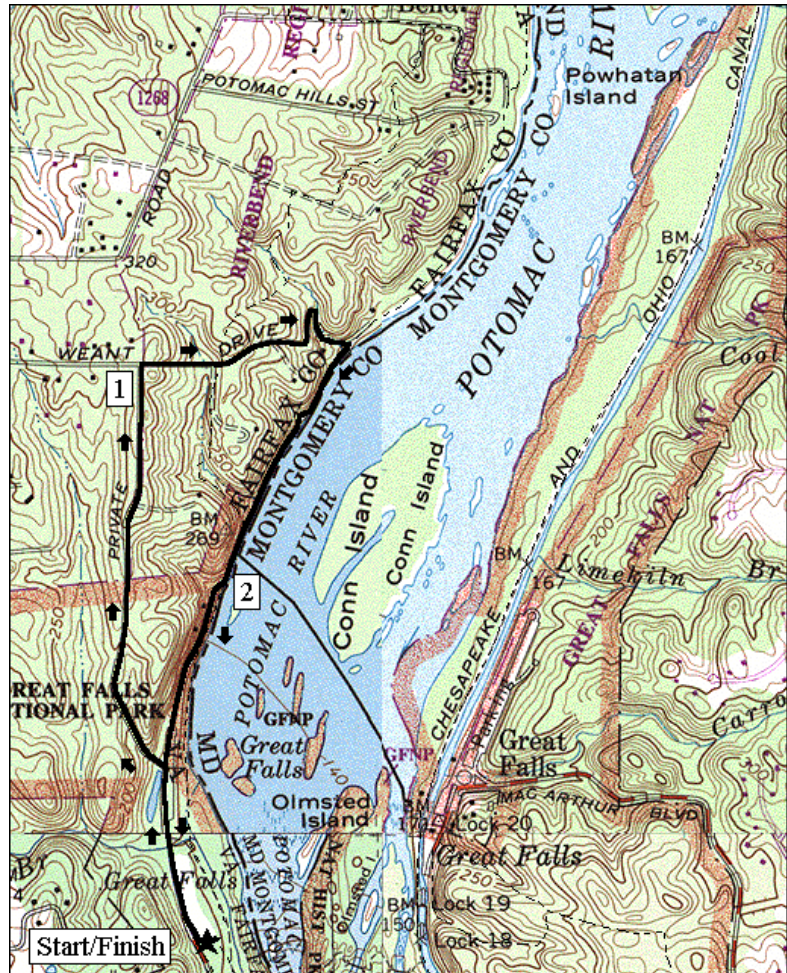
2.0 trail becomes rough
gravel

2.1 trail X on L goes along
river

R/L 2.35 Old Dominion Dr

2.5 Mine Run Trail on R

L 2.65 into Visitor Center parking at xwalk



Printed from TOPO! ©1999 Wildflower Productions (www.topo.com)

Riverbend

Distance: 5.2 or 3.95 miles

Rating: V, or IV; dirt trails w/rocky and sandy spots; hills in the woods when returning

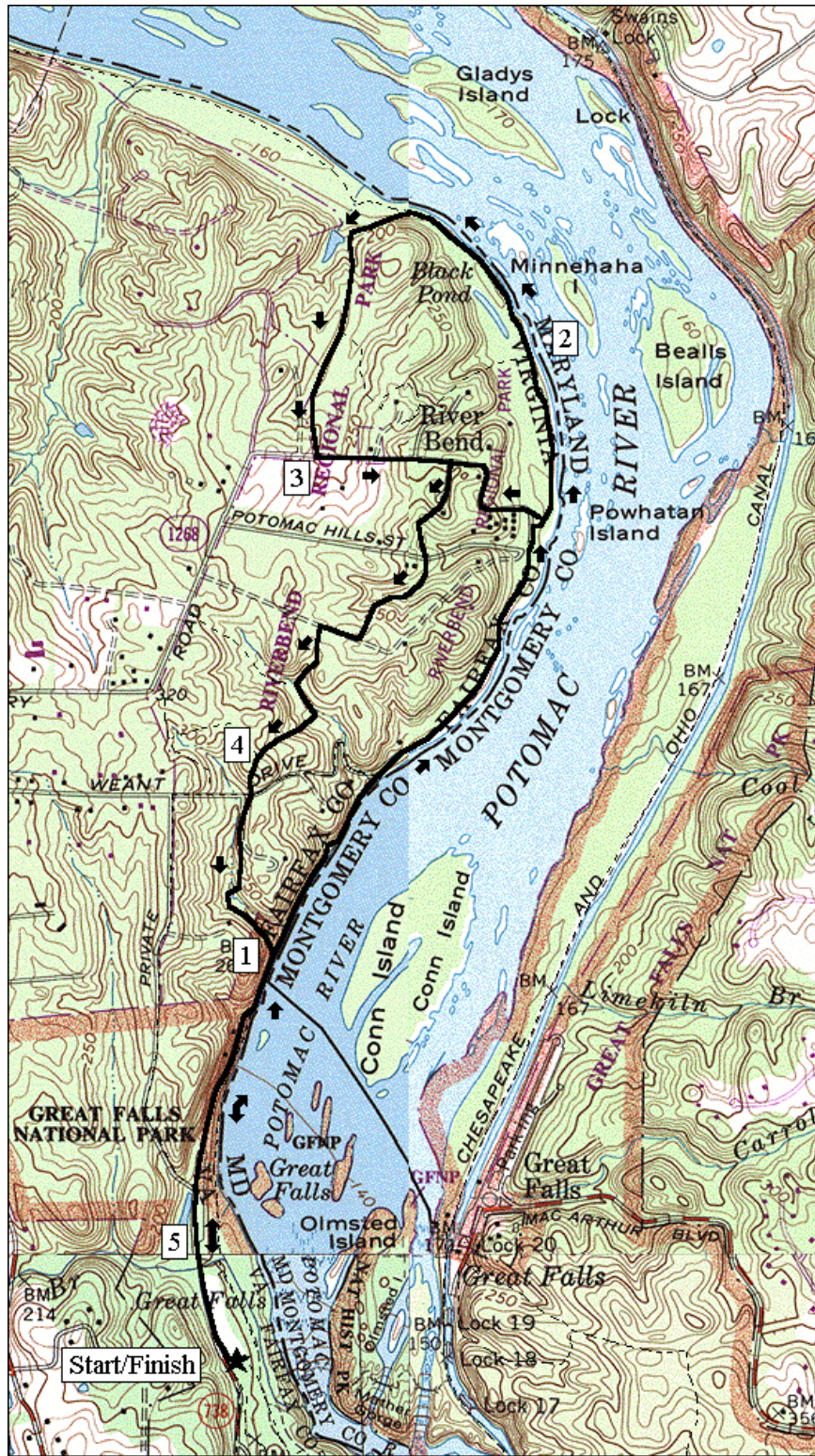
5.2 Mile Route

	L	3.0	Jeffery Rd (unmarked)
R	0.0		from the parking lot onto Old Dominion Dr
		0.15	Mine Run Trail on L
R/L	0.3		last parking on R; toward river on gravel road; becomes Potomac Heritage Trail (PHT)
		0.55	trail X on R
		0.75	aqueduct dam; rough rocks (!)
		1.0	Upland Trail (UT) on L (for return)
		1.15	Weant Dr on L (unmarked; gravel)
R/L	1.65		R at Potomac Hills St; L on paved trail to Visitor Center
		<*	
BR	1.7		pass the center then bear R to stay on the PHT; trail is sandy
		1.8	trail X on L
		1.9	trail X on L
		2.05	trail X on L to Nature Center
R	2.3		on wooden bridge to stay on PHT at trail X
BL	2.45		Paw Paw Trail; gravel road; blue blaze
		2.55	trail X on R at Black Pond
		2.65	trail X on L
S	2.75		trail X on L to creek & Nature Center
	L	3.0	Jeffery Rd (unmarked)
	S	3.15	Center Trail is S as road turns L
	R	3.25	Upland Trail (UT)
		>*	
		3.3	trail X on L to Visitor Center
		3.4	Potomac Hills St (unmarked)
		3.6	fire road
		3.7	at T to stay on UT
	L	3.75	at trail X on L to stay on UT
		3.8	trail X on L
	L	3.85	at T after bridge over stream; UT
	R	3.9	trail X on R; to stay on UT
	L	4.0	at T at top of hill to stay on UT
	CR	4.1	Weant Dr; to stay on UT
	L	4.15	at T to stay on UT
	R	4.25	at T at river; PHT
		4.5	aqueduct dam; rocks (!); Great Falls National Park
		4.65	trail X on L follows river
	R/L	4.9	Old Dominion Rd from parking
		5.05	Mine Run Trail on R
	L	5.2	Visitor Parking at xwalk

*3.95 Mile Route

			(unmarked)
		1.8	trail bears R; trail X on L
S	1.7		to Visitor Center parking on paved trail; leave the riverside
	1.75		across parking at xwalk & go up the stairs to the Center Trail head
	L	1.95	Upland Trail (pickup cues at mile 3.3 on 5.2 mile route)

Riverbend



MN TN
10½°
0 1000 FEET 0 500m 1000m
1 MILE
Printed from TOPO! ©1999 Wildflower Productions (www.topo.com)