

Jefferson Patterson Park: “Where History and Nature Surround You”

By Danita Boonchaisri

Sometimes the Southern Maryland weather is simply too nice to waste even a moment of daylight indoors. Couple that with a family that’s been cooped up for far too long and a tight budget and you might be wondering, “Where can we possibly go for a day of fun without breaking our budget?”

Jefferson Patterson Park & Museum (JPPM) has just the ticket – and that ticket is FREE!

History & Archaeology

JPPM was donated to the citizens of Maryland in 1983 by Mary Marvin Breckinridge Patterson. With 560 acres, 2.5 miles of shoreline, 65 archaeological sites and a rich and storied history, it was certainly the largest land gift ever given to the State of Maryland, and arguably one of the most important.

With archaeological evidence of human habitation going back to 7500 BC, to 1608 when Patuxent Indians encountered Capt. John Smith sailing off the shores, through 1814 when the Battle of St. Leonard Creek was fought off its banks during the War of 1812 and then to 1932 with Jefferson Patterson’s purchase of the property and naming it Point Farm Estate, historical and natural treasures abound here.

Water

There are two small beaches suitable for setting up a few chairs, digging in the sand and letting the kids splash about (no swimming allowed though). The park fronts the beautiful Patuxent River and St.

Leonard Creek and the gentle slope and shallow waters are safe for even wee ones. Kids will love hunting the shoreline for blue crabs, shells or driftwood.

A boardwalk leads to an area for boat access or kayak and canoe launching.

Hiking/Birding

There are a number of [trails](#) that circle the park, including some that go across or through planted fields, along the riverfront and through the woods. The Village Trail is ADA-accessible and winds through the Indian Village. The Riverside and War of 1812 Trails are about a mile long each and include interpretive signage. On any given day, you might see people jogging, strolling or seeking unique varieties of birds along the way. Some common birds to watch for include red-winged blackbirds, blue jays, song sparrows, American robins, ospreys and the occasional bald eagle.

Picnicking

There are dozens of places to spread a blanket and enjoy a quiet lunch, and picnic tables are abundant. Whether by the water, in one of the open fields, next to the Visitor Center or playground or by the exhibit barn, the views are gorgeous and you’re sure to find a spot to call your own. Bring a soccer ball or kite for a little post-lunch romp.



A Nature Playground!

A relatively new addition is the Nature Play Space, located near the visitor center. Its natural, wooden features, oversized “bird’s nest,” and two slides make it a shady, fun place for kids to explore and use their imagination outdoors.

Cycling

Bring your bikes, strollers or scooters and use the park’s paved and relatively flats roads and trails to get in some additional exercise. Roadways are shared with cars but traffic is minimal, the speed limit is 15 mph and drivers are courteous. (No skating or skateboarding allowed.)



A Visitor Center

The visitor center, located in a former cattle barn, features displays about the Pattersons, the science of archaeology and work being done on the property. The nearby barn features an archaeological exhibit and displays of antique farm equipment.



Take My Advice

- Before going, check the website for any [special events](#). These can add another layer of excitement to your visit but if you’re looking for a quiet day of peaceful outdoor reflection, you don’t want it spoiled by a squadron of bagpipers, drummers or Highland dancers on site for the annual Celtic Festival.
- Bring plenty of food and drinks – the park is at least 20 minutes from Prince Frederick, Lusby or Solomons, the nearest towns with restaurants or convenience stores.
- The park does have strategically placed porta johns but be sure to visit the facilities before taking off on a hike, visiting the Indian Village or heading to one of the beaches, especially with little ones in tow. It can be a long and miserable trudge back in an “emergency.” The bathrooms at the Visitor Center are best.
- If you can visit on a Thursday, call ahead to schedule a free 1 p.m. tour of the [Maryland Archaeological Conservation curation, research and conservation lab](#). The MAC lab is home to over 10 million fascinating archaeological artifacts from across Maryland and the docents love to immerse visitors in the world of historical relics and preservation. Drop-ins are okay but advanced registration is encouraged.
- Looking for a gorgeous place for a corporate retreat, meeting or wedding? JPPM has [rental facilities](#) that can accommodate up to 200 guests.
- Leashed dogs are allowed.



Getting There

Located at 10515 Mackall Road in St. Leonard, MD, JPPM is a little off the beaten path. The trip from DC takes about 1.5 hours, from the Beltway or Annapolis it's a little over an hour and from Baltimore it's an hour and 40 minutes. Once off the main Route 4 artery, you'll travel some back country roads so trust your GPS. The entrance can be easy to miss if you're not paying attention – if you find yourself dead-ended overlooking St. Leonard Creek, you've passed it.



Hours and Fees

The park is open from 7:30 a.m. to dusk every day except New Year's Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas and all activities described above are free.

There are a variety of lectures, demonstrations, workshops and events throughout the year, some of which have a nominal fee. Check the [events calendar](#) for details.