

# Chickahominy River Recreational Access Study

Prepared by the  
Richmond Regional Planning District Commission

October 31, 2007

Town of  
*Ashland*  
Counties of  
*Charles City*  
*Chesterfield*  
*Goochland*  
*Hanover*  
*Henrico*  
*New Kent*  
*Powhatan*  
City of  
*Richmond*



**Virginia Coastal Zone**  
MANAGEMENT PROGRAM



Planning District Commission

Regional Planning District Commission  
9211 Forest Hill Avenue, Suite 200  
Richmond, Virginia 23235  
Phone: 804.323.2033  
Fax: 804.323.2025  
[www.richmondregional.org](http://www.richmondregional.org)

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## Purpose of Study

The Chickahominy River Recreational Access Study is intended to provide the foundation for efforts to preserve existing access to the river by canoeists, kayakers, anglers, and bird watchers, as well as to investigate the potential addition of future public access sites to create a designated water trail on the river. This report is intended for use by government agencies, non-profits, and anyone interested in planning and promoting public access along this unique river in the counties of Charles City, Hanover, Henrico, and New Kent and the City of Richmond. By focusing at the watershed and river corridor level and by thinking beyond political divisions such as city, town, and county, the study concludes with recommendations for steps to take to improve recreational access for this shared natural resource.

## Introduction

This study was developed over the course of three months, from June 2007 to August 2007, as a special project for the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program. The Richmond Regional Planning District Commission (RRPDC) staff worked with a committee of representatives from counties within the watershed to develop this document. In February, staff also participated in a planning meeting of the James River Association, which has a grant to develop a water trail with historic interpretation. (Note: A portion of James City County, which has several facilities included in this study, is within the watershed, but is part of the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission.)

**Figure 1.** Kayakers on the Chickahominy River near Route 5 and Chickahominy Riverfront Park





This study is broken into four sections and appendices with resource information and existing conditions data. The first section examines the Chickahominy River watershed as a whole including its nature, historical resources, recreation, and tourism. The second section describes the existing and potential access sites to the water by canoeists and kayakers along the river and its main tributaries, and includes a summary of important factors for recreational users and planners, including site development issues. The third section looks at what types of planning has been done to provide recreational access on the Chickahominy River and in the area. The fourth section provides suggestions to persons, interested groups, and local governments who are interested in developing blueways and increased access to the water.

As a recreational resource for fishing, boating, and related nature recreation, the Chickahominy River has potential for enhancements that could provide additional benefits to the region. The river is within easy driving distance of large population centers, making the area's recreational opportunities accessible to thousands of people.

**What is a blueway?** A blueway is a water feature or water trail corridor which can serve potentially multiple benefits, including active or passive recreational use, wildlife habitat, and natural heritage resource protection. The terms “blueway” and “water trail” are used interchangeably in this study. Blueways are comparable to land-based trails as they both have routes with beginning and ending access points with various points of interest along the way. They can be for day use and/or overnight with camping sites for the non-motorized boating public. These water-based trails can be established with features and facilities that make their use more enjoyable for residents and visitors, including signage, maps with routes and travel times, various amenities, and safety systems.

## Nature, History, Recreation, and Tourism in the Chickahominy River Watershed

This first section of the study describes the entire watershed in terms of its location, ecological significance, historical and cultural resources including historical landmarks, and local recreation and tourism in the area.

### Location of the Chickahominy River Watershed

The Chickahominy River and its tributaries are situated in east-central Virginia and flow through seven jurisdictions including: the Town of Ashland, the City of Richmond, and Henrico, Hanover, New Kent, Charles City, and James City counties. The river, shown on Map 1, serves as a major boundary line for each of the five counties. The river flows into the James River and is part of the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

The Chickahominy River watershed covers 470 square miles or roughly 300,000 acres. The river's drainage basin begins northwest of Richmond and the first nine miles of the Chickahominy River flows through the eastern Piedmont becoming a Coastal Plain stream near Mechanicsville. This upper third of the watershed contains more residential development than the middle and lower portions of the river. Southeast of Providence Forge in New Kent County, the Chickahominy River becomes a lake. The 1,200-acre Chickahominy Lake is held by a low dam, Walker's Dam, shown in Figure 2. The lake supplies drinking water for Newport News Water Works. Little Creek and Diascund Creek are also impounded nearby for Newport News Water Works. Below Walker's Dam, the Chickahominy becomes tidal and flows south through marsh lands and finally empties into the James River. A third tributary, Morris Creek, joins the river by the Chickahominy Wildlife Management Area (CWMA) not far from the James River.

**Figure 2.** View of Walker's Dam with New Kent County on the left of the dam and Charles City County on the right side. (Photograph provided by Charles City County.)







The watershed is criss-crossed by several major highways and roads. Interstates 64 and 295, US Route 60 (Pocahontas Trail), US Route 33, and Route 5 cross generally west-east. Major north-south roads that provide access to the river and its tributaries include Interstate 95, US Route 301, US Route 360 (Mechanicsville Turnpike), Route 156, Route 106, Route 155, and Route 623.

## Natural Capital

The Chickahominy River watershed is rich in biodiversity. The plants and wildlife, which attract anglers, hunters, and bird lovers, live within a fragile ecosystem and include many rare, endangered, and threatened species. Recreational access to the river and its tributaries must be planned carefully in order to conserve such a unique resource. The plants, wildlife, wetlands, and types of natural communities within the watershed are briefly described in this section.

### Wetlands and Natural Community Types

Approximately 4,000 acres of wetlands are located within the Chickahominy River watershed. Wetland areas are seasonally or perennially wet due to replenishment of water from a groundwater source or the pooling of water during the change in seasons. General wetland types are briefly described in Figure 3. (See Map 2 for the location of the river's wetland areas.)

Several natural communities within the Chickahominy River watershed make up distinctive habitats which are rare in Virginia. According to the Natural Heritage Division of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), these natural communities include tidal freshwater marshes, Coastal Plain depression wetlands, tidal bald cypress forest wetlands, a fluvial terrace woodland, and Coastal Plain/Piedmont acidic seepage swamps. The Natural Heritage Division of DCR also provides a GIS analysis for identifying, prioritizing, and linking natural habitats in Virginia through its Virginia Conservation Land Needs Assessment (VCLNA). Mapped areas show natural, unfragmented lands, "cores," natural landscape blocks, and others with relatively little human disturbance. The lower Chickahominy River watershed in the tidal zone has areas of significance as natural cores, clusters, corridors, or landscape blocks. (For more information see links to the DCR web site in Appendix A: Resources.)

**Figure 3.** Wetland Types

Estuarine Wetlands - tidal wetlands in low-wave-energy environments where the salinity of the water is greater than 0.5 part per thousand and is variable owing to evaporation and the mixing of seawater and freshwater; includes tidal wetlands of coastal rivers and embayments, salty tidal marshes, mangrove swamps, and tidal flats.

Lacustrine wetlands - wetlands within a lake or reservoir greater than 20 acres or within a lake or reservoir less than 20 acres if the water is greater than 2 meters deep in the deepest part of the basin; ocean-derived salinity is less than 0.5 part per thousand.

Palustrine wetlands - freshwater wetlands including open water bodies of less than 20 acres in which water is less than 2 meters deep; includes marshes, wet meadows, fens, playas, potholes, pocosins, bogs, swamps, and shallow ponds; most wetlands are in the Palustrine system.

Source: USGS, National Water Summary on Wetland Resources, Glossary, 1998

## Plants and Wildlife

The forested portions in the upper and middle watershed above Walker's Dam contain red maples, tupelos, black gums, green ashes, and overcup oaks. As the river approaches Chickahominy Lake, the trees become more dispersed and bald cypress and tupelo trees are abundant. In the lower watershed area, the vegetation along the widening river and marshy tidal creeks consists of button bushes, alders and yellow irises. Aquatic vegetation includes vibrant beds of yellow pond lily and pickerelweed. The vegetation in these tidal sections is marked by wild rice, cattails and big cordgrass.

**Figure 4:** Tidal wetland (Photograph provided by Charles City County)



The abundance of wildlife in the undeveloped areas of the watershed is well known. Mammals such as white-tailed deer, muskrats, otters, beavers, minks, and raccoons live along the banks of the river. For bird watchers, wild turkeys, wood ducks, great horned owls, red-tailed hawks, and pileated woodpeckers are found. Seasonal birds include mallards, black ducks, prothonotary warblers, wood thrushes, scarlet tanagers, and yellow-billed cuckoos. Populations of great blue herons, ospreys, snowy egrets, kingfishers, and bald eagles inhabit Chickahominy Lake. Aquatic life includes fresh water mussels, fiddler crabs, snakes, eastern mud turtles, and rare reptiles and amphibians. For anglers, chain pickerel, bowfin, yellow perch, channel catfish, long-nose gar, blue catfish, and largemouth bass are often abundant.

Rare, threatened, and endangered species are plants and animals identified as species of special concern and measures of protection are needed. The Division of Natural Heritage within the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation maintains a database of information on rare and endangered species. Map 2 shows the general locations of the habitats of rare and endangered species within the Chickahominy River watershed. These habitats amount to 19,574 acres of the watershed. The small whorled pogonia, the sensitive joint vetch, and the bald eagle (recently removed from the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife, but protected as a State Threatened Species under Virginia law) are among the more than a dozen species of state and/or federal concern. Ensuring the vitality and survival of these species depends on conserving land and protecting their fragile environments.

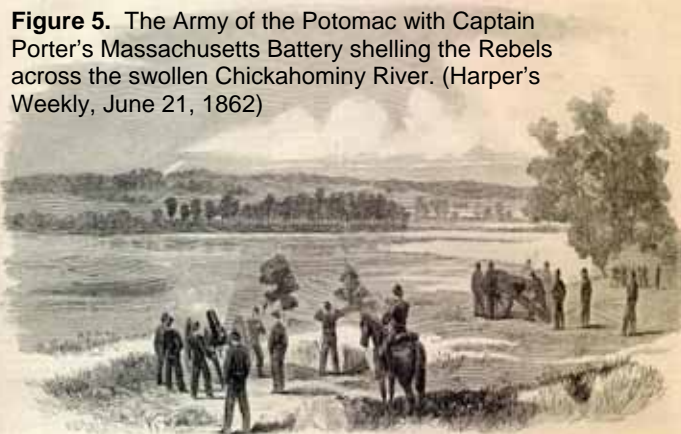
**Map 2: Natural Resources in the Chickahominy Watershed**

## Historical and Cultural Resources

Historical and cultural resources in the Chickahominy River watershed are also diverse and abundant. They are described briefly in the following sections. Increasing the public's access to the river will provide additional opportunities to present information to the public about the historical, cultural, and natural aspects of the area.

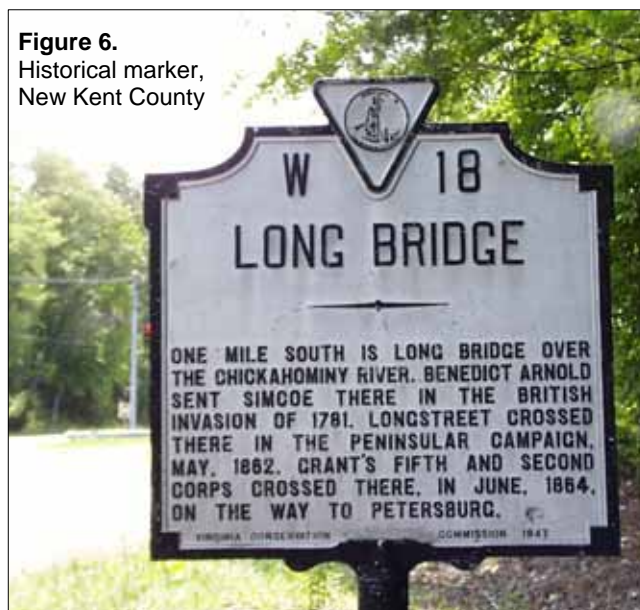
The Chickahominy River is named after the Native American people who have lived in the region for hundreds of years. The name Chickahominy translates to "coarse ground corn people." The Chickahominy people lived in the area prior to the establishment of the English settlement at Jamestown. Members of the Chickahominy tribe were among those who captured Captain John Smith of Jamestown as he explored the land along the Chickahominy River.

The river was also instrumental during the Civil War, as its swamps influenced the tactics, placement, and movement of both the Union and Confederate army troops. Figure 5 shows a sketch from that historical period. Earth mounds and trenches constructed in the watershed during the battles of Seven Pines and Cold Harbor still exist today along Chickahominy Bluffs and Gaines Mill.



**Figure 5.** The Army of the Potomac with Captain Porter's Massachusetts Battery shelling the Rebels across the swollen Chickahominy River. (Harper's Weekly, June 21, 1862)

## Historic Landmarks and Markers



**Figure 6.**  
Historical marker,  
New Kent County

Historic properties and landmarks are located throughout the watershed and are often close to the Chickahominy River. These sites, including Civil War battlefields, historic homes, and museums, draw thousands of local and distant visitors each year. Dozens of state and county historic markers (such as the one shown here in Figure 6) promote awareness of historic events and of resources of local and national significance.



## Scenic River Designations

The Chickahominy is a picturesque river. Residents and visitors can attest to the enjoyment of viewing its unique and beautiful scenery. In 1990, a 10.2 mile section of the Chickahominy River, beginning at U.S. Route 360 between Hanover and Henrico counties and ending at their shared boundary with New Kent County above Bottoms Bridge, was designated as a state Scenic River by the Virginia Scenic Rivers Program. The signs shown in Figure 7 are at one of the crossings in this section. The Scenic River designation establishes official recognition of the natural, scenic, historic, and recreational value of the river and places it among Virginia's most valuable river resources. The downstream sections of the Chickahominy River have been determined to be "qualified" or "potential" components within the program. (The Scenic River Program is on the DCR web site under Recreational Planning. The web site and many others are included under the resources section in Appendix A.)

**Figure 7.** Creighton Road Bridge



## The Virginia Capital Trail

The Virginia Capital Trail is a planned pedestrian and bicycle trail that will connect the Commonwealth's former capital cities of Jamestown and Williamsburg to the present capital of Richmond along the scenic Route 5 corridor. On May 1, 2007 the Chickahominy section of the trail in James City County opened to the public; it is four and a half miles long, from Jamestown High School to the Chickahominy Riverfront Park. When it is completed, the trail will traverse over 50 miles and pass through five jurisdictions.



## Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail

Birding and wildlife viewing are among the most popular forms of recreation in the United States. The Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail created by the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) enables users to locate habitats and enjoy the area's wildlife in their natural environment. The trail's Richmond and Plantation loops have several stops within the Chickahominy watershed. Linking these points of interest to the Chickahominy River presents tourists with excellent recreational and educational opportunities. (For more information on the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail visit the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' web site listed in Appendix A.)

## Public Lands in the Chickahominy River Watershed

Hiking and exploring in the watershed are also possible at several local parks, state lands, and national battlefield parks. Visitors can leave their water crafts behind to explore many natural areas. In Figure 8, the names of parks that are within the watershed and that provide opportunities for nature study are listed by the jurisdiction in which they are located.

These areas provide many outstanding settings for birding and for learning about the ecology of the watershed. Parks such as Vawter Street Park in Henrico County contain trails and a boardwalk with winter time views of a great blue heron rookery. Additionally, many of the watershed's public spaces provide a way to explore the region's history and learn about the role of the river during the Civil War. The National Park Service's Richmond National Battlefield Park, headquartered in the City of Richmond, includes several sites within the Chickahominy River watershed such as Cold Harbor, Gaines Mill, and Chickahominy Bluffs with areas for strolling and birding.

Other public lands within the watershed feature cultural and historic sites that have excellent opportunities for environmental and nature education. Links to local parks' department web sites and state agencies are in Appendix A at the end of the document under Local Links to Parks and Recreation and Public Recreational Facilities.

### Figure 8: Public lands in the Chickahominy River watershed

**Charles City County** • Mt. Zion Park •  
Chickahominy Wildlife Management Area

**Hanover County** • Mechanicsville Park  
(proposed) • Black Creek Park (proposed) •  
Cold Harbor Battlefield Park • Gaines Mill  
Battlefield Park

**Henrico County** • Three Lakes Park • Vawter  
Street Park • Chickahominy Bluffs National  
Battlefield Park • Meadowview Park  
(undeveloped)

**James City County** • Chickahominy Riverfront  
Park

**New Kent County** • Diascund Lake property  
(undeveloped) • Crawfords State Forest

**City of Richmond** • Bryan Park



## Tourism and Recreation

Outdoor recreation in a unique setting is the main attraction of the Chickahominy River. The following section outlines the connections among tourism, ecotourism, and blueways. Along the Chickahominy River corridor, there are opportunities for localities or groups to launch ecotourism programs.

Almost 1.5 million people live within an hour's drive of the Chickahominy River (see Table 1). In addition, millions of people visit nearby Williamsburg and Jamestown every year; the colonial history and theme park attractions of the area east of the Chickahominy River are part of the reason that Virginia is a top U.S. tourist destination. The Chickahominy River's location and its natural, cultural, and historic resources can provide an excellent opportunity for those in search of leisure time activities. For travelers, the river is also in proximity to picturesque state parks, historic attractions, and heritage trails which are available year-round.

In addition to the thousands of people who already fish and hunt on the Chickahominy River, the fast-growing ecotourism market remains a largely untapped sector of the tourism industry for the area. Ecotourism is defined as travel to destinations where the flora, fauna, and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. Principles of ecotourism include minimizing impacts of tourism, building environmental knowledge, and increasing cultural knowledge and awareness. Ecotourism can produce economic benefits for communities in rural areas. Similarly, sustainable tourism is an industry which attempts to make a low impact on the environment and local culture, while helping to generate income, employment, and the conservation of local ecosystems.

A good model for these types of ecotourism programs is the water trail of the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program on the Eastern Shore; it includes an eco-tour guide certification program. See the links in Appendix A for more information about this Coastal Zone Management Program sponsored model as well as other programs.

**Table 1.** 2006 Area Population Estimates

<b>River's Adjacent City &amp; Counties</b>	<b>Population 2006</b>
Charles City County	7,221
Hanover County	98,983
Henrico County	284,399
James City County	59,741
New Kent County	16,852
Richmond (City)	192,913
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>660,109</b>
<b>Other Nearby Cities &amp; Counties</b>	
Chesterfield County	296,718
Colonial Heights (City)	17,676
Dinwiddie County	25,695
Emporia (City)	5,625
Goochland County	20,085
Greensville County	11,006
Hopewell (City)	22,731
King William County	15,381
Newport News (City)	178,281
Petersburg (City)	32,445
Powhatan County	27,649
Prince George County	36,184
Surry County	7,119
Sussex County	12,249
Williamsburg (City)	11,793
York County	61,879
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>782,516</b>
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>1,442,625</b>
Source: U.S. Census Bureau	

## Access Points on the Chickahominy River and its Major Tributaries

The following pages contain an assessment of conditions related to boating access on the Chickahominy River and its tributaries for small boats such as kayaks and canoes. After an overview and a map with site locations (Map 3), the river is described by its access within three sections. A list of hazards and challenges concludes this section.

### Access Points Overview

RRPDC staff visited twenty-one different sites along the Chickahominy River and its major creeks. Staff used the Chickahominy Watershed Guide Map printed and distributed by the Chickahominy Watershed Alliance in 1998 as a reference for the various access points in the watershed. The sites were photographed and documented; a brief description of each site along the river can be found in Appendix B. Map 3 shows the location of each site which is color coded to indicate what type it is. The types are:

- Informal access points – nine small areas, typically located near bridge crossings with no amenities and rugged non-motorized boat put-ins. Trails and pathways leading down to the drop-in areas are undeveloped at these sites. Parking is not available at most of the sites; anglers and boaters generally leave vehicles next to the road in the right-of-way.
- Commercial access points – seven sites available for motorboat launches; canoeists and kayakers put-in from a boat ramp. Fees for launching and/or parking are charged.
- Public access points – five publicly-owned and designed for use by the public for launching boats.

**Figure 9.** Diascund Creek at Route 60 between New Kent and James City counties



The site descriptions in Appendix B include the presence of parking facilities, restrooms, restaurants, and boat ramps. The descriptions begin at Mile 61.4 at the Creighton Road Crossing and end at Chickahominy Riverfront Park. They also include sites on Diascund and Morris creeks including the informal put-in shown in Figure 9. The measurements are very approximate.

**Map 3: Recreational Access Points in the Chickahominy River Watershed**

## Descriptions of Access Points along the Middle and Lower Chickahominy

Potential boat access begins in the river's middle watershed area and ends approximately 59 river miles later near the confluence at the James River in the lower watershed. The potentially boatable section can be divided into roughly three segments 1) the swamp – the river as it flows between Henrico and Hanover counties and between New Kent and Charles City counties, 2) Chickahominy Lake – the reservoir behind Walker's Dam between Charles City and New Kent counties, and 3) the tidal section of the river with its many tidal creeks in New Kent, Charles City, and James City counties.

All three segments have access points that vary in type, conditions for paddlers, amenities, and overall conditions. The following discussion gives a brief overview of the potentially navigable sections of the river.

### The Swamp – Creighton Road to Route 155 – Mile 61.4 to Mile 33.2

The river access points from Creighton Road between Hanover and Henrico counties to Route 155 between Charles City and New Kent counties are generally near bridge crossings and are more commonly used by fisherman than by canoeists. In this section, the narrow sandy-bottomed river meanders through forested wetlands in a wide flood plain. Due to low water, fallen trees, snakes, and other obstacles, this portion of the river is not navigable for much of the year. Because of the slow current, an "out and back" journey could be possible or even preferable starting at one of the put-ins.

In this first section of the river, there are six access points: Creighton Road Crossing, Route 156 Crossing, Bottoms Bridge, Long Bridge, Crawfords State Forest and Route 155 Crossing. All of the sites in this section of the river are informal ones; they lack amenities for visitors such as secure parking, restroom facilities, telephones, and trash receptacles.

**Figure 10.** Long Bridge between Charles City and New Kent counties



Because of fallen trees and the narrow channel, kayaks would not be appropriate. Of these informal access points, some parking does exist near the Route 156 Crossing on the Henrico County side of the river and at Long Bridge (Route 106) on the Charles City side; these two sites have paved or gravel areas in the VDOT right-of-way with room for parking. Figure 10 shows a view of the river bank from the bridge at Long Bridge. Crawfords State Forest further down river is public land, but due

to the distance from Route 60 where the entrance is gated to the river, it is not practical to launch a boat there.

### **The Lake – Route 155 to Ed Allen's Boats and Bait – Mile 33.2 to Mile 24.0**

Chickahominy Lake is a drinking water reservoir formed by Walker's Dam. The lake extends from Route 155 just south of Providence Forge approximately nine miles east to the dam. There are one public and two commercial access points in this section: New Kent Forestry Center, Eagle's Landing, and Ed Allen's Boat and Bait, which is located near Walker's Dam. Anglers in small motor boats frequent the lake, launching for a fee at the private boat ramps.

Route 155 has no parking areas, though anglers do pull over to fish. The area is very close to many amenities in Providence Forge and is located along the path of the future

**Figure 11.** Fishing on Chickahominy Lake



Courthouse-to-Courthouse Bike Route which is being planned to follow Route 155 from Charles City Courthouse to New Kent Courthouse. Approximately five miles down the lake, New Kent Forestry Center, managed by the Virginia Department of Forestry, has property on the north bank, but most of the wetlands surrounding the property are part of the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' Game Farm Marsh. This marsh is only accessible by boat from launch sites elsewhere. Currently, the forestry center limits access to its

property from the water and from land; groups obtain special permission from the center's staff to launch canoes and kayaks, usually for educational purposes during weekday business hours.

Parking and boat launching is available (for small fees) three to five miles further down the lake at Eagle's Landing and at Ed Allen's Boat and Bait. In Figure 11, a fisherman is shown casting from a small motor boat on the lake near Ed Allen's. These commercial sites offer visitors many amenities such as restrooms, nearby camping areas, shops, and restaurants. Use of motorized boats becomes more widespread on this segment of the Chickahominy.

In April of 2007, a large breach occurred in Walker's Dam near the boat lock structure causing the water levels behind the low dam to rise and fall with the tides. The boat lock structure and dam are closed to fishing. The City of Newport News, the owner, has budgeted for several million dollars to repair the dam.

### **The Tidal Chickahominy – Walker's Dam to Chickahominy Riverfront Park– Mile 23.6 to Mile 2.4 (including Diascund Creek and Morris Creek)**

Below Walker's Dam, the Chickahominy River meanders around several necks and then widens to a mile or more in places. The main channel of the tidal river runs near marshes and bluffs as it drains a dozen or so large tidal creeks. For those paddling on the



Chickahominy, wakes created by these boats can be hazardous. The water level and flow also begins to fluctuate with the tides in this portion of the river. The shallow areas along the coast line and in the creeks are more suitable for kayakers and canoeists, although small boat access to most of the creeks is limited.

In the first 10 miles below the dam, the few launch sites along the river are privately-owned and operated. They are Rockahock Campground (at the dam), Colonial Harbor Marina, Riverside Camp, Chickahominy Haven, and River's Rest Marina. A wide range of facilities can be found at these sites including major boat repair, restaurants, boat slips, swimming pools, campgrounds, a large festival venue, and a motel.

**Figure 12.** View from River Landing at CWMA in Charles City County



Diascund Creek is a tidal creek that enters the river near Chickahominy Haven and extends several miles north to the dam at Diascund Creek Reservoir. The creek forms a boundary line between New Kent and James City counties. There are no commercial or public access sites in the tidal portion of Diascund Creek. It has been included in this study because of the potential for small boat use on the creek.

The access sites along the last 10 miles of the Chickahominy River are few, but public, including Brickyard Landing in James City County and the Chickahominy Wildlife Management Area's (CWMA) River Landing on the Charles City side. In this part of the river, tidal creeks such as Shipyard, Yarmouth, Blackstump, and others can be explored with less competition from motor boats. Access to many of these creeks however require long paddles across open water, as shown in Figure 12.

The access sites along the last 10 miles of the Chickahominy River are few, but public, including Brickyard Landing in

**Figure 13.** Chickahominy Riverfront Park boat ramp owned by James City County with Gordon Creek in the foreground and Chickahominy River in the distance to the left





Further down stream, Morris Creek along the southern side of the Chickahominy Wildlife Management Area extends for more than 10 miles inland to Route 623. A boat launch on the creek is available for use by canoeists and kayakers.

The final access point on the river at the Chickahominy Riverfront Park (Figure 13) is the only place that provides a range of services and rentals for canoeists and kayakers. A long loop around Gordon and Nettles creeks is a popular route for energetic paddlers. Camping is also available, and there is direct access to the Capital Trail from here.

## **Important Factors for Canoeists and Kayakers**

This section lists the challenges of the existing loose network of access sites for canoeists and kayakers who may be using these now or in the near future.

### **Swamp**

- Limited or no parking areas
- No restrooms
- Potential for trespassing and conflicts between users and owners of private property near bridges which result in limiting access
- Getting lost in remote swamp areas
- Low water
- Downed trees
- Snakes
- Disturbing wildlife
- Causing erosion

### **Lake**

- Sharing commercial launch sites with larger boats
- New Kent Forestry Center – only open for permitted group boat use
- Boats wakes
- Less of a wilderness experience

### **Tidal River and Creeks**

- Tides
- Winds
- Distances
- Sharing launch sites with larger boats
- Boats wakes

## **Site Development Issues for Recreation Planners**

At present, the majority of canoers and kayakers must make use of unmarked slopes and banks for launching boats, and safe, user-friendly access to the river is limited. Boaters can use the same boat ramps as power boaters, but such use can create conflicts and safety hazards such as slippery surfaces and shallow slopes which make getting in or out

of boats difficult. Use of the informal access points might seem easier or more convenient than formal locations; however, some problems with informal access sites include trespassing on private land, unsafe or inadequate parking, unsafe or inadequate boat launching facilities, and possible degradation to environmentally sensitive areas.

Improving existing sites or creating new ones to create a blueway network presents many challenges. Some of these are listed below:

1. Bringing cars and people to the water's edge requires environmental permits and other considerations for construction.
2. Budgeting for maintenance of improved boat put-ins is an important consideration.
3. Public lands held by the Virginia Department of Forestry at the New Kent Forestry Center and Crawfords State Forest are not managed for canoe and kayak boat access by the public.
4. Current commercial sites along the Chickahominy Lake and River accommodate paddlers; however, trends in waterfront development show that smaller establishments are being lost to private developers who turn commercial marinas into private condominiums with private boat use. The Chickahominy Riverfront Park and other sites in James City County present examples of a locality buying private marinas and campgrounds for public use.

Limited user information is available for recreational boaters about trip planning, wildlife viewing, and the cultural and historical information specific to the Chickahominy River. There is a need to provide recreational paddlers adequate access facilities, routes, and information. Destination trips on the Chickahominy are limited because of gaps in access points. These gaps make linkages to other access sites difficult and less efficient. Moreover, rivers typically have safety concerns, due to potential water hazards like rocks and trees located above and below the water's surface. Currently, information alerting users to potential water hazards on the Chickahominy is not displayed at access sites or made available elsewhere. Signage, maps, and brochures can be sources of information to help paddlers avoid risky areas along the waterway.

If recreational usage by anglers and boaters increases on the Chickahominy River, demand for more public access sites throughout the corridor will rise. Recreational facilities for other outdoor activities might also increase the demand for areas with nature trails and bird and wildlife viewing. Additionally, development along the river in the form of home building could threaten public access to the Chickahominy and unregulated housing development along the river could easily disrupt its present beauty and natural characteristics.

# **Planning for Public Access to the Chickahominy River – Local, State, and National**

## **Comprehensive Plans – Local Governments**

Local governments throughout the Chickahominy River watershed have adopted comprehensive plans and park and recreation plans to help coordinate development in their jurisdictions and promote the overall visions of the future. All of the comprehensive plans in the watershed's counties include goals and objectives to conserve and protect natural and cultural resources. The plans also include goals to identify potential sites where recreational river access to the public can be provided. However, in the counties of Hanover, Henrico, Charles City, New Kent, and in the City of Richmond no known recreational water access projects are presently being planned for the Chickahominy River or its tributaries. (See the section Local Comprehensive Plans Online in Appendix A: Resources for web sites and more information about the plans.)

## **Virginia Outdoors Plan 2007 Draft – Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)**

The *Virginia Outdoors Plan 2007 Draft*, prepared by the Commonwealth's Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), provides recommendations related to the development of blueways and water access in the state. For the Richmond region, the plan recommends access to the region's rivers and streams as necessary for meeting water-related recreational demands. Where opportunities are available, lands should be acquired or use agreements arranged with private property owners to help meet the demand for public access, and portages should be created around dams and other river obstacles. Furthermore, access considerations include navigable rivers (such as the Chickahominy River) of the state that should be managed as water trails and public access areas with support facilities developed at appropriate intervals along the major rivers. Additionally, regional and local governments should work with state agencies to market water trails through brochures, maps, signage, and the media. The plan also recommends that local jurisdictions should encourage both private and public landowners to operate rest stops and boat-in-only campgrounds along water trails at suitable site locations along Virginia rivers and streams.

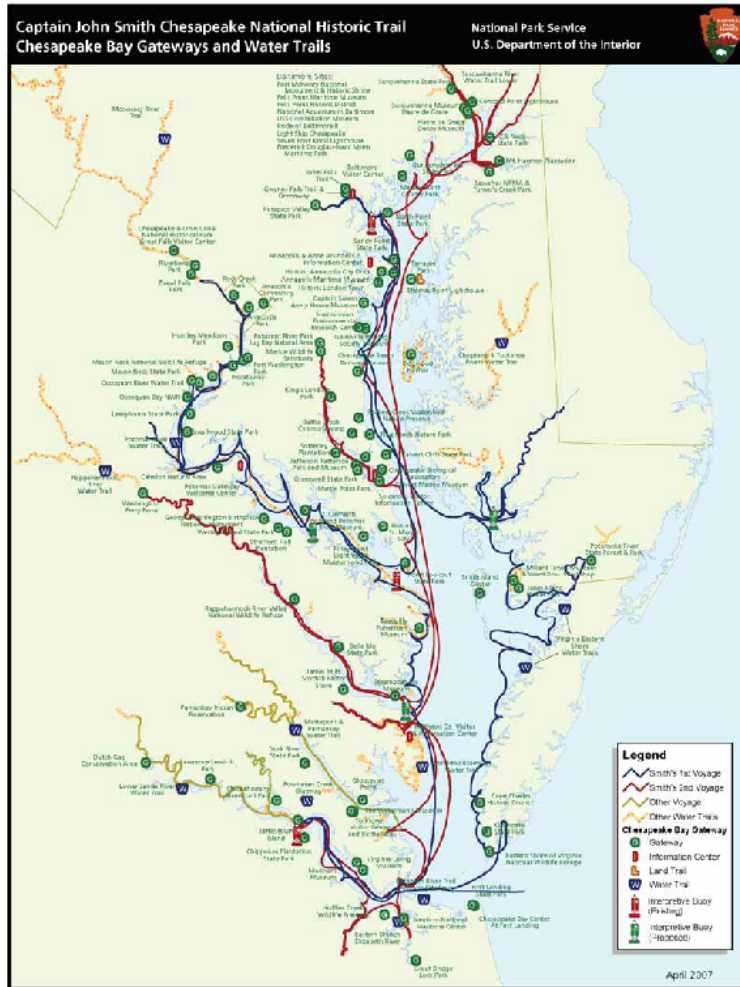
The *Virginia Outdoors Plan 2007 Draft* contains a specific recommendation for the Chickahominy River calling for a regional park in Charles City County south of Providence Forge which would complement the Chickahominy River Wildlife Management Area downstream.

## **The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail**

The John Smith national historic trail is the first national water trail in the United States. In commemoration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Smith's exploration of the Chesapeake Bay, the trail is made up of a network of sites within the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, including the Chickahominy River. The water trail follows the journeys of John Smith as he navigated the Bay and its rivers. Currently, many sites along Smith's

explorations are part of the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network. The Network provides grants to develop water trails in and along the rivers and bays that make up the national trail.

Figure 14: National Park Service Water Trail map.



The Chickahominy River played a significant role in John Smith's explorations. By developing blueways along this historic resource, the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network can be linked to the Richmond region and the history of John Smith's travels along the Chickahominy River can be provided to visitors.

In 2007, the James River Association (JRA) received a grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities to help establish a land and water-based route highlighting historic events along the navigable portions of the Chickahominy River. RRPDC staff participated in a stakeholders' meeting in February. The JRA is collaborating with the Chickahominy Tribe, as well as the Virginia Council on Indians, the

Conservation Fund, adjacent counties, and other interested parties, to encourage heritage tourism along the Chickahominy River, to increase awareness of the river's natural and historic resources, and the need to protect them. As of this writing, the project had not been completed.

## The Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay and the Chickahominy Watershed Alliance

In 1997, the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay (ACB), in partnership with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service formed the Chickahominy Watershed Alliance (CWA). The CWA completed habitat restoration projects, fostered partnerships with community groups, and created environmental education programs. In 1998, the CWA published a watershed guide that identified existing landings, marinas, dams, campgrounds, and sites of historical interest along the Chickahominy River. The guide includes information on the river's natural resources, early history, and information about water conditions. In the

late 1990s, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service created geographic information system mapping throughout the Chickahominy River watershed. The watershed alliance was short-lived. RRPDC staff used its watershed guide in research for this study.

## **Blueways and Water Trails in Central and East Central Virginia**

The popularity of recreational paddling is generating interest in water-based trails and blueways all over the U.S. and in the Richmond and Williamsburg areas as well. Blueways are designated sections or routes along rivers, streams or across other bodies of water such as lakes or salt water for recreational canoeing, kayaking and boating activities. Examples of three area projects (although not within the Chickahominy watershed) are described below.

### **The Mattaponi, Pamunkey, and York Water Trails**

The Mattaponi and Pamunkey Rivers Association (MPRA), a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of the Mattaponi and Pamunkey rivers, has worked with state and federal agencies to develop water trails in the York River watershed. The trail follows the Algonquin Trace, the waterway used by Native American tribes to travel between villages. A series of kiosks with educational information are being placed at public boat ramps along the rivers. MPRA is working with Hanover County to install a kiosk near Hanover Courthouse at a river access point on Route 301. The association's web site provides links to tidal charts for the rivers. (The Pamunkey and York rivers run along the northern county boundaries of Hanover, New Kent, and James City counties.)

### **Lower Appomattox River Trail**

The Friends of the Lower Appomattox River (FOLAR), another non-profit organization, has developed both greenways and blueways along the Appomattox River which flows along the southern boundary of Chesterfield County. The Crater Planning District Commission sponsors FOLAR. In addition to the development of trails and water access sites, FOLAR has created a river and trail guide to assist interested residents and visitors. (Localities adjacent to the Lower Appomattox include Chesterfield, Dinwiddie, and Prince George counties and the cities of Petersburg, Colonial Heights, and Hopewell.)

**Figure 15.** Volunteers plant trees in flood plain near greenway trail along the Appomattox River (Courtesy of FOLAR)





## Powhatan Creek Park and Blueway

Powhatan Creek is another tributary in James City County that flows into the lower James River; the Powhatan Creek watershed is directly east of the Chickahominy River watershed. The one-acre park next to Jamestown Road (State Route 31) has a “carry-in” boat launch area; it was developed by James City County with matching grants used to assist with the cost of site improvements. The park has five small fishing piers, interpretive materials, and an unpaved parking lot with space for 20 vehicles.

**Figure 16:** Powhatan Creek launch site and fishing piers



In 2002, the county received authorization from the Virginia Marine Resources Commission to install the fishing piers and the steps/boat slide, shown in Figure 16, for the county-owned site. The steps/boat slide replaced a dirt boat ramp. The new ramp with steps was specifically designed as a concrete structure to reduce the need for continual maintenance and the step-down tiered design was designed to discourage the use of motorized watercraft that had been adversely

impacting the shoreline along the water access park.

**Figure 17:** Blueway Signage



In 2004, the county received a grant for \$51,200 from the National Park Service’s Chesapeake Gateways Network program for refurbishing the site (including the signage shown in Figure 17) as well as funding assistance from the Coastal Resources Management program of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The county’s parks and recreation department created the concept plan for the improvements and a local engineering firm was responsible for the site plan and construction drawings.

The put-in is located on the blueway which follows the Powhatan Creek to the James River near Jamestown Island. James City County has also recently acquired a private yacht basin downstream.



## Recreational Access Opportunities and Recommendations

The Chickahominy River is a beautiful and unique recreational resource that can be enjoyed year-round by outdoor enthusiasts. Creating a river trail can distinguish the river as a recreational asset and attraction for ecotourism. Key trail features include: designated access sites as points of entry to the river, a program to maintain open river passage between the sites, and production of informational materials to facilitate public awareness and use of blueways. This section of the study recommends several courses of action that can be taken by governments, advocates, and businesses to improve access to the river and to create a blueway plan.

### Recommendations

1. Improve existing public boating access facilities to increase recreational opportunities. Upgrades to facilities can include the following:
  - Maintain clean landings so those who participate in recreational activities on river will be more likely to take part in and return for more trips on the river.
  - Improve access at informal sites including Creighton Road, VA 156 Road Crossing, Bottoms Bridge, Long Bridge, Route 155 Bridge Crossing, the John Vernon Taylor Bridge on Diascund Creek, and Route 623 near the pump station on Morris Creek. Currently, the put-in landings are dirt, mud, and rocky landings.
  - Improve parking facilities around informal public access locations. Pedestrian safety on the roadsides is needed and signage can be utilized to alert approaching vehicles to possible parked cars and pedestrians.
  - Develop better amenities and access to the river across public lands including the New Kent Forestry Center, Crawford's State Forest, and Chickahominy Wildlife Management Area.
2. Work together to create a blueway plan. Steps for establishing blueways for the Chickahominy River can include the following, some of which are described on the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network web site:
  - Establish a core group of stakeholders and build partnerships with individuals and organizations interested in the project. Create a formal organization from these individuals to act as an advisory committee to organize, manage, and develop the blueway network.
  - Identify all stakeholders and groups in the region that would be affected by the creation of or have an interest in the blueway.
  - Use this document and other feasibility and suitability studies to gather data for a plan.

- Conduct meetings or forums with the public and survey landowners who will be influenced by a proposed blueway.
  - Locate blueway facilities, which include public access sites to be developed and maintained as official points of entry, stop-off points, and exit points to the blueways. Facilities can be classified as boat access, day use for viewing wildlife, fishing or other related activities, and/or camping.
  - Establish public access sites by acquiring access permission from private individuals or by purchasing sites by way of land donations, purchases of easements, or outright purchases of land.
  - Feature various opportunities for exploring the river ranging from beginner outings that take only a few hours (i.e., from Long Bridge to Route 155 Crossing) to advanced multi-day canoe/kayak camping routes (Route 155 Crossing to River Landing in the Chickahominy Wildlife Management Area). Sections of the river need to be classified to help paddlers identify areas and the skill levels needed.
  - Produce public information and educational materials to facilitate public awareness and use of the blueway; these can include an official web site and printed materials such as guidebooks and maps.
  - Place signage at access points with blueway information to provide wayfinding information, safety guidance, and regulations. Install where feasible related wayside exhibits that include historical and educational stories and information related to stop-off points on the blueway.
3. Consider demonstrating the link between lower watershed and upper watershed of the Chickahominy River in parks and recreation areas by educating residents about their impact on the river and the Chesapeake Bay. Signage and educational maps and materials placed in local parks can inform visitors about the native flora and fauna in the watershed and the historical and cultural significance of the river.
4. Minimize negative impacts that access facilities and recreational users can have on the river and its natural, cultural and scenic resources by:
- Evaluating needs, proposed uses, and potential impacts of recreation facilities before siting and designing them. Issues that should be addressed include minimizing overuse, noise and pollution, protecting public safety and sensitive areas, and scenic quality.
  - Designing facilities to encourage compatible recreational uses and discourage undesirable uses.
  - Designing boating access facilities for carry-in access for small boats. A stepped canoe and kayak put-in allows easy access for small boats and discourages use by large ones.

- Locating safe, off-road parking areas away from the riverbanks where feasible with a buffer area between parking areas and the river.
5. Protect and improve water quality and wildlife habitats for recreational enjoyment of the Chickahominy River.
- Water quality in the Chickahominy River should consistently meet or exceed state water quality standards in order to provide for the desired recreational uses of fishing, swimming, and related water activities.
  - Wildlife habitats of the Chickahominy River corridor should be conserved in order to support healthy populations of native plants and animals and to provide for recreational uses such as bird watching, nature viewing and photography, hunting, and fishing.
6. Funding is available for recreational projects that help create and improve the public's ability to learn about and enjoy the Chickahominy River and watershed. To assist in the improvement of existing public access sites, the creation of new public recreational access facilities and the development of blueway networks, it is recommended that a database of funding resources and grant opportunities be created (see Appendix A for more information).

**Figure 18:** Chickahominy River between Henrico and Hanover counties near Creighton Road

