

# Harpers Ferry Area River Access Plan



Prepared by American Whitewater

2016

The Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers meet in the small historic town of Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. Tens of thousands of people enjoy floating, fishing, and swimming in the rivers each year, and yet river access has proven inadequate and unsafe in meeting the recreational interest. The rivers in this small confluence area are bordered by four National Park units, three states, four counties, a highway, and a railroad. In 2015, American Whitewater worked with the National Parks Service's Rivers Trails and Conservation Assistance Program to create a river access plan that crossed all these jurisdictions, aimed at creating sustainable and achievable solutions to longstanding river access hurdles in the area.

This plan is based on information gathered during a series of interviews, workshops and site visits held in 2015 that involved paddlers, outfitters, planners, and various other stakeholders.

*Note: This plan was developed in 2016 as an ESRI story map that is no longer supported by ESRI. To archive the plan, it was subsequently migrated to this format in 2026, which reduces the geospatial richness of the plan, and may limit the plan's clarity.*

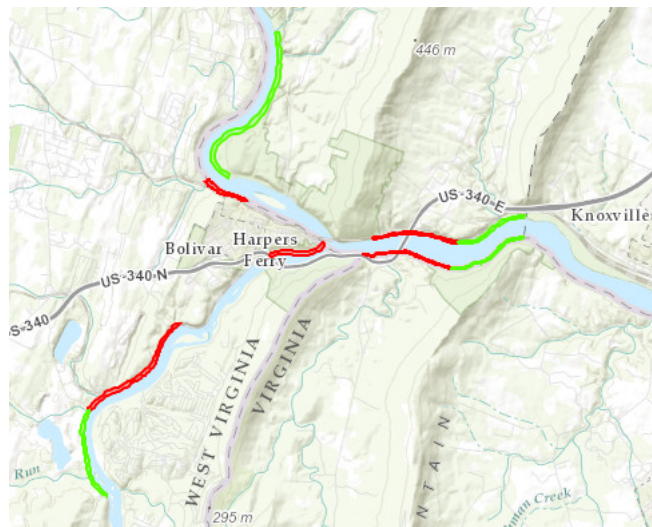
## **Community Meetings**

American Whitewater and RTCA hosted workshops in January and June of 2015 to gather information about river access needs, issues, and opportunities. These well attended meetings brought paddlers and planners together from around the region. In January we huddled around giant wall maps peppering them with sticky notes and comments that were synthesized into a draft River Access Plan. In June we focused on vetting the plan, agreeing on priorities for action, and dividing up the workload. The results of these and follow-up efforts are detailed in this plan.

## **Whitewater River Access Zones**

Planning participants from the whitewater paddling community reached consensus on optimal and sub-optimal zones.

Optimal zones (**Red**) require minimal flatwater paddling, ease shuttle challenges, and provide a desirable whitewater run. Sub-optimal zones (**Green**) are technically acceptable in that they offer access to whitewater reaches, albeit with significant added shuttle length and/or flatwater paddling. Access in



Optimal Zones will fully support paddling, and access elsewhere will result in fewer opportunities for fewer people. Note that this plan aims to benefit many river visitors but is tailored to whitewater paddlers because of the relatively narrow range of options for whitewater visitors and the outstanding nature of the whitewater resources in the area.

## **Site Visits**

In January and June of 2015 we conducted site visits of a total of 23 current and potential river access sites on the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers. The site visits highlighted the patchwork nature of river access on these rivers, and how the sites needed to facilitate safe public access are simply not in place.

## What We Found

Through the public meetings and site visits 23 sites were identified that currently, historically, or potentially serve river access needs. These sites are highly diverse in terms of capacity and availability for public use, and range in ownership from the National Park Service (green pins), commercial outfitters (red pins), state and/or power company (blue pins), and more complex private ownership (yellow pins).



## River Access Issues and Challenges

The current public river access situation on the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers is a tenuous short-term pattern of use resulting from numerous limits on where the public can access the

river. The National Parks limit, prohibit, or allow river access in various locations. Some rafting outfitters allow public river access on their private lands for a fee. The railroad significantly limits where safe and legal access to the river may be gained. Traffic and highway safety are likewise major limitations. In short, river access is greatly constrained, and governed more by where paddlers can't put in than where they can. Just as important, the capacity of safe public river access areas is far below the recreational demand.

### **Preferred Whitewater Access Zones**

In the January 2015 paddler focus group meeting, paddlers outlined their preferred geographical zones for river access. Their goal was generally to minimize flatwater paddling while maximizing whitewater paddling on both the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers. Their preferred access zones are as follows:

- **Shenandoah Put-In:** Paddlers desire to launch on the Shenandoah river as close to the beginning of the rapids as possible, and no farther upstream than the Millville Powerhouse. This makes River Rats the most optimal acceptable put-in, Millville Powerhouse the least optimal acceptable put-in, with other sites in the Millville area falling in between both geographically and in terms of desirability.
- **Shenandoah Mid-Point Put-In:** Paddlers noted the value of the 340 Bridge access area for allowing them to paddle shorter trips, often focused on freestyle paddling.
- **Potomac Put-In:** Paddlers desire a put-in upstream of the Needles Rapids on the Potomac River, as close to those rapids as possible. Dam 3 is the optimal currently available put-in location.
- **Shenandoah and Potomac Shared Take-out:** Paddlers desire a take-out very near the lower 340 Bridge, making Potomac Wayside and Sandy Hook the optimal take-out sites. The Weverton access site is a sub-optimal site that is acceptable to paddlers, though not ideal due to the flatwater paddling required to reach this site. At one time, Lower Town was the ideal site though taking out at that NPS site is no longer permitted by the NPS.

### **Current Noncommercial Access Areas & Limitations**

When sites at which river access is either private, prohibited, or not yet developed, are removed from consideration, relatively few sites remain. This map depicts current access options and

their zone of preference (red for optimal, green for suboptimal). Note the following limitations at the remaining sites:

- **Shenandoah Put-In:** The only optimal Shenandoah put-in at Quarry requires parking on and traversing private property. The suboptimal put-ins are far upstream and often at capacity.
- **Potomac Put-In:** The only optimal Potomac put-in at Dam 3 has only 3-5 parking spaces. The suboptimal Dargan Bend put in is far upstream.
- **Take-Out:** The only optimal take-out for both rivers is Potoma Wayside which has only 3 parking spaces.



The suboptimal site downstream at Weverton has limited parking and is not currently a legal track crossing, though the Appalachian Trail does cross here.

The quality, capacity, and handicap accessibility of river access is severely inadequate relative to the quality of these outstanding rivers.

### **Planning Processes Affecting River Access**

Regional planners highlighted several current planning processes that could result in improved, or diminished, river access. These projects are as follows:

- **Millville Dam Relicensing:** The Millville Dam is undergoing the once-in-30-years process of federal relicensing, creating an opportunity to secure significant access enhancements in the vicinity of the dam. This process is roughly one third of the way through a 5-year process.

- Ongoing NPS Planning: The three National Parks regularly undertake planning, maintenance, and construction projects that could benefit river access sites on NPS lands.
- CSX National Gateway Project: CSX Railroad is reconfiguring their tracks and tunnels in the area, creating potential opportunities for enhanced crossings.
- Hwy 340 Bridge Enhancements: The WV DOH is considering improvements to the 340 bridge near the takeout, which could impact or benefit existing access opportunities. This planning is occurring now.
- Loudon State Park Planning: A new state park is in the process of being created on the Virginia side of the optimal take-out area that could provide parking, shuttle, or river access options. Planning is beginning in the near term.
- Private Property Sales and Leases: Several opportunities exist to work with willing private landowners that may be interested in offering river access through sale, lease, or development of their lands.

## **Recommendations**

### **Shenandoah River Put-In Recommendations**

- A. Enhance Millville Powerhouse and Tailrace put-ins and portage opportunities through engaging in the dam relicensing.
- B. Pursue new public river access opportunities on Old Standard Quarry land through working with willing landowners.
- C. Explore the potential to purchase or lease a lower Millville put-in from a willing seller or owner.

### **Potomac Put-In Recommendations**

- A. Improve Potomac put-in at Dam 3 by formalizing and expanding parking, possibly by moving the gate, through working with managers. This project could align with NPS Harpers Ferry NHP Centennial Project for Potomac Armory Canal Trail between Lower Town and River Riders.
- B. Work with NPS C&O Canal NHP to more clearly share access rules at Lock 34 (on weekends and holidays).

- C. Create better understanding and sharing of access and shuttle options offered by outfitters.

### Take-Out Recommendations (shared by both rivers)

- A. Secure a safe and legal public railroad crossing at Weverton with a sustainable trail to the river, in cooperation with CSX, the four National Parks and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.
- B. Re-design Potoma Wayside with potential ADA and Vehicular access to the river, potentially utilizing one of two old roads to the river in conjunction with the 340 Bridge project.
- C. Create better understanding and sharing of access and shuttle options offered by outfitters.

### Recommendation Summary

The recommendations in this plan will lead to outstanding public whitewater access opportunities on the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers through creative partnerships. The plan strives to create acceptable short-term solutions to fill immediate needs, while at the same time pursuing ideal long-term solutions that are in



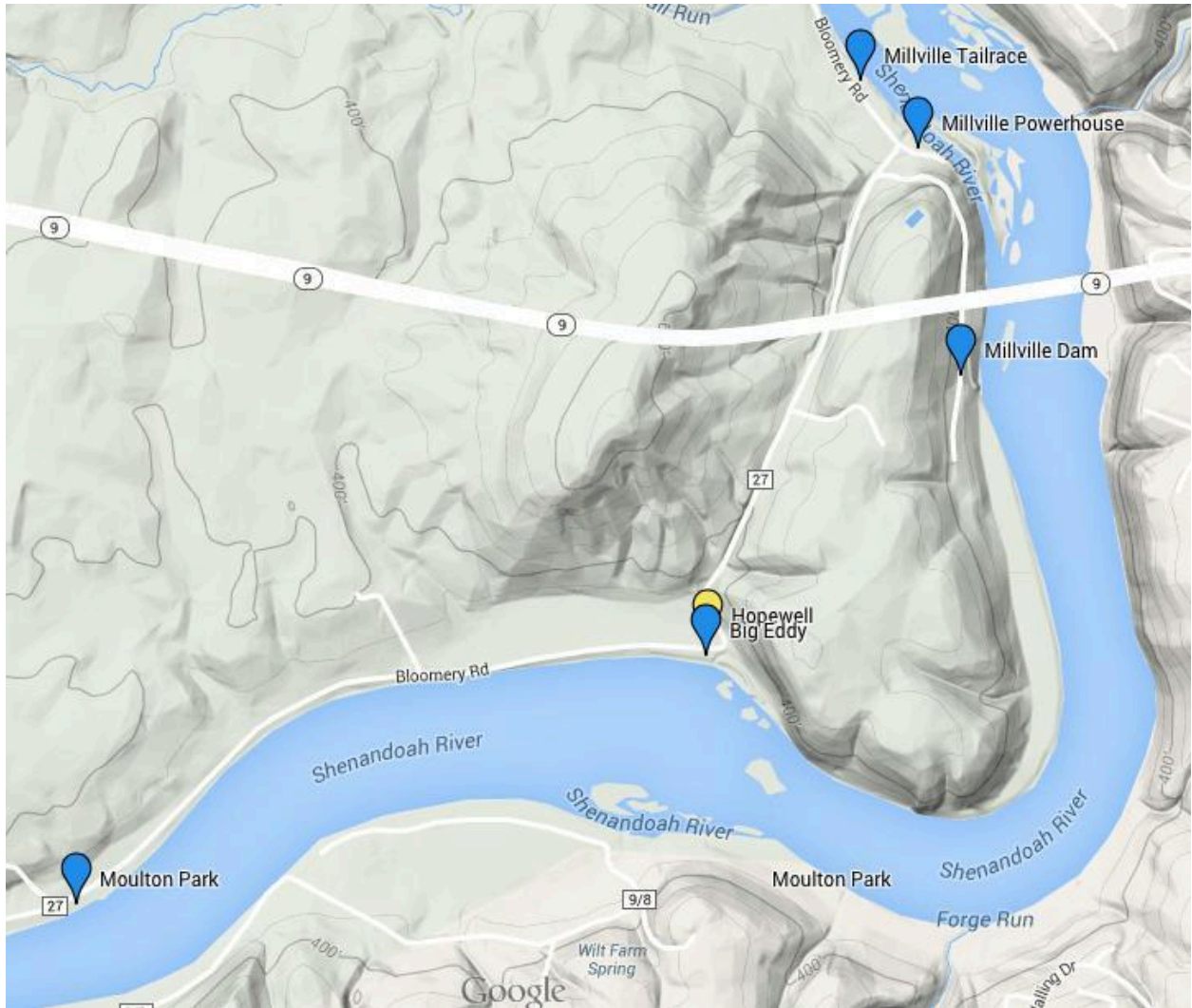
keeping with the National Park setting and high quality of the recreational opportunities. When the plan is implemented, the public will have a wide range of options for sustainably enjoying the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers.

### **Plan Contributors**

The following groups contributed information to this plan: Harpers Ferry Historical Park, Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail, C&O Canal National Historical Park, Appalachian Trail; NPS Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program; planners from Loudon Co. VA, Frederick Co. MD, Washington Co. MD, Jefferson Co. WV; WV DOT, HEPMO, CSX, River Riders, River & Trail, Harpers Ferry Adventure Center, Calleva Outdoors, Monocacy Canoe Club, Mason Dixon Canoe Club, Coastals, Canoe Cruisers, Blue Ridge Voyageurs, Baltimore Canoe & Kayak Club, Potomac Riverkeeper, Shenandoah Riverkeeper, Harpers Ferry Outdoor Festival, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, River Management Society, and American Whitewater. Thanks!

**Appendix 1. Current and Potential River Access Areas Identified Through Outreach**

**1) Shenandoah River Put-Ins**



**Moulton Park**



- **Manager:** Jefferson County Parks & Recreation (WV); DNR manages it in the summer
- **Capacity:** ~ 40 parking spaces + porta johns.
- **Primary uses:** Flatwater take-out, occasional put in, camping.
- **Planning Nexus:**
- **Handicap Accessible:** Yes
- **Issues:** A lot of flatwater to paddle to reach the first rapids on the Shenandoah. A ton of tubing in the area – jams up with people; can't see the water. Traffic along the road. Upstream of core whitewater interest. Limited parking in high season.
- **Opportunities:** None

## Hopewell



- **Manager:** Not currently a public access site. For Sale (SnyderBailey.com)
- **Capacity:** Large. 233 ft of riverfront + 18 acres and 2 buildings.
- **Primary uses:** None
- **Planning Nexus:** None. Potential purchase.
- **Handicap Accessible:** Potentially.
- **Issues:** Not in public ownership. Upstream of core whitewater interest.
- **Opportunities:** Purchase could offer flatwater paddling access, and whitewater training access, and other amenities.

## Big Eddy



- **Manager:** WV Division of Natural Resources (DNR) / P.E. Hydrogeneration LLC
- **Capacity:** Limited parking

- **Primary uses:** Flatwater paddling, fishing, picnic, and whitewater park and play.
- **Planning Nexus:** Dam relicensing
- **Handicap Accessible:** Yes
- **Issues:** Lack of Parking. Upstream of core whitewater interest.
- **Opportunities:** Maintain through relicensing.

### Millville Dam



- **Manager:** WV Division of Natural Resources (DNR) / P.E. Hydrogeneration LLC
- **Capacity:**
- **Primary uses:** Portage (especially for multi-day trips), fishing, overflow put-in.
- **Planning Nexus:** Dam relicensing
- **Handicap Accessible:** No
- **Issues:** Lack of portage signage / formality, low flow in bypassed river reach.
- **Opportunities:** Formalize portage opportunity, improve portage signage and parking. Consider flow enhancements for through-paddlers, etc, and maintain site through relicensing.

### Millville Powerhouse



- **Manager:** P.E. Hydrogeneration LLC
- **Capacity:** ~8 parking spaces
- **Primary uses:** Commercial tubing put in, tailwater fishing, whitewater put-in.
- **Planning Nexus:** Dam relicensing
- **Handicap Accessible:** Yes
- **Issues:** Crowding / capacity.
- **Opportunities:** Maintain / expand site through relicensing.

## Millville Tailrace



- **Manager:** WV Division of Natural Resources (DNR) / P.E. Hydrogeneration LLC
- **Capacity:** ~50-60 parking spaces.
- **Primary uses:** Whitewater put-in (long), tubing, fishing, picnic.
- **Planning Nexus:** Dam relicensing
- **Handicap Accessible:** Yes
- **Issues:** Crowding / capacity.
- **Opportunities:** Maintain / expand site through relicensing.



### Quarry Riverfront / Johnny Cash USGS gage

- **Manager:** Old Standard Quarry
- **Capacity:**
- **Primary uses:** Fishing, partying.
- **Planning Nexus:** None
- **Handicap Accessible:** No
- **Issues:** Very limited roadside parking, traffic
- **Opportunities:** None

### River Riders Shenandoah

- **Manager:** River Riders outfitters, leased from Old Standard Quarry.
- **Capacity:** ~15 spaces
- **Primary uses:** Commercial put in, (commercial) tubing take-out, limited fee-based non-commercial whitewater put in
- **Planning Nexus:** None
- **Handicap Accessible:** Yes
- **Issues:** Private access, Fees, traffic
- **Opportunities:** None

### Historical

- **Manager:** Historical Outfitters (out of business?)
- **Capacity:** ~20 parking spaces
- **Primary uses:** Commercial put in, limited use
- **Planning Nexus:** None
- **Handicap Accessible:**
- **Issues:** Private access, traffic, possible sold or out of business.
- **Opportunities:** Inquire re new ownership, possible public use when no commercial trips via agreement?

### River and Trail

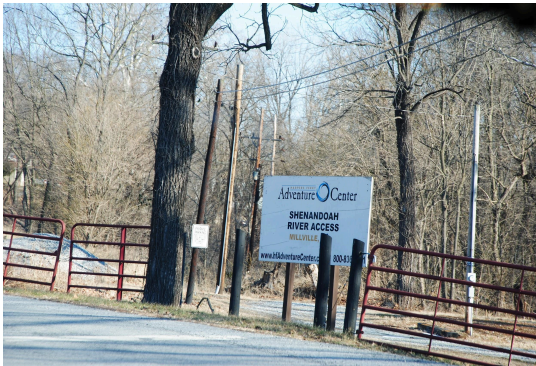
- **Manager:** River and Trail Outfitters
- **Capacity:** ~30-40 parking spaces
- **Primary uses:** Commercial put in, tuber takeout and put in, hanging out / eating (sell food).
- **Planning Nexus:** None
- **Handicap Accessible:**
- **Issues:** No private boater parking in the commercial season, when river runs low in summer, put in on the Potomac River at River Riders
- **Opportunities:** None
- **Other:** sometimes runs 1-3 day runs on the Shenandoah River

### H.F Adventure Center (Quarry Parking)



- **Manager:** Old Standard Quarry or CSX (TBD)
- **Capacity:** ~30 parking spaces.
- **Primary uses:** Private whitewater boater put in (preferred).
- **Planning Nexus:** None
- **Handicap Accessible:**
- **Issues:** Limited and unofficial public parking, walking across HFAC property required to reach river, vehicle security, potential trespass.
- **Opportunities:** Formalize parking / access arrangement?

### H.F. Adventure Center



- **Manager:** Harper's Ferry Adventure Center Outfitters
- **Capacity:**
- **Primary uses:** Commercial put in. Private boater put in (preferred). Tubing (by the hundreds)
- **Planning Nexus:** None
- **Handicap Accessible:**
- **Issues:** No public parking. When river runs low in summer, put in on the Potomac River at River Riders.
- **Opportunities:** Formalize access arrangement?

### Private Lots

- **Manager:** None - Privately owned.
- **Capacity:** Potentially significant
- **Primary uses:** Private camping
- **Planning Nexus:** None
- **Handicap Accessible:** Potentially
- **Issues:** No Public Access
- **Opportunities:** Potential for purchase or lease from willing landowner. Locations ideal for whitewater put in.

### River Rats



- **Manager:** Old Standard Quarry land, leased by River Riders.
- **Capacity:** 8-10 spaces, potential for more.
- **Primary uses:** Commercial put in for River Riders.
- **Planning Nexus:** None
- **Handicap Accessible:** Yes
- **Issues:** Rough road, close to CSX tracks, currently gate is locked and land is private.
- **Opportunities:** Potential lease or purchase from willing owner. Location ideal for whitewater put in - above Bull Falls.

### Peregrine Road

- **Manager:** Old Standard Quarry
- **Capacity:** Unknown
- **Primary uses:** None
- **Planning Nexus:** None
- **Handicap Accessible:** Unknown
- **Issues:** Currently under private ownership, under foreclosure. Access value unknown.
- **Opportunities:** Potential river access site if purchase from willing seller was possible. Putting in above Bull Falls in this location would be desirable to paddlers.

### 340 Bridge



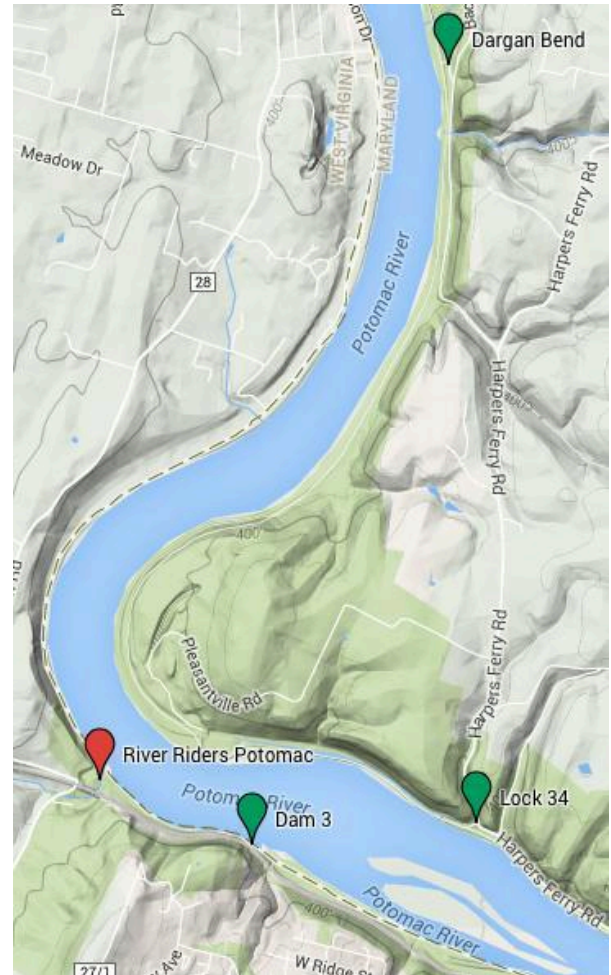
- **Manager:** NPS - Harpers Ferry NHP.
- **Capacity:** ~36 parking spaces
- **Primary uses:** Lower Whitewater Put-in (bridge to bridge), fishing, beachgoing.
- **Planning Nexus:** Ongoing NPS planning
- **Handicap Accessible:** No
- **Issues:** Often at capacity with significant unmet demand, competition among beachgoers and paddlers and anglers.
- **Opportunities:** Park could allow this lot to be a designated shuttle bus stop, allowing people to park at the visitor center. Potential for buses to carry kayaks? Add parking capacity.

## 2) Potomac River Put-Ins

### Dargan Bend



- **Manager:** NPS - C&O Canal NHP (possible MD DNR partnership)
- **Capacity:** 40-70 cars
- **Primary uses:** Motorized and non-motorized flatwater boating access. Whitewater put-in.
- **Planning Nexus:** Ongoing NPS - C&O Canal NHP Planning
- **Handicap Accessible:** Yes
- **Issues:** Not a highly desirable site because of slow moving flatwater distance to rapids (1-3 miles), possible conflicts with speedboats, stinky bathroom, poor road condition.
- **Opportunities:** None. Nice example of a larger accessible river access site.



### River Riders Potomac



- **Manager:** River Riders Outfitters
- **Capacity:** ~ 30 cars

- **Primary uses:** Potomac whitewater put in for private and commercial paddlers. SUP and other 2-way paddling access for flatwater reach upstream. camping, cabins, ropes course.
- **Planning Nexus:** None
- **Handicap Accessible:** Yes
- **Issues:** Fees (\$5/day or \$25 annually). One lane underpass.
- **Opportunities:** CSX / State joint ownership of the road parallel to the river, CSX allows River Riders to improve area away from river.

### Dam 3



- **Manager:** NPS - Harpers Ferry NHP
- **Capacity:** 3-5 cars
- **Primary uses:** Potomac whitewater put in above the Needed rapids.
- **Planning Nexus:** Ongoing Harpers Ferry NHP planning, possibly in coordination with the Town.
- **Handicap Accessible:** No
- **Issues:** Limited parking capacity.
- **Opportunities:** NPS could develop better parking (up to 20 cars), or move the gate farther downstream to allow for additional roadside parking.

### Lock 34



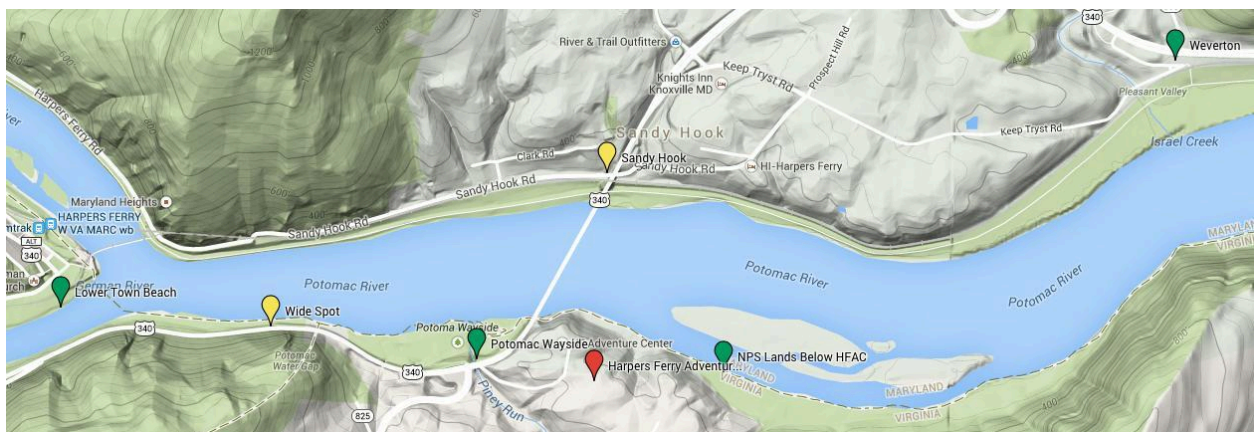
- **Manager:** NPS - C&O Canal NHP (CHOH)
- **Capacity:** 3-5 car capacity, reserved for outfitters by NPS.
- **Primary uses:** Put in for outfitters (River and Trail, etc), whitewater tubing drop-off.
- **Planning Nexus:** Ongoing NPS planning.

- **Handicap Accessible:**
- **Issues:** Below Needles rapids so paddlers miss it. Drop off only for river access; no parking + cars can mess up other cars. Vandalism? Clarification with NPS about public access on weekends and holidays; some paddlers are denied access while commercial use occurs.
- **Opportunities:** CHOH motorpool upstream from Lock 34 has river access; have to walk across a field and path (not great) to the river. Need for a shuttle?

### Maryland Heights

- **Manager:** NPS - C&O Canal NHP
- **Capacity:** Limited parking
- **Primary uses:** Hiking trailhead. Some people use to access the river for swimming, fishing, or boating.
- **Planning Nexus:** None
- **Handicap Accessible:**
- **Issues:** Limited parking, lot is for hikers, below Needles rapids.
- **Opportunities:**

### 3) Take-Outs (Shared by Both Rivers)



### Harper's Ferry Lower Town Beach

- **Manager:** NPS Harpers Ferry NHP
- **Capacity:** Large
- **Primary uses:** maintain historical feeling; Swimming (locals) and sightseeing
- **Planning Nexus:** None
- **Handicap Accessible:**
- **Issues:** Paddling access prohibited by NPS
- **Opportunities:** Unknown. Possibility of park shuttle bus stop that allows boats.

### Wide Spot

- **Manager:** Unknown
- **Capacity:** Roadside parking, unknown capacity
- **Primary uses:** Swimming at Bass Rock, fishing.
- **Planning Nexus:** Unknown
- **Handicap Accessible:** No
- **Issues:** Lack of parking, ticketing of vehicles, traffic + safety.

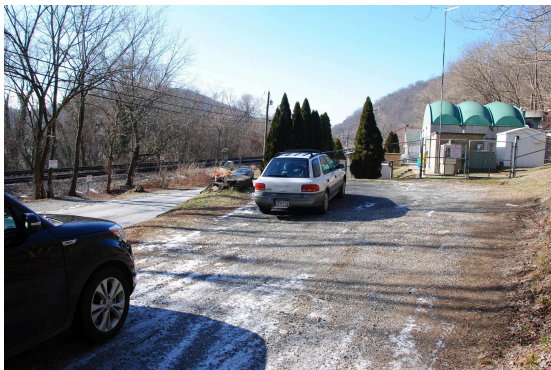
- **Opportunities:** None likely, but desirable area. (discussion of Exxon being a prime location). Add parking and traffic calming? Or close it and Bass Rock down; move all guard rails closer so there is no room to park along 340.

### Potomac Wayside (“Wayside”)



- **Manager:** NPS - Harpers Ferry NHP
- **Capacity:** 3 vehicles
- **Primary uses:** Shenandoah and Potomac whitewater takeout for majority of commercial paddlers, rafters, tubers as well as fishermen, individual paddlers, and locals hanging by the river.
- **Planning Nexus:** DOH 340 Bridge Project, Ongoing NPS planning, Loudon Park planning
- **Handicap Accessible:** No
- **Issues:** Very limited parking, capacity typically exceeded, traffic, road safety, not ADA accessible, steep climb (aka “Hernia Hill”) from the river to parking, and everyone must carry rafts + gear up hill, problems loading and unloading
- **Opportunities:** Improve/pave road and add significant parking on floodplain with gate at top. Add capacity, provide fair enforcement. Shared use with commercial and individual users. Reasonably priced season pass, daily fee. Other option - close as a take-out and agree to a safer take-out nearby downstream with more adequate parking. Other idea: clear lower area and allow parking (30-50 cars); not to be used during flood (10’ and above).

### Sandy Hook



- **Manager:** CSX & Washington Co. Dept. of Water Quality

- **Capacity:** 8-15 cars
- **Primary uses:** Take-out for full Shenandoah and Potomac, and Bridge to Bridge, especially when Potomac Wayside is full.
- **Planning Nexus:** CSX National Gateway Project, DOH 340 Bridge Project
- **Handicap Accessible:** No
- **Issues:** It is illegal to cross the CSX tracks in this area (history of several deaths here in past) and parking is not dedicated for river access (not adequate parking).
- **Opportunities:** Sandy Hook is in a very desirable location for river access. Permission could be sought and granted from CSX for creation of a bridge over tracks to make crossing safe or the track could be configured in a manner that allows safe/legal crossing as part of the National Gateway Project, Washington County could formalize parking, and/or DOH could create a new access opportunity in the vicinity as part of the 340 Bridge Project.

### Harpers Ferry Adventure Center



- **Manager:** Harpers Ferry Adventure Center Outfitter
- **Capacity:** Large amounts of parking (>100 cars)
- **Primary uses:** Commercial takeout, rope's course, camping, cabins, zip-line
- **Planning Nexus:**
- **Handicap Accessible:** No, unless road is improved.
- **Issues:** Long and steep road from the river to ridgetop parking. Private paddlers not aware of consistent fee structure and acceptability. Safer take out option than Potomac Wayside.
- **Opportunities:** Fee-based shuttle, Trail between Potomac Wayside and this property. Develop standard private access for fee option with HFAC.

### NPS Lands Downstream of Harpers Ferry Adventure Center

- **Manager:** NPS - Harper's Ferry NHP
- **Capacity:** Unknown
- **Primary uses:** Viewshed Protection from Jefferson Rock
- **Planning Nexus:** Potential nexus with Loudon Park planning, and Ongoing NPS planning.
- **Handicap Accessible:** Unknown potential
- **Issues:** Unknown
- **Opportunities:** Potential location for an ideal river access site lacking traffic issues, accessibility issues. Possibly in conjunction with Loudon Park, County road planning, etc.

## Weverton



- **Manager:** NPS - C&O Canal NHP
- **Capacity:** 12 vehicle spaces
- **Primary uses:** Paddling takeout, put in for paddling to Brunswick.
- **Planning Nexus:** Ongoing NPS Planning
- **Handicap Accessible:** No
- **Issues:** This is a “private” CSX crossing, not an approved public crossing of the tracks. No good signage. Downstream from whitewater paddlers’ preferred takeout zone (flatwater). Trail in sub-optimal condition. Nettles make hiking the trail painful. No lighting (safety issue).
- **Opportunities:** If legal to drive across tracks, parking could be developed on other side (this was the historical use pattern). Partnership / volunteer opportunity to improve trail to river, several places would benefit from steps.