

This Is America

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The Potomac River Flows Through Cities, History The Potomac flows right through the city of Washington, DC

From VOA Learning English, welcome to *This Is America*.

I'm Jim Tedder.

And I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

Today we tell about the Potomac River. The Potomac is one of America's most historic waterways. It flows more than 600 kilometers, from the Allegheny Mountains to the Chesapeake Bay and finally into the Atlantic Ocean.

Winding Through Cities and States

The Potomac River is the wildest river in the world that flows through a heavily populated area. On its way from the mountains to the ocean, it runs through West Virginia, Maryland, Virginia and the United States capital, Washington, DC.

The Potomac River supplies water for most of the six million people who live in the DC area. Millions of people use the river and the land nearby for boating, fishing, bird watching and other recreational activities. The area is home to birds such as the great blue heron and the American bald eagle.

The Potomac River has played an important part in American history. For example, America's first president, George Washington, lived for many years along the Potomac in Virginia. He urged that the river be developed to link Americans with the West.

We Go Where People Lived Thousands of Years Ago...

The wind is blowing hard along the Potomac today, making the water dangerous in some places. So we will make our trip along the river virtually, without ever having to leave the room. For our virtual tour, we will take a small boat, a canoe we move through the water by rowing oars or paddles.

Our trip will take seven or eight days. The boat has only enough space for two or three people. But there is other traffic on the river. We do not feel alone.

We start in the calm waters of Shepherdstown, West Virginia. A travel guide tells us that people lived here 15,000 years ago. The Potomac River was a meeting place for American Indians long before Europeans arrived. The

Indians gathered to trade food and furs. Today, people often find objects that the Indians left behind.

We work hard to power our virtual canoe, and are happy to stop and rest at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. During the 19th century, this village was an important transportation center for the river, a smaller waterway and a railroad. At Harpers Ferry, the Potomac flows through the Blue Ridge Mountains. Here it meets the Shenandoah River.

From our boat we can see the water flowing toward huge rocks. Green trees cover the mountains on either side. Round white clouds hang low against a blue sky. It looks very peaceful.

A Place of Rebellion

But this area is not known for peace. In 1859, the United States was close to civil war between the northern and southern states.

The federal government stored weapons at Harpers Ferry. John Brown and 18 of his supporters captured the storage center. However, federal troops recaptured it the next day. Brown was later hanged. But his name was made famous forever by American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson wrote that although Brown had died, his spirit would march on.

Harpers Ferry became a national historical park in 1944. Today the park welcomes visitors who come to learn about life along the Potomac River.

It's a Bird...

Bird-watching is a favorite activity in the park, where more than 170 bird species have been identified. Great blue herons populate a part of the historic area, and Canada geese can be seen along the edges of the Shenandoah Canal. The park also has pileated woodpeckers and Baltimore orioles.

Most of the time we sail smoothly down the Potomac. But sometimes the river is wild. George Washington understood that the Potomac was difficult to travel on, even for much bigger boats than the canoe. He proposed a waterway to avoid dangerous areas along the Potomac. But he did not live to see it built. Washington died in 1799. The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was built more than 25 years later.

Over the years, continued flooding from the Potomac damaged the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. Today it no longer carries goods. Instead, the C&O Canal is a national park. Kayaks and barges float on the waterway, passing through locks. These devices close off the canal and use special gates to raise or lower the boats. They do this by raising or lowering the water level.

The area between the Potomac and the canal is called a towpath. It extends about 300 kilometers from Washington, DC to Cumberland, Maryland.

Today we see families walking their dogs along the towpath. Other people are running or riding bicycles. Still others are fishing. Swimming is not permitted.

Visitors to the towpath sometimes see brick ovens, or remains of brick ovens. A national park employee tells us that people who lost their homes during the Great Depression once warmed their meals in the ovens.

Dangerous Waters Ahead...

Now we are getting close to the city of Washington. Here the river begins to look dangerous. Signs warn boats away from the 24 kilometers of the Potomac Gorge. People leave their canoes to walk along the towpath.

Water moves fast in the gorge. There are many rocks and waterfalls. The gorge begins above a large waterfall called Great Falls. Here the water drops to sea level. The gorge then extends to Theodore Roosevelt Island, named for America's 26th president.

Here we may get a good look at a blue heron. This beautiful bird stands for a minute on a rock on one long, thin leg. An eagle spreads its wide wings in the sky, but does not land.

We Enter Washington

We take land transportation to follow the river into America's capital. Washington, DC was built on low wetlands in 1800. The British burned the city in 1812. But Americans soon rebuilt it.

While in Washington, we decide to continue our virtual trip on the Potomac in a larger boat. This will take us past George Washington's home in an area just south of Alexandria, Virginia. He helped design the big white house, called Mount Vernon. The former president and his wife Martha are buried on the property.

Today we see sheep and goats eating grass on the hill between the back of the house and the river. This sight probably looks about the same as it did when George Washington directed activities at his beautiful riverside farm.

The Threat of Pollution

After passing Mount Vernon, we end our trip on the Potomac River as it flows toward the Chesapeake Bay. By now, we have a deep feeling for the beauty of the river. But the beauty always exists under threat of pollution.

Over the centuries, industry, agriculture and human development severely damaged the environment of the Potomac. By the 1970s, people described the river's condition as sickening. Then Congress passed the Clean Water Act in 1972.

The water quality has improved greatly since then. Yet coal mines in West Virginia still drop harmful acids into the water. Waste materials from the Anacostia River float on the Potomac. Sediment material that falls to the bottom prevents traffic on some parts of the river. Pesticide products and fertilizers pollute the water. Many environmentalists worry about the building of new homes and businesses along the river.

The Potomac faces many environmental problems as a result of population growth and its resulting pressures on land and water resources.

The river flows through land controlled by developers, private owners, and state and local governments. These groups often have conflicting ideas about what is good and bad for the river. Several organizations work to protect and improve the Potomac River and the land near it.

The Potomac Conservancy is one of those organizations. It carries out a land protection program, develops land and water restoration projects, and provides education programs for adults and young people.

We hope that Americans will always take care of their historic Potomac River.

This program was written by Jerilyn Watson and produced by Kelly Jean Kelly.

I'm Jim Tedder.

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