

Patapsco River Geography

Welcome to NOAA's Patapsco River interpretive buoy, located at latitude 39 degrees 9.11 minutes north longitude 76 degrees 23.47 minutes west.

It lies in the upper Chesapeake just east of the intersections of the Craig Hill and Brewerton ship channels entering the Patapsco River and Baltimore's harbor from the south and north, respectively. The buoy sits in 20 feet of water surrounded by shallower lumps that would have been large oyster reefs when Captain John Smith and his crew arrived here, June 12, 1608, during their first exploratory voyage up the bay that summer.

It takes some imagination today to see the mouth of the Patapsco as Smith and his crew did when it was entirely forested. The huge formerly Bethlehem steel mill dominates the skyline on the north side the tall key bridge crosses the river and the south shore is heavily developed first by houses and then by industrial plants especially the massive cooling towers of Constellation Energy's Brandon Shores power plant.

The industrial prospective builds with the cranes of Dundas can see bright marine terminals on the way up the Patapsco. Changing to this high city skyline near the inner harbor where the Jones Falls River and the main stem Patapsco flowed through wild rice marshes in Smith's day. It's also difficult to visualize travel by water up the Patapsco to Elkridge its original head of navigation. Force entries of timber cutting, agriculture including tobacco, and development in the rivers watershed have filled in the channel to the point that only canoes and kayaks can navigate there today.

Meanwhile, back at the buoy the contrast is just as great between the two ship channels, which are dredged to 50 foot deep grooves and the shallow 15 to 20 foot channel shoulders from which still rise those hard bottom lumps with names like Six Foot Knoll, Seven Foot knoll, Belvedere Shoal, Man-o-War Shoal, Tea Table, and Gale's Lumps. True their oysters are much depleted by over fishing, pollution, and disease but they still represent some of the best live bottom habitat remaining in the upper bay.