

# North Branch Susquehanna River *Water Trail*

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*The North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail offers seclusion.*

**by Bob Frye**     *photos by the author*

It's not often that paddling a Pennsylvania river sparks discussion of the French Revolution and guillotines, let alone offers the chance to explore what was a safe haven for French refugees.

But, that's the North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail.

It flows into Pennsylvania from New York near Sayre, Bradford County, and continues to Sunbury, Northumberland County, where it joins the West Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail to form the main stem of the Susquehanna River. Between those two points, it twists, turns, winds and meanders.

Its history is just as quirky.

In the 1790s, the French Revolution was terribly violent. The Reign of Terror in 1793-1794 led to the arrest of at least 300,000 people and the public execution of 17,000, mostly loyalists to the monarchy. Some looking to escape that fate sailed to Haiti. Others fled to Pennsylvania and formed French Azilum—a community on one of the river's horseshoe bends—near present-day Towanda.

Among those supposed to settle there was the French Queen, Marie Antoinette. She never made it—and French Azilum later died, too, when Napoleon welcomed its expatriates back after a decade.

But, anyone who paddles the North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail—which stretches more than 180 miles, along nearly the river's entire length in Pennsylvania—can start or end their trip at the French Azilum historic site, home to one of the trail's many boat launches.

Paddlers as well as other boaters can explore additional historic sites, from those related to mine disasters to canals to a huge, and hugely famous, rock, the Standing Stone. Located on river right—that's the right side going downstream—between Wyalusing and Wysox, Bradford County, it was a common meeting place for Native Americans for perhaps centuries.

"You can't miss it if you float that section," said Cain Chamberlain, Executive Director of the Endless Mountains Heritage Region, which manages the upper 146 or so miles of the river trail. "It stands about 20 feet above the water. It's massive. It's an amazing site."

"But, the water trail is full of history like that. Some is good history, some is more tragic, but there are lots of stories along the trail."

There are dozens of boat launches along the water trail. Go to [emheritage.org/susquehanna-river-north-branch-water-trail](http://emheritage.org/susquehanna-river-north-branch-water-trail) to download the map and guide. According to Chamberlain, there's always room for more. Most are easily accessible, too. Some are more developed and are suitable to hand-carrying boats to the water.





*Paddlers on the North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail.*

But, they each put people on a river that's suitable for paddlers of all experience levels.

"Really the only section of rapids of any consequence is the Nanticoke Rapids," said Chamberlain of the section that can be Class II under certain conditions. "Other than that, there are just some stretches that have some very minor rapids and channels. There's nothing that would deter even a beginner."

Floating the river—covering maybe 2 miles an hour if you're steadily but leisurely going along—offers the chance to do some fishing, of course. It can be quite good, too.

Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission biologists survey the river at six points every July, primarily looking for Smallmouth Bass. That work consistently turns up good numbers of bass.

"A lot of the river is relatively shallow, with a lot of riffle-pool-type habitat that's perfect for Smallmouth Bass," said Aaron Frey, PFBC Area 4 Fisheries Manager. "There's a lot of rock in the river, too, of all sizes. That's also great for Smallmouth Bass, compared to something like a silt bottom."

"So, really, the North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail's Smallmouth Bass are both abundant and spread out. The average angler can expect to get into bass."

There are other fish, too. Walleyes are, if not as numerous as bass, still available. There are Channel

Catfish—fish in the 20-inch range are common, with a good amount up to 30 inches—and some Flathead Catfish. Then, there are the river's Muskellunge. People who know their ways and specifically target them do well," said Frey.

"They're not everywhere. It's not like you just float down the river and cast the whole time," said Frey.

"In summer, they hang around creek mouths, where there's a cooler water stream coming in. Usually, any kind of decent hole below a stream flow has some good habitat as well. Don't overlook areas with slower, backwater current either."

The scenery is another of the water trail's draws. The river flows through mountains and by high-rising rock faces, which makes it seem more serene, and sometimes even remote. The bend around Vosburg Neck State Park is especially charming.

"It really feels like going back in time when you paddle along Vosburg Neck State Park, because when you make the turn, there are no houses or anything that you can see. It's just the mountains, the trees and the water," said Chamberlain. "It's very peaceful."

Of course, all that countryside—and the river itself, which is cleaner than in past decades—supports a variety of wildlife. One particular type offers surprisingly reliable thrills—bald eagles.





*Launching on the North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail.*

“They’re something to see in person,” said Chamberlain. “Anymore, if you go on a short 5-mile stretch of the river, you’re almost guaranteed to see at least one. There are quite a few of them now.”

“A lot of paddlers even see eagles come down and scoop up a fish.”

It’s no wonder, then, that the North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail has been voted Pennsylvania’s River of the Year more than any other waterway. That’s voted on by river users. And, these days, more and more of them are using the water trail every year, with multiple liveries renting kayaks and canoes and shuttling folks with their own boats. Hopefully, another business will open, too—thanks to a historic effort.

In September 2023, federal, state and local governments and non-profit organizations came together to remove the Oakland Dam. Located in Susquehanna County and stretching 755-feet long and 16-feet tall, it was built in 1929 but had been obsolete since about 1990. It was a safety hazard and prevented fish and other species from easily moving upstream and downstream. Now that it’s gone, people are already using that section of river more heavily, and they hope to see a kayak rental open soon.

Anglers, boaters and other outdoor enthusiasts now find their souls amidst the river’s beauty.

“I grew up along the river, grew up paddling the river as a Boy Scout, and now, I’ve been in this job for years,” said Chamberlain. “So, maybe I’m a little biased. But, I think the North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail is a wonderful resource and a great way to get outside.” ☐

### Oakland Dam:



## More Information

- Most of the North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail can be broken into segments of 10 miles or less, based on the distance between access points. But, there are a few sections where floats of 15- to 18-miles are required. Consult a North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail map at [emheritage.org/susquehanna-river-north-branch-water-trail](https://emheritage.org/susquehanna-river-north-branch-water-trail) before setting out. It suggests day trips and shows the location of islands open to camping. It also details historic points of interest and more.
- The Endless Mountains Heritage Region offers a number of guided paddles and sojourns. Check out [emheritage.org/sojourns](https://emheritage.org/sojourns).
- The Susquehanna Greenway Partnership, which manages the North Branch Susquehanna River’s lower stretches, also offers details on suggested day trips on its portion of the waterway. See [susquehannagreenway.org/branches/north-branch](https://susquehannagreenway.org/branches/north-branch).
- For the really adventurous, the Endless Mountains Heritage Region operates the 444 Club. It recognizes those who paddle—in segments or one continuous trip—the entire 444 miles of the Susquehanna River, from Cooperstown, NY, to the Chesapeake Bay at Havre de Grace, MD. About 90 have qualified so far. Details are at [emheritage.org/444-club](https://emheritage.org/444-club).



*Motorboaters and paddlers can utilize the North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail.*