



Lower French Creek Water Trail

A Community Treasure

Map & Guide

Water trails are recreational waterways on a lake, river, or ocean between specific points, containing access points and day-use and/or camping sites for the boating public. Water trails emphasize low-impact use and promote stewardship of the resources. Explore this unique Pennsylvania water trail.



HISTORY OF FRENCH CREEK

French Creek is arguably one of the most ecologically significant waterways in Pennsylvania and has been called one of Pennsylvania's foremost aquatic treasures. French Creek originates in Chautauqua County, New York, and flows 117 miles through Erie, Crawford, Mercer, and Venango counties before joining the Allegheny River.

The French Creek watershed covers approximately 1,270 square miles, providing a habitat for many types of wildlife and birds, as well as over 80 species of fish and 27 species of freshwater mussels. Scientists attribute French Creek's outstanding biodiversity to the fact that it is part of the rich Ohio River watershed and has maintained its high quality habitat, including sand and gravel substrates, riffles, runs, and pools. The French Creek drainage also has a good supply of alkaline groundwater resources that provides a buffer against the affects of acid deposition.

French Creek was given its name in the early 1750s by George Washington who visited the Creek in an effort to dislodge the French from the area. During this period of colonization and westward expansion, the Creek served as an important waterway for the French Army and the early American settlers.



FRENCH CREEK WATER TRAIL

Originating in Chautauqua County in western New York, the French Creek water trail flows southerly through Erie, Mercer, Crawford, and Venango counties, ultimately joining the Allegheny River in Franklin, PA. The main branch of the Creek is over 117 miles long and the watershed encompasses 1,235 square miles of land. The Creek, along with its tributaries, is responsible for draining 72 municipalities in four Northwestern Pennsylvania counties. French Creek is outstanding for fishing and canoeing, and provides water for communities and agricultural activities. Thanks to its high water quality, rich biodiversity, and notable history, French Creek is considered to be one of the most important streams of its size in the Northeast United States.

STEWARDSHIP

Protecting French Creek from environmental degradation is a shared mission. Help care for the land, water and cultural resources along the French Creek water trail by respecting wildlife, nature and other recreationists. It is important to wash footwear, boats and vehicles to minimize the spread of invasive species from one place to another. "Leave No Trace," a national outdoor ethics program, provides some guidelines to minimize your impact. For more information about "Leave No Trace," visit www.Lnt.org.

Leave no trace for camping and day use:

1. Plan and prepare campfires to limit forest fires.
2. Travel and camp on durable surfaces
3. Dispose of waste properly
4. Leave what you find
5. Minimize campfire impacts
6. Respect wildlife
7. Be considerate of other visitors



RESPECT THE PRIVACY & RIGHTS OF LANDOWNERS

Please respect the privacy and rights of landowners along this trail by obtaining permission before entering any privately owned land. Unless you are otherwise certain, assume the land is private property. In any case, avoid loud noises and boisterous behavior. Remember that sound carries across water much more clearly than on land. Use the same courtesy that you would want. A friendly wave or quiet greeting is always welcome.



For your safety and enjoyment:

- Always wear a life jacket
- Obtain proper instruction in boating skills
- Know fishing and boating regulations
- Be prepared for river hazards
- Carry proper equipment

PENNSYLVANIA BOATING REGULATIONS

• A U.S. Coast Guard-approved wearable personal flotation device (PFD or life jacket) is required for each person on board. In addition, one throwable device (seat cushion or ring buoy) is required on boats 16 feet in length or longer. Canoes and kayaks, regardless of length, are not required to carry a throwable device.



• From November 1 through April 30, boaters must wear a life jacket on boats less than 16 feet in length or any canoe or kayak during these cold weather months.

• Life jackets must be the appropriate size for the person intended and must be in good, serviceable condition.

• Life jackets must be worn by all children 12 years old and younger on all boats 20 feet or less in length while under way, and on all canoes and kayaks. Others are strongly encouraged to wear a PFD at all times on the water.

• All boats must display an anchor light (a white light visible 360 degrees) when at anchor between sunset and sunrise. Boats can use a lantern or clip-on battery-powered unit to meet this requirement.



• Unpowered boats must carry a white light, either hand-held or installed, to be displayed in time to avoid a collision between sunset and sunrise and during restricted visibility.

• All powered boats must show running lights between sunset and sunrise. All boats are required to carry a sound-producing device. Motorboats less than 40 feet in length must carry some mechanical means of making a sound signal. This device may be hand-, mouth- or power-operated. An athletic coach's whistle is an acceptable device. Operators of unpowered boats (canoes, kayaks, rowboats, paddleboards) are required to carry a device capable of sounding a prolonged blast for 4-6 seconds that can be heard by another boat operator in time to avoid a collision. An athletic coach's whistle is acceptable.

• All motorboats must be registered, regardless of where they launch.

• Unpowered boats (canoes, kayaks, rowboats) using Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission or State Park or Forest access areas must either be registered OR display a valid launch permit. Launch permits can be purchased through the Commission's website at www.fishandboat.com (Click the "Outdoor Shop" icon.) or at many state park offices

• Operating watercraft, including canoes and kayaks, under the influence of alcohol or drugs is illegal. This law is strongly enforced for user safety. For further information on boating regulations, contact the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission at www.fishandboat.com

PADDLING SAFETY TIPS

• **Wear your life jacket.** Some 80 percent of all recreational boating fatalities happen to people who are not wearing a life jacket.



• **Expect to get wet.** Even the best paddlers sometimes capsize or swamp their boats. Bring extra clothing in a waterproof bag.

• **Be prepared to swim.** If the water looks too hazardous to swim in, don't go paddling.

• **If you capsize,** hold on to your boat, unless it presents a life-threatening situation. If floating in current, position yourself on the upstream side of the capsized boat.

• **Scout ahead whenever possible.** Know the river. Avoid surprises.

• **Be prepared for the weather.** Get a forecast before you go. Sudden winds and rain are common and can turn a pleasant trip into a risky, unpleasant venture.

• **Wear wading shoes** or tennis shoes with wool, polypropylene, pile, or neoprene socks.

• **Never take your boat over a low-head dam.**

• **Portage** (carry) your boat around any section of water about which you feel uncertain.

• **Never boat alone.** Boating safety increases with numbers.

• **Keep painter lines** (ropes tied to the bow) and any other ropes coiled and secured.

• **Never tie a rope to yourself** or to another paddler, especially a child.

• **Kneel to increase your stability** before entering rougher water, like a rapid.

• **If you collide with an obstruction, lean toward it.** This will usually prevent your capsizing or flooding the boat.

• **File a float plan** with a reliable person indicating where you are going and when you will return. Remember to contact the person when you have returned safely.



TOWNS AND TOURISM

The Creek Town program is a unique collaborative partnership between local municipalities and the French Creek Valley Conservancy that seeks to create positive, sustainable economic growth based around the incredible value of French Creek. Along French Creek, these towns host many valuable community treasures that hold great history and importance to the region.

Cochranton: Situated at the confluence of Little Sugar Creek and French Creek, Cochranton is said to have been settled as early as 1805 when the first house was built by John Adams. Cochranton is a borough of Crawford county and was officially created on April 5, 1885. Today's borough is made up of the original land grants of John Adams and Thomas Cochran, for whom the village was named. The Great Western Railway opened a market place for the rich agricultural area. Since then, business growth has kept pace with the needs of the community which now numbers 1,148 people. Amenities include full dining options and access to French Creek.

Utica: Nestled on the banks of French Creek is the borough of Utica. The Borough is bordered completely by French Creek, and has boat ramps and water access at Mile Marker 10 of the French Creek Water Trail. Although small, (population is less than 200), the community is very family-friendly and holds a bass tournament each year in June.



Franklin: Serving as the county seat of Venango county, Franklin, Pennsylvania, has a population of 7,212. Every major architectural style used in western Pennsylvania, from 1830 to 1930 can be found here giving Franklin the title: "The Victorian City."

The historic district, from Federal Hill to Miller Park, is registered in the National Registry of Historic Places. Franklin's location, at the confluence of French Creek and the Allegheny River was a key spot during the French and Indian War. The French claimed this territory and, in 1753, sent an advance party here to erect a fort. Today, Franklin is home to Applefest, which is the largest craft festival in western Pennsylvania. Hotels, taverns, theaters, and full dining options are a selection of the many amenities provided by the town.

POINTS OF INTEREST



Ernst Bike Trail is constructed over the old Meadville-Linesville Railroad line. The trail passes through the lush bottom lands of French Creek Valley and traverses terrain with imprints of ice-age glaciations. The paved trail is five miles long and runs from the Park Avenue Plaza in Meadville to Route 19.



Geneva Marsh is the largest open marsh in Pennsylvania and is home to rare species of birds and plants. It is designated as an Audubon Society Important Bird Area and has at least two active bald eagle nests. Geneva Marsh also provides a resting and feeding place for many species of waterfowl and other migratory birds. Fishing and viewing the flora and fauna of the marsh are best accomplished with canoes and other small boats. Geneva Marsh is located in southern Crawford County, directly off of Interstate 79 at Exit #141.

The French Creek Feeder Canal was constructed in 1827 and added to the transportation system that would eventually connect the lake port at Erie to inland areas and the Allegheny River at Franklin. The canal operated from 1827 to 1870 and crossed French Creek on an aqueduct near the current route 322. Beginning north of Meadville, the canal traveled down the eastward bank of French Creek and reached Shaw's Landing just north of Cochranton. Remnants of the canal can be seen in many places along French Creek reminding visitors of the Creek's historical past.



Custaloga Town Boy Scout Camp is a campground used by the French Creek Council Boy Scouts. The facility gets its name from Custaloga, the chief of the Munsee or Wolf Clan of the Delaware tribe. This historical figure was living at Venango (now Franklin) when Washington visited the area in November of 1753 on route to Fort LeBoeuf. Located at the mouth of Deer Creek, Custaloga town now serves as a year round facility for boy scouts and venture crews. There are opportunities to rent certain sections of the camp and enjoy hiking and other activities the camp has to offer.

FRENCH CREEK CREATURES

More types of fish and mollusks are found in French Creek than any other stream in Pennsylvania. The watershed is home to 27 species of mussels, 15 species of darters, and four important bird areas (IBA). Many species that thrive in French Creek have been extirpated from their natural ranges due to habitat loss and degradation of water quality. Nevertheless French Creek remains relatively healthy, leading The Nature Conservancy to include the French Creek watershed in its listing of national "hot spots" with ten or more at-risk fish and mussel species, and citing it as a critical watershed to conserve these species.

Mussels were once common throughout the eastern United States but have decreased in numbers due to their sensitivity to pollution and destruction of habitat. French Creek is home to four federally endangered mussel species. These species have lost 95% of their historic range but fortunately healthy populations can still be found in French Creek.

Colorful darters thrive in French Creek, which hosts 15 different species. Many of these species are rare or endangered.

French Creek is also home to Pennsylvania's largest salamander, the eastern hellbender. This salamander can reach up to 29 inches long and can weigh up to five pounds, making it one of the largest salamanders in North America.

Bald eagles and osprey are commonly seen in the watershed. Crawford County is one of the best places in Pennsylvania to see bald eagles.



POPULAR ACCESS POINTS

Wilson Shute: Follow Rt. 322 for 2.3 miles south of Meadville, turn right on to Wilson Shute Road, then left into the parking lot just before the bridge. **Parking available.**

Shaw's Landing: Follow Rt. 322 for 6.1 miles south of Meadville, turn right onto SR 2005, then left onto Dutch Hill Road (dirt) and follow for 0.5 miles. Located next to Conneaut Outlet. **Parking available.**

Utica Access: About 7.5 miles west of Franklin on Route 322, there will be a paved crossroads with a sign for Utica. Turn left. After driving down a steep hill, look for the parking area on the right side next to the railroad tracks before crossing French Creek. **Parking available.**

Franklin Access: Located in Franklin, south of the Route 322 bridge, along Elk Street between 3rd and 4th streets. **Parking available.**



VISITOR OPPORTUNITIES

Outfitters, guides, accommodations and recreational opportunities are abundant in the towns along French Creek's "Creek Towns" Communities. For more specific information regarding attractions and information presented in this guide, we encourage you to access one of the following resources.



French Creek Valley Conservancy
814-337-4321
frenchcreekconservancy.org



Crawford County Visitors Bureau
814-333-1258
visitcrawford.org

