

The Washington Post

Give History a Workout on Pa. Trail

Correction to This Article

In the print edition and previous Web copy, Carlisle, Pa., was incorrectly identified as Carlyle, Pa. The correction has been made.

By Nancy Dunham

Special to The Washington Post
Wednesday, March 11, 2009

The last thing I expected to do with my bought-at-a-children's-toy-store bicycle was take a half-day jaunt down a serious bike path.

I am as enthusiastic as anyone else about back-to-basics exercise, but the last time I rode a bike without counting down the minutes to the metaphoric finish line, my age began with a "1."

Yet I discovered that not only did I enjoy a trip on the 21-mile Heritage Rail Trail, part of a path that connects the Baltimore area and York, Pa., but also I wasn't the only non-athlete out there.

The Heritage Rail Trail is part of the National Trails System and runs from the Pennsylvania-Maryland state line to York. It is like no other in large part because of the many amenities, including benches and port-a-potties, and small-town attractions along its length. And many would say the trail is like no other because of the many individuals and businesses that help make it a welcome destination, including the two Eagle Scouts who conceived of the trail and

raised \$10,000 toward its construction costs in the early 1990s.

Kathy Modesitt and her husband, David, of Highland considered themselves weekend bikers when they first took to the trail. Stopping at Serenity Station, a cafe and day spa that also offers bicycle repairs and rentals near the midpoint of the trail, they were among those impressed with the sites along the way.

"This ride was great, quiet and scenic," Kathy Modesitt said. "It really is wonderful here . . . and quite historic."

Indeed, historic events include Abraham Lincoln's stop at Hanover Junction on his train trip to deliver the Gettysburg Address in 1863. The Hanover Junction train station houses a small museum, open on weekends from spring through fall.

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The presence of such historic sites off a scenic trail is what prompted Kate Laskowski of Easton, Md., to visit.

"It was pretty easy, and we also got a good workout," she said.

Tom Brant, executive director of the York County Department of Parks and Recreation, not only rides the trail but also helps keep it safe, tended and, of course, "wonderful."

A 2007 survey that Brant oversees found that users of the 10-foot-wide trail traversed it by bike (71.7 percent), by walking or hiking (18 percent), by running (5.3 percent) or on horseback (0.8 percent). About 60 percent of users come from the York area, with almost 26 percent from Maryland, Virginia and Washington.

But word of mouth brings users from all corners.

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Emily Cole of San Francisco heard about the trail from her father, Mike Cole, of Carlisle, Pa., and had to try it when she visited him last fall.

"He is obsessed with it. He has ridden the whole thing and knows the whole history," Cole said. "I honestly thought that it was pretty amazing to have a place like this in Pennsylvania. . . . It seems more like something San Francisco would have done."

Those who use the trail are often surprised to find many rest areas and traveler-friendly merchants and business people.

"It is very flat, really safe, and people enjoy it," said Rick Bazuine, owner of the New Freedom Railroad Cafe, who said repeat riders range in age from about 35 to 60. "We have quite a few regulars who ride down, park and come in for a while."

Visitors who want to spend the weekend, often enjoying the area's wineries, shops and seasonal festivals, sometimes camp nearby or stay at one of the area's bed-and-breakfasts.

Pam Nicholson, who owns the Jackson House Bed and Breakfast in Railroad with her

husband, Bob Wilhelm, said they took one look at the property and "fell in love and had to make an offer."

Although the B&B, which was built in 1859, is a special property, situated right beside the trail, the quaint, friendly feel of the town was equally important to the couple's decision to relocate from Reisterstown, Md. "There's just a lot of history here and a small-town approach to life," Nicholson said.

That, of course, extends to neighborly welcomes to those on the trail, no matter what their athletic ability.

Mary Ryan of Lutherville, Md., president of the Baltimore Bicycling Club, said she recommends the trail to all those who want to give biking a try.

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"There are some people that never feel comfortable riding in traffic, and they can stick to this trail," she said. "That's exactly how I got started. . . . It's absolutely wonderful for beginners and families that want to go out and enjoy a ride."

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