

Bike trail touches Eastern Continental Divide

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This past June, I wrote about watersheds. The example I used was Laurel Hill Creek on the east side of Laurel Ridge in Somerset County. It is a medium-sized watershed, and one that is easy to visit and explore in one day.

Of course, watersheds vary. They might be very small, even just a few square feet of your backyard, or might be very large, covering much of a continent. Small watersheds, when put together, add up to larger and larger areas of land being drained. Laurel Hill Creek is a part of the Casselman River watershed covering three states -- Pennsylvania, Maryland and West Virginia. The Casselman is part of the Youghiogheny River watershed that covers those same three states but is even larger. Going up the ladder, the Youghiogheny empties into the Monongahela River, beginning at Fairmont, W.Va., and flowing north to Pittsburgh, but still within just the three states.

Then a big step up occurs. The Ohio River drains the states noted before and adds western New York, Ohio, Kentucky, Illinois, Tennessee, Virginia, Indiana and North Carolina. That last state is surprising, but not when you look at a map and see that North Carolina extends across the Appalachians to their western slopes.

The Ohio begins at the Point in Pittsburgh and flows for 981 miles to Cairo, Ill., where it joins the Mississippi River. More than 25 million people, which is more than 10 percent of the population of the United States, lives in the Ohio River watershed.

Of course, the next step up to the Mississippi watershed is a big one.

The Mississippi drains more than 42 percent of the central United States. It is the third-largest watershed in the world and the longest river in the United States. In all, 31 states and two Canadian provinces are drained by the Mississippi River watershed.

This huge watershed's boundaries are on the North American continent. The headwaters of the Mississippi in the Rocky Mountains mark a significant geographic boundary called the Continental Divide. At the knife-edge summits of snowcapped Rocky Mountain peaks, the summer snowmelt drips into icy clear rivulets on one side of the ridge, and the water ultimately finds its way to the Gulf of Mexico. Just a few feet away, on the other side of the ridgeline, the water heads for the Pacific Ocean.

When people talk about the continental divide, they usually refer to the Western Continental Divide, which is the more dramatic boundary in North America. That geographic contour follows the crest of the Rockies from British Columbia, Canada, through the United States and southward into Mexico and Central

America.

However, there are other continental divides in the United States, and two of them are in our backyard.

The Eastern Continental Divide separates the Mississippi watershed from watersheds that flow directly into the Atlantic Ocean. The divide runs from the southern tip of Florida north through Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia, and ends in northern Pennsylvania.

The end in northern Pennsylvania is an unusual spot, a triple divide.

A triple divide is where two continental divides intersect and the water flows into three different watersheds. In north central Potter County, there is an unnamed hill from which water flows in one direction into the Allegheny River and then the Mississippi watershed, some water flows north into New York and the St. Lawrence River, and the remainder flows east into the Susquehanna River watershed and the Atlantic Ocean.

This is one of only five triple divides in all of North America -- Triple Divide Peak, Montana; The Hill of Three Waters, Minnesota; Three Waters Mountain, Wyoming; an unnamed hilltop near Gold, Pa.; and the unofficially named Headwaters Hill, Colorado. I would like to give directions to the spot in Pennsylvania, but the land is private property and the owners deserve their privacy. However, on an Internet site I used to research this article -- www.gpsinformation.org/jack/Divide/Divide.html -- the Web site author, Mark A. Gonzalez, suggests that "Hopefully, someone will champion a fitting name for so distinguished a peak."

From that hill in Potter County, the divide between the Atlantic Ocean and the St. Lawrence River continues north through New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and into Canada, ending in Nova Scotia. It would be an interesting road trip to follow the divide, where you can, all the way from Florida to Nova Scotia.

However, there is a place to visit the Eastern Continental Divide more easily.

In Somerset County, the divide runs along the crest of a small ridge west of Little Savage Mountain and southeast of Meyersdale, Pa. One way to visit this geographically significant landmark is by biking or hiking the Great Allegheny Passage bike trail.

The southeastern portion of the passage just opened to the public in May of this year, and there are several places to get on the packed limestone path for a walk or bike ride. One such access is from a restored Western Maryland Railway station in Meyersdale. Use Route 219 from Somerset to reach Meyersdale, then turn left onto Main Street, and the station is just up the hill.

Once you park, bike east, right from the station, on the Great Allegheny Passage toward Sand Patch, Deal and Cumberland, Md. There are trail maps available at the station and, on the weekends, friendly volunteers who will gladly give directions. The ride from Meyersdale to the divide is about nine

miles, so judge your abilities accordingly.

If you want a shorter bike ride and/or walk to the Eastern Continental Divide, drive to the Deal access to the passage. To get there from Main Street in Meyersdale, just before the restored station, look for Glade City Road on the right. Turn right and follow this road along Flaugherty Creek.

In about two miles, you will drive under the Keystone Viaduct. You can't miss it, because it is a massive railroad structure that once carried trains of the Western Maryland Railway. A viaduct is made up of several small spans, usually crossing different kinds of land or water. The term viaduct comes from the Latin *via* for road and *ductus* to conduct something. The Keystone Viaduct lives up to its name by crossing the CSX railroad, Flaugherty Creek and Glade City Road. Instead of trains, it now carries bicycles on the Great Allegheny Passage.

Continue on this road for another 1.6 miles to a right turn onto Deal Road. Follow Deal Road for 2.4 miles to a "Y" and bear right. In 1.9 miles is a parking area and access to the Great Allegheny Passage. Much of this route will be marked with signs for the Allegheny Highlands Trail. This is the old name of the bicycle trail, and it will change in the future.

Park at the Deal access and turn left onto the trail.

When you start, you will see a concrete underpass about a mile ahead. McKenzie Hollow Road goes over the trail at that underpass, and the high point of the trail in the underpass is the Eastern Continental Divide. From there, water flowing west goes into Flaugherty Creek and ultimately toward Pittsburgh. Water going the other way goes into a tributary of Laurel Run that flows to Wills Creek, goes into Bedford County and then on into Cumberland to meet the Potomac River.

This is the highest point on the Great Allegheny Passage, at 2,392 feet above sea level. If you are riding a bike, it is a great place to start a long ride on the passage, as Pittsburgh, 140 some miles away, is all downhill, and so is Washington, D.C., more than 200 miles to the east.

If you have some extra time, just a bit more than a mile farther east on the passage is the Big Savage Tunnel. The tunnel was built by the Western Maryland Railway in 1911 and reconstructed over the past several years to link the Great Allegheny Passage to Maryland. The tunnel is more than 3,300 feet long and lighted. On the other side is a magnificent vista from the east flank of Big Savage Mountain. The view includes three states: Pennsylvania, Maryland and West Virginia. Another mile beyond the tunnel is the Mason-Dixon Line and Maryland.

If you start from Deal, it is a relatively short eight-mile round trip that includes crossing the Eastern Continental Divide, a ride through the longest tunnel on the Great Allegheny Passage, a spectacular view of three states and crossing the fabled Mason-Dixon Line.

That should make for an event-filled short trip that will astound your friends with

the telling.