

The Washington Post

Thrown for a loop in New Jersey

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Wednesday, December 2, 2009

The New Jersey Turnpike crept into the conversation on an early stretch of the Millstone Valley Scenic Byway, a 27.5-mile loop in a state frequently defined by exit numbers. Liz Palius brought up the much-maligned road to illustrate a fact and dismiss a cliché, all in one breath.

"This is classic New Jersey landscape," remarked the president of the Millstone Valley Preservation Coalition as we slowly motored along a countrified road trapped in a history picture book. "Most people think it's the turnpike, but it's not."

The newly designated national byway is inured from turnpike jokes. You can't even ask "Which exit?" because the celebrated road in north-central New Jersey, near Princeton, is many routes removed from the NJTP.

Isolated from the rumble of six-lane traffic and the sprawl of strip malls, the byway seemingly travels backward, to the 19th century, when the Delaware & Raritan Canal was a watery highway of commerce; to the Revolutionary War, when George Washington and his men tromped through the lowlands after two victorious battles; to the 1700s, when Dutch settlers farmed the fertile valley; to the pre-Colonial Native American settlements of the Lenni Lenape.

"The byway celebrates the many phases of history here," said Palius, who hopes to open a visitors center and introduce self-guided walking and audio driving tours next year. "Indians, Dutch settlers and Revolutionary War troops all moved through the area. This was the natural corridor."

Looking at the map outlined by the National Scenic Byways Program, the drive appeared as easy and straightforward as any closed circuit: Go up (Millstone River Road), over (Millstone to East Millstone) and back down (Canal Road). On paper, it appeared to be a freewheeling foray along rural roads with the canal, Millstone River, preserved open spaces and a dozen historic attractions to engage the mind and eye. Behind the wheel, the ride was more challenging, due to Jersey's haphazard signage and street design.

"The byway is really the connector" for Millstone Valley, Palius explained, "which is big, wide and complicated."

The route's shape resembles the (slightly skewed) bottom portion of a man on the run. The southernmost point sits in his left foot, in Kingston; the top in his archless right foot, site of Millstone and East Millstone. In my first attempt to explore the road, I ended up in his left knee.



A towpath follows the Delaware & Raritan Canal, which once carried coal barges. (Lardner/klein Landscape Architects From National Scenic Byways Online)

The 36-mile main canal ribbons through the byway. From 1834 to 1932, it was a shortcut for barges transporting coal from Philadelphia to New York and clay to potters in Trenton, N.J. A towpath parallels the waterway, now quiet except for the plunk of canoers' paddles and the plink of fishing lines. At an access point in Rocky Hill, I met a hiker from Pennsylvania dressed in gear more suitable for rough terrain than a flat trail.

"I like hiking things that have a beginning and an end," said Jim Puzo, who was on a quest to trek 1,000 miles by the new year. (He was about 100 miles from his goal.) "It's a prettier path than I expected. Being out in the woods has a calming effect."

Though it was growing late, I was determined to set foot on the path. Along the tree-lined trail, headlights flickered on the canal's glassy surface and shadows darkened my next steps. When I had to struggle to see the tip of my shoe, I turned back.

For my second outing, I rode shotgun in Palius's car, gladly letting her navigate as I hung my head out the window and watched the pastoral views float by. We started at the locktender's house in Kingston, part of the Delaware & Raritan Canal State Park.

"The area has evolved over many, many years," Palius explained over coffee and an almond paste pastry at Main Street Bakery, but enough of the early buildings and setting have remained to form 14 historic communities. "The canal connects the villages, and each village has its own history."

The communities dotting the byway are surprisingly undeveloped, which in a historian's vernacular means that they are well-preserved. Millstone, for example, has a gas station and a humble convenience store. An 1834 blacksmith shop now houses a museum demonstrating the inner workings of a forge. An Indian grinding stone the size of a boulder sits out front, an artifact from the first inhabitants. A similar mortar rests on the front lawn of an 18th-century Dutch Reformed church, which was reduced to firewood by British forces during the Revolutionary War. (It has since been rebuilt.)

Across the bridge and past an abandoned outhouse (in use till 1957), Cedar Hill Cemetery in East Millstone is a plain-air studio for grave rubbers, the stones faded by the rough hands of time. The tombs are a lesson in genealogy, and criminal punishment. A small, worn marker designates the resting spot of Martha Place, the first woman to be executed by electric chair. (New York did the deed in 1899, but her home state received her remains.) Her gravestone bears the same epitaph as that of a dog also interred here: "At rest."

Most of the sights -- a one-room schoolhouse in Griggstown, for example, and the Bridgetenders House at Blackwell's Mill -- are simple structures with stories to tell. Some of the most impressive tales come out of Rockingham, a mansion that served as a crash pad for George Washington. (He wrote his farewell address to his troops here in 1783.) "Washington did sleep here," said curator Lisa A. Flick, as we toured an all-purpose room painted in Prussian blue. "I just don't know exactly where."

The sun started to paint its evening streaks across the sky as Palius and I closed the loop. As we passed Rocky Hill en route to Kingston, I pictured Dutch farmers tending the land, boats plying the canal and Washington pressing ahead toward peace. And I imagined a lone hiker adding up the miles to reach the end of his journey.

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