

# APPALACHIAN TRAIL: Weverton to Gathland State Park

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## IN BRIEF

This outing on South Mountain in western Maryland offers hikers superb views as a reward for a strenuous climb. It also includes an easy ridgetop trail segment, plus an unusual memorial.

## DESCRIPTION

South Mountain forms part of the Blue Ridge portion of Maryland and adjoining Pennsylvania. Logged and fought over in the 19th century, much of it is now protected within several Maryland state parks known collectively as the South Mountain Recreation Area. Threading through the area is a 40-mile strip of the Appalachian Trail (AT).

This somewhat challenging out-and-back AT hike features South Mountain's southernmost portion, which rises above the Potomac River in a series of high cliffs. The area, broadly straddling the line between Washington and Frederick counties, lies roughly 60 miles northwest of Washington, D.C. The north-to-south hike is 13.8 miles long (including about a half mile of side trips) and accumulates about 3,000 feet of elevation change between the trailhead at the foot of the mountain and the state-park

## Directions

From junction of Capital Beltway (Interstate 495) and I-270 spur in Maryland, drive northwest for 31 miles on I-270 to Frederick. At exit 32, swing right to get onto I-70. Proceed for 0.4 miles and, at next fork, stay to left to get onto I-70 heading west. Proceed for 0.9 miles, and then turn right at next fork (I-70 exit 52) to get onto US 340 heading west. Proceed for about 14.5 miles. Then turn right onto MD 67, go 0.1 mile, turn right onto Weverton Road, and go 0.2 miles to gravel parking area on right.



## KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

**LENGTH:** 13.8 miles

**CONFIGURATION:** Out-and-back

**DIFFICULTY:** Quite hard

**SCENERY:** Mountain woodlands, farmland views, Potomac panorama

**EXPOSURE:** Mostly shady; less so in winter

**TRAFFIC:** Usually light; heavier on cliffs and in park on warm-weather weekends, holidays

**TRAIL SURFACE:** Mostly rocky, with dirt; some rooty, grassy stretches; pavement in park

**HIKING TIME:** 6.5–8 hours

**SEASON:** Year-round

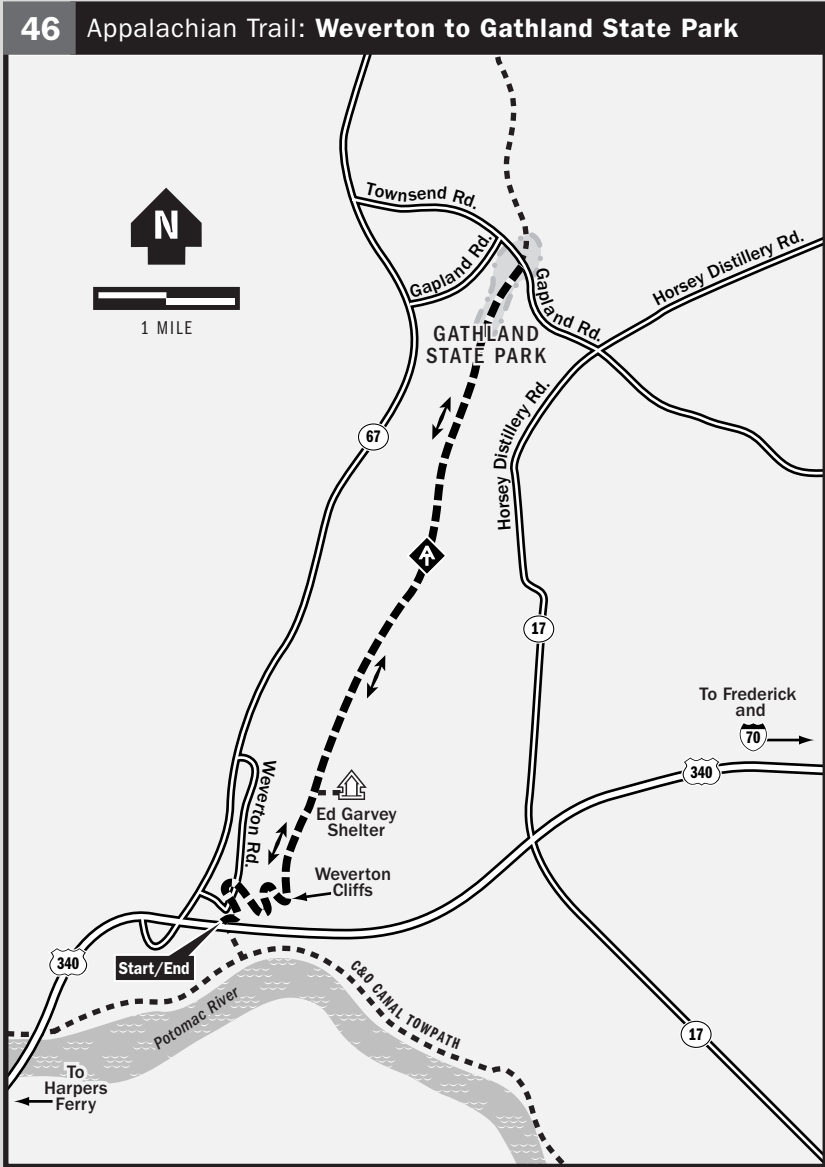
**ACCESS:** No AT restrictions; Gathland State Park open daily, sunrise–sunset

**MAPS:** USGS Keedysville, Harpers Ferry; PATC Map 6

**FACILITIES:** None at trailhead; toilet at trail shelter; water, phone, toilets at Gathland

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** Contact Appalachian Trail Conservancy, in Harpers Ferry, (304) 535-6331 or [www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org); and South Mountain Recreation Area, in Boonsboro, (301) 791-4767 (for annual Adventure Guide, send 83¢ SASE to SMRA, 21843 National Pike, Boonsboro, MD 21713)





turnaround spot at Crampton Gap. The gap was the site of a September 1862 engagement that was one of several known collectively as the battle of South Mountain. Two decades after the Civil War, the Crampton Gap area was bought by a wealthy writer and ex-war correspondent named George Albert Townsend, who turned it into a mountain retreat of eccentric design. He named it Gathland,

**Although you're going to have to chug uphill to reach this spot on Weverton Cliffs, you'll get views that are unrivaled in the metro area.**

based on his pseudonym, “Gath” (his initials plus *h*) and the biblical city of Gath. He later spiraled into poverty and died, as did his estate. Eventually acquired by the state, the estate became the 135-acre Gathland State Park in 1958.

The hike route passes through mostly deciduous woodlands that provide shade and greenery during the growing season, later turn beautifully autumnal, and then open up in leafless winter. Flowers, ferns, and wildlife add to the seasonal variety. So does poison ivy, so stay on the trail. My preferred fall clothing color is orange, because the no-hunting-allowed AT right-of-way is narrow.

To get started at Weverton, go to the eastern end of the parking lot and take the path that leads just a few yards to the white-blazed AT. Turn left onto the trail and follow it to Weverton Road. After crossing the road (carefully), head for the utility pole where the AT plunges into the woods and then starts going uphill. The trail gains 500 feet in elevation as a mile-long series of switchbacks. En route, detour onto a rocky, signposted, and blue-blazed side trail on the right. Follow it downhill for about 200 yards to Weverton Cliffs, which has, in the late Ed Garvey’s words, “one of the most spectacular views along the entire [AT].” On a clear day, you’ll get a panoramic view of the Potomac River Valley and environs, especially if you have field glasses. In the fall, watch for migrating hawks, streaming by on a northwest wind, sometimes at eye-to-eye level. Then retrace your steps to the AT.

Continue up the trail as it rises steadily for several hundred feet over the next mile to reach and follow South Mountain’s narrow crest line. After about a half mile more, you’ll reach a signpost, which points right, toward one of the overnight shelters that dot the AT. Walk a hundred yards and check out the shelter’s construction, views (especially in winter), and colorful logbook (trail register).



Completed in 2001, the Ed Garvey Memorial Shelter honors a man who lived, breathed, through-hiked, and wrote up the AT for decades. Volunteers led by master builder Frank Turk erected the shelter and its matching privy and the Roberto Reyes memorial campfire benches.

Beyond the shelter, the trail pitches up and down a bit as it threads through the ridgetop woods for 3.8 miles to Gathland State Park. Here and there, a fleeting view is to be had, usually in winter, but the basic scenery is of the restful green-tunnel variety. You may see deer and wild turkeys—or evidence of them. Be sure to stay with the white blazes. Eventually, the trail noses gently downhill into the state park. There, follow a paved roadway for a few hundred yards to reach a 50-foot-high structure that marks the hike's turnaround. Townsend (Gath) erected it as a memorial to his fellow war correspondents. Then follow the white blazes for 6.7 miles back to the Weverton trailhead.

## **NEARBY/RELATED ACTIVITIES**

During or after the hike, explore Gathland State Park and its collection of Townsend memorabilia and display boards. To learn more about the Appalachian Trail, see Hike 59, page 285.