



Road Trip

Along the River: Middletown to Maytown to Elizabethtown

by **Yvonne J. Milspaw and Brant Ellsworth**
(2021 Annual Meeting Local Planning Committee)

This 2-3 hour day trip will allow you to see The River, Three Mile Island, the remains of the Union Canal, the Swirl Holes, a new Amish settlement, Donegal Church and the Folklore Coffee Shop in Elizabethtown. What more could you want in an afternoon drive?

The Susquehanna River is long (444 miles), shallow, navigable only in short sections, and is crossed by many, many dams for flood control (though sadly, they do not always exactly work. Time is sometimes measured by major extremely destructive floods. The most recent Perfectly Awful Flood was in 1972, caused by Hurricane Agnes, (simply referred to as “Agnes”). The River originates in Lake Ostego, near Cooperstown, NY (home of the Baseball Hall of Fame, of Famous American novelist James Fenimore Cooper, and two folk arts museums). It runs south through Binghamton, home of Binghamton University, where many students have first encountered folklore studies). The River runs southwest, through the Endless Mountains and the Wyoming Valley, site of atrocities during the settlement and colonial period, the center of anthracite coal production and devastating floods, and past the cities of Wilkes-Barre and Scranton (Joe Biden’s hometown). Near Sunbury, the River joins its West Branch, which flows past Jersey Shore (a great name for a river town in the middle of Pennsylvania) and Williamsport (home of the Little League World Series). The now very wide, but still shallow River runs south, through a Bald Eagle sanctuary, past some Amish settlements, across the Appalachian Trail, past Harrisburg (where many folklorists have lived and worked), and then on into the Chesapeake Bay. The river was once rich with migrating eels, shad and other sea born fish, but now, thanks to more than 24 dams, only contains small mouth bass and other smaller fish.

There has been a documented Native American presence along the Susquehanna River for about 12,000 years or so. Archaeologist Paul A. Wallace (1975) dates the presence to about 11,000 BCE. State Archeologist Barry Kent (1984) documented a date of 7000 BCE but admits the date may be as early as 12,000 BCE. James Adavasio and Jake Page’s (2002) excavations of Native settlements near Pittsburgh yield a radiocarbon date of 16,000–20,000 BCE. The Native people who lived in the valley in 1612, when John Smith made his famous map of the Chesapeake Bay, were called (by him) Susquehannock, for the River along which they lived. We don’t know what they called themselves. They were likely Iroquoian speakers, and likely very

recent settlers of the area, possibly replacing some of the Lenape (Delaware) people (Mann 1491). The name Susquehanna probably predates them by thousands of years (Nicolaisen). Some scholars speculate that the name Susquehanna may mean something like “the place we eat oysters.” Many of the roads in this area are repurposed Native People’s trails.

Middletown

→ **Take Cameron Street/Rt 230 East to Middletown.** About 20 minutes.

Middletown was named for its location halfway between Lancaster and Carlisle, both extremely important colonial cities.

→ **Turn right at the square onto South Union Street.**

Admire the nice mansions along the way. The Brownstone mansion on the left near the stoplight, now Alfred’s Victorian Restaurant, has its very own ghost, Emma, who occasionally shows up looking like a guest. She has appeared in at least one staff photo. That Tattered Flag Brewery and Distillery on the right sometimes makes TMI (Three Mile Island) ale. And the Brownstone Restaurant is much recommended. Yvonne’s mother has a painting hanging in the restaurant.

→ **Continue along South Union Street**, past the next traffic light and along the Swatara Creek (possibly meaning “the place we eat eels”).

On your left are two buildings worth stopping to admire. One is the “Old Fort,” a double log house. Now it belongs to the Middletown Area Historical Society but until recently was a dwelling. It is believed to have been the local fort during the French and Indian Wars in the mid-18th century. Beside it is the Old Band Hall, once a Methodist church in Highspire (or Oberlin), that was decommissioned and moved via horse drawn wagons to Middletown. James Weirich remembered helping with the move, probably around 1920. He was a musician, a trombonist, who played with the Liberty (Fire House) Band in Middletown. Almost every little town had town bands that would present concerts and march in local parades. Weirich had been a musician and medic in the U.S. Army in Europe during World War I and had been a member of General Pershing’s personal band.

On the right, you may be able to discern the remains of a basin that once held canal boats here at the junction of the Union and Pennsylvania Canal systems. Built during the early part of the 19th century, the canals were largely bought out and replaced by the railroads by the late 19th century. You are now “down at the river,” the poorest section of town full of people who proudly call themselves “River Rats.” It is the place where the Swatara Creek meets the Susquehanna River. It is also now sparsely populated. The devastating flood in 1904, called the Ice Flood, saw houses crushed. Yvonne’s grandmother remembered being rescued by rowboat from the second floor of her house by her father during that flood. She, her mother and her older sister were terrified by the raging water carrying huge chunks of ice. Their house, built by her father, was along Water Street in Lower Royalton. You will be driving by the site of it. Other floods in 1936 and 1972 (Agnes) forced evacuations. After Agnes, houses in this area were so badly damaged that the people were forcibly removed to undamaged housing, though some rebuilt “safer”

houses on their land. They were not happy about it, but most of them left and their houses were demolished. Entire small, poor communities all along the River suffered similar fates. The section of Harrisburg called Shipoke, near the hotel, went from an extremely poor neighborhood to Yuppie stardom after Agnes.

→ **Take the Canal Bridge** (there used to be the Aqueduct Bridge just beside this new bridge, that allowed canal boats to cross the crick), cross the crick and enter the tiny town of Lower Royalton.

→ **Turn right immediately onto Water Street** along the Swatara Creek (where Yvonne's grandmother's house used to be), then keep left and drive along the Susquehanna River.

Isn't it pretty? There is a nice pull off where you can get a great view of the cooling towers of Three Mile Island (there used to be a great chainsaw carver at the pull off). And you can see the Riffles, a ridge of rocks across the river, making it extremely shallow and totally unnavigable. Along your left are the remains of the old Union Canal system. You will see the remains of the locks which lifted the canal boats around the Riffles shortly. You might want to take some photos here.

→ **Continue driving along Water Street.**

At the stop sign, near two mansions, look right to see the remains of an old windmill that was an ice storage facility. The wind turned the sails to keep the ice cool through the summer.

→ Soon Water Street will curve sharply left.

Look left to see the old canal locks. You can park there and walk back, though long pants and sturdy shoes are strongly recommended.

→ As you continue, cross the railroad tracks and **turn right onto Rt 441 South.**

Three Mile Island

→ **Drive a few miles down 441 South**, past the entrance to the Island, and pull off the road near the edge of a large open field on the left.

At the edge of the woods there is a small cemetery (called by local media folks the *TMI lounge*). This is a good place to think about the accident. Three Mile Island is the only partial meltdown of a nuclear plant in the United States. Ever. March 1979. Panic. No one—even the experts—had any idea what was going on or what it all meant. Visits from President Carter. Wall-to-wall media. Experts complaining that they couldn't get any work done what with all the visiting politicians. Early Conspiracy Theory practice, cancer scares, extremely tasteless jokes. We had it all. In 1978 Yvonne and Doug bought and restored a traditional Pennsylvania German three room central chimney log house, about one mile north of here (Milspaw 1983). They moved in February 1979. One month later, in March 1979, they had to leave because of the "event" at the Island. Doug was a director/cameraman at WITF-TV, our local PBS affiliate. He stayed behind to cover all the events. Much of the footage you still see today is his work. Yvonne and her in-laws and the cat moved very briefly to New England, but she returned quickly, in time to start gathering folklore about the "event." She blames Alan Dundes for guilting her into it.

Common beliefs about the effects of the Three Mile Island disaster were centered on conspiracy theories about cancer scares, unexplained deaths, mutations of farm animals, a surge in premature births of infants, and overwhelming requests by women for abortions. People did not trust any information from the utility or from the government, or sometimes from health experts. People believed that psychic Jeanne Dixon had predicted it, and that worse was to follow. The insider jokes were bitter; outsider jokes were pretty funny—"What's the four-day forecast for Middletown? Two Days." "Forecast: cloudy with a 40% chance of survival." People said things to us like "You have a certain glow." "Do you glow in the dark?" "You are radiant today." (Milspaw 1981, 2007). Thirty years later, narratives about the event centered on personal experience narratives where the narrator was a hero, though many still blamed the event for their health problems. Last year the entire Island and all its equipment were sold for \$1.00.

Swirl Holes and Lancaster County

→ **Continue driving south on Rt 441.**

On your right you will pass the Red Hill Farm Market (it was only slightly affected by the TMI accident. They likely have great pumpkins and apples just now).

When you pass the second entrance to Three Mile Island you will be in Falmouth, and in Lancaster County. I am sure you noticed the difference.

→ **Take a right turn into the Falmouth Boat Access and River Trail Park.**

You can walk the trail, or much more importantly, if the River is low, you can take a short walk north (upstream) to visit the **Swirl Holes**. Officially these are the Conewago Falls, but locals call it the Swirl Holes. It is an outcrop of rocks where small stones have become trapped and swirled around much larger rocks by the river for hundreds of thousands of years, forming perfectly circular holes. They are numerous, gorgeous and awesome all at once. The rocks are easy to navigate. And you can bring home extraordinary photos. The walking trail extends along the river for several miles just in case you need a hike. You could hike south (downstream) and visit the somewhat ironically named "White Cliffs of the Conoy" if you like. The Conoy is a small local creek and a long-lost Native American village.

→ **Continue driving south on Rt 441.**

You are now in the heart of Lancaster County, the Garden Spot of the country. At least that is what we say it is. The soil is limestone base and is rich for crops and animals. Most farmers make their living through market gardening, dairy and small livestock. The farms are old, beautifully tended and prolific. Look at the houses and the bank barns, the latter built into hills so one side has a hill to enter the upper story, the barn, and the lower part, the stable, is dug into the hill to provide livestock with warmth in winter and coolness in summer. The overhang (the forebay) provides shade in summer and permits feed to be easily dropped into the stable yard from the upper barn. Houses and barns tend to have the same roofline and are generally aligned south or southeast to collect the low sun in winter, and shade from the higher sun in summer. Many older houses have a separate outbuilding called a summer kitchen where women's heavy work—slaughtering, large scale cooking, laundry is carried out. Trees—often nut trees—are fence

rows. The older houses and barns are stone—generally limestone or brownstone. Some houses are log underneath clapboarding.

You will pass a lovely old mill on your left.

And on your right, you will pass a Pennsylvania Historical Marker for the Conewago Indian Village, excavated by the PHMC Archaeological Division many years ago (now back to being a farm field). It was a Middle to Late Woodland Iroquois-style settlement (1450-1700) of longhouses.

Maytown

→ **At the stoplight take Rt 743 North** and go into the sweet little town of Maytown.

Travel to the square (which is really a circle). You may wish to stop and look around a bit.

→ **Go to the right out of the center of town, and travel along Rock Point Road.**

→ **Take a left onto Rt 772 East, Colebrook Road, then take the second left (past Airport Road) onto Donegal Springs Road.**

Along here you are in the heart of a relatively new **Amish** settlement. Look for horses and buggies, people in plain clothes, women and girls in solid-colored plain dresses and white coverings (caps), men and boys with suspenders, plain colored shirts, black pants, and broad-brimmed hats. If married, the men will have beards but no moustaches. Depending on the *Ordnung* of their community (set by the local Bishops), they may or may not have buttons on their clothes. Most houses are extremely neat, have extensive gardens around them, and many have signs out to sell their produce, baked goods or small woodworked items. They will be very nice to visit, but they will not allow you to photograph them, nor will they sell anything on a Sunday. For more detailed information on the Amish and other Plain People, consult Kraybill 1989.

Donegal Church

As you turn onto Donegal Springs Road, you will pass an old one-room school (very like the one Yvonne attended for three years) and an uncovered log house.

On the right is the 1721 Donegal Presbyterian Church and Cemetery, overlooking Donegal Springs. It is probably worth a quick visit.

Elizabethtown, the Folklore Coffee Shop and Groff's Meats

→ **Continue driving along Donegal Springs Road to Rt 743 North.** It will be a right-hand turn at a stop sign.

→ When you reach Elizabethtown in a few miles, **turn left at the light onto Rt 230 West/743 North/ Market Street.**

Stop at the square and look around. Folklore Coffee is right on the square. A block west (on Market Street) is Groff's Meats, a local business (probably fourth generation by now) which

makes and sells excellent, local, Lebanon bolognas and other smoked and fresh meats and cheese.

→ **Continue to drive along Rt 230 West towards Middletown and Harrisburg.**

When you cross the Conewago Creek you will be back in Dauphin County. Just at the creek, look up at the brick-end barn (now a business called Ed's landscaping): there is a little heart built into the brick gable of the roof. It is really for ventilation, but it is fun to make up other stories for it. As you top the long hill, there is also a nice little cemetery next to the former Brethren Church along the right-hand side of the road.

→ **Continue along Rt 230 West to Middletown and eventually to Harrisburg.**

Works Which May Be of Interest

Adavasio, J. M. and Jake Page. 2002. *The First Americans: In Pursuit of Archeology's Greatest Mystery*. New York: Random House.

Kent, Barry. 1984. *Susquehanna's Indians*. Anthropological Series No. 6. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Kraybill, Donald B. *The Riddle of Amish Culture*. 1989. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.

Mann, Charles C. 2005. *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*. New York: Knopf.

Milspaw, Yvonne J. 1981. Folklore and the Nuclear Age: The Harrisburg Disaster at Three Mile Island. *International Folklore Review*. 1: 57 – 65.

—. 1983. Reshaping Tradition: Changes to Pennsylvania German Folk Houses. *Pioneer America: Journal of Historic American Material Culture*. 15:2. 67 – 84.

—. 2007. TMI-2: Elements in the discourse on disaster. *Contemporary Legend*. 10: 74 – 94.

Nicolaisen, W.F.H. 2001. *Scottish Place Names: Their Study and Significance*. Edinburgh: John Donald.

Wallace, Paul A. W. 1975. *Indians in Pennsylvania*. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.