

A Creek Runs Through It

Rock Creek meanders through Montgomery County for more than 20 miles and is marked by nature's beauty, by Melanie Choukas-Bradley

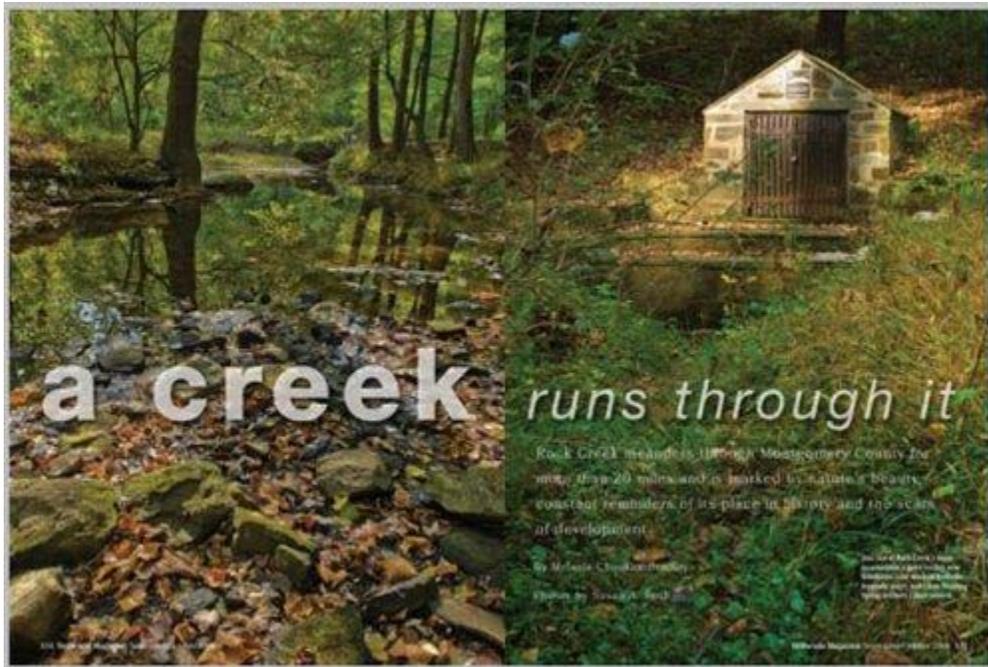


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Susan A. Roth

Steve Dryden and I dig our paddles into the “silty” bottom of Rock Creek. We are trying to canoe upstream just south of the Beltway in Chevy Chase, where the Mormon Temple commands a tree-lined horizon. Dryden, a local historian, writer and board member of Friends of Rock Creek’s Environment, points to the former site of the 18th century mill that gave the road next to us (Jones Mill) its name and to the chiseled rock ledge beyond the mill site he says was once a quarry. After a time, our strenuous paddling pays off and we enjoy a few moments of easy travel until we reach a rocky stretch.

There, we drag the heavy canoe up a vine-covered bank and portage through the mugwort and stilt grass to the Beltway overpass. “This must be a first,” I say to Dryden as we carefully climb down a rock wall to “put in” directly under the multilane highway. Traffic drones above us, and we hear a loud trip-trapping that sounds like a frightening contemporary version of Three Billy Goats Gruff.

Back in the water, we enter a strange land of enchantment. Bottomland trees lean over the dark mirror of Rock Creek: bone-white sycamores, smooth gray ironwoods and cinnamon-barked river birches. The Beltway hums over our left shoulders, and trash hangs like Spanish moss from the trees. Tires seem strategically placed in the creek bottom, providing extra leverage for silt-paddling. The gravel beaches are strewn with beer and soda cans. But there is a flock of wood ducks upstream, flying away from us, and amid the Dr. Pepper cans, raccoon prints are stamped into the muddy shore.

A mother deer and her fawn climb down the bank and stand in the creek drinking.

From the canoe, the contrast of wild beauty and degradation strains the senses. Through the twilight trees, a large green Connecticut Avenue sign drifts into ghostly view on the Beltway above us, its arrows pointing toward Kensington and Chevy Chase.

As dusk gathers, it begins to rain. Dryden and I turn the canoe around and head downstream. Between the silt and frequent portaging, we get in quite a workout. I feel exhilarated as we drag the canoe out of the creek under a cloud-obscured moon, and walk over a wooden footbridge and back to the small parking lot. Later, I will learn from Montgomery County historian Michael Dwyer that even the Indians who traveled Rock Creek for thousands of years, hunting, fishing and gathering nuts and berries, didn’t consider its waters navigable this far north.

Over the following weeks, I will travel the main stem of Rock Creek in Maryland, from the Washington, D.C., line to Laytonsville. Mostly, I will go by means easier than canoe: by bicycle, on foot and, for a very short way, by car. I want to follow the creek to its source. I want to watch it riffle over rocks, meander wildly through the flood plain, cut a path through the upland Piedmont terrain. I want to see if it is healthy or sick, pristine or trashed, wooded or bare, eroded or not. I want to know who lives in and around it, and who visits. I want to understand its history and try to imagine its future. I will go alone and with family and

friends, with park professionals and conservationists, including Dryden. I will begin my journey at Boundary Bridge.

Boundary Bridge

Bethesda Row may be a better-known recreational magnet, but for those of us who like to walk on the wild side—in the literal sense—there’s a place called Boundary Bridge. The arched stone and concrete 1935 footbridge with a painted brown wooden rail spans Rock Creek at the District line near Beach Drive, where the road is closed to motorists on weekends. A popular launch for woodland jogging, hiking, cross-country skiing, cycling, dog-walking, birding and botanizing, Boundary Bridge even serves as a venue for tai chi. The bridge is plain and utilitarian, but for those of us who come here often, it holds a sort of magic, like the Japanese bridge in Monet’s garden.

A tea-colored Rock Creek flows gently under Boundary Bridge, but it turns the color of Turkish coffee when it becomes high and wild during storms and in their aftermaths. Sycamores, American elms, tulip trees, river birches, ironwood, maples and spicebush grace the immediate shoreline, and tall ashes, oaks and bitternut hickories grow nearby. The Boundary Bridge flood plain is famous for Virginia bluebells and other spring wildflowers, but in recent years, an invasive plant called lesser celandine has been crowding out the native ephemerals with its thick carpet of succulent leaves, shiny yellow flowers and tenacious roots.

This is the part of Rock Creek that I know intimately and visit frequently for exercise, nature study and as a botany teacher and field trip leader. Boundary Bridge links the Washington portion of Rock Creek Park, a national park first established as federal parkland in 1890, with Maryland’s Rock Creek parkland, which dates to the 1930s’ effort to preserve local stream valleys during the early flush of suburban development.

The District of Columbia may own the legend of Rock Creek, but it is we in Montgomery County who shelter its beginnings and preside over most of its 33-mile journey from a Laytonsville golf course to its mouth at Foggy Bottom. If you add up all the tributaries, the Montgomery County portion of Rock Creek totals 155 miles of stream, draining a watershed of over 39,000 acres, according to Doug Redmond, principal natural resources specialist for the Park Planning and Stewardship Division of the Montgomery County Department of Parks.

The Boundary Bridge area is a year round refuge for Polly Trottenberg and Mark Zuckerman, a Chevy Chase couple who hold senior staff positions on Capitol Hill. Trottenberg and Zuckerman walk and run along Rock Creek almost daily with their beagles, Aphrodite and Buddy. Trottenberg and Zuckerman find their creek visits an antidote for intense workdays filled with ringing phones and buzzing BlackBerry devices.

On a morning walk along Rock Creek with the dogs, Trottenberg marvels over the wildness of the creek and its location in the midst of the city and suburbs, and Zuckerman muses: “If you were airdropped here, what would distinguish this place from being in the wilderness?” Indeed, Rock Creek Park’s wildness has inspired aficionados from John Quincy Adams (who heralded it as “this romantic glen”) and Teddy Roosevelt, to the world-renowned scientist Edward O. Wilson, who was captivated by nature study in the park as a boy.

Though most Boundary Bridge visitors stick to the trails heading into the District, Trottenberg and Zuckerman often wander back into Maryland, where they take me now. Along creek-side trails, they show me stumps resembling sharpened pencils, where beavers have gnawed down trees. Trottenberg has watched those beavers swim in Rock Creek, and she and Zuckerman show me spots where they recently have seen red foxes, deer and herons. Trottenberg tells me their Rock Creek visits inform and inspire the work they do: “It gives us tremendous inspiration, and it’s gotten both of us thinking about storm water runoff and environmental degradation,” she says. “Some of what we see on our Rock Creek Park walks parallels the bigger issues Congress and the country are wrestling with, including water quality, open space preservation and climate change.”

Aphrodite and Buddy happily sniff their way along Rock Creek, greeting other dogs, some of whom they remember from previous walks. We mosey past Candy Cane Park’s playground and recreation center (where a birthday party is in progress) up to Meadowbrook Stables, which, like much else I’m to learn about Rock Creek, embodies both the historically noteworthy and the ecologically problematic. I will learn that the white, colonial revival-style barn, built in 1934, was considered one of the premier riding stables in the East in its heyday. And, on a later visit, Audubon Naturalist Society Executive Director Neal Fitzpatrick will show me how and where harmful nutrients from the stable’s wastewater collecting pond can leach into the creek during floods.

At the stables, the beagles lead Trottenberg and Zuckerman back to their neighborhood, and I return to Boundary Bridge. As I walk along the eroded banks of Rock Creek, I observe the silt buildup that makes for

difficult canoeing and, more critically, challenges aquatic life. While I admire the beauty of the tree-lined creek—including the young river birches that my friend, Carole Bergmann, forest ecologist for the Montgomery County Department of Parks, chose for planting near East West Highway—I think about how everything we do along Rock Creek and within its watershed is mirrored back to us by its waters.

North by Northwest from Boundary Bridge What better way to christen a new bicycle than to take the Rock Creek Trail from Boundary Bridge to Lake Needwood— about 14 miles—on a beautiful Sunday. As I will discover, the trail hugs Rock Creek most of the way. And as I wheel along, I'm happily surprised by what I see. True, each fallen tree collects a disturbing array of plastic foam cups, milk jugs and beer cans, and the plastic "Spanish moss" motif isn't limited to the stretch near the Beltway. But much of the way, the unimpeded and surprisingly pristine-looking creek hums slowly or swiftly along, depending on the terrain, and the trees are thick and filled with cardinals, chickadees, nuthatches and woodpeckers.

A short section of the bike trail is under construction, so a detour routes me over (instead of under) the historic railroad trestle that once was part of the Georgetown Branch rail line and now carries the Capital Crescent Trail above Rock Creek. The detour follows another bike trail through a Chevy Chase neighborhood that's the former site of "Clean Drinking Manor," a 700-acre land grant property owned by the Jones family from the 18th century to the 20th century, according to Dryden. The origins of the name are a bit mysterious, Dryden says, but one story credits some turn of the 18th century surveyors who broke open their last flask of liquid refreshment at one of the springs along the creek. Today, Manor Care Health Services occupies the former site of the original Clean Drinking Manor house.

The side trail rejoins the main trail near a spring that served the Jones family and those who worked for them, including slaves, and is marked by a small stone replica of a springhouse. Watercress lines the small tributary below the stone structure. Springhouses dotted Rock Creek in centuries past, serving the dual roles of protecting precious spring water and providing refrigeration for farm produce.

The trail goes through a wetland where small tree frogs called spring peepers make sleigh bell music each spring and where barred owls and screech owls call. The Audubon Naturalist Society, housed at the Woodend Mansion just across Jones Mill Road and up the hill, often brings children to the wetland for nature study. On my bicycle, I pedal in the blink of an eye the distance it took an hour to paddle by canoe, zipping past a playground ringed by old black walnut trees and then under the Beltway.

The many Rock Creek Trail users I encounter include cyclists, walkers, joggers, rollerbladers and a man being pushed in a wheelchair. When I stop to observe a flock of frenzied robins dining on honeysuckle berries, a young woman interrupts her run to ask if I'm bird-watching. I'm used to the camaraderie of Boundary Bridge and the constant meet and greet of neighbors, but I am pleasantly surprised to discover that Rock Creek friendliness also infuses visitors to the north.

The young woman, Daphne Fuentesvilla, grew up next to Rock Creek in Kensington. She and her husband now live in a home that overlooks the creek where she swam as a child ("maybe not such a good idea"), and "played all day, having mud fights with my friends and coming home with mud in our ears." She remembers how the days spent splashing in Rock Creek inspired her imagination. Daphne now works as an engineer and unwinds along Rock Creek in the same way Trottenberg and Zuckerman do—running and observing nature through the seasons. As a child, Daphne saw fish, snakes, turtles, foxes and raccoons in and around Rock Creek, and she still finds box turtles crossing the bike/running trail and often spots deer, pileated woodpeckers, large hawks and tiny hummingbirds, all next to Beach Drive and within a stone's throw of Rockville Pike.

As I pedal north, a motif emerges. Next to the mature woodlands adjoining Rock Creek, with glimpses through the trees of neighborhoods hugging the ridges, there is a jeweled string of parks and playgrounds. They are filled on this Sunday afternoon. Children whiz down the brightly colored slides, and men play soccer on nearly every field, calling out to their teammates in Spanish. In Ken-Gar Palisades Park, the cattails in a Rock Creek wetland nearly swallow the goal line.

Ken-Gar sits next to an impressive 1890s stone railroad bridge that still bears commercial train travel (the bike path and Beach Drive pass under its arch) and near the former site of Newport Mill, a flourmill dating to the 18th century. Josiah Henson, who was a principal inspiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom" character, experienced a religious awakening at age 18 while listening to a local preacher at the mill, according to Susan Soderberg, a Montgomery County historian who serves as education and outreach planner for the historic preservation section of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. Henson, who grew up a slave on the Riley Plantation (a log structure often referred to as "Uncle Tom's Cabin" still stands off Old Georgetown Road on the former plantation site) later became a preacher himself. He and his family eventually fled Kentucky and went to Canada, where he founded a

settlement and school for other escaped slaves and became a leading figure in the Underground Railroad. A plaque next to the trail highlights his story.

Soderberg says it is likely that escaping slaves or “freedom seekers” used Rock Creek as a route on the Underground Railroad. “Traditionally, freedom seekers used stream valleys to find their way north because roads were dangerous,” she says. For Confederate General Jubal Early, “Rock Creek was just another stream to be forded,” according to Charles T. Jacobs, an esteemed Civil War historian and author of the Civil War Guide to Montgomery County, Maryland, who died shortly after being interviewed for this article. Early’s forces “sought to threaten the defenses surrounding Washington, D.C., in July 1864 in order to draw Union troops from the battlegrounds in Virginia,” Jacobs said. With the July heat contributing to “a high rate of straggling” after the Battle of Monocacy near Frederick, Early divided his forces near Rockville, sending the bulk of his cavalry and mounted infantry down Rockville Pike toward Fort Reno in Tennytown (now Tenleytown) and leading the rest of his troops down Veirs Mill Road toward Silver Spring and Fort Stevens, “crossing Rock Creek near Samuel Veirs’ grist and saw mill,” according to Jacobs. The mill, built in 1838, was located about 2 miles southeast of Rockville.

As I wait with my bike at a traffic light on Veirs Mill Road, the largest and busiest thoroughfare traversed by the Rock Creek Trail (a trail bridge is planned), I try to imagine Rock Creek’s agrarian past and the large farm properties that depended on slave labor to grow tobacco. Later, after the soil became depleted, the farms expanded their cultivation of cereals and grains, which were brought to the mills for grinding. Today, we remember the mills primarily through the names of roads, such as Veirs Mill.

Once I’m past Veirs Mill Road, the woods expand and the creek ravines steepen. Christmas ferns spring from the rocky ledges above Rock Creek. As I get closer to Lake Needwood, I reflect on what I have gleaned about the creek’s ecology. I have peered into the water at several spots and seen no fish. But I know from the hours I’ve spent at Boundary Bridge that fish can be elusive. The banks of Rock Creek itself are largely wooded, but the tributaries feeding it seem battered and bruised, buried under roads and forced through pipes. In a few spots, I smell what seem to be emanations from the sanitary sewer system.

As I learn from Carole Bergmann, Neal Fitzpatrick, Steve Dryden and other ecologists, storm water runoff is a huge problem for the creek. Development has increased the number of impervious surfaces (roads, sidewalks, parking lots, rooftops) in the Rock Creek watershed. When it rains, water races into the storm drains and then into the tributaries and main stem of the creek. Patchwork engineering of water flow over the years has been unable to effectively control the sudden rush of water into Rock Creek during and after storms. The swiftly flowing water carries toxic runoff and a heavy sediment load, not just from the creek’s surroundings, but from the banks and bottom of the creek itself. And when stormwater brings down creek-side trees, which I often see happen near Boundary Bridge, the sediment overload increases. Rapid runoff also can challenge the sanitary sewer system, leading to leaks, according to Dryden.

As I pedal northward, the water seems clearer and the banks less eroded. For the most part (there are exceptions), the creek water is less compromised as you get closer to the source. Water quality charts verify what can often be seen with the naked eye: pollution is more of a problem in the densely settled areas downstream, close to the District line. In the upper parts of the Rock Creek watershed there are stretches of stream where the water quality is considered good to excellent, while in lower Rock Creek the water quality is fair to poor. At the Southlawn Lane crossing north of Rockville, I peer into the clear water of a former baptismal pool. As late as the 1950s, full immersion baptisms were performed here by the Mt. Calvary Baptist Church. This part of Rock Creek still exudes the serenity of a sacred site.

My ride culminates in a delightful lunch next to a beaver dam in a mountain laurel patch just south of Lake Needwood in Derwood. As Rock Creek trills over the dam, a red-shouldered hawk circles above. Here I meet a woman named Rita Mhley (pronounced Millay), a fellow writer who has lived next to the creek for 28 years and speaks passionately of its beauty and importance as a refuge—describing the jack-in-the-pulpits that bloom each spring with their purplish-brown and green leafy hoods, the people she meets who are gathering mushrooms, and how her teenage son used to ride all the way to Mount Vernon on the contiguous bike paths. She says things have changed around the creek—the Derwood-area farm where she and her family used to purchase produce is now dotted with large houses—but that her familiar stretch of the creek has largely remained the same. “It still has that rustic flavor,” says Mhley.

Lake Needwood and Lake Frank I am holding a quartzite spear point in my hand that was unearthed along Rock Creek. Montgomery County Department of Parks archeologists Jim Sorensen and Heather Bouslog tell me that this piece of tan stone carved by a nomadic American Indian is 1,000 to 2,000 years old and was found at the Agricultural History Farm Park just north of where we are convened. Seated at a lunchroom table at the historic Needwood Mansion, Sorensen and Bouslog and two volunteer archeologists, Jim Owens and Jean Goertner, are filling me in on Rock Creek’s expansive history over bowls of microwaved

soup. Every few minutes, one of them pops up to grab and photocopy a history file or collect and share an artifact. Energy crackles at this impromptu archeology round table. The 19th century brick Needwood Mansion, which overlooks the lake of the same name, was acquired by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and currently houses parks department offices and an informal museum.

Sorensen and his colleagues describe the early hunter-gatherers of the Archaic period (defined as 8,000 B.C. to 1,000 B.C.) who traveled Rock Creek in small bands, gleaning huckleberries and blackberries in the summer, and persimmons, acorns and chestnuts in the fall. The creek was filled with fish, and the woods with game. Even later, during the Woodland period (defined as 1,000 B.C. to 1,600 A.D.) when regional Indians were growing crops in the larger flood plains of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers, they continued to travel Rock Creek and create seasonal camps. Sorensen says spear points, pottery fragments, animal bones and other artifacts found in a rock shelter near Meadowside Nature Center off Muncaster Mill Road—along Rock Creek’s North Branch, its largest tributary—span a 5,000 year period, from about 3500 B.C. to A.D. 1440.

Thanks to a fish ladder put into operation a year ago at Peirce Mill downstream in D.C., an adromous fish such as shad and herring—which live in saltwater but swim up fresh water rivers and streams to spawn and were sought by generations of Indians and European settlers— soon may return to portions of Rock Creek in Maryland.

The fish, however, won’t reach the ancient spawning grounds that lie beyond the Needwood Dam, a seemingly impenetrable barrier that gave Rock Creek Regional Park manager Jim Humerick quite a scare on a night in June 2006, when its impermeability suddenly was called into question. After an unexpected deluge brought 10 inches of rain to some parts of the Washington area, causing a 25-foot rise in Lake Needwood, the dam began to leak and 2,300 people downstream had to be evacuated in the middle of the night. Since then, the dam has been strengthened. Park managers and the Maryland Department of the Environment keep a close eye on both the Needwood and Lake Frank dams during flood watches and warnings.

Lake Bernard Frank (often called simply Lake Frank) and Lake Needwood were created for sediment and flood control back in the 1960s (some flooding of Rock Creek, especially in the Beach Drive area near the District line, still occurs after heavy storms), but they have become beloved recreation spots. The lakes are located just north of the confluence of Rock Creek’s major branches—Lake Needwood along the “main stem” that I’m traveling, and Lake Frank on the North Branch. Humerick Takes me on a tour of both lakes, pointing out the boating launches, archery range, new volleyball court at Lake Needwood, and pristine beauty of Lake Frank’s encircling trails. There are no natural lakes in our area so these two fill a need. When Humerick and I cross the Lake Frank dam, a flock of bluebirds crosses our path, a flash of cerulean on a gray day.

Steve Dryden and I take a much more conventional and leisurely paddle around Lake Needwood on a Sunday afternoon, navigating around an island teeming with Canada geese and chatting from our canoe with a fisherman on the shore who says he’s not at all concerned that the carp and catfish aren’t biting. On a rainy afternoon, Bergmann, the Montgomery County Department of Parks’ forest ecologist, happily shows me the beauty of Lake Frank’s upland forests of native oaks and hickories. That morning, Bergmann had taken me many places along Rock Creek where she is engaged in constant battle with non-native invasive vines such as porcelain berry, mile-a minute and Asiatic bittersweet, which, when left to their own devices, can kill Rock Creek’s mature trees. As we gazed at recently liberated trees, Bergmann described in vivid detail the muscular measures required to deal with the most tenacious and threatening invasives, measures involving Bush Hogs, machetes and carefully targeted herbicide applications on the stumps of the vines.

The creek beyond Lake Needwood When I ask Humerick about covering the several miles of Rock Creek between Lake Needwood and the Agricultural History Farm Park on foot, he says I’ll probably be able to make my way along the creek on a network of what he calls “people’s choice” trails, an unofficial series of paths created by the footsteps of park visitors.

On a chilly Saturday, my husband Jim and I set out for a day of bushwhacking. We park on the north side of Lake Needwood and are soon enchanted by what we find. There is a beaver dam above Needwood Road, where a noisy convention of mallards is clearly enjoying the day. Beyond the northern part of the lake and adjacent wetland, Mill Creek flows into Rock Creek. We find a fallen tree next to the confluence that serves as a picnic table. While we eat our sandwiches, we take in the scene. White oaks and mockernut hickories surround us, and the creek is lined with familiar bottomland trees, including river birch, ironwood and box elder. Where Mill flows into Rock, the convening creeks mirror their pristine surroundings. No trash. No funky smell. Little evidence of erosion.

A man and a woman make their way toward us. The woman, Marian Schwenk of Derwood, is bundled in a blue jacket and hood, while her more lightly dressed husband, Bob Schwenk, wears binoculars around his neck. They live within walking distance of Mill Creek and walk along both creeks frequently.

Their faces light up as they recount some of the wildlife highlights of their many visits over the years: red fox cubs peeking out of their den; a family of beavers sitting on top of their lodge during a flood; the fawn who tried to follow them home. They describe the sweetness of the wood thrush song, the bright colors of the warblers migrating in the spring and all the herons they've seen over the years: green, great blue, black-crowned night and great white egret. Once, they spotted a mink.

I hate to interrupt their reverie, but feel compelled to bring up the subject of the Intercountry Connector, or ICC, that is slated to cross both the main stem of Rock Creek and the North Branch, cutting across the main stem just north of here. Their faces fall, and Marian says she's still hoping to find a species of wildlife rare enough to stop the road. "I called the Sierra Club when I saw the mink," she says.

My husband and I wander along this untouched stretch of Rock Creek for several miles, spotting no plastic foam cups or unnatural Spanish moss, but instead seeing many large sycamores hugging the banks, skunk cabbages coming up in the flood plain where the creek meanders wildly, and pileated and downy woodpeckers in the trees. As we walk, we think about Bob and Marian and their profound love for this place. That makes it all the more painful to come upon a particularly scenic and musical stretch just below Muncaster Mill Road, where Rock Creek ruffles merrily over the rocks, and oaks, tulip trees and hickories reach for the clear afternoon sky. The tall trees are festooned with brightly colored ribbons— their festive orange, pink, yellow and blue hues belying the deadly intent underlying their placement on the tree trunks. This is where the long-fought highway may finally be built. Jim and I are quiet for a long time afterward as we walk.

The Source

Humerick takes me on a tour of the upper reaches of Rock Creek in his park service vehicle, and we visit one of my favorite Montgomery County destinations, the Agricultural History Farm Park. On this 410-acre hillside setting traversed by Rock Creek's main stem and a tributary, a historic gothic farmhouse and bank barn on the crest of the hill have been restored to look like 100-year-old buildings. The farm was occupied by Nathan Magruder in 1748 and remained in the Magruder family for many years. Today, the Montgomery County Department of Parks hosts public events here, such as a Popular Harvest Festival every year. Many fourth-grade classes learn about the region's natural resources and agriculture at the Agricultural History Farm Park through a county school program known as "Close Encounters with Agriculture." The Montgomery County Cooperative Extension Service and county programs for agricultural economic development and farmland conservation are located here. A network of hiking trails takes visitors along the fields and into the woods lining Rock Creek.

Humerick and I visit the source of Rock Creek's main stem, something he says he has never done. It looks like there are a few small springs north of Dorsey Road, but Rock Creek's "official" headwaters, if there is such a thing, are just south of the road at a springhouse next to a pond on the Laytonville Golf Course. We find the 19th century Dorsey Springhouse with faded, gray wooden siding in sagging shape, its shingled roof collapsed and nearly gone, surrounded by a tangle of greenbriers, Japanese honeysuckle and multiflora rose. An old red maple stands sentinel nearby, and when Jim opens the springhouse door on its ancient hinges, we peer into a former era. Within the historic, neglected structure, rocks that once may have cooled butter and milk still preside over the trickling beginnings of Rock Creek.

Melanie Choukas-Bradley of Chevy Chase is the author of three natural history books, including *City of Trees*, and a longtime contributor to *The Washington Post*. In 2008 and 2009, she is leading a series of Rock Creek walks for the Audubon Naturalist Society called "A Year at Boundary Bridge."