

GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL®

ROUTE ASSESSMENT REPORT
MAY 2025

RAILS TO
Trails
conservancy

WASHINGTON, D.C.



RTC staff and members of the Warrior Expeditions team set out on a ride along the existing route of the Great American Rail-Trail in May 2024 | Photo by Mariah Miranda

A journey westward along the Great American Rail-Trail will begin at the steps of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. The trail will travel among some of the most iconic landmarks in the nation’s capital along the National Mall, including the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, where the trail heads north along the Rock Creek Park Trails. The route then picks up the Capital Crescent Trail in Georgetown, which flows into the towpath of the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal National Historical Park stretching from Washington, D.C., to Cumberland, Maryland.

TABLE 2: GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL MILEAGE IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

Total Length / Total Length along Great American Rail-Trail in D.C. (in Miles)	7.5 (100%)
Total Great American Rail-Trail Gap Miles in D.C. (% of Total State Mileage)	0 (0%)
Total Trail Gaps in D.C.	0
Total Great American Rail-Trail Miles in D.C.	7.5

GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL ROUTE ASSESSMENT 2025

MAP 1: WASHINGTON, D.C.

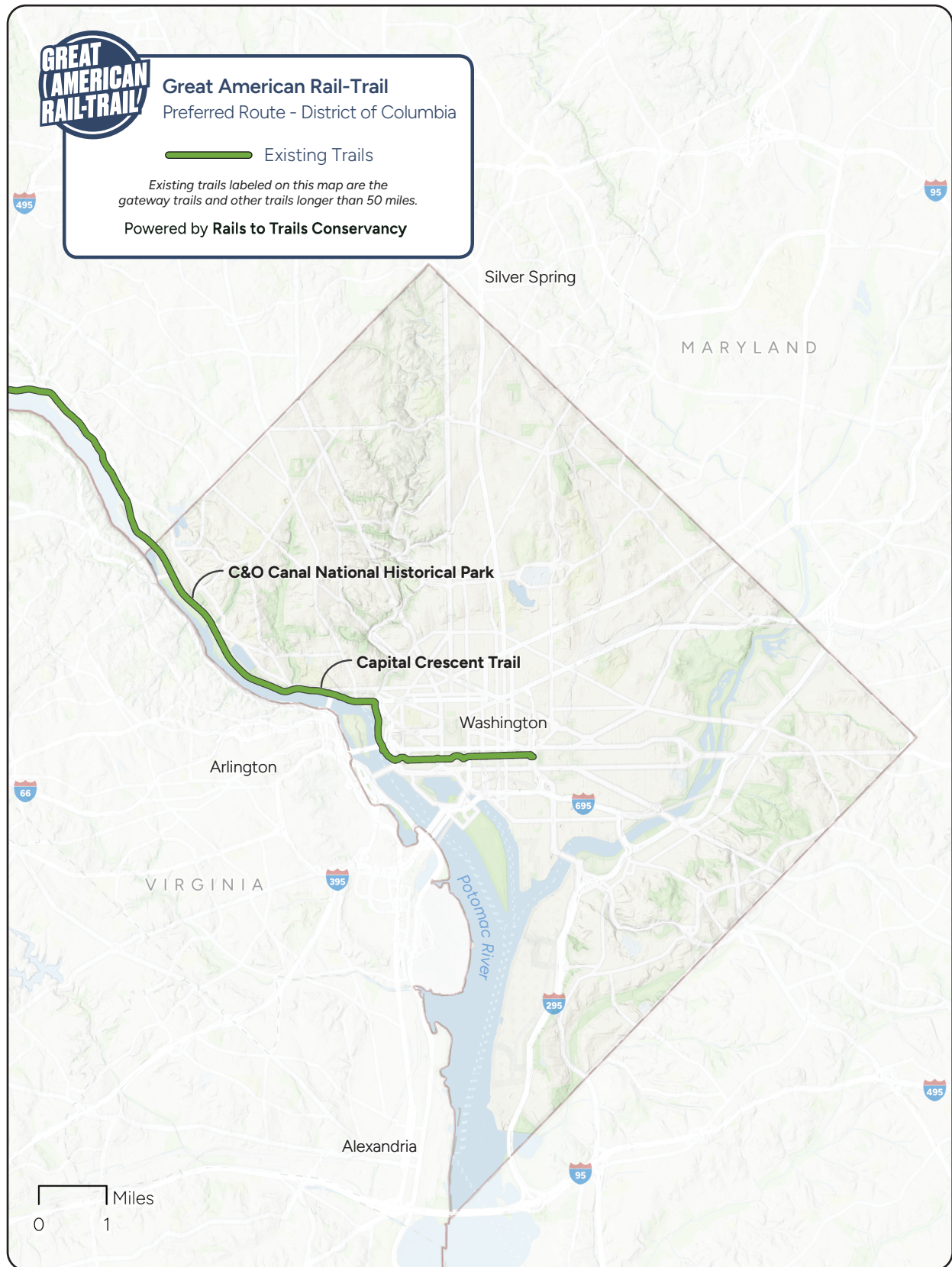


TABLE 3: GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL ROUTE THROUGH WASHINGTON, D.C.

Existing Trail Name	Length in D.C. Along Great American Rail-Trail (in Miles)
National Mall Trails	2.4
Rock Creek Park Trails	0.7
K Street/Water Street Cycle Track	0.6
Capital Crescent Trail	2.3
C&O Canal National Historical Park	1.5
Total Miles	7.5
Existing Trail Miles	7.5
Trail Gap Miles	0.0

**NATIONAL MALL TRAILS**

Total Length / Total Length along Great American Rail-Trail in D.C. (in Miles)	5.0 / 2.4
Surface Type	Concrete, dirt
Trail Manager	National Park Service
Website	nps.gov/nama/index.htm

Beginning at the steps of the U.S. Capitol, the Great American Rail-Trail will travel west from this eastern extent along the National Mall. The National Mall has a series of trails owned and maintained by the National Park Service that are popular with tourists traveling around the monuments and museums. Bicycles are allowed on the trails, but because the trails are frequently crowded, cyclists should take caution and proceed through the National Mall Trails slowly. The trail crosses the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway (also known as Rock Creek Parkway) before heading north along the Potomac River. The trail hugs the river, then merges with the Rock Creek Park Trails.

Guinness World Record holder Ian Mackay holds an event on the National Mall before beginning a 475-mile wheelchair trek on the Great American Rail-Trail in 2022. | Photo by Anthony Le

ROCK CREEK PARK TRAILS

Total Length / Total Length along Great American Rail-Trail in D.C. (in Miles)	8.5 / 0.7
Surface Type	Asphalt, dirt
Trail Manager	National Park Service
Website	nps.gov/rocr/planyourvisit/hiking.htm
TrailLink Map	traillink.com/trail/rock-creek-park-trails

Rock Creek Park is the oldest and largest urban park in the national park system. The portion of the Rock Creek Park Trails system through Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C., is owned and maintained by the National Park Service. The Rock Creek Park Trails connect to the National Mall Trails along the banks of the Potomac River near the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge. The Rock Creek Park Trails travel 8.5 miles in total in Washington, D.C., and the Great American Rail-Trail utilizes its southernmost portion.

K STREET/WATER STREET CYCLE TRACK

Total Length / Total Length along Great American Rail-Trail in D.C. (in Miles)	0.6 / 0.6
Surface Type	Asphalt
Trail Manager	District Department of Transportation (DDOT)

The Rock Creek Park Trails create a connection to a protected bike lane, or cycle track, along K Street/Water Street in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, D.C. (accessible via a ramp from K Street Northwest to Rock Creek Parkway). The two-way protected bike lane travels the length of K Street/Water Street, underneath the elevated Whitehurst Freeway, to the entrance of the Capital Crescent Trail.

CAPITAL CRESCENT TRAIL

Total Length / Total Length along Great American Rail-Trail in D.C. (in Miles)	11.0 / 2.3
Surface Type	Asphalt, crushed stone
Trail Managers	DDOT, Montgomery County Department of Transportation, Montgomery Parks, National Park Service
Website	cctrail.org
TrailLink Map	traillink.com/trail/capital-crescent-trail

At the end of Water Street, the Great American Rail-Trail reaches the first rail-trail along the route as it heads west from Washington, D.C., onto the Capital Crescent Trail. This 11-mile trail uses the right-of-way of the former Georgetown Branch of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which was abandoned in the mid-1980s. The paved Capital Crescent Trail is sandwiched between the Potomac River on the left and the C&O Canal on the right. After about 2 miles, the Capital Crescent Trail arcs northward toward Bethesda, Maryland, and crosses over the C&O Canal Towpath at the Arizona Avenue Bridge. Trail users continuing on the Great American Rail-Trail can find a connection to the historical C&O Canal Towpath at Fletcher's Cove Boathouse 0.5 mile before the Arizona Avenue Bridge.

C&O CANAL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Total Length / Total Length along Great American Rail-Trail in D.C. (in Miles)	184.5 / 1.5
Surface Type	Crushed stone, dirt, gravel
Trail Manager	National Park Service
Website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> canaltrust.org nps.gov/choh/index.htm
TrailLink Map	traillink.com/trail/chesapeake--ohio-canal-national-historical-park

The majority of the C&O Canal National Historical Park, also known as the C&O Canal Towpath, is in Maryland and is addressed in the next chapter.

APPENDIX: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Abandoned rail corridor – When a railroad company ceases operations on a line or terminates the line itself. Abandonment is official when the Surface Transportation Board (STB) has issued an order authorizing abandonment of the line and the railroad has notified the STB that it has consummated the abandonment authorization.

Active rail corridor – Any rail corridor that has not been formally abandoned through the process identified by the Surface Transportation Board.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) – The federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability.

Arterial road – A major thoroughfare, particularly one used to provide a large traffic capacity for traveling longer distances.

Ballast – The trackbed upon which railroad ties are laid, often composed of crushed stone.

Bike lane – A portion of the roadway that has been designated by striping, signage and pavement markings for the preferential or exclusive use of bicyclists.

Bike route – On-street routes that are signed for bicycle travel but do not provide any physical or visual separation from automobile traffic.

Bollard – A short post used to divert traffic from an area or road.

Contiguous – Sharing a common border; touching.

Culvert – A tunnel carrying a stream or open drain under a road, railroad or trail.

Decking – The surface of a bridge.

Federal Railroad Administration – An agency within the U.S. Department of Transportation that handles matters related to the railroad industry.

Geographic Information System (GIS) – A system designed to capture, store, manipulate, analyze, manage and present spatial or geographic data.

Greenway – A strip of undeveloped land, set aside for recreational use or environmental protection.

Interim on-road connector – An on-road segment that is to be used temporarily while a trail is being planned or built.

Multiuse trails – Trails that are designed to accommodate more than one type of use (walking, bicycling, horseback riding, etc.).

Non-motorized trails – Trails that do not allow travel using vehicles with motors.

Off-road trails – Trails that are outside of a roadbed for motorized vehicles.

Protected bike lane (cycle track) – A bikeway that is at street level and uses a variety of methods for physical protection from passing traffic. Protected bike lanes (cycle tracks) can allow bicycle movement in one or both directions on one side of a road.

Railbanked/railbanking – Condition allowing a railroad to “bank” a corridor for future rail use. During the interim, alternative trail use is a viable option.

Railbed – The roadbed of a railroad track.

Rail corridor – The tracks and railroad right-of-way (generally 50 to 100 feet wide, though it varies widely by geography).

Rail-trail – The conversion of a disused railway track into a multiuse trail. The characteristics of abandoned railways—flat, long, frequently running through historical areas—are appealing for various developments.

Rail-with-trail – A trail located adjacent to an active rail line.

Rail yard – A complex series of railroad tracks for storing, sorting, loading and unloading railroad cars.

Recreational Trails Program – A competitive grant program managed by state trail administrators; therefore, only projects that meet certain criteria may be funded. Its funds are drawn from the larger Transportation Alternatives Program.

Right-of-way – The land on which a railroad line, road or utility is built.

Roadway – The strip of land over which a road passes.

Shared land marking (sharrow) – Road marking used to indicate a shared land environment for bicycles and automobiles.

Shared-use path – A form of infrastructure that supports multiple recreation and transportation opportunities (a common synonym for “trail”).

Shoulder (road) – A strip of land adjacent to the traffic lane of a road, often used as an emergency stopping lane.

Surface Transportation Board (STB) – The federal agency that oversees changes made by railroad companies. Formerly the Interstate Commerce Commission.

Towpath – A road or trail on the bank of a river, canal or other inland waterway.

Trailbed – The roadbed of a trail.

Trail gap – Section of trail that still needs to be built to connect the existing trails.

Transportation Alternatives Program – A program administered by the Federal Highway Administration to authorize funding for programs and projects defined as “transportation alternatives,” including on- and off-road pedestrian and bicycle facilities. The Transportation Alternatives Program is the largest federal source for trail funding.

Waterway – A river, canal or other route for travel by water.



At Rails to Trails Conservancy, we are building a nation connected by trails. We reimagine public spaces to create safe ways for everyone to walk, bike and be active outdoors.