

U.S. Senator Tom Carper

A Proposal:

Delaware National Coastal Heritage Park

BACKGROUND

In 2002, U.S. Senator Tom Carper undertook a public process to solicit ideas and assess support for the creation of a National Park unit in Delaware. Delaware is the only state without a designated unit of the National Park system. Using an internet survey of the general public and a mail survey of various organizations along with discussions with many individuals, Senator Carper found significant interest in creating some kind of National Park unit. In 2003, he established a committee of twelve Delawareans representing all three counties and the City of Wilmington to look more closely at suggestions that had been made for such a unit and to make recommendations to the Senator with regard to which of the suggestions, if any, the Senator might pursue. Among other activities, the Committee held public workshop meetings in each county and the City of Wilmington to further solicit input and ideas from interested citizens. The Committee's ultimate recommendation was an amalgam of several individual suggestions. Senator Carper accepted the recommendation and will propose that Congress authorize a formal study of the feasibility of the committee's proposal.

THE PROPOSAL

Senator Carper proposes the creation of a Delaware national coastal heritage park. The park would be unique among national parks in both its physical dimensions and its theme. Physically, the park would be comprised of a series of connected interpretive centers and sites. The centers would largely direct visitors to already existing attractions related to the theme of the park. Thematically, the park recognizes that Delaware's coastal region, as interpreted through the historic, cultural, and natural environment, provides an experience of interwoven threads that hold great significance in the history of the United States. It also recognizes that the region offers outstanding opportunities for resource protection, heritage education and recreation.

THE CONCEPT

The concept of the Park has its roots in the notion that Delaware's coastal region is a near-perfect microcosm of America's coastal history. It acknowledges that coastal regions have always played a key role in human activity and that they will continue to do so. From the beginning of our nation's history, Delaware has been the location of nationally important and emblematic themes of development. The persistent rural character of the state situated in such an intensely developed east coast corridor afforded the preservation of many sites, buildings, structures and vistas to provide the visitor an unparalleled opportunity to experience the coastal American landscape and understand its role in the development of the nation. These themes include:

1. **History of Indigenous Peoples.** Delaware is rich with the history of Native American tribes such as the Nanticoke and Lenni Lenape.
2. **Colonization and Establishment of the Frontier.** Among the most significant developments in this regard are the history of the first European settlers in the Delaware Valley who built fortifications for the protection of settlers like Fort Christina in 1638 at the Rocks in Wilmington, which was established to protect the Swedish and Finnish settlers, and Fort Zwaanendael to protect the Dutch in Lewes. Also, Delaware witnessed the increased influence of the English and Dutch that accompanied the growth of European immigration.

3. **Founding of a Nation.** Delaware made significant contributions to the development of our constitutional republic. Historical sites such as the John Dickinson Plantation, the boyhood home of the “Penman of the Revolution”, proliferate in the coastal region.
4. **Industrial Development.** Some of the earliest exploitation of water power occurred in Delaware with the mill development on the Brandywine River.
5. **Transportation.** Water served as the main transportation link, connecting Colonial Delaware with England, Europe and other colonies. Water transportation along Delaware’s coastline retained its importance through the 20th century and displays a variety of aids to navigation. These aids address both river travel, with the range light navigation system, and ocean-going travel, with the National Harbor of Refuge at Lewes and Fenwick Island lighthouse at the coastal border with Maryland.
6. **Coastal Defense.** Protection of this vital link was a consistent concern from the Colonial Period through the 20th century as evidenced by the superb collection of fortifications spaced along the river and bay from Fort Delaware on Pea Patch Island to Fort Miles near Lewes.
7. **The Last Step to Freedom.** Delaware has an extensive and well documented history of Underground Railroad activity. The coastline was an embarkation point for many freedom-seekers, in small craft or large steamers, to cross to the free territory of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Many other escaping slaves crossed the Christina River on their way to freedom at the site of the current Tubman-Garret Park in downtown Wilmington.
8. **The Coastal Environment.** Much of the beautiful and ecologically important natural area along the coast is already preserved as federal and state wildlife areas and state parks. Delaware’s coastal environment provides outstanding resource based recreational opportunities such as crabbing, fishing, swimming and boating.

THE “PARK”

These themes will be highlighted and showcased in a format unique to the National Park system. The Park will be structured much like a series of bicycle wheels, each with a hub and spokes. The hubs will be interpretive centers located strategically along the coast line. These hubs will provide the visitor with a comprehensive look at the themes most prevalent in the surrounding area. The spokes will be the connectors to the attractions and sites that make up the wheel.

The “gateway” or “headquarters” hub will be located on the 7th Street Peninsula at the site of the Fort Christina monument. Within a short walking distance of the existing Fort Christina State Park is the Old Swedes Church, the oldest Episcopal Church in America in continuous use; the Kalmar Nyckel, a replica of the ship that carried early Swedes to our shores; Tubman-Garrett Park, located at a point in Wilmington where escaping slaves crossed the Christina River as part of their journey on the Underground Railroad, and other attractions. This area would be developed as a specific destination point for the Park.

As a hub, it would also provide information, advice and directions about other sites in the Wilmington area that relate to the themes of the coastal region. These would include the Thomas Robinson House on Philadelphia Pike in Claymont, associated with the Revolutionary War, and the Brandywine Mills Historic District for the beginning of water-powered milling history. It would include visitors’ facilities, interpretive programs, the park headquarters and other amenities.

A second hub would be located along the Delaware River in southern New Castle County. It would provide information on attractions in that area. Notable among those are the City of New Castle’s renowned National Landmark historic district including the early statehood and Underground Railroad

histories interpreted at the New Castle Court House Museum. Other examples include the George Read II House and Garden as well as related attractions in New Castle County such as Fort Delaware State Park on Pea Patch Island and Fort DuPont near Delaware City.

A third would be located in Kent County, along the coast of the Delaware Bay. It would provide information on the existing preserved natural areas such as Bombay Hook and on the myriad other attractions in Kent County that are integral parts of the themes highlighted by the Park. These would include the John Dickinson Plantation, the Octagonal School Museum, the fishing villages of Liepsic, Little Creek and Bowers Beach, and Barratt's Chapel.

A Sussex County hub would be located in the Lewes area and would provide information on the numerous historic sites and natural areas that have made Sussex County's coastal region so pivotal to Delaware. These would include the Zwaanendael Museum, the National Harbor of Refuge, Fort Miles (Cape Henlopen State Park), the Indian River Lifesaving Station, the Nanticoke Indian Museum, and the aids to navigation including the Fenwick Island Lighthouse, the Lightship Overfalls, the Harbor of Refuge Light, and the Breakwater Light.

Together, these four interpretative hubs would provide the necessary historical context and direct visitors to the many existing attractions that help us understand and appreciate the entire breadth of experiences available along Delaware's Coastal region. They would disperse visitors to their destinations along existing roads, transit lines, bikeways and land and water trails. Through southern New Castle and Kent Counties, many visitors would traverse one of Delaware's most scenic roads, Route 9, which was recently proposed to be designated a scenic and historic highway.

THE PLAN FORWARD

Senator Carper will be seeking authorization and funding from Congress for a formal study to be conducted by the National Park Service in cooperation with the State of Delaware, the coastal region communities and the general public. The study will more fully explore the concept outlined above and make recommendations to Congress. Based on those recommendations, Senator Carper will then seek legislation to authorize and fund the park itself.

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