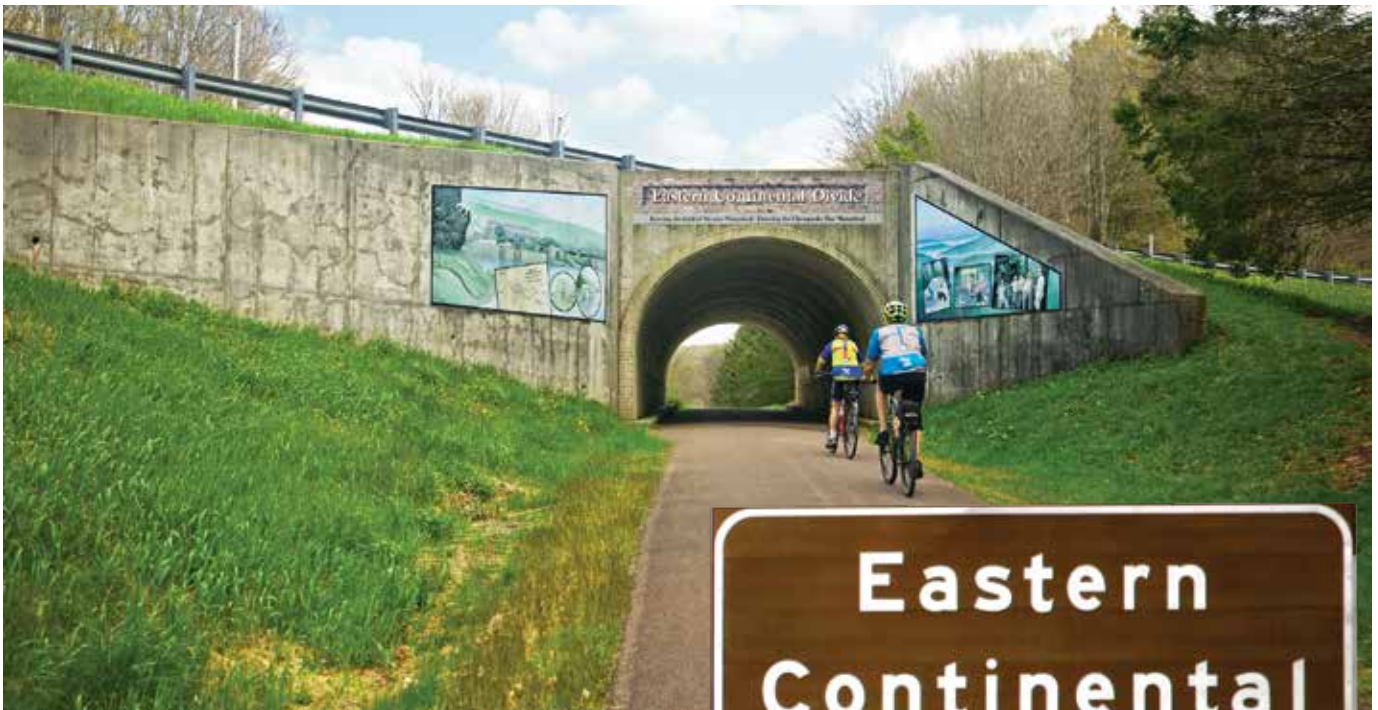


# Eastern Continental Divide

ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE, HISTORY AND FUN

Written by: **Shelby Calhoun**



Driving along I-68 through Garrett County, Maryland, at approximately mile marker 26, is an overpass for Green Lantern Road. Situated before the bridge overpass are signs indicating the Eastern Continental Divide, Elevation 2610 FT. I've passed this sign many times, but not given it much thought. Vaguely remembering a reference to the Great Continental Divide in a history or geography class had given me enough information to recall that precipitation falling to the east of the Great Divide emptied into the Atlantic Ocean and precipitation falling on the west side emptied into the Pacific Ocean – but that was the extent of my knowledge on the subject. Whether due to inattention on my part, or an oversight in the curriculum, I don't remember hearing anything about an Eastern Continental Divide.

So what is the significance of the Eastern Continental Divide sign?

## Environmental Science –

The Eastern Continental Divide (ECD) originates in Pennsylvania on the summit named 'Triple Divide Peak' approximately 10 miles south of the New York-Pennsylvania border. The ECD follows the boundary between the Allegheny River and Susquehanna River watersheds through most of Pennsylvania. At Blue Knob near Altoona, the divide begins to follow Allegheny Mountain and then Little Savage Mountain. A few miles before the Pennsylvania/Maryland state border, the divide begins to separate the Youghiogheny River and Potomac River watersheds.



**Above: The Eastern Continental Divide is the highest point on the Great Allegheny Passage.**

**Sign on I-68 in Garrett County, Maryland, indicating the elevation of the Eastern Continental Divide.**

*PHOTOS BY MIKE CALHOUN*

In Maryland, the Divide runs significantly west of the Allegheny Front, following Backbone Mountain, and passing near the source of the North Branch Potomac River at the Fairfax Stone. The ECD then passes through a plateau of the Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia, passing between the north end of the Canaan Valley in the Cheat River watershed, and the Mount Storm Lake basin in the Potomac River watershed. The divide then rejoins the Allegheny Front.

As it continues south, the Eastern Continental Divide passes through several East Coast states until it enters Florida. Precipitation to the west of the divide eventually empties into the Gulf of Mexico watershed, while precipitation to the east ends up in the Atlantic Seaboard watershed. Although a divide is often associated with high elevation the ECD at its southern terminus, which is the northern



Kissimmee River watershed in Florida, is only 70 feet above sea level.

### History –

As it turns out, the Eastern Continental Divide played an important part in the history of America. Prior to the mid-1700s the ECD, also known as the Eastern Divide or Appalachian Divide, represented a boundary between British and French possessions in North America. The French and Indian War which began in 1754 and ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1763 provided Great Britain enormous territorial gains in North America. The Proclamation Line of 1763 was a British-produced boundary marked in the Appalachian Mountains at the Eastern Continental Divide. The decree prohibited American colonists from settling on lands acquired from the French, following the French and Indian War, which were located west of the ECD. This decree limited expansion, caused disputes over subsequent frontier policy and forced the colonists to pay extra taxes in order to cover expenses from the war. The colonist's discontent concerning these limitations ultimately helped lead to the American Revolution.

### Fun –

The Great Allegheny Passage is a 150-mile rail trail between Cumberland, MD, and Pittsburgh, PA. The Eastern Continental Divide (ECD) is the highest point on the Great



Above: One of several informational signs inside the underpass on the GAP trail.

Left: The Eastern Continental Divide on the Great Allegheny Passage is a favorite stopping point for photographs for hikers and bikers.

Allegheny Passage (GAP) at 2,392 feet above sea

level, located at mile marker 23.7. Since the trail opened, the watershed divide on the GAP has been amusing both hikers and bikers. As the GAP crosses from one watershed to the next, it is marked by murals depicting the Western Maryland Railway and Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad on either side of an underpass below McKenzie Hollow Road between Meyersdale and Frostburg. A favorite stopping point for photographs, it is often surrounded by wildflowers in the summer months and beautiful fall foliage each October. Along the GAP trail, the ECD is most closely accessible via the Deal, PA, trail-head.

So, if like me, you missed the information on the Eastern Continental Divide in school, you may want to take a little side trip and see how much information one little sign along a highway can actually mean.

For more information see: <https://gaptrail.org>  
<https://www.hmdb.org> <https://www.scrtta.org>