

Traveling through north along State Hwy 145 it's hard to miss the forest-covered hill of Millstone Bluff slightly elevate in the horizon on the northwest side of the road. It is a unique archaeological site, rising above the surrounding Shawnee Hills 320 feet higher than the adjacent creek valley. The top of the mesa-like bluff is ringed by a broken sandstone escarpment. It is here that Mississippian peoples (AD 1350-1550) built their homes, carved their religion into the stone and buried their dead in stone box graves.

Stone Forts

Millstone Bluff is also one of a series of "stone forts" created by Late Woodland peoples (AD 600-900). Stone forts were built by constructing a stone wall across the easiest access points to the bluff top. It is unclear whether these stone enclosures were used as fortifications or perhaps, for some other ceremonial or community purpose.

Prehistoric Households

Archaeologists working at Millstone Bluff have excavated portions of seven of approximately twenty-six houses on the mesa-like bluff top. These investigations revealed that the Mississippian peoples of Millstone Bluff lived in semi-subterranean (one half below the ground and one half above the ground) houses surrounding an open central plaza. These houses varied in size and were constructed by digging rectangular "basements" in the ground. Timber posts were inserted into the excavated "wall" trenches and smaller branches were woven in between the upright posts like weaving a basket. Finally, the homes were packed with wet clay. The clay daub insulated the structure making it warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Houses were occupied for about twenty years. When the house became vermin-infested it was burned and a new structure was built nearby to replace it. The pit left by the burned house was filled in by village refuse such as broken pottery, discarded stone tools and food remains.

Today the only outwardly visible sign of the ancient homes of the Mississippian peoples are the round depressions atop the bluff.



Ancient Rock Art

Rock art or petroglyphs have been carved into horizontal sandstone slabs on the northwest side of the bluff. These designs depict various figures thought to be important in the religion of the Mississippian culture and to the identity of the Mississippian Indians living there. The figures include a falcon-like bird, an antlered serpent, human-like figures, crosses inside circles, and other motifs. Archaeologists believe that Mississippians believed in a three-tiered universe: the Under World, This World, and Upper World. The Under World was inhabited by dangerous creatures such as the Horned Serpent and Underwater Panther while birds, particularly the falcon, belonged to the Upper World. Between these two worlds existed This World where humans, plants, and most animals lived. When viewed together as a multi-panel work of art, these petroglyphs may represent a portrayal of Mississippian cosmology.

Stone Box Cemetery

Another important part of Mississippian life was the preparation and interment of the dead. A specific area on the bluff top was designated as a cemetery where the dead were placed in stone box graves. These graves were constructed with large stone slabs that formed a "box" that held the body and other important items such as tools, pottery and food that the deceased might need in the afterlife. Over the years, due to repeated vandalism and looting activity, all that remains are the empty stone box graves.



Millstone Bluff Trail

Length: 0.6 mile –entire loop

Surface Type: Woodchips

Difficulty Level: Moderate to difficult. The upper trail loop is accessed by a wooden staircase.

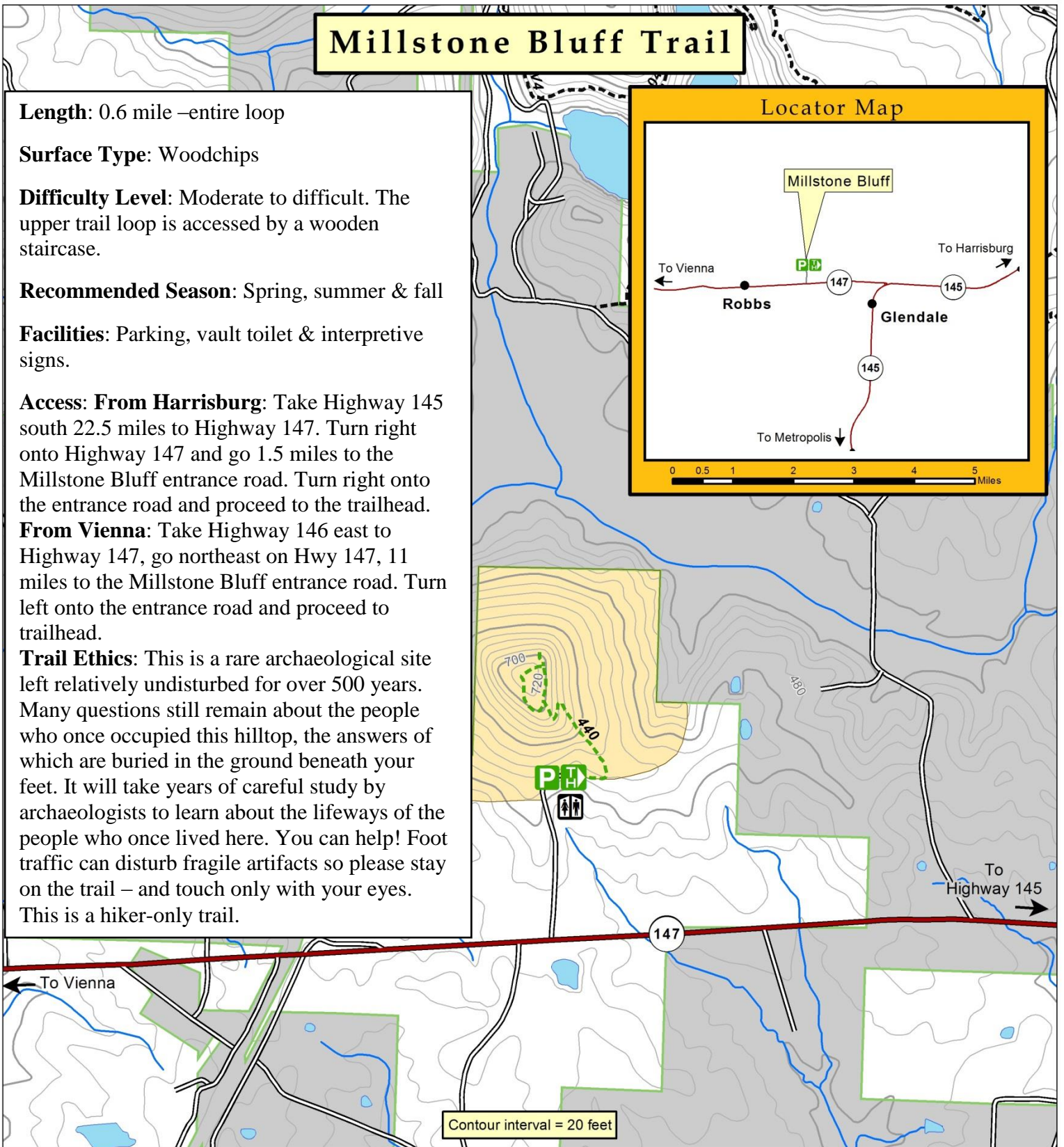
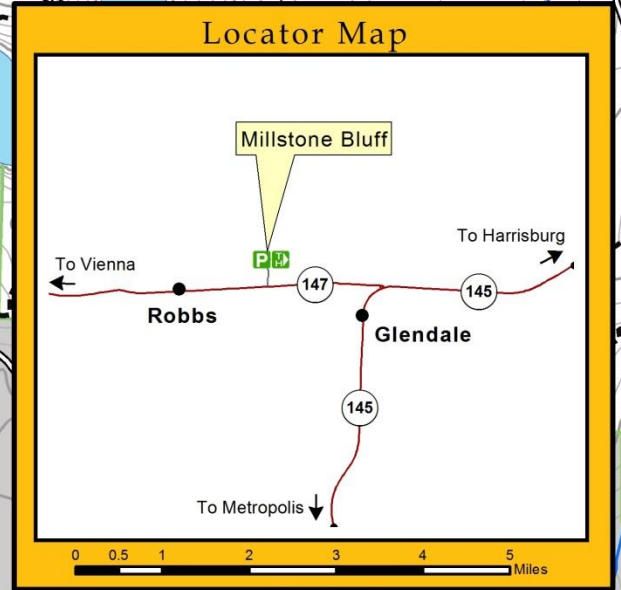
Recommended Season: Spring, summer & fall

Facilities: Parking, vault toilet & interpretive signs.

Access: From Harrisburg: Take Highway 145 south 22.5 miles to Highway 147. Turn right onto Highway 147 and go 1.5 miles to the Millstone Bluff entrance road. Turn right onto the entrance road and proceed to the trailhead.

From Vienna: Take Highway 146 east to Highway 147, go northeast on Hwy 147, 11 miles to the Millstone Bluff entrance road. Turn left onto the entrance road and proceed to trailhead.

Trail Ethics: This is a rare archaeological site left relatively undisturbed for over 500 years. Many questions still remain about the people who once occupied this hilltop, the answers of which are buried in the ground beneath your feet. It will take years of careful study by archaeologists to learn about the lifeways of the people who once lived here. You can help! Foot traffic can disturb fragile artifacts so please stay on the trail – and touch only with your eyes. This is a hiker-only trail.



Legend

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|------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| Restroom | State Highway | Natural Area |
| Parking & Trailhead | Road | National Forest Land |
| Hiker Only Trail | Stream | Non-National Forest Land |
| Hiker/Equestrian Trail | | |

