

The Anacostia River



Coffin & Coffin

Landscape Architects and Urban Planners

THE ANACOSTIA RIVER ITS PAST NEGLECT AND FUTURE POTENTIAL

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The L 'Enfant Plan

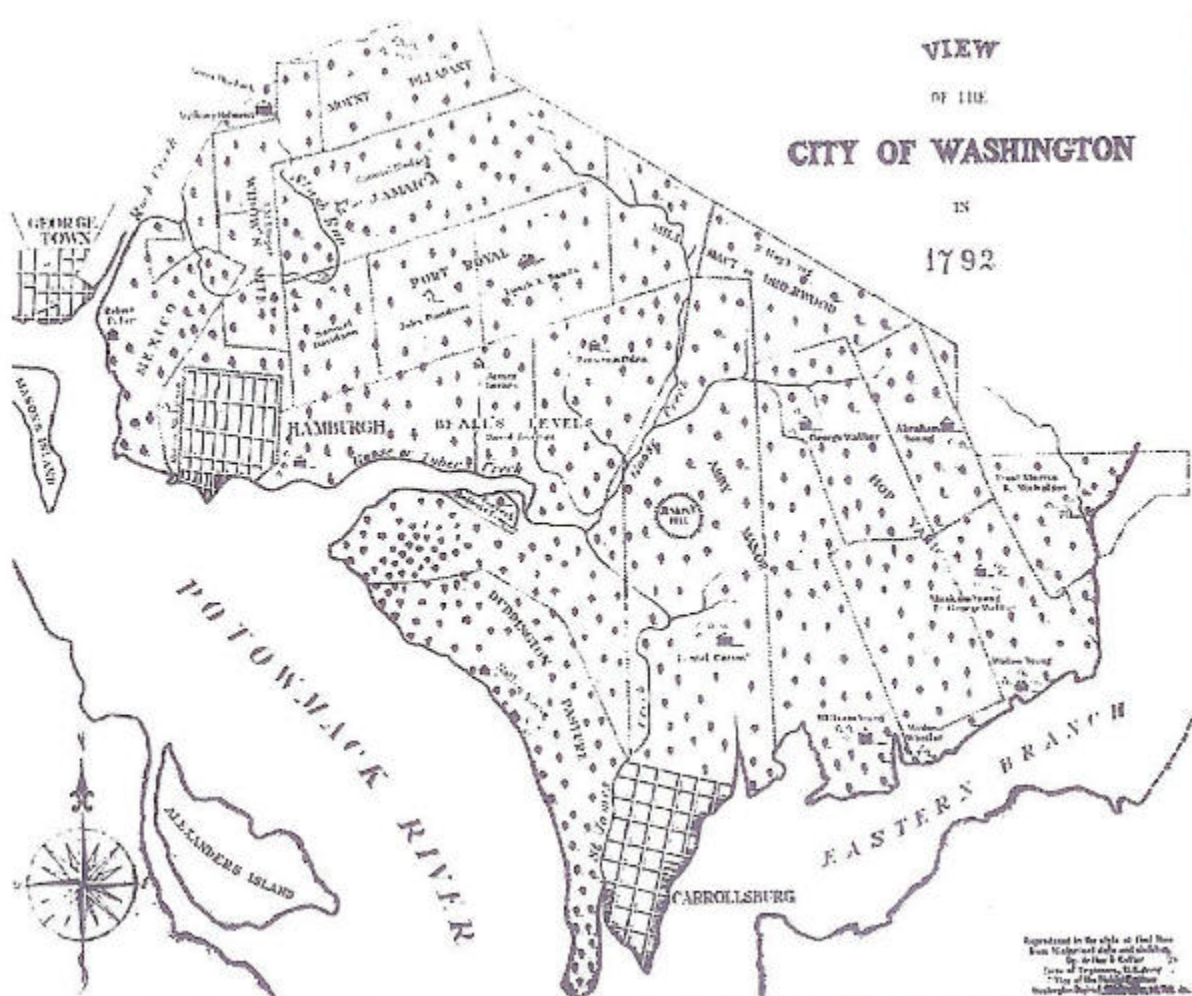
Before the 19th century the mouth of the Anacostia River at the Potomac River was about 1,700 feet wide. As a result of infill, it has narrowed to a width of 400 feet at the Navy Yard, a few hundred yards from its mouth. Imagine the potential of a 400-foot-wide deep-water river in the heart of the nation's capital, less than half mile from the Capitol itself.

L'Enfant's plan for the nation's capital envisioned that the governmental core of the city would rest between the Anacostia River, which flows from the northeast, and the Potomac River, which flows from the northwest. Immediately to the south of the junction of these two rivers, the Potomac flows due south for a distance of about 20 miles. Ships arriving at the new capital city had to follow the river around a dramatic 90-degree bend and sail due north with a view of the Capitol and the White House in the distance. L'Enfant wrote that the principal structure was the "Congress House," located on "Jenkins Heights," which "stands

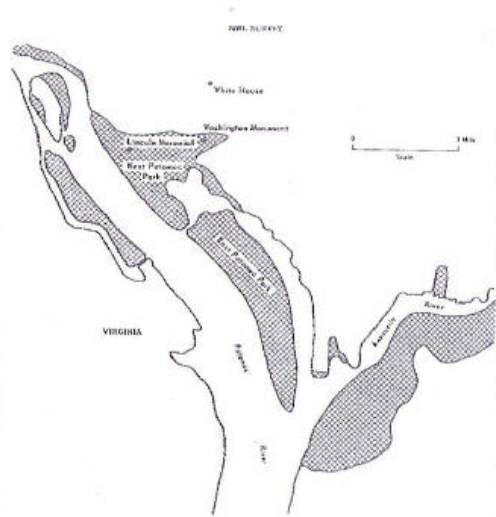


as a pedestal waiting for a monument." To the west he located the "President's House on a low ridge overlooking Tiber Creek and visible from 10 or 12 miles down the Potowmack." Fort Washington was built at this 90-degree turn of the river to protect the city. At that time the Anacostia River was called the Eastern Branch. The physical setting of the new capital city was spectacular. Sailing up the Potomac gave a clear view of both the Capitol and the President's House as white specks in the landscape. Approaching the city from Maryland, you first encountered either the escarpment bordering the Anacostia River or the escarpment at the edge of the city, along what is now Florida Avenue, which overlooks the entire city. Approaching from Virginia there also was a noticeable ridge line which overlooked the Potomac River and the city.

The selection of a permanent location for the nation's capital brought forth 24 different site proposals. It was finally resolved to choose a place "between the Susquehanna River and the Potomac River, at the most healthy and convenient place, having regard to the navigation of the Atlantic Ocean, and the situation of the western territory." Finally, after seven years, a compromise was reached by Congress. Congress agreed to assume Revolutionary War debts owed by the states and the northern states withdrew the sites they had originally proposed.



In the early 1800s a deep-water channel was dredged up to the community of Bladensburg, Maryland, reopening an outlet for farmers in upper Maryland. The Anacostia River northeast of Massachusetts Avenue remained under water even at low tide, supporting large fields of wild rice. By the late 19th century over half the city's sewage was deposited on these tidal flats, to be washed away with the flow of the Anacostia River and the high tides coming up from the Potomac River. The creation of a deep-water channel up to Bladensburg, however, effectively drained the flats, exposing at low tide mud flats and Land Areas Filled after 1837 grasses that retained the raw sewage. The area thus became a breeding ground for malaria-laden mosquitos. As a consequence, very few homes were built within a mile or so of this area, and it is interesting to note that in 1898 all of the employees of the U.S. Navy Yard located there were infected with malaria.



Land Areas Filled after 1837

The Effects of Time

During the 18th and early 19th centuries the principal modes of transportation were horseback and ship. But by the mid-19th and during the 20th centuries, they were supplanted by railroads and highways. These changes affected the land and land use along the Anacostia River. The role of the Anacostia was significantly diminished.

Large segments of the eastern side of the Anacostia River were filled, as were the shores of the Potomac where Reagan National Airport and East Potomac Park now stand. Several railroad bridges across the Potomac River, together with these landfills obscured the view from the river to the unique setting of the capital city envisioned by L'Enfant.

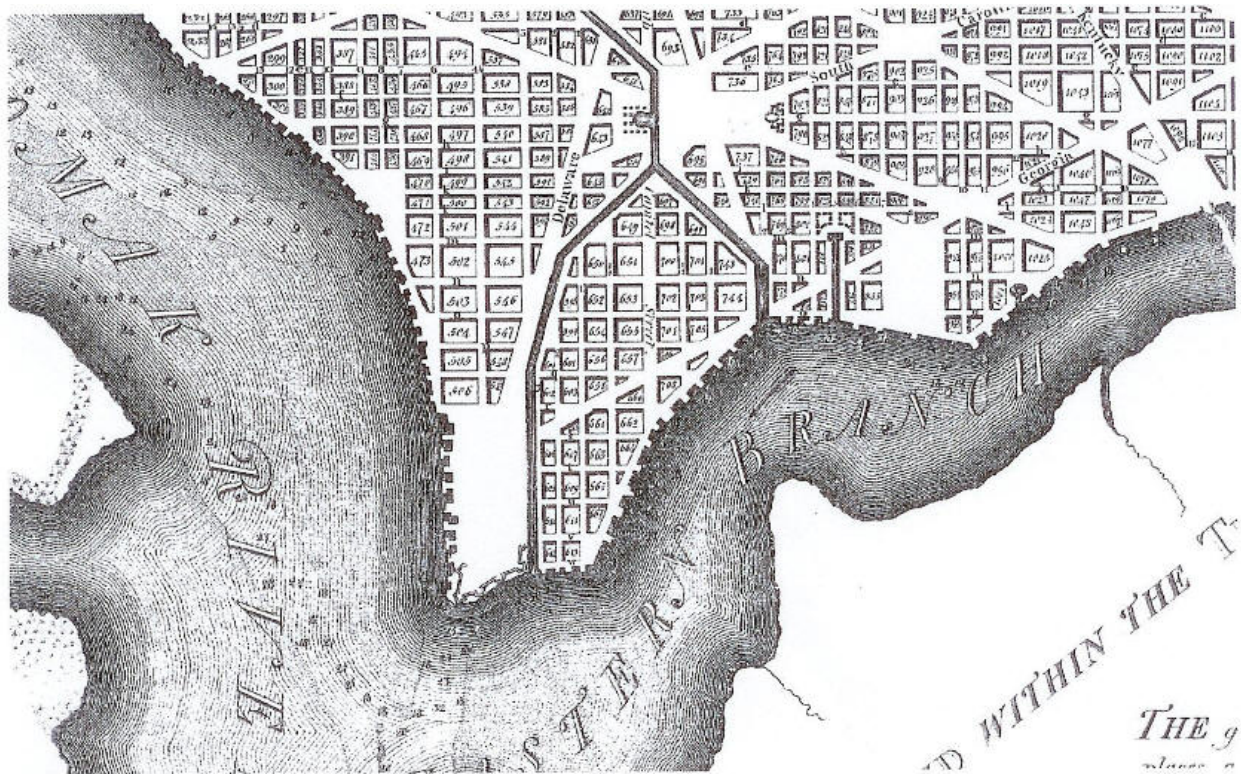
The McMillan Plan

The 1902 McMillan plan for the Anacostia River was an excellent design for restoring land use adjacent to the marshes. The plan called for the river to be dammed. Tidal fluctuations above the dam would be stabilized without sea walls, and a water park would be created with a comfortable residential area overlooking the park, similar to those along the Charles River in Boston. The plan would also create a useable deep-water port from the Potomac River up to the dam and make commercial development of the river possible.



1893 PLAN OF WASHINGTON, D.C.
When the McMillan Plan was being designed

The first major facility constructed upon the Anacostia River was the first U.S. Navy Yard, built in 1791 initially to protect the American merchantmen from the Barbary Pirates off the North African coast while delivering and receiving goods from Europe. A few years later the Marine Barracks was built nearby to protect the Navy Yard, the White House and the Capitol. Because the Anacostia River and the Potomac River form a tidal estuary where normal tides on the Anacostia are 2.9 feet high, with exceptional tides rising as high as 11 feet, the original plan called for a Water Street with sea walls paralleling the shores of both rivers. The provision would give the Federal Government riparian rights and provide public piers and docks to accommodate commercial activity in the new city. The development of this street as a federally owned roadway was the intention of both Presidents Washington and Jefferson, and was supported by Congress and the Supreme Court. Water Street was located on the L'Enfant Plan, the Ellicott Plan of 1792, The Dennott Plan of 1797, and the King Plan of 1803. Although built along the Potomac River, it was abandoned by the Commissioners when they laid out the city plan for the Anacostia area. Privately owned squares and local streets were laid out beside the river and on its tidal flats.



Taken from the L'Enfant Plan

In 1916 the Secretary of War advised Congress that "construction of a dam will furnish the most satisfactory solution of the problem of improvement." However, because of silt from the upstream waters of the Anacostia and the existing sewage problem in part of Anacostia lying within the District of Columbia, construction of a dam was impractical.

The Anacostia in the 20th Century

The US Army Corps of Engineers was given the project of cleaning up the river basin. Engineering studies were started and continued from 1921 to 1941. In 1956 the Corps of Engineers finally completed the designs for the Anacostia River. The direction from Congress for the improvement of the river was to first remove the rice flats, and second to provide much needed recreation land and water for citizens living between the Capitol and the river. With the exception of Union Town just across the river from the Navy Yard, very few people lived east of the Anacostia River before 1921. This lack of urban growth on the 1893 Plan of Washington was recognized when the McMillan Plan was being designed.

The plan for Anacostia River Basin improvements has not changed over time. It has remained an engineering solution, with little or no regard for possible urban growth. The solution for controlling tidal fluctuations was to create Kingman Lake, with locks and walls which no longer function. The lake was named after General Kingman, the former commanding general of the US Army Corps of Engineers.

Since the early 1920s additional studies began for the design of the D.C. Stadium, the Kenilworth dump, and the Anacostia Freeway. It is interesting to note that the design of the Arboretum, begun in 1927, was later related to Maryland Avenue N.E. in accordance with plans prepared in 1949 by the Public Building Administration and approved by the National Capital Park and Planning Commission. Maryland Avenue was intended to cross the Anacostia River and join the future Baltimore Washington Parkway. This roadway would have provided an elegant vehicular entrance to the city. It should also be noted that the Anacostia Freeway, together with the railroad, effectively severed most access to the river and thus limits recreational opportunities for residents of the far Northeast and far Southeast neighborhoods. Land use development over time ignored the river's urban design potential. Within the last three decades the river shores have housed a major city dump, a practice-shooting ground for the Capitol police, public housing, oil storage facilities, transportation corridors, and relatively inaccessible recreation areas. Many of these facilities still exist.



The National Arboretum

Recommendations

Studies by Coffin & Coffin of the Anacostia River Basin were done in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They recommended many community oriented projects as well as over 45,000 new dwelling units for a "new-town-in-town." Today, the basic urban design concern remains unchanged: the river is an undeveloped, invaluable urban resource. Vulnerable sites which should be evaluated for changed land use or modification over an extended period of time are the yacht basin, the D.C. Jail, the D.C. Morgue, D.C. General Hospital, RFK Stadium and its vast parking areas, the school grounds north of Benning Road, the Benning Road PEPCO Plant, the Anacostia Golf Course, the extensive underutilized playgrounds maintained by the National Park Service, portions of Saint Elizabeth's Hospital grounds, and portions of both Bolling Field and the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory.

The specific need and justification for locations of water so close to the Capitol should be evaluated. The existing transportation networks need to be reevaluated to support urban growth commensurate with that of the National Capital. The vertical and horizontal alignments of local streets, the METRO rail system, the B&O railroad tracks and yards, the Anacostia Freeway, and the location of the railroad and highway bridges need to be assessed in order to achieve a more vibrant harbor. Perhaps the railroad could be tunneled and the freeway elevated to provide better community access to the water.

It should be noted that the improvements of the far Northeast and far Southeast areas of Washington D.C. in terms of jobs, income and community life does not rest upon small areas of economic incentive zones here and there within the communities, but rather in addressing the river as a whole and integrating its features into an exciting attraction within the city.

The design suggestions of the McMillan Commission for a dam in the river and the elimination of sea walls upstream from the dam and the barrier islands around Kingman Lake makes sense today. The dam would block out biological pollutants from the Potomac River before it enters an upstream lake within the Anacostia River. With current technology, such as inflatable dams to stabilize the water level above the dam and flocculation to cleanse the river, the visions of the McMillan Commission could be realized. The inflatable dam could be deflated during heavy rainfalls upstream. Release of flocculate into the river could be triggered by sensors in the upstream tributaries during severe storms. Silt loads within the Anacostia River today are, less than they were in the early 20th century as a result of storm-water management and sediment control measures promulgated by the State of Maryland. The river shores between the Potomac River and the dam should be designed for the development of a deep-water port as indicated on the McMillan Plan of 1902.



These conditions could be economically designed to create a beautiful urban asset, including a deep-water port adjacent to two METRO Stations, Water Street with a pedestrian promenade, a cluster of major hotels, restaurants, shops, museums, monuments, offices, terminals, piers and warehouses, and a large clear-water lake that would provide boating and fishing in Washington, D.C. A project such as this could bring significant jobs, recreation, and revenues to the city.

The Current Situation

The publication "Extending the Legacy" prepared by the National Capital Planning Commission outlines four themes for the growth of Washington over the next 50 to 100 years. All support these improvements for the Anacostia River:

1. Building on the historic L'Enfant and McMillan plans, which are the foundations of Washington;
2. Unifying the city and the monumental core, with the Capitol as the center; Using new memorials, museums, and other public buildings to stimulate economic development;
3. Integrating the Potomac and the Anacostia rivers into the city's public life and protecting the Mall and adjacent historic landscape from future building;
4. Developing a comprehensive, flexible and convenient transportation system that eliminates barriers and improves movement within the city.

The McMillan Plan proposed two major parks for Washington, D.C., Rock Creek Park and the Anacostia River, so that citizens can explore the great natural assets of their city. The Anacostia River has yet to be properly developed.

Today the diverse federal agencies and the District of Columbia government which own the land and dictate the land uses, have no authority or capability to develop a comprehensive urban design for the betterment of our capital city. Several things could and should be done in addition to cleaning the river by removing local outfalls from the roadways to the river and designing bicycle trails. Perhaps the first thing to be done is to create a nationally recognized urban design committee responsible only to Congress and free from the vested self-interest of federal and local agencies. A master plan for revisiting the advantages of the McMillan Plan is needed, together with assessing the current physical, economic and social opportunities that this wonderful port, commercial center, and body of water can offer the city. Such an overview would dramatically change ownership patterns and greatly benefit the city.

This is a job requiring congressional involvement since existing land uses were created by Congressional authority. Undertaking such a major urban design project goes far beyond revitalization efforts, although most of the adjacent neighborhoods would be revitalized. The Anacostia River itself, which constitutes roughly seven square miles, or about one tenth of the District's 70 square miles, is basically publicly owned and provides minimal recreational value to the city. The river is 6.7 miles long from its mouth to the Maryland border and has an average width of 300 feet. About eighty percent of the adjacent land is owned by the federal and local governments. If a commission can be created similar to the institution that was the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (it might be called the Anacostia River Basin Authority), the city could look forward to major physical and social improvements within the Anacostia River Basin with significant revenue benefits such as income, real estate, and sales taxes.

It should be noted that the Anacostia Waterfront Corporation established by the DC government does not have the authority to change existing federally owned land uses. Therefore its ability to comprehensively plan and develop the area is severely limited.

The law enabling such a corporation should provide a comprehensive master plan that insures proper development and use of the area. In addition, the corporation must carry out as a minimum the following activities which no existing agency or group of agencies can accomplish.

1. The type of uses both public and private, to be permitted;
2. Criteria for the design and appearance of buildings, facilities, open space and other improvements;
3. An estimate of the current value of all properties to be acquired;
4. An estimate of the relocation costs that would be incurred in carrying out the provisions of the plan.
5. An estimate of the costs of land preparation for all properties to be acquired;
6. An estimate of the reuse values of the properties to be acquired;
7. A program for the staging of a proposed development including a detailed description of the portion of the program to be scheduled for completion by a given date
8. A determination of the marketability of such development;
9. A thorough study of the economic impact of such development, including the impact on the local tax base, the metropolitan area as a whole, and existing business activities within the developing area;
10. The procedures (including both interim and long term arrangements) to be used in carrying out and insuring conformance to the development plan.



Bangkok, Thailand - A Sister City of Washington, D.C.

Laurence E. Coffin, Jr. is an adjunct associate professor of Architecture in Urban Design. In the late 1960's and early 1970's his firm was retained by the Government of the District of Columbia to study the far Northeast area of some seven square miles, and the far Southeast of some eleven square miles for beautification programs to enhance the livability of the local communities. Upon completion of these studies, Laurence and Beatriz Coffin, of the firm Coffin & Coffin, were retained by the government of the District of Columbia to study the portion of the Anacostia River Basin which lies within the District of Columbia with a view for the development of a "New-Town-In-Town."

CARROLL B. HARVEY
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October 29, 1968

Mr. Philip Hammer
Chairman, National Capital
Planning Commission
726 Jackson Place, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20576

Dear Mr. Hammer:

The Office of Community Renewal of the District of Columbia has retained the firm of Laurence E. Coffin, Jr. and Beatriz DeW. Coffin to make an urban design study of the Anacostia River reflecting this river's social, economic and physical potential. This study is in keeping with the adopted Community Renewal report.

Your complete cooperation with this office and Mr. Coffin's firm is hereby solicited and will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

CARROLL B. HARVEY
Acting Director
Office of Community Renewal

bcc: Laurence E. Coffin, Jr. ✓
Identical letters sent to:

Mr. Matthew Platt, WMATA
Mr. Nash Castro, National Park Service
Mr. George Avery, Public Services Commission
Mr. Thomas Appleby, DC Redevelopment Land Agency
Corps of Engineers