



The Anacostia River, Sedimentation and Reduced Water Depths

During the 17th and 18th centuries the Anacostia River was navigable above Bladensburg (then a major port for exporting tobacco). In the 1790s, the DC section of the river was between 20 and 35 feet deep. By the 1850s, the depth had decreased several feet. By 1891, the Army Corps of Engineers measured the depth at 18 feet at the Navy Yard, decreasing to 13 feet at Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, and six to 10 feet at Benning Road.

The depth reduction was caused by increased sedimentation from soil erosion (protective vegetation on the river banks was removed for agriculture and urban development) and discharge of sewage into the river. Sandbars and marshes expanded. Between 1890 and the 1950s, Congress authorized dredging to deepen the channel. The dredged material was deposited on the river banks to reclaim wetlands, altering the river shoreline.

Today, the river faces many challenges, including sedimentation, water pollution, and floating trash. The current, significantly reduced depths of the Anacostia River are shown on the nearby Aerial View of the Federal Navigation Channel.



Near This Site. . .

Prehistoric Quarry Site
– On the Virginia Avenue right-of way, just north of the District Yacht Club, lies a prehistoric quarry site. It is unknown whether this site is still intact.



Near This Site. . .

Native Americans - The Anacostia River has a long history, dating from Native American settlements. The Nacochtankes had base camps on the west bank of the Anacostia River, near the DC Jail and Congressional Cemetery. It is possible that they may also have camped in the Boathouse Row area. They lived in dome-shaped homes made with bent branches and skins, and engaged in agriculture and trading. They hunted deer and grew corn. By the 1670s, the Nacochtankes had disappeared from the Anacostia River area. Some retreated to the north or west; others were killed or died from disease.



Near This Site. . .

John Wilkes Booth's escape route – On April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln at Ford's Theatre. Booth escaped on horseback. He rode south on 11th Street, SE, to a wooden bridge at the Navy Yard, across the Anacostia River. A sentry asked Booth why he was crossing the bridge after the curfew. Booth gave his real name to the sentry, who allowed Booth to ride across the bridge into Anacostia. When questioned later, the sentry said, "I thought he was a proper person to pass, and I passed him." The wooden bridge was at or near the current 11th Street Bridge, which is the same location where the Eastern Power Boat Club began operations in 1905, forty years after Booth's now infamous escape.



Near This Site. . .

Navy Yard Ferry – Aquila Wheeler and his wife Elizabeth Young Wheeler operated a ferry here during the 18th-19th centuries. The dock was near 14th Street and Virginia Avenue. Their frame house (18 x 21 feet), barn, and cabin are believed to be near the ferry site. Portions of the ferry docks may still exist under fill at the tip of 14th Street, SE. The District Yacht Club currently resides at this location.



Near This Site. . .

Barney Circle - The first bridge across the Anacostia River was a wooden draw bridge chartered in 1795 by the Eastern Branch Bridge Co. and completed in 1804. When the British invaded Washington in 1814, they destroyed the bridge. The bridge was rebuilt, but burned in 1845 from a fire started by sparks from a steamboat. The Talbert and Naylor families (prominent landowners in 19th-century Washington) operated a ferry across the Anacostia from the late 18th century until 1822 and from 1845 until 1890. In 1890, an iron bridge was built, replaced by the John Philip Sousa Bridge in 1940.



Near This Site. . .

Antebellum Farm – William Young, Jr., who in 1779 inherited from his father land now encompassing Boathouse Row, lived with his family and slaves on the bluff (now inside Congressional Cemetery, located just to the north of Boathouse Row) overlooking the Anacostia River and present-day Barney Circle. He had a 24 x 36 frame house, a kitchen, and four log dwellings (probably slave quarters). This was a typical prosperous antebellum farm. No trace remains of these buildings. His heirs eventually sold the land to Congressional Cemetery and others.

