



The Anacostia River: People and Places

The Anacostia River flows 8.5 miles from the Maryland suburbs to its mouth at the Potomac River near downtown Washington, DC. Its watershed is home to more than 2.4 million people, including some of the city's most economically distressed residents.

Despite the important role it has played in the history of our region, the Anacostia has often been neglected and abused, leading it to be dubbed “the forgotten river.” Today, local residents are working to reclaim and restore this valuable natural resource.

Left: Map of the Anacostia watershed showing the location of the museum

Courtesy of Anacostia Community Museum, Smithsonian Institution

Right: Falconer Rodney Stotts takes part in the 2012 Anacostia River and Jazz Festival in Anacostia Park, accompanied by a rescued red-tailed hawk.

Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution

Left: A family enjoys Paddle Night, courtesy of the Anacostia Watershed Society.

Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution

RECLAIMING THE EDGE

The Anacostia River plays an important role in the cultural, spiritual, and creative lives of Washington, DC's residents. It provides a peaceful place to rest and relax in an otherwise hectic urban environment and serves as a destination for leisure activities, including boating, biking, and fishing.

Today, community members are coming together to help restore the Anacostia watershed and fight for their right to a healthy, just, and sustainable future.

“This place without all question is the most pleasant and healthful place in all this country . . .”

—British explorer Captain Henry Fleet, 1631

A LIFE FORCE

Before the first Europeans and Africans arrived at the banks of the Anacostia, the area's native Algonquin peoples—the Nacotchtank—viewed the river as a life force full of richness.

The depth of the river, then 40 feet, allowed transatlantic ships easy access to the port of Bladensburg, Maryland. New settlers exploited the bounty provided by the river and its streams.

Over time, people often took too much from the rivers and depleted natural resources by overharvesting, killing off flora and fauna, and polluting streams with industrial waste.



Above: Americans once harvested 17.5 million pounds of shad from the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, including the Anacostia River. Today, federal and state laws regulate fishing for shad.

Courtesy Library of Congress



Above: Washington's Navy Yard, founded in 1799, served as a major shipbuilding and armaments center. Once a major source of industrial pollution, the Navy Yard has participated in efforts to restore the health of the Anacostia.

Courtesy Library of Congress



Right: Members of Washington's Jewish community take part in a Tashlich ceremony, a symbolic casting off of sins, at Yards Park to mark the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year.

Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution

*Background illustration: Harvested by enslaved people, Tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) was a key part of the local economy until the early 1800s.*