

Riverbend Park Cultural Resource Management Plan

Written by Marty Smith

06/29/11

Executive Summary

Riverbend Park is rich in both prehistoric and historic archeological sites. This plan identifies the research and field work that has been which shows that most of Riverbend Park is covered by prehistoric and historic cultural resources, and because of this the park needs to be carefully managed to protect these irreplaceable resources. Proposed research, interpretation and management projects are identified and the park is divided into two different cultural resource protection zones to better assist in prioritizing where the greatest emphasis of resource protection should be placed.

Introduction

I. Existing Conditions:

Riverbend Park is 418 acres located on the shores of the Potomac River in Great Falls, Virginia. It is part of the Potomac Gorge, a federally designated area that has been professionally surveyed and delineated to identify the many unique and unusual biologically and geologically diverse features of the park and adjoining parklands. Of the 418 acres only approximately 5-8 acres is paved or has recent structures built on it, so that approximately 98-99% of the park land has been undisturbed for over fifty years.

Riverbend has a large picnic area, three parking lots, a Visitor Center and Nature Center, a boat marina, a boat launch ramp, two paved entrance roads, a reservable picnic pavilion and two brick houses which are maintained as rental properties. There are approximately 10 miles of multi-use trails that are all natural surface trails. The Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail runs the full length of the Potomac River shoreline through the park.

Approximately 400,000 people visit the park annually. A county survey estimates that over 70% of visitors are families. Many visitors attend interpretive programming at both facilities. Some of the more popular activities for visiting park patrons involves

hiking, fishing, boat rentals, picnicking, wildflower and bird watching, dog walking, horseback riding, kayaking and boating.

II. Riverbend Mission Statement:

Riverbend Park is a nature preserve managed to protect the biological communities and cultural resources of the Potomac Gorge, while providing a natural space for education, research and outdoor recreation that is compatible with preservation goals.

III. Goals for Cultural Resources:

Riverbend has many rare and unique resources. A site survey using shovel tests and surface surveys was conducted by Mike Johnson from the Cultural Resource Protection office. His surveys documented more than 80 prehistoric and historic sites, finding more American Indian sites at Riverbend Park than any other park in the FCPA. Additionally, historic research and documentation has identified Riverbend as the site of Conn's Ferry which was the Ferry used by President James Madison when he was fleeing from the British during the War of 1812. Conn's farm was an early 19th century farm which continued to be a working farm up into the 20th century. Conn's family retained African-American slaves. In the early 1800's one of these African-Americans escaped to freedom. It is believed that he was aided by the famous Underground Railroad network.

Based on the Riverbend Mission Statement shown above Riverbend Park focuses on preservation while finding ways for people to get out into the park to enjoy and appreciate the unique resources. Trail systems are rigorously maintained to encourage hikers, families, joggers, equestrians, mountain bikers and other trail users to stay on trail and protect the resources. Riverbend seeks and maintains a broad variety of outdoor recreational activities that provide active recreation while minimizing the impacts of visitors through offering boat rentals, fishing programs, extensive picnic facilities, overnight camping, evening astronomy programs, etc. The park does not allow any off trail programming or activities as a way to minimize the human footprint on the natural areas.

Interpretation is a key component of natural resource protection. Exhibits in the visitor center focus on the unique and rare features of the Potomac Gorge. Rare and threatened species of flora and fauna are given special emphasis. Interpreting the Potomac River's hydrology and rich cultural significance is another strong component of the site's mission.

There are also exhibits on the extensive American Indian culture that was at Riverbend and in Fairfax County. Interpreting the unique and rare features of the Potomac Gorge is given great emphasis. Interpreting the Potomac River's hydrology and rich cultural significance is another strong component of the site's mission. Interpreting 1800's farm life, President Madison's crossing the Potomac as he fled the British, the Underground Railroad, and life during prohibition are all important parts of the cultural history at Riverbend. Interpreting 1800's farm life, President Madison's crossing the Potomac as he fled the British, the Underground Railroad, and life during prohibition are all important parts of the cultural history at Riverbend.

The Goal of the Cultural Resource Management Plan at Riverbend Park is to protect the known archeological sites and facilities of historic significance, interpret these resources to educate the public about them, to maintain collections and to conduct further research into the many archeological sites.

Preliminary Cultural Resource Assessment

- I. Known Cultural Resources:
 - a. American Indian sites are abundant at Riverbend. Sites are located along the floodplain and in the upland forest areas. Artifacts have dated the sites to Early Archaic and show continuous habitation of the Riverbend landscape for over 12,000 years up to Late Woodland. Many artifacts have been recovered.
 - b. Conn's Ferry is a significant piece of history. Research has shown that the ferry was located where the present Riverbend Boat Ramp is today. The ferry was used to transport President

Madison across the Potomac during the War of 1812 so that he could reunite with his troop commanders.

- c. The Conn Farm was in what is now the large meadow. This was an early nineteenth century farm which was used for growing corn and tobacco. The Conn family was slave owners and one of their slaves named Elliott escaped with the assistance of the Underground Railroad and secured his freedom.
- d. Conn's house is believed to be located on the hill directly above the current visitor center. This site was discovered by Debbie Robison and there are clearly indentations in the soil indicated human dwellings that were there at one time. A request has been submitted to have the site tested. If this turns out to be Conn's house it is significant in that according to historic record President Madison stayed at Conn's house for one night while he waited out a storm, the next morning he was transported across the Potomac River by Mr. Conn.
- e. Moonshine sites are abundant throughout Riverbend. These sites are located in steep ravines and hollows and are littered with old jars and bottles, along with bricks and some other debris.
- f. Fishing camps are well documented at Riverbend Park through old photographs and first hand accounts. Fishing camps were located in at least three areas of the park, where the current picnic grounds are located today, in the large Weant Drive meadow clearing, and in the old quarry site close to the Washington Aqueduct Dam.
- g. An old quarry is found within the boundaries of Riverbend Park. It is cut deep into the rocky bluffs along the shoreline close to the Washington Aqueduct Dam and it is believed the dam was used to supply local rock to construct the dam. An old photograph of the site shows the original dwelling that was on this spot.
- h. On the bluff above the Washington Aqueduct Dam there is a structure that is believed to have been used to construct the dam. Also there is literature available through the National Park Service suggesting that the bluffs above the dam on the Virginia side were used by confederate soldiers during the Civil

War to bombard the Union forces who were constructing the dam.

- i. Old stone house site north of the picnic pavilion. This old house site has not been tested for its historic value or relevance. There is a standing old stone chimney still in place and many pieces of old "junk" littered throughout the fallen stone walls.
- j. Old springhouse is located just west of the old stone house, approximately 60 yards away. The spring has stone walls in place and water is still present.
- k. A possible old well house sits atop a ridge that is located due west of the current picnic pavilion. It is a concrete structure with walls, a roof and an open door.
- l. Old house sites from the early to mid-twentieth century are present in numerous places in the upland forest. These old house sites are littered with old brick and junk piles that contain many metal items.
- m. The Nature Center is in fact made up partly of old historic log cabin. The exact date and history of the cabin is not known, but it is believed to be from the early twentieth century.
- n. According to the Fairfax County office of Cultural Resource Protection there are two cemeteries located within Riverbend Park boundaries.

II. Results of Documentary Research:

- a. Debbie Robison did very thorough and well documented research to establish the location of Conn's Ferry. Her research was then written up and published. It was reviewed by Liz Crowell and Mike Johnson who said that her research looked good. Debbie Robison's research clearly shows that Conn's Ferry was located at the current site of the Riverbend Park public boat ramp. Her research also documents that the Conn family were slave owners and one of their slaves escaped and made and made it to freedom. She also discovered facts about the kind of farming the Conn family was involved in. Due to her research Riverbend Park staff have applied to have Riverbend listed on the federal list of Underground Railroad sites.
- b. Information from the National Park Service about the C&O Canal revealed that during the Civil War the high bluffs on the

Virginia side of the Potomac River was used by confederate forces for artillery fire at the Union troops who were working on the Washington Aqueduct Dam. This strongly suggests the artillery was set up and fired from the bluffs located in Riverbend Park that are directly above and north of the dam.

- c. Photographic archives for Riverbend is fairly extensive. Over the years park neighbors, the Great Falls Historical Society and park staff have discovered many historic photographs of structures and people at Riverbend Park. Some of these photos have dates, others are clearly identifiable as to their locations within the park.
- d. Land deed research conducted by John Rutherford showed very clearly the boundaries of the land that was owned by the Conn Family and clearly linked corroborated the research of Debbie Robison's identifying where the Conn's Ferry was located, where the road to the ferry passed through the park, and where Conn's farm was located.
- e. The map of documented historic and prehistoric sites created by John Rutherford of the Cultural Resource Protection Office clearly shows that there are many archeological sites all over Riverbend Park. This is significant in that any projects involving trails or disturbance of the soil cannot be done without consulting the Cultural Resource Protection Office or at least initially getting approval from the Park Manager.

III. Results of Field Reconnaissance:

- a. A full phase I survey was completed by Mike Johnson over the course of one year. During this period many prehistoric and historic sites were discovered and registered. At the end of this series of surveys Mike Johnson made the statement that Riverbend has the greatest number of recorded prehistoric sites of any parkland in Fairfax County. Based on these surveys Riverbend Park land has been inhabited continuously for about 12,000 years.
- b. Clark's Branch Bridge site was a Phase III survey that was conducted because of a new bridge that was being installed. This survey identified a very unique and important prehistoric site, one that was nicely stratified to show continuous use for approximately 12,000 years.

- c. John Callow conducted surface surveys throughout parts of the park. These surveys identified between 2-3 dozen prehistoric sites. One of these surveys resulted in the discovery of large pottery shards and the designation of a new prehistoric site in the floodplain which has been labeled the Callow site.
- d. Debbie Robison researched land deeds, followed by field surveys, which led her to discover an old dwelling site which she believes could be the former house site of the Conn family. This would mean that this is the site where President James Madison spent the night prior to crossing the Potomac River on Conn's Ferry.

IV. Probability for Presence of Other Sites:

- a. The Phase I surveys of the park revealed a large number of prehistoric sites that spanned a 12,000 year period. The sites were located along the floodplain, on the terraces and on the upland areas. Mike Johnson made the comment that he thinks it is very possible that there could be a large permanent village site at Riverbend Park.
- b. The Clark's Branch Bridge site was the most significant single prehistoric site investigated. The site exposed continuous use for 12,000 years. Mike Johnson said that if they could get funding he thinks it is possible that further excavation could reveal a Clovis or pre-Clovis site.
- c. The site of the Conn family house has possibly been discovered by Debbie Robison. Debbie conducted document and land deed research followed by field reconnaissance and she found what she believes to be the possible location of the home.
- d. American Indian rock shelters. Mike Johnson identified several large rock outcrops that he believes could have been used by American Indians.
- e. During Mike Johnson's field work he listed a long linear trough as a possible site for the Potowmack Canal built by George Washington.

V. Cultural Resource Protection/Sensitivity Zones

- a. See attached map.
- b. Note that on the map Riverbend is labeled almost entirely as highly sensitive, with the exception being the farthest most tip of the park located north and west of the Transcontinental

Pipeline. The reason for this is very clear, there are so many American Indian sites and historic sites found in the floodplain, on the slopes, on the terraces and in the upland forest areas that there should never be any soil disturbance in the park south and east of the Transcontinental Pipeline without consultation and approval of the Riverbend Park Manager and the Cultural Resource Protection Office.

VI. Threats to Cultural Resources

- a. Soil erosion and degradation due to stream bank erosion and creation of social trails. Many visitors climb up and down the steep river banks, creating severe erosion and gulying. One of these exact locations revealed a perfectly intact 4,000-5,000 year old greenstone axehead. Another area along the river caved in and approximately thirty feet of riverbank was swept away.
- b. Collectors removing prehistoric and historic artifacts from the many exposed sites. Site staff are periodically told that people have found projectile points, old glass bottles and many other artifacts, which people refuse to bring in to the park. There are numerous old house sites, a windmill, moonshine sites, well houses and other features that are very visible in the park and seem to invite curious people to cut off trail to investigate.
- c. Neglect of research, maintenance and protection which will lead to loss of possible historic resources. There are numerous prehistoric sites such as Clark's Branch Bridge which need greater research to discover and protect the artifacts and the site. There are other sites which will continue to deteriorate and subside with time if no research is done, such as the Conn family house site which would have been the site where President Madison spent the night.

Proposed Cultural Resource Management and Plan Implementation

I. Trail maintenance

- a. To keep people on trails, away from historic structures.

- b. Elimination of secondary and tertiary social trails which criss cross the resources, create gullying and erosion, and in fact can cause deterioration of cultural sites.

II. Soil erosion control

- a. Erosion of riverbanks and trails has led to prehistoric artifacts falling right out of the ground and then being collected by park visitors as they hike along. Staff have had numerous confessions over the years by park visitors who report finding and collecting "arrowheads" they discovered while hiking. Erosion has revealed much more significant artifacts as well such as axe heads and pottery.
- b. No soil disturbance allowed of any kind park visitors or park staff without getting approval by the park manager or the Cultural Resource Protection Office.

III. Interpretation

- a. Interpretive exhibits and flyers are needed to raise the awareness of the public to encourage their support and win their cooperation in protecting the unique resources at the park. The following areas are directly focused on the cultural resources of Riverbend Park and they are where we will investigate and seek to develop funding and interpretation:
 - i. American Indian exhibits
 - ii. Conn's Ferry exhibits
 - iii. Underground Railroad exhibit and slavery in Fairfax County
 - iv. Prohibition exhibits
 - v. Civil War exhibits
 - vi. Farming in the 1800's in Fairfax County
 - vii. Fishing camps and outdoor recreation in the 1800's and early 1900's in Fairfax County
- b. Programs will be researched and possibly created on the following topics:
 - i. American Indians of Fairfax County and Virginia
 - ii. Farming in the 1800's in Fairfax County
 - iii. The Civil War in Fairfax County and the Dranesville District area
 - iv. Conn's Ferry
 - v. The War of 1812 and the flight of President Madison

- vi. Prohibition in Fairfax County
 - vii. Fishing camps and outdoor recreation in the 1800's and early 1900's in Fairfax County
- IV. Establish historic structures for preservation and interpretation
 - a. A meeting with Cultural Resource Protection staff needs to be set up to discuss how or when they may be able to review some of the historic structures and sites. Their office could identify what they feel is significant and needs further research.
 - b. Riverbend's large number of historic structures and archeological sites need to be evaluated and discussed for future preservation and interpretation. Some of these structures include:
 - i. Clark's Branch Bridge American Indian site
 - ii. Windmill
 - iii. Conn family house site
 - iv. Potowmack Canal site
 - v. Conn farm
 - vi. Farm tools and equipment found at Riverbend Park
 - vii. Cemeteries
 - viii. Corn crib
 - ix. Stone house site and spring house
 - x. Moonshine sites
- V. Further research
 - a. As identified above, a meeting with the Cultural Resource Protection office is the first step in helping Riverbend staff to identify what further research needs to be pursued. There are many identified sites and potential sites that could be significant cultural resources.