

CHAPEL ISLAND HISTORY

View from Chapel Island across the Richmond Dock, c. 1885 | SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND ARCHIVES, VCU LIBRARIES

Chapel Island occupies a long tidal stretch of the James River to the east of Mayo's Island, and it has a long and complicated history.

RICHMOND COMMONS In the planning of Richmond in 1737, the area along the river was reserved as the Richmond Commons, the first public open space in Richmond's history. Among other purposes, the space provided an informal promenade along sycamore-lined banks of the river channel that separated the Commons from Chapel Island.

CHAPEL ISLAND/SANDY BAR FISHERY Originally, Chapel Island was a relatively small sandbar, named for the eighteenth century house of worship located on it. Also known as the Sandy Bar Fishery, here workers using seine nets harvested large numbers of shad and other fish. The construction of the Trigg Shipyard in 1898 changed the size and configuration of the island by filling in the river channels between Chapel Island, the old Richmond commons and Wildewilt's Island.

WILDEWILT'S ISLAND/FISHERY A German immigrant entrepreneur named Wildewilt took possession of a shipwreck at this location around 1800, converting it to a saloon and oyster house. He placed pilings in the river to catch sand and flood debris that enlarged the wreck to an island. Eventually ice flows ground Wildewilt's enterprise into oblivion, but the island continued as a commercial fishery.

LIBBY PRISON AND WATER STREET One of many warehouses along Water Street (the location of the present elevated railway) fronting the Richmond Dock after 1816, the Libby Ship Chandlery achieved infamy as a Confederate military prison. The demolition of the building for reconstruction as a Chicago tourist attraction after 1880 prompted the subsequent demolition of the remaining Water Street buildings by 1904.

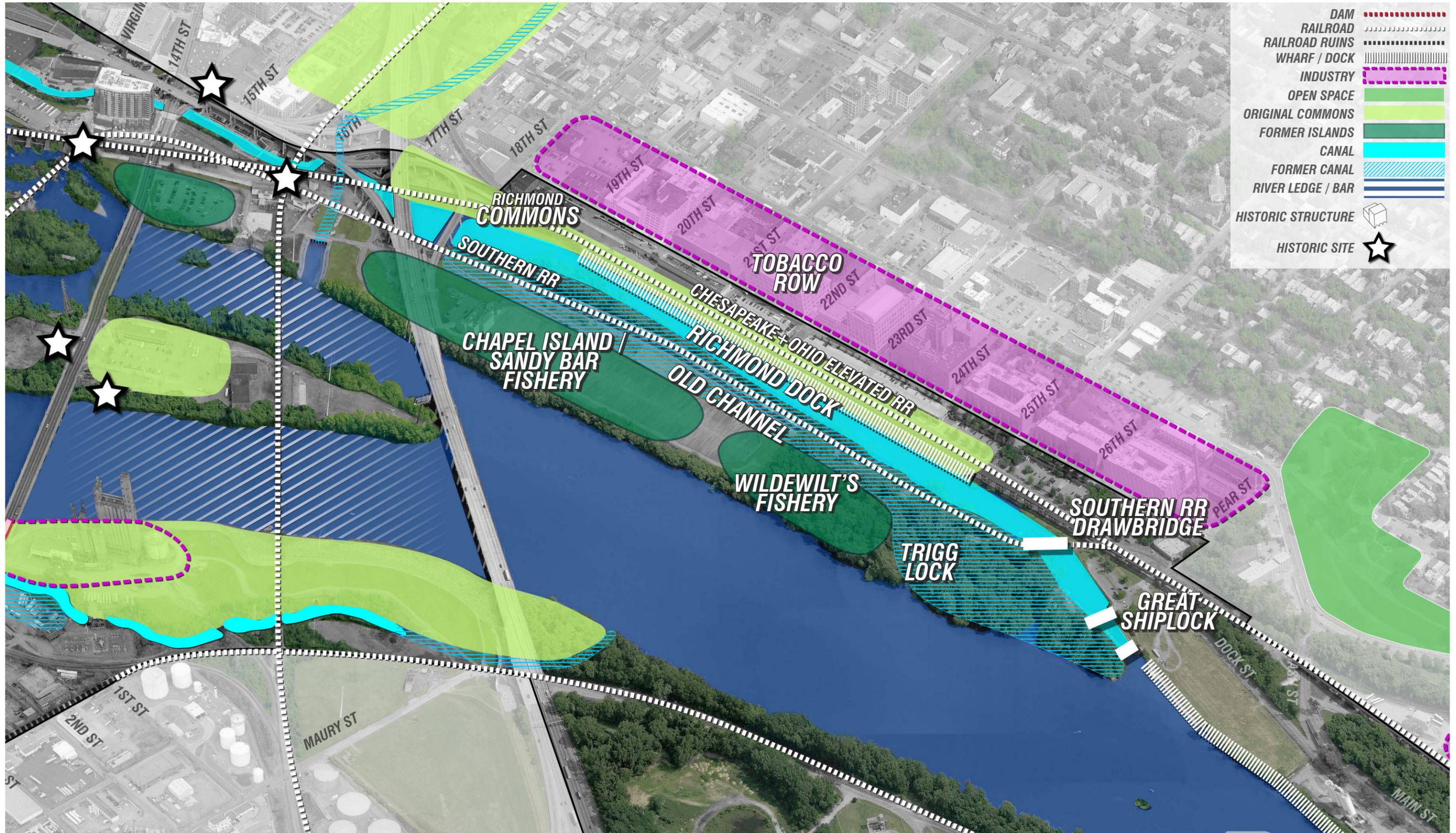
RICHMOND DOCK The shallow waters along Chapel Island prompted Richmond leaders to organize the Richmond Dock Company in 1816 to improve upriver navigation. The company subsequently constructed the Richmond Dock, a ship canal that provided a navigation channel of ten feet or greater between 14th Street and 28th Streets. The 1854 construction of the Tidewater Connection Locks joined the Dock to the Great Turning Basin and made it a part of the James River and Kanawha Canal.

GREAT SHIPLOCK The present granite locks built in 1854 replaced the original 1816 locks of the Richmond Dock and provided for the passage of vessels between the tidewater and ship canal levels.

TRIGG LOCK Between 1898 and 1906, the William R. Trigg Company built torpedo boats for the Federal Government. The lock ruins still present on the island were used by the Trigg company to launch their completed vessels from the Richmond Dock into the James River.

CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO RAILROAD In 1877, the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad built its first line on the south side of the Dock, and in 1904 shifted their line to the present elevated railway.

THE SOUTHERN RAILROAD Around 1894, the Southern Railroad had constructed rail spurs on the north side of Dock Street that eventually facilitated the development of the Tobacco Row industrial area. After 1906, the Southern constructed the present drawbridge across the Dock and rail line extending across Chapel Island.



CHAPEL ISLAND HISTORY





CHAPEL ISLAND

“Urban Recreation” 10 ACRES

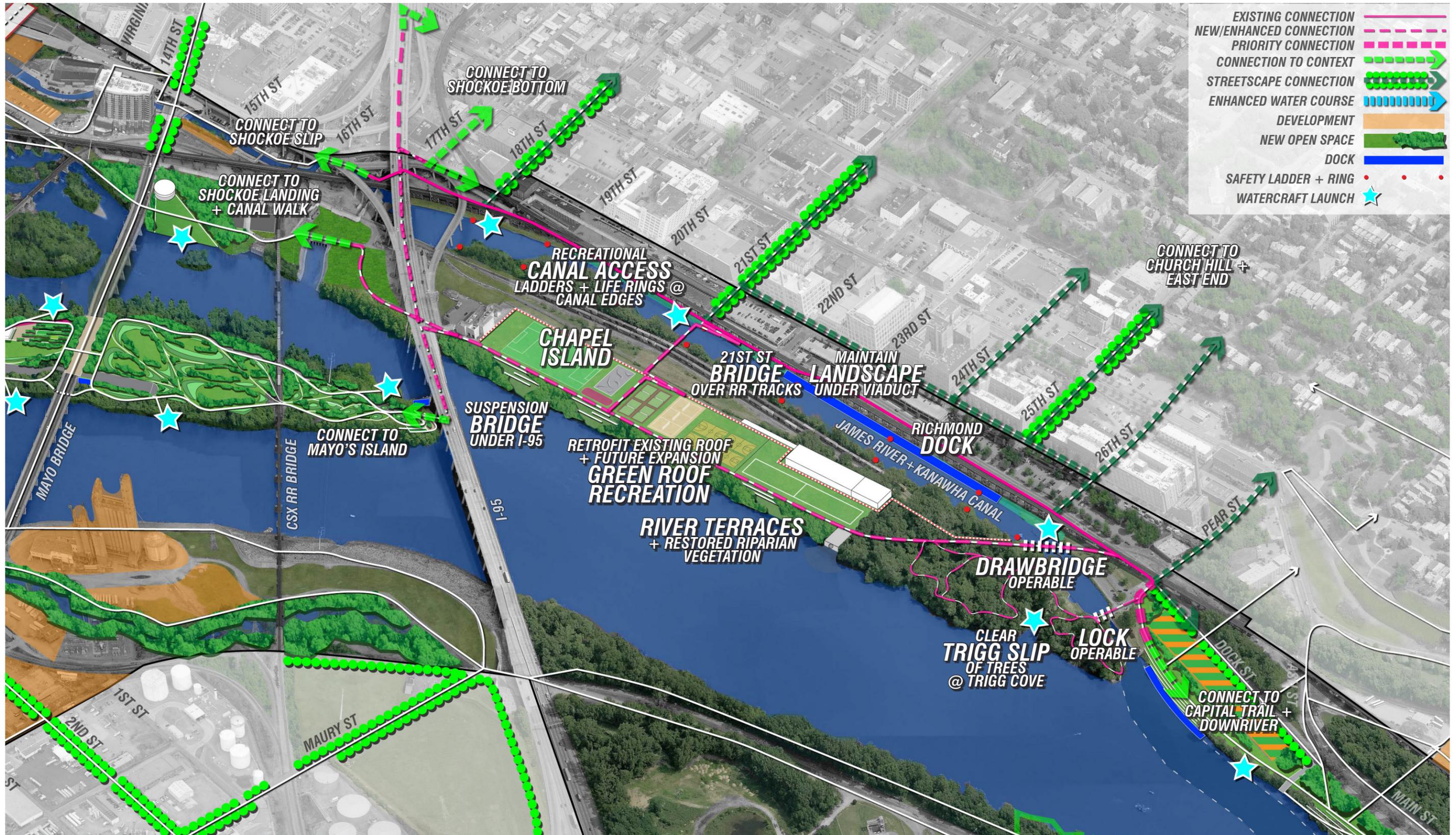
Chapel Island is largely dedicated to public infrastructure, with site access restricted to Department of Public Utilities (DPU) operations related to flood control, assorted Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) structures, and a greater than 5.5-acre Shockoe Combined Sewer Retention Basin. The Norfolk Southern switchyard and mainline to West Point occupies the canal-side portion of the island, effectively precluding public access to the island-side of the James River and Kanawha Canal, between the floodwall at 17th Street and the Norfolk Southern drawbridge adjacent to 26th Street. Public access is available to the densely forested, 11-acre downriver portion of the island, corresponding to the Trigg Shipyard ruins; the riverside of the Great Shiplock locks; and land abutting the retention basin. Public visitors can access the lower tip of the island by traversing either of the lock gates via steps, but without ADA access, at Great Shiplock Park. The 14th Street Takeout provides river access for rafting and kayak watercraft along the island, without provisions for long-term parking.

Pending projects for Chapel Island include the significant expansion of the Shockoe Retention Basin, increasing the facility downriver by between 33% and 50% of its existing footprint. This expansion will push into the lower 11-acres of forested DPU-administered land. Current facility planning by DPU anticipates UV-treatment of water, and therefore a less restrictive setback to public access. The existing facility pre-treats combined sewer water before it is piped to the sewage treatment facility on the south bank. Making use of emerging treatment technologies could result in a reduction of the facility footprint, and should be explored in order to minimize loss of forested acreage. The ideal scenario is a reduction of the current facility footprint, rather than expansion, through the implementation of cutting edge treatment technologies to yield improved quality and volume treatment.

Concurrent planning by the Richmond Regional Planning District Commission for an improved trail through the Trigg Shipyard zone is complementary with the basin expansion. The combination of expanded infrastructure and expanded public access to the island points toward an opportunity to accomplish three tasks: First, improved odor control of the retention basin through technology, and second, dual use of the existing and future phases of the Shockoe Basin to provide something more than an expansive asphalt pavement as roof. Third, and most important from a Riverfront vantage point, is the opportunity to extend public access along the riverside length of the island.

Expanding public access along the facility from Great Shiplock Park to Mayo Bridge will provide three quarters of a mile of additional trail access to the Riverfront, responding to public comments to “expand public access to the shoreline.” Existing vegetation on the riverside of the basin facility can be selectively thinned to provide for multiple advantageous views onto the James River, without fully exposing the DPU facility to view from the river. An 8-foot fence can be positioned along the basin structure to restrict public access to the roof, confining recreational use along the existing basin, and to the basin expansion roof. Universal access is not currently available to the island from Great Shiplock Park, as lock gates both include steps. A short-term, interim configuration anticipates a reversible modification that provides ramps at one or both lock gates, affording universal-access from parking lot to island. Longer term, attaching a universally-accessible span to the fixed Norfolk Southern drawbridge would provide universal-access without adding a new span across the canal. Adding a span to the outside of the drawbridge acknowledges that the drawbridge is currently in the down position, and has apparently been altered to remain in this position as the mechanism for lifting is no longer operational. If the canal is to again become navigable, a long-term goal, then the drawbridge will necessarily need to be restored to function. Universal accessibility improvements will similarly need to be adjustable so that watercraft can pass under any span or through the lock gates.

The downriver tip of Chapel Island was the former home of the Trigg Shipyard. The concrete lock abutments remain intact, though the gates have been removed and canal connection filled in and re-vegetated. The scale of the stepping abutments and iron rings hint at their historic vessel use. As such, this former lock could be reinterpreted as an amphitheater of sorts with strategic removal of trees between the abutments resulting in Trigg Cove, an open space clearing in the forest canopy, directly adjacent to the backwater cove formerly used to launch war craft, now used to launch recreational watercraft.



CHAPEL ISLAND





CHAPEL ISLAND: SHORT-TERM





CHAPEL ISLAND: SHORT-TERM

A continuous, publicly accessible trail along the Shockoe Retention Basin would bring more people to Chapel Island and along the James River, from 14th Street to Great Shiplock Park. Selective thinning of existing Chapel Island vegetation would allow for riparian replacement species and the strategic insertion of seating overlooks along the river. A perimeter fence would preclude public access to the roof of the sewage facility, redirecting attention to the river. The existing basin roof is prominently visible from distant towers and homes, and is an open invitation to envision alternate uses. Strategies for reclaiming the 5.5-acre and eventually 7 to 8-acre rooftop range from the purely utilitarian to purely recreational, each with significant costs. A green roof could be configured without public access, utilizing lightweight, pre-planted trays of low-maintenance plants positioned behind a restrictive fence controlling access to the roof. Similarly, a solar panel array of nearly 8-acres positioned on the roof would generate significant power, reducing DPU reliance on conventional power sources.



EXISTING



CHAPEL ISLAND: LONG-TERM





CHAPEL ISLAND: LONG-TERM

Long-term, the roof of the retention facility could be structurally retrofitted to span the existing subsurface CSO basin to support a new public landscape. Public programming could include a combination of regulation-sized soccer fields, basketball courts, a skate park, tennis courts, beach volleyball courts, or alternatively, passive walks across an extensive vegetated green roof landscape. The long term objective is to transform a purely infrastructural environment into a dual-use landscape, integrating sewer functions with public access and recreation. The close proximity of Chapel Island to recent residential redevelopment in Shockoe Bottom and Tobacco Row makes a publicly-accessible Chapel Island all the more enticing as a common Riverfront open space, with public improvements catalyzing further adjacent redevelopment.



EXISTING



JAMES RIVER & KANAWHA CANAL

Navigation of watercraft into the canal is currently impossible given three factors. First, the James River and Kanawha Canal was declared a non-navigable waterway for the purposes of certain U.S. Coast Guard regulations through a 1999 Congressional Declaration (Pub. L. 106-32, June 1, 1999, 113 Stat. 115; 33 U.S.C. § 59ij), and the City has restricted public boating in the canal. Second, the Norfolk Southern drawbridge is both inoperable and fixed in the lowered position, meaning that it is functional for railroad passage, but cannot be raised for watercraft passage. Third, the lock gates at Great Shiplock Park are non-functional due to sedimentation in the lock requiring future dredging, as well as a non-functioning lock mechanism. An automated or on-demand mechanism would be necessary to again return the locks to their functional capacity suitable for watercraft passage. The combination of these three issues precludes the passage of commercial and historic watercraft that would enliven and activate the James River and Kanawha Canal water sheet. One short-term

programming adjustment would be to adjust restrictions, eliminating prohibition on the use of non-motorized, personal recreational watercraft such as canoes and kayaks from using the lower canal between 17th Street and the locks. Allowing this activity, with prominently posted warnings regarding the risks of doing so, would provide much needed activity on an otherwise underutilized stretch of the Riverfront. Richmond City Code Chapter 26, Article XI regulates activities on both the Haxall and James River and Kanawha canals, and articulates the joint responsibility of granting approval for water sheet activity. Under the Congressional Declaration, the City may obtain technical assistance from the Secretary of Transportation to ensure public safety with regard to how vessels are built, maintained, and operated on the James River and Kanawha Canal, who may terminate the Declaration with proper public input.



TOBACCO ROW

The parcels between Cary and Dock streets are primarily parking lots allocated to the residential redevelopment of Tobacco Row. The quantity of parking is linked to the residential units of the various rehabilitated structures, and may exceed the number of cars actually using the permitted facilities. There may be an opportunity to reduce the footprint of the surface parking lots, or allow for limited public use of the lots, through an amended agreement between the City and building owners. Three of the nine blocks are constructed as two-story parking structures, with the top level of parking coinciding with Cary Street. The parcels between 18th and 21st streets are bisected by the floodwall along the transverse centerline of the blocks, complicating their potential for alternative uses. Land use of these parcels is limited as they are subject to flooding below Cary Street. There may be opportunities to consolidate

existing surface parking into additional parking structures, effectively reducing the footprint of surface parking by 50%, or another three blocks. This would allow for the removal of impermeable surface lots and the expansion of permeable surfacing as either a private or public open space, with the objective of encouraging more outdoor pedestrian activity.