

DC's Island Sanctuary: Managing Nature and Culture on Theodore Roosevelt Island

Saylor Moss, Historical Landscape Architect, National Capital Region, National Park Service,
1100 Ohio Drive SW, Washington, DC 20242; saylor_moss@contractor.nps.gov

THEODORE ROOSEVELT ISLAND NATIONAL MEMORIAL IS A WOODED ISLAND IN THE POTOMAC River located between the thick mass of 12-story buildings that comprise Washington, DC, and the tall skyscrapers of Arlington, Virginia (Figure 1). The site is managed by the George Washington Memorial Parkway (GWMP), which spans approximately 40 miles between Great Falls, Virginia, and Mount Vernon. There is also a shorter section of the GWMP along the Maryland side of the Potomac.

There are volumes that could be written on events that took place on this landscape. This paper discusses the interesting history of the island in brief, which will help in the understanding of how modern resource management on the island is directly tied into island history. It will also discuss some of the management solutions and challenges on the site.

Archeological evidence shows that the island, known as Analostan, was in use by Native American tribes until the early eighteenth century. The island name Analostan possibly derives from Necostin or Anacostian Indians who lived in the area for hundreds of years before European settlement.

The Mason family of Virginia acquired the island in 1717. George Mason IV was the author of the Virginia Bill of Rights. In 1798 he established Mason's Ferry, which linked the island, via a ferry landing on its north side, to what was then Maryland, and what is now the Georgetown area of Washington, DC. The island became known as Mason's Island (Figure 2).

In order to get to the island from Virginia, people would hire private charter boats. This persisted from the time the ferry opened until 1807, when a temporary causeway was built from the Virginia shore to the northwest corner of Mason's Island. The ferry and subsequent causeway were a vital link between Virginia and the north. It changed the way people traveled around the area and the region. It was significant in national transportation history as it connected people to Washington and Maryland, as well as to the Ohio River Valley and beyond. It was not until 1809 that Long Bridge, the first bridge connecting Maryland and Virginia, was built, approximately one mile south of the island.

Mason IV's son John Mason built an estate plantation on the island, and called it Analostan. He and his family lived there from 1792 to 1833. He built a classical revival-style mansion and associated outbuildings. There were also slave quarters and associated buildings. Mason and his

Citation: Weber, Samantha, ed. 2012. *Rethinking Protected Areas in a Changing World: Proceedings of the 2011 George Wright Society Biennial Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*. Hancock, Michigan: The George Wright Society.
© 2012 The George Wright Society. All rights reserved. Please direct all permission requests to info@georgewright.org.



Figure 1. The wooded landscape of Theodore Roosevelt Island and the skyscrapers of Arlington Virginia as seen from the rooftop of the House of Sweden in Georgetown, D.C (Photo by Saylor Moss).

slaves tended pleasure, private, and kitchen gardens, an orchard, and a tree-lined allee that led from the ferry landing to his home, which was on a high point near the center of the island. There were lawns, agricultural fields, and pastures where Mason raised sheep and experimented with cotton, as did many gentlemen farmers of the day. It is said that Mason maintained a buffer of trees around the edge of the island, with a break for a view to the east. It is not known where that break was, and it is certain that whatever island dwellers saw during Mason's era is no longer visible in the vastly altered modern landscape. In 1928, one visitor described the island as "the most enchanting spot I ever beheld." After financial trouble and bank repossession, Mason left in 1833.

After Mason's departure there is mention of commercial cultivation on the island. Reports of peach trees, roses, and vegetables can be found. There was also a resort and a saloon on the island. People from the surrounding area would come to the island for recreation. There were company picnics, feasts, dances, and even a tale of jousting.

Cultivation and social use of the island ended in 1861 when the military occupied the island. Union troops were trained here, notably the black troops of the First US Colored Troops. Structures, including barracks, offices, and an infirmary, were constructed to house and care for the troops. It is likely that the Mason mansion and its outbuildings may have been used to house troops as well. The landscape at this time was untended and sparse.

Between 1864 and 1865 the Army buildings were used as a temporary refugee camp for blacks arriving in DC from the south. It was an overflow Freedmen's camp, where a lack of basic supplies and overcrowding led to death and disease. The federal government was unable to resettle or take care of the men, women, and children who came north in search of jobs and a better life for themselves. The Association of Friends and other benevolent groups helped provide for the freedmen's physical, educational, and spiritual needs. The camp was disbanded in 1865.

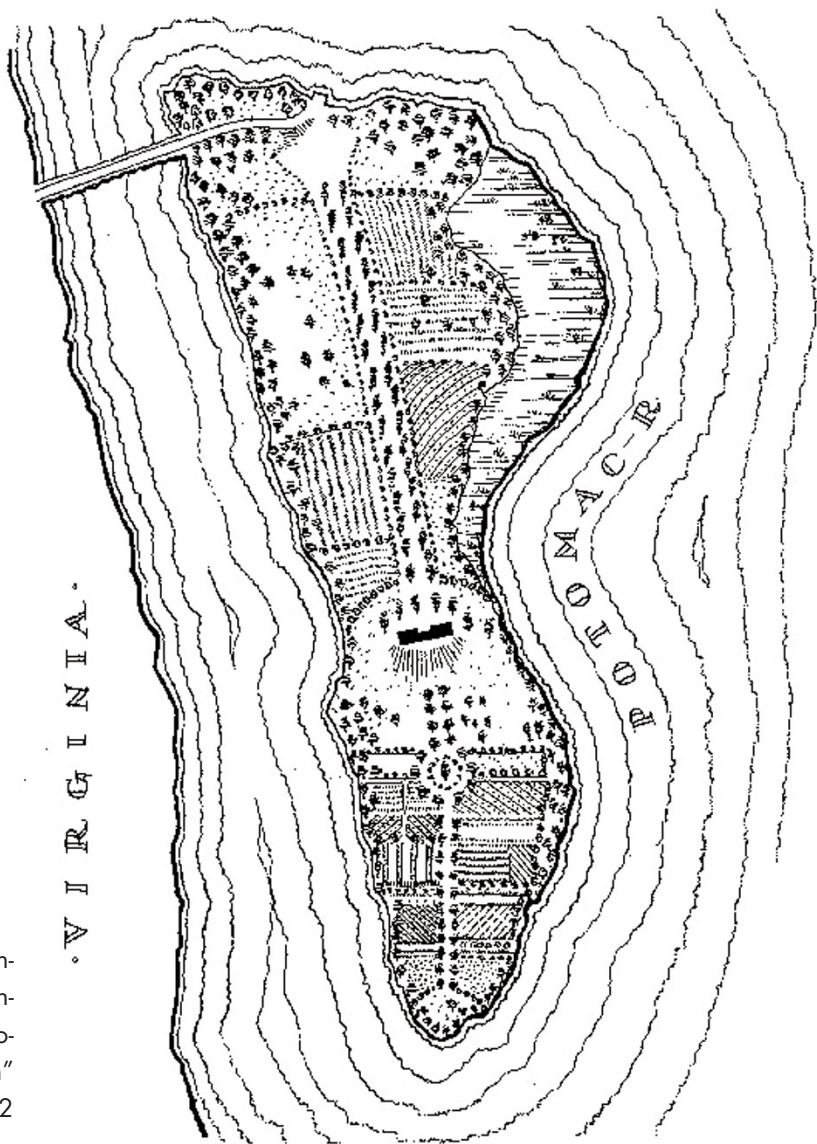


Figure 2. This 1818 map illustrates the Mason-era causeway, ferry landing, swamp land, mansion and associated landscape. (Image reproduced from "A Map of the City of Washington" by Robert King 1818: Source NPS HALS DC-12 2008 delineated by Clemmens, Kidd, Mincey).

After the Civil War era, the island was once again used for short term recreation. It was used for ice storage; there was a boat house used by nearby boat clubs; a story exists about Alexander Graham Bell and a Smithsonian institution secretary, Professor Samuel Langley, conducting aerodynamics and aeronautics field tests in which they were unable to raise a large square kite-type rigging into the sky. The island also had a reputation for shady goings-on. At this point the island could only be reached by boat, and it was a good place to hide.

In 1902, a reporter for the *Washington Times* said, "The interior aspect of Analostan is desolate in the extreme." What was left of the Mason House was hidden in dense a growth of trees which had overrun the island. In 1913 the Washington Gas Light Company purchased the island for \$77,000. No plants or facilities were ever built during their ownership. A caretaker and his wife lived in a clearing on the island. A carpet of honeysuckle covered much of the landscape. The swamp was a trickling creek surrounded by grass and cattails.

In 1931, the Roosevelt Memorial Association (RMA, established in 1919, and renamed the Theodore Roosevelt Association, or TRA, in 1953) purchased the island from the Washington Gas Light Company, just before the Justice Department condemned the property and added it to DC parkland. The RMA's goal was to establish a national memorial to Theodore Roosevelt that

would rival those of Washington and Lincoln. The following year, the RMA gave the island to the federal government, but maintained planting and development rights.

Within two years of the purchase, the island was renamed Roosevelt Island, and later Theodore Roosevelt Island (TR Island) by President Herbert Hoover. The island was given to the United States, and was administered by the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital. The RMA continued to retain the rights to create a planting plan, and to erect a monument to Roosevelt in the future.

In May 1932, the RMA hired architect John Russell Pope and the Olmsted Brothers firm to prepare plans for both projects. Pope served mainly as an advisor, and he died in 1937. Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and his colleague Henry Hubbard are regularly associated with TR Island planting design. Olmsted was the son of the forefather of modern landscape architecture in America. At this point in his career he had served as adviser and designer, or both, on many prominent Washington landmarks, including the White House grounds, the Jefferson Memorial, Rock Creek Parkway, and the National Cathedral grounds. Over time, he became a major figure in comprehensive city planning, the concept of neighborhood-centered development, and designing to emphasize the importance of common open and recreational spaces. Some of the key language in the 1916 bill establishing the National Park Service (NPS) was Olmsted's. Henry Hubbard had been a student of Olmsted Jr.'s at Harvard, and was the first person to receive a degree in what was newly known as landscape architecture.

The landscape of the island was to be a nod to Roosevelt's conservation ethic. Olmsted utilized the methods that both his father and the NPS promoted. Those included the preservation and creation of natural or scenic beauty, and the use of native plants and rustic structures. Olmsted's goal for the site was to establish a native, climax forest, and to establish a feeling of sanctuary. He pictured a landscape accessed at a single point, with meandering paths, and without vehicular traffic, wherein an architectural memorial would serve as a unifying point on the island.

This was a unique concept in parks at the time. Olmsted would not be manipulating a pre-existing landscape; he was basically reconstructing one, and leaving it to fend for itself. It was not typical of the NPS to create native woodlands and wetlands from scratch, and it would be difficult to sustain. It was not intended to be a professionally managed landscape like he and his father had created for George Vanderbilt in North Carolina at Biltmore, or a like the woods George Perkins Marsh and Frederick Billings managed in Vermont. TR Island would be of value to the country as a presidential memorial, and a respite from the urban surroundings, instead of a systematic attempt at forestry.

Olmsted wanted the ruins of Mason House removed so they would not be at odds with Olmsted's vision of ecological progression. The ruins were removed with permission of NPS (and despite the protests of architects and historians), and the artificial terraces were smoothed out. A historic American buildings survey (HABS) team was given a limited amount of time to document the ruins in 1936.

The Civilian Conservation Corps cleared most of the island vegetation, and planted and transplanted, according to Olmsted's specifications. Some of his plans were not realized, like a landing on the south end of the island, and a bridge leading to Little Island off of the southern tip of TR Island.

Along with a pallet of native plants, and a few non-natives thrown in for general interest, like the bald cypress that is still visible in the freshwater tidal marsh, Olmsted recommended keeping three species that are some of the most feared invasive exotics of modern times, English ivy (*Hedera helix*), periwinkle (*Vinca minor*), and Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*). There will be more about these plants later. Now a short timeline of events on the island during the second half of the twentieth century.

- 1953: An NPS ferry utilized the historic ferry landing, and started bringing visitors to the island by boat.
- 1954: Architect Eric Gugler (known for the White House's Executive West Wing) and Sculptor Paul Manship (known for the golden Prometheus sculpture at Rockefeller Center) were hired to prepare plans for the memorial. The end result of their work was a large plaza punctuated by the largest memorial in Washington, DC. At 21 feet, 6 inches, it is slightly taller than Jefferson and Lincoln's memorial statues, which are each 19 feet tall (Figure 3).

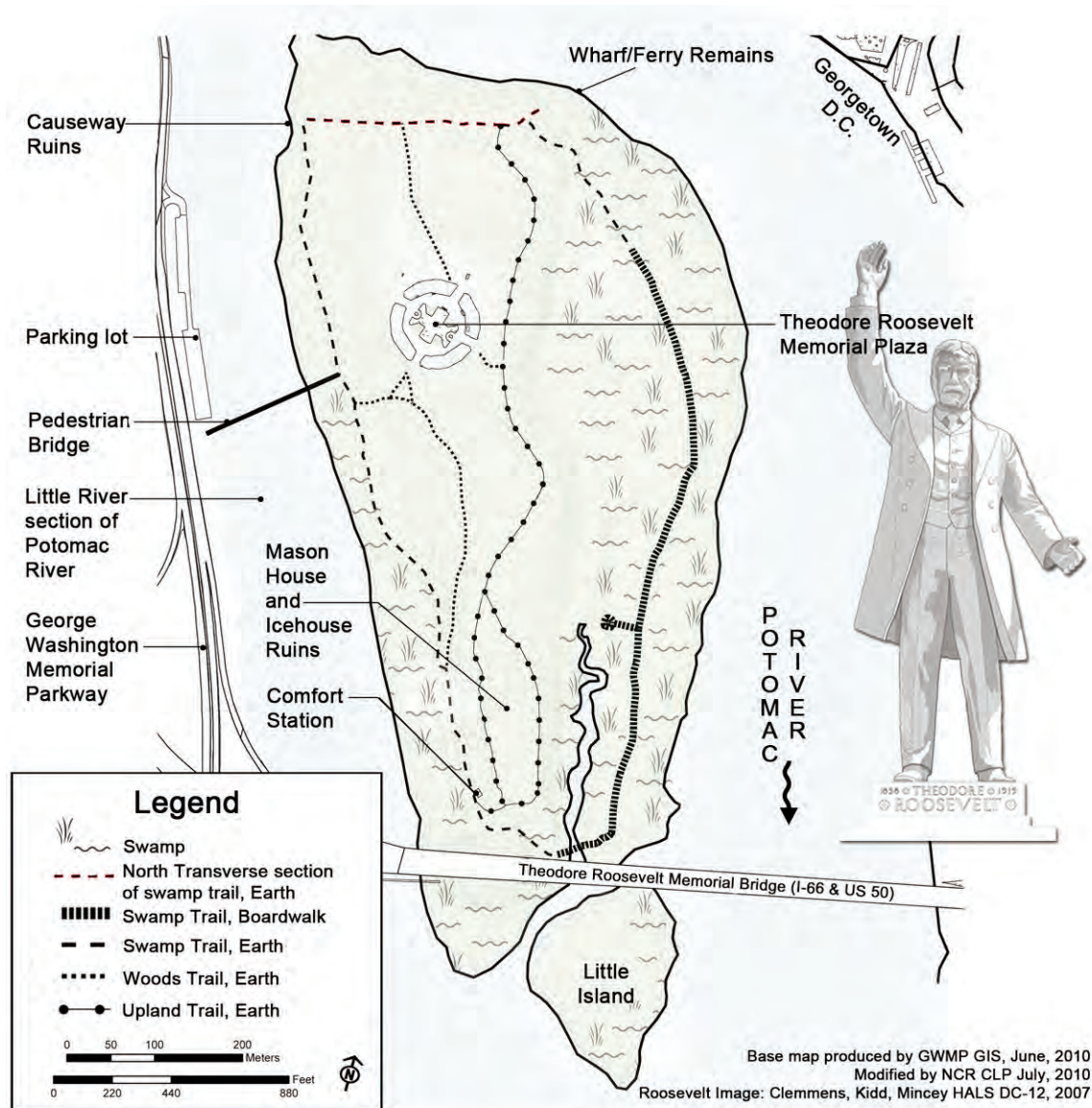
Figure 3. Paul Manship's Theodore Roosevelt Statue stands just over 21 feet tall. It is situated on the north end of an elliptical plaza with fountains, moats, benches and monoliths inscribed with Roosevelt quotations (NPS National Capital Region Cultural Landscape Program).



- 1964: Theodore Roosevelt Bridge was constructed. It was not part of Olmsted's original design, but deemed necessary to accommodate traffic flow between DC and Virginia. Its low profile and modest design were intentional, to blend in as well as a bridge can.
- 1967: The memorial was officially dedicated by President Lyndon B. Johnson.
- 1979: A pedestrian bridge was built between the island's west side and the Virginia shore. It provided the single access point that Olmsted imagined, and it was wide enough to accommodate service vehicles.
- 1996–1998: A boardwalk of recycled materials was built to allow visitors access to the island's swamp and marsh areas, without damaging sensitive ecological resources, or getting their feet wet. No significant changes to the island's hardscape have been made since that time (Figure 4).

So what does all of this history have to do with resource management? Aside from the formal plantings in the memorial area, which are primarily willow oaks and boxwood, today the

Figure 4. Theodore Roosevelt Island National Memorial existing conditions site plan (NPS National Capital Region Cultural Landscape Program).



island is a forest. To the untrained eye it looks perfectly natural—as if it could have been there for a thousand years. Resource managers know that limited work on the forest after planting, and limited resources, meant establishment and spread of plants we consider undesirable today.

So what do we do about this? We can do nothing and, like many, assume that a forest left alone will correct itself, or, we can continue to do the best we can with what resources we have. The concrete and marble may crack and become discolored, but it will probably last for a long time. The native vegetation, on the other hand, will decline or disappear altogether, without intervention. The proliferation of invasives and exotics is hindering growth and slowing succession of native vegetation. There is scientific speculation that vines thrive with increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and many of the invasives on the island are vines. Without serious intervention, will the Olmsted forest be smothered by vines? With continued climate change, will more and different vines, like kudzu, move in and take over? Will the marshes and swamps be forever changed by non-native aquatic plants, like the beautiful but non-native yellow iris (*Iris pseudocorus*) that expands the swamp, decreases marsh areas, and reduces the food supply for the native wood duck?

The GWMP is doing much more than simply letting the forest be. There are several in-depth studies on invasives, one in particular by a Duke University professor that talks about specifics on how honeysuckle thrives in the sun, and intercepts the light before it reaches the forest floor, and how ivy thrives in less sun, and intercepts light from the forest floor, and actively strangles trees. It study also talks about how vinca outcompetes native ground covers, and the specifics of the damage that yellow iris causes.

The park also engages in an early detection and rapid response program to identify and monitor invasives. The park actively uses volunteers and organizes funds for exotic vegetation removal. Understanding the historical significance of the property informs the methods selected for vegetation removal and treatment. For instance, the park identifies and treats English ivy, honeysuckle, and vinca using cut and paint techniques with approved herbicide, in a specific time of year. This method preserves archeological resources, both known and unknown, from being disturbed by hand-pulling vegetation which can cause soil removal, and exposure of underground resources.

Resource managers understand that the invasive ground cover fig buttercup (*Ficaria verna*) has a narrow herbicide treatment window, and it is hard to control without damaging nearby desirable plants. Knowing that the nearby plants are from Olmsted's plan motivates the park staff to avoid damaging non-target plants during non-native plant control efforts.

The island has a dense understory. Understory plants may not all be desirable, but in the mid-Atlantic region, the deer populations are so dense that a thick understory is rare. The fact that this landscape is an isolated island where deer do not exist is unusual, and may present another level of challenges for management.

TR Island is special. It is a wooded island in the middle of a large city. There are no vehicles there, and it is the largest presidential memorial in DC. The GWMP takes the layers of history into account when managing the unique resources of the site, in order to preserve the layers of the past, and honor the man who so revered the natural world.

References

- Pliska, Jonathan. 2008. *Historic American landscapes survey: Theodore Roosevelt Island (Anacostan Island, Mason's Island HALS)* DC-12. Washington, DC: NPS.
- Fanning, Katherine. 2001. *Theodore Roosevelt Island national register nomination*. Washington, DC: NPS.
- Moss, Saylor. 2010. *Cultural landscape inventory, Theodore Roosevelt Island*. Washington, DC: NPS.