



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**America's Capital
Potomac River and East Potomac Park**

The Potomac River and East Potomac Park Report One

April 17, 2006

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. I am back in Northern Virginia for a while. As mentioned in earlier reports, Reporterette, Milli, and your Reporter are slowly migrating west to be closer to our families. I anticipate these next few months will be a farewell to this part of the country; at least regarding our eastern home. We will likely sell our remaining properties on the east coast, and these transactions will break some of my ties to this lovely, revered part of America, our nation's capital.

Let's get started with another report on "America's Capital" series. We'll begin with a Sunday afternoon visit to an island located on the Potomac River.

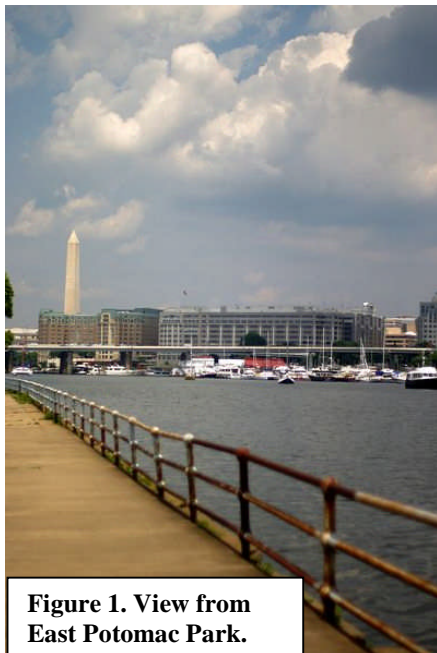


Figure 1. View from East Potomac Park.

Hains Point (also called East Potomac Park) is one of my favorite spots in Washington, DC. I discovered the park the first week I arrived here in 1965. My temporary home was the Bachelor Officers Quarters (BOQ) at Fort Myer, Virginia. My Navy junior officer's room was not much larger than a ship's steerage class accommodation. East Potomac Park's grass, trees, and panoramic views of Washington (See Figure 1¹) became a refuge from my small living space. I spent many early mornings there, sitting on the grass, reading the *Washington Star* and the *Washington Post*.

Yesterday, I revisited these former stomping grounds and spent the afternoon taking in a cool, pleasant spring day. I walked around the periphery of the park, which at a brisk pace takes just over an hour. My jaunt lasted longer because I often stopped to take in the scenery and talk to the fishermen. (I use the word fisherman generically for both sexes.)

The island of East Potomac Park lies near the east bank of the Potomac River and adjacent to southeast DC, as shown in Figure 2. The shores of the island are bordered with an aging cement sidewalk, on some parts of the island, an equally aging boardwalk. On the west side of the park, the walk lies at an angle, tilting inward toward the land--the result of heavy rains and erosion from the high tides of the river. The railing around the boardwalk, rusting and askew, are reminiscent of past times

¹ "East Potomac Park," Wikipedia.



Figure 2. Parts of DC.

On weekends, the park is crowded with golfers, tennis players, cyclists, children cavorting around the playgrounds, BBQ grillers, fishermen, and those who need a time for idleness. Most of the people who frequent the park are of black or brown color. It was evident I was no longer in Northern Idaho, home of the whites and the White Aryan Nations.

In the afternoons, East Potomac Park is often littered with trash. During the day, it accumulates from the many visitors who have quit their row houses and apartments in the District for open space in the park. In some spots, it's noisy, especially at the south end of the island. So, why frequent a noisy, dirty park, just to promenade on a slanted boardwalk? Why horse around in a place in which I am a racial minority? I like the place. It's diverse and peaceful.

As I strolled around the concrete boardwalk on the east side of the island, I had a fine view of southeast Washington. If you visit America's Capital, I recommend you take time to walk around the island. It will give you a good idea of the layout of this part of DC, and again, the views are inspiring.

Across the water, on the mainland of DC, I saw a Marina and several seafood restaurants, shown in Figure 1. Further down toward the south, I spotted Fort McNair. Earlier in my life, as part of

my introduction to an assignment with the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), I spent several days attending classes at the Army Graduate School at Fort McNair. I recall listening to a famous lecturer who dwelled on the dangers of the Cold War. He repeatedly declared: *America is losing the Cold War to the Soviet Union and China*. This lecture took place in 1966. The military audience was not happy with his pronouncements. Shortly thereafter, I read his two-volume treatise on the subject, and recently pulled this tome from storage and reread some of the chapters. He was wrong on just about everything he said about the Cold War, the USSR, and China. But in the 1960s, he was considered a brilliant expert on these subjects.

Anyway, not visible from the East Potomac Park, and just beyond Fort McNair, lies the Navy Yard. After completing a two-year tour with the DIA in Arlington, I extended my commission for another two years and was assigned to the Yard. Here, I served-out my time in the U.S. Navy as a software programmer. If you have an opportunity, pay a visit to the Navy Yard. It has a first-rate museum and on occasion, a Navy vessel is docked at the Yard, on the Anacostia River. The ship is often open to visitors.

Fishing is Fine on the Potomac

During the walk yesterday, I decided to learn more about the fish who live in the Potomac River, and any luck the fishermen might have been having in catching the fish. I approached a man who had three lines in the water, "Hello. What are you going for?"

The person glanced up from his fishing poles, and dismissed me with, "Fish." Hm, not a good start for my fish investigation, but maybe he came to the park for some privacy and solitude.

This person was an exception to the other fishermen who were fishing at the Park. A score of other fishermen were glad to talk to me about their fishing. Catfish were biting; so were White Perch. One man informed me he was above fishing for lowly Catfish or Perch. He had his lines baited for Bass. Reporter, "Any luck?"

"Not yet, but I've been here only five hours." I didn't say anything, but I hoped he was not planning for an evening meal of Bass.

Don't Do *Anything* In This Water!

When I first came to Washington, DC, the Potomac River was so polluted that fishing was forbidden. Fish eating experts warned fish eaters that eating fish from this river might cause a serious illness. I had not heard about this dire alert, and I liked to swim. The Potomac River was inviting, so one day I went swimming in this river. It never occurred to me why I was the only swimmer out that day. It was hot as Hades, miserably humid, too. What was the big deal? Dive in!

A friend owned a boat and on the day of my swim, we were sailing his dingy down the Potomac toward Mount Vernon. Casting-off my trousers and shirt, I told him I was going swimming. I am not sure if this person knew about the dangers of the water into which I was about to dive, but he said, *Sure go ahead*. (He also sold me, a beginning snow skier, his old 220 cm skis. In his sales pitch, he claimed they were the perfect length for a beginner. I never learned to ski very well, partially because my first two years of skiing were on skies resembling planks from a Redwood.)

In I went. The cool water was heaven in disguise. My friend sailed around me a couple times then threw out a line. He was sailing back north to the marina and suggested I troll behind the boat. Great. The return trip to the marina would be more pleasant in the water than out of it.

As we approached the marina, I swam to the stern of the boat and pulled myself in. At that time, I realized I had spent well over an hour in noxious and foul H₂O. My formerly white skivvies were gray. My body resembled an ambulatory oil slick. My friend's reaction? He thought my appearance was hilarious, but he also had laughed at my trying to navigate the beginner's ski slope while strapped to modified tree trunks.

That was the last time I swam in the Potomac River. I didn't become ill, and as you can see, I didn't die. But I emerged from the Potomac River as one foul-looking and foul-smelling swimmer.

It's a Log. No, it's an Inner Tube! It's.....

During these times, the U.S. Navy's R&R (relaxation and recreation) department provided a first-rate service to Navy personnel. A fully manned (...eh, fully personed) boat could be reserved for a day to cruise the Potomac River, perhaps traveling south to Mt. Vernon, if you wanted to visit George's home. The men who were personing the boat were a skipper and two sailors. They took care of just about everything. The only requirements for the passengers were: (a) reserve the boat, (b) show up at the Navy Yard with food and beer, (c) get in the boat, and (d) take in the beautiful scenery while eating and drinking.

Unlike commissioned U.S. Navy ships, booze could be consumed on an R&R craft; one reason the RR boat was in demand. Another reason was the scenery encountered during the cruise, such as the Capitol, several stunning monuments, and the Potomac River itself. The demand for the boat was so great that the R&R folks established a lottery for reserving the craft for the prime days. We were lucky. We drew a Sunday. Perfect.

Two friends, their dates, yours truly, and my date had the good fortune to snare this boat on a beautiful spring day. (As an aside, my two friends did not include the guy with the sailboat who sold me his Redwood skis.) We met at the Navy Yard at midmorning, deposited ourselves and our bounty into the boat, and told the skipper to take us upstream so we could view Georgetown from the river. "Aye aye, sirs," as the crew pushed the boat from the pier and we began what we thought would be a fun-filled day.

The following conversations are paraphrased, but accurate reflections of what happened next:

- Sailor at the bow of the boat, "Hold it skipper. Go to starboard. There's a log floating toward us."
- We passengers glanced idly toward the temporary impediment to our cruise. My friend observed, "Say, that's not a log. Looks like big inner tube to me."
- Sailor, "No sir. It's a log. We get a lot of them out here."
- The alleged log floated closer to us. My other friend said, "That's not a log. That's no inner tube. It's a person! A body!"

We had come across a dead man. Or, a dead man had come across us. Whoever initiated the encounter, the fact remained that six party animals were looking at a decidedly defunct human. It was a downer, so to speak, to our festivities. The dead man was floating face-down in the water, slowly making his way south, toward Mount Vernon. He was fully-clothed, so we assumed he had not jumped in the water for recreational reasons. Upon closer inspection, we could see he was bloated and...never mind.

What does one do with a floating cadaver? First, snare it, so it does not make its way to Mt. Vernon and disturb the tourists. Talk about a one-way trip.

Then what? Without going into the details, let me say that a water-logged, puffed-up dead person is not all that pleasant to view or smell. We discussed the possibility of pulling him into the boat, but that idea was quickly vetoed by all the live people in the vicinity. We had a hook into his shirt collar, so he was now drifting alongside the boat. Without much ado, we used the boat's ship-to-shore radio and informed the Watch Officer at the Navy Yard about the situation. Our boat Skipper asked, "Can you send an ambulance to our dock? We have a dead body out here."

My friend, "Skipper, we don't need an ambulance. He's past that. We need a hearse."

A discussion then occurred among the boat crew and passengers as to what vehicle was most appropriate for the occasion: An ambulance or a hearse? Your (future) Reporter kept silent during this discussion, but I thought a hearse was more appropriate than an ambulance. Ambulance personnel are motivated to save a person from being buried. Hearse personnel are motivated to get a person under ground as soon as possible. I said to myself, *Eventually, this man is going to end up in a hearse anyway*. The ambulance seemed like an unnecessary step in the process.

The dilemma was resolved by the Watch Officer, "I'm sending the Yard ambulance. We don't have a hearse on the base." Shortly, the ambulance arrived, and the ambulance crew took the body off our hands. We broke-out the beer a bit early.

After the cruise, the crew probably made up for their required abstinence. We traveled up and down the Potomac River for a few hours, but our hearts weren't in it anymore. A few beers helped of course, and an occasional gallows humor joke kept us going. Still, we were glad to get off the boat.

The next day, the newspapers carried an account of this incident. The victim had indeed drowned. He was an inmate at a nearby mental asylum who had wandered away from its protected grounds. No one will ever know what happened to this man or why he became an object of interruption to six thwarted merrymakers. After reading the obit, I thought, *Life is short. Don't make it shorter by falling into a river*.

The Potomac River is now clean enough for fishing, and I occasionally see water skiers *on* the river. I suspect dead bodies occasionally crop up here and there. After all, it is a big river and lots of people walk its shores and ply its waters in boats.

One suggestion for my readers who might someday visit Washington. Go to one of the Marinas on M Street, across from the East Potomac Park. Buy a ticket for a boat cruise to Mount Vernon. It's a pleasant way to spend the day.

By the way, don't think of buying a one-way ticket, as you will come under suspicion as someone who might be planning to hijack the boat, or even worse, blow it up. Can't be too careful these days. Besides, one-way tickets are only available to....well, you know, people who are already dead, or terrorists waiting in line to become dead.

More on the Potomac River and East Potomac Park in the next report.

Your on the Street Reporter

The Potomac River and East Potomac Park Report Two

April 17, 2006

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. For this general report, there is not too much more to say about East Potomac Park. Later, we will explore other parts of the Potomac River.

One of my readers asked about "*West Potomac Park*." Good question. Take a look at Figure 2 in the first report. West Potomac Park is the peninsula *north* of East Potomac Park. Logically enough, the two parks are tagged with the names of West and East because they are North and South of each other.

Granted, as you can see from Figure 2, they also lay just a bit West and East from each other. So, they should have been named "North by Northwest Potomac Park" and "South by Southeast Potomac Park." But they were not because these long titles would not fit on the park administrators' business cards.

Anyway, West Potomac Park (not shown in this report) is expansive. There is no sense of a confined urban park that one encounters in some city parks. Large meadows, fields, and paddocks are there for the asking. With some reservations made for group activities, all you need to do is walk onto the manicured pasture (from ample parking on the adjacent streets) and use it for whatever suits your fancy.

Before I discovered other ways of abusing my body, I played in a football league on the fields at West Potomac Park. For ten Fall Sunday mornings, a team of 30 year-old white guys from Northern Virginia did battle with a team of 20 year-old black guys from DC. What we lacked in ability we made up for in age, and sometimes we even won a game.

In the first report, I mentioned the presence of tennis courts and a golf course at East Potomac Park. The Park also has a fine driving range. As you hit the ball, assuming you follow-through properly, you end your slice with a view of airplanes flying into and out of Reagan National Airport. Their landings and take-offs require the pilots keep them a few hundred feet over the Potomac River; a fine view from the ground and a spectacular view from the airplane. If you have a choice of local airports for your visit to DC, I recommend National.

The Awakening Statue

Of all the features of the West and East Potomac Parks, I've saved my favorite for last. It is a statue at the southern tip of East Potomac Park, named The Awakening. Figure 3 shows this statue. As you can see, it's a bit on the unusual side. Seems to me the figure is not awakening but is already awake and...well, just irritated about something. But who wouldn't be put out mired in all that dirt?

The statue is popular with children and adults alike. Kids use the leg as a slide and the mouth as a tiny cave. Speaking of the mouth, the face of the statue, shown in Figure 4, displays anguish,

maybe pain. It reminds me of my getting up each morning, at least before I retired. Nowadays, I may not get up at all.



Figure 3. The Awakening.



Figure 4. A closer look at the face...I feel your pain.

The sculptor is not identified. Last year, a plaque explained the origins of the statue, when it was created, and by whom. But the plaque has been removed. I called the park authority to get this information, but a recording warned me the wait time to talk to an actual person might exceed my life expectancy. I tried the Internet, but to no avail. Sorry, I gave it a go.

If you are in town, park your car around the street on this island. Take a few hours to walk Potomac Park. It will be time well spent.

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