

BROWN'S ISLAND HISTORY

Detail of Plan of the City of Richmond drawn from actual survey and original plans, Micajah Bates, 1835 | VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Brown's Island is a portion of the Richmond Riverfront shaped by industrial development. Industrial operations on Brown's Island closed down in the second half of the twentieth century, and the City developed the island as a public park with dramatic views of the river.

BROWN'S ISLAND The origins of Brown's Island are mysterious. An 1809 map shows open water at this location, but by 1817, maps depict a recognizable Brown's Island. The island probably began as a sandbar that was eventually shaped into an island by a combination of pilings, alluvial deposits, and fill. By 1835, the island was attached to Johnson's Island and formed the south bank of the Haxall Canal. Various industries occupied the island over the years, and the owners of the last one, the Albemarle Paper Company, donated the island to the City for use as a park.

JOHNSON'S ISLAND The excavation of Ross's (later Haxall) Mill Canal from 8th Street eastward to 12th Street formed this island, now indistinguishable from Brown's Island

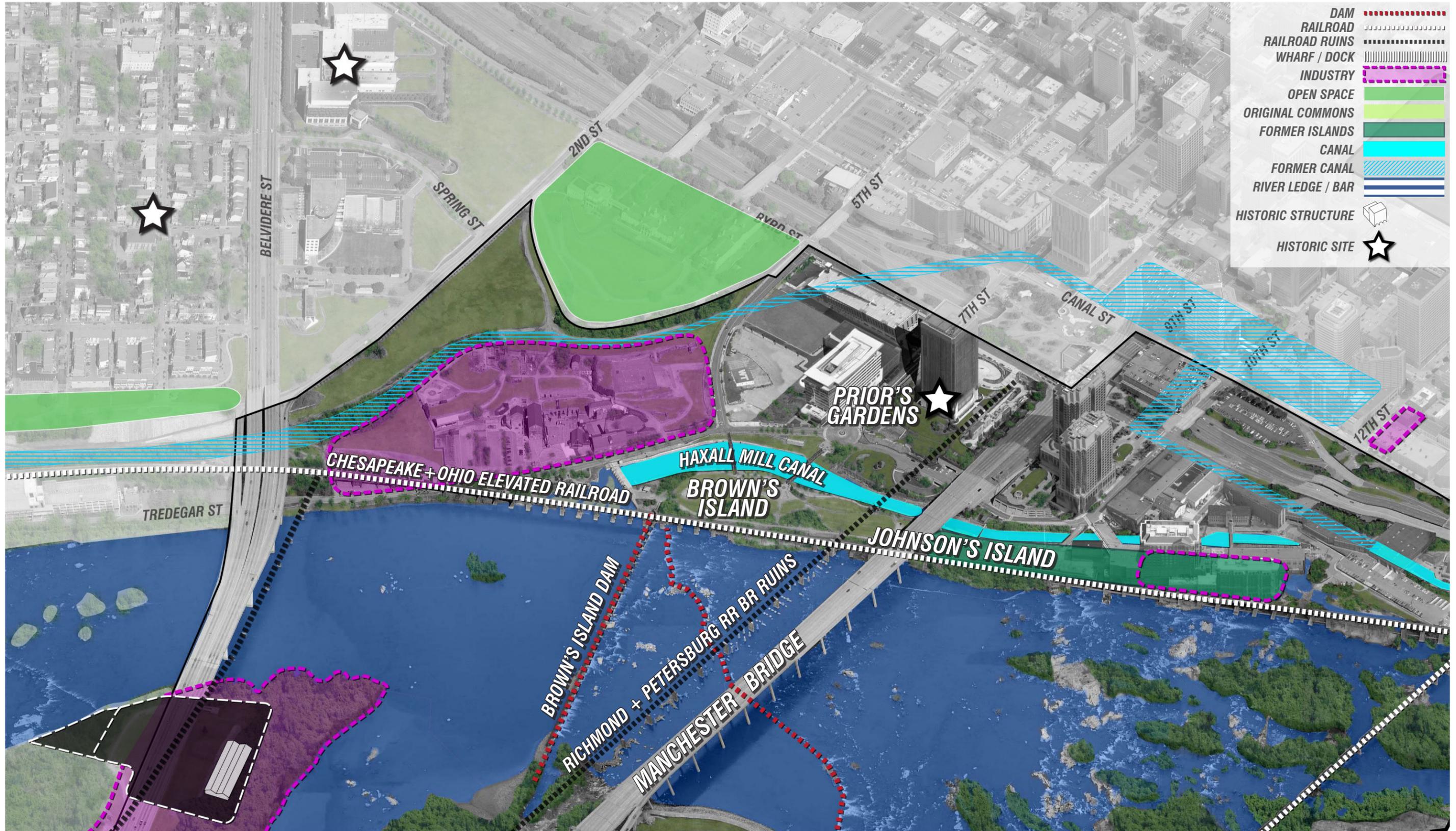
PRIOR'S GARDENS In the early nineteenth century, this private pleasure garden stood above the banks of the river at the present-day location of the Federal Reserve bank. Prior's Gardens was equipped with a classical pavilion and terraced gardens, and customers of the garden could enjoy ice cream, music, fireworks, and outstanding views of the Falls.

CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO ELEVATED RAILWAY In 1904, the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad constructed one of the longest elevated railways in country, if not the world. Extending almost two miles from Fulton Yards in the east to Oregon Hill in the west, this unimpeded and flood-proof rail section formed a rail by-pass around Downtown Richmond.

MANCHESTER BRIDGE Constructed in 1972, this massive structure is the third bridge on the site. The first bridge on the site was known as the Manchester or Free Bridge.

RICHMOND AND PETERSBURG RAILROAD BRIDGE In 1838, Richmond native Moncure Robinson constructed this wood-decked structure with stone piers. The tall piers of the structure raised the bridge deck out of danger from floods and connected tall abutments on the north and south banks of the river. The bridge burned in 1865, and was subsequently reconstructed several times; the final construction that rose in 1904 and was demolished in 1972 included the concrete piers that are present today as ruins.

BROWN'S ISLAND DAM The construction of a power plant at the eastern end of the Haxall Canal starting in 1904 necessitated the construction of this dam to assure a steady and regulated flow to the plant's steam turbines. The sluice gates of the dam could be adjusted to regulate the flow into the canal.



BROWN'S ISLAND HISTORY





BROWN'S ISLAND

“URBAN RIVERFRONT” 7 ACRES

Brown's Island is Richmond's primary public event landscape. Venture Richmond manages seasonal performances, festivals and events, with temporary stages erected at either end of the well-maintained lawn. The lawn is the fundamental focal space, adaptable to a variety of event configurations, with mature, shade-providing sycamores lining the river side of the lawn. The recently completed Foundry Park Bridge spans the Haxall Canal at 5th Street, increasing public access to the island. The immediate adjacency of Brown's Island to the James River and the under-utilized Haxall Canal offers great potential for expanding the island program, activating it when there are no events underway. Brown's Island sits immediately adjacent to Pipeline Rapids, one of the most beautiful stretches of the James River. A fundamental objective of the Riverfront Plan is to work around the barrier of the CSX viaduct to open up Brown's Island more directly to the James River. A number of additional reconfigurations along the perimeter of the island, described on subsequent pages, transform Brown's Island from a seasonal event space to a daily destination.

The first and most cost efficient improvement is to encourage use of non-motorized, personal recreational watercraft along the Haxall Canal. Select events already condone the use of kayaks, canoes and stand up boards. Ample public comment articulates the desire that water passage along the half mile of canal would be popular for a variety of reasons, with the primary result the introduction of activity to an otherwise quiet water sheet. A combination of permanent access ladders and life rings can be intermittently fastened to the canal walls for life safety and emergency egress.

A new arrival plaza would extend from Tredegar Street across the adjustable dam span to the existing “3 Days in April 1865” installation. This new, permeable paver-clad plaza would expand into the lawn, allowing for a café and/or concessions. A small restroom facility would be integrated into the structure, with café vendor responsible for maintenance and security. The existing heliport would be reconfigured as a children's water play space.

The 7th Street Bridge over the Haxall Canal currently terminates in a stepped cone bisected with stairs, preventing passage of bikes, strollers and wheelchairs. The southern stair can be reconfigured to a smaller footprint, integrating a consolidated stair with a universal-access ramp aimed downriver.

The gravel, back-of-house logistics lot beneath the Manchester Bridge is a critical connective passage to the Canal Walk, and yet it currently sends the visual cue that this is not a public space, nothing more than a back-of-house operation. Logistics and public passage can both be integrated, with permeable pavers transforming and expanding the pavement into an arrival plaza capable of accommodating turning tractor trailers. The existing shipping container storage strategy could be unified through a cohesive architectural intervention to make the storage more intentional and less haphazard, or replacement with a shed appropriate for a public space and dedicated to festival and event programming.



BROWN'S ISLAND





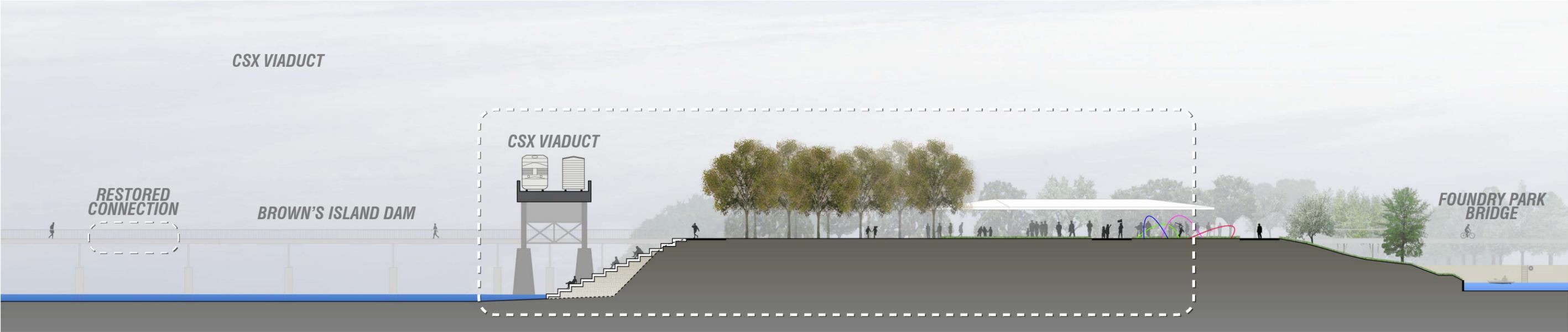
BROWN'S ISLAND





HAXALL CANAL

Arrival at Brown's Island involves crossing the Haxall Canal at one of several bridges. The new Foundry Park Bridge at 5th Street is a much-needed alternative accessible route to and from the island. Nevertheless, the arrival 'on' the island from any of the spans remains underwhelming. With the anticipated future development of parcels adjacent to MeadWestvaco, the upriver tip of Brown's Island will become a destination. Transforming a portion of the existing island edge from steeply sloping lawn to stone terraces with an interactive fountain accomplishes several objectives. First, a civic water feature provides visual activity and white noise audible from Tredegar Street as enticement to explore the island. People attract more people and a water feature provides a visual draw to those that opt to get wet and play in the water, as well as visitors who are drawn to watch others. Potable water would be captured and re-circulated on the upper portion of the fountain, whereas the lower jets throwing arcs into the canal would recirculate canal water.



JAMES RIVER

RIVER TERRACES

SYCAMORE GROVE

EVENT / FESTIVAL

PLAY / CAFE

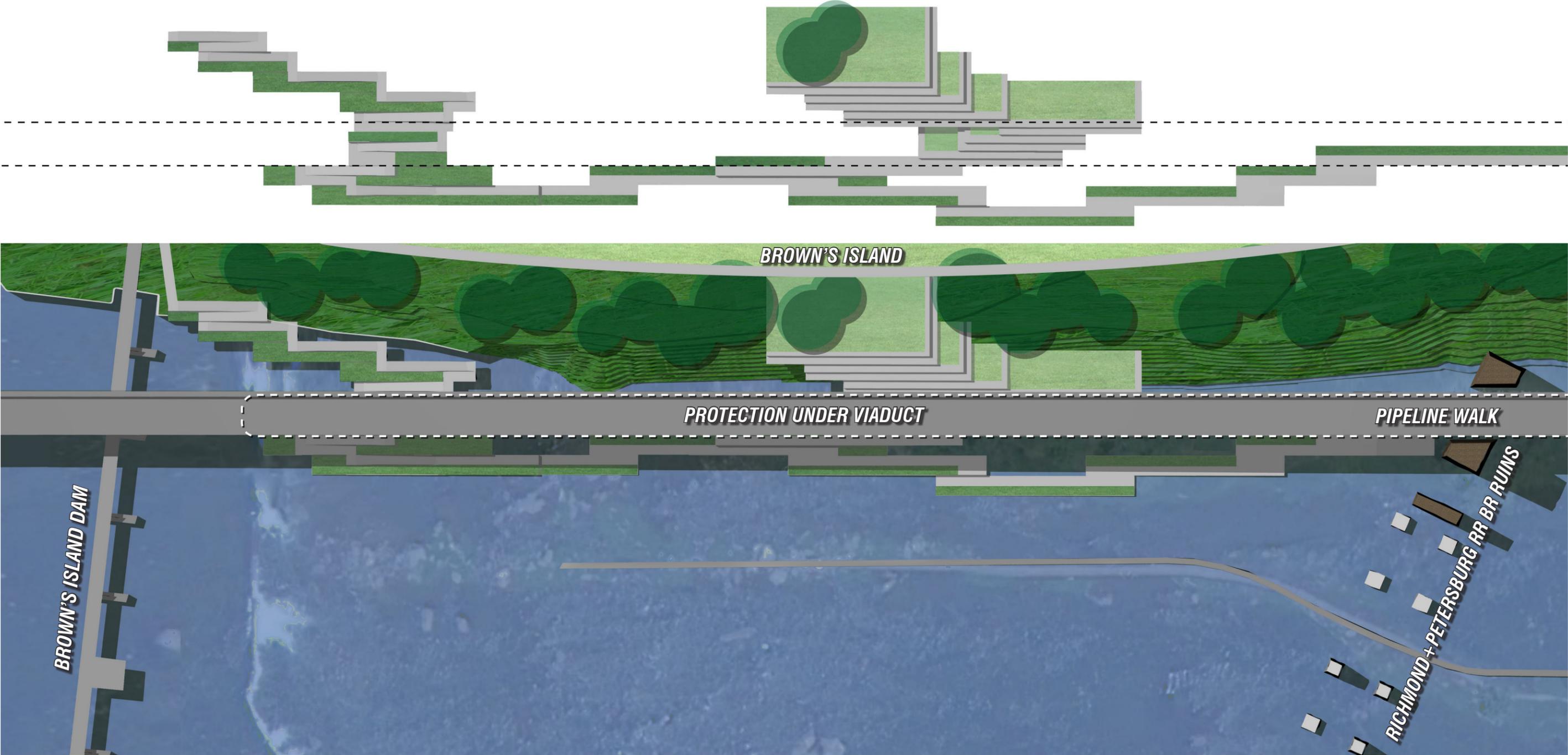
HAXALL CANAL



EXISTING

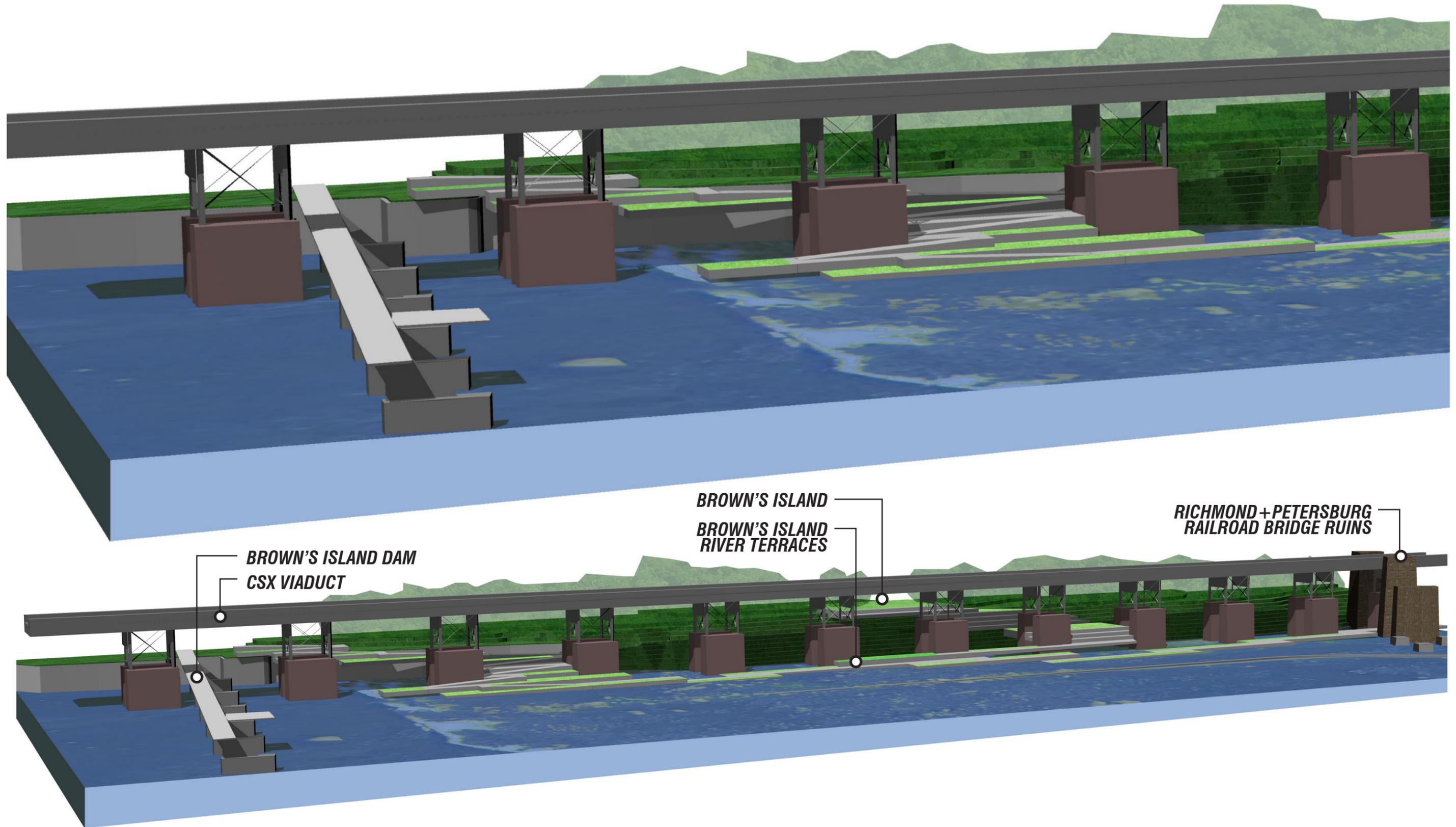
BROWN'S ISLAND RIVER TERRACES

The riverside of Brown's Island is defined most prominently by the passage of the CSX Viaduct paralleling the length of the island. The rail viaduct is a heavy visual presence, in part because the steep slope beneath the structure is rubble strewn and vegetated with volunteer species, inhibiting pedestrian passage. Nevertheless, views under the viaduct to Fishway Rapids and Pipeline Rapids are impressive, and as yet underutilized. Richmond is the only U.S. city with class IV rapids within the City limits. Getting closer to the water will enhance the experience of people visiting the island; immersing them more fully in the audible and visual majesty of the rapids.



BROWN'S ISLAND RIVER TERRACES

The Brown's Island River Terraces will thread a universally-accessible route down from the event lawn, beneath the viaduct, and along the rapids. The River Terrace project would transform a heretofore underdeveloped slope to create a promontory-as-path down to the river, connecting visitors to Brown's Island to the Pipeline Rapids below. This crucial pedestrian link promises direct interaction with the James River. This non-linear network of walks and switchbacks will connect to the existing Pipeline walk, and will need to be configured on mini-piles, with industrial-strength detailing to weather the intense seasonal flooding and debris that will immerse the terraces. The CSX viaduct will provide shade from the southern sun. A retrofitted screen beneath the viaduct will protect the public from debris dropped from freight trains passing on the viaduct above.

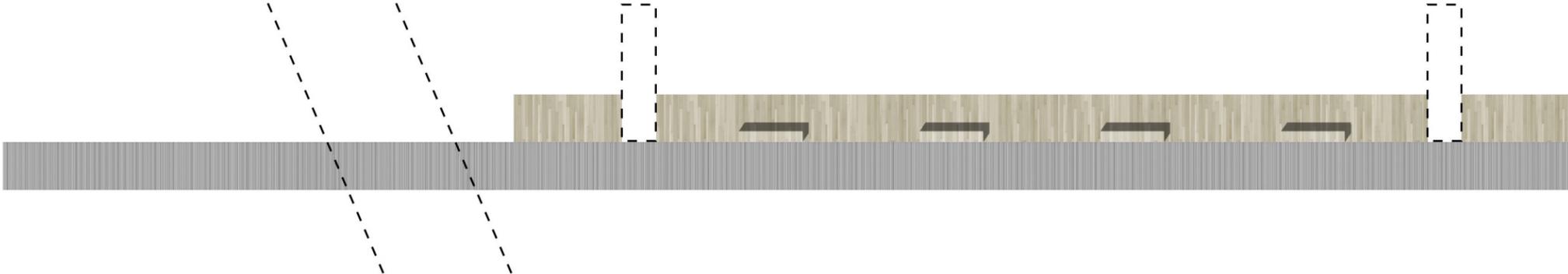


BROWN'S ISLAND DAM
CSX VIADUCT

BROWN'S ISLAND
BROWN'S ISLAND
RIVER TERRACES

RICHMOND + PETERSBURG
RAILROAD BRIDGE RUINS

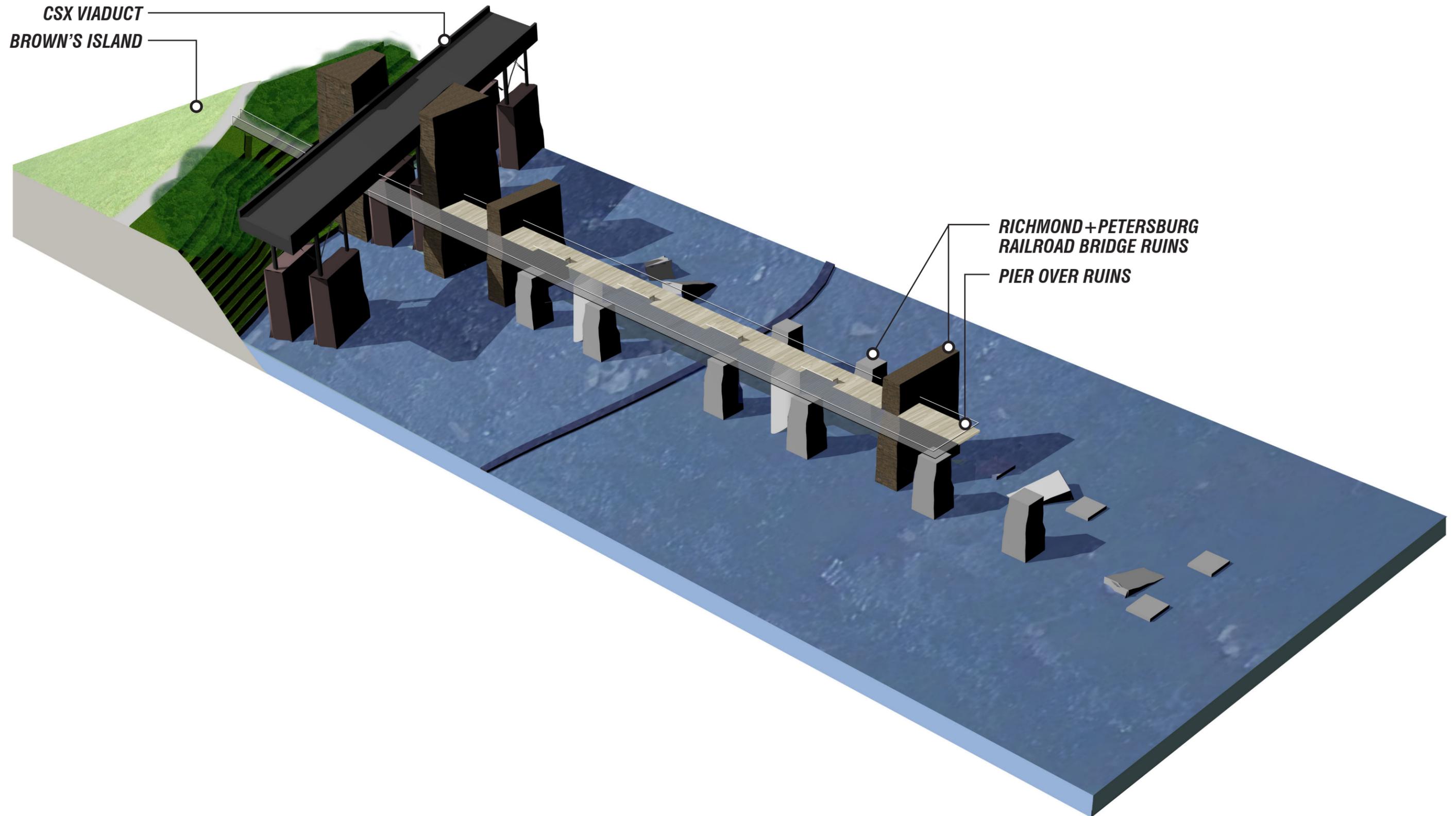
BROWN'S ISLAND RIVER TERRACES



PIER OVER RICHMOND + PETERSBURG RR RUINS



Located 200-feet upriver from the Manchester Bridge, the massive structural columns of various incarnations of the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad Bridge survive as majestic ruins. While some are plumb and upright, repeated flood events have toppled others. The limited restoration of this railroad bridge would integrate new steel spans with the existing piers and abutments constructed of ashlar granite and concrete, supporting a mix of wood decking and steel grating over the Pipeline Rapids. The 250-foot-long pier would connect to the Brown's Island lawn, passing under the CSX viaduct. Integrated seating and subtle night lighting of the new and old structures would provide a new destination adaptely reusing Richmond's existing historic infrastructure for an innovative contemporary purpose.



PIER OVER RICHMOND + PETERSBURG RR RUINS