



## **BELLE ISLE** HISTORY

*Old Dominion Iron and Nail Works viewed from Spring Hill, 1895* | SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND ARCHIVES, VCU LIBRARIES)

Throughout Richmond's history, Belle Isle formed one of the most dramatic natural spectacles along the entire Falls of the James River. Geologically, the core of the island is a large granite outcropping that gave the island its original name, Broad Rock. This granite island divided the James River into two deep gorges. The rush of the James River around the island, particularly when the river was in flood, created a roar that could be heard for miles around and a sight considered to be majestic and sublime. The rapid descent of the river at Belle Isle drew industrial development to the island in the nineteenth century that shaped the present island landscape. The beauty of the river spectacle at Belle Isle prompted the preservation of vantage points on the opposite banks of the river and led to the incorporation of the island into the James River Park system in 1972.

**BELLE ISLE DAM** This dam structure directed water into the Power Canal, initially as a wing dam. The present dam constructed in 1905 closed the South Channel of the river (except in high water).

**BELLE ISLE POWER CANAL** Begun in 1815 and expanded in 1905, this mill canal provided hydropower to industry on Belle Isle for more than a century.

**BELLE ISLE IRON AND NAIL WORKS SITE AND RUINS** Constructed in 1815, this iron works drew water from the Power Canal to operate its metal-working equipment.

**BELLE ISLE QUARRY** The Belle Isle Quarry was one of dozens of quarries that thrived along the Falls of the James, prior to granite becoming largely obsolete after the use of reinforced concrete became widespread.

**BELLE ISLE PRISONER OF WAR CAMP AND CEMETERY** The Confederate Government established a military prison on the island during the Civil War, and the wretched conditions of the prison made the name of Belle Isle infamous. Artillery emplacements on the high ground of the island secured an overcrowded and unsanitary tent encampment where some 30,000 men were imprisoned in the middle years of the war. The prisoners who died were initially buried on the island and their remains were removed after the war.

**THE BELLE ISLE NORTH DAM** Constructed in 1908, this dam connected to the Hollywood Dam, blocking the flow of the North Channel of the James (except in high water) until the dam's breach in 1972.

**HOLLYWOOD DAM** This dam began as a small wing dam for and viewing platform from the Richmond Waterworks in 1831. In the conversion of the waterworks to a hydroelectric plant in 1908, the City expanded the dam to its current extent.

**HOLLYWOOD CEMETERY** Hollywood is one of America's most important examples of a "rural cemetery" established in 1847 to take advantage of the view of the river around Belle Isle.

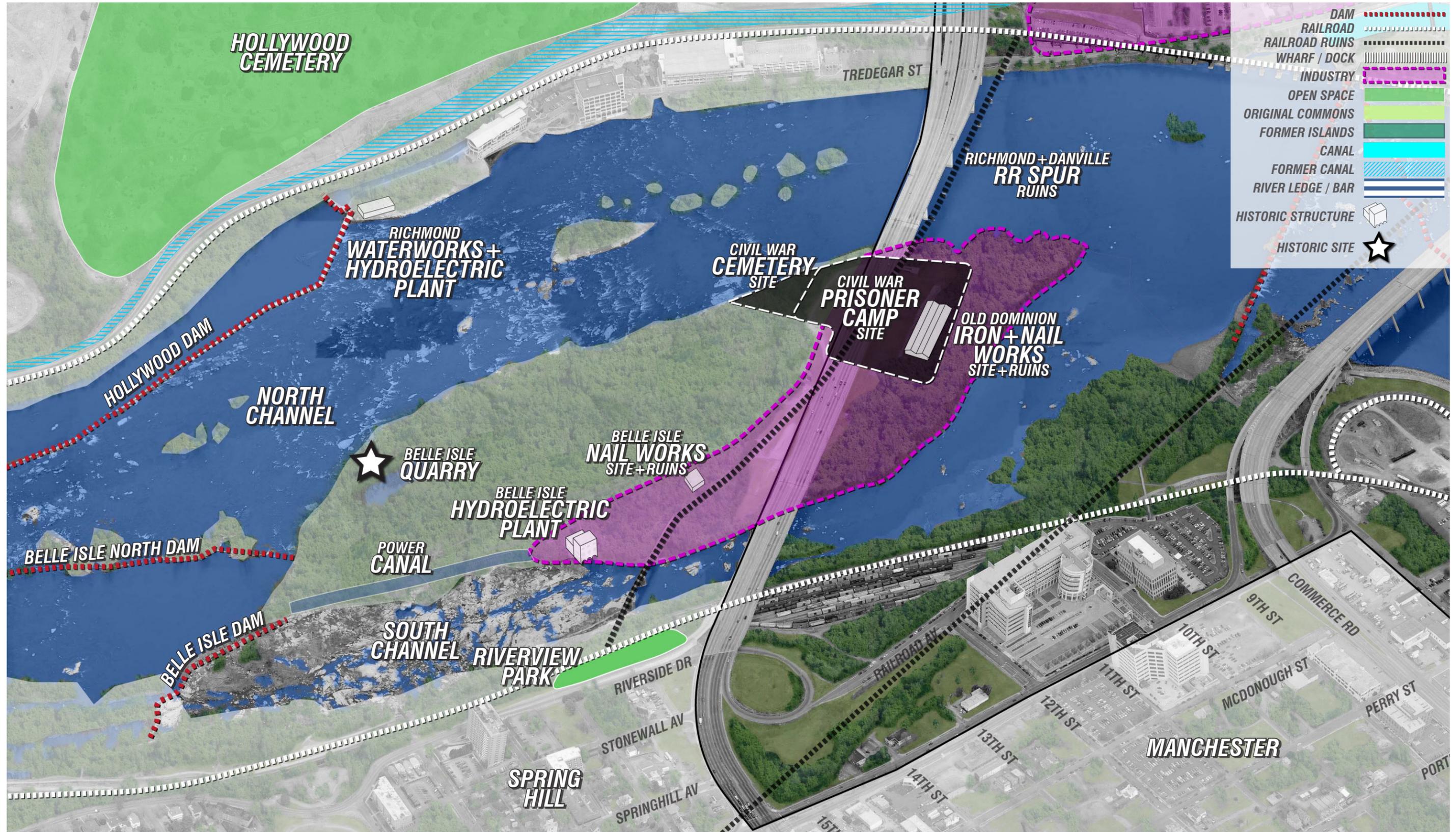
**THE OLD DOMINION IRON AND NAIL WORKS** By 1895, this successor to the Belle Isle works completely covered the eastern end of the Belle Isle and during its operations expanded the island's footprint by dropping slag over the banks of the island.

**RIVERVIEW PARK** This hilltop park is a viewing point for Belle Isle constructed in 1936 in conjunction with the first Lee Bridge and Riverside Drive.

**RICHMOND AND DANVILLE RAILROAD SPUR BRIDGE RUINS** This bridge completed a spur of the railroad across the South Channel in 1852 and the North Channel c. 1870, providing worker access and material transport to Belle Isle.

**RICHMOND WATERWORKS AND HYDROELECTRIC PLANT** The first municipal waterworks began to harness the river to raise water to a municipal reservoir in 1831, and in 1908 the City of Richmond converted it to a hydroelectric plant to power municipal streetlights.

**BELLE ISLE HYDROELECTRIC PLANT** The Virginia Railway and Power Company constructed this hydroelectric plant on the Belle Isle Power Canal in 1905 to generate electric power for Richmond's electric streetcar system.



## BELLE ISLE HISTORY





## **BELLE ISLE**

### **“URBAN WILD” 54 ACRES**

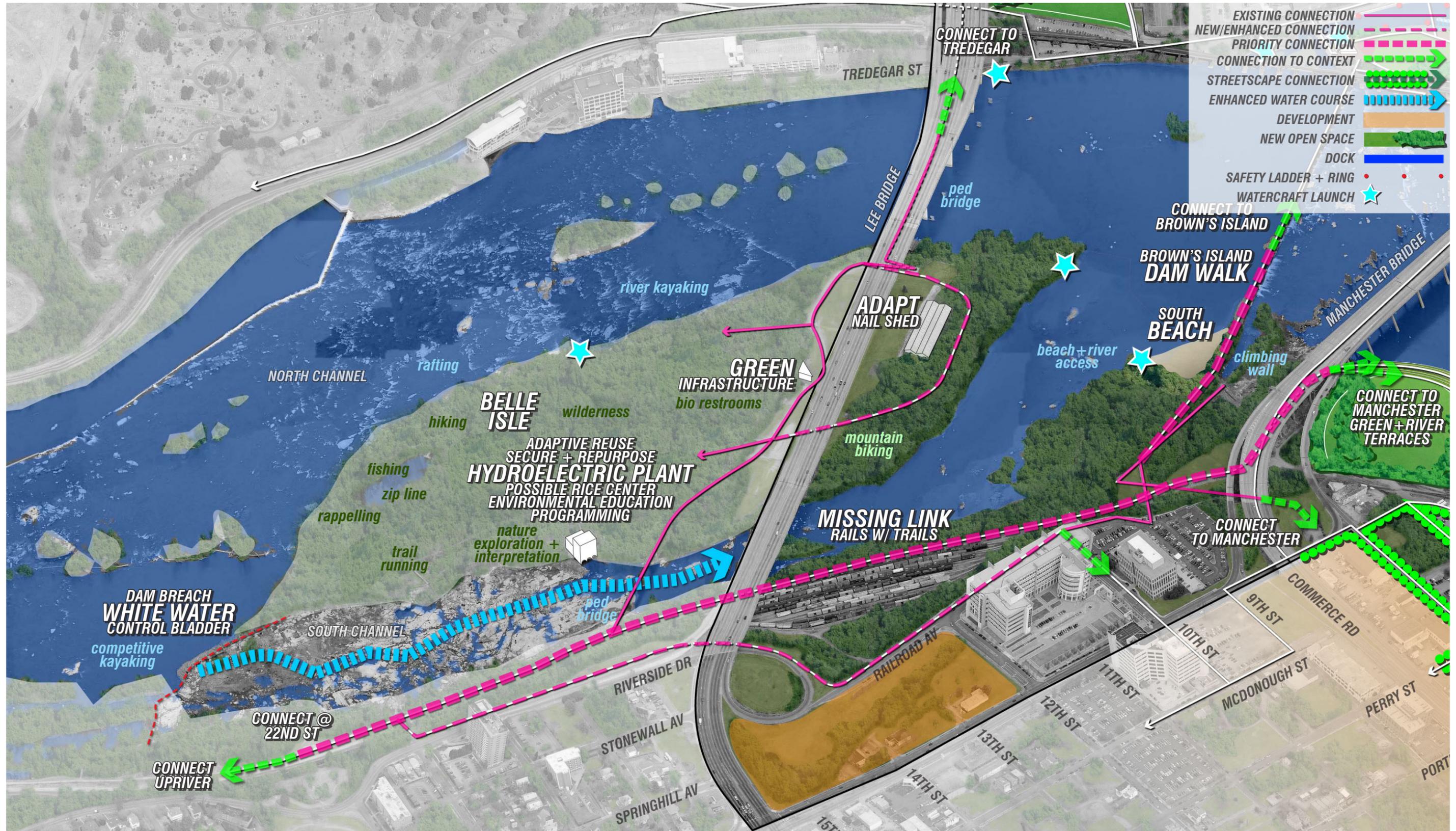
The 54-acre Belle Isle is protected under the James River Park System Conservation and Open Space Easement, established in 2009 to maintain the relative natural aspects of the island, as well as +200 acres of additional Riverfront parkland; this easement effectively prohibits new construction, commercial operations, and motorized recreation. The island enjoys arguably the best pedestrian connection to the north bank along the Belle Isle Pedestrian Bridge, a suspension bridge retrofit beneath the Lee Bridge. The island also has a vehicle-capable bridge connecting to the south bank, restricted to public safety and authorized operations vehicles, which must cross the Norfolk Southern switchyard below Riverside Drive. The absence of vehicular access and non-linear, non-universal-access from the south bank reinforces a relative isolation for Belle Isle. The island’s physical isolation allows for a dramatic detachment from the urban environment of both banks, providing a much valued natural retreat positioned prominently upriver of downtown. At the same time, this detachment allows for a somewhat elastic interpretation of rules in an environment largely removed from the enforceable laws of the City. Illustrative signs cheerfully instruct visitors on how to behave during their stay.

The Plan embraces the natural wildness of Belle Isle as it is today. Several vacant structures offer opportunities for adaptive reuse, consistent with the existing island atmosphere. Although the former Hydroelectric Plant along the south channel of the River is boarded up, it remains an attractive location for illegal activity. The Plan promotes the adaptive reuse of the structure to achieve three objectives: 1. Transforming a nuisance into a positive; 2. Adapting a former industrial structure into a node of environmental education programming, possibly with Rice Center participation; 3. Programming the structure as a node for public safety, staffed on weekends to further promote public safety across the island through periodic bike patrols.

The triangular structure, a former Nature Center/Lavatory constructed in the 1990s, is prominently positioned along the main north-south trail bisecting the island. This building could be adapted as an eco-composting toilet facility, providing an expanded personal hygiene solution without running a sanitary sewer line to the south bank. Similar facilities are provided in far more remote and constrained locations nationwide, capitalizing on an off-the-grid, sustainable systems approach to park amenities. The Old Dominion Nail Shed could be adapted to provide reliable shade and refuge from the weather as a picnic shelter or event shelter. Alternatively, a portion of the shed may soon be used as a bike skills course, in accordance with a pending proposal. A companion off-road bike skills course recently completed south of the shed has reshaped the ground and retained existing trees to create a new amenity on the island.

General trail improvements across the island will enhance visits and facilitate greater, controlled access to the River. Across the south channel, the Plan envisions the potential for a sandy beach. This location is free of trees and situated on a comparatively slack water side of the River, without excessive underwater plant growth. This South Beach corresponds with the south bank abutments of the Brown’s Island Dam, which when repurposed, will provide a direct pedestrian connection to Tredegar Beach on the north bank, effectively positioning a beach at either end of the dam structure.

Competitive-level kayaking may be accommodated on the south channel on a seasonal basis, without impacting the North Channel rapids. The south channel is dry compared to the main north channel of the James River, due to the Belle Isle Dam at the upriver tip of Belle Isle. With further study, a strategic removal of a portion of the masonry dam and replacement with an air-inflatable or water-filled bladder dam would allow for controlled diversion of water into the south channel, attracting skilled river kayakers and international-level competitions.



## BELLE ISLE





RAILS WITH TRAILS

## MISSING LINK TRAIL

There is a significant missing link on the south bank, impeding pedestrian and bike access between 21st Street along the river and the Manchester Floodwall Walk. Currently, access along this stretch is limited to an informal dirt path, which allows cross connections into the City at the 21st Street stair, which will never be ADA accessible, and at the Sun Trust parking lot. An alternate, paved route is possible along the existing Norfolk Southern switchyard directly adjacent to the south channel. Recent Commonwealth of Virginia legislation (Virginia Code § 29.1-509) limits liability to railroads (HB504) by extending recreational use indemnification to railroads, allowing rails with trails along active rail corridors. In this instance there is adequate dimensional width available to pave an accessible 3,000-foot long route between the active rail track and the existing chain link fence. Norfolk Southern could continue to use this corridor for vehicular access and maintenance. The possibility of pedestrians and cyclists being hit by trains would be reduced because they would have a safer alternative to crossing or walking the rails.



EXISTING



EXISTING

### **BROWN'S ISLAND DAM WALK**

A notable link between north and south banks of the River can be established by adapting the existing Brown's Island Dam structure for pedestrian and bike travel. The structure is largely intact, with new sections required on either end to reconnect the steel structure to the north and south banks. The existing historic steel vocabulary would be adapted to incorporate durable safety guardrails and accessible grating, clearly distinguishing between the old and the new. The existing "Three Days in April 1865" installation of decking and narrative would remain intact at the north abutment. In several locations along the length of the dam, seating areas would be added, cantilevering out over the James River as observation promontories and rest zones along the 1,500-foot long span. This adaptively re-purposed artifact of industry would become the key component to cross-river foot and bicycle traffic, directly connecting both banks of the River at the center of Richmond's public realm. The ability to traverse the River free from vehicular traffic has proven its value on the Lee Bridge suspension link, and the Dam Walk would reinforce this circulation loop with an entirely different proximity to the rapids.