

VIEW OF JAMES RIVER FROM  
LIBBY HILL.

*View of Rocketts from Libby Hill as it appeared c. 1800 (published 1896)* | VALENTINE RICHMOND HISTORY CENTER

## **DOWNRIVER** HISTORY

The view down the James River from Libby Hill has an uncanny similarity to the upriver view from Richmond Hill at Richmond-Upon-Thames, England. Richmond's founder, William Byrd of Westover, recognized the similarity when establishing and naming Richmond in 1733. The scene that enraptured Byrd and countless others since is a beautiful arc of the tidewater James. The north shore of this arc is an area historically known as Rocketts, a thriving shipping area in the nineteenth century with wharves extending for more than half a mile along the river. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the increasing size and depth of merchant vessels reduced the number of ships docking at Rocketts, due to the comparatively shallow waters of the port. Rocketts declined as newer port facilities down river and deeper ports elsewhere diverted cargoes from Rocketts and eventually brought its history as a working waterfront to an end.

**NAVIGATION OBSTACLES** The same granite underlayment that forms the Falls of the James River continues into the tidewater section of the River forming three substantial navigation obstacles: Rocketts Bar, the Gillies Creek Ledge, and Jones' Rock. Above these obstacles, only watercraft drawing seven feet or water could pass. The City of Richmond spent considerable toil and treasure, particularly from 1850 to 1860 and 1930 to 1940, to remove or neutralize these navigational barriers and hazards.

**RICHMOND WHARVES** By 1835 a continuous line of wharves extended from the Great Shiplock all the way down river to Lower Rocketts. Maintained by the City of Richmond and private merchants, these wharves received passengers and cargoes from and sent them across the Chesapeake Bay, the Atlantic, and as far away as South America and California. Incoming cargoes included finished goods, seafood, coffee, and fertilizer, while iron goods, flour, tobacco, and coal were among the port's exports.

**BLOODY RUN** Bloody Run is a small tributary of Gillies Creek, which separates Libby Hill and Chimborazo Hill and is credited with the being the site of a seventeenth-century battle between Virginia colonists and Native Americans.

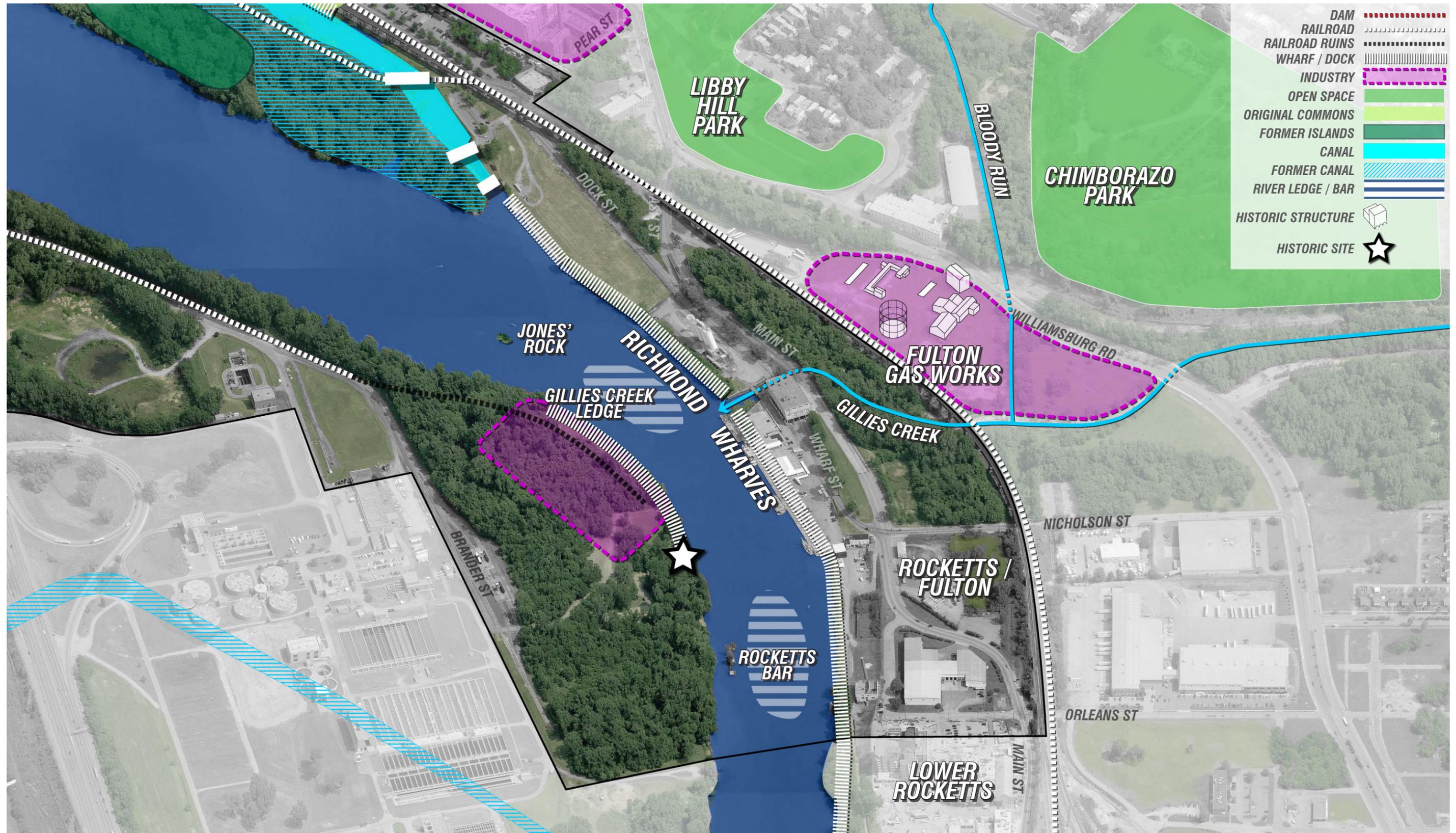
**GILLIES CREEK** Gillies Creek runs through one of the largest creek valleys in the Richmond area. Its confluence with the James is midway along the lower waterfront.

**ROCKETTS/FULTON** Rocketts is the name of a ferry that operated across the river near the mouth of Gillies Creek. The wharves that developed along the river in this area became known as Rocketts as well, with the wharves farthest downriver being known as Lower Rocketts. In the twentieth century the name faded from general use and the name Fulton came to be applied to the eastern section of Richmond along Gillies Creek and the James River. Twentieth-century urban renewal programs led to the demolition of all of the historic structures in Fulton, leaving Gillies Creek Park and the modern neighborhoods now present there.

**FULTON GAS WORKS** From 1854 until the middle of the twentieth century, the City of Richmond manufactured coal gas for Richmond homes, businesses, and streetlights here. The cast iron gas holder (tank) framework is the largest and most visible structure in the complex.

**LIBBY HILL** Libby Hill is a prominent spur of Church Hill (also known as Richmond Hill). Libby Hill Park provided the vantage point that inspired the naming of Richmond by William Byrd of Westover.

**CHIMBORAZO HILL** Chimborazo Hill was one of the first things seen by ships' crews navigating up the river. The hill was jokingly referred to as Chimborazo after an Ecuadorian volcano viewable far out in the Pacific.





**SCENIC RESOURCES:** HISTORIC VIEW FROM LIBBY HILL

WHITE OUTLINE HIGHLIGHTS CURRENT LOCATION OF LEHIGH CEMENT SILOS

# *SCENIC RESOURCES*



Richmond's Riverfront and river views contribute dramatically to the City's unique sense of place, quality of life, and desirability of property. Richmond's river landscape possesses an intricate mix of the natural and built environments. The river is intertwined with historic ruins and modern towers. The community boasts a range of river views: distant and proximate, panoramic and discrete, public and private, general and priority. The City should endeavor to address these scenic resources in a balanced manner that recognizes, prioritizes, and enhances this range of views. Future growth and public action along the Riverfront must embrace the value of river views while protecting rights and facilitating appropriate development.

The views from certain vantage points deserve special attention as priority views. These priority views are public amenities. They have significant public value and/or historic importance and should be defined, preserved and enhanced for the community. Examples of potential priority views include from the vantage point on Oregon Hill with a view angle from the Lee Bridge to Brown's Island, and from the vantage point on Libby Hill with views reminiscent of Richmond upon Thames. Through improvements to the Riverfront and redevelopment, additional priority views and vantage points may be identified, such as, for example, the view of the downtown skyline from public vantage point(s) in Manchester.

Certain tools are available for the City to protect priority views. These include overlay zoning (for height, massing, setbacks, etc.), property acquisition, conservation easements, and transferrable development rights. Of course, views from priority vantage points are not purely natural and are not frozen in time; such views already include a mix of built elements (some historic) and even with some protections, the broader landscape will continue to evolve.

A balanced approach to scenic resources cannot protect existing views from all private vantage points. One property owner, simply being first in time, does not diminish the rights of other owners to use their property to reasonable heights. Views are dynamic—new elements have been added through generations and will continue to be added. However tools and strategies are available to address and enhance public and private river views as development occurs. These include building height limits (potentially graduated with distance from the river), conditional use permitting, massing and story step-back requirements, as well as standards for access and right-of-way improvement. Limited, narrow intrusions that become part of the view without precluding vistas from other vantage points should be encouraged.

Development and access should facilitate physical and visual connection to the river. Development may be arranged along access corridors and/or with stair-stepped bulking (or terracing) in order to maximize views and draw Riverfront value inland into the property. New or extended public right-of-way should be oriented as view corridors to preserve and enhance sight lines to the river, frame discrete or episodic river views, and provide physical access. During redevelopment, sightlines and public access can be adjusted or restored.

The City may consider additional analysis to identify more priority views and vantage points for the Riverfront and the City as a whole (such as views of the downtown skyline from Church Hill). Such a process would include: (i) analyzing the quantity and quality of views; (ii) prioritizing views for protections; and (iii) assessing and implementing appropriate tools and strategies. This process would include public input throughout the effort.

# DOWNRIVER

## “River Connections + Neighborhood Park” 10 ACRES

The downriver end of the study area encompasses everything between Pear Street and Rocketts Landing, from Dock and Wharf streets to the river, with the adjacent Fulton Gas Works as an important outlying parcel. With the exception of the Gas Works, these are low-lying river edge parcels subject to flooding and therefore challenging to transform from former industrial properties into marketable mixed-use projects with commercial or residential components. Regulatory restrictions on land use, other than industrial use, preclude occupiable building space that is subject to flooding. This necessitates raising any occupiable structure one foot higher than the federally determined 100-year flood zone; it also requires a secondary means of emergency vehicle egress to allow for public safety access and evacuation during flood events.

The most prominent and time-sensitive pending downriver project is the completion of the Virginia Capital Trail, which is expected to follow the existing CSX rail line through Rocketts Landing, crossing the Intermediate Wharf and Lehigh Cement parcels. The trail is ultimately anticipated to follow a public access easement across the Riverfront portion of the USP parcel, connecting to the completed trail at Great Shiplock Park, thereby connecting the 50+ miles of continuous multi-purpose trail between Williamsburg and Richmond by 2014. Interim trail improvements along the Lehigh and USP parcels may be necessary.

All downriver parcels should actively improve and engage the Riverfront. From Great Shiplock Park down to Gillies Creek, the shoreline is comprised of rubble and volunteer species; with the completion of the Virginia Capital Trail, public realm improvements should include the restoration of this riparian edge ecology. These parcels should incorporate passive and active Riverfront recreation opportunities, including a variety of docks and watercraft launches that take advantage of the adjacent navigable channel and flat water. A community boathouse may be appropriate on the upriver portion of the Lehigh site, while Annabel Dock will offer a berth for deepwater vessels such as tall ships and commercial cruises. Terraces at Lehigh and Intermediate dock provide direct access down to the river’s edge.

The Route 5 Multimodal Corridor Study has evaluated various alternatives for addressing the growth in vehicular congestion along the heavily-traveled corridor stretching from downtown Richmond into eastern Henrico County. The Corridor Study consultant team recommends Concept 2, with an alignment concentrating traffic along existing Williamsburg Avenue rather than a significant road widening through Rocketts Landing, although a final recommendation has not been made by the Metropolitan Planning Organization (as of the date of this Plan).

The Riverfront Plan does not endorse either of the two options developed under the Route 5 Corridor Study but urges the MPO and the consultant team to look at other options. As the focus of the Riverfront Plan is to improve public access to the Riverfront, public realm landscape and developable parcels, any transportation improvement options that would run a broad swath of regional highway through Rocketts Landing and along the lower Riverfront is detrimental to the objectives of improving the Riverfront access and public realm landscape. Vehicular pavement expansion along rivers and waterfronts is antithetical to larger national trends to remove vehicular travel structures from the water edge. Configuring significant roadway infrastructure and retaining wall structures within the Riverfront runs counter to efforts to bolster the James River as a destination and desirable place to live and play.

**USP** The +5-acre USP parcel (formerly known as the Tarmac property) sits between Great Shiplock Park and Lehigh Cement, with +800 feet of river frontage. To address the role of this property within the context of Richmond’s Riverfront, this plan defers in all matters relative to this parcel to the language in the 2009 Downtown Plan that has already been adopted as part of the City’s Master Plan. The Downtown Plan recommends two alternates for this key parcel along the riverfront: a Development Scenario featuring Urban Center-character development with a strip of land along the waterfront designated for public use, and a Public Open Space Scenario that features the preservation of the waterfront property as a Natural Area. For illustrations of these two scenarios from the Downtown Plan, please see page 173.

There are numerous statements in the 2009 Downtown Plan that will have a bearing on the review of proposals for this property. They include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Develop a comprehensive system of natural open space along the river and create green connections between city parks and the riverfront. The City should work with private property owners to assist in the creation of a continuous public waterfront along the river [ . . . ] Where possible, additional waterfront park land should be acquired and made available for public use. Where this is not possible, clearly marked pathways should be created to connect Downtown’s riverfront parks, allowing visitors continuous access to the waterfront and an engaging experience of Downtown’s natural features.
  - Preserve views to the river by limiting building heights and protecting important viewsheds. Downtown’s dramatic topography affords striking views of the river; by some accounts, Richmond received its very name because its view of the James River was similar to the prospect from Richmond-upon-Thames, England. [ . . . ] It is essential that rezoning of land and new construction in Downtown be carefully considered and that building heights be controlled to protect these historic views.
  - Improve visual and physical access to the river. In addition to creating new view corridors to the James River, preserving existing and historic viewsheds towards the river is essential to connecting the city to the river. Future development along the riverfront needs to be carefully considered so that it will not impact significant historic views such as “the view that named Richmond” from the top of Libby Hill Park.
  - Acquire unique properties for open space along the river. The City should actively work to acquire properties for public open space along the river. As the revitalization of Downtown continues, and as more people begin living and working in the area, the need for open space will swell and new signature spaces along the river will need to be made available to all. Now is the time to realize that key properties are limited in number and for the City to actively pursue the purchase of these properties. Properties to acquire include those with historic, scenic, wildlife, or recreational values, among others. In particular, the former Tarmac property parcel and the Lehigh Cement Factory on the north side of the river and Mayo Island in the center of the river should be purchased. The City should purchase the properties at fair market value and negotiations with these various property owners should begin as soon as possible.
- If the properties are not acquired by the City for public use, any redevelopment should include significant public open space components, including spaces that allow for access to the James River.
- Extend and connect walking trails. The Virginia Capital Trail is a 54-mile trail that will link Williamsburg and Richmond, primarily along the Route 5 corridor. [ . . . ] As the evolution of Downtown continues, there should be a continuous trail on the north bank of the James River, from Rockett’s Landing to Tredegar Ironworks.

**LEHIGH** The Lehigh Cement parcel is currently active as a cement processing facility served by rail. Lehigh is in the process of shifting operations to a county location, and transfer of this property to the City is progressing. Upon completion, the rail activity will cease and the silos can be pulled down, with the property reconfigured for public access to the James River. Vehicular parking should conform to either parallel on-street parking or head-in parking, rather than a dedicated off-street lot, in order to maximize public open space. The current rail alignment should continue downriver as the Virginia Capital Trail alignment. The Virginia Capital Trail becomes the spine along which pedestrian and cycle traffic follows the river, as well as the interface between the river and adjoining neighborhoods and properties. River edge trees should be selectively replaced with appropriate riparian species; while terraces

*DOWNRIVER**(continued)*

step down to provide direct river access. A boathouse may be located on the upriver portion of the Lehigh site. There are several paper streets perpendicular to the river that should be studied for their ability to connect into the Virginia Capital Trail, providing greater physical links to future up-slope development.

**INTERMEDIATE** The Intermediate Wharf, a City-owned parcel, fronts the James River with three distinct bulkhead structures. The main Warehouse Dock bulkhead begins at Gillies Creek, extending some 370-feet downriver, or half the length of the parcel. The elevated paved slab continues to be used as a multi-purpose platform for various events, including the Tall Ships Festival. A seasonal or permanent community pavilion could be positioned on the wharf slab, capitalizing on the raised promontory for events. A floating dock could be attached parallel to the front of the Warehouse Dock, with an associated gangway for access down, accessible for fishing as well as boat access. There is the potential to attract a relatively new class of ocean-going cruise ships, each approximately 250-feet in length and requiring a substantial 300-foot long dock to tie up to.

The wood Intermediate Dock bulkhead, 150-feet long, has significantly deteriorated, and though fenced off, fishing from this location remains attractive and public access continues. Intermediate Dock will need to be replaced or pulled down. Two options to explore include a sloped lawn beginning near the rail spur, sloping gradually down toward the water, as well as a second option that substitutes the wood bulkhead with a concrete or stone terrace stepping down to the water edge. The 220-foot long Annabel Dock bulkhead is concrete and can continue to be used for commercial watercraft.

Three rail lines splay off of the main spur that continues upriver across Gillies Creek. Of the four tracks, only the second or third should define the alignment for the Virginia Capital Trail. The main spur (or second from Wharf Street) remains active today, and aligns with the bridge over Gillies Creek. The third track (from Wharf Street) could conceivably be the trail alignment with a tighter radius curve to meet the bridge. The primary reason to shift from the second to third track is to accommodate head in parking from Wharf Street rather than parallel on-street parking. The trade-off lies in balancing parking demand and pavement against public open space. Cobblestone paving dominates between the rail tracks, and where possible, should be either kept in place or reconfigured to contrast with the Virginia Capital Trail asphalt, and the pavement of Wharf Street parking. The trail alignment should not conform to the first track from Wharf Street, as that rail dead ends at the Gillies Creek bulkhead, and would require either a third bridge, or two immediate 90-degree turns, neither of which are desirable. The existing rail bridge has been preliminarily confirmed as sound, since ongoing rail traffic far exceeds future pedestrian loading requirements.

**ROCKETTS LANDING** Additional boat docks and slips are anticipated for the river edge, between Nicholson and Orleans, with incremental development of parcels uphill of the Virginia Capital Trail. Reconfiguration of Main Street, particularly as it approaches Nicholson Street, will precede substantial redevelopment of Rocketts Landing parcels below Nicholson Street. Efforts to reconnect the historic Fulton Hill area back to the Riverfront could occur via existing CSX underpasses, particularly at Denny Street and Louisiana streets, where existing timber rail viaducts occur in the rail embankment. The existing boathouse at Rocketts Landing may need to be relocated or reconfigured. A single combined boathouse with multiple clubs and users has generally been viewed as a positive tenant and could be reconfigured within Rocketts Landing. If this proves unwieldy, the shared boathouse facility should ideally gravitate upriver no further than the USP site.

**FULTON GAS WORKS** The Fulton neighborhood has a long history in the development of Richmond. Adapting the existing buildings to new, occupiable uses renews the property while keeping the historic fabric intact. The Fulton Gas Works is both an opportunity and a challenge. The property boasts several intact historic structures and industrial artifacts which have been protected through restricted access to the site. The 20-acre complex lies derelict due to soil contamination following decades of nineteenth century industrial use as a City-operated gas works. Federal funding is not directly available to the City for cleanup or mitigation according to EPA regulations since the City was the owner and the polluter.

The City is exploring a range of options to activate the site for redevelopment, including transfer of the Fulton Gas Works to a third party to address the contamination with the objective of developing a revenue-producing strategy for the property.

Several of the existing industrial artifacts should be retained as well, notably the collapsible gas tank structure, as emblematic of the past site function even if not operable. Scenarios for redevelopment hinge on soil remediation funding. The elevated CSX viaduct bisects the site from the Riverfront; however, acquisition of surplus CSX rail right-of-way at grade that bisects the site from east to west will help consolidate the City parcel with the Richmond Housing and Redevelopment Authority parcel into a more attractive property. Gillies Creek arcs across the site from east to west, also bisecting the southern third of the property from the bulk of the site to the north. The culvert-lined drainage channel poses additional complexities in terms of flood inundation, a 100-foot wide Chesapeake Bay Resource Protection area on either side of the channel, and a Resource Management Area covering the entire property requiring a permit for any grading activities. Re-grading of the site for surface parking may be an effective strategy for encapsulating contaminated soils on site.





## **DOWNRIVER OPEN SPACE + RIVER ACCESS**

The Lehigh Cement parcel is a prime location for downriver public open space and direct River access. Upon transfer of the property to the City, the Lehigh Silos should be removed to maximize open space, and improve views to the River. The Virginia Capital Trail should follow the existing rail alignment across Gillies Creek, taking advantage of the existing bridge crossing. From the repurposed bridge, the trail would curve upriver to run along the edge of the James to meet the completed section of the Capitol Trail at Shiplock Park. An open, shaded green would offer options for passive recreation on the north side of the trail, while river terraces step down to provide public water access on the south side. Selective removal and replacement of volunteer species along this River edge will improve the native riparian shoreline. The upriver portion of the site may be suitable for a community boathouse; a ramp from the boathouse down to the water will allow for the launch of sculls and other watercraft. On-street parallel or head-in parking along Water Street accommodates visitors that arrive by car, while minimizing the loss of open space to parking.

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