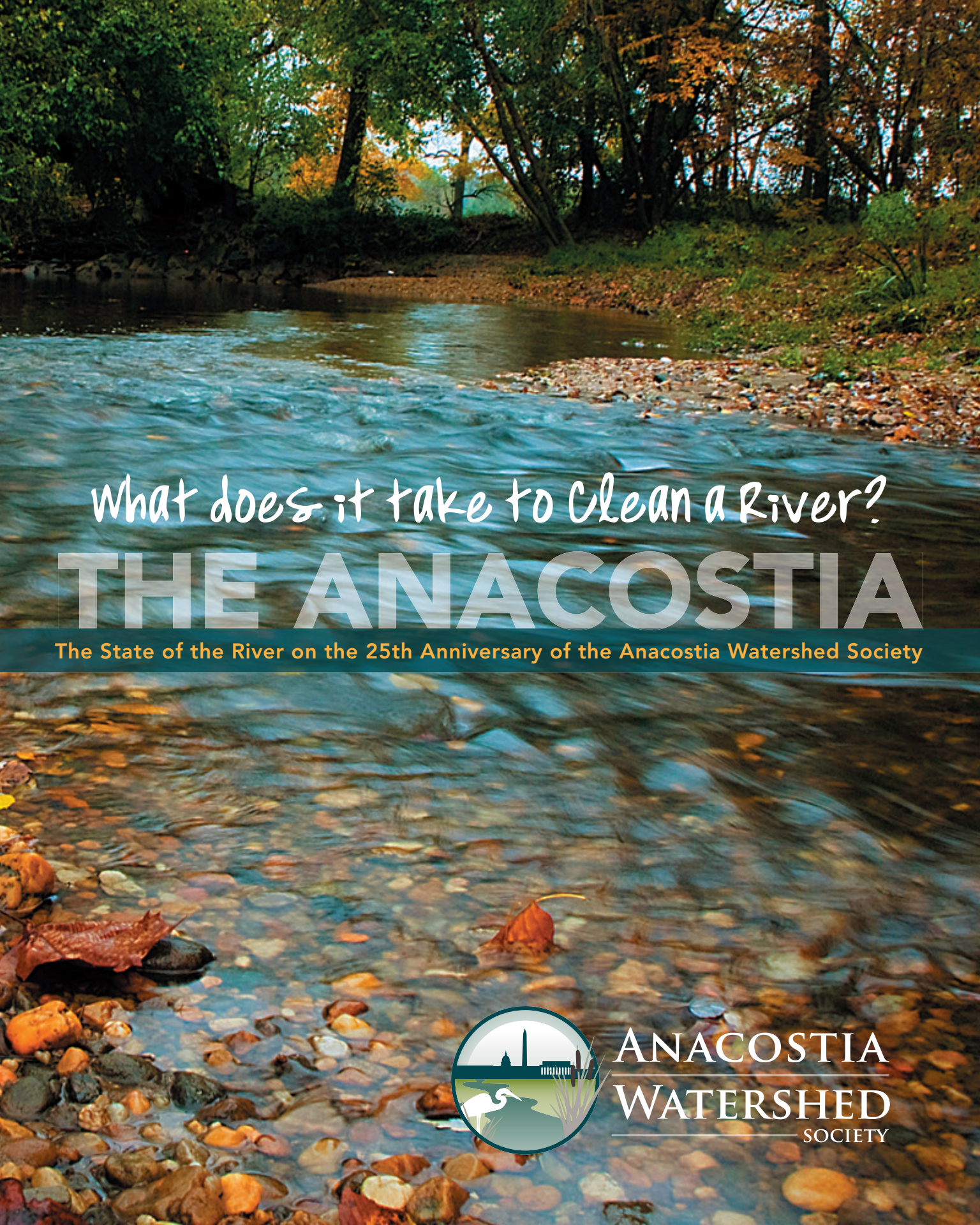

What does it take to Clean a River?

THE ANACOSTIA

The State of the River on the 25th Anniversary of the Anacostia Watershed Society

Anacostia Watershed Society

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The Anacostia River flows through the heart of Washington, D.C. and its neighboring Maryland communities. Starting in Prince George's County, the main stem of the Anacostia River flows approximately nine miles into Washington, D.C., where it joins the Washington Channel and eventually empties into the Potomac River. The Anacostia has 13 major tributaries: Northwest Branch, Northeast Branch, Sligo Creek, Paint Branch, Little Paint Branch, Indian Creek, Beaverdam Creek, Still Creek, Dueling Creek, Lower Beaverdam, Hickey Run, Watts Branch and Pope Branch.

If you live in, work in, or visit the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area, you have probably spent time inside of the Anacostia River watershed. This 176 square mile area of land encompasses most of the eastern half of the District of Columbia and large portions of Prince George's County and Montgomery County in Maryland.

Throughout time, rivers have held powerful metaphorical significance. There is up river and down; against the current and with it. Like veins, rivers unite, flowing through disparate cultural and economic realities. Like knives they divide, casting people and places apart from each other, on one side of a river's banks or the other.

Perhaps the most powerful human association of all, rivers possess a baptismal spirit. They are where we go to get clean — to wash our souls and to be born again. So then what does it mean not to be washed by a river, but to wash one? What does it mean to clean a river?

One that flows through the capital of the richest and most powerful nation in the world, the modern-day birthplace of civil and political liberty?

What does it mean to clean the Anacostia?

"The water that you touch is the last of what has passed and the first of that which comes."

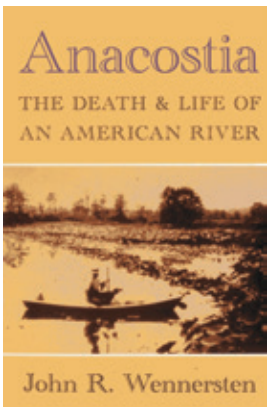
– Leonardo Da Vinci

The Anacostia River may be tiny when compared to other U.S. rivers, the Ohio or the Mississippi, or even the Potomac. But it packs a potent historical punch.

Fed by small tributaries that course south from Montgomery Country through Prince George's County in Maryland, its main stem is less than nine miles long and terminates in Washington, D.C., a short distance from the United States Capitol.

In the old days, the Nacotchtank tribe called the Anacostia and its environs home, and when white explorers first sailed its clear, slow moving waters, they marveled at the river's splendor, and the bounty of its flora and fauna. So full was the Anacostia with life, it is said Captain John Smith could dip a frying pan in its water and scoop out fish.

But the bounty didn't last. Disease and white settlement drove the Nacotchtank away. Intense cultivation of tobacco depleted the soil, bombarding the river with sediment. African slaves reached the river's shores in chains. And when Pierre L'Enfant, the French architect charged with designing Washington, D.C., proposed centering the city around the Anacostia's riverfront, Georgetown landowners intervened, and the river experienced the first of its many bouts of disinvestment.



"The environmental degradation that followed is typical of American rivers," says John Wennersten, author of the book, *Anacostia: The Death and Life of an American River.*

If the river's abuse began with unsustainable tobacco farming in the mid-1700s, it kicked into high gear during the Civil War — the so-called crucible of the American spirit. The construction of a large industrial complex known as the Washington Navy Yard and a population surge fundamentally altered the river's landscape. Forests were razed; human sewage and industrial waste were indiscriminately dumped. A disastrous precedent was set.

"The Anacostia represents the contradiction of the American spirit, the part of us that wants paradise, but paradise on the cheap."

– John Wennersten

By the 1950s, population growth, industrial pollution, an open dump and urban disinvestment had all but destroyed the Anacostia. Paradise was lost, and as Wennersten says, a river that once hosted "mixed-racial communities of blue collar whites and blacks" working in the various industries of the growing city became the racial divide between white Washington and black Washington.

"A highway [295] separated people from the river, racial tension separated people from the river, toxins and trash separated people from the river." Titanic socio-economic forces had largely prompted people to turn away, and by the 1980s, the Anacostia River had been nearly "forgotten."

But not completely forgotten.

Black residents living along the river continued to fight. In the late 1960s, they protested a municipal open air burning dump in Kenilworth Park. Their demands to close the site were only met after a tragic death, when a seven-year old boy died in its flames. In the 1970s, community activist George Gurley led a charge against the Pepco Benning Road Power Plant, which residents suspected of polluting the air and increasing asthma rates. "If the folks who live in Georgetown lived at River Terrace," the late Gurley was known to say, "They would be raising hell."

But Gurley raised his own hell, as did others in the community. The beauty of the river persisted, and what had been so badly abused was more than ever worth saving when Anacostia Watershed Society founder Robert Boone entered the scene 25 years ago.

It didn't take long for Boone, a 49-year-old North Carolinian with a spiritual bent, to see that the river needed help. Tires and refrigerators, basketballs, sewage, and all forms of trash floated in its water. Even an old jalopy — a 1962 Oldsmobile — could been seen lodged in its banks by what is now Bladensburg Waterfront Park. The river was an absolute mess.

"I saw all the pollution in this miracle. The tracks of human civilization, everything we end up throwing away, the whole story of contemporary America, right there on the river's banks." – Robert Boone

Boone was working for an environmental group focused on the Potomac River at the time. But as fate had it, an area developer named Curtis Peterson came by one day, and the two got to talking. Peterson was looking to "give back to the environment," after years of "taking from it," Boone recalls. Boone suggested they start a non-profit, and in 1989, with a chunk of seed money donated by Peterson, the Anacostia Watershed Society was born.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

1600s – 1700s

The watershed's forests were cut down to make way for colonial farms. Single-crop tobacco cultivation takes root.

1800s

Soil erosion from upriver agricultural fields begins to fill in the once thriving port of Bladensburg, where the water was once 40 feet deep. Other parts of the river experience similar sedimentation.

Late 1800s – early 1900s

Population growth and development lead to increased pollution from storm water runoff and alterations in the flow of the river; toxic waste is dumped along the river's shores and raw sewage is discharged into the water; wetlands are destroyed.

1930s

The Army Corp of Engineers constructs a seawall along the river, effectively eliminating most of the 2,500 acres of tidal freshwater wetlands.

1970s

Industrial facilities and municipal waste sites line the Anacostia. Illegal dumping is rampant. River water is choked with junk and trash. The riverbed is poisoned with toxins. By this time, 96% of the Anacostia tidal wetlands are destroyed, the health of wildlife is severely impacted.

CLEAN WATER ACT

Passed in 1972, the goal of the Clean Water Act, is to restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the nation's waters by preventing pollution sources, providing assistance to publicly owned treatment works for the improvement of wastewater treatment, and maintaining the integrity of wetlands.

For more information on the Clean Water Act, please visit **www.EPA.gov**.

From the beginning, AWS aimed to get the Anacostia clean enough to swim in and healthy enough to fish from, or "fishable and swimmable," as required by the Clean Water Act of 1972. Put more simply, it wanted to get people and wildlife back into the river. Its manifesto: "Clean the river, recover the shores and honor the heritage."

Boone surveyed the scene. Many of the watershed's residents were African-American and struggling financially. It was clear that talk would be cheap — the watershed communities needed action, not words. So Boone gathered up some volunteers and got busy cleaning.

*"If you remove the visible blight, people will come back. We did river clean ups, road side clean ups. The message was simple: **Clean it up!**"* – Robert Boone

Slowly but surely, a consciousness began to take root in the watershed, and in 1992 Boone hired on a 25-year-old named Jim Connolly as his program manager.

Trash clean-ups gave way to tree plantings and numerous public events. AWS marshaled larger and larger numbers of volunteers: "Don't Dump! Anacostia River Drainage" they stenciled on storm water drains throughout the watershed. When a rack of canoes was donated, the volunteers were able to get out on the river, not only to recreate, but also to clean. "that really magnified our effort," Boone says.

AWS developed an educational branch. "We got into the schools, did slide shows, took students on canoe trips," Connolly says. An Earth Day Cleanup that began in partnership with Seafarers Yacht Club drew hundreds. It is now an annual spring event that draws thousands of people to the river. AWS volunteers began the hard work of restoring the ecosystem by planting native wetland plants in tidal marshes. All the while, young people and adults alike were being exposed to active, healthy, outdoor opportunities in the heart of the Nation's Capital.

Ultimately, however, community engagement proved only half the battle, and AWS soon found itself at the center of a series of David and Goliath political and legal fights — the first of which concerned a billionaire by the name of Jack Kent Cooke, the owner of the Washington Redskins.

Around the same time that AWS was founded, Cooke had announced plans to construct a new football stadium next to the existing Redskins stadium, RFK.

"For years people around RFK," in the nearby middle-class, mostly African-American neighborhood of Kingman Park, "didn't have control of their homes during games," Boone says. Football fans would storm the neighborhood, littering, drinking, urinating in public. Adding insult to injury, "the footprint of the new stadium was right in the river," Boone says.

Though many D.C. residents were enthused at the prospect of a bigger, grander stadium, Boone realized it would have come at a devastating price to nearby residents and the river.

"In and around Kingman Park, you had the highest concentration of municipal activity in one area, and they were ready to drop another bomb in the neighborhood," says Herb Harris, who was the President of the Kingman Park Civic Association and wrestling with the city's existing trash-burning incinerator, dump and power plant. "The stadium would have all but destroyed the neighborhood."

With federal park land involved, the project required congressional support. With so much at stake and so little time, Boone and Harris took the fight straight to Capitol Hill.

Together, "like a doubles team," as Harris says, they stalked the halls of Congress, cornering House members, and convincing them that allowing public land to be developed for private profit would set a dangerous precedent. In turn, they took Cooke to the mat. The fight they started lasted for years, and received much press.

"The stadium and the fight against it represented a coming of age for the issue of environmental justice in the District of Columbia." – Herb Harris

In the end, the owner wouldn't agree to a solution that ensured the health of the community and its river, and he relocated the stadium.

25th Anniversary
ANACOSTIA WATERSHED SOCIETY
Discover Your Anacostia

1989 - 2014
Anacostia Watershed Society Accomplishments

24,714
Number of wetland plants grown/planted

16,238
Number of native trees and shrubs planted

1,095
Tons of trash removed from the watershed

10,870
Number of tires removed from the watershed

30,825
Number of youth engaged in environmental education

815
Local educators trained in watershed education

114,450
Total number of people engaged by AWS across all programs

117,163
Square feet of green roof installations administered

527,233
Gallons of rainwater treated by green roof installations

In 1996, AWS took on an even bigger foe, suing the U.S. Navy — but this time, the foe became a friend.

Like other area industrial facilities, the Washington Navy Yard had a history of dumping toxic waste into pits on land and into the river. So AWS sued the Navy on the grounds that they had violated the Clean Water Act. "It seemed outlandish," Connolly says. "I remember thinking, 'Are we really going to sue the U.S. Navy?' But we did, and we won."

After receiving a court order to clean the site, the top brass at the Navy Yard dragged their feet for a time. But the situation changed when a new commandant, Admiral Chris Weaver, arrived in 1998.

Weaver was new to the area. "All I knew was that this part of town was not desirable," he says. "The infrastructure and the community here, it was just frozen in time, like a ghost town." As he settled into his new position, he began to study the problem of toxic sedimentation, and it dawned on him that the clean-up order represented an opportunity — something to embrace, not moan over.

"Maybe it was the Navy's fault, maybe it wasn't, but the contamination was there, so let's do what's right by the river instead of arguing. Rather than going to court and challenging everyone to prove we were at fault, why not just fix it?"

– Admiral Chris Weaver

Weaver did just that, attacking the contamination head on — "he saw the big picture," Connolly says. His team used Navy research ships to survey the riverbed for toxics, and removed hazardous submerged Navy storage tanks that had been dumped in the river. In the years that followed — thanks in no small measure to the revitalization of the river that Weaver helped administer — the surrounding neighborhood experienced an explosion of economic interest.

Yards Park and new development in the Capitol Riverfront neighborhood along the Anacostia River, 2013

Next up, AWS turned its attention towards the problem of sewage. In the District of Columbia, a combined sewer and storm water system was overtaxed and in disrepair. After every heavy rain, not only did litter end up in the river, so too did raw sewage — and lots of it. A solution would end up requiring another lawsuit, one which David Baron was happy to help with.

Baron had recently landed a job at the public interest law organization called Earthjustice. "I sat down with Robert and others and listened to the different concerns about problems facing the river," he says. "The one that seemed the biggest by far was the problem of sewage overflows."

"Every year, billions of gallons of raw sewage and stormwater were being spewed into the river during rainstorms with bacteria counts tens of thousands of times over safe levels. And nothing was being done about it. Literally, nothing being done about it."

– David Baron

In 1999, with Baron as their lawyer, AWS and other environmental groups filed suit. A settlement was reached, and the city was ordered to stop the flow of sewage into the river. "It was a key milestone for cleaning the river," Baron says, "the Watershed Society played a central role, not only as a litigator and a plaintiff in the case, but in developing the political support for the resolution. Robert Boone was absolutely dogged in hounding the public officials to get off their behinds and support a solution."

The city devised a plan to construct a complex of underground tunnels to capture and treat sewage overflows. The project, which will cost upwards of $2 billion, is underway, and will reduce the amount of sewage entering the river by 98%. The Anacostia tunnels should be fully operational by 2022.

In 2008, Boone retired and the organization's mission was taken on by 52-year-old water quality expert, Jim Foster.

Today, Foster, who has worked clean-ups as far away as Antarctica and Japan, faces a very different reality from what Boone encountered 25 years ago. Trash and raging storm volumes still course through the Anacostia, and the removal of dumped toxics has barely begun. But progress to restore the river is visible and real. More to the point, he works within an elaborate tapestry of economic and public interest that now colors the river. "I don't ever want to hear somebody call the Anacostia 'forgotten' again," he says. "It's not."

If anything, the river is practically hot. Many credit a plan put in place in 2000 by former D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams with prompting the turnaround in public perception of the river. The Anacostia Waterfront Initiative, a 30-year, $10 billion plan brought together nearly 20 Federal and District agencies in an effort to revamp the river and transform its shores into a world class waterfront.

"The whole idea, is to focus on the river as a way of bringing different parts of the city together." – Anthony Williams

The Initiative represents one of the first proactive moves on the part of the D.C. government to invest in the river. In it, many developers saw a green light, many of the efforts that AWS and its partners had spent years laboring over took off.

Around the Navy Yard, for example, the clean-up efforts spearheaded by Admiral Chris Weaver in the 1990s gave way to the creation of an entirely new neighborhood called the Capitol Riverfront.

In 2008, a baseball stadium was built, the new home of the Washington Nationals. Condos, apartments and lofts were constructed; restaurants, cafes and bars appeared. And through it all, the improving health of the river played a key role.

"A clean river and economic development are not mutually exclusive." – Michael Stevens

Indeed, the engine of economic development was beginning to turn, in part, because of a cleaner river. "People who live here want views of the river, they want proximity," Stevens, Executive Director of the Capitol Riverfront Business Improvement District, says.

In other parts of the watershed, the connection between the river and the health of the community became clearer. Asked about the relationship between a healthy river and a healthy economy, the Reverend Gail Addison, President of End Time Harvest Ministries, a nonprofit serving youth in the historic Port Town of Bladensburg, responds: "You can't separate them. You really cannot."

Asked to comment on the state of the river today, Addison, who has partnered with AWS since 1997, says:

"Well, look where the state of the watershed was back in '97. It was so dismal and so poor. The Port Town really looked forgotten…And just look where we are today. We've got everybody's attention from Congress all the way down to some of the little ones in the community."

Q&A with Reverend Gail Addison

Reverend Gail Addison founded End Time Harvest Ministries (ETHM) - a community partner of the Anacostia Watershed Society - in the mid-1990s to equip youth in the historic Port Town of Bladensburg with educational, social and economic life skills. Since then, ETHM has made job-ready over 3,000 youth in the Port Town community.

Q. How did ETHM start and how did it come to partner with the Anacostia Watershed Society?

A. In 1996, I approached the major players in Bladensburg and told them, "I think I have a way of effectively involving youth and their parents in the community's development." In the process, I was referred to Robert Boone. At that time, AWS was one of the more established nonprofit organizations in the community. As a matter of fact, I think they were the only established nonprofit in the community. And when I met this very kind, eccentric, wonderful gentleman, he was thrilled to hear about helping young people — with a focus on urban at-risk kids, that being the core of what ETHM does.

Q. What has the partnership with AWS been like?

A. AWS has been a valuable partner. They not only provided our youth with internships, but also provided mentoring that was very unique. AWS is our environmental educator; they exposed the kids to a high quality of environmental training. The organization involved them in stormwater management issues, and not just on Earth Day. The kids were so interested in the environmental education and works that they started their own stormwater management project, called Project 450 Community Clean Up.

Q. Why focus on kids?

A. When you involve youth in any problem in the community, you're going to solve it holistically. You're going to see great outcomes. Because they grow up in the process, what they learn gets woven into the tapestry of the community.

ROADMAP FOR A CLEAN RIVER

2014
Sediments toxics study launched

2016
Hiker-biker trail link complete

2017
Sediments toxics plan announced

2020
Runoff reductions sharply reduce sediment buildup; bottom grasses flourish

2021
Zero river trash goal is 90% achieved

2022
Sewage overflow releases reduced by 98%

2023
'River friendly' land development guidance adopted in D.C. and MD

2024
Toxics remediation projects complete

2025
River declared fishable and swimmable

Roadmap to a fishable and swimmable Anacostia River

While the District of Columbia government sees the Anacostia becoming "fishable and swimmable" by 2032, Foster and his team at AWS think it can get there sooner.

"There's an effort to get the entire Chesapeake Bay fishable and swimmable by 2025. Why should we lag behind?" – Jim Foster

Fishable and swimmable in 11 years — but how? To understand, one needs to take stock of the solutions already in motion.

New and major fee-supported programs to reduce runoff will enable the installation of tens of thousands of rain gardens, permeable pavement and green roof projects.

After AWS won a lawsuit against the local sewer authority in Maryland, extensive repairs to broken and leaky sewer pipes began, complementing the massive sewage reduction efforts in D.C. that will bring marked improvements by 2018.

Clean-up of toxic sites has begun again after a long pause. In 2014, the Washington Gas site will be cleaned and the Pepco Benning Road Power Plant torn down. The District has begun a major study of riverbed sediments, which a new coalition, United for a Healthy Anacostia, wants completed by 2018.

In 2009, D.C. implemented a fee on plastic bags, drastically reducing their number in the river. In 2011, a similar bill passed in Montgomery County, and now the District is considering a ban on single-use Styrofoam products – another scourge of the river.

New environmental literacy standards in D.C. and Maryland mandate the need for students to learn about their local environment and the need to protect it. Each year, thousands of local students engage in hands-on restoration of the Anacostia and learn to be environmental stewards of the river.

The river is being recognized as a huge recreational asset to the D.C. area. Multiple boathouses, dozens of crew teams, and hundreds of canoeists and kayakers utilize the river, and the Anacostia Riverwalk Trail is partially open and heavily used. Once complete, the trail will provide seamless, scenic travel for pedestrians and bicyclists along the river to Nationals Park, Historic Anacostia, RFK Stadium, and the National Arboretum.

AWS believes that by simultaneously addressing the many challenges and by building on the growing momentum all the players have generated, we can reach our collective goals by 2025. This roadmap shows how it can be done.

But even with big policy and engineering fixes, Foster says, holding an empty plastic bottle fished from the river, "it will come down to little things like this — it will come down to behavior change."

Litter, pet waste and automobile fluids continue to pollute the watershed. Many people still fail to realize that what gets thrown out on the street ends up in the water. Ironically, studies show that the behavior that leads to littering is tied to notions of personal cleanliness. Not wanting trash in their car, office or pockets, people throw it on the street.

"When you start to look at how people interact in their environment, you realize that we've become disconnected from our natural environment," Foster says. "People think that water comes from the faucet.

And yet if the Anacostia's renaissance has shown anything, it's that the health and wealth of the river is synonymous with the health and wealth of the people who live around it.

"It will come down to little things like this – it will come down to behavior change." – Jim Foster

"We're trying to clean this river. Now, I don't know if I'll ever see it or not, but I've got two grandsons. They're all grown up, and about ready to get boats of their own, and they like to fish, though eating 'em isn't recommended. Someday, I'd really like to see my grandsons catch a fish outta here and have it safe to eat."

– Howard Gasaway

A gentle breeze blows off the Anacostia.

The air is warm and sweet, and Howard Gasaway Sr. sits at a picnic table outside the Seafarers Yacht Club.

82-years-old, Gasaway grew up in Washington, D.C. and served for a time as the Commodore of Seafarers Yacht Club, the first all-black club of its kind in the country's history. He's been boating the river his entire life, and concerned about its health long before he met Robert Boone 25 years ago.

It's been a joy for Gasaway to witness the boost in health and popularity the river has experienced in recent years. "I'm just overwhelmed," he says.

As he talks, a train roars by and a helicopter flies overhead — not so subtle reminders that the Anacostia is and always will be an urban river. But Gasaway isn't fazed. That's just the river, he seems to say by saying nothing at all, and he loves it all the same.

Not far away, in Capitol Hill, 9-year-old Chapen Magee remembers when she heard about the Anacostia River. "I was on a walk with my dad," she says, "and we passed by a little stream."

"There was a whole bunch of trash in it, and my dad went, 'You know, all of this goes in the river. It'd be really cool if we could clean it up."

Since then, Chapen, who held her last birthday along the Anacostia — an "Earth Day Birthday" — has developed a remarkably incisive theory about how adults and kids view the environment: Adults see their sins in its degradation, kids don't.

"It's easier for kids," she says, "Grownups think, 'Ugh! I've been doing this my whole life and anything I do now won't be useful,' which is the opposite of what kids think. Kids think, 'If I don't do this, nothing's going to happen."

"People need to be encouraged," Chapen said. "They can't just think, 'It's too late, there's nothing I can do.'"

As 82-year-old Howard Gasaway knows, and 9-year old Chapen Magee knows, and all the others who have played and will continue to play a part in the Anacostia River's resurrection know so well, it takes all of us.

This is what it takes to clean this river.

This story just scratches the surface.

There are so many people, partner organizations, citizen leaders and government agencies, students, teachers, volunteers and more who are working every day to bring the Anacostia River back to life. For more about the Anacostia River and those who are making its restoration possible, please visit **www.anacostiaws.org**.

The Anacostia Watershed Society would like to thank Linda Rapp and Vincent Rotondaro for their help in the creation and design of this report and the following sources for use of their images:

Derek Parks (Northwest Branch front cover, sidebar image on p. 10 & 11),

Capitol Riverfront BID (aerial view of river inside cover)

Rindy O'Brien (family canoeing on p. 1, child canoeing on p. 9, rower on p. 11)

BeyondDC (Yards Park on p. 6)

The Gazette (Reverend Addison on p. 9)

WAMU (Jim Foster on p. 11)

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100% wind power in a carbon neutral process.