

“Why Did the Anacostan Indians Choose to Live on Capitol Hill?”  
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The next time Hollywood is looking for a story about American Indians (Amerinds) who capture a 20-something settler and integrate him into their tribe for 5 years, the saga of the Anacostan Indians, who lived in and around what is now Washington, DC, may become a major movie - It's already a comic (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Frames from “Up the River” by Joe Sutliff, 2016

The Anacostan (sometimes also called “Nacotchtank” or “Anacostine”) were only one of the many tribes who have lived around the Chesapeake. Like many of their peers, they were farmers, but their reputation includes special associations with crafting stone and trading. Their name was said to be derived from the Indian word “anaquashatanik,” meaning “a town of traders.” (1) Today, the only lasting cultural reference to the Anacostans is the modified version of their name given to the Anacostia river (2).

What we know about this tribe has the makings of a great story. Their history was colorful and they lived on the land that was to become the future capital of the United States. Among the many Amerind settlements that have been identified around what is now Washington, DC, this article will focus on the Anacostan village that was located only a few blocks from where the US Capitol Building now stands. In several ways, this location is unique for an Amerind village. It is unquestionably the location that provides the deepest link between the first people who lived on this land and all current residents of our Capital City.

In the early 1600s, Captain John Smith led the first European exploration of the Chesapeake and mapped the tribes encountered in his travels (3). His map of the region, published in 1624, names the natives “Nacotchtank” and shows that the Nacotchtank chief, the “werence,”\* lived on the east bank of the Potomac which is now mostly Bolling Air Force base (Fig. 2 & 3).

\*In the writings of the Virginia Colony, there are a number of spellings of “werence,” (eg. Werowance in Fig. 3; weroance, etc), as well numerous spellings for many place and tribe names.



Fig. 2. John Smith Map (w Nacotchtank highlighted)

On this map, and several included below, the local tribe is labeled as the “Nacotchtank.” Alternate names “Anacostines” and “Anacostans” were introduced by Jesuit Father Andrew White, who accompanied the first permanent European settlers in this region, Catholic dissidents from England. They arrived in Maryland in 1634. Father White studied the local language so he could translate church teachings for the natives. The sounds of the Native languages were not easily grasped by English speakers and English spelling wasn’t standardized until the mid 1700s. For example, Father Smith’s English writings include this phrase “the Roman Catholicks of This Kingdome.” Variations on Native words are not surprising. The name “Anacostan” became popular enough to be used to rename “the Eastern Branch” of the Potomac, the Anacostia River.



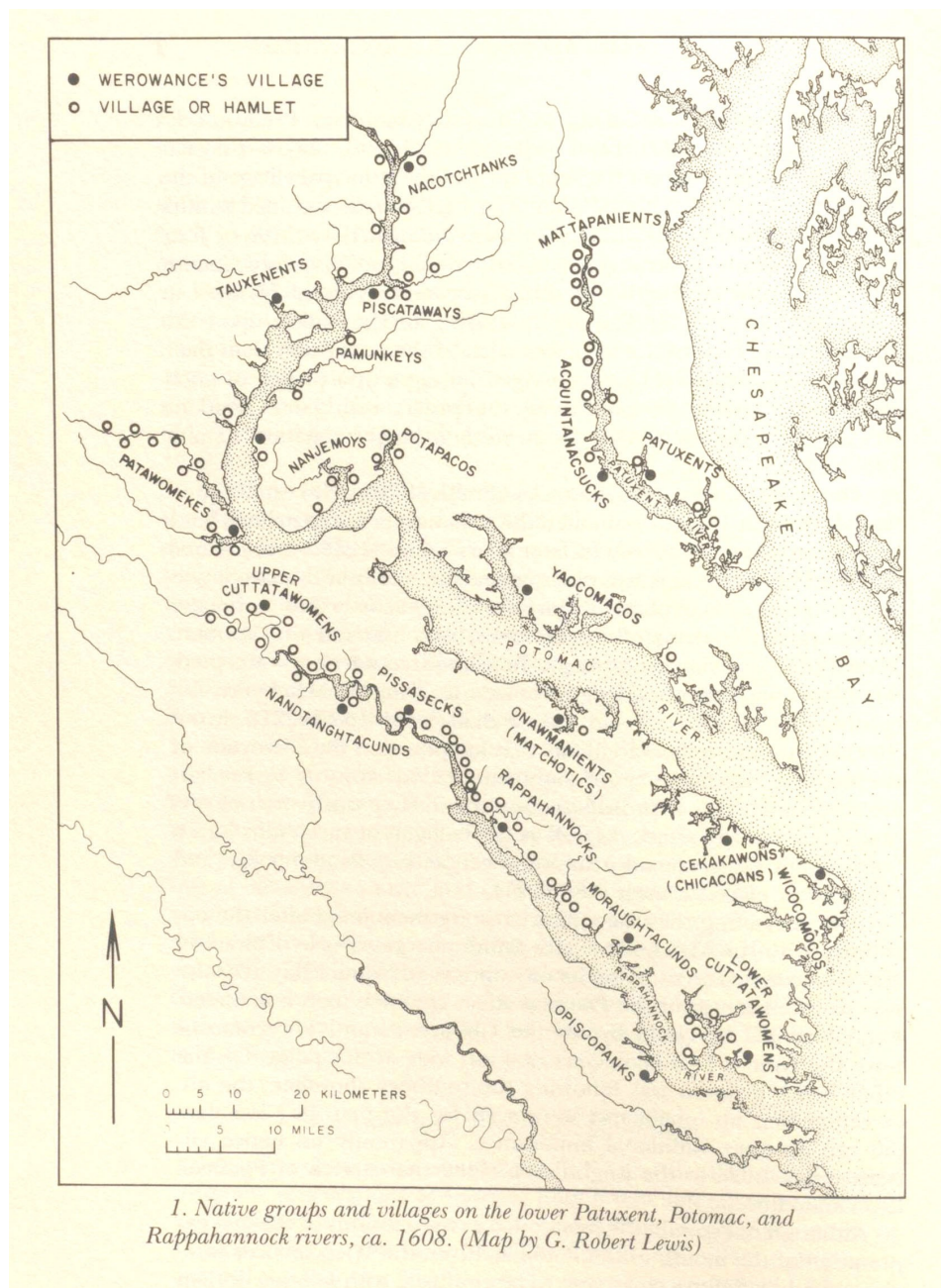


Fig 3. Native groups and villages on the lower Patuxent, Potomac, and Rappahannock rivers, ca.1608 (Map by G. Robert Lewis) (13)

Other maps specific for Nacotchtank/Anacostan villages have them spread along the Potomac river, up to the lower falls, and along the Anacostia (Fig. 4).

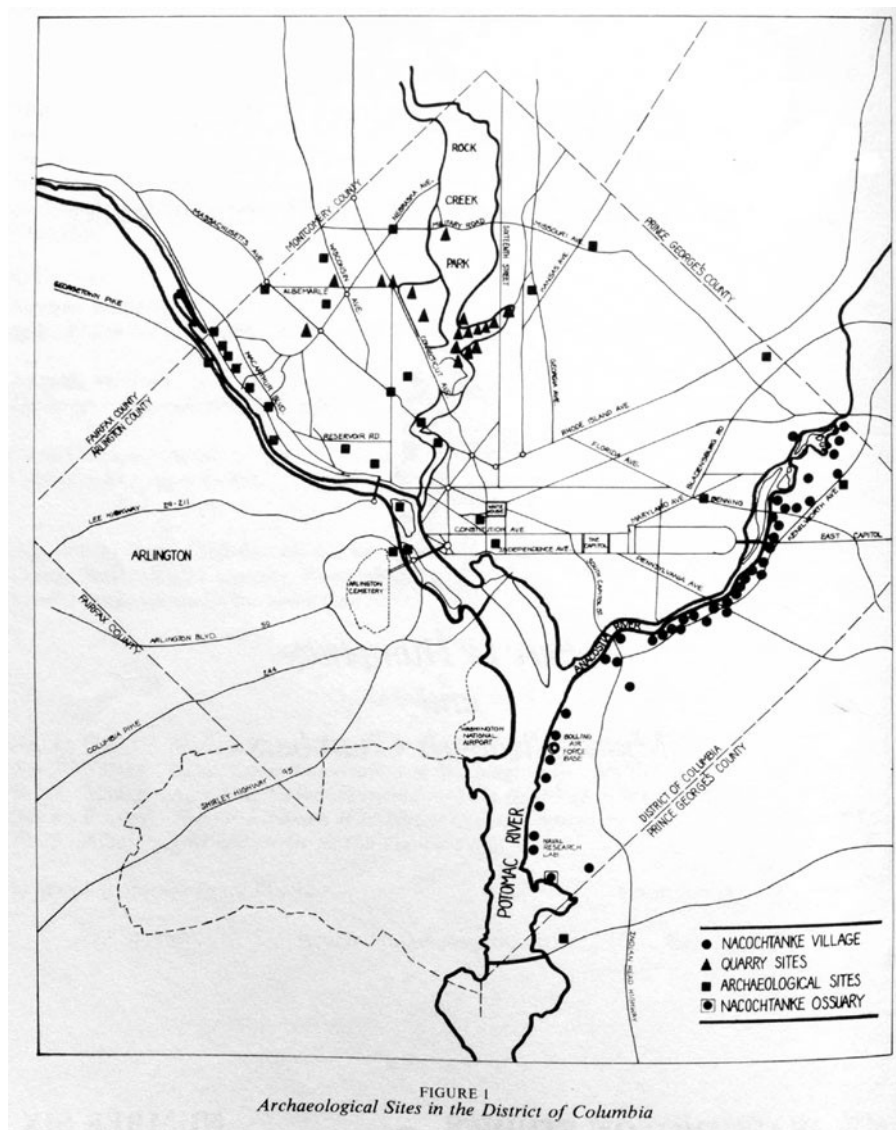


Fig 4. Archaeological Sites in the District of Columbia (Ref 7)

What we know about the Anacostan site closest to the Capitol comes from the research and writings of Samuel Vincent Proudfit (1846-1934) in the late 1800s (4). Proudfit was an archaeologist who had done extensive research on the Amerinds who lived along the Missouri River in Iowa. In the early 1880s, he returned to Washington to work at the Interior Department. Proudfit was among a small group of archaeologists, including Willian H. Holmes (1846-1933) and Elmer R. Reynolds (1863-1911), who identified and collected the remains of the Amerinds of the District. Holmes and Reynolds focused on the archaeology of the Piney Branch quartzite quarry and the soapstone quarry near Van Ness, both sites in the Northwest quadrant of Washington, DC (Fig 4). Quartzite is the locally available stone that can be chipped into a sharp edged tools, such as ax heads or arrowheads. It is harder to work with than flint, but more common (see Fig 5). Soapstone is a soft rock, relatively easy to cut and shape, that was used to make cooking pots, bowls and pipes (see Fig 12).

In Proudfit's key article on the Amerind villages in Washington, DC, he seemed pleased by the ready availability of archaeological artifacts at hand in the District:

“These fields have been under cultivation for many years, and are regularly visited by local collectors, yet they are to-day, in places, fairly strewn with the wreck of the old village life.” (5)

His colleague Holmes was even more ebullient about the richness of the remains to be found around the District: “So numerous indeed are [the remains] in certain localities that they are brought in with every load of gravel from creek beds, and the laborer who sits by the wayside breaking bowlders for our streets each year passes them by the thousands beneath his hammer; and it is literally true that this city, the capital of a civilized nation, is paved with the art remains of a race who occupied its site in the shadowy past.” (6)

More recent evidence of the abundance of native artifacts in the District appeared in 1975, when Robert S. Marshall, a National Park Curator, not an archaeologist, superficially inspected the fill dirt that was dug out from under the White House when a swimming pool was being built. It turned out that the fill dirt contained 17 Native artifacts, including 2 quartzite points and a pottery fragment (7). (Fig. 5).

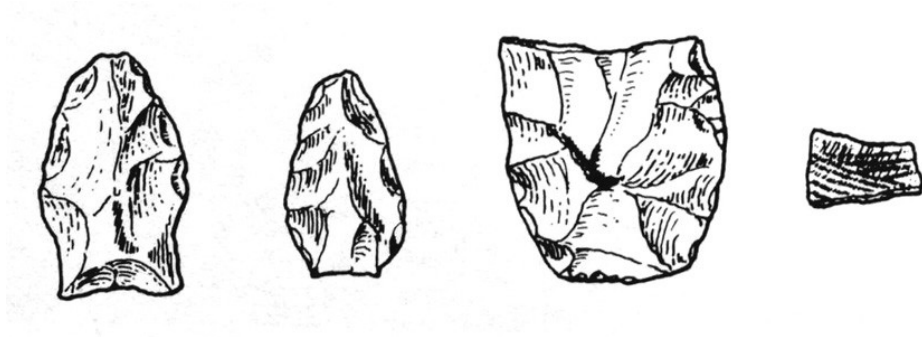


Fig 5. Artifacts from the Excavations of the White House Swimming Pool (7).

Other notable remains of the Natives of the District include the ossuaries that were found in construction on the Bolling Air Force base in the 1930s (8) (Fig. 4) and a pit containing shark teeth, a comb, pendants, cloth and human bones uncovered during the construction of the Whitehurst Freeway in 1997 (Fig. 6) (9). From the location of the Bolling remains, association with the Nacotchtank or a predecessor tribe would be likely. Carbon dating of the Whitehurst freeway remains suggested they came from Middle Woodland archaeological culture (300 BC–AD 900) (9).



**Figure 5-15. Artifact Assemblage at the Base of Feature 283, Ramp 3** (clockwise from left: comb [3216-1]; bead [5007-1]; slate pendant [3250-1]; schist pendant [3234-1]; point [3250-2]; antler disks [3216-2; 3249-3,4; 3265-4; 5009-4; 5013-1]; shark teeth [223-1; 3216-5,12; 3249-1,2; 3265-1,3; 5009-1,3]; hammerstone [3216-15]; phallus effigy [5007-2]).

Fig. 6. Native Artifacts from Whitehurst Freeway Construction (9)

In Proudfit's key article, "Ancient Village Sites In The District Of Columbia...", he explained the chief clue he used to locate a native village:

"In addition to the stone relics which this field affords, it should be observed that an abundance of pottery, in fragments, is to be found - one of the unfailing evidences of permanent aboriginal occupation." (10)

In a later paper, Proudfit explained his criteria in more detail (11):

"An examination of any cultivated field that lies along the Potomac or Anacostia will furnish more or less evidence of temporary occupation. The difference between these places and village sites is readily discernible in the character of the remains, as well as in the quantity. The former show flakes, and chips of stone, with here and there an implement of the knife and arrowhead type, while the latter, with its ever-present pottery, seems to have left its mark on every stone in the field. The wreck of an old village can never be mistaken for the camp-ground of a single season."



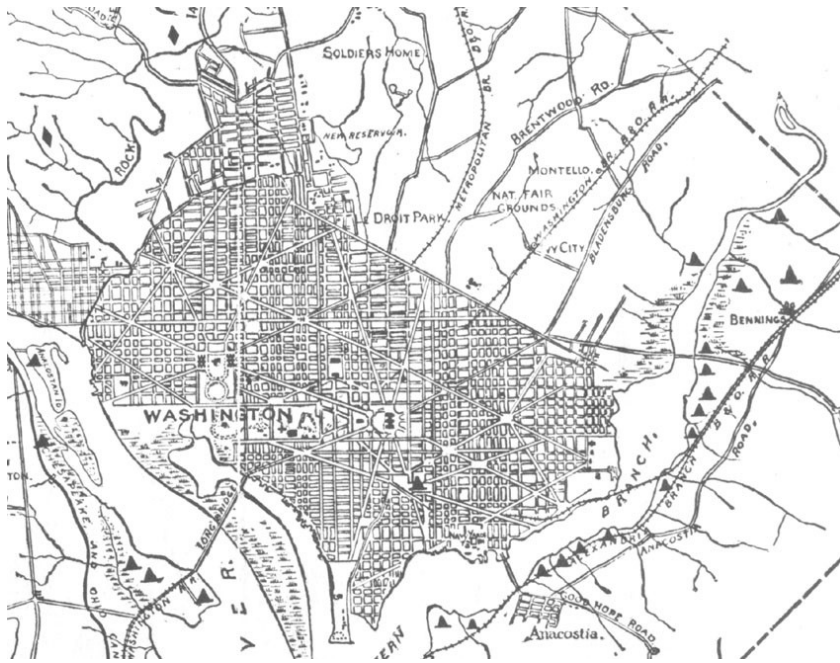


Fig 7. Proudfit Map of the District of Columbia showing village site on Capitol Hill (4).

In this paper, Proudfit also clarifies his use of the term, “village:”

“it should be remembered that an Indian village of the Potomac was not a compact assemblage of houses, but scattered dwellings along a watercourse, with the intervening spaces usually under cultivation. In some instances, however, a cluster of houses might be found at such points as afforded more than the ordinary riparian advantages, but usually the dwellings were comparatively isolated.” (11) Anthropologists now describe this character of Native houses as “dispersed-settlements” (12).

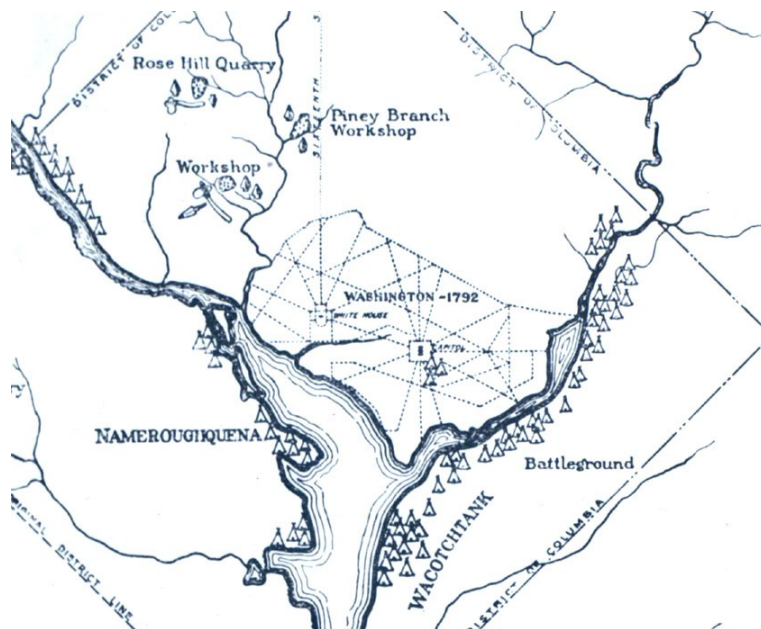


Fig 8. Diagram of Indian Villages, p. 6 in Development of the United States Capital. Washington, Government printing office, 1930. (71<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, House document no. 35).

Of the two villages Proudfit identified inside the boundaries of the District, one was near the Anacostia in the area that is now Ft Lincoln. The location of the second village was described as (10):

“the Carroll place in Washington, north of Garfield Park and between First and Second streets S. E.,”

The Carroll place refers to the house that Daniel Carroll, one of the original District land owners, built on the location in 1793 (13) (Fig. 9).

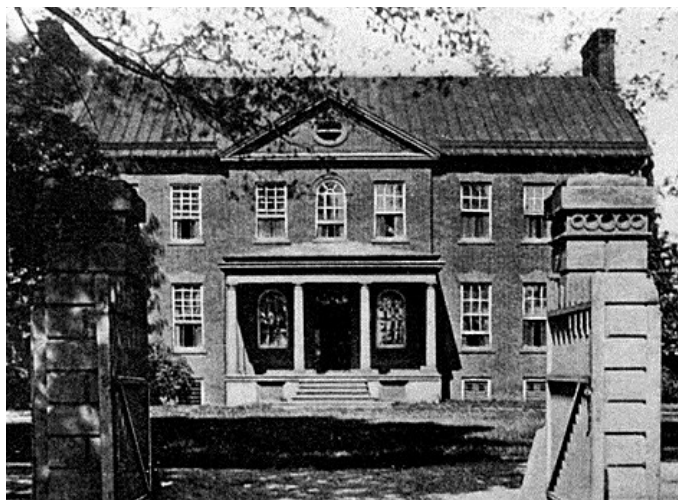


Fig 9. Duddington Manor, built 1793, demolished 1886.

A map of the property (Fig. 9) shows that the grounds contained a spring which was probably a key element for Daniel Carroll's choice of the location, as it would have been for the Anacostans before him. A description of the grounds, written in 1898, said “the manor, situated in a grove of giant oaks, in the midst of which was a large, free-flowing spring of drinking water” (14).

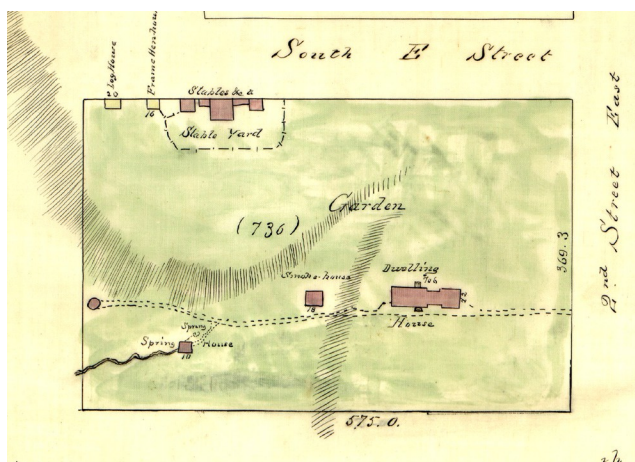


Fig 10. “Plan of part of Washington shewing the situation of the buildings belonging to Mr. Dan'l Carroll of Duddington.”



Carroll was referred to as Daniel Carroll of Duddington, his family's hometown in England. The path shown through the property that led to the spring was the likely origin of the street now called "Duddington Place" which was not a street on the original L'Enfant city plan.

Daniel Carroll died in 1849. His daughters lived in the house until 1886 when the land was sold for redevelopment into the row houses that stand there today (13). Proudfit printed his key article about this village site and others in the District in 1889, so he seems to have gained access to the property to look for artifacts after his return to the District from Iowa in the mid-1880s.

Most Anacostans lived along the water, many on the east bank of the Anacostia (Figs. 4 & 8). Identifying a spring on this village site explains how the Natives got water without living on a stream or river. But why did this group choose to settle uphill from the nearby rivers and use this spring? As one clue, Proudfit also noted that native occupation seemed to be widespread on the top of the area L'Enfant designated as Jenkin's Hill (15), which we now know as Capitol Hill.

As Proudfit wrote:

"The principal part of Nacotchtanke seems to have been about due east of the Capitol, for the fields at this point give greater evidence of occupation than at most others, though indications of Indian occupation are to be found at nearly all points of the valley. " (5)

Proudfit's use of the term "occupation" is ambiguous, but he did not locate any village sites on the area due east of the Capitol. Natives farming in the Southeast US, like many others in the Americas, planted corn, beans and squash as complimentary plants in groups, sometimes in patches of about a quarter acre (16). The grouped plantings are traditionally known as the Three Sisters (16). Men cleared the land, and women did the planting (17). The flat area east of the Capitol would have been more suitable for larger plantings than the hillsides or lower areas, closer to the rivers. So the land now occupied by the Library of Congress, Jefferson Building, and the Supreme Court, which are both part of the flat crest on top of Capitol Hill, may have been a central location for the Anacostans to farm (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Grounds of the Library of Congress, Jefferson Building, during construction.

Records from the early settlers indicate that the Anacostans were believed to have good stores of corn. It was an attempt to barter for corn that brought a party of 26 men from Jamestown to the Anacostans in 1622 (18). The Anacostans were suspicious of the settlers and the negotiations did not go well (19). A confrontation erupted that led to the death of all but one member of the trading party, Henry Fleete

(1602-1661). Five men who did not go ashore with the trading party escaped. Fleete, about age 20, was taken captive and lived with the Anacostans until 1627 (Fig. 1) (18,20).

With a farming area on the top of Capitol Hill, the village near Garfield Park would have been a location that provided access to the those fields and about equal access, when necessary, to James Creek and the Anacostia (Fig. 12).

Other speculative roles for the Carroll site might have been: an outlook providing broad views of both rivers, from treetops on the hill; a sheltered space, removed from the river and less accessible to attack; a dryer area with fewer mosquitoes and other insect pests that might be found on the rivers.

The extensive development around the Carroll site in Southeast Washington, DC, included the elimination of the creek (James or Goose Creek) that ran along the base of what is now Capitol Hill (Fig. 12). Other changes in the District have been even more dramatic. The shorelines of the Potomac and the Anacostia rivers are now far different than they were before the European settlers arrived. A visit to Kingman Island in the Anacostia can provide a vivid experience of the changes in the river (Fig 12). Prior to the arrival of European settlers in the 18th century, the Anacostia River was a fast-flowing and relatively silt-free river with very few mudflats or marshes. Kingman Island didn't exist. Between 1860 and the late 1880s, large mudflats ("the Anacostia flats") formed on both banks of the Anacostia River due to deforestation and runoff from farming upstream along the river. To eliminate a prime breeding ground for malaria- and yellow fever-carrying mosquitoes, dredging was used and Kingman island was built up on those flats by the Army Corp of Engineers in the early 1900s (21).

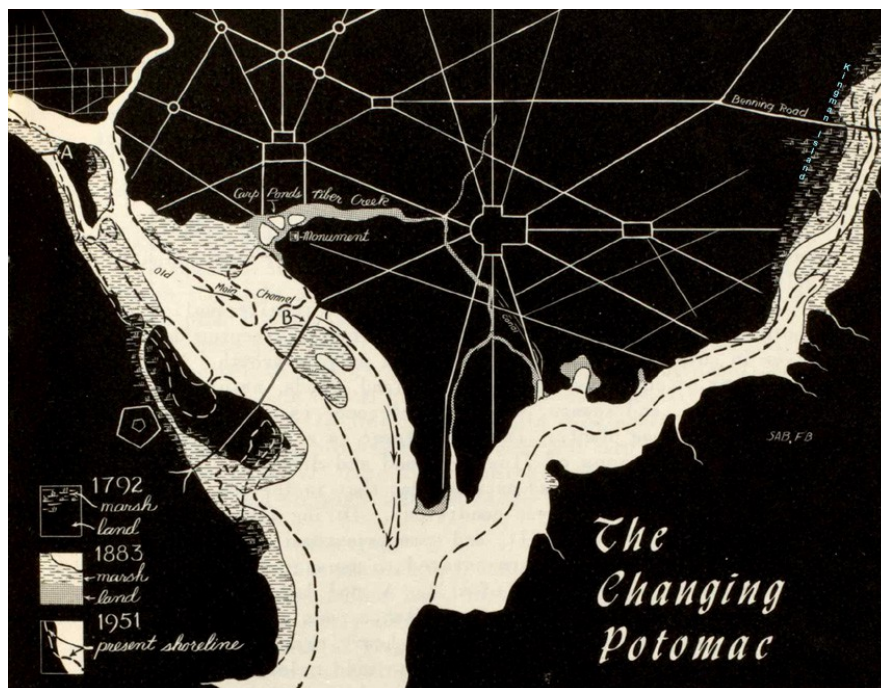


Fig. 12. The Changing Potomac.

On Proudfit's maps and several others (Fig. 3,5,7; Ref. 3,8), it's odd that a tepee icon was used to designate "Indian villages." A scholar like Proudfit was very likely to know that the typical house of

the Anacostans and all the natives of the Chesapeake was the wigwam or longhouse (Fig 13). The tepee is portable, like a tent. Amerinds who farmed, like the Anacostans, built domed huts to be occupied for months or years. Drawings of the villages and natives of the Southeast from the late 1500s show the basic shapes of the wigwam and long house (Fig. 13). The tepee, much like the large feather headdress, was characteristic of the Natives of the southwest.

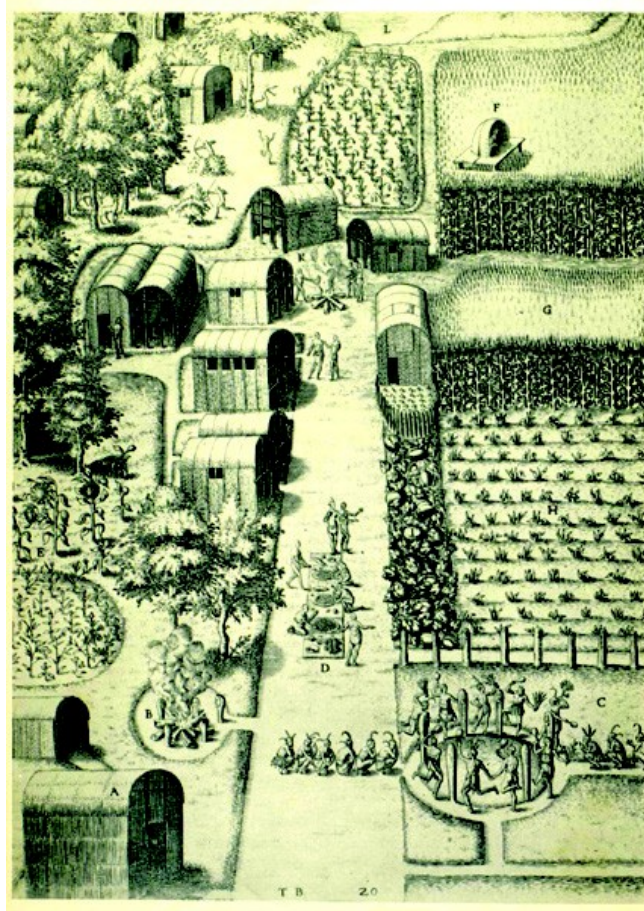


Fig 13. Drawing of the Indian Town of Secota, printed 1585

As shown in Fig. 14, Algonquin Amerinds also had their own style of dressing and used far fewer feathers.



Fig 14. A weroan or great Lorde of Virginia.



In his writings, Proudfit did use the term wigwam (22), so it is likely that the tepee error was not his. A possible explanation for the inappropriate use of the tepee icon on the maps could be the demands of his publishers and printers, who might have preferred the tepee icon as simpler, more readily available or made, and more easily recognized by the reader.

The period following the arrival of Europeans was hard on the Anacostan tribe as it was on all the native peoples of the Chesapeake region. European diseases, such as measles, cholera and smallpox, devastated some tribes and cut their numbers drastically (23). There are no detailed reports about diseases among the Anacostan. However, in the early 1600s, the Anacostans were estimated to be a tribe with only about 340 members (24). During the 17<sup>th</sup> century they were repeatedly attacked by the settlers and continued to fight wars with other nearby tribes (18). For example, in November of 1622, an attack by settlers, intended to take revenge for the death of the men in the Henry Fleete incident, killed several Anacostan warriors and burned their crops (18). This happened only 8 months after the Anacostans captured Fleete. It certainly must have been an awkward time for their hostage. The journal Fleete published later in his life does not contain any details about his time with the Natives (20), but he obviously survived. In 1627, Fleete returned to Jamestown and then England. During his 5 years with the the Anacostans, Fleete learned their Algonquin language which made him a very successful trader when he returned to the Chesapeake (18).

By the late 1660s, the Anacostans had been so ravaged by fighting and disruptions in their lives that the remaining members of the tribe moved for a short period to what we now know as Roosevelt Island (25). The earliest settler name for Roosevelt Island was Ancostan Island (25). After that relocation, the remaining Anacostans eventually dispersed themselves into the larger Piscataway tribe and lost their tribal identity. In 1697, most of the decimated Piscataway tribe in southern Maryland moved to Pennsylvania (23).

Speculation about the activities in the Anacostan's Capitol Hill settlement, while it functioned, are limited by what we can say about the time frame for when it was occupied. Defining the time period for archaeological evidence of the Anacostan and possible tribes before them in the District was a topic repeatedly addressed by Proudfit and Holmes (4,26). The depth of the debris left at the quartzite quarry on Piney Branch made it evident to Holmes that work had gone on in that spot for at least hundreds of years (26)(Fig. 15).



Fig 15. WH Holmes in the Piney Branch Quarry

Based on similar findings at various levels in the massive debris, Holmes stated that there was no evidence that more than one group had worked there, but that was the limit to what he could conclude (26). Rock debris and pottery fragments only offer limited clues about their creators. They can clearly demonstrate that Natives were there, but most often, only a very broad estimate about when. The remaining artifacts certainly cannot say with precision when the Natives stopped their work or moved any particular settlement.

Another limiting factor in describing this Anacostan settlement on Capitol Hill is the fractured information that has been passed down on how and when the Natives lived in and around what would be the District. Based on his 1606 visit, John Smith placed the home of the Nacotchtank Chief on the east bank of the Potomac, below the mouth of the Anacostia (2). We don't know exactly how long it stayed there, but we do know it was gone about 60 years later. The Anacostans were not closely followed in the Colonist's records, so what we can now say about them is rather limited (27). Observations about their life and culture must rely on speculation generalized from reports on other Chesapeake tribes.

For example, can we define how long into the European period the Anacostans continued to work in the quartzite and soapstone quarries? There are a number of possible social factors that we can't describe in much detail: Was working the unique local quartzite quarry (26) to make arrowheads a fundamental part of becoming a warrior? Soapstone was roughly cut in its quarry, then moved and finished later (29). Was finishing soapstone into cooking vessels and other items something men and women did routinely, or was it an infrequent task? (Fig. 16)

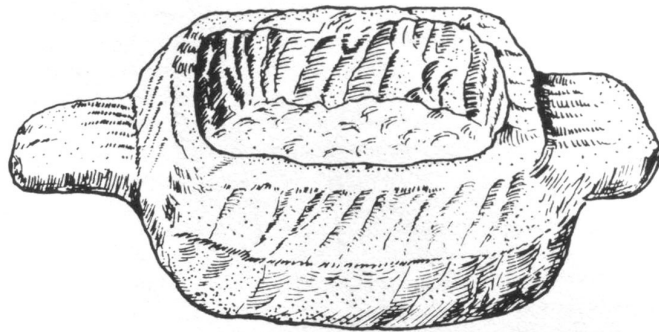


Fig 16. Unfinished Soapstone Vessel

The items made from the raw materials in the quarries were useful from day to day, and were also good commodities for trade. However, it would have been true then, as now, that factors such as stress on the community, from sickness, the death of their warriors, or the destruction of their farm fields (18), would affect many aspects of the Native's lives, including their productivity and health. As the post contact records show, the stresses on the tribe were substantial enough to disperse it completely by the late 1660s (23,30).

Garfield Park in southeast Washington is one block from the former Carroll estate and the site of the Capitol Hill village. Current dog walkers in Garfield park are actually sharing with the Anacostans in a long tradition of keeping dogs as helpers and pets (31). Evidence of dogs living among the Chesapeake

Natives can be found in a 1585 drawing of an Amerind village in what is now Virginia (Fig. 17). A dog is shown in profile in the upper left of the central, open space in the village.

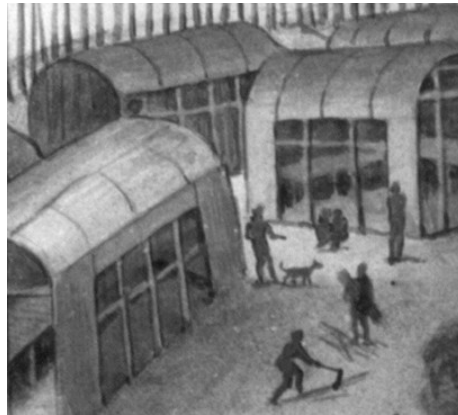


Fig. 17. A portion of the drawing, "The towne of Pomeiock," by John White. ca 1585.



Fig. 18. A Carolina Dog

The Carolina Dog, with a heritage traced back about 8000 years in North America (32), is the standard breed that is quite similar to the animal profiled in the drawing (Fig. 18). It's unlikely that any of the Native's dogs received the level of care that is common today, but remains from burial sites in Virginia have uncovered a dog buried at the feet of its owner, and dogs buried in graves of their own (31). These burials show that dogs could be valued members of a Native community.

What the colonial records describe about Natives around the Chesapeake, and the Anacostans, largely covers a period of decline. Our appreciation of the settlement on Capitol Hill, as well as the many other settlements around the city (Fig. 3,5,7,8), cannot be based on the few decades in which the lives and culture of the Anacostans were cut short. The presence of the Anacostans on this land unquestionably spans centuries before the English settlers moved in. Today, despite enormous technological changes, we still share with the Anacostans our day to day experience of this land - it's heat and humidity, the snowfalls, life bounded by two rivers and our care of animals.

With the long passage of time and extensive development of Capitol Hill around Garfield Park, there is probably a very limited potential to find more remains from this village and the people who lived there.



However, at present, the history of this village is not noted publically anywhere near the site on Capitol Hill or even within the District. We may not be able to learn much more, but there is still a great potential to acknowledge and teach what we do know about the Anacostan Natives who once lived in the heart of our Nation's capital.

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