

Land Use Planning Term Project

AN EVALUATION OF THE PLANNING OF
WASHINGTON CROSSING STATE PARK

by

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INTRODUCTION

Physical Description?

Washington Crossing State Park is located in Hopewell Township, Mercer County, and ~~is situated~~ 8 miles northwest of Trenton on the Delaware River. The area surrounding the 841 acre park is primarily residential, although there are some agricultural areas. The park boundaries are marked, to the north, by Church Rd., the east by County Route 579, and to the south by County Route 546. The far western portion of the park is bisected by County Route 29 and the Delaware Raritan Canal St. Pk. The border to the far west is the Delaware River.

Washington Crossing serves five counties. They are, in New Jersey: Mercer, Hunterdon, Middlesex, and Somerset, and in Pennsylvania: Bucks. The populations in these counties vary from 203.4 to 1916.1 persons per square mile (Apffel 3). There are 10,521 acres of public open space in Mercer County (The Common Wealth 22). The closest public open space facilities being: Delaware Raritan Canal State Park (a portion of which is located in Washington Crossing), Washington Crossing State Park Pennsylvania (located directly across the river), and Rosedale County Park (approximately 10 minutes by car in Hopewell Twp.).

Surface water present at the Crossing is found in the Delaware River and the D&R Canal. The portion of the park ~~which is located~~ between the canal and the river is designated as a floodway, and/or a flood hazard area. In addition wetland conditions occur sporadically along the branches of the Steele Run creek. In the upland portions of the park the land is flat to gently sloping and the soils are primarily loamy and well-drained. The vegetation of the park consists of lawns, successional fields, and mature oak-hickory forests.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Titusville New Jersey earned its place in the history books during the American Revolution in the ~~year of~~ 1776. For most of the early portion of the war the Titusville region was occupied by the Hessians. General George Washington's division of the Continental Army was encamped on the opposite side of the Delaware River, in Pennsylvania. The winter of 1776 was a particularly harsh one. The Continental troops were suffering badly, and morale was low. General Washington came to the conclusion that a move must be made before the army became so weak and depleted that it could no longer fight; so, he and his advisers devised a daring plan.

On Christmas day Washington and his troops assembled at McConkey's Ferry and began crossing the Delaware River in Durham boats. Due to poor weather conditions the crossing took several hours, and it is believed that during that time Washington and the other generals set up a temporary headquarters in the home of James Slack (what today is known as the Ferry House) who was the Ferry master at the time. Once the crossing was complete, the troops divided. One garrison, led by General Washington and General Greene, began marching towards Trenton by way of Pennington Rd; the other, led by General Sullivan, went via River Rd. This was to be one of the prongs in a "three prong attack" (Main-Reutter 48). The second prong was led by General Ewing who crossed below Trenton and secured the bridge spanning the Assunpink Creek. The third was led by General Cadwalader, who crossed below Bristol and attacked the Hessian garrisons located there (Main-Reutter 49).

Washington and Sullivan arrived in Trenton almost simultaneously and succeeded in their surprise attack - mortally wounding Hessian commander Colonel Rall, and subduing the 900 Hessian soldiers (Main-Reutter 49).

The Battle of Trenton, and the following Battle of Princeton, were the turning points of the American Revolution. Washington's crossing of the Delaware sparked the series of pivotal events which occurred over the period of time that has come to be known as "the ten crucial days."

THE EARLY YEARS OF WASHINGTON CROSSING STATE PARK

Approximately 130 years after Washington's historic crossing, in 1909, a group of Knights of Columbus decided that a portion of land should be set aside to commemorate the event. In 1910 a commission was formed to accomplish this, and in 1913 the 100 acre Blackwell Estate was purchased and became Washington Crossing State Park. At that time both Fredick Law Olmstead and the New York City Park Commissioners submitted plans for the Park; however, neither of them was implemented in full - if at all (Main-Reutter 14). According to an unofficial historical report on the park,

The park was set up so that historic areas wouldn't be cluttered with recreational facilities. Included in the plans was the purchase of the Ferry House, the erection of a monument in the park, landscaping and road construction, and use as a national military campground (The History of 1).

It does not appear that planning, other than for land acquisitions, in Washington Crossing has ever followed any ~~real~~^{real} specific

or point, but is this the only reason?

master plan. There may have been proposals, but by and large, it does not seem that they were used. It would have been difficult to do any grand-scale planning at first because over the first 60 years, the borders of the park were altered almost yearly (Composite Acquisition map). Save the 34 land acquisitions, very little seems to have changed in the first 50 years of the park's history. In the late thirties and forties the Works Progress Administration built the maintenance buildings, performed road improvements, and did much of the initial landscaping in the picnic areas. They also restored the Ferry House to the tavern they thought it had once been. It has since been discovered that the tavern was actually attached to the Nelson House, down by the River. Despite this discovery, the restoration has never been corrected, and Judith Johnson's parlor room still contains a bar and grill.

Later, in 1968, the Nature Center moved from its home in one of the houses located near the Church Rd. end of Brick Yard Rd. to its present location in the old Lippencott House; which is also located off Brick Yard Rd., but is not quite so far away from the main park thoroughfare.

By the end of the 1960's most major tracts of land had been acquired and it was fairly clear what the park would look like once the final missing portions had been purchased. It was in this period of time that the first comprehensive plan (that could be located anyway) appeared.

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This plan is really a collection of plans developed for every existing, and potential, state park and recreation area. The plans, released in 1967, were prepared by the Department of Conservation and Economic Development, and were financed by the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund Program.

While this was perhaps the first plan prepared for the entire park as it is presently found, and much of the acreage was newly acquired, this was not "virgin" land - a fact the planners seemed largely to ignore. In addition to the fact that the planners assumed that they were working with a relatively clean slate, they also seem to have been far more interested in creating an area and a history for it, than enhancing what already existed.

In the explanatory blurb next to the map it was stated:

Plans call for the development of Liberty Village, a proposed community made up of a collection of colonial building which will be acquired from all over the State and moved to this site. It will supplement existing historic features such as the McKonkey Ferry House [now known to be the Johnson Ferry House], Nelson House and Bear Tavern, to form an interesting reminder of this important period of New Jersey history (50).

In fact, creating a "Liberty Village" would greatly detract from the understanding of the history which took place at this site.

First, the Ferry House is not what is usually considered "traditional" colonial architecture, ^{and} neither is the nearby barn. The Johnsons, who built both of these structures, were Dutch; so the architecture is unique, and quite distinctive. These buildings would appear incongruous with the transported structures as it is likely that they would represent more traditional architectural styles.

Second, by creating this village, the landscape would be vastly different from the one that existed during Revolutionary times. The whole area was a plantation and was inhabited only by the family that ran the ferry and the farm, and their servants. Seriously altering the landscape (at least more so than it already had been) would make visualizing how the events took place more difficult and would probably deemphasize the true history. In addition to these points, it should also be noted that there is serious doubt as to the authenticity of what is believed to be the Bear Tavern.

Also mentioned in the Comprehensive Plan is the development of a 9-hole golf course and club house which would occupy much of the Phillips farm area and Knox Grove (50). Considering that there is a golf course (which was in existence at the time of this plan) located no more than five miles away on the same road, this feature seems unnecessary. There were also plans to erect a Fire Engine museum approximately where the main entrance is located today (50). Why? It would make sense to construct this museum somewhere near an area that had experienced an important event in fire engine history, not where Washington crossed the Delaware.

eh?

Finally, it is stated in the plan, "The northeastern portion of the park will be devoted to a natural area, featuring a nature study center which will serve as the starting point of a nature trail system" (50). What is not mentioned, but can be seen on the map, is that they have dammed up the small crick which is, for all intents and purposes, dry 6 months out of the year, to form fairly substantial lake. It seems doubtful that such a lake would form; although it would be a pleasant location for the Nature Center. It also appears that the area set aside

for nature study and nature trails is relatively small, especially when compared to the size of the golf course. Knowing the popularity of the present expansive nature trail system, it might have been wise to allot more land for this use.

This plan is wholly unrealistic. It works against the history and the character of the area and it is impractical. The cost in 1967 was estimated at two million dollars. It is likely that by the time the plan was implemented the price would have been much higher. In addition, the maintenance of the park would have been phenomenal. The golf course alone would probably have been more than the present maintenance crew could handle. ^{How?} Where was the State planning on raising the revenue that would be required to staff and maintain the facilities? Security would also have been a problem because this plan is very much decentralized, making it very difficult to patrol.

MASTER PLAN REPORT

This plan was prepared by Chas T. Main Inc. (hereafter referred to as Main-Reutter), a Boston Engineering firm, in 1973. The development of this plan was in anticipation of the 1975 bicentennial. It was asserted in the report that:

The State of New Jersey has charged the Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Parks and Forestry, with the task of protecting and preserving unique and significant natural and cultural phenomena and to make them available to the public by such means as will not destroy or degrade these phenomena ... Therefore, it is a charge of this report to ascertain the proper

relationship of the cultural and/or natural phenomena and the type and location of compatible recreation facilities (6-7).

In order to provide this, three types of recreational use are recommended for the park: passive recreation, active recreation, and historic recreation; the latter taking precedence in the allocation of space (19-22). In order to maintain the historical integrity of what could be considered the prime historical area - the region surrounding the McKonkey (Johnson) Ferry House, Main-Reutter recommended the following measures to diminish audio-visual intrusions: "A portion of Route 29 will be reconstructed at a lower elevation to permit the construction of a pedestrian - park vehicle overpass with ramp down to a bridge across the Canal. Electric and telephone utilities will be underground" (20). Main-Reutter also recommended the construction of an Interpretive Center which would orient visitors to the park and its history, and that the land uses and the outbuildings of the revolutionary period be reconstructed in the region surrounding the Ferry House (20).

The areas which were not set aside for use as historic sites were divided into active and passive recreational areas. The following facilities "will create and maintain an environment in which nature will be dominant and the maximum number of people in attendance will be prescribed to guarantee a high quality nature based recreation experience" (22). Main-Reutter recommended the construction of a new Nature Center to better suit the facility's needs, and upgrading the existing amphitheater. They also endorsed the maintenance of the 40 acre field located off of Route 579, known as Phillips farm, for use by large organizations and the development of a transient camping area for overnight family camping in the northwestern corner of the park(22).

In addition to creating the three types of recreational areas, Main-Reutter made the following recommendations to further enhance the park:

- 1) The removal of the Washington Crossing Bridge; and in its place the institution of ferry service, reminiscent of the colonial period (15).
- 2) Landscaped plantings situated all around the borders of the park to provide a buffer zone from the audio-visual intrusions.
- 3) The demolition of the present maintenance area, and construction of a new one on what is now the old entrance road (85).
- 4) The purchase of remaining private lands which are completely surrounded by park property (16).
- 5) A complete replacement of the park roads, including the creation of a new entrance and a contact station (tollbooth) (88).
- 6) The purchase of the Titusville post office and land and the subsequent construction of a small sewage treatment plant on that property (86).
- 7) The phasing out of the current picnic areas and the creation of three new family picnic areas, and one group picnic area (85).

The plans proposed in this report are far more realistic than those of the 1967 plan. They are very much in keeping with the character of the area and they utilize the land effectively, providing sufficient organized recreational areas without encroaching on open and wooded space. With few exceptions (most significantly, the removal of the Washington Crossing Bridge), it would have been in the best interest of the park to fully implement this plan.

While at first glance, the composition of the park today seems to

have very little in common with the proposed 1973 plan. Upon closer examination, it is possible to see that in some form, many of the suggestions made in this report were, at least in part, taken. Unfortunately, the overall effect of this piecemeal implementation lacks the flow and continuity of the master plan. Among the suggestions which were put into effect are the construction of the pedestrian bridge over Route 29, the construction of the Interpretive (Visitor) Center, the institution of a tollbooth and the closing of the additional entrances, and the improvements of the Open Air Theatre. None of these improvements were done in the way that the Master Plan indicated; however, it is clear that they originated from the plan.

Two suggestions that should have been adopted were the transient camping and the relocation of the maintenance area to the old entrance road. Overall, in Mercer County, there is a deficit in family camping areas. The park does have four group campsites which require reservations at least two weeks in advance, but the nearest family campsites, that do not require reservations, are located over a half hour away in Bull's Island State Park. Also, the old entrance road is an ideal location for the maintenance area. It is set apart from most of the park's recreational facilities, it really is not visible from any other portion of the park, and the road is usually only used by local residents who walk or bicycle into the park. The present maintenance area is in what should be a historic area, as it is also the location of the Blackwell House.

The implementation of this plan in its entirety would have been lengthy and costly, but once it was complete, it probably would not have cost much more money-wise and effort-wise to maintain (excluding the

ferry). The basic facilities are the same and although they are located in different areas they are still clustered more or less centrally, facilitating effective security. The one possible exception to this is the transient camping area which is located far away from the rest of the facilities, and could be easily accessed from private properties which abut the park making it difficult to secure. A problem with maintenance could also surface if a great deal more mowing is needed. This activity is very costly in time and labor, especially during the summer months. Despite some minor problems and few unrealistic planning ideas, this plan does seem feasible, and I believe its implementation could have been a success.

Excellent -- you needed to state this earlier because your thorough description gets lost without this context.

WHAT IS REALLY THERE, AND WHY

Rather than being modeled after one plan or one vision, most of the facilities and features of Washington Crossing State Park are the way they are, where they are, because of one of two things. Either there was a need or desire on the part of the state or the public for a specific facility, or the area or building as it existed was suited towards or needed for a certain use. An example of the park fulfilling a need of the state, is the State Nursery. At its inception, the Nursery needed a home, and Washington Crossing was a relatively unestablished park with plenty of space to spare; so it was chosen. The Nursery was moved to Jackson in 1986 because the Crossing was no longer the most feasible location for it. There are still however, several stands of white and red pines to remind the visitor that it existed there for many years.

The public needs to play a large part in what facilities are available in the park. Many organizations, or special interest groups, use the park to house their facilities. For example, there is an observatory located near the Nature Center that is owned and operated solely by the Princeton Amateur Astronomer's Association. Another instance of this are the radio-controlled model airplane fliers. They used to fly their planes over the Phillips Farm area. Then they joined together and formed an official club. A small "airport," in one of the back fields, was constructed for them, and it may only be used by members of the club.

As an example of the land presenting itself as appropriate for a certain use, I submit the story of the Open Air Theatre. In 1966 there was a severe storm that swept through the park bringing heavy rainfall. The Steele Run Creek (which must have contained more water then, than it does now) flooded and washed out a sort of basin at the base of a gently sloping hill. When the Superintendent, Dirk VanDommelen, was patrolling the park after the storm, he came upon this area and he saw that a natural amphitheater had been created. The next summer the Open Air Theatre had its first performance. In the beginning the area was altered very little - stage lighting was minimal, and audience members brought their own blankets and lawn chairs and sat on the hill. Today, the stage is covered with gravel, a platform has been placed in the creek to serve as a small orchestra pit, there are buildings off-stage to hold sets and to provide dressing rooms for the cast, park benches have been installed on the hill and the aisles have been paved. There also is a box office, a concession stand, rest-rooms, and a lighting shack. What hasn't changed is that the Open Air Theatre is still one of

the most popular features of the park, and the musicals that are presented there continue to delight the audience, whether it is their first season at the O.A.T. or their twentieth.

Many of the properties acquired for the park already had buildings on them, some of which were in extremely poor condition and were demolished, but others, like the Lippencott house, were in fairly good condition and invited use. The Nature Center exists today where it does because the Lippencott house was an adequate building in an appropriate area, and it was cheaper to use it than to construct a new building. The Park Office was moved to the Bear Tavern when it outgrew the tiny "Ranger Room" located in the maintenance area.

In addition to responding to what is available, planning in the park is also regulated by three limiting factors: the budget, maintenance, and security. An example of how the budget and security have altered the park is Chestnut Grove, which used to be located just past Greene Grove. The site was not designed to receive heavy use. The access road and the parking lot were both stone and gravel and the road was only about 1½ lanes wide. There were no bathroom facilities and no source of safe drinking water. In order for the grove to accommodate the use it was getting these problems would have to have been solved. In addition, the area was being used frequently for beer parties - it was difficult to secure (Emery Int.). As there was neither the money, nor the man-power to make the necessary improvements, the area was closed.

The arboretum, or what is supposed to be the arboretum, is an example of how lack of maintenance manpower limits what facilities are offered. The arboretum is located in the southwestern corner of the

park and is about 5-6 acres in size. Over the years there have been many different attempts at an affordable and lasting method of labeling the trees. All have failed. In the summer of 1988, the superintendent, Jim Wiles, decided it was time to rejuvenate the arboretum. He busied the maintenance crews with cleaning out the beds of ferns, pachysandra, and flowering shrubs when they weren't occupied with more routine duties. I was assigned the job of keying out the trees, creating the labels (made of "punched out" brass tags with genus, species, and common name, screwed to 3"x4" blocks of wood), and nailing the labels to the trees. I was assured that this was the method that would work. After a summer of Sunday mornings spent working on the arboretum I had labeled probably less than 10 percent of the trees, and the maintenance guys had been almost fully occupied by their routine duties, so there wasn't much difference in the beds. Two years later, my labels are corroding and falling off, and the perennial beds look as overgrown as they did before. The moral to this story is that what can be done in the park is very much limited by whether or not it can be maintained. As it stands now, there is not enough manpower to do much more than the most basic (and sometimes not even that) upkeep of the grounds and the buildings.

THE FUTURE

The proposed future for Washington Crossing is outlined in the Ten Year Management Plan written by the current superintendent, James Apffel. According to this plan, the goal of the park is "1. To preserve for historical interpretation the site where General George Washington crossed the Delaware River during the American Revolution. 2. To

provide recreational opportunities based on the public's needs and demands" (2). Mr. Apffel stated that he wants to continue emphasizing the educational and interpretive aspects of the park while making some much needed improvements in the already-existing facilities.

The first improvement in Mr. Apffel's plan is the construction of a new reception center which is to be located to the right of the tollbooth upon entering the park. This center would house the administrative facilities now found in the Park Office and the tollbooth. In addition, the center would serve as an information center for visitors - freeing the Visitor Center from its burden of orienting park visitors and allowing it to function solely as a museum.

Next, Mr. Apffel hopes to construct a new maintenance complex adjacent to the old one. The area needs expansion, and the present buildings are old and inadequate. Originally the old maintenance buildings were slated for demolition after the construction was complete, but as they were built by the W.P.A., they are historic sites and cannot be demolished. According to Mr. Apffel, this is not a problem, because the buildings can be used as garages for maintenance and patrol vehicles, storage, and as a headquarters for the prison crew that does maintenance in the park. The field in which the proposed Maintenance Complex would be constructed is one of the best sites in the park for it. The field is unused (I have never seen anyone in it), and it is pretty much blocked from sight by a dense border of spruce trees which surround it.

The third major improvement in Mr. Apffel's Ten Year Plan involves the Nature Center. Ideally, a new facility was to have been built in the Cedar Bliss area, but the plans for that have already been vetoed.

In lieu of a new building, Mr. Apffel stated that he would be satisfied if an addition was built on to the present building to provide workshop space, something the Nature Center is sorely lacking, and if Brick Yard Rd., the approach to the Nature Center, was paved. Right now, the road surface is coarse gravel and rock and must be graded several times a year.

These plans are just proposals. Whether or not they will move from ideas on paper to buildings on land is contingent on several factors. First, approval must be received from the Historic sites Council, the Regional Superintendent, John Garcia (a representative of the Office of Planning and Policy[?]), the Department of Improvements, and the Bureau of Grounds (Apffel Int.). Second, none of the plans will become reality if capital improvement funds are not made available, and judging from the current economic crisis within the state, it is not likely that those funds will be forthcoming.

CONCLUSION

After reading the preceding analysis, it is possible that the impression that Washington Crossing St. Pk. is a deteriorating, unkempt, ineffective, second-rate facility may have been given. This is not the case. There can be no argument that with a more generous budget there would be many possibilities for the Crossing, but considering what is available, the park has much to offer.

Educationally speaking, there are several options open to the public. The Visitor Center is a superior facility, housing a large portion of the Swan collection of Revolutionary artifacts. Also, thanks

largely to the enthusiasm of its curator, the Ferry House is more than a dusty old home. It operates much of the week as a living history museum - providing a unique opportunity to see eighteenth century farm life in action. The Nature Center runs programs throughout the year for school groups, day camps, and the general public, and is open daily to those who prefer to explore on their own.

According to the 1984 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, in Mercer County there a deficiency of supply of the following activities: freshwater boating, boat fishing, horseback riding, basketball, camping, and playground activities (Apffel 10). Three of these: camping, playgrounds, and horse trails, are provided in the park. In addition, the river and the canal are popular spots for both freshwater fishing and boating. Washington Crossing St. Pk. fulfills an important need in Mercer County, providing not only these, but many other recreational facilities.

While it is true that Washington Crossing State Park was developed in a rather unorganized and piecemeal fashion and some of the present facilities are in need of improvements, this does not seem to detract from the public's enjoyment of the park. The physical organization of the recreational opportunities could be better, but it is not likely that the average visitor would be aware of this. What is more important is that Washington Crossing is an important asset to Mercer County, providing much needed recreational space, and that the quality of the educational and interpretive offerings which do exist are first-rate, regardless of their location.

*A careful + a fine ~~piece~~ piece
of work -- good analysis & well
formed.*

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