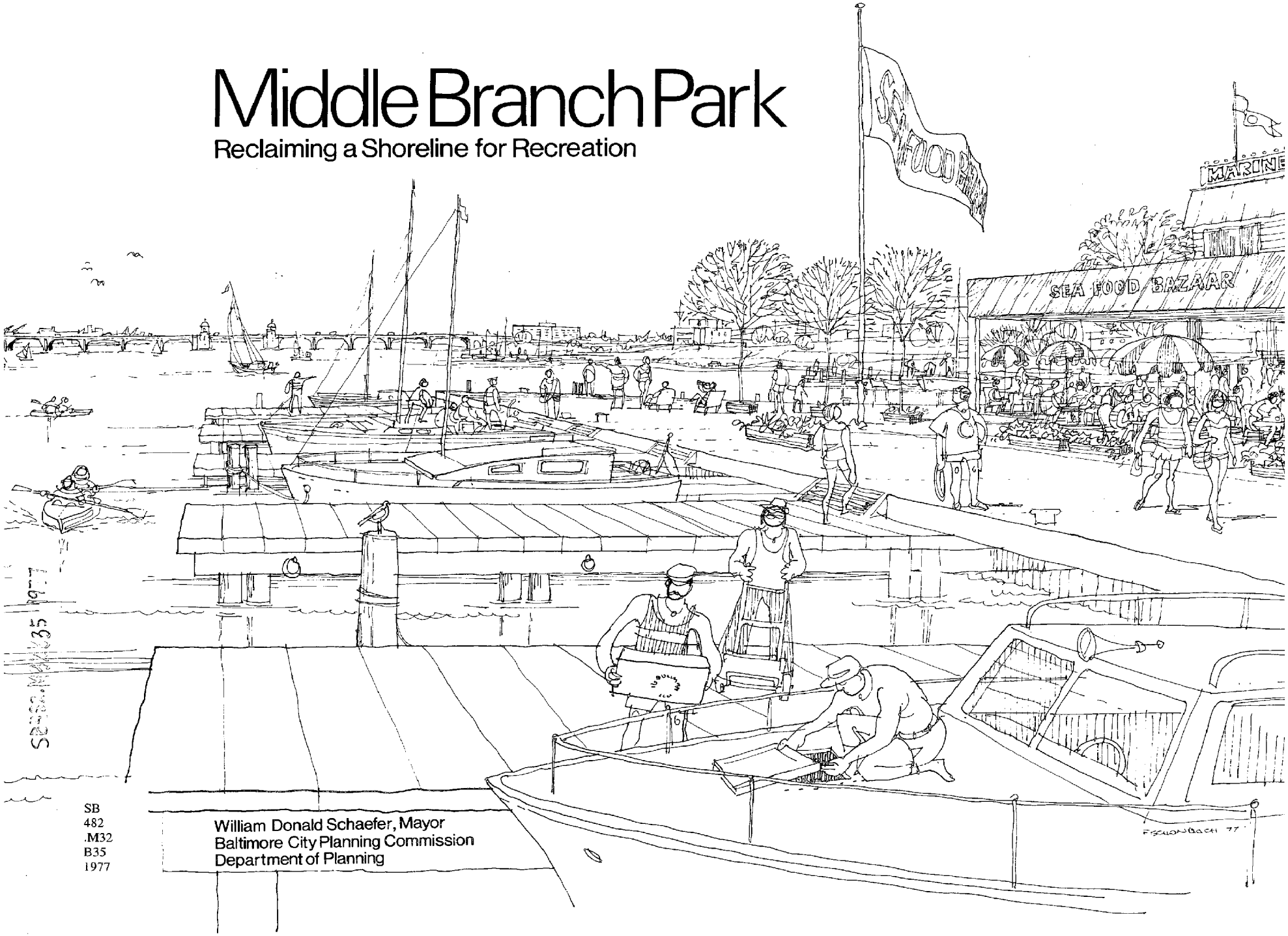
Middle Branch Park

Reclaiming a Shoreline for Recreation



William Donald Schaefer, Mayor
Baltimore City Planning Commission
Department of Planning

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Fellow Baltimoreans:

This plan for the Middle Branch represents an important contribution to the future of our City. Rarely does a city Baltimore's age have an opportunity to reclaim such an extensive area for increased recreational use.

The plan clearly points out many exciting opportunities for boating, aquatic study, bicycling and other leisure-time activities. With its less developed shoreline, the Middle Branch complements the more densely developed Inner Harbor, offering Baltimoreans one more important water resource.

The opportunities identified here are real. This is an action plan which will be carried through over the next decade. Plans like this insure that today's dreams become tomorrow's realities. Through it, we will create a park system along the Middle Branch which will be enjoyed for many generations to come.

Sincerely,

William Donald Schaefer

Mayor

The preparation of this report was financed in part through funding by a grant from the Office of Coastal Zone Management, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, under the provisions of the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972.

Overview

The Middle Branch of the Patapsco River is a natural resource of significant unrealized potential. With six miles of shoreline and 416 acres of water area, it is 20 times the size of the City's Inner Harbor. Through careful planning and development, this water body could become the City's most extensive shoreline recreation facility.

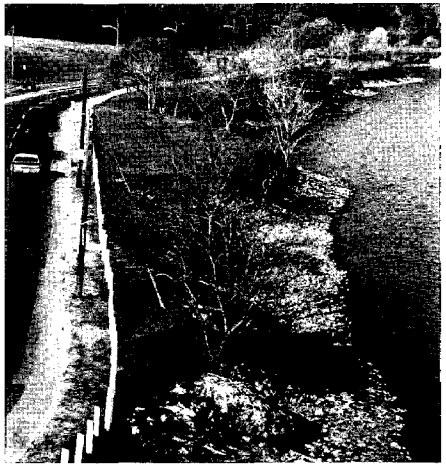
Today, however, the water's edge has fallen into neglect. It is strewn with debris, junked cars, and rotting buildings. The water is polluted by the outfall from the Gwynns Falls and several major storm drains. These problems are compounded by deep accumulations of silt which severely restrict the types of development possible along the water's edge.

The Middle Branch is surrounded by a diversity of industrial and commercial concerns, isolated residential communities, and parkland. Although water-related trade once played a role in the movement of goods, today only one industry still uses barges.

Major uses along the shoreline include the Western Maryland Railroad storage yard, Swann Park, Baltimore Gas and Electric Company's Spring Garden Station, Carroll Industrial Park, the City's Pyrolysis Plant, B.G.&E.'s Westport Power Generating Plant, and the Carr-Lowery Company's glass manufacturing facility. There are also numerous smaller concerns located landward. The underutilized Broening Park and several auto junk yards occupy the south shoreline along Waterview Avenue. Open space continues south, past the South Baltimore General Hospital, to the proposed Reedbird/Patapsco Park.

Several residential areas are near the Middle Branch: Cherry Hill occupies a large tract of land to the south Westport is situated between Russell Street and the industry on the western shore; and the South Baltimore community is clustered along Hanover Street and to the east.

The plan which follows describes the Middle Branch area in detail, assesses its problems, and identifies proposals to restore the water body to its rightful status as an important City recreational resource.



Photos by Alain Jaramillo

Left:
Hanover Street Bridge
Photo by Alain Jaramillo

Right:
1917 view of Hanover Street Bridge and Light Street Bridge

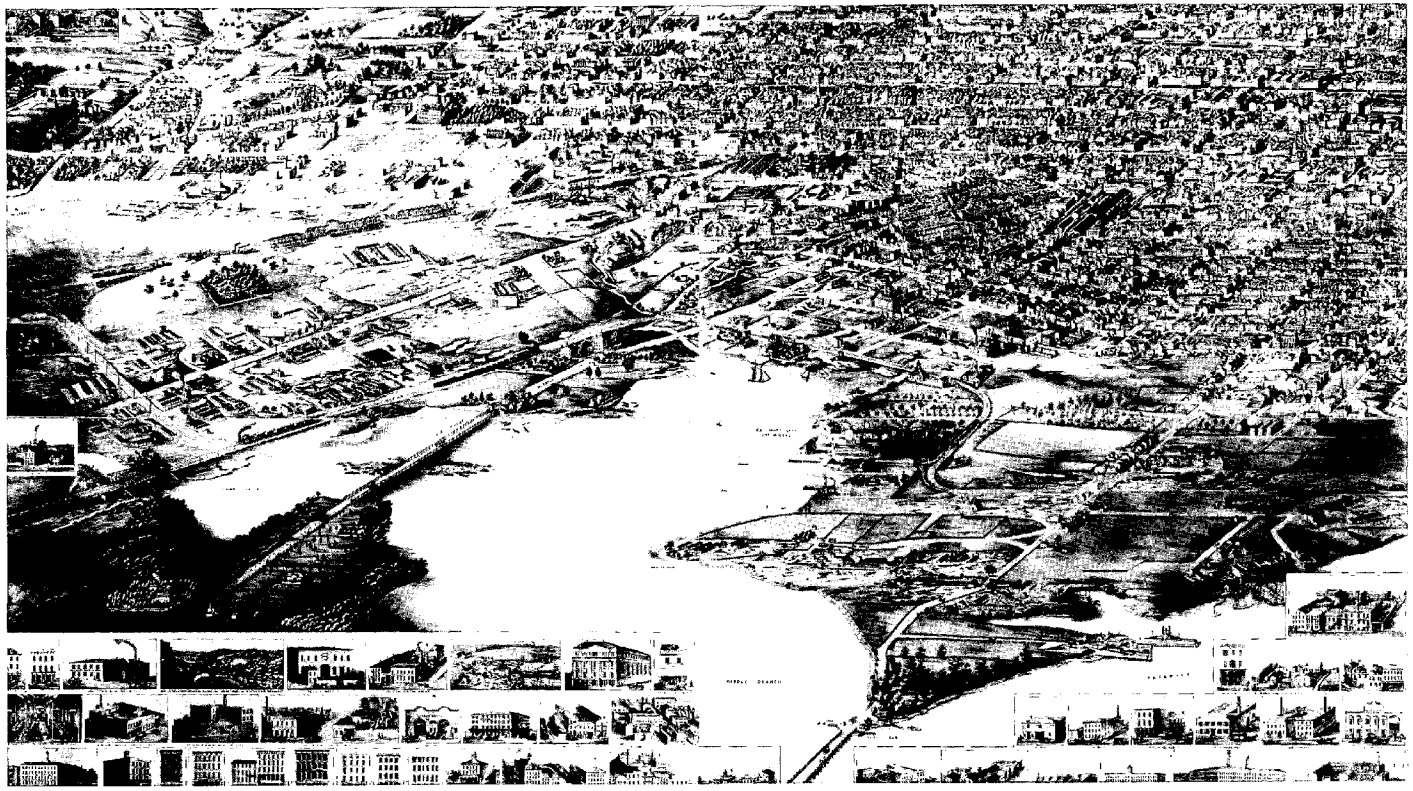


Illustration courtesy of the Peale Museum

Above:
Detail of 1869 lithograph of Middle Branch area

History

Because of better access to transportation, flatter topography, and an abundance of marketable natural resources, development of the north and northwest shores of the Middle Branch began in the early 18th century. By contrast, much of the south shore remained rural until the 20th century, with wooded areas, dairy farms, fish houses, piers, and informal swimming areas.

Near the beginning of the 18th century, iron ore was discovered near what is now Mount Winans, and an iron furnace was erected at the mouth of the Gwynns Falls. In the 1720's, when settlers began looking for a site to incorporate the town which eventually became Baltimore, they considered the Middle Branch area. However, the owners of the furnace discouraged the settlement for fear it might disrupt their profitable business. As a result, the site for the new city was moved northward to what is known today as the Inner Harbor.

Large amounts of clay deposits were also found near the mouth of the Gwynns Falls, and a number of brickyards were constructed in the area during the early 1800's. The bricks were used locally for much of the rowhouse construction of the period.

Endowed with rich marshes, a wooded shoreline, and water full of shad, herring, perch, and rock fish, the Middle Branch also became an important recreation area for the growing city. In the early 1800's, a Mr. Fletcher opened a summer garden at the foot of an extended Howard Street. The resort was named "Spring Gardens" after the numerous fresh springs which flowed into the Middle Branch.

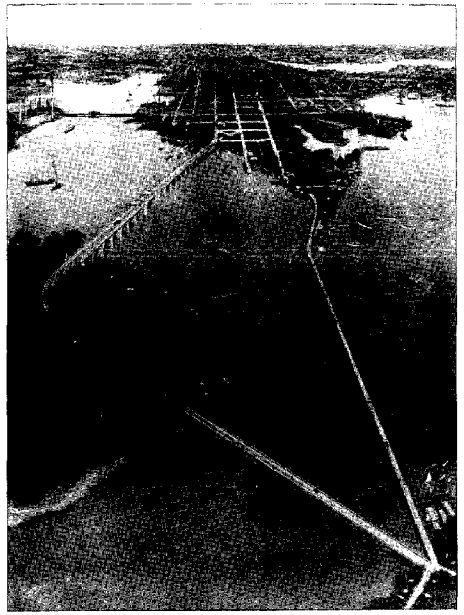


Illustration courtesy of the Peale Museum

By 1815, Fletcher had expanded operations to a site on the south shore, establishing the elegant resort, Fletcher's Fish House, where vistors could enjoy day-long outings and fine cuisine. By 1850, the original resort on the north shore had been closed and replaced by the Baltimore Gas Light Company's Spring Garden facility.

The 1850's also marked the beginning of a long-standing interest in the Middle Branch area by engineer and inventor Ross Winans. Winans built a shipyard on what is now the Western Maryland Railroad's Port Covington yard to produce his iron "cigar ship," a 19th-century precursor of the submarine. During the same period, Winans also built greenhouses and cottages for his staff, thus founding the Mount Winans community, which still bears his name. Later, in the early 1870's, he invested some $400,000 to build more extensive housing for a community of workers.

Other development along the north and northwest shores during the mid-19th century included a few breweries, coal yards, a glass factory, and some residential developments similar to Winans'.

By the 1880's Westport, on the west shore, only consisted of eleven houses, a glass factory, Mulbach's dairy, and a brewery. However, it experienced relatively rapid change over the next ten years, acquiring a substantial amount of new housing, as well as a firehouse, meeting hall, and train station.

The mouth of the Gwynns Falls was originally wide and swampy, not taking on today's configuration until the early 20th century. The Falls was crossed by Harmon's Bridge to Russell Street and much of this low area was used as a City landfill. Bush and Bayard Streets ended in docks which continued to operate until the late 19th century. In 1904, the Western Maryland Railroad built a branch line through Mount Winans and Westport, eventually to cross the Middle Branch and tie into the company's Port Covington docks. In 1905, the first foundation for the Westport power complex was laid.

The completion of the Hanover Street Bridge in 1916 opened Brooklyn, Fairfield, Hawkins Point, and Cherry Hill to increased residential and industrial growth. In 1919, these areas were annexed to the City.

During the 1920's, portions of the shoreline changed as industries built new facilities or re-occupied older structures. In 1924, the Western Maryland Railroad completed the existing bridge across the Middle Branch.

Most recently, there have been three major changes in the Middle Branch area. The Baltimore Gas and Electric Company was granted a permit in 1976 to fill in seven acres of shoreline at the Spring Garden facility. A similar permit was granted in the same year for the filling of ten acres at the City's Central Garage on Dickman Street. Construction of segments of Interstate 95 and Interstate 395, which intersect in the Middle Branch area, began in 1976. I-395 will provide a link between I-95 and the downtown, via the proposed City Boulevard.

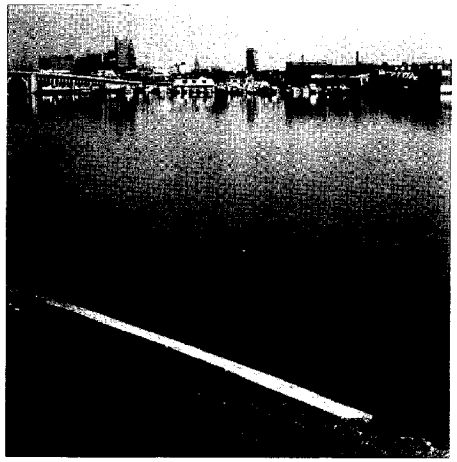


Photo by Alain Jaramillo

Left:
Looking north toward Hanover Street Bridge, 1935

Photo courtesy of the Peale Museum

Above:
Same view today

Industry Analysis

Several industries dominate the Middle Branch. Moving westward around the shoreline from the north side of the Hanover Street Bridge, the major industries include:

City of Baltimore Central Garage: Used for the repair and storage of City vehicles, a portion of the property also serves as a landfill for demolition debris.
Western Maryland Railroad: This large storage area is a staging station for goods to be shipped out of Port Covington.
Allied Chemical Company: The plant, which is now closed, lies in the path of I-95, and will be demolished.
Baltimore Gas & Electric Company's Spring Garden Gas Storage Facility: Fill is being used to create an additional seven acres of land for storing the company's equipment. This is one of B.G.&E.'s major storage facilities.

Carroll Industrial Park: This area consists of parcels of vacant land and many smaller industries. Using Federal funds and the City's Industrial Loan Program, there will be improvements to streets, parking, and lighting to interest industries in locating here.

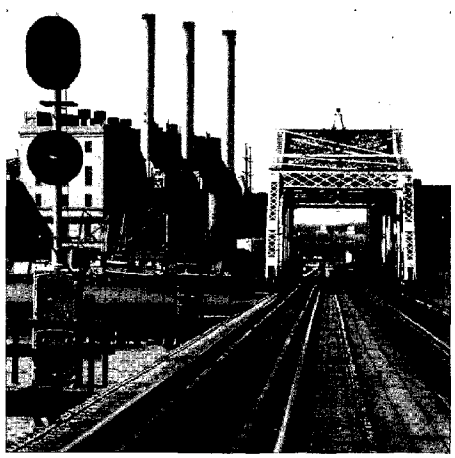


Photo by Alain Jaramillo

Pyrolysis Plant: The City's experimental waste reduction facility sits on the peninsula east of Russell Street, near the mouth of the Gwynns Falls.
Baltimore Gas & Electric Company's Westport Generating Station: This plant generates electricity for the entire downtown area.

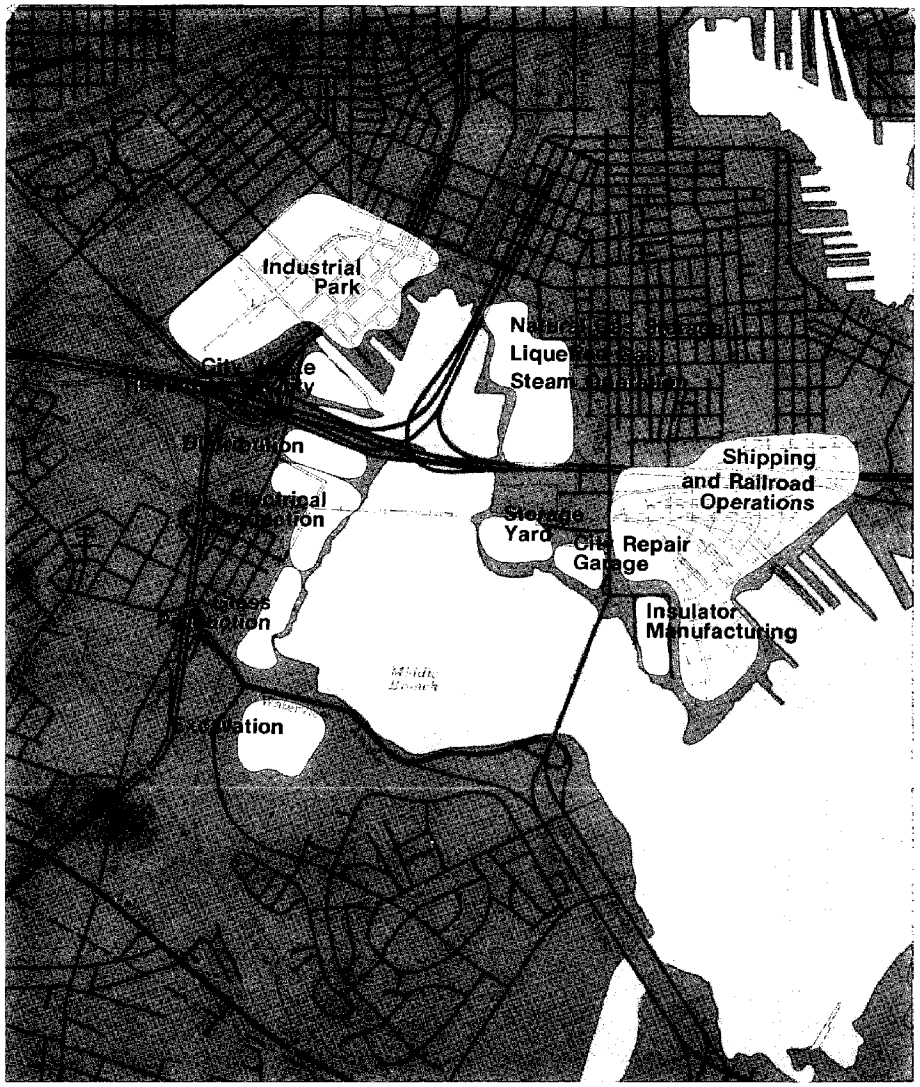
Carr-Lowery Glass Manufacturing Company: Employing 1,200 persons in the production of glass jars and bottles, Carr-Lowery received a fill permit in 1976 to allow expansion of their furnace facilities. This has enabled the plant to increase productivity and maintain present employment levels.

Besides these major industries, the south shore includes a mix of truck parking lots, auto scrap yards, a motel, undeveloped public open space, and two marinas.

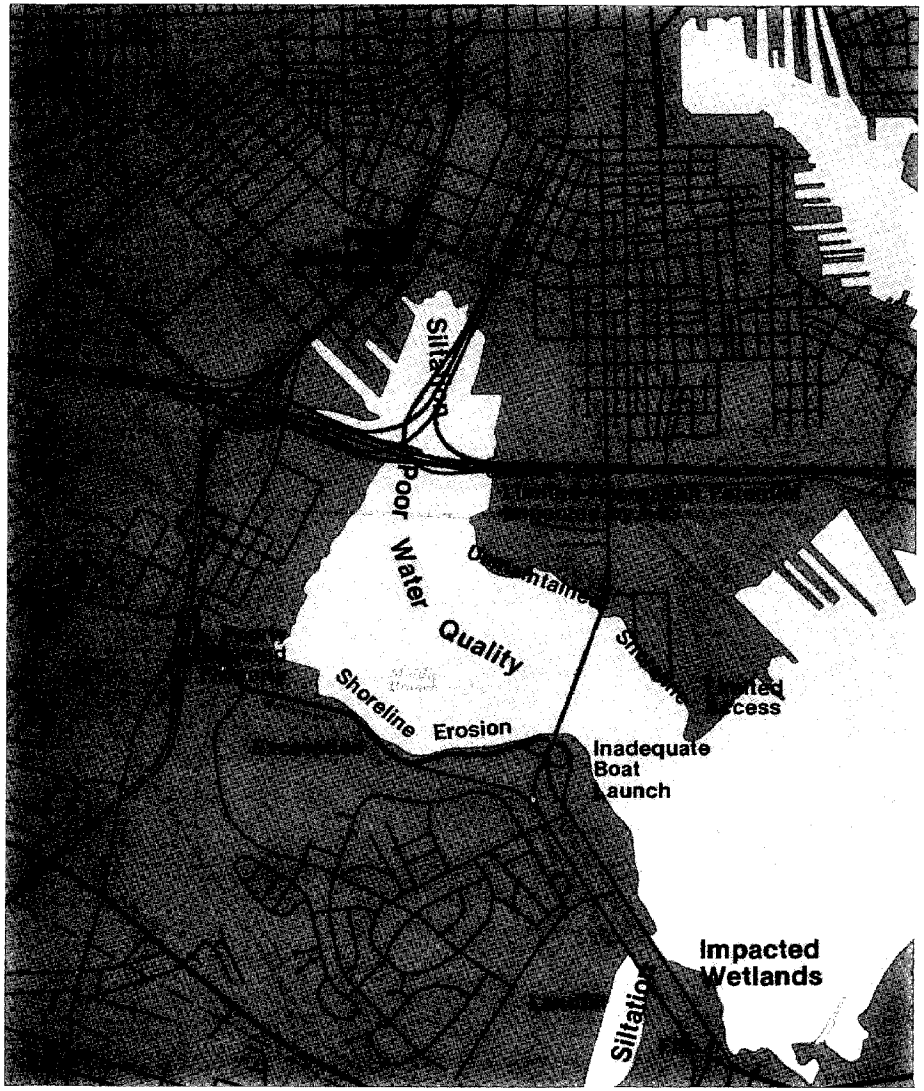
Employment at Middle Branch industries has been stable in the past and is expected to remain stable in the future, with the possibility of increased employment at the Carr-Lowery Company and new industrial development in Carroll Industrial Park. The only potential site for development, located near the intersection of Waterview Avenue and Cherry Hill Road, is under consideration for an industrial warehousing park.

Except for a few barges to the Baltimore Gas and Electric Company's Westport Station, water-borne commerce is non-existent along the Middle Branch. Although the Spring Garden Channel, which extends from the Hanover Street Bridge north to the Western Maryland Railroad bridge, was last dredged by the Corps of Engineers in 1960, it is still deep enough for the barges and for pleasure boats. The responsibility for maintaining the channel belongs to the Corps of Engineers, which has no plans to dredge it.

Left:
B.G.&E. Westport Generating Station



Above:
Middle Branch industries



Above:
Existing problems

Summary of Problems

The problems of the Middle Branch area fall into three major categories:

Conflicting Land Use: First, there is a conflict between adjacent neighborhoods and the various junk yards, scrap metal operations, and storage yards, which often do not maintain a high standard of operation. While some of these problems are being addressed in the improvement program for Carroll Industrial Park in the northern portion of the Middle Branch, considerable attention will be required along Waterview Avenue and in the Westport community.

A second land use problem is the fragmentation and isolation of recreation space. Interspersed between industries and with almost no direct connections to residential areas or other recreation facilities, the open space along the Middle Branch is severely underutilized.

Access: Traffic to most Middle Branch industries uses neighborhood streets in the Westport, Cherry Hill, and South Baltimore communities. The heavy truck traffic in these areas has created safety problems, divided parts of neighborhoods from one another, and generally lowered the liveability of these areas through noise and exhaust pollution. The completion of I-95 and I-395 is expected to relieve these problems somewhat. However, many areas will still be burdened with undesirable levels of truck traffic.

Another access problem is the difficulty of reaching the open space along the shoreline, particularly the south shoreline in the vicinity of South Baltimore General Hospital. Heavily trafficked Hanover Street, Potee Street, and Waterview Avenue set up barriers between the Cherry Hill community and the waterfront. Even motorists find it difficult to reach the shoreline under the present street configuration.

Water Quality: The Middle Branch has for many years received urban runoff and silt from the Gwynns Falls and major storm drains. Overflow from inadequate sanitary sewers, discharges from industrial concerns, debris, and storm runoff, carrying dirt, oil, and asphalt from city streets, have turned the Middle Branch into an unpleasant, polluted water body which currently supports only the most minimal forms of aquatic life. Deposits of silt, in several areas reaching a depth of 60 feet, have fused with heavy metals and other toxic substances. Aggravating these already serious problems, traces of the carcinogen Kepone from the former Allied Chemical Plant have been found both in the water and the soil around the plant.

Efforts are now underway to remedy the most severe aspects of the pollution problems. Completion of the Southwest Diversion Main should curtail sewage overflows and enable many faulty septic tanks to be eliminated. Proposals to clean up the shoreline have been included in the Carroll Industrial Park plan. The fill permits for the Baltimore Gas and Electric Company, Carr-Lowery, and the City's Central Garage should also promote a cleaner and more stable shoreline by insuring that the type and amount of fill are monitored.

To protect the public from possible exposure to Kepone, soil in the area of Swann Park adjacent to the former Allied Chemical Plant has been covered with clay. A special committee of State and local health officials is monitoring the site and dealing with any problems that arise.

The combination of improved water quality and a stabilized shoreline free from debris will provide the basis for water-oriented recreational activities on the Middle Branch.

The Plan

Numerous studies have cited the potential for creating a major public, water-oriented recreation area along the Middle Branch. The protected nature of this water body makes possible recreational boating and marine activities not feasible in other active areas of the port. The Middle Branch Park Plan, prepared by the Department of Planning, maps out specific actions that can be taken to restore the derelict water body and create Baltimore's largest shoreline park.

The plan calls for the creation of a park around portions of the perimeter of the Middle Branch, threaded together by a continuous pedestrian/bikeway trail. The goal is to provide maximum access to the water and to increase recreational opportunities. The plan proposes the creation of boat launches, marinas, playfields, fishing piers, open green spaces, picnic areas, wetlands, and a water resource instructional facility. Easy access to the park will be provided by the new I-95 and I-395 expressways, Hanover Street, Russell Street, and by new pedestrian connections to adjacent residential communities. In addition, the park's pedestrian/bike trail will connect directly with the bike and pedestrian paths in Gwynns Falls Park and Patapsco State Park and with a pedestrian/bike trail from the Inner Harbor and Federal Hill.

Specific improvements called for in the plan are:

Swann Park Relocation: Swann Park will be relocated south of the Western Maryland Railroad tracks and west of the Dickman Street Garage to a site presently used by the railroad for open storage of crated auto parts. The relocation, which will be accomplished through a land exchange with the railroad, has several important advantages.

First, it moves the park away from industry and the new highway which would have completely surrounded it. (To protect the existing park from excessive noise levels, the City would have had to build an expensive sound barrier. At the proposed site, a much less costly barrier will be required.)

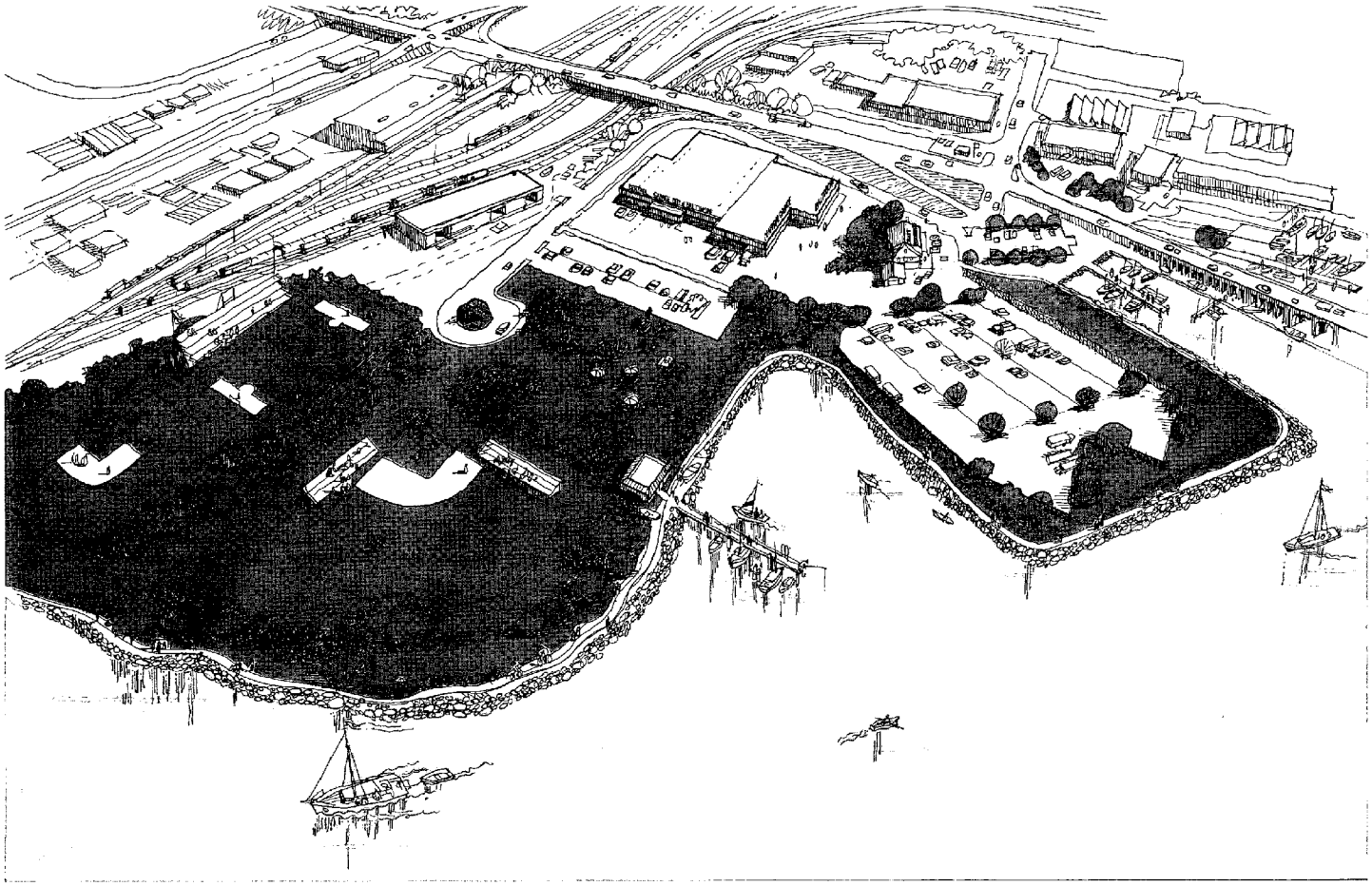


Illustration by Fred Schonbach

Second, it provides the railroad with improved storage capacity, a larger site, and more direct access to City streets and the Port Covington marine terminal. The railroad will be able to use the existing Swann Park and several acres located under Interstate 95. Direct access to the site will be provided by McComas Street.

Third, the relocated Swann Park will provide a larger park area with a shoreline directly connected to public access along the Central Garage fill site. The proposed park will contain all the facilities of the existing park, as well as additional athletic fields, a pier, picnic areas, bike and pedestrian trails, and access to over a half-mile of shoreline.

It will take several years to complete the complex legal arrangements involved in the land exchange. If the exchange occurs, the relocation will be accomplished in phases to assure public access to a ballfield at all times. The new park will be constructed using funds from the sale of additional acreage to the railroad and possibly replacement funds from the highway. Additional improvements to the shoreline park will require State Waterway Improvement funds, U.S. Bureau of Outdoor Recreation funds, State Open Space funds, and City loan funds.

Above:
Relocated Swann Park

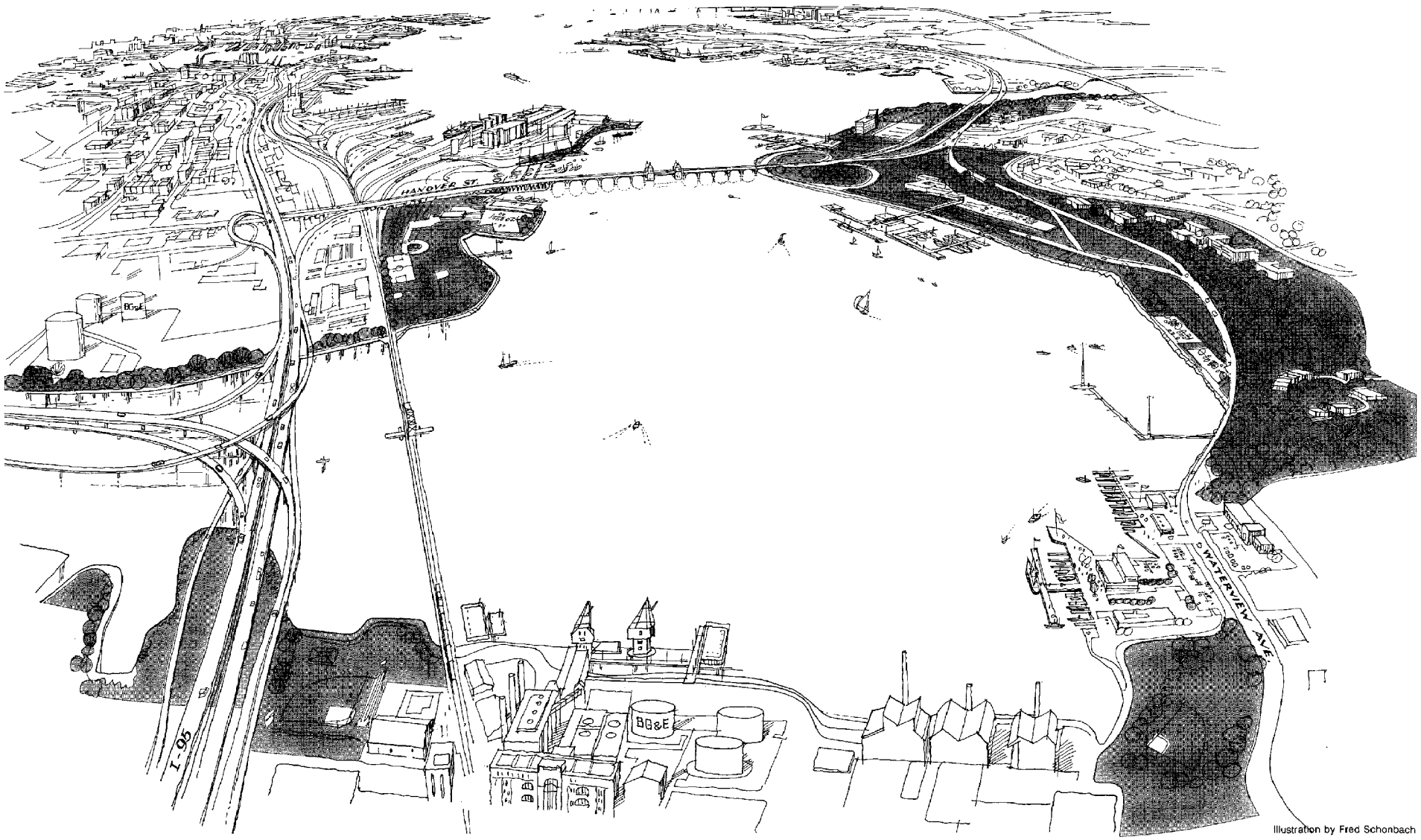


Illustration by Fred Schonbach

Above:
Middle Branch Park Plan

Fold out this page for Middle Branch Park Plan

Ferry Bar Site: The Federal government is scheduled to give a portion of this small peninsula at the foot of Light Street to the City in late 1977; it will be landscaped and improved with a pier for pleasure boats, a small picnic area, and a lookout park. A private developer has applied for a permit to expand the marina located near Light Street, adjacent to the Ferry Bar site.

Marina (North Shore): This 150-slip marina, located between Hanover Street and the Locke Insulator Company, has been improved by its owner over the past several years and will be expanded to provide a maximum of 400 slips. The Middle Branch Park Plan encourages this expansion, and calls for additional marinas along the south and west shorelines.

Jake's Restaurant: Plans are under review for improvements to this restaurant located at the northern end of the Hanover Street Bridge. The owner will make building and site improvements which will tie the restaurant more closely into the new public access to be provided along the shoreline.

Central Garage Landfill: This landfill for demolition debris will reach capacity in approximately two years. Once completely full, it will be landscaped, paths for pedestrians will be provided along the water's edge, and small landscaped hills will be built to screen the operation of the Central Garage from the public access area.

Bottom:
Proposed marina along Waterview Avenue

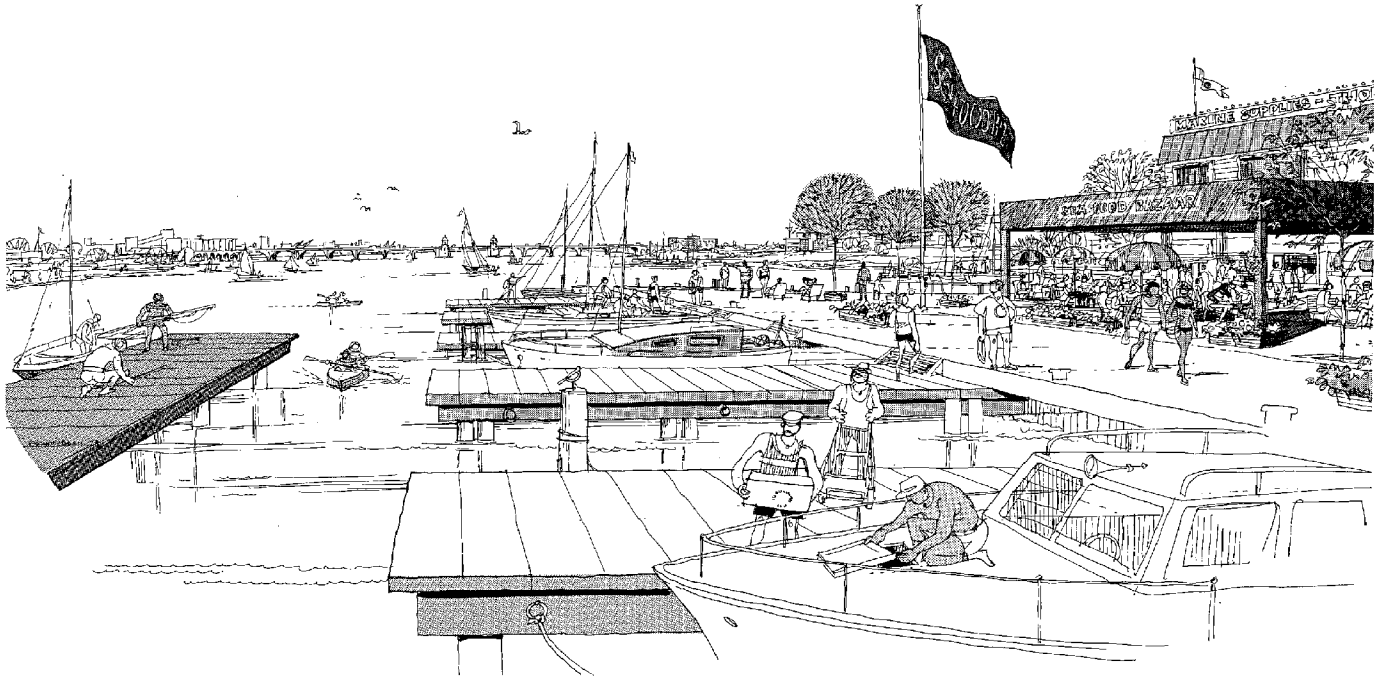


Illustration by Fred Schonbach

Marina/Recreation Area (Waterview Avenue): The junkyards on Waterview Avenue, near Cherry Hill Road, are proposed to be cleared and combined with vacant land to create a site for a large marina and support facility. The marina will have parking, repair facilities, a large boat launching ramp, and permanent moorings. A portion of the site will also be used for ballfields, open green space, a restaurant, and picnic areas. Development of the marina will be a joint public/private endeavor.

Landscaped Pedestrian Easements: Several industrial concerns will provide easements for a landscaped pedestrian/bikeway trail along the waterfront. These include easements on the Baltimore Gas and Electric Company's new fill site, behind firms in the Carroll Industrial Park, and on the City's Pyrolysis Plant site. At the Pyrolysis Plant, an overlook has been created at the water's edge. A pedestrian/bike path will connect the Inner Harbor and the Gwynns Falls bike trails with the Patapsco State park system. Funding for landscaping and creating the pedestrian/bike trail in the northern portion is expected to come from the Federal Highway Administration during the upcoming year, with construction commencing during the next two to three years.

Water Resources Center: This proposed facility would be used to teach water safety, swimming, boating, and the ecology of an urban water body. There might also be special provisions for studies and observation of methods to improve water quality, with the Middle Branch serving as a test area. The City would encourage concerned agencies of the Federal and State governments and private research groups to experiment with various techniques to return a degraded, urbanized water body to an acceptable level of purity. City school students and the general public would be able to observe these experiments and gain a greater understanding of the functions of an urban water system.

Classrooms and laboratories would be located in the triangle of land bounded by Waterview Avenue, Potee Street, and Hanover Street and would be connected by a walkway over Waterview Avenue to piers and a swimming/boating area.

This project will require the joint investment of City, State, Federal and private funds. Within the year, applications for funds to develop the center will be filed with the U.S. Bureau of Outdoor Recreation and the State Waterway Improvement Fund; discussions will be held with private and public research groups to interest them in locating at the center; and special grant requests will be made to the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare for support of an environmental studies program for the City's school children. The actual operation of the center would be the combined responsibility of the City's Department of Recreation and Parks and Department of Education.

Middle Branch Park

(1) **Ferry Bar Site:** The City will provide landscaping, a picnic area, a pleasure boat pier, and a lookout park.

(2) **Pedestrian Paths, Marina, Boat Launch:** Pedestrian access to the water and landscaping will be provided along the shoreline of the Central Garage fill area. The existing private marina and boat launch near the Hanover Street Bridge may be expanded. The City will encourage improvements to the existing restaurant.

(3) **Relocated Swann Park:** Swann Park will be relocated to the present site of the Western Maryland storage yards. There will be two ballfields and a lighted football/soccer field. Access will be provided along the shoreline connecting the Central Garage site and the bikeway/pedestrian pathway system north to the Inner Harbor area. The new park will be landscaped and will contain picnic sports, a pier, and new parking facilities.

(4) **Landscaped Pedestrian Easements:** The north shoreline will be developed with pedestrian trails and bikeways. There will also be improvements to the water's edge, including cleaning and landscaping and the possible creation of a wetlands area.

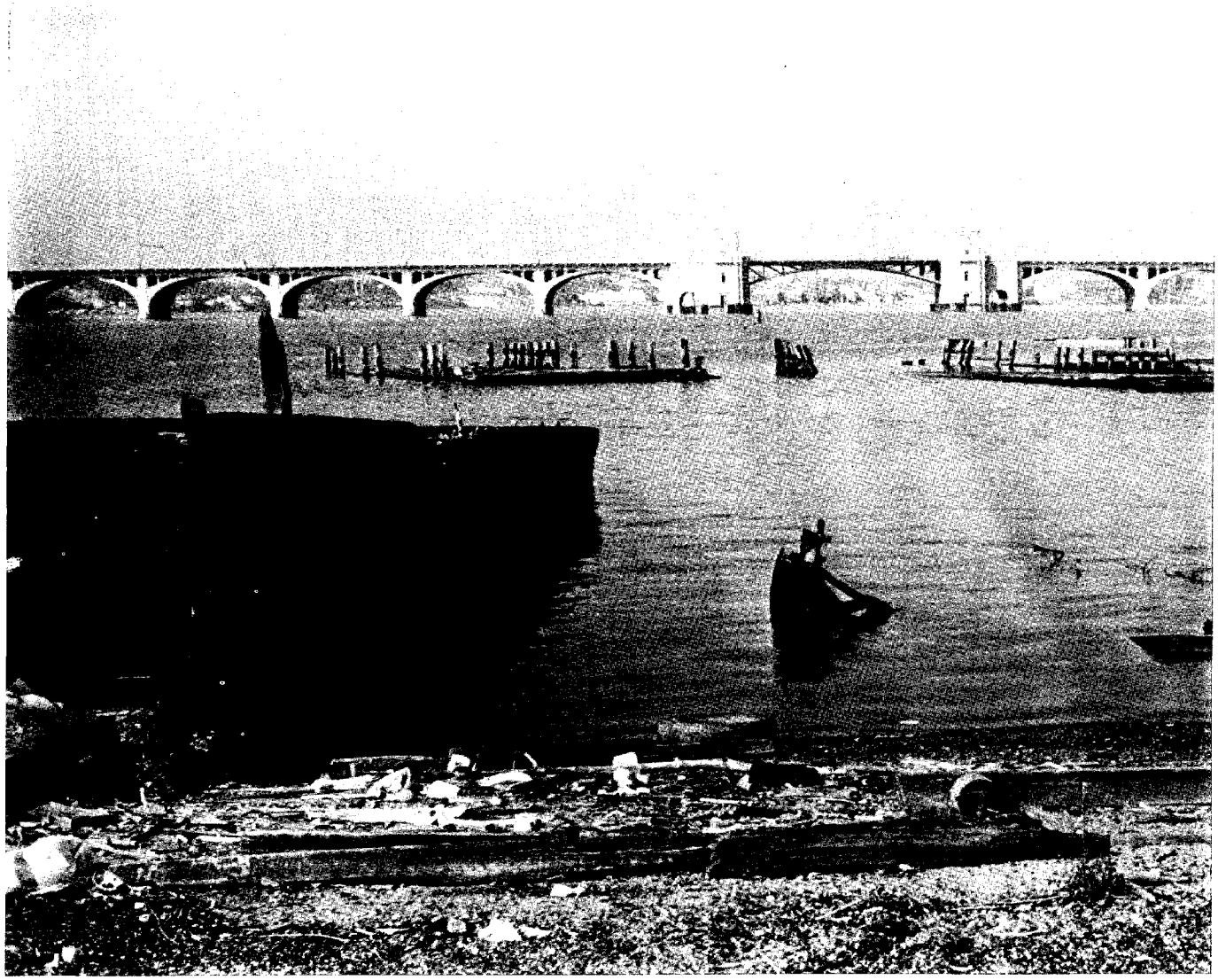
(5) **Pedestrian/Bike Trail:** This landscaped trail will link the Gwynns Falls bikeway to the Middle Branch Park and Patapsco State Park system.

6 Boat Launch/Marina: Existing junkyards will be replaced by a major marina with permanent moorings, a launch, and repair facilities. The area will also include a restaurant, parking, picnic areas, and athletic fields. This will be a joint public/private project.

7 Water Resources Center: Proposed to provide a unique educational opportunity to the youth of Baltimore, the facility will contain classrooms and laboratories to study water quality and the effects of urban runoff and to test methods of improving the water. As part of this program there will be extensive facilities for instruction in water safety, swimming, and boating. A number of small sailboats, rowboats, and other water craft will be located at the center for instruction. This will be operated by the Department of Recreation and Parks and Education, with the aid of private water research and safety groups.

8 Boat Launch, Marina, Shops, Restaurant: This will be a combination of facilities designed for both the boating enthusiast and those people who simply like to watch water-related activities. The City will expand its existing boat launch, and private developers will be encouraged to construct a large marina and service facility. A group of shops, a restaurant, and doctors' offices will be located on the shoreline adjacent to a long, public pier. This facility should serve both the general public and visitors and employees of the South Baltimore General Hospital. The area will be tied to the rest of the park by a pedestrian/bike trail.

9 *Reedbird/Patapsco Park:* This former landfill site will be converted into a large park linking Middle Branch Park to the Patapsco State Park system. Active, water-oriented recreational facilities are proposed, and the large 80-foot mound may become a harbor observation area.



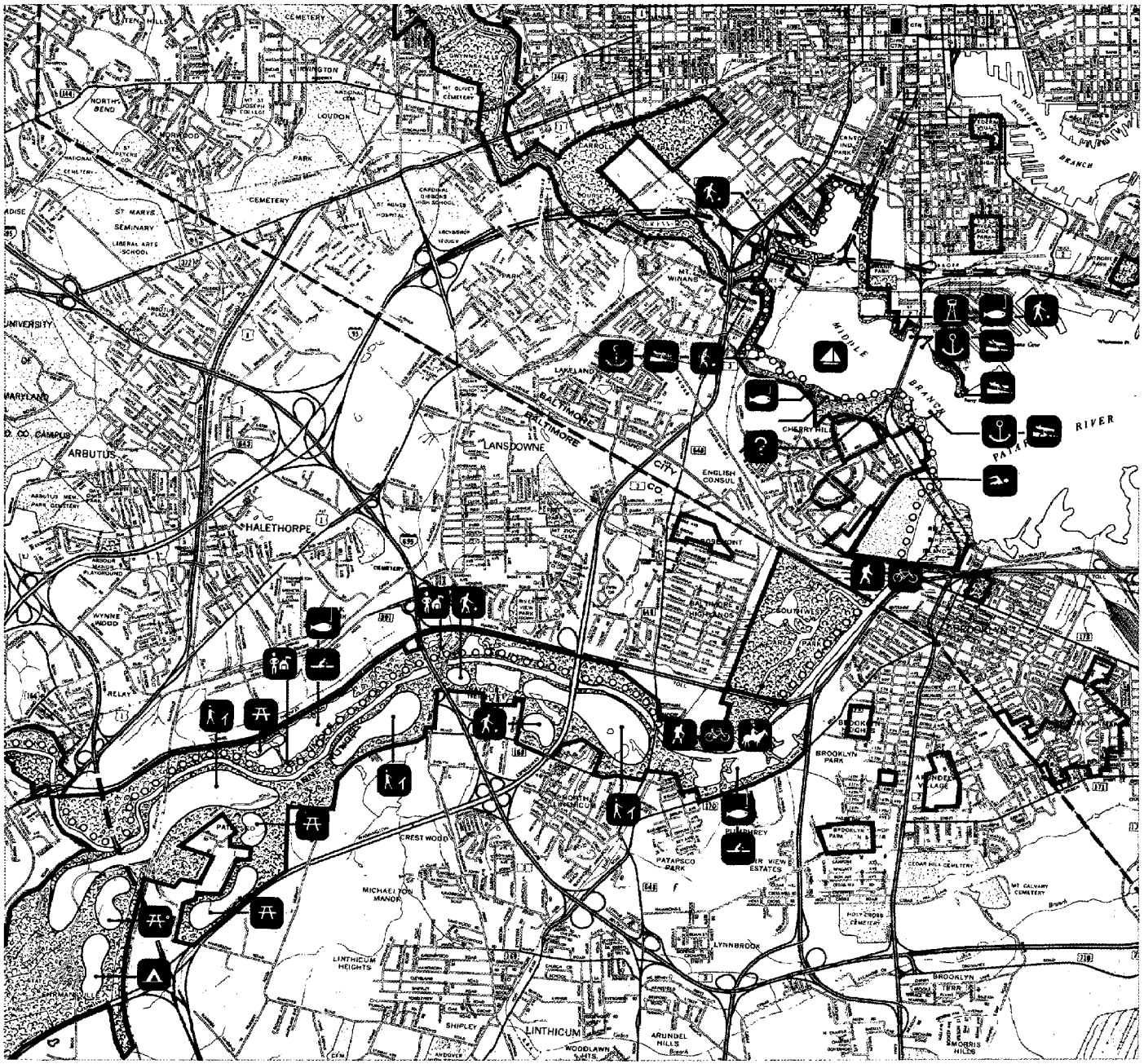
Above:
Shoreline debris, sunken barges (Ferry Bar site)

Photo by Alain Jaramillo

Boat Launch/Marina/Shops/Restaurant (Broening Park): The south shoreline east of the Hanover Street Bridge affords an excellent view of the bridge and the shipping operation across the water at South Locust Point. Next year, the City will seek to update and expand its boat launch here using State Waterway Improvement funds. The expanded launch would include moorings, piers, and a large parking area. The private sector will be encouraged to develop a marina, waterfront restaurant, small shops, and a few doctors' offices. Pedestrian access and waterfront activities like fishing and crabbing would be promoted by the construction of a pathway along the shoreline.

Reedbird/Patapsco Park: The City Department of Recreation and Parks is currently developing a master plan for the conversion of the Reedbird and Potee landfills into a large park which would link the Middle Branch Park to the Patapsco State Park system. Grass has already been planted in the area adjacent to the existing swimming pool and the site of the old incinerators. Additional areas will be planted in the near future. Active recreational facilities such as athletic fields will be located in these areas. The remainder of the park will be green open space, perhaps with pathways and an observation area at the summit of an 80-foot mound now located on the site. There is also the possibility of constructing piers along the river's edge for boating and fishing. A total of $400,000 is provided for this project in the City's current Capital Improvement Program, allocated in 1979, 1980, and 1981. Additional funding is anticipated through special State and Federal grants and through City bonds.

Shoreline Clean-up: *The City will conduct a general* clean-up of the Middle Branch area to remove debris and junk in the water and along the shoreline.



Map courtesy of Sam Crozier Associates

Information Center

Trail Head

Picnic Area

Observation Point

Marina

Boat Launch

Sail Boating

Rowing or Canoeing

Fishing Area

Swimming

Nature Study Area

Group Camping

Hiking Trail

Bike Trail

Equestrian Trail

Field Sports

Court Sports

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Left:
Middle Branch Park system – Bike/pedestrian trails connect Inner Harbor, Gwynns Falls Park, Middle Branch Park and Reedbird/Patapsco Park.

Steps to Implementation

Short-term Projects

These are projects scheduled to occur over the next three years.

Sunken Barge Removal: *Presently, there are a* number of sunken barges in the water along Waterview Avenue and at the foot of Light Street. Besides presenting a hazard to boaters, these barges are an eyesore and will be removed under the State's Waterway Improvement Program. Work is scheduled to begin in early 1978.

Reedbird/Patapsco Park Landscaping: Five acres of the former Reedbird Landfill, covered with topsoil and planted with grass in the fall of 1977, will undergo additional landscaping to provide a new park facility for adjacent communities. Work is scheduled to begin in the spring of 1978.

Public Boating Facilities: Plans are being drawn for landscaping, a boat pier, and a lookout park at the Ferry Bar site. New ramps will be built at the Broening Park boat launch, the existing parking lot will be expanded and resurfaced, new piers will be constructed, and the adjacent grounds will be landscaped. Work is scheduled to begin in the spring of 1978.

Jake's Restaurant Improvements: The owner will either rehabilitate or rebuild this establishment located on Hanover Street near the Central Garage. Work is scheduled to begin in 1978.

Bikeway and Waterfront Access (West Shoreline): The City is preparing an application to the Federal Highway Administration for funds to provide a green edge and bikeway along the west shore. Work is scheduled to begin in 1979 or 1980.

Landscaping and Waterfront Access (B.G.&E. and Central Garage Fill Sites): After these two landfill sites have reached capacity (estimated to take two years), they will be landscaped and pedestrian paths along the water will be provided. Work is scheduled to begin in 1980.

Long-term Projects

These are projects scheduled to occur over the next three to seven years. Rough estimates of when work could begin are indicated.

Marinas (Waterview Avenue and South Baltimore General Hospital areas): Pleasure boating facilities, shops, and restaurants will be located here. Work is projected to begin in three to five years.

Hiking Trail/Bikeway System: Eventually there will be a continuous system linking the Inner Harbor with Leakin Park, the Southwest Park in Baltimore County, and the Patapsco State Park system. Work is projected to begin in three to five years.

Reedbird/Patapsco Park Recreation Facilities: New recreation facilities will include hiking trails, boating facilities, a scenic overview, and athletic fields. Work is projected to begin in four to seven years.

Swann Park Relocation: The existing park will be relocated south of its present site. The relocated park will contain the same recreation facilities as the original, plus several new features. Work is projected to begin in four to seven years.

Water Resources Center: This proposed facility would provide for instruction in boating, swimming, and water safety, as well as field research in water quality.

These long-range developments, complex in scope and funding, require a coordinated approach by local, State, and Federal agencies, communities, and private developers. Yet, despite its complexity, the plan is pragmatic and promises to produce a major recreational resource for the City and the entire region.

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South shore near Cherry Hill
Photo by Alain Jaramillo

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