

Civilian Conservation Corps Activities in the National Capital Region of the National Park Service

by Lisa Pfueller Davidson and James A. Jacobs

A recent study of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) activities in the National Park Service's National Capital Region explored the CCC's important role in employing out-of-work youth to expand the Washington, DC, region's recreation infrastructure during the 1930s. Working under an agreement with the National Capital Region, Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) staff historians completed archival research and fieldwork to produce an overview historical narrative and inventory of CCC projects in the region.¹ In addition to the National Mall and other parks in the capital's monumental core, the region administers an array of historic and natural sites throughout the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Between 1933 and 1942, 12 CCC camps in the Washington metropolitan area completed an impressive array of projects for the National Park Service. Enrollees built park roads, picnic areas, athletic fields, cabin camps, comfort stations, reconstructions of Civil War forts and canal locks, and a bird sanctuary, in addition to clearing brush and debris, planting and pruning trees, and providing erosion control. While rustic architecture built by the CCC in wilderness areas is better known, the National Capital Region efforts are indicative of the broad and diverse scope of the program in metropolitan areas.²

National Park Service Use of CCC Camps

The War Department, in cooperation with a "technical agency" supervising the projects, administered and equipped CCC camps. The National Park Service was one of the most active supervising agencies, quickly capitalizing on the infusion of personnel and funds offered by the CCC and other New Deal relief programs to accomplish deferred improvements in many parks. The National Park Service was also instrumental in the Recreational Demonstration Area program, which reclaimed barren farmland near metropolitan areas as organized camps and recreation areas for city-dwellers. Two former demonstration areas are now part of the National Capital Region—Chopawamsic, Virginia (now Prince William Forest Park), and Catoctin, Maryland (now Catoctin Mountain Park).

The availability of emergency funding and relief labor also coincided with a major expansion of the National Park System. Executive Order 6166, issued

June 10, 1933, transferred national military parks, battlefield sites, and national monuments formerly administered by the War Department and the Department of Agriculture to the National Park Service. For the Washington region, this transfer included the national capital parks and 60 other memorials, monuments, and structures around the city. This expansion represented a major opportunity to enhance existing facilities and develop new recreation areas—which fit well with the CCC's purposes.

The National Park Service established its first Washington-area CCC camps in October 1933, Camp No. NP-6-VA at Fort Hunt, Virginia, and Camp NP-7-DC in Fort Dupont Park, Washington, DC. Before the CCC program was terminated in June 1942, the National Park Service supervised camps at the National Arboretum (with the U.S. Department of Agriculture), in Arlington near the Memorial Bridge, Rock Creek Park, Chopawamsic and Catoctin Recreational Demonstration Areas, Fort Washington, and along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal in Cabin John, Maryland. Each camp housed a company of 150 to 200 enrollees, unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 22.

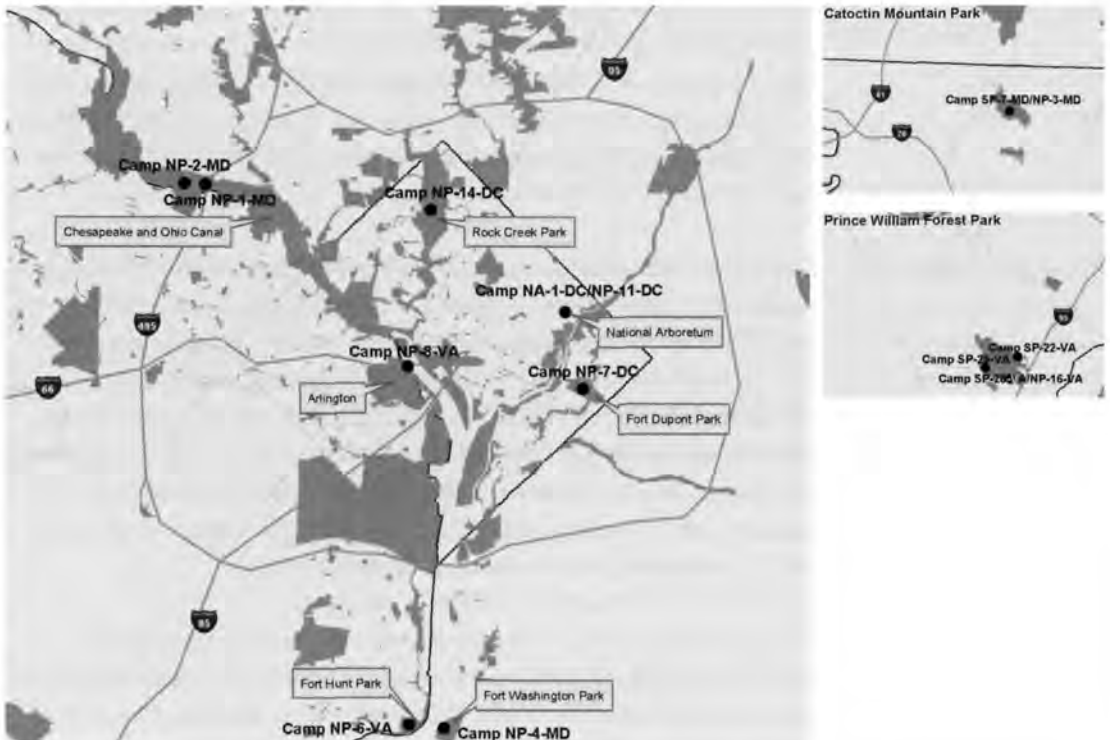
The majority of enrollees in Washington-area camps came from the mid-Atlantic or upper Southern states. As at most camps in the nation, segregation was practiced in Washington with three of the camps designated for African American enrollees—one at the National Arboretum and two at the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal.

Historical Overview and Inventory

The historical overview included both the CCC camps and the projects completed by the enrollees. The typical CCC camp was a modest assemblage of wood structures. After 1936, CCC buildings were constructed using military specifications for lightweight, portable structures. Very few remnants of the temporary CCC camps survive, most notably the former education building at one of the Chopawamsic camps, now Prince William Forest Park. Documents and photographs created as part of inspection or progress reports and maintained in the National Archives provide detailed information about many aspects of CCC camp activities.³

The inventory uncovered projects that were often ephemeral, particularly when compared to the products of other New Deal programs. Frequently, even where resources such as parking lots, access roads, picnic areas, tennis courts, and ball fields are still evident or in use, day-to-day maintenance, upgrades, natural degradation of materials, repair, and replanting have rendered little of the CCC-era fabric extant and visible. The fieldwork was guided by two key documents, "Inventory of Work Accomplished by CCC Camps Under the Jurisdiction of National Capital Parks, October 19, 1933—January 1, 1942," generated from period work-completion records submitted by each

FIGURE 1. HABS INVENTORY OF CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS RESOURCES IN THE CAPITAL REGION OF THE NPS.



This Geographic Information System map of CCC camp locations in the National Capital Region of the National Park Service reflects the widespread imprint of the New Deal-era work camps. (Map by Deidre McCarthy, Courtesy of the Cultural Resources Geographic Information Systems Facility, National Park Service.)

camp, and the "Report of Civilian Conservation Corps Operations in the National Capital Parks, October 15, 1933—June 30, 1942," which was based on but also moved beyond the scope of the earlier report.⁴

Information in the reports was organized for the inventory using an electronic database created in FileMaker Pro software. Data describing the location of each item inventoried was tied to geographic information systems (GIS), allowing the spatial distribution of CCC resources to be examined. The field survey team consisted of three historians, one with a strong knowledge of both geographic information and global positioning systems. The team identified existing CCC resources from period documentation, and then collected information on their locations using a global positioning system (GPS). A satellite-based navigation system, GPS provides one way to collect accurate geographic coordinates for geographic information system map layers. Achieving submeter detail, GPS works by triangulating the position of a receiver on the earth using satellite signals. Once located, information about each CCC resource was attached to the GIS feature for use in analyzing the inventory results. (Figure 1)

In addition to the digital inventory, a methodological essay described selection factors that influenced the content of the survey. Individual projects occurring at sites not originally or no longer part of the National Capital Region were

FIGURE 2
 This ca. 1935 view shows a nearly completed parking area at Roaches Run Bird Sanctuary in Arlington, Virginia. (Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration)



eliminated. Some CCC projects, such as seeding and sodding grounds or laying drainage pipes, were beyond the inventory's scope because they were ephemeral in nature or now accessible only through subsurface investigation. Proceeding from the selected list of sites and projects, the inventory identified those that are still visible.

Examples of CCC Projects in the National Capital Region

In 1934-1935, Camp NP-6-VA in Fort Hunt developed Roaches Run Bird Sanctuary along the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway (later the George Washington Memorial Parkway) in Arlington, Virginia. (Figure 2) In addition to intensively grading and landscaping around a lagoon near the tidal Potomac River, the CCC constructed a bituminous concrete parking area with log guard rails, connected to the parkway by an approach and an exit spur; a bituminous concrete sidewalk on the lagoon side of the parking area linked to two miles of foot trails; a gamekeeper's residence and feed storage house; and a tide gate controlling water flow between the lagoon and the Potomac River. Although now completely refurbished with contemporary materials, the overall form of the existing entrance and exit spurs and the parking area accurately represent what the CCC constructed at the site to accommodate automobiles. The stone superstructure of the tide gate also survives, but no other aspects of the site, including the footpaths, residence, or storage house, survive.

Camp NP-II-DC at the National Arboretum worked at Fort Bunker Hill Park, an irregular one-block site located in a neighborhood of single-family houses in northeast Washington. With the help of two other camps, NP-6-VA (Fort Hunt) and NP-14-DC (Rock Creek), the CCC transformed a sharply sloping site into a community amenity with a picnic ground at the highest point and an amphitheater in a depression near its lowest, which were tied together by wooded foot trails and serviced by four water fountains. The field survey

FIGURE 3

This CCC enrollee is constructing a cabin at the Chopawamsic Recreation Demonstration Area, now Prince William Forest Park in Virginia. (Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration)



found a mostly intact but essentially unused urban ruin. No picnic tables remain and two extant (though likely not original) water fountains are no longer plumbed, but pathways still criss-cross the site, and stone retaining walls that define the amphitheater's stage are extant and its terraced log seating is discernible.

Between 1935 and 1941, three CCC camps contributed to the creation of the Chopawamsic Recreational Demonstration Area (now Prince William Forest Park) in Triangle, Virginia. (Figure 3) Their primary efforts resulted in five recreational camps each with a central kitchen-dining hall, administrative building, infirmary, service buildings, staff quarters, and a washhouse (laundry), with some also containing a crafts lodge. Multiple satellite camp units, each composed of camper cabins, "leaders" cabins, unit lodges, and latrines shared the central structures. In developing the site, the CCC also established water and sewage systems, constructed roads and bridges, planted trees, dammed Quantico Creek to create swimming areas, and built a main administrative building and a park superintendent's residence.

Prince William Forest Park's CCC legacy has been well documented on the National Park Service's List of Classified Structures⁵ and in nominations of four National Register of Historic Places historic districts that are also components of a multiple property nomination for the park. This inventory focused on a single representative cabin camp (Camp 2—"Mawavi"). The structures at this camp are well maintained and have seen few, if any, alterations. Places of obvious repair show that care has been taken to match materials, such as in-kind replacement of waney-edged siding. In general, this camp and others from the CCC period at Prince William have been and remain well looked after, despite heavy use during the summer season—a testament to both the quality of the original design and construction and careful maintenance.

Conclusion

While the rustic cabins and organized camping facilities at Chopawamsic match the perception of CCC construction, Roaches Run parking area along George Washington Memorial Parkway and the now-neglected urban park at Fort Bunker Hill illustrate the variety of CCC projects in the Washington, DC, area.

Through conservation of natural resources, development of recreation facilities, and preservation of cultural resources, CCC activities helped the National Park Service meet its diverse stewardship responsibilities at a time of significant expansion. While many of the projects completed by the CCC enrollees in Washington were ephemeral in nature or have been altered, the collective effort helped to establish the National Capital Region's first generation of modern recreation infrastructure. By merging a contextual overview with detailed site-specific information, this study establishes a foundation for understanding the CCC's institutional influence and the significance of CCC cultural resources within the region.

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Notes

1. The National Capital Region is one of seven regional offices of the National Park Service. The CCC study was initiated by Darwina L. Neal, Chief, and Gary Scott, Regional Historian, Cultural Resource Preservation Services. In addition to the authors, Deidre McCarthy, Virginia Price, Martin Perschler, and Catherine Lavoie worked on this project for HABS.
2. By January 1, 1942, 885,500 man days and \$282,300 for work project materials had been expended by the National Park Service CCC camps in Washington, DC, and adjacent areas. The value of the CCC labor, at \$2 per day, was calculated at \$1,771,000. These figures do not include the extensive construction projects at the Recreation Demonstration Areas. See Robert M. Coates (for Ray M. Schenck, Field Supervisor), "Inventory of Work Accomplished by CCC Camps Under the Jurisdiction of National Capital Parks, October 19, 1933—January 1, 1942," 1942, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, DC, Folder—Progress Reports, Box 44, Entry 20, RG 79, National Archives and Records Service.
3. HABS researchers accessed the archival sources mainly through Record Groups 35 (Civilian Conservation Corps), 79 (National Park Service), and 77 (Army Corps of Engineers) at the National Archives and Records Service.
4. See Robert M. Coates, "Inventory of Work Accomplished"; Charles H. Gerner, "Report of Civilian Conservation Corps Operations in the National Capital Parks, October 15, 1933—June 30, 1942," June 1950, Washington, DC, photocopy in Virginia District Office and Library, George Washington Memorial Parkway, location of original unknown.
5. The List of Classified Structures is a computerized inventory of all historic and prehistoric structures located on National Park Service property that have historical, architectural, or engineering significance.

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