

Little Italy and Quarry Working Along the Potomac

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The lands now comprising the George Washington Memorial Parkway have a long and storied past, and contain many sites important in our nation's history. The Parkway, a property listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its commemoration of our first president and its significant landscape and roadway design, was constructed along the Virginia shore of the Potomac River in stages between 1928 and 1962. The first portion was opened in 1932 during the bicentennial of George Washington's birth and connected Mount Vernon with Washington, DC. Today, the Parkway runs from Mount Vernon past Washington, DC to I-495 at the American Legion Bridge, and its corridor passes through sites including former American Indian villages, George Washington's farm fields, Civil War earthwork forts, and Little Italy – an early 20th century quarry worker settlement in Arlington County on the hills above the Potomac River.

The northern-most portion of the Parkway traverses the Potomac River Gorge, an area characterized by steep cliffs of metamorphic schist and gneiss rock formations. The roughly 3-1/2 mile stretch of Parkway lands in Arlington County between Theodore Roosevelt Island and the Chain Bridge/Little Falls area is part of the lower Potomac Gorge, and the cliffs here were quarried to obtain "Potomac Bluestone" for use as building material in and around the nation's capital for nearly 150 years. Georgetown University's Healy Building and the National Zoo's Panda and Elephant Houses are a few examples of buildings constructed using Potomac Bluestone from these historic quarries along the Virginia shore.

The first quarrying that actually took place here in the Potomac Gorge, however, was that conducted by American Indians, not for the bluestone, but for other lithic material including quartz, quartzite, and soapstone for making stone tools and implements. The earliest historical mention of the Gorge was by Captain John Smith during his 1608 exploration of the Potomac River when he sailed up to the Fall Line and remarked of the "mighty rocks" and the places that "where the waters had falne from the high montaines they had left a tintured spangled skurfe..." (Abbott 1990: 30), likely referring to the micaceous deposits weathered from the rock formations.

Nearly two centuries after Smith's visit, the first of several commercial quarrying efforts of the palisades began with the 1789 purchase of 207 acres

of land around Little Falls near the current Chain Bridge area by Philip Richard Fendall and Lewis Hipkins. Quarrying activities were initiated shortly afterward and stone was supplied as building material for the construction of the new federal city of Washington, DC. Fendall advertised the quarries in 1796 as “containing an immense quantity of building and foundation stones...” and that “four quarries are now open...” (Abbott 1990: 31). These Fendall and Hipkins quarries operated under various ownership up to the twentieth century.

In 1833, a group of Washington businessmen that included William Corcoran bought land along the Potomac formerly belonging to John Mason. The land was subdivided in 1835 to include forty-three quarry lots between Three Sisters Island and Pimmit Run. These lots were later sold by Corcoran to William Easby in 1845 and remained in Easby ownership until 1890 when his heirs sold the property. The quarries continued operating into the twentieth century and one of the later owners was the Columbia Granite and Dredging Company.

In 1851, Gilbert Vandewerken bought land along the Potomac and set up quarries following the Civil War to take advantage of the post war construction boom in Washington. He operated three quarries, one below Chain Bridge, one at Gulf Branch, and one below Spout Run. These quarries also operated into the twentieth century under various ownership and one of the companies included the aforementioned Columbia Granite and Dredging Company.

Throughout the history of these quarries, rock was blasted, hammered, and drilled from the cliff faces. In the early years, most work was done by hand. As the years wore on, mechanized equipment was employed, but there was still a great deal of manual labor involved. Gilbert Vanderwerken’s grandson described how men would use a steam-powered drill hammer to create a hole in the rock for blasting powder. Once the rock was blasted, the resultant rubble and the larger building stones were hauled by the men in wheelbarrows to waiting scows on the river (Abbott 1990: 33-34). Evidence of the quarry operations is preserved along the Potomac shoreline in the form of rusting hulks of equipment including boilers to power steam driven tools and concrete bunkers for storing dynamite. Period maps also indicate quarry related features such as a compressor house and a boat landing.

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As they became employed here, they were allowed to make their homes along the company lands in exchange for modest rentals. A scattering of shacks soon dotted the hillsides overlooking the Potomac in the area between Spout Run and Pimmit Run, with a concentration in the Marcey Creek ravine, and were collectively referred to as Little Italy or Little Sicily. Life in this community of quarrymen has been referred to, perhaps romantically, as “colorful, hard, and sometimes violent, resembling that of early western mining towns,” complete with fights and shootings (Templeman 1959: 142).

One family who made their residence in Little Italy was that of Michele Dimeglio, an Italian immigrant from Naples who came to the United States in 1903 as a young man of nineteen. He moved to this area via West Virginia, where he had worked in a quarry, and married an Irish woman by the name of Cora Woodlock. The Dimeglios eventually had ten children: Charlie, Eva, Louise, Willie, Mary, Jimmy, Eddie, Joe, Betty, and Mike. The Dimeglios all had taken the Anglicized surname of Miller, following the lead of the eldest son Charlie, to better fit into American society. Staff at the George Washington Memorial Parkway, with the assistance of NCR Ethnography program funding, had the opportunity in 2007 to conduct an oral history interview with the youngest son and daughter, Mike Miller and Betty Binns, as well as the husband of Betty, Marvin Binns, a life-long Arlington County resident.

Betty and Mike were born in 1934 and 1939 respectively and lived in Little Italy into their teen years. Betty and Mike and their siblings were apparently the only children in the immediate area, and some of their older brothers and sisters had moved out, married, and begun having their own children when Betty and Mike were born. The children led a relatively simple life, going to public schools and playing along the Potomac River swimming, fishing, boating, and wandering the hillsides. They spoke of jumping into the Potomac River from a rope swing atop “40-foot rock” near Spout Run, of purchasing a treat from the ice cream scow that visited along the shoreline, and of rowing boats up and down the river.

The quarrying industry was winding down even before the time Betty and Mike were born and they had no childhood memories of their father working in the quarries, only family stories. The last company that Mr. Dimeglio had worked for was apparently Smoot Sand and Gravel, one of the last to quarry the gorge, which ceased operations in 1938. They recalled that their father received a check, likely Social Security or public assistance, as well as food stamps, and also tended several garden plots. Their mother Cora stayed at home raising the children and tending to household chores.

Betty and Mike described their house as not much, basically a simple four room shack made out of materials that were easily attainable and affordable,

usually cheap lumber, tar paper, and corrugated tin. Windows were more often than not covered with chicken wire, though some had glass. There was no electricity or running water, kerosene lamps provided light, and springs supplied water. Heat was provided by a wood stove.

Near to the Dimeglio residence, Betty and Mike recalled that during their youth there lived only a few other individuals, as most of the occupants of Little Italy had departed following the closing of the quarries. Brothers Giuseppe (Josh) Conducci and Carmelo (Carl) Conducci, Phillip (Phil) Matoli, and a couple of other individuals were the only ones remaining. Betty left Little Italy at age 17 and married, having two children with a first husband, who later died, before marrying her current husband Marvin Binns. Mike went to live with a sister in Maryland at about the time Betty left, which apparently was around 1951. Though they didn't indicate it, this was reportedly the year when their father died. Josh, Carl, and Phil were the last inhabitants of Little Italy, forced to move in 1956 after the federal government acquired the land for extending the George Washington Memorial Parkway.

Though the quarrying industry has disappeared from the Potomac riverfront and the lands of the George Washington Memorial Parkway, remnants of this activity survive in the form of the jagged cliff faces that had been quarried and the abandoned equipment used to extract the rock from the gorge. As one drives the Parkway near Spout Run, a former quarry area is evident. As one hikes the Potomac Heritage Trail along the Potomac shoreline, various pieces of equipment are encountered. These vestiges of the former quarrying activities serve as reminders in the landscape of past lives along the Parkway.

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