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CITYSPACE

River Bred



THE SUN ALSO SETS: And in this case it does so over the Schuylkill River, which once provided residents their drinking water. Today, however, Philadelphia neglects its waterways. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Philadelphia has a great street system, but we need to turn attention to our once-integral waterfronts.

by Alan Greenberger

When William Penn sailed his boat up the Delaware, he stopped first in New Castle, Del., and then Chester. Neither of those places suited his fancy, so Penn's surveyor, Thomas Holmes, went on ahead and ultimately recommended a location between two rivers.

One, the Delaware, was a great waterway, well protected from the ocean. The Schuylkill — already coined "hidden river" by the Dutch — was navigable, though not as wide as the Delaware. The stretch of land between them was relatively flat, so Penn approved the location and a plan that called for a city that would grow inward

from each river. His city layout included a Front Street along each river, with ascending numbered streets — as in Delaware Second and Schuylkill Second — that ultimately met at Broad Street. Though Philadelphia did not develop quite as Penn had envisioned, each river took on a major role in the city's history.

The supremely broad Delaware became the city's lifeline to the world, and Philadelphia quickly became the most important city in North America. It remained the national center of commerce and industry well into the 19th century. The city's topography descended to meet the Delaware, terminating in dense port activity.

But while commerce along the Schuylkill did not emerge in the same frenetic fashion, something even more important happened: it became the source of the city's fresh drinking water.

To support the growing city in 1820, Philadelphia built the Water Works, the engineering marvel of its day that pumped river water up to "Fair Mount" (the reservoir located on the hill that is now the home to the Philadelphia Museum of Art). From Fair Mount, wooden water mains directed fresh water throughout today's Center City. So important was the Schuylkill that when the freshness of the water was threatened by industrial pollution upstream in 1857, the commonwealth created Fairmount Park to protect the great watershed.

But by the early 20th century, the times started changing.

Railroads and gas-powered vehicles came to dominate commercial activity in and around the city. For lack of any other easy place to locate them, railbeds and highways were placed astride these two great rivers, effectively cutting Philadelphia off from its waterways.

What started as a city between two rivers became a city between two highways that happened to be next to two rivers.

Not content with simply cutting off the life of the city from the rivers, we have persisted in further denigrating the situation. Abandoned piers, overgrown forests of weed trees and big-box stores that turn their back on the river typify the current condition. Even in Fairmount Park along the drives — arguably one of the most beautiful assets to be found in any city — highways and railroads isolate and diminish other marvelous areas of the park (try this test: picture yourself describing to a visitor how to get to the Japanese House or the Robin Hood Dell).

A return to the rivers is not a nostalgic call for some former greatness. The original purpose and meaning of these great waterways has changed, dramatically. The Delaware, though still an important working port, is not likely to return as the premier conduit on which goods are brought to the city. And the Schuylkill, though fairly clean, will never be the source of our drinking water again. Rather, a return to the rivers is a call for a return to identity.

Great cities usually have two critical physical assets: a dense street system full of intersections and memorable geography. (Think of Paris and its relationship to the Seine, Chicago and its relationship to both Lake Michigan and the Chicago River, and Boston and its relationship to the harbor, which is now improving as a result of the Big Dig.)



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... from William Penn that endures. But geography? We've had it for
100. Our rivers, and the land around them, need to become part of our
identity, literally and symbolically.

... Pennsylvania's department of landscape architecture, has pointed out that
Philadelphia is a city with an extraordinary perimeter of water — 26 miles of waterfront in all. It's going to take
generations of hard work to really get it back. But if we aspire to be a great city, we have to rise to the challenge.

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