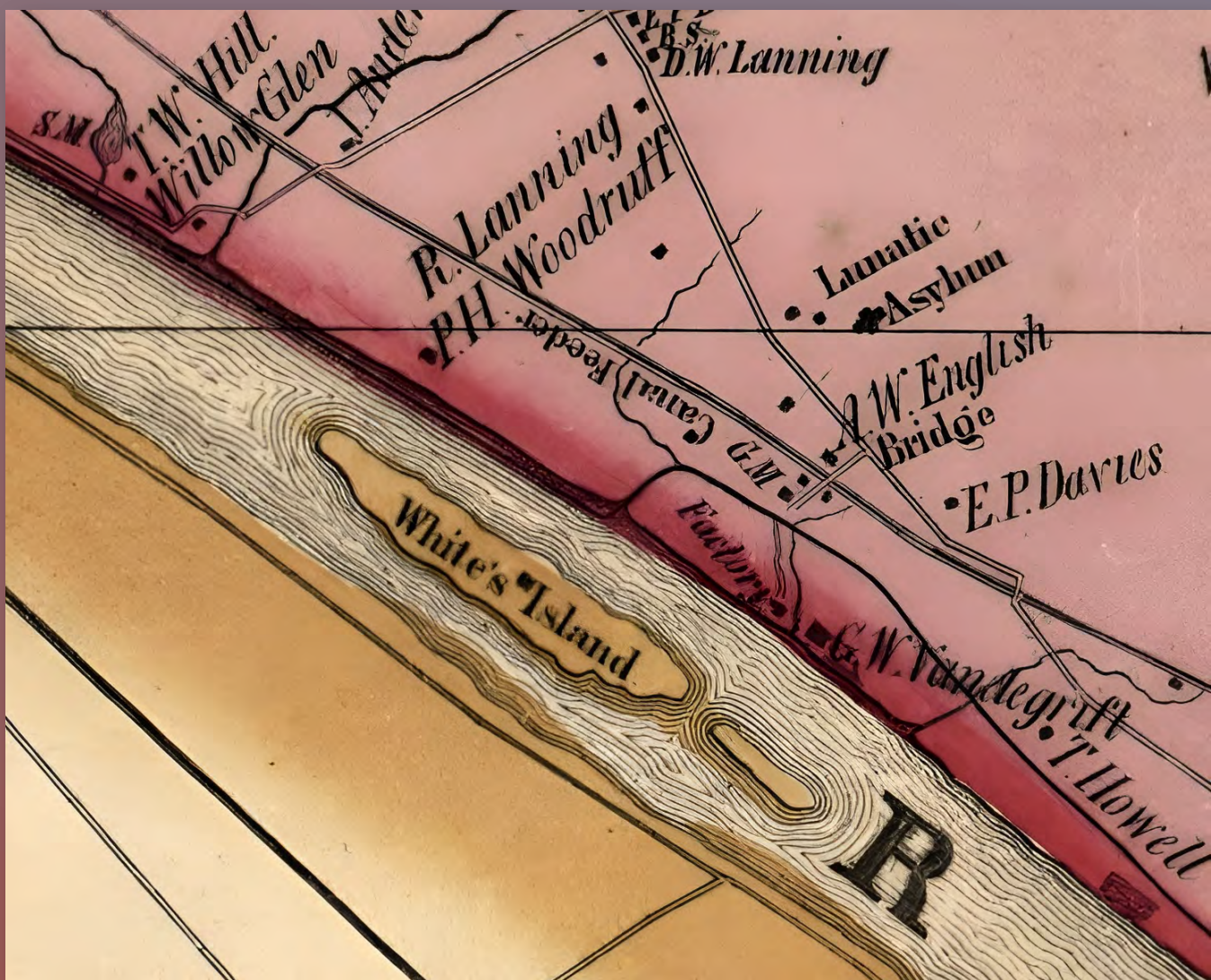# An Island Retreat

Isolated in the Delaware River, the wooded island before you may seem like an untamed patch of backwater wilderness. The foliage, however, obscures some fascinating local history and geography.

Known for more than 100 years as Rotary Island, this refuge in the river was historically used for scavenging, grazing and farming before taking a recreational turn as the home of a canoe club in the late 19th century and as the site of summer camps in the 20th century.

Origins

Rotary Island is formed on bedrock of sandstone, siltstone and mudstone on top of which have accumulated glacial and alluvial sediment supporting trees and underbrush. For several thousand years, local Lenape groups and their forebears used the island as a camp, gathering natural flora, hunting wildlife and netting fish such as sturgeon and shad, which migrated and spawned every spring in the fresh water above the falls of the Delaware.

Rotary Island has gone by many names. When Europeans first settled in the middle Delaware Valley and used the island for grazing and fishing, it was known as Gould's Island for James Gould, a lawyer who resided there in the early 18th century. It was later known as White's Island, named after a family who lived and farmed on the island for several generations. Due to the island's mid-river location between two states, it only officially became a part of New Jersey following an agreement made with Pennsylvania in 1783.

Rotary Island campers embarking into the Delaware toward Rotary Island. Circa 1925. Image credit: J. Lewis Unsworth, *History of the Trenton Rotary Club 1914-1969*, 1970.

This mid-19th-century wall map shows a house on Rotary Island, known then as White's Island. Image Credit: J. Otley and J.W. Keily, *Map of Mercer County, New Jersey*, 1849.

An old stone farmhouse on Rotary Island as it appeared in a photograph taken around 1900. Reputedly built in 1846, it burned down in the 1950s. Image credit: J. Lewis Unsworth, *History of the Trenton Rotary Club, 1914-1969*, 1970.

Members of the Park Island Canoeing Association posing at a camp on the island. *Circa* 1900. Image credit: Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

Mercer County Health League campers being welcomed by an island staff member. Accustomed to urban living in Trenton's neighborhoods, many children took days to acclimate to Rotary Island's greenery. *Circa* 1939. Image credit: Trentoniana Collection, Trenton Public Library.

"Paradise Haven of Health"

Toward the end of the 19th century, the island took on a new role as a recreational retreat, a place to escape the noxious air and noise of industrial Trenton. In 1889, it was purchased as the headquarters for the Park Island Canoeing Association, a local club, and renamed Park Island. The club established cottages and camp sites, and held a popular annual regatta.

The island's canoeing heyday lasted only a couple of decades. In 1917, the canoeing association sold the mid-river property to Trenton's Rotary Club for $10,000 ..... and a rose. With a mission dedicated to community service, the Rotary Club partnered with the Mercer County Tuberculosis and Health League to convert the newly named Rotary Island into a summer camp for undernourished and underprivileged children.

During World War II, the Rotary Club began granting use of the island to other camping groups, including the Community Camp Association, the Trenton Rescue Center and the Trenton Christian Camp Association. Soon after the war, club interest in using the island declined. The tragic death of a caretaker, killed while crossing over to the island on a cable barge, hastened its end as a recreational destination. After numerous floods wiped out many of the camp-era buildings, the island reverted to a natural state. Rotary Island was acquired by the State of New Jersey with Green Acres funding and is now part of Washington Crossing State Park.