Flood Control Plans Debated: Flood Control Plains Debated
By Eugene L. Meyer Washington Post Staff Writer
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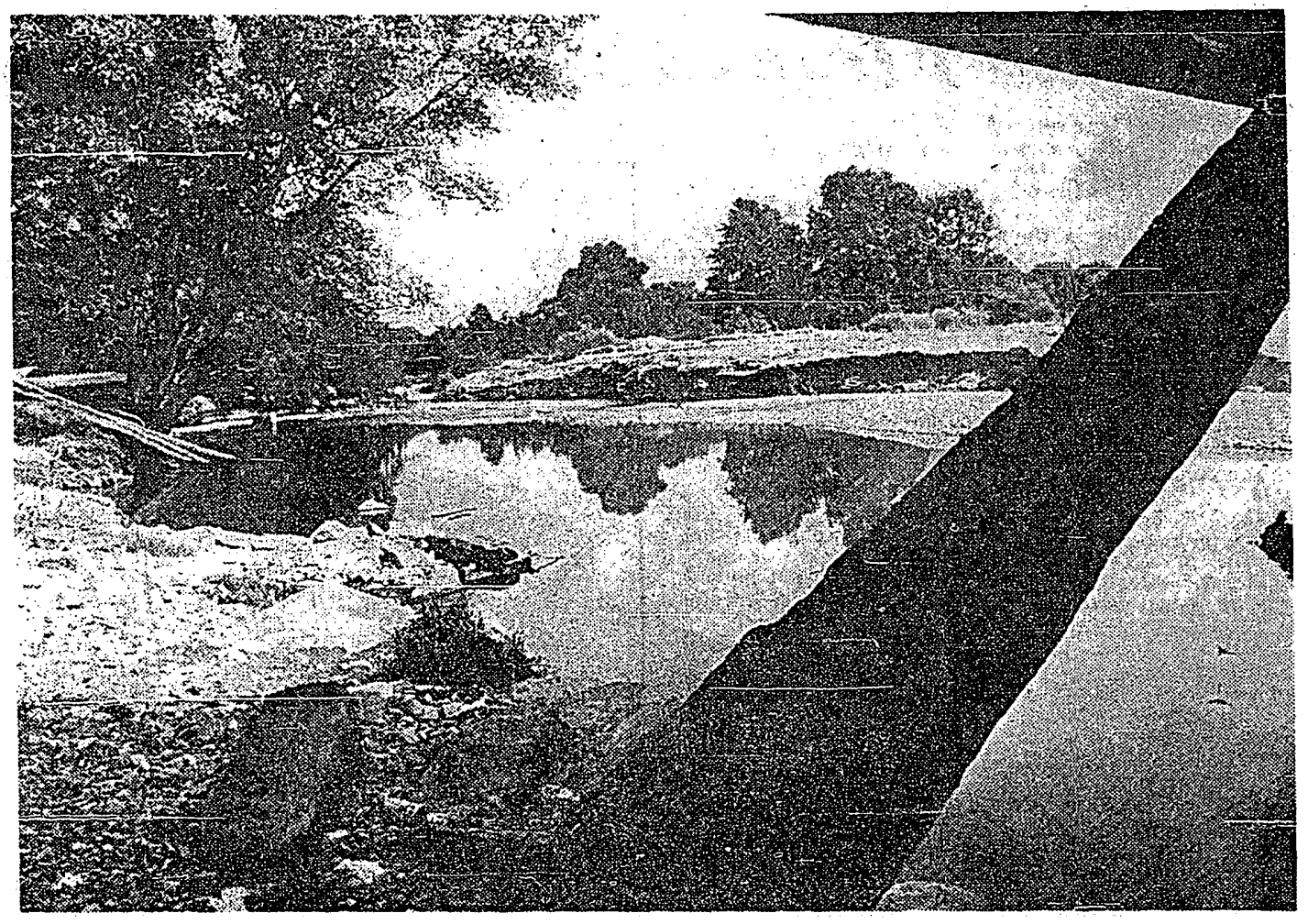

By Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

Paint Branch will be widened, deepened and straightened if Army Corps of Engineers' plan is put in effect.

Flood Control Plans Debated

By Eugene L. Meyer
Washington Post Staff Writer

"It was something I've never experienced before, and I hope and pray to God I never will again," said Leonard Smith of the flooding that swamped his Prince George's County home last month from tropical storm Agnes. "When we left the house, there was 4 feet of water. We had to wade 50 to 75 yards to get to high ground."

For 30 years, Smith has lived in the Lakeland area of College Park, a small enclave of 147 black and 30 white families wedged inside the "V" between Paint Branch and Indian Creek.

Every time it rains heavily, Lakeland lives up to its name.

If the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has its way, the troubles of Smith and his neighbors will be ended in a few years.

The Corps plans to widen, deepen and straighten Paint Branch, Indian Creek and Northwest Branch a few miles away. The proposal has some conservationists up in arms, charging that the flood control plan will spoil the area's natural beauty and also won't work.

The controversy presents a case study of the conflicts between environmentalists — whose paramount concern is preservation of the natural environment — and others — who believe the man-made environment of homes and businesses next to the streams must come first.

In addition, without the Corps' flood control project, an urban renewal plan that Lakeland residents have been seeking for years cannot proceed.

The Corps of Engineers plan, more than a decade in the making, faces what may be its final, and perhaps its toughest hurdle next week when it comes before the National Capital Planning Commission.

By the Corps' own description, sections of Paint Branch and Indian Creek, two of the streams involved, are "slow moving bodies of water which meander through wooded, undeveloped low areas . . .

"Snakes, rabbits, raccoons, opposum, insects, birds, and many other small animals are supported directly or in-

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directly ... Areas such as these are valuable, not only because they are biologically productive and support a variety of wildlife, but also because they are a source of diversity in an otherwise urban environment.

"In developing the Anacostia River for flood control, it is important to realize that many of these natural values along the Paint Branch and Indian Creek reaches will be lost."

A reporter visiting the streams at two points the other day saw no animals, fish or people. What he saw was a quiet, almost bucolic setting.

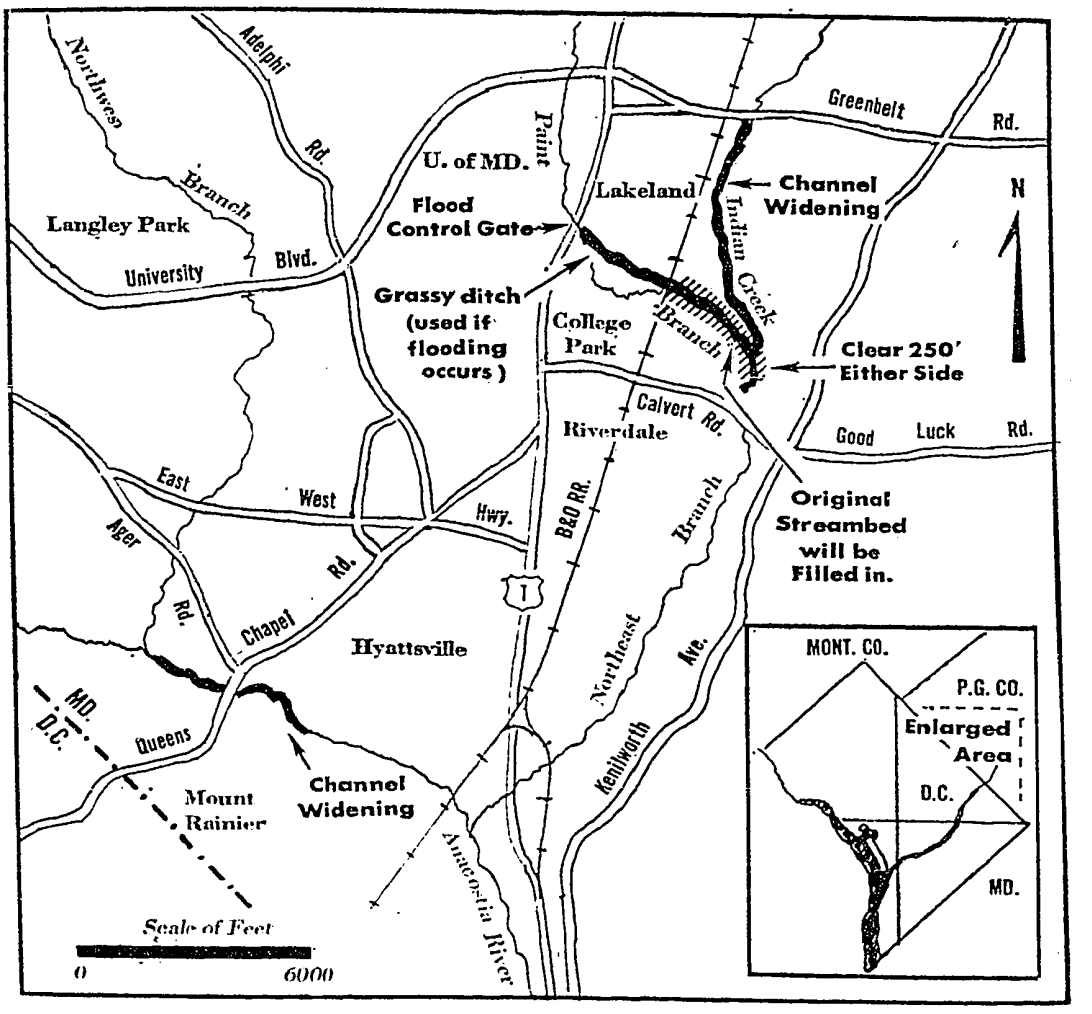
What the Corps proposes to do, for about $900,000, is not exactly what it had in mind at first. In the early 1960s, the Corps wanted to line the upstream banks with concrete—an anti-erosion measure—as has been done in some downstream portions. That idea was dropped. Instead, the Corps wants to install "riprap," rocks fitted without mortar against the banks.

The plan also called for straight "channelization,"—widening, deepening and straightening the streams so that more water can pass through without overflowing the banks. That has only partially changed. Here's the final plan:

- Straighten 5,610 feet of the Northwest Branch, widening it to 70 and 80 feet, allowing an additional 8,000 cubic feet per second of water to pass through the channel without flooding.
- Widen and straighten various portions of the Paint Branch, deepening it to about 50 feet along one 7,200-foot stretch, constructing a new stream channel in other places and clearing vegetation in some places back as far as 250 feet from the stream bed to facilitate water flow.
- Widen Indian Creek, which feeds into the Northeast Branch, to 30 feet for a 7,600 foot stretch. The new channel would follow its present course, except for a 600 foot section where it joins Paint Branch.

Seventy-five per cent of the affected land is owned by the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission. The rest is to be acquired by the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission.

"Originally, we had a very good engineering solution," says Col. Lewis W. Prentiss Jr., district engineer for the Susquehanna and Potomac Basins. "People said that's a typical solution of you engineers. So we went back to the drawing board. We've done everything really possible to have both worlds on this problem."



By Joseph Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

Heavy lines indicate proposed flood co ntrol project on Anacostia tributaries.

But the environmentalists don't think so. Judy Comparetto, president of the College Park Ecological Association, thinks the Corps still has chosen an engineering solution. "Natural steams don't behave like pipes," she says.

"We would like to see everything stop to see if we couldn't come up with an effective flood control plan without wrecking the river," Mrs. Comparette said.

Supporting the Corps plan are government officials and businessmen, as well as those living near the streams. Arrayed against the plan are a number of conservation and environmental groups.

The environmentalists quote the Corps' own environmental impact statement, filed as required by law last year:

"The appearance of the proposed channels will be less esthetically pleasing than the naturally meandering stream. . . . The streams will be widened and straightened, and the land adjacent to the Paint Branch selectively cleared and planted in grass. This procedure not only removes most of the cover and food available to the wildlife, but all of the natural fauna within the stream."

The Corps' statement concludes, however, "The gains in flood protection will require the reduction of natural environmental values."

Elizabeth Dougherty, a College Park Council member and a strong proponent of the Corps plan, says: "We are not going to have a sterile channel with concrete walls. The stream has not been natural for the last 50 to 100 years. We contaminated the world a long time ago."

Col. Prentiss says that Agnes caused "substantial damage" in the upstream areas. If the flood control project had been completed, there would have been "a probable savings of $2 million," he said.

The environmentalists agree the project would decrease flooding in the immediately adjacent areas. But, they say, the technique of widening and deepening the streams would only push the problem downstram.

Robert Mueller, a geologist and president of the Lanham-Greenbelt Citizens for a Better Environment, said: '(By moving the water faster), it will accelerate erosion downstream, transfer the flooding downstream and increase the siltation in the estuary (killing aquatic life there). People want a short-term solution in one place. They don't think about what happens downstream. It is cheaper to phase out the structures on the flood plain. They want to spend a lot of funds fighting nature."

Dr. Arthur Dorman, an optometrist and chairman of the Prince George's County delegation to the Maryland General Assembly, agrees that "its going to create problems downstream, but a proper plan by the Corps of Engineers should be able to take care of it."

Mueller says the Corps has no such long-range plan. And even in parts already widened and deepeneed, Agnes wrought heavy destruction—$500,000 alone at the Bladensburg marina.

Mrs. Dougherty says, "No one totally has the answer."

But she has little patience with the environmentalists when she thinks about the people who suffered in the floods. "The night of Agnes," she recalls, "I stood down there and helped 147 families out of Lakeland, and I did not see a beaver, raccoon or eel or any of the ecologists or conservationists. However, I saw an awful lot of cold, frightened people."

The environmentalists maintain that flood plain zoning and government acquisition of present buildings is still the answer. "They're never able to protect the flood plans completely," Mrs. Comparetto said. "The only solution is to get these people to higher ground, and don't develop where you know it will be flooded out."