

Islands

The following two paragraphs are paraphrased from:
http://watershedatlas.org/loweralleggheny/fs_natsys3.html.

There are many islands throughout the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio Rivers in the Pittsburgh area. One of the primary functions of rivers is to **transport** sediments from the headwaters to lower elevations. The source of the sediments is usually erosion of soil and weathered rock fragments, but may also be glacially-deposited sediments, as in the case of the Allegheny River. During periods of high velocity flow, especially during flooding events, the river can transport large amounts of sediment. As floodwaters recede and velocities drop, the sediment is deposited. Islands begin with the slow accumulation of sand and gravel deposited over years of flooding. Eventually, these accumulations break the surface of the stream or river to form an island. Along with the **deposition** of sand and gravel, silt and clay accumulate among the interstices, the pore spaces between gravel, and become the soil medium that supports the growth of sub-aquatic vegetation, grasses, shrubs, and eventually trees. The plant species found on islands are well adapted to full sun, moist to wet soils, and seasonal flooding. Sycamore trees and alder shrubs are common woody plants found on islands.

Once an island is established, **erosion** begins to work on both the upstream and downstream tips of the island. If the island is predominantly gravel, it will last a long time. If the composition of the island is mainly sand and silt, however, one can readily witness the erosion of its upstream and downstream tips over a fairly short time. Islands are ephemeral, in-stream landscape features; they grow with deposition, and wash away with erosion. Islands in the three rivers come in many sizes. Some are ten acres or less, while others, like Neville Island, can be hundreds of acres.

Islands Here and Islands Gone

Kilbuck Island

On all early maps and drawings of Pittsburgh, an island, or in some cases a series of islands is shown in the vicinity of the present-day Carnegie Science Center and Heinz Field. Although not shown on any earlier maps, the island across the Allegheny from the Point was first referred to by L ery in 1755. He described on his drawing (Figure 5) "...an island which is a peninsula when the water is at medium..." A single large island is shown on Elais Meyer's 1761 map (Figure 9). An artist's rendering of what a view from this island might have looked like is shown in Figure 11. A sand bar, presumably covered at high water, connects it to the north shore much as described by L ery. The 1795 map (Figure 12) shows two islands and a small peninsula; the larger island is called Smokey Island. The Plan of Pittsburgh from a 1796 engraving by Tardieu L'Aine (Figure 13) does not show any islands, but the accuracy of the north shore area depiction is in question as there appears to be a stream shown in the area of the islands that is

hidden by the figure caption. The 1815 Darby map (Figure 14) and the 1825-1826 map of the area (Figure 15) show three islands (Kilbuck, Low, and a small unnamed island) and a 'sand bar at low water.' The 1825-1826 map appears to be a derivation of the 1815 map because the shapes of the islands are nearly the same. A good contemporary view of Smokey island is shown in an 1817 figure (Figure 16) taken from a sketch drawn by Mrs. E. C. Gibson, member of the Philadelphia Bar, while on her wedding journey (Laurent, 1980). By 1850, a map of Allegheny City (Figure 17) by Day and Cramer (From Cowin, 1985) shows that Smokey or Kilbuck Island is again now just a peninsula off of the North Side.

By the early 1900s, the backwaters behind the islands were filled in to make room for industrial development on the North Side.

The Island in the Mon

The 1795 (Figure 12) and 1815 (Figure 14) maps both show a large island in the middle of the Monongahela River. The large sand bar was used as buckwheat fields in the late 1700s. Significantly, the island so well depicted on the 1795 and 1815 maps is not present on any earlier maps (Figures 5 and 6, as well as Figures II-18 and II-23 in Stotz (1985), Elias Meyer's 1761 map (Figure 9), nor on the first sketch of Pittsburgh drawn in 1794 by Louis Brantz, a Philadelphia merchant). This suggests that a major flooding event between 1794 – 1795 deposited the material that was to become the island. The island then persisted to at least 1815. A sketch of Pittsburgh in 1817 (Figure 16) does not show the island. However, the 1825-1826 map by H. H. Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach, shows the island as a "sand bar dry at low water," but again, this just may be a copy of the 1805 map.

Wainwrights Island

Wainwrights Island was located in the Allegheny River adjacent to what is now Lawrenceville.

<http://www.clpgh.org/exhibit/neighborhoods/lawrenceville/lawb.html>. In the words of Fleming (1915) "Wainwright's Island [has] long since wasted away, [but] it was on this island that [Christopher] Gist and [George] Washington landed after their perilous voyage across the Allegheny, full of heavy floating ice, on an improvised raft in 1753, while returning from their mission to the French commander, St. Pierre, at LeBoef, now Waterford, Pa. Washington records in his journal December 27, 1753, that they built the raft with one poor hatchet and finished after sunset, putting a whole day in the work. The next day they launched it and getting aboard, pushed it off. He [Washington] continues:

"Before we were half way over we were jammed in the ice and in such a manner that we expected every moment our raft to sink and ourselves to perish. I put out my setting pole to try and stop the raft that the ice might pass by, when the rapidity of the stream threw it with so much violence against the pole that it jerked me out into 10 feet of water, but fortunately, I saved myself by catching hold of one of the raft logs.

Notwithstanding all our efforts, we could not get to either shore, but were obliged as we were near an island to quit our raft and make for it."

The two put in a miserable night, Gist having his fingers and toes frozen, but the channel between the island and bank froze so hard they had no difficulty in crossing in the morning and then made their way to the cabin of John Frazier, the English trader on the Monongahela, at the mouth of Turtle Creek.”

Most likely the narrow backwater between Wainwrights Island and Lawrenceville was filled in the late 1800s to make more land for development. However, it is still shown on an 1863 map showing the “Defenses of Pittsburgh” (Cowin, 1985, page 317).

Today, in the vicinity of Pittsburgh, there are three islands in the Ohio River (Brunot Island, Davis Island, and Neville Island) and six in the Allegheny River (Herrs Island, Sixmile Island [located six miles from the point], Sycamore Island, Ninemile Island, Twelvemile Island, and Fourteenmile Island). There are no islands in the Monongahela River near Pittsburgh. The large number of islands in the Allegheny is a reflection of the large amount of glacially-derived sediment that was moved by the river. For an interesting coverage of the Ohio River Islands see Ferrick-Roman (2001).