



PRELIMINARY INFORMATION FORM (PIF) for HISTORIC DISTRICTS

Note: PIFs are prepared by applicants and evaluated by DHR staff and the State Review Board based on information known at the time of preparation. Recommendations concerning PIFs are subject to change if new information becomes available.

DHR No. (to be completed by DHR staff) 020-6465

1. General Information

District name(s): Dutch Gap Historic District

Main Streets and/or Routes: Near 111 Henricus Park Road, Richmond, VA 23231

City or Town: Chester, VA

Name of the Independent City or County where the property is located:

Chesterfield County AND Henrico County

2. Physical Aspects

Acreage: 142 acres

Setting (choose only one of the following):

Urban _____ Suburban X Town _____ Village _____ Hamlet _____ Rural _____

Briefly describe the district's overall setting, including any notable landscape features:

The Dutch Gap Historic District encompasses the historic canal works dug on behalf of the Union Army in 1864-1865 that was intended to allow Union troops and ships to bypass Confederate fortifications on the James River. Today, the former "Seven Mile Loop" is bypassed by two canal cuts, one from the period of significance and the other dug across what became Hatcher's Island in 1878. Suburban development has been largely focused on the road corridor along Route 10, leaving a substantial wooded buffer along the river along much of the old river channel in this area which is now known as the Relic River. The modern Henricus Historical Park living history museum is located on the south point, along with a modern boat launch and dock area along the east side of the bluff. A wooden boardwalk runs along the western edge of the south point near the water level. The north end of the district is in Henrico County, on property now incorporated into Varina Farm and in agricultural use except for a wooded buffer area along the river.

The open promontory that is now a central feature of the Henricus Park museum once connected across the river and numerous historical photographs show the progress of cutting a channel through what was a fifty-foot high sandy bluff. The river in this area largely preserves the historic setting and feel of the 19th century, particularly looking upriver from east to west. The river edge is wooded, revealing very little of the modern neighborhoods and other development just inland. The modern Varina-Enon Bridge across the James to the east is the only significant modern intrusion and is only visible from the east side of the bluffs.

3. Architectural/Physical Description

Architectural Style(s): N/A

If any individual properties within the district were designed by an architect, landscape architect, engineer, or other professional, please list here:

If any builders or developers are known, please list here:

Date(s) of construction (can be approximate): August 1864-January 1865

Are there any known threats to this district? Yes, pending bridge construction and a planned commercial marina.

Narrative Description:

In the space below, briefly describe the general characteristics of the entire historic district, such as building patterns, types, features, and the general architectural quality of the proposed district. Include prominent materials and noteworthy building details within the district, as well as typical updates, additions, remodelings, or other alterations that characterize the district.

This historic district encompasses the historic canal structure and ancillary works for the Dutch Gap Canal, a substantial engineering project undertaken by troops and conscripted laborers under the command of Union Gen. Benjamin Butler in the latter half of 1864. The project began in August 1864 and was completed just after the New Year in 1865.

The canal was proposed as a solution to the entrenched Confederate defenses to the east of Richmond, which had successfully withstood all attempts at Union advance for nearly four years. Confederate gun emplacements along the James River, “an extremely tortuous stream”¹, were sited such that Union boats had to withstand heavy fire on the long “reaches” or straight stretches of water between numerous blind bends in the river. The Dutch Gap was particularly attractive as a project, despite the enormous difficulty of hand-digging a canal through hard, wet mud, because the narrow neck of land was only 175 yards wide and would cut off nearly four miles of river travel, avoiding at least two significant Confederate batteries and allowing Union boats to potentially go around the north end of the famous Howlett Line defensive works. This technique of digging a canal to bypass defenses was something Grant attempted at the siege of Vicksburg, with canal attempts at DeSoto Point, Duckport, and Lake Providence throughout 1863 that were dogged by numerous technical and geological challenges before being abandoned when Vicksburg surrendered.²

Initial assessments by Gen. Butler and Chief of Engineers Peter S. Michie on August 7, 1864 proved favorable so troops were set to excavating the surface soil in a series of parallel ditches with hand tools and wheelbarrows.³ Subsequently, rails were laid to move soil by cart. “The enemy erected mortar

¹ January 21, 1865 *Harper's Weekly*: Dutch Gap Canal. Avail. <https://www.beyondthecrater.com/resources/np/1865-np/jan-65-np/np-18650121-harpers-weekly-dutch-gap-canal/>, accessed 08/15/2025.

² See, Terry Winschel, U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center, “The Engineers at Vicksburg, Part 04: Grant's Canal”. Avail. <https://www.erd.usace.army.mil/Media/News-Stories/Article/933967/the-engineers-at-vicksburg-part-04-grants-canal/>, accessed 08/15/2025.

³ See, Jan. 21, 1865, *Harper's Weekly*: Dutch Gap Canal; see also Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, [General Grant on the Siege of Petersburg](#) (p.575); see also Library of Congress, [The War of the Rebellion: a compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate armies](#) (Plate LXV).

batteries under cover of the river bank, which proved a great annoyance...[so then] bomb-proofs had to be built for security to the workmen.”⁴

Contemporary sources go on to describe the following events: “By the middle of November fifteen thousand cubic yards of earth had been removed by hand. The steam dredge removed, in addition, fifty tons a day. In little over a month more all that remained to be done was to remove the dam between the two sections and the bulk-head still left at the upper end. The dam was easily removed by mining. More elaborate preparations, however, had to be made for the removal of the bulk-head. This was cut into three pieces, as far as possible. Streets were cut through, and thus one-third of the mass of earth removed. From the vertical cut on the left of the centre galleries were run toward the centre; and, after reaching a proper point, a shaft was sunk twenty-eight feet in depth, from which galleries ran toward the river. Five magazines were constructed, capable all together of holding six tons of powder, and at four o’clock P. M. on New-Year’s Day the grand explosion took place. The effect was hardly what was expected.”⁵

The unexpected effect was that the explosion quite literally blew “up” the remaining earth and it all came back down again into the channel, rendering it too shallow for boat traffic and creating a neat firing channel for Confederate guns on the other side. All told, the length of the canal was “between five and six hundred feet, its greatest width about one hundred and twenty-two feet, and its greatest depth about seventy feet.”⁶

The channel eventually eroded sufficiently to permit traffic and has been the primary river channel since that time. Since the Civil War, the area has been generally used for agricultural purposes through the mid-20th century when the nearby Chesterfield Power Plant was developed (1942) and commercial development extended along both sides of Route 10 to the south of the district boundaries. A 1990s residential development is located to the east at Rivers Bend, with a conserved area of wetlands along the bank opposite the Canal. The northern portion of the district is in Henrico County and was acquired for permanent protection in 2024⁷, but no legal protections have been applied to date.

Resources may also include:

- Archaeological remains of “bombproof” shelters in east bluffs⁸
- Archaeological sites associated with Union encampment on the shorelines east of the canal
- Graves of soldiers and laborers on the east side of the south bluff

⁴ January 21, 1865 *Harper’s Weekly*: Dutch Gap Canal.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ HenricoNews, “Henrico to buy 2,095-acre Varina Farms for land preservation”, Henrico County Public Relations, <https://henrico.gov/news/2024/01/henrico-to-buy-2095-acre-varina-farms-for-land-preservation/>, posted January 17, 2024.

⁸ See, e.g. “Dutch Gap, Virginia. Bomb-proof quarters”, LC-DIG-cwpb-01927, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Avail. <https://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cwpb.01927/>, accessed 8/17/2025.

4. District's History and Significance

In the space below, briefly describe the history of the district, such as when it was established, how it developed over time, and significant events, persons, and/or families associated with the property. Please list all sources of information used to research the history of the property. (It is not necessary to attach lengthy articles or family genealogies to this form.) Normally, only information contained on this form is forwarded to the State Review Board.

If the district is important for its architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, or other aspects of design, please include a brief explanation of this aspect.

The Dutch Gap Historic District and its associated archaeological features on and around the James River are associated with the Civil War, specifically the summer of 1864 through the early weeks of 1865, during which Union troops under the command of General Benjamin Butler attempted to breach the entrenched Confederate defenses of the Howlett Line. While the canal failed to secure the hoped-for military advantage, it nonetheless made a substantial contribution to the outcome of the war and subsequent commercial development along the James south of Richmond. The Dutch Gap Canal is also notable for being the site of brave acts worthy of a Medal of Honor, in which Lieutenant Walter Thorn raced across the top of the canal bulwark as it was about to explode to warn a forgotten picket.

The Dutch Gap is the name commonly associated with the narrow neck of land that historically connected Farrar's Island and the main of Henrico County north of the James River. This neck was at one time approximately 175-200 yards wide and was part of a large series of oxbows known as the "Seven Mile Loop". It appears that Union commander Brig. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant became interested in using canals to bypass Confederate defenses at the siege of Vicksburg, despite three separate failures of canal works there prior to the city's surrender.⁹ The canal cut at Farrar's Island is described as proposed by Gen. Butler and supervised by Chief Engineer Peter S. Michie, who completed detailed drawings of the works.¹⁰ The canal progress was also photographed comparatively frequently, with numerous photographs extant of the canal progress, nearby military operations, and the completed canal in the early spring of 1865.

The area was historically the site of settlements prior to English colonization associated with the demesne of Arrohateck, contacted by Christopher Newport on upriver travels in 1607.¹¹ Later, this area is believed to be the site of the Cittie of Henricus, the second English settlement in Virginia founded in 1611.¹² By the time of the Civil War, photographs show farmhouses and other features associated with agricultural use.¹³

During the Civil War, Union armies repeatedly tried to attack the Confederate stronghold of Richmond from the east. Campaigns on either side of the James River failed in 1862 and again in 1864, as Confederate troops entrenched a massive line of works between Richmond and Petersburg known as the Howlett Line. Canals were tried at Vicksburg and despite failures there, seemed to have been top of mind as the Union Army eyed another assault on Richmond.

⁹ See, Terry Winschel, U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center, "The Engineers at Vicksburg, Part 04: Grant's Canal". Avail. <https://www.erd.usace.army.mil/Media/News-Stories/Article/933967/the-engineers-at-vicksburg-part-04-grants-canal/>, accessed 08/15/2025.

¹⁰ See, e.g. Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, [General Grant on the Siege of Petersburg](#) (p.575); Library of Congress, [The War of the Rebellion: a compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate armies](#) (Plate LXV).

¹¹ Rountree, Helen & *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*. Ashuaquid (fl. 1607). (2020, December 07). In *Encyclopedia Virginia*. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/ashuaquid-fl-1607> Accessed 8.17.2025.

¹² See, e.g. "Henricus and Henricopolis", National Register of Historic Places, nomination, https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/VLR_to_transfer/PDFNoms/020-0709_Nomination_REDACTED.pdf. Accessed 8/17/2025.

¹³ See, e.g. "Dutch Gap, Virginia (vicinity). Deserted farm house near Dutch Gap canal". Library of Congress, LC-B811- 2556, <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018670820> Accessed 8/17/2025.

A cut at Dutch Gap would have eliminated the need for Union boats to steam up at least two of the long river “reaches” or straight stretches of open water around blind bends that were covered to deadly effect by Confederate gun batteries.¹⁴ Boats could provide critical reinforcements, supplies, and supporting firepower to attacking troops, as they did at the nearby Battle of Malvern Hill in 1862, and therefore could be a tremendous asset for a final assault on the Confederate capitol. A cut at the Gap could also potentially allow boats to skirt around the northern terminus of the Howlett Line at nearby Battery Dantzler.

In August of 1864, “[t]he general direction of operations, with the command of the entire force to be employed, whether for digging or other purposes, was intrusted to Brig.-Gen. B.S. LUDLOW, while Maj. PETER S. MICHIE was assigned to the post of Chief Engineer.”¹⁵ Troops were “thrown across” the river and set to work building a campsite to accommodate the thousands of men and horses, digging preliminary ditches, and setting up gun batteries to “return the enemy’s compliments”.¹⁶ Union troops worked from east to west, sheltering behind a bulwark on the western side which was left to make a dam as the excavations worked downward. Removal of the surface soil was initially easy, but the harder, denser, fine-packed mud underneath proved impossible for the steam-powered dredges available to Maj. Michie; “[i]n the beginning New York soldiers were employed, but these were subsequently relieved by colored soldiers... [t]hese suffered much from fever, brought on by the dampness to which they were exposed.”¹⁷ Units at Dutch Gap included the 116th Regiment from Kentucky, possibly shown in contemporary photographs of USCT pickets around the abandoned farmhouses nearby¹⁸:

“The force at Gen. LUDLOW’s disposal comprised about seven hundred colored troops, but about three hundred of them were constantly required for duty as picket-guard, and for other services aside from actual labor in the canal, and the number of laborers was still further trenched upon by sickness, chills and fever prevailing to a very considerable extent. During the progress of the war the men engaged in it were changed several times, new details relieving the old ones. Once, as the public will remember, a number of rebel prisoners were counted for a short time among the workers, having been placed there by Gen. BUTLER in retaliation for the employment of colored prisoners by the enemy on their fortifications.”¹⁹

Heat and rain, with generally unsanitary camp conditions, contributed to outbreaks of disease and it was decided to “press”, or forcibly employ without pay, a group of free Black persons from Roanoke Island in North Carolina to augment the labor force. A letter of protest was discovered by researchers in 2013 addressed to General Butler describing the following:

“they were taken to Dutch Gap “*at the point of the bayonet*” and forced to dig for weeks without pay. When more laborers were needed “*guards were then sent ... to take up every man that could be found indiscriminately young and old sick and well. the soldiers broke into the colored people’s houses taken*”

¹⁴ See, e.g. “Dutch Gap Canal, James River, Virginia. Confederate battery on James River above Dutch Gap Canal”, Library of Congress, LC-B815- 29, <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018671958> Accessed 8/17/2025.

¹⁵ “THE DUTCH GAP CANAL.; How the Work was Commenced and Prosecuted The Blowing Out of the Bulkhead.” *New York Times*, January 8, 1865, page 2. Avail. <https://www.nytimes.com/1865/01/08/archives/the-dutch-gap-canal-how-the-work-was-commenced-and-prosecuted-the.html> Accessed 8/17/2025.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ January 21, 1865 *Harper’s Weekly*: Dutch Gap Canal. Avail. <https://www.beyondthecrater.com/resources/np/1865-np/jan-65-np/np-18650121-harpers-weekly-dutch-gap-canal/>, accessed 08/15/2025.

¹⁸ See, e.g. “Colored Pickets on Duty Near Dutch Gap”, 1864, [E. & H. T. Anthony](https://www.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2018.43.11), American, 1852 – 1901, Smithsonian National Museum of African-American History and Culture, 2018.43.11. Avail. https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2018.43.11 Accessed 8/17/2025.

¹⁹ “THE DUTCH GAP CANAL.; How the Work was Commenced and Prosecuted The Blowing Out of the Bulkhead.” *New York Times*, January 8, 1865, page 2. Avail. <https://www.nytimes.com/1865/01/08/archives/the-dutch-gap-canal-how-the-work-was-commenced-and-prosecuted-the.html> Accessed 8/17/2025.

sick men out of bed ... " A Union lieutenant endorsed the letter, writing that the men "were brought away by force" and were suffering greatly."²⁰

Finally, when the works were substantially complete, Maj. Michie's team determined to blow the bulkhead using mines and six tons of gunpowder arrayed along its length.²¹ With some aplomb,

"Gen. BUTLER, with most of the officers of his staff, rode down to the Gap, to witness the culminating act of the great enterprise of which he was the sole author, and in which he has taken so deep an interest. There was some delay in arranging the fuse, but as the New-Year's sun began to redden in the west, and somewhat less than an hour before its setting, the explosion occurred. It was attended with but a slight report, and although dust was thrown to the height of one hundred feet, the concussion was barely sufficient to crack the ice on a mudpuddle near the edge of the crevice."²²

Distant observers at the time seemed to have been unaware of the near-disaster that occurred just before detonation as a frantic aide realized no one had alerted the picket standing guard at the opposite end of the bulkhead. Walter Thorn, first lieutenant of the U. S. Colored Infantry, "dashed off in the direction of the bulkhead" under enemy fire from upriver to warn the lone sentry. Thorn apparently got the man's attention by shouting at him to run, then jumped off the bulkhead just as the soil beneath him exploded. Thorn was unhurt and was later awarded a Medal of Honor for his bravery that day; in recommending him, a superior noted Thorn's act "was as deliberate an act of self-sacrifice and valor as was ever performed in our country or any other".²³

The blast destroyed much of the hard work done by the Union troops and pressed laborers, as most of the soil disturbed by it fell back into the ditch, resulting in a channel too shallow for boats to pass. The Confederates took immediate advantage of the new firing channel and commenced to shell the ditch, work site, and camp from batteries upriver, killing dozens of people who were later interred along the southeast bank at the modern site of Henricus Park.²⁴

A somewhat ironic contemporary report concluded thus:

"Since its commencement seven thousand shells have been thrown in and around the canal; fifty men have been killed there, and two hundred wounded; forty-five horses have been killed, three barges sunk, and nine tugs disabled. The engineer who has superintended the

²⁰ "Evolution, Civil War history meet in fossil with tragic past", University of Maryland CNMS, November 26, 2013. Avail. <https://cmns.umd.edu/news-events/news/evolution-civil-war-history-meet-fossil-tragic-past> Accessed 8/17/2025. NB: The tragic abuse of the Roanoke Islanders was memorialized in 2013 when researchers associated with the University of Maryland described and named a fossil possibly found in historic spoil piles from the excavation of the Dutch Gap Canal "Potomacapnos apleutheron", from the Greek for "freedman". This fossil is of particular historical importance because it may not have been discovered without the uncompensated and unrewarded labor of the pressed Roanoke Island people and it has proved to be of particular importance in the history of humanity and the field of archaeology as potentially the oldest example of a flowering plant ever found in North America.

²¹ "THE DUTCH GAP CANAL.; How the Work was Commenced and Prosecuted The Blowing Out of the Bulkhead." *New York Times*, January 8, 1865, page 2. Avail. <https://www.nytimes.com/1865/01/08/archives/the-dutch-gap-canal-how-the-work-was-commenced-and-prosecuted-the.html> Accessed 8/17/2025.

²² *Id.*

²³ Beyer, Walter F. and Keydel, Oscar F. *Deeds of Valor: How America's Heroes Won the Medal of Honor ..., Volume 1* (The Perrien – Keydel Company: 1901), pp. 477-478. Avail. <https://www.beyondthecrater.com/resources/other-pubs/deeds-of-valor-vol-1/dov-v1-477-walter-thorn/#fn-48029-1> Accessed 8/17/2025.

²⁴ See "African-Americans in Early Virginia History", Henricus Historical Park, February 19, 2021. Avail. <http://henricus.org/2021/02/19/african-americans-in-early-virginia-history/> Accessed 08/15/2025. NB: These remains are extant at Henricus Park, currently marked by a fence and believed to include approximately 50 burials, though some may have been moved to other sites after the war.

work, PETER S. MICHIE, has been made Brevet Major, for meritorious services during the campaign.”²⁵

The canal at Dutch Gap did not serve its intended purpose, but likely did hold down enough Confederate attention and manpower throughout the latter half of 1864 that other efforts at Deep Bottom and elsewhere proved successful. The presence of the USCT is particularly significant, as is the tragic story of the pressed Roanoke Islanders later memorialized by 21st century archaeologists studying rare fossils produced at Dutch Gap possibly through the uncredited labor of those individuals.²⁶

The canal structure and associated archaeological remains are a unique survival of Civil War engineering works and may be the only such “cutoff” canal extant, after subsequent weather events changed the course of the Mississippi to obliterate similar canals near Vicksburg. Dutch Gap remains relatively unaltered from its 19th century appearance and maintains a high degree of integrity.

5. Property Ownership (Check as many categories as apply):

Private: _____ Public\Local Public\State _____ Public\Federal _____

6. Applicant/Sponsor (Individual and/or organization sponsoring preparation of the PIF, with contact information. For more than one sponsor, please list each below or on an additional sheet.)

name/title: George Fickett, Member, Board of Directors
organization: Richmond Battlefields Association
street & number: P.O. Box 13945
city or town: Richmond state: VA zip code: 23225
e-mail: _____ telephone: _____

Applicant’s Signature: _____
Date: _____

•• *Signature required for processing all applications.* ••

In the event of organization sponsorship, you must provide the name and title of the appropriate contact person.

Contact person: _____
Daytime Telephone: _____

Applicant Information (Individual completing form if other than applicant/sponsor listed above)

name/title: N/A
organization: _____
street & number: _____
city or town: _____ state: _____ zip code: _____
e-mail: _____ telephone: _____
Date: _____

²⁵ January 21, 1865 *Harper’s Weekly*: Dutch Gap Canal. Avail. <https://www.beyondthecrater.com/resources/np/1865-np/jan-65-np/np-18650121-harpers-weekly-dutch-gap-canal/>, accessed 08/15/2025.

²⁶ “Evolution, Civil War history meet in fossil with tragic past”, University of Maryland CNMS, November 26, 2013. Avail. <https://cnms.umd.edu/news-events/news/evolution-civil-war-history-meet-fossil-tragic-past> Accessed 8/17/2025.

7. Notification

In some circumstances, it may be necessary for DHR to confer with or notify local officials of proposed listings of properties within their jurisdiction. In the following space, please provide the contact information for the local County Administrator, City Manager, and/or Town Manager.

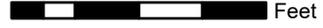
name/title: John Vithoukas
locality: Henrico County
street & number: 4301 E Parham Rd
city or town: Richmond state: VA zip code: 23228
telephone: (804) 501-4000

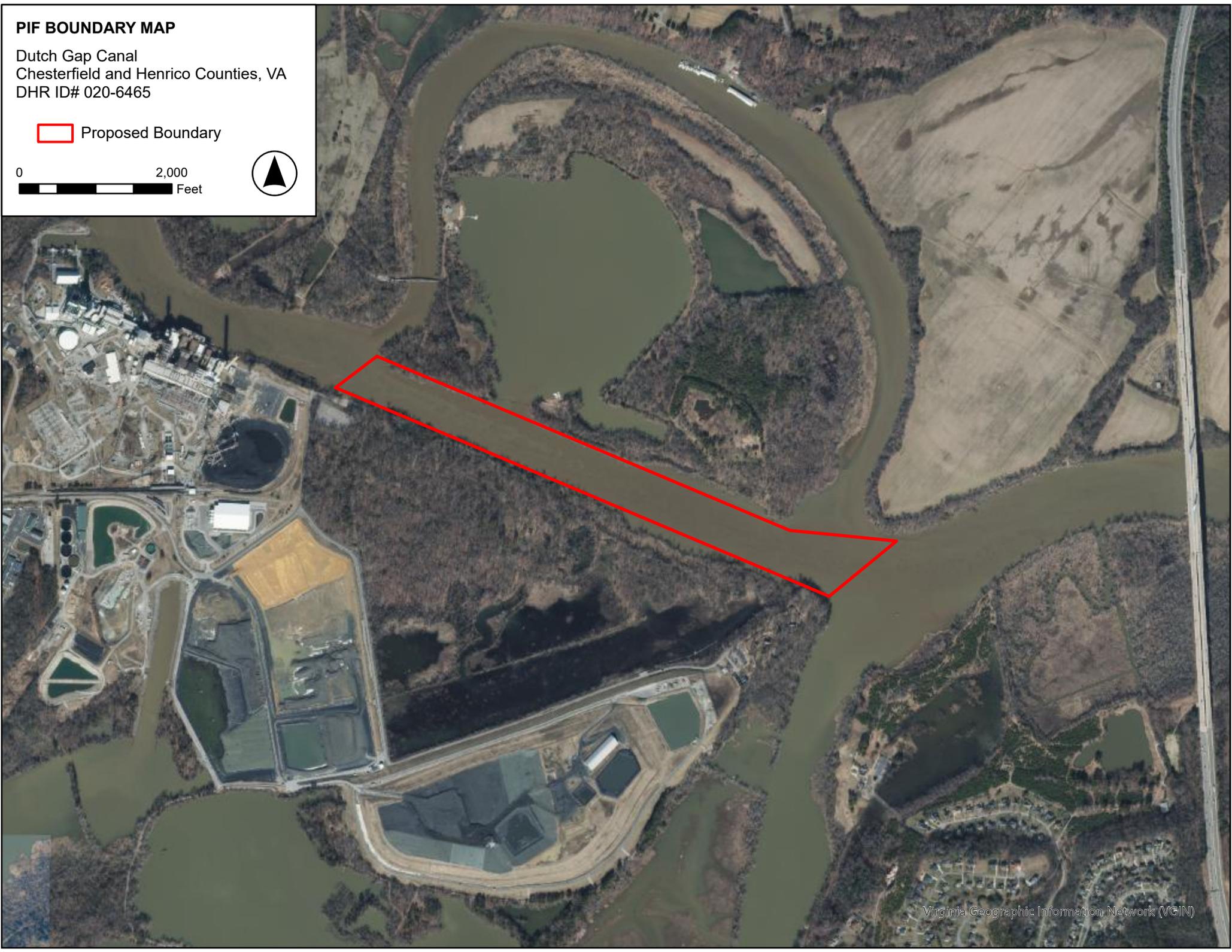
name/title: Dr. Joseph P. Casey
locality: Chesterfield County
street & number: 9901 Lori Road
city or town: Chesterfield, VA state: VA zip code: 23832
telephone: 804-748-1190

PIF BOUNDARY MAP

Dutch Gap Canal
Chesterfield and Henrico Counties, VA
DHR ID# 020-6465

 Proposed Boundary

0 2,000
 Feet



H 52

1200 F





12-11

12-11











