

A SLICE OF POTOMAC RIVER GEOGRAPHY

Spilsbury, Gail Dickersin. *A Washington Sketchbook: Drawings by Robert L. Dickinson, 1917–1918.*

Baltimore, Maryland: Chesapeake Book Company, 2011. 196 pages, oversize, with foldout map.

Numerous interior early-20th-century maps and drawings, many in color. ISBN: 978-0-9823049-3-8.

Retail: \$30, from author \$24. Phone 510-323-5764 or gailsplisbury@gmail.com

Reviewed by Eugene Scheel

Was it five years ago that a young lady from Washington called me and said she had an old map she wanted to show me?

We met at the Thomas Balch Library for history and genealogy in Leesburg, Loudoun County, Virginia and she unrolled a large hand-drawn affair, ink on vellum, innumerable detail and flourish, a veritable illuminated-manuscript style of map, signed by its physician artist and map-maker "RLD October 1918."

It was like eating peanuts—you could go on and on looking for hours. I saw scores of names appearing on no other map, reams of notes telling how to get from one place to another, and pithy comments about the scenic and historic sites.

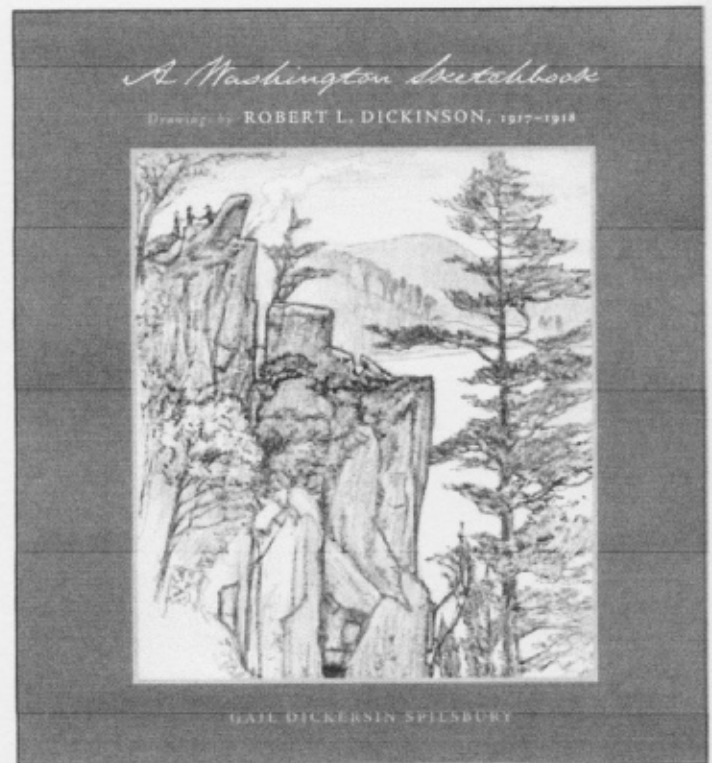
As I write this review I am looking at a copy, for now the public can view this cartographic gem. It is a foldout at the close of Gail Spilsbury's *A Washington Sketchbook*, an exquisite study of a slice of Potomac River geography just west of the Nation's Capital.

What other map has such notes as "Here lived Jackson who killed Ellsworth"; "Leesburg Turnpike, a rough and gullied road. No proper road to Falls on Virginia side"; and on the Maryland shore, "Conduit Road. Fine Asphalt. To Georgetown."

And the directional notes to scenic and historic sites! "R. To hotel, thence diagonal toward river, somewhat rocky path, near cliff (views) dip across brook. Caves are over edge where low wall steps path down. Locks extant, follow to river: then back and up to path again to cliff along BALCONY floored with potholes to camp"

The map and its book, the latter featuring many detailed hand-drawn 1937 maps by hiker and author Robert Shosteck, is an invitation to try each of Dr Dickinson's and Mr Shosteck's several hikes: Black Pool, Sandy Landing, Cupid's Bower, Falls Rock Gate, Greytower, and other sites of allure—they all beckon.

Recently I spoke with author Gail Dickerson Spilsbury (not related to physician Dickinson) and she told me how she came to write the book. Having studied history and writing at New York State colleges she became interested in the Frederic Law Olmstead



family. On researching her book *Rock Creek Park* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), Gail had come across a letter from Dr Dickinson to Mr Olmstead, Jr., asking if he (Dickinson) could use texts from Mr Olmstead's 1918 report on Rock Creek Park, Washington, D. C. In the letter Dr. Dickinson mentioned he had rendered some drawings of the D. C. Area.

Having already published a *New York Walk Book*, the drawings were to be part of a Washington Walk Book. But an eighteen-month stay in the capital city gave Dr Dickinson little time to bring the project to fruition.

"I've got to find those drawings," Gail thought, but she gave up after searching two months. Then, one day in the hushed reading room of the prints and photographs division of the Library of Congress "I found them in their

original three-ring binder. Dickinson had donated them to the library in 1941 but they had never been catalogued. I let out a yelp. A staffer rushed over to find out what was the matter."

Many of these drawings, often in the subdued colors of a French impressionist or the Japanese artists Hokusai and Hiroshige, appear in Ms Spilsbury's book.

Gail then beavered down the grandchildren. "Well, the family was delighted, and a grandson just took the map out of an old tube and rolled it [the original, now a fold-out copy in the book] out and put it on the table.

"Someone then said, 'You've got to show it to Gene Scheel,'" and that's how I got involved, and told Gail she needed to publish that map with accompanying text.

And a fine text it is. Read her description of the namer of Cabin John Bridge:

This strange man inhabited his humble hut for many years, shunning and avoiding everybody, claiming no neighbors except the rocks and trees, and no associates or companions except his gun and his fierce and fleet-footed dogs Frequently [curious people] would hear music on some peculiar instrument, and sometimes he would sing songs and quaint and touching melodies in a foreign language . . . [to] one whose memory he cherished.

And after her description (only a bit of it entered here) there is a ca.1900 photo of the bridge, with a cabin and outline of a man below.

These links between text and graphics are reinforced by several copies, on their now-yellowed paper, of articles by J. Harry Shannon, *The Washington Star's* "Rambler" columnist of the early-twentieth century. Mr Shannon escorted Dr Dickinson to various natural sites.

Introducing a biography of the remarkable Dr Dickinson is a nearly blank page, the projected cover of "A Washington Walk Book," emblazoned only with the calligraphic title, the projected publisher (The American Geographical Society), and name, Robert Latou Dickinson. "I am twins," he once said, "a surgeon and an artist. Sometimes I don't know which it is that I am."

A grant well-spent from the C&O Canal Trust funded publishing of Gail Spilsbury's *A Washington Sketchbook*, and while it is still on the shelves, you have got to go out and buy it.

Ms. Spilsbury publishes books on Washington, D. C.-area subjects and encourages and works with authors. Check the web-site: bergamotbooks.com. A *Washington Sketchbook* can be further viewed at www.washingtonsketchbook.com.

—Eugene Scheel, a WMS member and frequent Portolan contributor, is writing an agricultural history of Loudoun County focusing on minutes of the Catoclin Farmers' Club, of which he is a member. The CFC is Virginia's oldest extant farming organization, founded in 1868. Mr Scheel is also planning commissioner of Loudoun's vast Catoclin District, with many miles of unspoiled Potomac River frontage, but without a Dr. Dickinson.



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