

III. SUMMARY OF EXISTING CONDITIONS

The geologic and cultural analysis in the Cultural Resource Assessment phase of this document examines the existing conditions of the Memphis Landing in detail. A summary of these conditions follows. Those seeking further information should consult the assessment document (Weaver et al. 1995) as the comprehensive source.

The Memphis Landing is located on the western edge of the traditional downtown core of the City of Memphis, separated from the Mississippi River by Mud Island, a massive sandbar that is now a public park, and the Wolf River Harbor, a slackwater basin that was the outlet for the Wolf River before construction of a levee on the north end of Mud Island in the 1960s (Figures 3 and 4).

Historically, the Memphis Landing became a defined place with the initiation of paving projects in 1859. The pavement stretched from Adams Avenue on the north to Beale Street on the south. The pavement was laid as a massive carpet from the approximate level of the designated low water mark (0.0 feet on the Memphis gauge, or 183.91 feet NGVD) to the current eastern edge of the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad line adjacent to Riverside Drive. From there, similar paving materials were used for the grades of all east-west streets and avenues connecting the Landing with Front Street, the traditional location of businesses with interests related to river commerce.

The construction of Jefferson Davis Park in the mid-1930s covered more than a full block of the Landing, reestablishing its northern edge at the line of Court Avenue. Related to this project was the construction of Riverside Drive, a scenic roadway first planned in 1908 but built in the 1930s to stabilize the eroding edge of the river bluff south of Beale Street. The construction of Riverside Drive and relocation of the Illinois Central Railroad tracks parallel to it on the east entailed the building of an embankment on the eastern edge of the Landing to raise it above flood stage.

Riverside Drive imposed a physical barrier between the Landing and downtown approximately 8–12 feet above the level of the stone paving. A steep (30–35 degrees) embankment separates the road and the Landing. A guardrail on top of the embankment separates traffic from the steep drop to the Landing. There is no curb or sidewalk on the west side of Riverside Drive. The embankment is paved with granite pavers installed during the construction of the roadway. Four ramps were built off of the west side of Riverside Drive to connect the Landing and the roadway. These too are paved with stones installed in the 1930s.

Tom Lee Park, constructed ca. 1935 south of Beale Street, currently defines the Landing's southern edge. At least part of the Landing was covered during the construction of this park, which is also elevated well above the average annual flood level. There is no pedestrian connection between the Landing and Tom Lee Park. However, on the north, a modest walkway connects the surface of the Landing with the elevated surface of Jefferson Davis Park.

The Landing is a vast, unified surface of stone blocks, set with occasional mooring rings for watercraft. Its surface area is estimated to be 379,000 square feet. Of this surface area, approximately 70,000 square feet of the paving has been lost, mostly due to erosion on its western edge. The grade of the Landing across its east-west axis is fairly consistent over its entire length, averaging approximately 1:6 (1 foot in height for every 6 feet of length). The grade of the Landing across its north-south axis is less consistent. Elevations decrease from north to south. Consequently, the line of the water's edge at the 0.0 foot mark forms a shallow arc, and as the water rises the east-west width of the Landing south of Union Avenue decreases faster than the area north of Union Avenue.

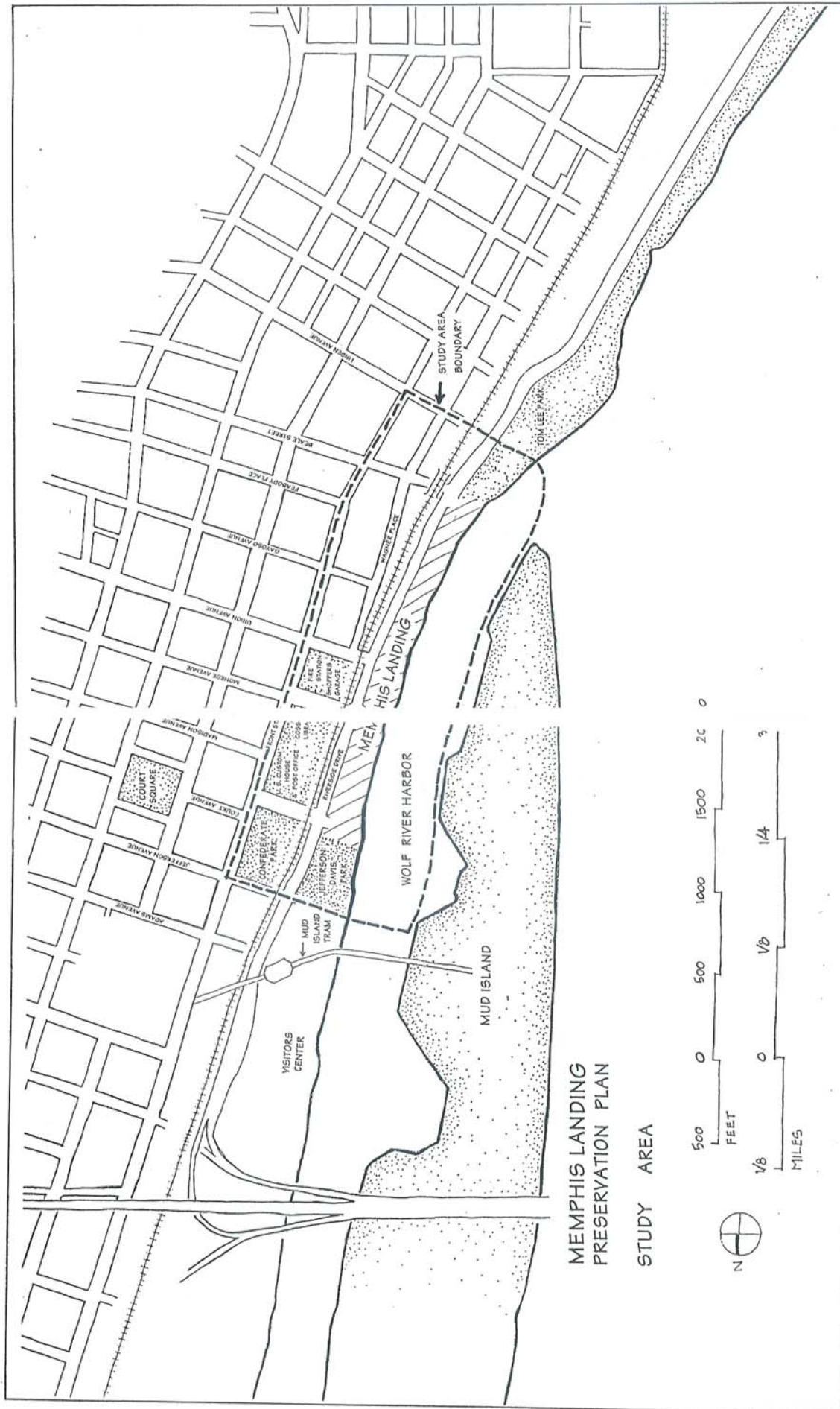


Figure 3. Location of the Study Area in Downtown Memphis.

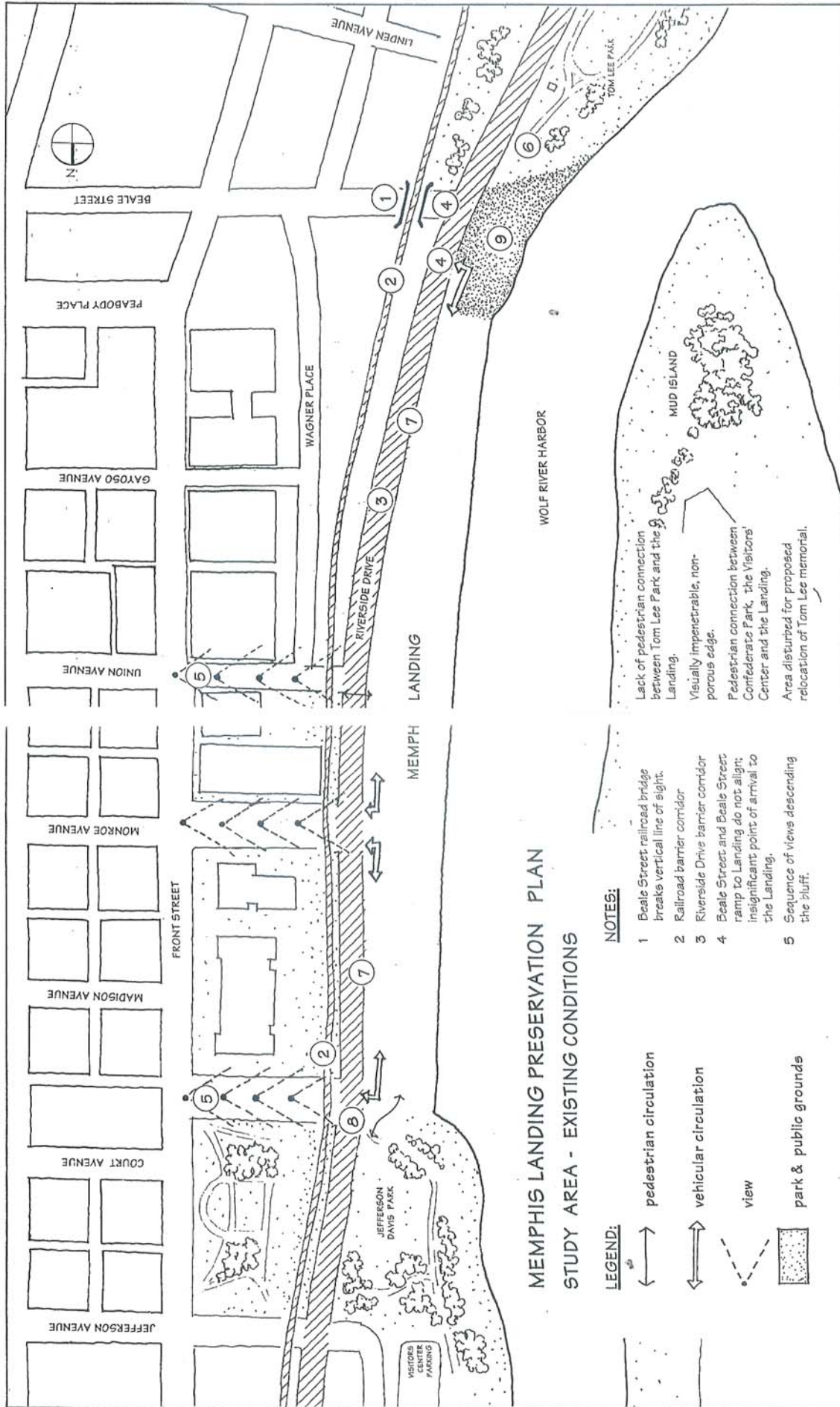


Figure 4. Plan of Existing Conditions and Context.

Examination of the Landing reveals evidence of its long history and periods of construction (Figure 5). Geological analysis indicates that nine types of stone have been used in original paving or repairs. Fossiliferous limestone was used to cover the largest area of the Landing north of Union Avenue. These stones are nondimensional and laid in a somewhat regular pattern. The area north of Union Avenue appears to represent the earliest paving projects, from 1859 to 1868. Later sections of the Landing south of Union Avenue (ca. 1879–1881) were first built using nondimensional fossiliferous limestone with a high percentage of low-quality friable limestone. This limestone breaks apart under heavy use, and large-scale repairs were apparently undertaken almost immediately, using a higher-quality, roughly dimensional oolitic limestone. Later repairs are associated with roughly dimensional sandstone. Construction of the service road at the base of Riverside Drive in the 1930s includes large areas of pink and white granites, suggesting these materials were not incorporated into the fabric of the Landing until the twentieth century. The granites are sometimes found as pure patches but usually occur in association with limestone blocks salvaged from the existing or disturbed areas of the pavement. The use of rhyolite and syenite also dates from the period of highway construction. Dimensional limestone appears to be the most recent raw material used, as similar stone was used in the construction of sidewalks at Confederate Park in 1983.

The surface of the Landing contains hundreds of significant cultural features, including mooring rings, stone drainage swales built into the surface of the pavement, and the Beale Street river gauge, used for measuring the daily change in water level on the Landing.

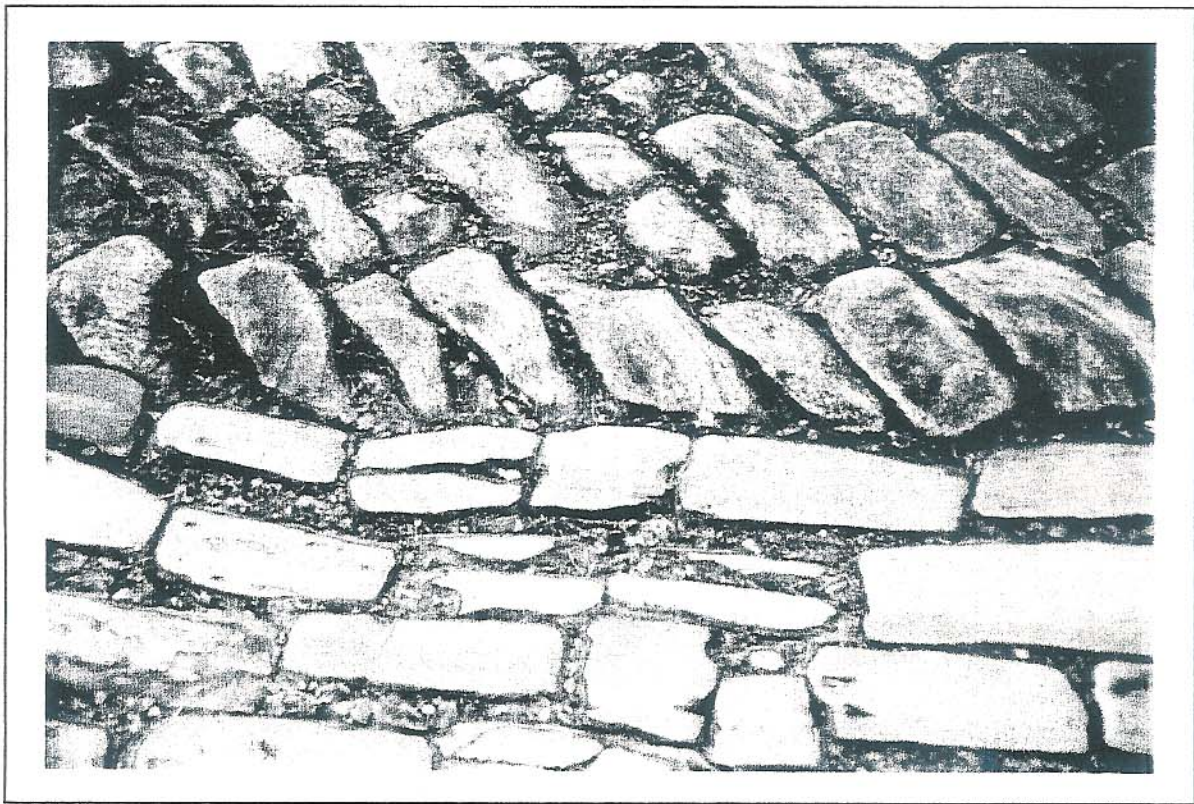


Figure 5. Differing Patterns and Materials of the Stone Paving on the Landing, Revealing Its History of Construction.