

The Sycamore Islander

February, 2000

Volume 79, No. 2

Old Photos Needed

Blair Bower is looking for photographs of former caretakers for an exhibit in the clubhouse. If you have any such pictures that you are willing to donate or lend for copying, give him a call at 703-528-4466.

February Meeting

The January meeting converged on the two agenda items listed in last month's *Islander* and approved (1) to change the term "Guest Card" to "Waiting List Pass" and (2) to limit the time-frame for applying for club membership to the single month of January each year. This second decision was agreed to go into effect after March 31 this year, in order to give members time to adjust to the new rule and inform any of their friends of the new time restrictions on receiving applications for club membership.

The February meeting will be held at 8:00 p.m. on February 9 at the home of Maurice Tobin. "Old Business" will discuss the issue of confirming the identity of members who wish to visit the island, particularly on Sundays when relief caretakers are doing the ferrying.

Directions: Head towards downtown on Massachusetts Avenue. Pass the US Naval Observatory and just after

crossing the bridge over Rock Creek Parkway, turn left at the light onto Belmont Road. The house is on the right at 2434.

MINUTES OF THE JANUARY MEETING

Attendance: Blair and Nancy Bower, Johnna Robinson, Bill Bays, Jane Winer, Peggy Thomson, Robert Henry, Betty Burchell, Doc Taliaferro, Renee Dunham, Alan Gelb, Tryon Wells, Bill Eichbaum.

President Tryon Wells called the meeting to order at 8:10 p.m. The minutes of the last meeting were approved.

Communications: Trip Reid corrected the statement in the December minutes that two Black Locust trees were planted on the Island; they were Black Gum. Gerald Barton observed that substitute caretakers have difficulty knowing who is who and suggested that there

The Sycamore Islander is a monthly newsletter of the Montgomery Sycamore Island Club. Articles, photographic essays, drawings, announcements, letters to the editors—any materials of interest to the membership and waiting list—are welcome and should be sent to the Editors, Jane and David Winer, 5927 Onondaga Road, Bethesda, MD 20816. Text and graphics may be sent as email attachments to davidwiner@erols.com in all common formats. The deadline for inclusion in a particular issue is receipt at the Editors' address ten days prior to the second-Wednesday monthly meeting of the club. **Earlier submissions receive priority.**

be some means to identify legitimate visitors to the Island.

Treasurer's Report: Alan Gelb reported "so far so good."

Parties Report: Bill Eichbaum submitted a detailed party report for year 1999. Annual reports will help to guide policy decisions about parties. In 1999, there were 24 parties averaging about 25 persons each. In two cases, sponsoring member's party privileges were suspended for infractions of Club rules.

Budget Report: Johnna Robinson clarified the final budget report for 1999. Repair, tax, and utility estimates were close to actual expenditure. Capital improvement costs were less than budgeted. We still have two outstanding payments - liability insurance and workman's compensation. A company has not yet been found to cover workman's compensation for the caretaker.

Canoe Report: Peter Winkler is the new owner of the Club canoe that was offered for sale.

Caretaker's Report:

- Past flood damage to floor and ceiling of the caretaker's quarters is being repaired. Replacement rather than repair is being considered.
- A child fell into the cold water during a family canoe trip.
- Doc suggested that the Club supply canoes at Lock 7 for the April river cleanup sponsored by the Alice Ferguson Foundation.
- 60 to 70 people visited the Island on January 2.
- Motor oil will be applied as a preservative to the clubhouse floor. A motion to use fresh oil rather than used oil was defeated. It was said that the acid in used oil is what makes it effective.

Old business: The December motion to change the name "Guest Card" to "Waiting List Pass" was passed unanimously.

The November meeting motion that would restrict accepting applications for membership to only the first quarter of each year was amended after debate as follows: Applications will be accepted until the

end of March this year and limited to the month of January in subsequent years. The motion passed as amended. [Note: Subsequent inspection of the minutes of the November meeting shows no record of the motion being made. This motion will be voted upon again at the next meeting.]

New business:

Tryon Wells announced that he would call a meeting of the Board of Directors to review club application procedures and materials and make recommendations.

It was proposed that the Islander post a reminder to those on the waiting list that they may apply for passes, if eligible. This was in response to a complaint from one of the club applicants on the waiting list distressed by the absence of a reminder in the waiting list fee notice.

Blair Bower suggested that we have a picture gallery in the clubhouse. A committee will be appointed for this project. Old and new maps of the Island will be included and suggestions were made for obtaining these.

Bill Eichbaum reported that the fish ladder construction at Little Falls is now complete and we will know in six months whether it works.

There was general discussion of winter canoeing and its dangers as well as club liability for accidents.

Suggestions were made in response to Gerald Barton's e-mail note of concern that substitute caretakers have some means to identify legitimate visitors to the Island. A roster could be kept on the ferry; a "Members Only" sign might be added to the Sycamore Island sign along the towpath. This discussion will be continued at the next meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:50 p.m.

—Recording Secretary, Renee Dunham



The Canoe Pool on Foot —by Penny Doolittle



The author, Bob Sinclair, and Lydia Weber forming up the crossing-pool.

I was inspired to dig up these old photos after reading Leah Hertz's article, "Revisiting the CIA Canoe Pool Path," in which she mentions that there were times when the trip was made entirely on foot. These pictures were probably taken in the late 1970's when winter here was really winter. Shown is me--in proper ice crossing outfit--Bob Sinclair, famous for crossing no matter what the weather, and the intrepid Lydia Weber. Her daughter Xenya accompanied us on the crossing that day.

I was a most disloyal canoe pooler but rarely missed a chance when the river was frozen over, mostly because it was incredibly thrilling, but also because it was so quick and easy--just walk down the hill and over to the Island, then across the river and up the Virginia side, ready for work. No need to mess with the ferry, canoes, or even with a change of clothes.

I wish that I had some photographs taken a few days later when the ice was beginning to melt. It was still safe to cross in the morning, but with a warmer sunny day predicted, getting home could turn out to be very

tricky. If it hadn't been for Bob Sinclair, I'm sure we wouldn't have risked it, but he was thorough in planning for every conceivable disaster and determined to go. We set off armed not only with his ice ax, but carrying long poles and dragging a canoe. The poles were in case someone fell through the ice. I think the canoe was intended to provide an escape should we become stranded on an ice floe or worse. As it was, the ice was very wet on top but passable for the return trip, but it was most comforting to have that canoe in tow.

I don't remember who else made that crossing. Does anyone else have some pictures? I know there were some wonderful ones of Peter



"...showing off my river crossing outfit..." with Bob.

and Holly cross country skiing around the Island. And of course, there were all those wonderful days of ice skating, when the river was frozen solid with smooth black ice stretching all the way to Virginia.

Those were the days.

Letter to the Editors

Dear Friends,

What a thrill to see the small reproduction of the map of Sycamore Island on the front cover of "The Sycamore Islander," January 2000 issue!

We are the lucky owners of the original full-scale colorful map.

My husband was given the map as a birthday present by one of his girl friends, Ruth Finckel, and in the border is printed her name and the date of 1931, so your guess of 1932 was pretty close.

My husband, Don Conner, sent the copy to, I believe, Jessie Bakeman when she was treasurer.

The boat house which you noted as on the river side, was the center of our visits. On nice days we (my parents and I) and friends (members) did not sit and visit in the club house but all gathered on the runway, on benches, extra chairs, etc. at the boat house. My mother and father (Adrienne and Hayden Collins) were regular weekend vacationers and I spent many happy hours there as a child from the age of about 10 to 20 when I married Don whom I met at Sycamore Island. He says he was a "river rat" whose parents rented a shack along the canal and he regularly swam over to Sycamore and eventually when he was eligible became a member.

Well I remember climbing, carrying any trash we had brought down, the 72 or 73 steps up the hill to Conduit Road where our car was parked across from Boots Johnson's Sycamore Store. And we always helped Boots' father, "Captain Johnson,"

whom we affectionately called-- behind his back--"Old Man Johnson." He was the care-taker for many years.

There were sleeping quarters above the two-story boat house, a large room divided by a canvas curtain with cots on each side. My pal, Alice W. and I wanted to bunk up there but we had to have a chaperone and our mothers took turns. Once when Mrs. W. was the chaperone, the mosquitoes were particularly active, so we turned off the lights (a bulb in the ceiling with a long cord to pull) and undressed in the dark. Alice and I were already in our cots and Mrs. W. was braiding her long hair prior to retiring. All of a sudden the lights went on! This was repeated a couple of times on-off-on-off until Mrs. W. finally realized she had braided the pull cord in with her hair and she was the cause of on-off when she lay down and got up. Oh, how we laughed.

During those years we had no problems with large parties as guests. If we wanted to bring one or two friends, or even a family of four, we did--without any prior arrangements. Of course the membership was smaller then than it is now but I personally would abhor a large group of strangers up there on our weekends. We were like one big happy family with no wrangling or signing up of guests.

I am enclosing a donation with the hopes you will continue to mail the monthly "Sycamore Islander." It is a joy to receive and is read avidly by me. If you have no particular use, I suggest you put the money toward a memorial to John Seabury Thomson, whom we never met

Notice to Applicants on the Waiting List

The past two years has seen a number of modifications to the rules regarding the issuance of “Guest Cards” (from here on out to be referred to as “Waiting List Passes”). All of the changes have been in the direction of limiting their availability, as current club members have grown concerned about the high levels of Island use in recent years. The Waiting List Pass was originally intended as a recruiting device to expand club membership. Today, with the waiting list at over 150 and last year’s issuance of Waiting List Passes at 70, the club is seeking to reduce the pressure. Last meeting’s vote to limit the future receipt of club applications to only the 31 days in January each year is yet another case in point.

In line with this concern, this year’s Waiting List Fee notice, annually sent to all applicants on the waiting list, did not contain a reminder to purchase a Waiting List Pass. This has caused some confusion and one complaint. In order to clear up any misunderstandings, the following is the actual text of the current rule:

6. *Waiting List Passes*

Waiting List Passes may only be issued between January 1 and March 31. Upon the request of an applicant for membership who is in good standing, and if the applicant has been on the waiting list for a minimum of 3 years, the Membership Secretary may issue to such applicant a Waiting List Pass valid for the year in which issued. Holders of such passes and members of their immediate families shall be entitled to the use of all facilities of the Island, subject to the By-Laws and Standing Rules, between November and April, inclusive, and from Monday to Friday inclusive during the remainder of the year, except for national holidays, and may pay an additional fee for the use of a canoe rack, if available. Waiting List Pass holders who are single, may bring a friend while visiting the Island. The Financial Secretary shall collect from each Waiting List Pass applicant, prior to issuance of the pass, a fee equal to one-half the regular annual dues.

The new part in this rule is the 3-year waiting period for an applicant to become eligible to purchase a Waiting List Pass. After considerable discussion at both the November and December meetings, the membership decided not to apply this waiting period part of the rule to applicants that had been previously eligible to receive a Waiting List Pass. Thus, anyone who could purchase a Waiting List Pass last year will be able to do so again this year. The rule would apply, however, to those who had never been eligible and to any future applicants. Inquiries should be directed to the Membership Secretary Peter Winkler.

Dropping the reminder to purchase a Waiting List Pass in this year’s Waiting List Fee notice puts the burden of responsibility for getting a Waiting List Pass onto the applicant that really wants one. The club assumes no responsibility to regularly remind members or waiting list applicants about any optional opportunities (Waiting List Passes, canoe rack availability, etc.) and will not include a reminder in future notices until the club seeks to use the device again as a recruiting tool in some future period of expansion.

– Tryon Wells

American Sycamore: A Hospitable but Somewhat Lonely Tree

—By Jane Hill



Sycamore Island's namesake, the American sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis* L.), is a tree of noble and ancient lineage. It is also big. On rich bottomlands, it can reach 150 feet in height and 12 feet in diameter. No eastern hardwood tops it, except tulip tree, and none outdoes it in girth.

The most venerable sycamores encountered by the early settlers were 500 to 600 years old, with decayed, hollow interiors. Pioneers could stable a horse, cow, or pig in one, or shelter a whole family until the log cabin could be raised. Canoeists should know that a dugout canoe fashioned from sycamore by the early French in Illinois measured 65 feet long and, depending on which version of the story you believe, weighed or could carry 9,000 pounds.

The ancient giants are no more, but many of their descendants now exceed 100 years. The hollow interiors of these youngsters could hardly house a horse, let alone a human family (though see cover photo), but they make comfortable quarters for smaller animals, including raccoons, opossums, owls, and Wood Ducks. For years, a pair of Barred Owls has roosted in a cavity atop a sycamore along the C&O Canal in Cabin John. Sycamores are also hospitable to animals in other ways. A pair of Bald Eagles maintains a perennial nest in the crotch of a large sycamore near



Barred Owl sunbathes in sycamore crotch next to the canal (arrow).

Great Falls, Maryland. Birders eye leafy sycamore canopies to catch glimpses of colorful warblers, orioles, and other songbirds that favor this species. In the northern and western parts of Maryland, Yellow-throated Warblers prefer tall sycamores for nesting.



Eagles' nest above Great Falls.

Sycamores also host swimmers, who know that a massive trunk leaning out from the riverbank makes a perfect support for a rope swing: Climb out the trunk, grab the rope, swing out, and let go! The trunk's lean arises after repeated flooding scours away the soil around the tree base.

The tenacious roots hold fast to the remaining soil, and the trunk, undercut on its river side, lists riverward. (The same happens to silver maples and willows.)



“Our” swing tree, a short walk, paddle, or swim upstream from the Island.

Sycamore foliage, like the trunk, is generously proportioned. The tree's genus name, *Platanus*, may come from the Greek *platys*, meaning broad, for the wide leaves. The species name, *occidentalis*, meaning western, is a designation that the famous eighteenth-century taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus, who named the tree, used more than once to distinguish North American plants from their European cousins--in this case, from *Platanus orientalis* L., the Oriental plane tree. (The "L." at the end of the scientific names indicates that Linnaeus named them.) The common name sycamore is thought to be derived from the Greek words *sykon*, meaning fig, and *moron*, mulberry--probably in reference to sycamore's dangling fruits.

As good a host as sycamore is, its generosity does not extend to its flower or fruit structure. Its tiny blossoms are clustered in balls, both sexes on the same tree, male clusters separate from female. The meager blooms, which are dull in color and scentless, make no attempt to lure pollinators with nectar or flashy colors. Sycamore casts its pollen to the

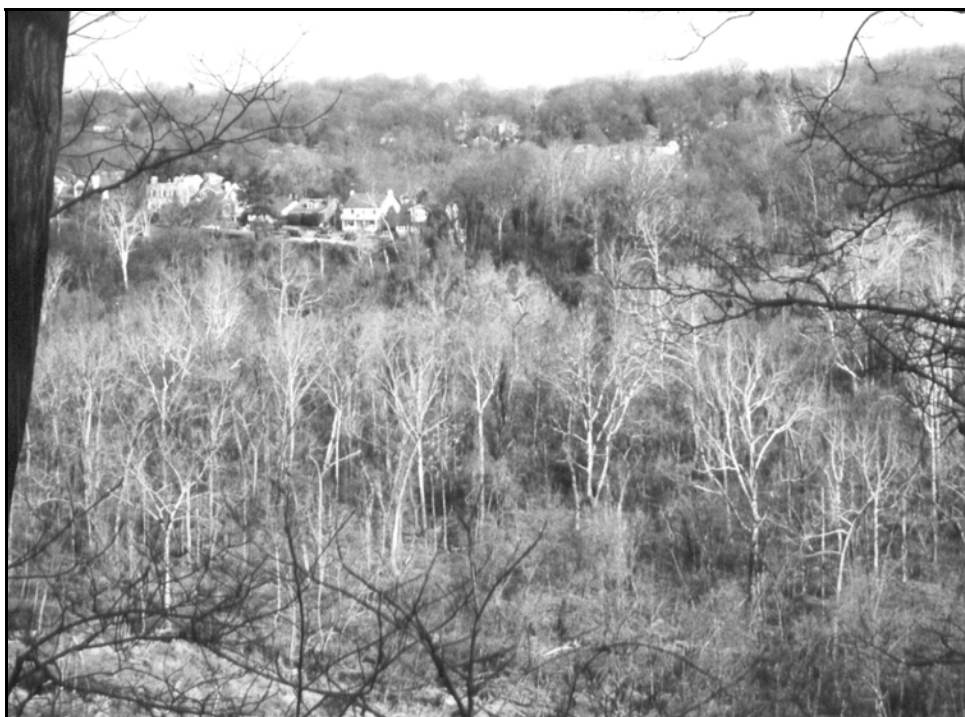
wind, and must produce plenty of it to ensure that some reaches female flowers on neighboring trees.

Many other eastern trees, including oaks, beech, walnut, birches, and elms, are also wind pollinated. Along with sycamore, they belong to an evolutionary line that arose from primitive, insect-pollinated flowering plants more than 100 million years ago, in areas that had alternating wet and dry seasons. In adapting to that climate, the trees became deciduous, shedding their leaves each dry season. During the leafless periods, the flowers were exposed to wind, and these species adopted wind pollination. These characteristics permitted the trees to venture out of the tropics, where flowering plants had originated, to drier, colder, temperate regions. There they were leafless during the cold season. Plants were sparse in these cool regions, and wind-pollinated ones quickly expanded their range and diversified, eventually dominating. But by about 80 million years ago, insect-pollinated plants also began to adapt to temperate climates. Their efficient exploitation of insect pollinators drove wind-

pollinated plants into a decline in numbers and diversity. As insects and flowering plants continue to co-evolve, wind-pollinated trees may become even more restricted, yielding to plants with scented and showier blossoms, pollinated by insects. Thus, sycamore flowers may not be dressed for success over the long haul.

An ominous sign is that sycamore has few living relatives. *Platanus* is the only genus in its family, Platanaceae, and there are only about eight species of *Platanus* worldwide. Botanists suspect that small, distinctive families such as Platanaceae and the other families of wind-pollinated flowering plants once had many more members and are now relicts.

The Potomac valley in winter reveals one of sycamore's more distinctive features: The bark on the upper trunks and branches is smooth and mottled, pale greenish-gray to yellowish or chalky white (some call it "camouflage" bark), in contrast to the drab grays of the other trees. Older bark of sycamore is dark, thick, and fissured. Stream valleys can be traced in winter by the zones of white-crowned sycamores lining them.



White trunks stand out in winter, showing the profusion of sycamores in the bottomland. Palisade above Little Falls, looking from Virginia.

Sycamore fruits, clustered in balls that dangle from long stalks into the winter, are also distinctive, and, like the flowers, spare and dull colored. The tiny nutlets (technically, achenes), so tightly packed in the balls, cast their lot with the wind, like the pollen. They are not fleshy, like pawpaw or persimmon, which reward a hungry animal who takes the trouble to carry off a fruit and its contained seeds to new sites. Each sycamore nutlet has a fringe of brown, silky hairs at its base to help send the nutlet sailing on the breeze when the ball begins to break apart in late winter or spring.

The wood of sycamore is unusual, too. With a beautiful figure of dark freckles in a cream to pink background, it intrigues woodworkers. It is hard, heavy, and fairly weak, and, with its interlocked grain, difficult to work, which limits its commercial value. Yet it has found its way into veneer, baskets, tobacco boxes, paneling, barrels, pallets, crates, butcher blocks, furniture, Pullman cars, and buttons (hence the old vernacular, buttonwood, for sycamore).

Appropriately enough, Sycamore Island's eponymous tree still grows abundantly there. Since the canoe club's founding in 1885, many of the island's trees have been allowed to grow, so some are even becoming venerable and holloled out. Rocky, the island's resident raccoon, knew all about it



Jane Hill, on the waiting list, especially enjoys swimming from the Island. She is a botanist and an accomplished birder, and for the last few years has been known as "The Voice of the Naturalist" for the Audubon Naturalist Society.

—Photos by Jane and David Winer

Error

The Editors inadvertently omitted a portion of Doc Taliaferro's poem, "Ode to the Caretaker's Wife," in the January issue of the *Islander*. Three lines slipped from the "text box" in a mouse-motion intended only to reposition the box, but that accidentally re-sized it. Doc has graciously accepted our apology.

Don't ask what your Club can do for you, but rather, what can you do for your Club?

Though it is only February, it won't be long before the annual search begins again for more volunteers to take over duties of administration and management of the island and its facilities. Some of the jobs, by the nature of their description, require more time and energy than others. Some do not require either in any quantity. How they are performed depends entirely on the member's effort, time and imagination. There is still ample time to consider the time and work level that you might wish to commit to this year and next. Please do consider it. It is why the club continues to be successful and why it remains a vital element in the minds of its members.

I would like to make special mention of two volunteers who have performed arguably two of the most demanding jobs in the club, Treasurer and Financial Secretary. Johnna Robinson, our ex-Treasurer has succeeded in restoring our treasury to good health from almost no reserve in 1993 to a substantial reserve in 2000. This was accomplished despite the flood devastation of the canoe shed in 1996. With a strong hand on the checkbook, and meticulous attention to the club's financial condition, I cannot remember a time when the club has balanced its fiscal books so well.

I would also like to thank Jinny Jones for uncomplaining devotion to the task of keeping track of all the dues checks and other incoming moneys these past 4 years. The Financial Secretary does triple duty in our club. Not only are checks deposited, but the address database of all the membership must be updated and maintained. This same data-

base also produces each month's labels for the *Islander* and the end-of-year dues and waiting-list-fee notices. I'd also like to point out that Phil Jones' devotion to contributing to the club goes all the way back to the 1960s. Between them, Phil and Jinny have given over 30 years of service and I think the club just ought to thank them.

Thank all of you very much. We intend to continue the tradition and the example you have set forth, for years to come.
– Tryon Wells

Ruppert



Cartoon by Johnna Robinson

Notes from the Island

It is turning into an interesting winter on the Island and the Caretaker and his Wife wish to thank the many of you who have called to check on our welfare during this period we are iced in. You may remember the sequence... the snow that was supposed to happen and did not... and the snow that should not and did. In between the river froze in the slough between the Island and the towpath, and looking forward to below freezing temperatures for a week into the future, we spent some time cutting a channel through the ice for the ferry on Wednesday, 19 Jan, so we could leave the Mother Ship and bring in supplies. It was exciting, like preparing for a hurricane, and there was much jocularly between us concerning all those people who come in the summer and comment on how wonderful it must be to live here. But in fact the two weeks thus far have proven to be an adventurous, snowbound interlude right out of a "Little House on the Prairie" novel. There is still the problem concerning the inadequate insulation in the quarters such that wind chills dropping below twenty can bring the inside temperatures into the low sixties despite all heaters at max, but these intervals do not last that long and are the perfect environment for snowbound snuggling anyway.

After the snow the river level dropped below the ice and the snow on the ice provided too much friction for our usual technique of crossing the iffy ice while standing in a canoe and pulling along the ice. But at last on Thursday, 27 Jan, we scooted across, feeling brave while trying a new technique in which we lowered the rope to a level where we could sit in the canoe to pull. The bridge and path up were icy but not actually treacherous and we felt the smug satisfaction of a mission achieved as we crested to MacArthur... only to be stunned at the realization of the much harder work that those of you in the real world

faced, as we contemplated our snowed-in auto and the sweaty task remaining.

As to the ice... it is always talking. There are sounds it makes in its forming... sounds it makes as the water level beneath rises or falls... sometimes like a great crack or sometimes like the sudden great twangs as of a cable snapping. I recall one night in particular when the ice was breaking up when it sounded all night like great leviathans were breaching in the darkness on either side of our ship. The morning after the snow I came out to footprints on the unshoveled walkway, and was astonished that someone would have been so foolish as to walk across. The security officer mentality swung on-line as I followed the tracks to a tree, and am embarrassed at how long it took me to figure out that although they really looked like footprints in the snow they were actually full body outlines of squirrels hopping from tree to tree. I still have not seen signs of beaver. There were some interesting tracks at the lower end of the Island, but consulting the book Peter left on the subject I was interested to note they were the tracks of a fox, and suffered a moment's apprehension for the cats.

All of the holes and sags in the floor of the caretaker's quarters resulting from the '96 floods (and before) have been repaired but one. However, these repairs are temporary, because when a large hole was cut through the floor to get to a sagging foundation for floor joists, it was discovered that not just one but many had been toppled or moved by successive flood waters moving beneath the floor. This does not at all affect the steel structure of the clubhouse, but only the flooring of the ground floor part of the quarters. The Captain will come up with another plan.

— Doc Taliaferro

Sunday Relief Caretakers

Date	Time	Name(s)	Telephone
February 6	11:00 - 2:00 2:00 - Dusk	Maxine Hattery John and Susan Membrino	202-362-1361 301-229-1154
February 13	11:00 - 2:00 2:00 - Dusk	Vicky Judson Mark Brenneman	301-320-5787 301-587-4919
February 20	11:00 - 2:00 2:00 - Dusk	Milton Cerny Patricia Roth	703-527-4376 202-686-0270
February 27	11:00 - 2:00 2:00 - Dusk	Karl Kosok Molley Peter and Jeff Jay	301-589-0034 301-229-2933
<p>*** Caretaker Volunteers ***</p> <p>Call John Krasny (301-564-0342) or Jeff Komarow (301-897-5996) to volunteer for caretaking in March or April. You can also contact them by e-mail at jfkrasny@erols.com or jeffkomarow@aol.com</p>			

Large

There are no reports of large parties scheduled on the island during the months of February and March.

**A large party application form may be printed from the club's Web page at
<http://www.sycamoreisland.org/systems.htm>
 — or —
 To request a form through the mail, call the Supervisor of Parties, Bill Eichbaum
 301-229-1713**



The Sycamore Islander

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February 2000

This Issue:

- Sycamore... The Tree.
- Crossing the river... on foot.
- "Waiting List Pass" passed.
- We get letters (nice ones).



The useful sycamore.

Pioneers used hollow sycamore trees for shelter. This small example grows a short walk above the Island, near Lock 7, by the riverside .