



The Sycamore Islander

February, 2002

Volume 81 No. 2

February Meeting

The next meeting of the Club will be on Wednesday, February 13th at 8:00 pm at George and Renee Dunham's house: 3840 Harrison St. NW, Washington DC. From the intersection of Wisconsin and Western Avenues, proceed south on Wisconsin Avenue. The first traffic light is at Jennifer St. The next is at Harrison St. Turn left (east) onto Harrison and proceed several blocks to 39th Street. Renee's house is the second house on the right after 39th.

Our gathering at John Noble's home on January 9th was both educational and most convivial. Before the meeting convened President Carl Linden showed a film in John's video "theatre" on the soon-to-be-repaired Monocacy Aqueduct. Crossing the Monocacy River, it is the largest and most impressive of eleven C & O Canal aqueducts. At the meeting Supervisor of Camping and Parties, John Noble, gave his annual report. It was brief--nothing to report. It was noted that holders of large parties must now meet a Club participation requirement. The meeting approved two new memberships and discussed various issues (see minutes below). The meeting adjourned at 9:30 giving everyone present an ample opportunity to enjoy the abundant table of good drink and delectables provided by our generous host.

Minutes of January 2002 meeting

Attendance: Anne Marie Cunningham, Cecily Abram, Terry Murphy, John Noble, Brad Coolidge, Renee Dunham, Art Roth, Jane & David Winer, Mardy Burgess, George Loeb, Tryon Wells, Al Brown, Peggy Thomson, Frances Short, Nancy & Blair Bower, Carl Linden.

The pre-meeting program featured the story of the Monocacy Aqueduct, which is one of the 11 aqueducts, and the largest aqueduct, on the C & O Canal. It is scheduled to be restored with funding from the National Park Service, Montgomery and Frederick Counties, and other contributions. Other ideas for money raising were discussed before the meeting began.

The December meeting minutes were approved.

Lisa Kliefoth was appointed financial secretary.

The Membership Secretary reported that 2 couples were added to membership: Steven Newman & Mary Tisdale, and Thomas Hylden & Shelly Davis, who have been on the waiting list for ten years. All four have been active and have attended the Club orientation.

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. **Note to submitters of announcements, articles, or letters: The deadline for inclusion in the March issue is receipt at the Editors' address on March 1. Earlier submissions receive priority.**

January Minutes (continued)

The newsletter Editors solicited additional contributions for the Islander. Examples of these could be descriptions of Island events, short biographies of members, memoirs, drawings, photos, poems, etc.

There are no current camping or party requests. The club is reminded that participation in three Club activities is now a requirement for sponsoring a large party.

The Chairman of Substitute Caretaker Scheduling especially thanked the Ingersolls for their participation.

Renee Dunham said she would handle a family games night as suggested during the last meeting: A parent and child event was suggested as an activity

following the model of the Midsummer Night party which the Caretaker's Wife sponsored during 2001. It was suggested that the coldest months be avoided to avoid drinking water and river ice problems.

Tryon Wells brought up the subject of E-Mail use: It was suggested that it be used for non-routine items, workfest reminders, etc.

The Caretaker requested compensatory leave to make up for duty on Federal holidays. This request was referred to the Personnel Committee.

The meeting was adjourned for *Noble* refreshments.

— George Loeb, Acting Recording Secretary

Ruppert



Cartoon by Johnna Robinson

New Year's Day 2002

—by Sherry Pettie —Photographs by Andy Carruthers



Andy and I started punching through the ice with the shovel and inching the ferry forward into the cleared area. It looked like it might take us an hour to reach the other side. Then the Captain appeared. “Let’s pull it over the ice,” he said. He climbed onboard and directed us through a creative technique of standing at the back of the ferry so the front raised up, getting a running start, so to speak, and pulling like crazy till the ferry went up on the ice, which our combined weight then broke through. Ferry-length by ferry-length we repeated the process until the passage was quickly cleared of ice.

The day started out with a bang. As I descended the steps of the canal bridge with photographer Andy Carruthers, we heard a gunshot. Looking up the canal, we saw someone standing on the tow path firing another shot across the canal into the woods. Of course I immediately feared it was the rope swing gang who are known to operate sometimes at frigid temperatures. “Looks like a State Trooper,” said Andy. I calmed down when I saw that indeed he was not an adolescent but a grown-up man with stripes on his trousers using a very professional-looking shooting stance. Andy fearlessly walked up the tow path to see what he could learn, which was that a Park Police officer was putting down an injured deer that had likely been hit by a car on the parkway. Andy also learned that it was okay to photograph the deer but not the officer.

Meanwhile, I set about opening the replacement padlock on the ferry that the substitute caretaker Mary Ellen had called me about when the old one broke. She also warned me that the slough would be iced over by the time I got there in the morning, so I brought a shovel to batter the ice. I was determined to open Sycamore Island on the first day of the year so that members could pay a visit and Doc and Phyllis could return safely from their holiday.

We took the Captain back to the canal side, and marveled at his parting words: “Don’t



bother wearing a life jacket. *If you fall you’ll be dead in minutes.*” Andy and I somberly pulled back to the Island to begin our term of duty.



After giving Andy a quick tour of the clubhouse, boat shed, and north and south ends, I received a phone call from the Captain. “The Island is closed. It’s too dangerous. Don’t let anyone over there.” Knowing my Island protocol, I assented to his instruction. But I wondered, since we were already there, wouldn’t we be better off sharing the danger with others? At any rate,

not a single member showed up to be turned away. I found a warm spot to sit and read *Anna Karenina*, and Andy roamed the island taking pictures, stopping periodically to pull the ferry across and keep the passage clear. Our quiet afternoon was punctuated by cawing of crows and the zinging sound of ice shifting and cracking on the river.



This episode, inspired by photographer Andy Carruthers’ pictures, is Sherry Pettie’s second article for the Islander. Sherry has been on the waiting list for several years and is a very active participant in Club activities.

Photographer Andy Carruthers was especially taken with this sycamore, “whose magnificent silvery trunk and canopy thrust up from the tiniest little patch of mud in grand solitude.”

Notes from the Island

Mon 7 Jan It was one of those times when you know something suspicious was going on... but you cannot at first figure out just what. It was something about how the cats were positioned... something about the alert aspect of their postures. And then it became clear that both had chosen high ground (or table and stair) from which they were observing the cat door that exits the kitchen into the men's locker room. Well... there was only one thing to do... and walking out into the men's locker room there was Rocky the raccoon... or one of his kin... sitting on the garbage can. He was unafraid as though he belonged there... very, very cute... and though clearly adolescent, larger than a kit. It was a beautiful moment and tableau... where was Bambi? And then... the Caretaker did something singularly stupid... mindless of the power of small words... when turning to the Caretaker's Wife he cheerfully commented that the raccoon was "probably" too large to get in through the cat door. The moral to the story: There are thoughts in life one had best be "certain" of before giving them voice.

Tue 8 Jan During a chance glance towards the Maryland shore this morning a squirrel could be seen scrambling across the ice to the Island. The first thought was to wonder at bravery... or stupidity... or luck... as many large hawks had been seen about. The second was at the surprise discovery that other "commuters" lived on the Island. This last musing was proved false when a later observation revealed that this was no commuter... this was a new resident. All day the squirrel could be seen carrying leaves up the large sycamore tree outside our front window... almost to the top.

Wed 9 Jan This morning there was another broken ice incident while taking the Caretaker's Wife across the ice in a canoe. When iced in we take a canoe and put it on top of the ice and use the lowered ferry rope to pull across. This distributes our weight and is literally our "safety net" should the ice break. The ice is always thinner in the middle... and this morning it did break!! Unfortunately... the ice was still of a thickness that in our first attempts we were not able to pull the canoe out of the broken space in the middle and onto the surrounding ice. There were some cold, anxious, out of breath moments as we contemplated our options. Fortunately, for such exercises we also trail behind an additional long rope that is tied to the ferry, and gives us a lower and more direct pull vector than the ferry rope hanging above... and this did the trick... as we were able to plant feet to gunwales and finally pull onto the ice surface and thence back to the Island. Where are those summer visitors who think that living here is a continuous rhapsody?

Fri 11 Jan There was a strange sound in the high winds last night and going to investigate we found that it was the ice singing. There are certain sounds made by



river ice that one becomes accustomed to when living on northern rivers... A tinkling when wind blown against the shore... a moan from the jostling of the flows in the wind and current... and a certain twang reminiscent of the parting of cables that occurs when the river is completely frozen over that must indicate some tectonic readjustment of the sheet ice.

Mon 14 Jan Yesterday we were able to break the ferry clear of the ice for the first time since 1 Jan in order to go get substitute caretaker Joe Cecil... who commented that it was like the spectacle of Shackelford coming through the ice. The Island was nonetheless closed on this day by the Captain because of the unusually high winds, which made the ferry impossible to handle. Members should be mindful that it is not only high water that renders the ferry inoperable.

Wed 16 Jan The new moon had set early...as it must... and while in the countryside it was certainly dark... in the river gorge the night sky was lit by twin planes of light. In the low overcast the clouds were aglow by the lights of the city. And even at 0200 hrs it could be seen while on beaver patrol that the sky above the river was crowded with avian flight that certainly could not occur without the aid of manmade light. The river is now filling with waterfowl probing the northern frost boundary so as to position themselves as the earliest arrivals and thus territorially advantaged. Three goose

Notes from the Island (continued)

couples have located in the area, and probably they grew up here as they start walking towards any humans seen out of doors... despite the fact that no geese have been thus far this season been fed on the Island. Flying above the river this night must seem to a duck or goose like flying between two panes of glass alighted as the reflected city lights on the surface of the low cloud cover are then thrown back by the reflecting surface of the river.

Mon 21 Jan One of the sounds one becomes accustomed to is that of the squirrel climbing up the side-walls of the building to get at the bird feeder. This sound would now go unmarked during the day... but when it happened last night all heads turned as one even before the sound was mentally processed and identified... it being out of context as being only a "daysound." Sure enough... it was Rocky the raccoon... who had obviously observed the squirrels' successful method and was determined to follow suit. Alas... Poor Rocky had the right clutching fingers but too much body mass to make it... although it was a great show. Still... he had the last laugh... as this morning it was evident that he had located the birdseed stored in the men's locker room and had pried open the cabinet to get to it. Winter is supposed to be quit down here, but it is getting downright crowded... what with coons and possums and ducks and geese and squirrels moving in. And already (!) the ducks are making those noises of cavortment.

Thu 24 Jan The long sight-views on the winter Island mean that the activities of our non-human neighbors are less private and thus frequently interesting. Without the green leaf canopy anything that moves on these bare tree trunks stands out... and the comings and goings of birds especially are a delight. The pileated woodpeckers seem more ever-present during this seasonal cycle but this is probably only because they are easier to see. This is the time in which the location where many birds live is more easily revealed, as they dart in and out of holes in unsuspected places. This morning a red tailed hawk swooped down upon some little thing in a beautiful motion as though perfectly scripted in a nature program. Although half an Island away, binoculars brought everything close... for a while... as he had the first course right there before flying away with half-eaten prey. Just another scene in the continuing everyday show... but usually hidden and unknown behind green foliage and witnessed only because of the bare aspect of the season.

Sat 26 Jan Last night around 0200 hrs the ferry bell rang briefly, but as this is no longer unusual... even in below freezing temps in January... and as there was no worry anyone would swim to the Island in 39 degree

water, we rolled over and went back to sleep. This morning the ferry rope was in the river. Taking a canoe to investigate it was discovered that not only had a connector on the chain at the towpath landing been disconnected in a way suggesting tools were used... but a sizable fire had been made near the top step of the landing, although we had heard no sounds of partying in the wee hours. Park Police was called and responded immediately to take the report on the vandalism. Captain John Mathews and Penny and Dick Doolittle also responded to calls for help, and with the Park Police helping, the ferry rope was pulled from the river and re-attached.

Mon 28 Jan Another tree has disappeared!! A mulberry tree in the wild area to the right as one walks down to the ferry is gone. Notice this is not a report that it has been felled or gnawed by beaver. The entire tree has gone missing... right down to the smallest branch. This was another instance of looking at an area and trying to figure out what looked different about it for some time before wandering over to see the tell-tale tree stump that looked as though it had been in a giant pencil sharpener... definite beaver evidence. Now... this tree must have been 15 feet tall... and for this tree to have been taken so completely and cunningly with no sign or indication beyond the easily overlooked stump implies not a single rogue beaver but a vast beaver conspiracy... a terrorist beaver cell somewhere near the Island. Homeland security should be notified!

Thu 31 Jan Yesterday afternoon a goose couple formally declared themselves for the nest in the root ball of the fallen sycamore to the left of the Captain's float. Presumably this is the same couple that has raised goslings in this same nest for the last three years. The Island has been relatively still since most waterfowl left mysteriously night before last. But such a hullabaloo arose outside that when we went to investigate, it was a loud argument between goose couples... with a bunch of crows sitting in the branches above volunteering a running commentary. The one fellow drove off the other... and since he has been getting bigger these last years... drove the challenger off the Captain's float as well, and has now claimed lordship over float, nest, and lawn. One hopes this will lead to another wonderful year of being able to watch nest and family evolve.

—Doc Taliaferro

*Excerpted from the Caretaker's Log at:
www.sycamoreisland.org*

Repair of the Monocacy Aqueduct in the Works

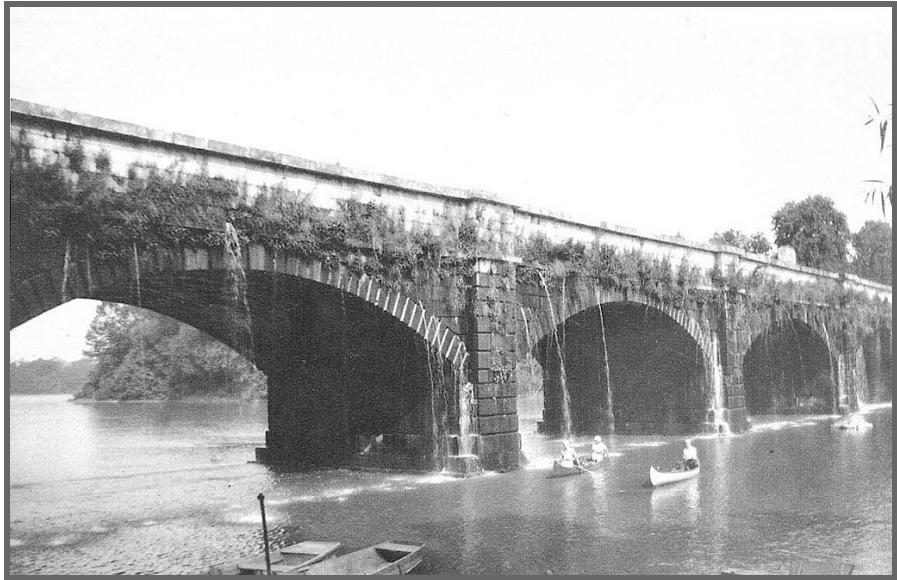
-A prime destination of Club members of yore!

— by Carl Linden

You may have heard the good news! Congress appropriated the funds to stabilize and restore the Monocacy Aqueduct to its former glory. The largest and most impressive of eleven aqueducts on the C & O Canal, the Monocacy Aqueduct has been deteriorating over time and is headed for eventual collapse if not repaired. About as long as the Washington Monument is high the Monocacy served as a "water-bridge" carrying canal boats across the Monocacy River. It was constructed by hand and its quartzite stone blocks were hewn from quarries near the base of Sugar Loaf Mountain some four miles from the aqueduct site. Begun in 1828, it was completed in 1833. It is a monument to early American civil engineering and is the finest such structure still remaining from the American Canal Era.

The Agnes Flood in '72 battered the aqueduct. Soon afterwards the park service put a steel harness (similar to orthodontic braces) on the structure as a temporary stabilization measure. However, for the past quarter century nothing further was done to stave off the deterioration the structure was undergoing. To lose it would be to lose a master link in the physical continuity of the C & O Canal National Historical Park as well as a monument to the nation's venture westward.

In 1995 the C & O Canal Association took up the cause of restoring the aqueduct. A Monocacy Aqueduct Committee was formed (chaired by your current president) and a fund-raising and public information campaign for restoring the aqueduct was mounted. The campaign was successfully concluded last fall when Congress appropriated \$6.4 million for the project. Work will begin in late spring or early summer 2002. The "orthodontic braces" will be removed. The beauty of line and proportion of the ma-



Sycamore Islanders canoeing on the Monocacy, beneath the Aqueduct ca. 1917.

— Photo by Paul Cathcart, one of the Club's leading canoeists at the time.

gestic, seven-arched aqueduct will once more emerge into full view.

Now one thing is clear from the above scenes from John Thomson's archive of old Club photos. Our Club forebears loved to take jaunts to the Monocacy Aqueduct. It is a great place for messing around with canoes and picnicking in this scenic spot where the Monocacy meets the Potomac. Members also took cruises on Canal Boat 67 from Glen Echo to the aqueduct. Old 67 was pulled by mules, or maybe by more fashionable horses, at a breath-taking three-mile-an-hour pace.

Some 14 hours later, not counting stops, it arrived at the Monocacy (mile 42.2 on the canal). Here we had the Club floating "large parties" going on for two days or more. Evidently, stringent large-party rules were not applied in those days.

Another thing is also clear. Our forebears appreciated the Monocacy Aqueduct as a prime destination along the canal and river. If they were with us today, they would have been four-square behind the effort to restore the old aqueduct. They knew an American Treasure when they saw one!

What Sycamore Island Means to Me

—By John Noble

The Island's pleasures live in my mind and comfort me. Recollections of a swim, a paddle up river, reading on the porch, and picnicking with friends come to mind a thousand times more frequently than visits to the Island. The land, water, and buildings that are Sycamore Island reality, become much more in our day-to-day lives. We have a sense of possessiveness for this unique social and physical environment made possible by those that have preceded us for over 100 years. And, thanks must go to our officers and dedicated members who keep the tradition alive.

Sycamore Island is my refuge. It is timeless, it is basic, and it is welcoming. Nonetheless many of us have a condition called Sycamoreislanditis. Symptoms are a longing to go to the Island followed by pejoratives such as errands to be run, household tasks to be performed, and the conclusion--no spare time for the Island.

Remembering the joy the island brings to visitors is always enriching. Several times we brought groups of NIH visiting scientists from Japan to Sycamore and enjoyed their appreciation of the remote beauty of the Island within our metropolis. The revered senior member of one delegation had never been in a canoe. He delighted all of us by trying it.

We have convened office retreats on the Island and have come away with the workplace product we were seeking and much more—a shared experience in a unique environment. We forget that a number of our friends and relatives have not been to the Island. On Thanksgiving Day we took my niece and her family to visit the Island after dinner. Although they have lived in the Washington area off and on for 15 years, they were amazed. Their seven and nine year old children especially loved the ferry.

All visitors are intrigued by some of our history, such as the canoe pool that commuted to Virginia from Sycamore, the height of flood waters on the Island, and the early use of the Island as a site for weekend overnight stays from Washington. I also enjoy describing the picture of a float plane parked at the Island and Ken Fassler's transition from living on a houseboat up river to becoming our caretaker some years ago. The thought of the job of the caretaker particularly sparks escape fantasies in both members and guests.

Another fantasy I have is to create the Sycamore Island Flying Club. In addition to club canoes, we would have

club inflatable flying boats. These are ultra lights (no pilots license required) that are affixed to rubber rafts. Imagine flying under and over the American Legion Bridge and the Union Arch in Cabin John. A particular advantage to adding this service to our Club would be the new material it would provide for discussion at the



Up in the air, Junior birdmen! Islanders: this could be you.

monthly meetings. In addition to canoe safety rules we would be able to establish flying boat regulations. One disadvantage is that we would have to postpone the renovation of the caretaker's quarters because we would need the \$25,000 to buy the first craft in our flying fleet. I am sorry, Doc and Phyllis.



Uhhh... let's see... that Cabin John Bridge has to be around here somewhere...

Now, back to reality. Early on we recognized the club as a place to get away from the day-to-day hubbub of our busy lives. It is a place to dream as well as a place to find the regenerating forces of nature. This is what Sycamore Island means to me.

Sunday Relief Caretakers February & March 2002

Date	Time	Name(s)	Telephone
Feb. 03	11:00 - Dusk	Vickie Judson & Mike Esch	301-263-9766
Feb. 10	11:00 - Dusk	Terry & Pat Murphy	301-320-5787
Feb. 17	11:00 - Dusk	Ann & Larry Heilman	301-657-3953
Feb. 24	11:00 - Dusk	Bob Sinclair	202-966-5204
Mar. 03	10:00 - 2:00	Richard Edelson	301-951-0195
	2:00 - Dusk	David Lyles	703-536-8692
Mar. 10	10:00 - 2:00	Michael Pertschuk & Anna Sofaer	202-966-0352
	2:00 - Dusk	Gene & Nancy Wathen	301-493-9499
Mar. 17	10:00-2:00	Ted & Ann Zahn	301-229-5969
	2:00-Dusk	Jeanne Asherman	301-587-5790
Mar. 24	10:00-2:00	Maxine Hattery	202-362-1361
	2:00-Dusk	Sherry Pettie	202-965-5366
Mar. 31	10:00-2:00	Lucky & Bill Marmon	301-654-7893
	2:00-Dusk	Bob Henry & Dorothy Barthemes	301-229-4936

***** Caretaker Volunteers *****

To volunteer for Sunday relief caretaking, call

Bill & Lucky Marmon: 301-654-7893

or

Howard and Candy Means: 301-320-5270

It's a great way to spend time on the Island!

Volunteers from the waiting list are encouraged. Don't forget: Relief Caretakers sign in too!

Large Parties

No Large Parties have been reported for February 2002

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, John Noble
e-mail: jnoble@erols.com, phone: 301-320-3554, fax: 301-320-4216

Sycamore Island Wants Your E-mail Address

Dues notices are in the mail and provide a handy way to update or enter your e-mail address with the club if you haven't already done so. Otherwise, you can send your e-mail address directly to the club's new Financial Secretary, Lisa Kliefoth at ckliefoth@aol.com.

Due to the often large volume of e-mail people are subjected to these days, the club is operating on the principle that less is more. Official e-mail from the club is currently restricted to (1) notifying members of emergency conditions on the Island, and (2) corrections about events announced in the *Islander* due to high water, inclement weather, or printed error. (3) Reminder notices of club events. Those who receive the electronic *Islander* online also receive a monthly notification by e-mail when the *Islander* is ready for download.

Some members may have noticed that this year's Member Roster included e-mail addresses along with more traditional ways of contact like phone numbers and addresses. As this form of communication is now almost universal, it was thought that it would be a benefit to members to be able to communicate with each other using this new tool and all the advantages that are part of it.

For those who still might be reluctant to part with their e-mail address, consider last spring's Orientation experience. Two days before the Orientation, it was determined that high water would probably not recede enough by the scheduled date. The event would have to be cancelled and rescheduled. There was no way to determine which of the approximately 180 applicants on the waiting list were planning to attend, and time was very short, so mailing a postcard or calling them all was out of the question. The club turned to e-mail. Yes, the club still had a sign at the top of the hill on the scheduled day, but as it went up there a half an hour late, and Doc had until then turned away no customers, the success of the last-minute e-mail notification was nothing less than dramatic.

For last-minute notifications like this, which provide considerable convenience to those notified (you, that is), and with the club's stated policy not to send official e-mails at the drop of a hat, please remember to enter your e-mail address on your dues notice or drop a note to Lisa Kliefoth.

—Tryon Wells. Website Supervisor

Orientation Dates for 2002 Waiting List Pass-holders and New Members

The tentative dates for the Spring and Fall Waiting List and New Member Orientations are Sunday (yes Sunday), **April 14** and Saturday, **October 19**. The Club's rules require that applicants attend an Orientation in order to become a member or obtain a Waiting List pass. For those who did not attend either of last year's Orientations and have received a Waiting List Pass for 2002, the Pass is conditional on your attending an Orientation -- preferably the Spring program.

We think our Orientations are informative and build a sense of community. Sure, it's an obligation, but it's also fun (or at least it's bearable and we cook a mean lunch).

These dates could change. Check the March and April *Islanders* for confirmation of the Spring 2002 date.

—Jeff Komarow, Membership Secretary

Local artist captures our riverscape.

Karen Mathis visited and canoed from Sycamore Island last fall. Liking the color and light she found on the river, she rendered several scenes in oils. You may see these paintings in her show, *Karen Mathis Reflections*, at the Spectrum Gallery in Georgetown from February 19 to March 17.



Morning Meditations, 22" x 30", oil on canvas



The Sycamore Islander

6613 80th Place
Cabin John, MD 20818

<http://www.sycamoreisland.org>

To view this month's *Sycamore Islander* on the Internet, go to:
<http://www.sycamoreisland.org/canopy/islander.htm>

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February 2002

This Issue:

- A memorable New Year's Day.
- Canoe canoe? In Winter?
- Revisiting the Monacacy Aqueduct.
- A Sycamorean's fantasy.
- Ruppert looks the other way.
- Ice-bound; continuous rhapsody... NOT.



The tip of our Rupperts Island in mid-January. Jungle-like in summer, it's much easier to explore now. Of course there's that river to deal with first—see Paul Staunton's advice inside.

—Photo by David Winer