



Where's the Dragon?

Photo by Joe Hage

The Sycamore Islander

August 2004

Volume 83 No. 8

President's Message

Another beautiful evening on the Island for our monthly meeting! This time I arrived a little early and sat out on the Captain's float watching a great blue heron on the swim float. They are such beautiful birds, and so graceful. After about ten minutes, a helicopter and airplane flew overhead at the same time. I think it was mostly the helicopter that scared him off.

Leaving the Island in the dark after the meeting has been special. The little light there is at that time reflects so beautifully on the water. And there seems to be a bit of a haze that enshrouds the river. And the meetings have been almost as peaceful as evening on the Island. Just a group of friends, chatting about things that are important to us.

The most interesting topic discussed at the meeting was about the trees on the Island. Blair Bower brought a folder of documents that his wife Nancy had from the Tree Committee of the early 70s. They were interested in repairing damage from weather, Dutch elm disease, and other calamities. They had taken an inventory of all the trees! Wouldn't it be interesting to do that again, to see how things have changed over the last 30 years? [See page seven for the results of the 1972 tree census.]

Once again, the discussion about the building was concerned with financing the project. We don't yet have any idea how much it will cost since we don't yet have a design, but we are fairly sure that it will cost more than what we have set aside for it. And, regardless of the ultimate cost, our savings will need to be restored. Several options were discussed again, including long-term, prepaid memberships, and assessments of all members. It was very clear that there is sensitivity toward those members for whom it could be a financial hardship. We will certainly establish a process that will be considerate of those in such a situation.

Financial accountability for the project was also discussed. Thus far, the building committee has had no expenses. I will personally assure you that any significant expenditure will be discussed in advance at a membership meeting, and that all expenditures will be carefully tracked throughout the project. It's been such a wonderful summer on the Island so far. I've made it there just to relax and enjoy myself more in the last month than I did in any one month last year. I hope you can make it down.

— Ann Marie Cunningham

August Meeting

**Wednesday, August 11, 8 pm
At the Island!**

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 Editor, Norman Metzger, 638 G Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003-2724 or by fax to 202/544-6027. Text and graphics may be sent as e-mail attachments to normanmetzger@verizon.net. Telephone: 202/544-6027 or 202/445-5436 (cell). **Note to submitters of announcements, articles, or letters: The deadline for inclusion in the September issue is receipt at the Editor's address by Monday, August 23rd. Earlier submissions receive priority.**

Minutes of the July 14, 2004 Membership Meeting

Present: Ann Marie Cunningham, Alan Gelb, Norman Metzger, Blair Bower, Johnna Robinson, Star Mitchell, Judy and John Lentz, Faith Earll, and Joe Hage.

Call to Order: President Ann Marie Cunningham called the meeting to order at 8:15 p.m., outside by the Captain's Float.

Communications and Announcements: Ann Marie Cunningham reviewed a folder of materials on trees given to the Club by the Bower family. It contains a detailed survey of trees on the Island done in 1972 and updated in 1976. In that era, there were 79 trees listed on the island (47 of them Sycamores). The folder was given to Norman Metzger [who publishes an excerpt on page seven]. A discussion of trees followed, and Alan Gelb suggested that we include some clearing of ivy on trees and do some work on Rupert's Island at the Spring Workfest.

Treasurer's Report: Alan Gelb presented the CY 04 Budget as of 6/30/04. He reported

that the finances are on track to date.

Minutes: There was no review of the June meeting minutes, as there was no quorum at that meeting.

Islander Report: Editor Norm Metzger solicited contributions for upcoming newsletters.

Old Business: A question was asked how plans were coming along for the renovation of the Caretaker's quarters. Ann Marie reported that the Building Committee will meet again when Jack Sanders returns. It was pointed out that the original funding will not be sufficient. Need for re-building the fund was discussed. No decisions on how to do that have been made to date. Alan Gelb suggested that options can be reviewed once the total cost of the project is known. Various types of possible assessments were discussed.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

Ken Fassler, Legendary Island Caretaker, Splits for the Hills

Ken Fassler, caretaker from 1979 through 1987, has decided to head to West Virginia and leave the city behind. Ken, who is used to unusual domiciles, is building a cabin on a knob in Franklin County. Not really 'building', but he needs to put in a stove, insulation, a water system and electric generators of some kind, all before winter. The cabin is four miles from a proper road and then 11 miles to the nearest town. Any Islanders with spare snowshoes to lend?

Ken was living near Great Falls in a houseboat in the '70's when he became friends with master canoeist John Thomson. Later, when the Island was in dire need of a caretaker, John talked him into helping us out. Ken's handiwork can be seen in the marvelous zigzag-edge walkway and in the behind the scenes Baba Yar shed. He was particularly gifted in scavenging, and many artifacts from the river have been incorporated into Island structures.

Ken studies natural numbers and is eager to get things settled so he can get back to his Atari. We Islanders wish him well.

-- Johnna Robinson

From Holly Syrrakos, Archivist: 75 Years Ago At Sycamore Island

Selections from the August, 1929 *Sycamore Islander*

In light of recent discussions about modifying the Clubhouse and caretaker's apartment:

"Building Committee Plans"

"The Building Committee seemed to feel dubious as to whether the Club has sufficient money on hand to erect the first section of the unit building plan, namely, the club-room section. This situation caused somewhat of a division of opinion among the members of the committee, some of the members being of the opinion that the Club should conduct a further building loan campaign at this time, raise more money and then proceed with the unit building plan. Other members of the Committee feel that the Club should not borrow more money. These latter members urge that the Building Committee should draw up plans for repairs to the Club buildings and that work on these repairs should go forward this fall. There has also been a rather insistent demand from some women members for repairs to the women's room. In view of this, the Committee's architect, Tom Edwards, was instructed to draw plans for improvements to this room of such a nature that they will not interfere with the expenditures for the first unit of the new clubhouse, in case money is raised for that project, and the Secretary and Treasurer of the Club were instructed to submit a report of the prospects for paying back additional loans."

A selection that makes you know these are historical notes:

"Dr. Halder L. Gahm and Mr. Everett G. Rodman were elected to the Club at the July meeting. There's still plenty of room for more members, both men and women."

Another comic interpretation from the Editor:

"The New Canoehouse runway"

"A few days ago Priest asked our staff if the new runway to the canoe-house was completed, whereupon our staff replied, with one voice, that it would not be completed until soap is smeared on the runway, thus enabling one to slide right down into the river without trouble from splinters. The new runway is really a fine structure and a few months of hauling canoes up the runway will cause members to naturally develop sufficient muscle to permit four members to drag up one canoe, instead of the six to eight [members] necessary at present. Members are therefore advised to refrain from purchasing muscle-developing machines for just a few more months.

"The platform in front of the canoehouse is the finest bandstand in these parts and as soon as a subway to permit members to walk beneath the runway has been excavated, all will be well."

The Canoe Consultant

Basic Strokes – Part II

Your Consultant's March column reviewed the draw, cross-draw, and forward ferry. The remark that these terminated the "session" left the way open for another bite at the apple. So let's try a second stroke session by tackling the infamous "j" stroke, sculling, and the theory of "dead stick" or back paddling down a rapid.

The j stroke is a smooth number when done correctly. The canoe seemingly moves itself through calm or moderately windy waters. This is a solo or stern stroke, never done from the bow. The idea is to most efficiently counteract the canoe's tendency to veer in the opposite direction from the side you are paddling on. Obviously, you have to take a bit off the forward momentum of the stroke; otherwise, the craft will circle rather than holding a straight (or your desired) line.

Assuming you are paddling on the right, just slightly twist the paddle outward from the hull with your top or left hand, letting it pivot in your lower or right. The degree of top hand twist is the trick and will vary with conditions. Despite its name, a reverse j is described as the paddle blade then breaks water without friction to set up the next stroke. Your Consultant will bet his small reputation on this being the best way to solo or stern a canoe – just compare how paddlers feel after doing anything else for an extended period.

Ever found the dock slipping away as you approach then embarrassingly miss the landing? Often, there is a group nearby prepared to comment on your muff. A simple draw will only move your part of the canoe toward the objective, leaving your partner further angled toward mid-river and possibly critical of your efforts. Pick up the scull, or feathering stroke, with which you can pull the entire canoe broadside into position. The stroke is one of leaning out, doing a slight draw, but with a back and forth feathering or weaving motion to broaden its pulling effect.

In whitewater, a canoe can maintain its line by going faster than the current or by going slower and letting the river do most of the work. The latter, known to some as the "dead stick" technique, is elegant when carried out by experienced paddlers, but is not for novices. The canoe almost seems suspended in the turbulent water when both paddlers – usually this is done tandem – back water and back ferry down a rapid. My point is that it is ballet-like, but counter intuitive since most of us want to blast through the whitewater.

Go ahead and try the dead stick way, but do it on easy water first. And, as was made clear in an earlier column, communicate! At the top of a Class 4 rapid on a Siberian river an experienced Canadian used his extensive local language skills to explain dead sticking to a muscular Russian bowman. When they got out there, adrenalin took over with the Russian. He ploughed full steam ahead. The canoe, receiving wildly contradictory directions, wallowed broadside into a whopping curler that dunked them both.

Next column: A Brief History of the Canoe – Part I

The Sycamore Store: A Chance to Escape the Wrecking Ball

--by Sherry Pettie

When I saw the For Sale sign go up last fall, I was certain this marked the end of the line for the Sycamore Store. Next stop, demolition, I sadly thought. Because the store ceased operating in 1995, I knew that zoning wouldn't allow another store there. And in an age of mansion-building and profit motive, what buyer would step forward with the willingness and wherewithal to take on such a modest house in need of so much repair?

But now against all odds the deliverance of the Sycamore Store seems at hand. Brenneman & Pagenstecher, a residential architecture and construction company, purchased the property in May. And according to Dean Brenneman, a partner in the firm, they plan to move their offices to the store after having it declared a historic property. As the store was first opened around 1920 by Hugh "Boots" Johnson, a member of the Sycamore Island Club, this comes as especially welcome news.



New owners Dean Brenneman, at left, and Peter Pagenstecher plan to restore the sign and keep it in place

Brenneman & Pagenstecher plan to restore and preserve the store as it is, including a restoration of the sign. Keeping the old sign up is a pleasing concept to those of us with a sense of nostalgia for leaving parts of the cityscape as they were. This was done to such great effect by the Wild Bird Center when it moved into Bonafield's garage further down MacArthur Boulevard and kept that distinctive sign.

Brenneman says his firm hopes to preserve the memory and feel of the store's interior by maintaining it as a large open room. The store counter will serve as a reception desk, and one food case will remain in place. The only planned changes to the exterior of the building are the replacement of the garage with parking spaces as required by the building code and the addition of a second floor exit stair from the rear porch, which is required by the fire code. The current private living spaces will all convert to offices for the firm.

Before Brenneman & Pagenstecher can proceed with these plans, they must get a permit from Montgomery County. The 1990 Montgomery County Master Plan gave a new zoning designation to the property (R-90). This ended the previously allowed use of "nonresident" professional offices. Brenneman has developed a twofold approach to addressing this problem: (1) to apply for a historic property designation with the county Historic Preservation Commission, and (2) at the same time ask the county to insert new text in the zoning code's special uses section that would allow professional offices in historic properties.

The architects will come to the September 8th monthly meeting at the Island to present their plans and to answer questions. Plan to attend and learn more.

This text change in the zoning code would allow the preservation of not only the Sycamore Store but other properties like it: those which have historic importance but are located in residential

areas and are not attractive to homebuyers. (Even in the current overheated real estate market, Brenneman reports that the Sycamore Store had only one other purchase offer, which was from a developer planning a teardown.)

I think most of us who have challenged a parking ticket or tried to find a handyman to repair a porch would regard the prospect of taking on multiple county officials and the complete restoration of a very old wooden structure as a problem to be avoided. But Brenneman says these tasks are all in a day's work for himself and his partner, Peter Pagenstecher.

Pagenstecher handles the construction and remodeling parts of their business and can restore the Sycamore Store at much lower cost than a purchaser who would have to hire a contractor. Moreover, in his architectural practice, Brenneman engages regularly with preservation commissions and zoning offices, and so is not intimidated by either of these processes.

In fact, Dean Brenneman is a man with a longstanding passion for historic preservation. He not only served for 9 years on the Rockville Historic Preservation Commission, but he has been on the lookout for a property to own and restore. He has been fascinated with the Sycamore Store for years and has attempted to buy the property before. He says he feels a special connection for the whole MacArthur Boulevard corridor.

Brenneman keeps a copy of an 1892 plat of the Glen Echo Heights subdivision spread out on his desk. He and his staff are conducting archival research on the Sycamore Store to assist the Preservation Commission in recording such details as when the land was subdivided, the chain of ownership, and the history of the surrounding area, a history that made the historic crossroads an obvious location for a store. At present, Brenneman and his staff have not discovered when the first structure was built on the property, nor whether this first structure is what became the Sycamore Store. Because additions to the present store and living quarters have clearly been made over the years, Brenneman is interested in learning how the building evolved over time. He would welcome hearing from any club members who have photographs of the Sycamore Store or other records that might assist in this research.



They will use the store counter as a reception desk for their architectural offices. Photos by David Winer.

Before completing the purchase of the store, Brenneman conducted a feasibility study. He spoke with county zoning officials who were encouraging about this project. Preservation commission members responded positively to the prospect of designating the building a historic landmark. Neighbors from Mohican Hills and Glen Echo Heights told Brenneman they were delighted to learn of his plans for the Sycamore Store and asked how they could help him.

But despite many positive developments, victory is not assured. Some oppose any nonresidential use of property at this location. In fact, it seems unlikely that the Sycamore Store will be preserved without strong expressions of neighborhood support. As a way of seeking that support, and to keep neighbors informed about progress toward preservation, Brenneman & Pagenstecher have created a website, www.sycamorestore.com.

In Touch With Joe...

I understand now why an enduring club like this one is named after the Sycamore tree. These magnificent trees are a symbol of perseverance and adaptation. They are also mysterious, beautiful and majestic.

Of course, like you, I have admired the Sycamores for years, their stark white limbs shining along the bank, their peculiar bark creating layers of colors and shapes. But, lately, maybe because of where I live, I have a new appreciation for these trees. First of all, they are huge. I know that in the winter I can stand in the parking lot on MacArthur Blvd. and be eye level with the top of the tallest of the trees. How high is that? It's got to be at least 150 feet. When a Sycamore tree fell during Isabel, its sprawling limbs completely covered the field and reached two stories into the air! Its immensity was further realized the following spring by the noticeable hole in the Island canopy. The shade will be missed; and it took a little time to get used to the extra sunlight streaming onto the Island; but now there is more sky for stargazing and if one tree falls it makes room for others.

One tree that is sure to benefit will be, what I call, the wedding tree. It was planted here at a wedding in the 1980's and was almost crushed when the Isabel tree fell but it now stands to benefit from the mishap of its tall neighbor. It's truly amazing that this tree survived and I give the credit to Gerry Barton who propped it up and nursed it back to health. Maybe he had inside knowledge as to the tenacity of this species of woody plant.

We did trim the major branches off the fallen Sycamore. But once all the major limbs were removed, not much else was done. The barren stalk of the tree lay there across the field all through the fall and winter and into the spring. There was talk of chopping it up to make benches and maybe even a dugout canoe but the trunk just lay there. Then something amazing and totally unexpected happened: The tree began to grow new branches! Now it's July and the barren stalk is growing like a Chia Pet^{®*}. The new branches, in their attempt to absorb as much sun light as possible, have sprouted leaves that are extraordinary. These new Sycamore leaves are 18 inches wide and 14 inches from tip of stem to the tip of the leaf. I guess old Sycamores never die. This tree lives on, just like the swing tree that continues to grow, even after being reduced to a stump. The will to live is so strong among these trees that even a two-foot log cut from a tree and placed in a hole will begin to sprout leaves.

I thought it appropriate to talk about the Sycamores this month since this has been the month of the shedding Sycamore. I don't remember this bark-shedding phenomenon last year and my guess is that it has been a good growing season. Whatever the reason, the Island is covered with the shedding of the Sycamore with all their colors and layers and shapes.

In other news, there are two deer living on Ruppert's, spotted by numerous visitors. The ground hog has moved out to the swim-dock area, quieter there. And I've spotted a ruddy turnstone* in the mud flats at the foot of the Island on three occasions now. And my fishing report: Lots of catfish, stories of biting bass and two confirmed and very tasty, walleye, caught and filleted by George Malusky.

*Chia Pet[®] ? Ruddy turnstone? The Editor, adding to a long list of incompetencies, was baffled by these terms. Joe, helpful as always, clarified: A Chia Pet[®] is a ceramic animal that you plant seeds in and when the plants grow it looks like the animal is growing hair. A novelty gift. A ruddy turnstone is a type of shore bird, very similar to a sandpiper.

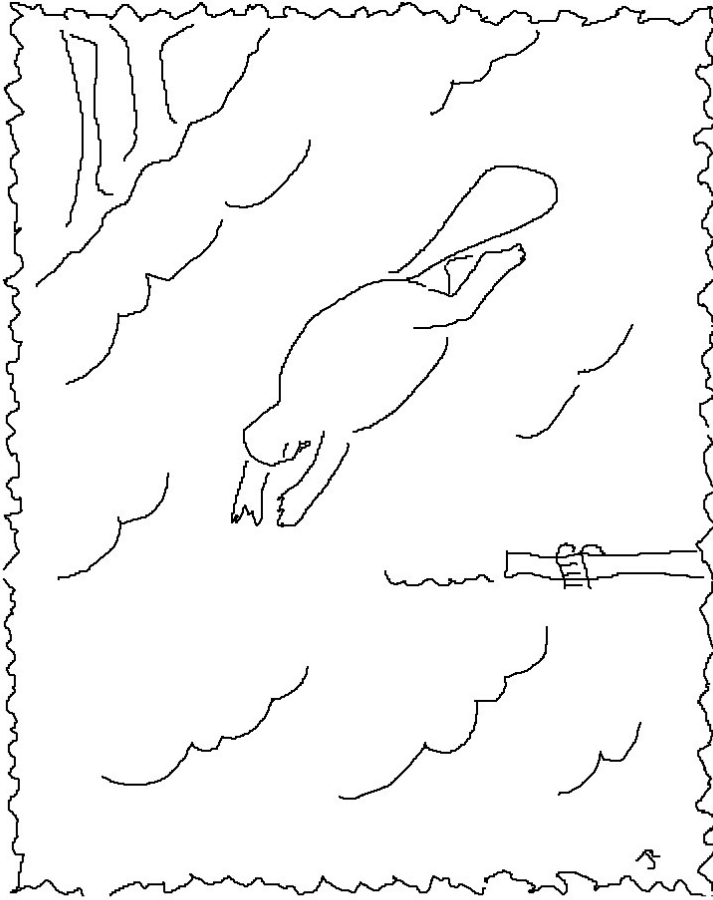
How Many Trees on Sycamore Island?

From the April 1972 report by Jim Johnston of the Island's Tree Committee of a census done in the winter by Phil Stone and Jim Johnston:

...there are the following important, wild native trees exclusive of the wooded sector upstream of the three shacks on stilts:

American elm, 43; black cherry, 4; hackberry, 4; silver maple, 34; black walnut, 6; green ash, 12; sycamore, 54; tulip tree (poplar), 11.

The largest tree is # 78, a tulip poplar, next to the screened porch....The tulip poplar is 56 inches in girth at 4 ½ feet above ground and approximately 95 feet tall. It must be at least 200 years old.



Ruppert

*—Created by
Johnna Robinson*

*Ruppert dives into an everchanging river,
Islanders slide in safely, do not dive!*

Sycamore Island Fishing Derby

Saturday, August 21, 2004

8:00 AM - 1:00 P.M.



Photo by David Winer

Club members, waitlisters, and friends—Please join us for a morning of fishing and fun! A hot lunch will be served at noon. Smallmouth Bass, Bluegill, and Catfish are now active on the Virginia shoreline, across from Sycamore Island. A few nice Walleyes have been caught, measuring 21". Even the weary Carp in the C&O Canal are still biting after the Cicada Invasion and will hit a small wooly bugger with the fly rod. Please contact George or Shelley Malusky at 301-871-1707, if you can make it. Hope to see you there!



The 2004 Annual Sycamore Island Mudfest



You are cordially invited to attend the honored tradition (which begins this year) of the Sycamore Island MudFest, to be held on Labour Day, Monday September 6th at 1:30pm until dark. The event is open to Everyone in the Sycamore Club including those forgotten and pathetic souls on the waiting list, and their kids (the latter are especially encouraged to attend, although they should be accompanied the whole time by responsible adults, please).



Proper attire, please

TO INCLUDE

- Canoë Race around the Island*
- Treasure Hunt (in Canoes and on foot)*
- Fashion Show (including the famous mud hat contest)*
- Mud Angels, Mud Pies*
- Fishing Contest (with live fish)*
- Free Lunch (Pizza, etc)*
- Games*
- Prizes!*



Pizza will be served at approximately 5:30pm and will be provided by the Club. Please bring side dishes and drinks (enough to share)

Please direct inquiries to Bill & Rachelle Banta 301-718-4217



Eyes Wide Shut: The Map in the Clubhouse

The January 2004 edition of *The Islander* included sketches drawn in 1917 by R.L. Dickinson, and a request from Gail Spilsbury for information any islanders might have about life during the early 20th century.

I met Gail Spilsbury last fall. She's a local author who was doing a book signing and lecture for her new book about Rock Creek Park. [*Rock Creek Park*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003] We got to talking and she told me about her plans for her next book, on the Potomac river. I quickly chimed in that I was living on the river, working at a very old and unique canoe club. She explained to me about how she got the idea for the book after she found some old sketches of the river while researching her first book. I became interested and suggested that she visit the Sycamore Island website. She then asked if I could help her find some places in the Dickinson sketches along the river. I had a lot of fun hiking around the river trying to pinpoint where the sketches were drawn. I was successful in locating two of the sites. I became further involved when Gail asked if she could interview me as a person who lives on the river. Of course, I said yes.

The day Gail showed up on the Island she had a large flat box with her and she told me that she had met with the descendants/family of the artist and that she had a surprise. She asked me some questions about life on the river and then she showed me the surprise: A map of the Potomac River gorge draw by the artist. The Dickinson family had lent her a rare copy of a map that was drawn to accompany the sketches. She explained to me how someone at the USGS had produced a map for Dickinson and he drew in all the hiking trails and interesting points along the river. We poured over this map for a while before I gave Gail a tour of the Island.

We ended the tour in the clubhouse and began looking at the old photos and maps hanging on the walls. Gail seemed to enjoying all the old pictures and the old-time feel of the clubhouse. I then noticed that one of the dirty old maps hanging on the wall looked very much like the map Gail had just showed me downstairs. There was a moment of disbelief when Gail looked closely and realized that this map too had the name R.L. Dickinson hand written in the corner. We excitedly took the unframed map off the wall and brought it out into the daylight. We compared it to the other map and noticed that although the maps were the same, the comments and descriptions were somewhat different. There were also some things that were not mentioned on both maps. Gail was very happy with the unexpected find, another piece to the puzzle, and asked if she could borrow it.

I let her take the Map to have it photographed and to give her a chance to look at it more closely; the Dickinson family was happy to hear of the discovery as well. Gail has returned the map, newly matted and framed and wants to thank the club for its help and generosity. She also suggested that we consider donating it to a library or archives to keep it safe; it may be a one-of-a-kind. [Gail Spilsbury adds that: *The Sycamore Island map says on it "Preliminary Sketch" and was just that—the unedited version of the final map. For instance, Dickinson took off the trolley schedule to Great Falls that is included in the preliminary sketch. The Sycamore Island map was mass produced during the bicentennial by someone connected to the Montgomery County Historical Society, because the MCHS has the leftover maps. They do not know who had the negative to reproduce the map.*]

— Joe Hage

Saturday Relief Caretakers August—September

August 7, 2004	9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.	Penelope Mitchell	301-229-4606
	3:00 p.m. - dark	Joan McKinney	202-234-1411
August 14, 2004	9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.	Greg Hitz	301-229-2998
	3:00 p.m. - dark	David Holdridge	301-657-8536
August 21, 2004	9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.	Blair and Nancy Bower	703-528-4466
	3:00 p.m. - dark	Kirk Renaud	301-718-9632
August 28, 2004	9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	3:00 p.m. - dark	Alison Levine	301-320-4353
September 4, 2004	9:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	2:00 p.m. - dark	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
September 11, 2004	9:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	2:00 p.m. - dark	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
September 18, 2004	9:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	2:00 p.m. - dark	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
September 25, 2004	9:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	2:00 p.m. - dark	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	

*** Caretaker Volunteers ***

**To volunteer for Saturday relief caretaking, call Candy Means: 301-320-5270.
Volunteers from the waiting list are encouraged. It's a great way to spend time on the Island!**

No Large Parties Scheduled in August

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



Little Falls Dam from the Virginia side. Photo by Joe Hage



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To view this month's Sycamore Islander on the Internet, go to:

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August 2004

- Fishing Derby
- The Annual Regatta aka "Mudfest"
- How Many Trees?
- Learning "The Dead Stick"
- The "Canoehouse runway"
- The Sycamore Store: A New Use



OK! Everybody out for volleyball!

Photo by Joe Hage