



The Eagles are Back! (p. 3)

Optics and Photo by David Winer

# *The Sycamore Islander*

*March 2005*

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## **President's Message**

I'm very pleased to announce that the Building Committee has a new Chairman. Chuck Pill, who has been serving as the supervisor of Painting and Carpentry, has agreed to chair the Committee. Chuck has been a member since 1989 and has been active on this building committee as well as the prior one. Further, I'm delighted that Ned Goddard and Richard and Cindy Bertaut have volunteered to work with Chuck, as co-chairs or in other roles, to lead the project to completion. Ned, Richard and Cindy have been on the waiting list for a total of fourteen years, and have been very active in support of the renovation of the caretaker's quarters. I expect that with renewed focus and enthusiasm there will be considerable progress to report next month.

April has many activities on the Island, so mark your calendar now and don't let other things prevent you from coming. The Spring Workfest will be on Sunday, April 10. There are jobs for the skilled and unskilled during the Workfest, from cleaning out the clubhouse to putting the floats back in the water to some repairs. This is followed by a great pot luck lunch. And, for those of you on the waiting list, you can earn a pass that will entitle you to use the Island with your family on a day of your choice, including summer weekends.

The new member orientation is set for Sunday, April 17. This has been a particularly fun event for me. We have a leisurely walk around the Island, while a number of the club leaders and long-time members talk of its history, environment and activities. Again, it ends with a wonderful pot luck lunch. Remember, you cannot

## **Upcoming Sycamore Events**

March Meeting, Wednesday, March 9th @ 8 p.m. At the Island.

April Meeting, Wednesday, April 13th @ 8 p.m. At the Island.

Spring Workfest, Sunday, April 10th, 9 am to 2 p.m. Rain date: April 24th

Annual Orientation: Sunday, April 17th. Rain date: April 24th [p.5]

Annual Flower Walk, April 17th, 1:30 p.m. [p. 2]

***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](mailto:normanmetzger@verizon.net). Telephone: 202/544-6027 or 202/445-5436 (cell). **Note to submitters of announcements, articles, or letters: The deadline for the April issue is receipt by the Editor by Monday March 28th.**

become a member of the Club until you have attended one of these, and it is the only one that will be held this year. And when it is over, there is no reason that you have to leave the Island immediately, so it is another opportunity for applicants to enjoy the Island prior to becoming members. The rain date for both of these events is Sunday, April 24. The next meeting will be held on the Island at 8:00 on Wednesday, March 9. I hope to see many of you there.

— Ann Marie Cunningham

## Welcome After Almost a Decade!

The following folk, who applied in Fall 1995, were voted to membership at the February Island meeting: Phil and Marianne Ross, Maria Stenzel, Tina and Frederick Ohly, Tory Ruttenberg and Greg Ferenbach, Richard and Janis Pappalardo. “Thank you for your patience and understanding.”

## Annual Flower Walk

**Sunday, April 17, 1:30 to 4:30**

### Rain or Shine

RG Steinman and John Parrish look forward to guiding the Flower Walk this year to a spot above where we hiked last April. Walking along the canal and the river at Carderock, we should see additional plants and trees that we did not come across last April, including two County Champion specimens: a pawpaw and a chinquapin oak. What makes a "County Champion", you may ask. Well, please join us, and ask questions of members RG and John who share a deep knowledge and love of botany.



Last year's group examines a shadbush along the Canal. Photo by David Winer.

To get to Carderock from the Sycamore Island parking lot on MacArthur Blvd, drive 4 miles upstream on Clara Barton Parkway and get off at exit for Carderock -- at the sign marked *Carderock Div., NavSerWarCen, Carderock* [Exit 41]. Cross over the Parkway & follow the sign to Carderock going under the Canal. Turn left at the "T" stop, and park in the downstream lot. We will meet RG and John there.

For folks coming from the opposite direction — from Great Falls, for example — turn right (east) from MacArthur Blvd. (just after Brickyard Rd.) at a 3-way stop onto Clara Barton Parkway and in very short order you will see the exit for Carderock. Take the off ramp, turn right, and follow the sign to Carderock going under the Canal. Proceed as above.

— Jane Winer

## Have A Good Read?

Tell fellow Islanders about a good book you've found that they ought to read by writing a review for the *Islander*. If you've never done a review, now is the time to learn the pleasure and art of telling readers all about, say, a 300-page book in a couple of pages of text. And if you've reviewed before, then you know the special satisfaction of sharing something good with others and in doing it well. For more information, contact the Editor at 202/445-5436 or [normanmetzger@verizon.net](mailto:normanmetzger@verizon.net).

## The Eagles Are Back!

A Sycamore member first noticed the eagles nesting on February 9<sup>th</sup>, at the same spot where two eagles were successfully hatched last year. Surely it's the same pair of parents. A few things you might want to know about eagles, gleaned from an excellent web site:

[http://www.dvercity.com/breeding\\_cycles\\_of\\_bald\\_eagles.html](http://www.dvercity.com/breeding_cycles_of_bald_eagles.html):

- They mate for life.
- The female lays 1 to 3 speckled off-white or buff-colored eggs a few days apart some five to ten days after fertilization.
- Both parents share the duties: hunting, egg incubation, nest watch, eaglet feeding, and eaglet brooding.
- Eaglets break out using an egg tooth after about 35 to 38 days incubation. They are full size in about 12 weeks, and they get ready to fly by flapping their wings vigorously. They lift off into the prevailing wind, sometimes with a good push by their parents. About 40 percent survive their first flight.
- Eagles need privacy and quiet to breed, and if they don't get it, they may simply abandon their nest.

The Island in Winter



Photos by Norman Metzger

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

### Selections from the March 1930 *Sycamore Islander*

The winter of 1930 appears to have been a quiet time at Sycamore. The minutes show no big parties; rather, they reflect the mundane business of running the Club.

The March meeting was called to order at 8:40 p.m., on the Island, with 12 in attendance.

On the maintenance side, there was a curious payment of \$11.41 for the Frigidaire, and a note that gutters and downspouts have been installed.

It was the issue of the caretaker that took the most time:

“Moved, that the President, Secretary, Treasurer and Captain of the Island be appointed a committee with authority to engage a caretaker on probation.

“After a discussion, it was agreed that the following duties should devolve upon the caretaker:

Keeping the clubhouse and other buildings and grounds clean; repairing boats; helping members get canoes off racks; ferrying members and visitors to and from the Island; looking after firewood supply and notifying Captain of Island when it becomes low; keep grass and leaves raked; roll tennis court and keep it in proper shape during playing season; make such small repairs to club property as he may be instructed to perform by the Captain of the Island or which may seem necessary to the caretaker himself; answer telephone; extinguish lights at night; shut off water from running faucets at night; watch for articles which may be left behind by members; fill oil stoves and obtain oil; dispose of garbage; keep stoves and fireplace clean. The caretaker shall also familiarize himself with all fire extinguisher locations; shall not drink intoxicants on the Islands or be intoxicated on the Islands and must not expect tips from members.”

The meeting adjourned at 10:45 p.m.

There is an odd addition to the Minutes. At the bottom of the page appears a sum with no apparent meaning. It looks like this:

63

20

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83

Any guesses about its meaning?

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The records of the Montgomery Sycamore Island Club are housed at the Kiplinger Library at the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. and are open to the public. The library is located at 801 K St., NW. and is open Wed.-Sat., 10-5. Phone is 202-383-1850.

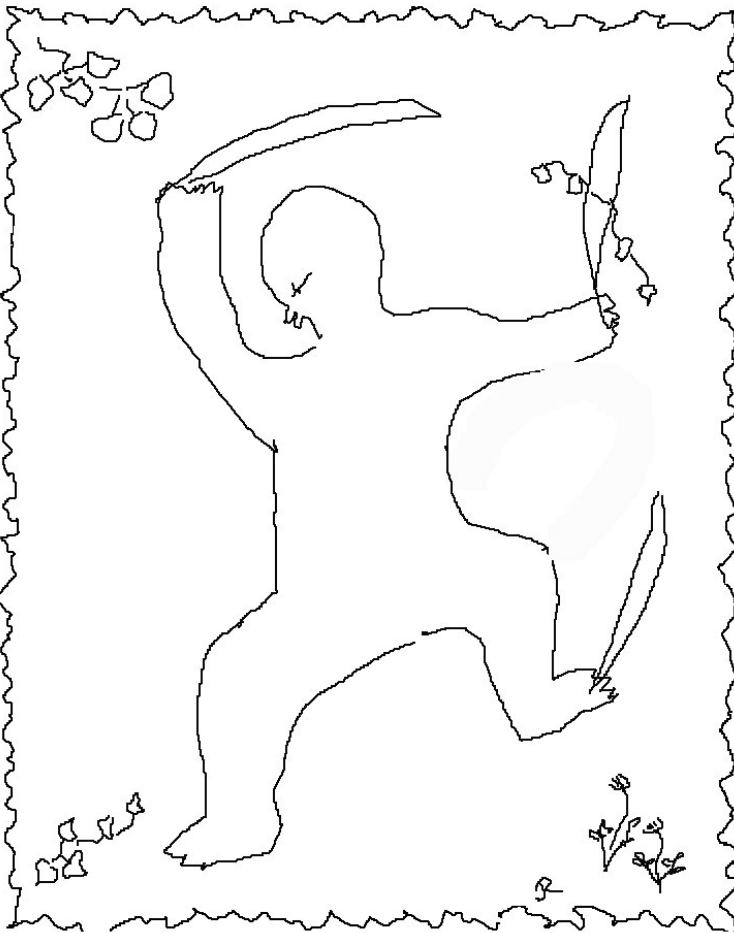
## Sycamore Orientation Set for Sunday, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 9:30 am

The annual Sycamore orientation for waiting-list families will be held on Sunday, April 17<sup>th</sup>. Participation in an orientation is required for membership or to purchase a guest pass. Those of you on the waiting list who have not yet attended an orientation should make sure that you attend one of these prior to your name coming up for membership.

The orientation is a great deal of fun with old-timers mingling with those who have more recently discovered Sycamore and sharing their knowledge of its history and ways. We meet around 9:30 in the morning and, weather permitting, walk around the Island discussing topics as we go, and then share a potluck lunch together.

If you are planning to attend, please contact Tammy and Joe Belden (202-882-2224 or [tbel@loc.gov](mailto:tbel@loc.gov)) and let them know. In addition, bring a dish to share with others for lunch.

—Tammy Belden



*Ruppert*

*Created by  
Johnna Robinson*

*Ruppert slays invasives;  
Islanders plant only Native Species.*



## In Touch With Joe...

I think my "fifteen minutes of fame" are now over; but being a celebrity was fun while it lasted. When Charlotte Tucker asked me for an interview, I never dreamed that I would wind up on the front page of the *Bethesda Gazette*. I also didn't realize how many people actually look at their *Gazette* (I see so many soggy ones at the bottom of driveways). Anyway, it was a nice article and I thought she did a good job of describing the Island as a friendly place. But my recent brush with stardom did not end with the *Gazette*. It turns out that I was also on the Montgomery County public access TV. I ran into someone at the hardware store who said they had seen me playing guitar on TV! I was surprised to learn that my face was being broadcast out across the region; but, I was glad to find out that my friend's short film (reported on in the July 2004 *Islander* by Morris Cobern) made it to the airwaves. This job does have its challenges: floods, winters, and now paparazzi.

This is a great time of year to explore Ruppert's Island. A short paddle upriver brings you to a place rarely visited by humans, where ancient cultures lived and fished, and where raccoons, beaver and deer live today. Now is the best time of year to go to this wild place, before the vines and weeds become impossible. I was there the other day, and noticed some potential campsites with excellent views. I also saw a deer that had recently lost its antlers and was shedding its thick winter coat. I saw many signs of a healthy beaver population and I thought this would be a great place to spend a moonlit night and watch the beaver as they do their work.

The bird life on the island is becoming very active. We have the eagles nesting across the river (p. 3) and the Canada Geese are busy mating and staking out their territory, which they do very loudly until late at night. Right now, I'm looking at fifteen mourning doves on the ground beneath my feeder, and that's not an exaggeration! I heard the call of a Kingfisher for the first time in many weeks and we see hawks daily. The weather is getting warmer and it's time to get ready for another season! I'm excited about getting busy in March so we're ready for the Workfest in April! See you there!

Spring is coming, really!

Photo by Joe Hage



## Sycamore Reads....

***The Grand Idea: George Washington's Potomac and the Race to the West*, by Joel Achenbach. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004. 367 pgs. \$26.**

**Reviewed by Norman Metzger**

The war won, George Washington returned after eight years to Mount Vernon on Christmas Eve 1783. He wrote to his dear friend Lafayette that he would settle down, to be "a private citizen on the banks of the Potomac...free from the bustle of a camp & the busy scenes of public life." Fat chance: He wasn't even there a year. In September 1784 he mounted up and headed west, Achenbach writes, "to the frontier of America, , and then would keep going, into the most remote, uncivilized backcountry – a thousand-mile journey that men of his breed had always called the howling wilderness."

He went west for several reasons. Maybe he was bored after no longer fighting the English and Hessians. And he had ambitions for the West. One was visiting his properties, dealing with tenants not paying their rents and evicting squatters. Washington owned over 60,000 acres of western land – in the Shenandoah Valley, western Pennsylvania, and along the Ohio and Greater Kanawha rivers. Squeezing more money out of these properties was important to Washington, because the Mount Vernon income was declining and he depended ever more on rents from his western lands. More grandly, he was determined to find a potentially profitable route to the West. For Washington, the Potomac was, Achenbach writes, "a natural passage to the interior...a commercial artery to the West. A highway. A corridor." With the Potomac as the link, the Chesapeake Bay could be linked not only to the Ohio but also to the Mississippi and then down to New Orleans, the Spaniards cooperating or gone.

Washington had mixed success with the squatters on his land, "getting into their face" but also getting -- after their initial astonishment at having the most famous man in the country ride up to demand his money -- some hard pushback. Imagine, say, Dwight David Eisenhower pulling up all alone and demanding his rent from some Pennsylvania farmer. The mind reels. But they had "squatted on the wrong man's land, and worse he was a details freak. He kept track of every shilling he was due, every acre he owned. The war hero doubled as an accountant." He collected some of his rent and was able to reclaim his land, albeit after tough legal work and seeming obliviousness to the hardship inflicted on families that had worked his land for years and built their homes there. The court case took two years but in the end the inequality prevailed: The most powerful man in the country against desperate and very poor farmers.

The squatters could be dealt with. The Potomac was another matter. It was a very tough river for commercial ambitions. And it was paradoxically the Potomac's success in getting past the mountains and to the ocean that made it so tough for what Washington wanted to do. Achenbach points out that:

*...the river has more than one trick for getting past the mountains. It has to cope with at least ten major ridges and smaller hills that stand between its source and tidewater. Sometimes the river takes on a mountain directly, plowing straight through it, as at Sideling Hill and the Blue Ridge. Other times it makes an end run around a ridge.... The river has small turns, loops, and meanders, and big ones as well, and at least twice it seems determined to reach Pennsylvania only to turn back within sniffing distance. To say that water runs downhill does not give justice to its inventiveness and precocity.*

It's almost impossible to imagine what Washington was up against as he traveled west to collect rent, toss squatters off his land, and find the way to the Ohio, used as we now are to roads, cars, plenty of food and lodgings, reliable maps, and if not always friendly at least not openly hostile people along the

way. Washington "zigzagged his way to splendid isolation." He navigated by memory – he had traveled through several times -- and when the sky was cooperative used the moon, stars, and sun as guides, It must have given him a frisson of pleasure for "out here, in the remote woods, He did not have to perform for anyone...[H]e had escaped the demands and pressures of being the singular public figure in a nation poised to become an empire."

After 34 days and 680 miles of often hard riding, Washington returned in October 1784 a bit more sanguine about the Potomac's ambiguity as both route and barrier, yet determined to force a route to the Potomac whatever obstacles the river threw up. He still believed that the Potomac could be navigated without locks. Washington canoed Seneca Falls, four miles upstream and four miles down, and confirmed the obvious: "The principal difficulties lye in rocks which occasion a crooked passage."

Islanders know some of the obstacles up close and personal, including the Little, Seneca, and Great Falls. The Pawtomack Company that Washington with others founded in 1785 set out to build "skirting canals" around these barriers. Your editor had the pleasure of joining the Canoeing Consultant in paddling through the skirting canal at Seneca Falls [See page 5 of the January 2004 *Islander* for a report on Violette's Lock, the Seneca Skirting Canal.] Much money was invested and lost in the venture. And it took a long time. The locks at Great Falls took 17 years to complete, and finally declared ready early in 1802. "The Potomac could now be traveled for about 200 miles above the fall line if the river level held right," and then using the skirting canals one could get to Georgetown or



Remnants of the Skirting Canal at Violette's Lock.  
Photo by Norman Metzger

Alexandria. It was tough going, and most boatmen, rather than trying to pole back up river, busted up their boat, sold it for firewood and the like, and walked home. The audacity of the project wasn't matched by financial success. In 1802, 305 boats carried almost 2,000 tons of cargo downriver. The Pawtomack Company finally declared a dividend. It was also the only one, and the "project revealed itself for what it was: a guaranteed way to lose money."

The venture was defeated not only by the river but also by new ideas. There was the first the notion of bypassing the combative river with a parallel, artificial waterway. "There are no falls. There are no rapids. A canal is an utterly denatured river. If the Potomac was innately demonic, a canal would be a kind of exorcism." That idea realized as our Canal did better than the Pawtomack Company but not for long. The same day that many joined the president John Quincy Adams at Great Falls to launch the "Great National Project," another and larger crowd gathered outside Baltimore to watch Charles Carroll, the last living signer of the Declaration of Independence, signal the start of construction for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. You know the rest.

The *Grand Idea* is a fine read, and the few quotes from the book only hint at the quality and vigor of the writing, which many of you are already familiar with through Achenbach's writings for the *Washington Post's* Style Section and *Sunday Magazine*. While the titular focus is on Washington's pursuit of a navigable route to the Ohio River, the book also offers a splendid portrait of George Washington himself, from his return as the hero of the Revolutionary War through his presidency and his death.



## Saturday Relief Caretakers March—April

March 5, 2005	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	John and Jyl Pomeroy	703-243-8256
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Kathy and Steven Carroll	202-723-2233
March 12, 2005	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	Vivian and Robert Braunohler	202-291-3717
	2:00 p.m. - dark	Peggy Thomson	301-656-3630
March 19, 2005	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	Priscilla and Kermit Roosevelt	202-966-5735
	2:00 p.m. - dark	David Lyles	703-536-8692
March 26, 2005	10:00 a.m. - 2:00	Carl Linden	301-229-2398
	2:00 p.m. - dark	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
April 2, 2005	10:00 a.m. - 3:00	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	3:00 p.m. - dark	Norman Metzger	202-445-5436
April 9, 2005	10:00 a.m. - 3:00	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	3:00 p.m. - dark	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
April 16, 2005	10:00 a.m. - 3:00	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	3:00 p.m. - dark	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
April 23, 2005	10:00 a.m. - 3:00	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	3:00 p.m. - dark	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
April 30, 2005	10:00 a.m. - 3:00	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	
	3:00 p.m. - dark	<i>Call to volunteer!</i>	

### \*\*\* Caretaker Volunteers \*\*\*

To volunteer for Saturday relief caretaking, contact Candy Means  
301-320-5270 or [candymeans@comcat.net](mailto:candymeans@comcat.net).

## Large Parties

No Large Parties Reported for April

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@shs.net](mailto:jnoble@shs.net), phone: 240- 747-4810, fax: 301-320-4216



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### **March 2005**

- Annual Orientation
- New Members
- Washington's *Grand Idea*
- Return of the Eagles
- Joe's "Fifteen Minutes..."



Beaver hutch on Ruppert's  
Photo by Joe Hage