



Monocacy Aqueduct

Photo by Joe Hage

# *The Sycamore Islander*

*April 2005*

*Volume 84 No. 4*

## **President's Message**

April can be such a beautiful month, with the emergence of warmer weather after the cold winter. It's always one of the busiest months on the Island. The Virginia bluebells are now emerging from the ground, first a deep purple then green. I hope you can come to one or more of the events so that you can see how lovely the Island looks when it's covered with bluebells.

The first event this month is the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Potomac River Watershed Cleanup, on Saturday, April 2<sup>nd</sup> from 9 until 12. The Club supports this activity along with many other organizations that collect trash along the Potomac and the streams that flow into it. Bring your lunch. The Club will provide trash bags, gloves, drinks and dessert.

April 10<sup>th</sup> is the date for the Spring Workfest. This is one of the most important activities the club sponsors each year. This year there will be some additional cleanup resulting from the reroofing project. Applicants on the waiting list can earn a pass that entitles them to the use of the Island on any day of their choosing if they volunteer at the Workfest or the Potomac Watershed Cleanup. Members who wish to host a large party can count participation in either of these two activities toward their eligibility.

## **Upcoming Sycamore Events**

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

April Meeting, Wednesday, April 13th @ 8 p.m. At the Island..  
Main item: Discussion of two concepts for the Caretaker's Quarters.

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

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

May Meeting, Wednesday, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 8 p.m. At the Island. VOTE  
on the two concepts as refined after the April meeting.

Annual Downriver Race, May 15th. Registration starts at 9 a.m.  
[p. 4]

***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 May issue is receipt by the Editor by Tuesday, April 26th.**

The monthly meeting will be held on the Island on Wednesday, April 13<sup>th</sup>. Members of the Building Committee will be present to describe two concepts for the Caretaker's Quarters, which are very similar to those that were published in the *Islander* in December. You will have an opportunity to ask questions and make suggestions. The concepts will be refined based upon your comments at a follow-on meeting of the Building Committee; the refined designs will be published in the May *Islander*; and at the May meeting (Wednesday, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 8 p.m.), we'll vote on whether to move forward with one of them. Please note that at the April meeting we will consider the concepts and not the costs. As Chuck Pill, the co-chair of the Building Committee, notes: "The committee decided to focus on getting a concept approved and then fully costed. We felt that 'real' estimates would need more definition of the specs. Both concepts are similar in many ways, and thus the cost differences are not that great. Additionally, the level of finishing, the participation of club-in kind labor, a modular/phased approach to construction, all play into reducing costs. We can also perhaps provide some costing factors based on sq footage and systems for the final concepts to be presented for vote at the May meeting."

I truly hope that you will attend the April and May meetings if you have any interest in the direction that the redesign of the caretaker's quarters takes. The discussion this month and the vote next month are critical to the project moving forward. If you have any concerns, questions or objections, these two meetings are the time to voice them. If you cannot be there, please e-mail or call me with your comments: [amcunning@juno.com](mailto:amcunning@juno.com) or 703/876-9165.

On April 17<sup>th</sup>, the New Member Orientation will be held at 9:30 a.m. on the Island. All applicants must attend an Orientation before they can become members or get a pass to use the Island on week-days during the summer. It's a fun event where you can learn about the history of the Island, the special events that occur, as well as the expectations of membership. It concludes with a potluck lunch. You're free to remain on the Island for the rest of the day to enjoy the new Spring on the Island.

Also on April 17<sup>th</sup>, but at Carderock, John Parrish and R.G. Steinman will lead the Spring Flower Walk, the third time that they've done so. Each time they've taken us on a different stretch of the Potomac, to see different species. If you're interested in Maryland native plants, you will enjoy hearing from them. They have a wealth of knowledge about native and invasive species. [Directions below.] April 24<sup>th</sup> is the rain date for both the Spring Workfest and the New Member Orientation. Please come to the April 13<sup>th</sup> meeting on the Island at 8:00 p.m. to get answers and to share your opinions about the proposed renovation of the Caretaker's Quarters and the Clubhouse.

— Ann Marie Cunningham

## Reminder: Annual Flower Walk

### Sunday, April 17, 1:30 to 4:30 Rain or Shine

To get to the starting point at 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*. 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

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

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

If March 1930 was a quiet month, April was even more so.

The April meeting was called to order at 8:30 p.m., on the Island, with 16 in attendance.

The first entry, after acceptance of the Treasurer's report, is an odd one:

“Moved and passed that the war canoe be presented to Messrs. Carl Stodder and Whipple.”

“The Captain of Tennis, Mr. [E. Reese] Thomson, stated that permanent markers would be placed on the tennis court to assist in marking the court.”

The following bills were approved, suggesting that an interim caretaker was found:

|  |         |
|--|---------|
| James C. Wood                            | \$12.75 |
| Blankets for caretaker                   | \$5.50  |
| Paint & glass for caretaker's room       | \$8.15  |
| Material for remodeling caretaker's room | \$49.45 |
| Stovepipe & pyrene liquid                | 11.40   |

The minutes also reflect an internal change. Sycamore Island membership used to be on a stock ownership plan. This meeting decided to have the Laws Committee look at eliminating out-standing shares of the stock.

The final decision of the night:

“Captain of the island given authority to move water system pump from ladies' room to men's room.”

The meeting adjourned at 10:30 p.m.

The odd addition to the March Minutes continues in April. At the bottom of the page appears a sum looking like this:

63  
19  
-----  
82

Any guesses about its meaning? Number of members, maybe?

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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.

## Notes of the March 9, 2005 Meeting

The meeting was held at the Island. Because a quorum was not present, no formal business was conducted. Those present, however, discussed current Club events.

**Present** Gerald S. Barton, David Winer, Jane Winer, Jim Drew, Ann Marie Cunningham, Johnna Robinson, Star Mitchell, Dick Way, John Matthews, Joe Hage, Jeff Komarow, and Peter Winkler.

**Construction Issues** Captain Emeritus John Matthews reported that several of the insulated windows in the caretaker's quarters need replacing. President Ann Marie Cunningham stated that if he and Captain Tryon Wells agreed on the repair, there was money in the budget to cover it. John also reported that replacing the old roof tiles from the Island would require a major effort. We discussed various possibilities, including hiring day laborers and attempting to do it ourselves during a Workfest. More research will be done on this topic.

**Large Parties** Large Party Supervisor John Noble reported, through Ann Marie, that a request had come in to hold a party (a flower walk) on an even-numbered weekend day, Sunday, April 24. That is the rain date for the Workfest and orientation. The sense of the meeting was that it would be all right to hold the party on that date if the Workfest had already occurred.

**Membership** There are three vacancies among the regular membership, and three waitlisters have been vetted. Because there was no quorum, they could not be voted in as members, but the sense of the meeting was that the three candidates could use the Island in the meantime.

**Downriver Race** Star Mitchell reported that the Canoe Cruisers Association's annual downriver race will most likely be held on Sunday, May 15. [More below]

**Bridge Right-of-Way** John Matthews asked if anyone knew the particulars of our right-of-way on the path from the parking lot and over the canal bridge. Gerry Barton researched the subject a few years ago but was unable to learn anything. It was suggested that Club Archivist Holly Syrrakos, who will be reporting at the April meeting, might know where to look for information. John asked the question because he is interested in rehabbing the trail. Dick Way suggested that, because the Club is a non-profit entity, we might enlist some Boy Scouts to do it as an Eagle project.

-- Peter Winkler, Recording Secretary

### Loosen Those Competitive Paddles

The Annual Downriver Race will be Sunday, May 15. Registration for racers starts at 9:00 a.m. at Great Falls. The race starts at 10:45. If you cannot race, please join us on the Island about 11:00 a.m. to help at the finish line and/or help with lunch and awards. If you feel that you just cannot paddle, I need **LOTS OF VOLUNTEER HELPERS**. Get involved and meet new friends! If you can help with the race (many easy jobs), please call me at 301-530-3252 or e-mail me at: [kayakingvstar@aol.com](mailto:kayakingvstar@aol.com).

If anyone would like to be a **sponsor** and put **your company/business** name/logo on our T-shirt for \$100, please, please contact me. This would be great advertisement for any business and you can use it as a tax deduction for a charitable contribution!

— Star Mitchell, Race Chair

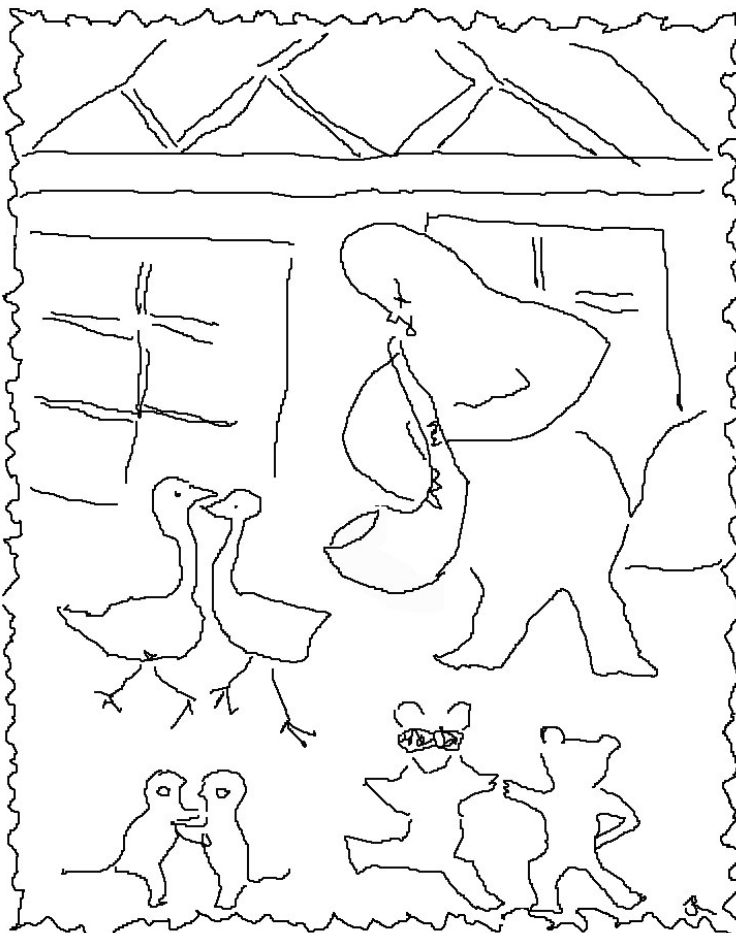
## Reminder: Sycamore Orientation Sunday, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 9:30 am

The annual Sycamore Orientation for those on the wait list 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 holds a dance in the new BigRoom!  
Islanders ponder a new era.*

*Ruppert*

*Created by  
Johnna Robinson*



## In Touch With Joe...

I'm so glad the cold grey days of March are finally over. I hope now that the wind and rain will cease and we can start to enjoy Spring on the Island. I will never forget the cold I felt one March evening, holding an ice covered rope in the middle of the river with the wind like fangs ripping right through me. April is really the best time of year to visit the Island. Everything is turning green, the wildflowers are out and the animals are active. I'm looking forward to seeing all of you as you return to the Island to see the bluebells and to participate in the Workfest or Orientation.

The geese have finally settled into their nests and as usual all the nests are next to the trails. So, be careful and try not to upset the expecting parents too much. The wood ducks, the great-blue herons and the kingfishers have all returned and will again be an everyday part of life down here. The deer that were hanging around seem to have gone and the groundhog has emerged from its hibernation, looking much thinner than it did last October. Luckily, I don't see any baby groundhogs this year.

I've been doing some improvements to my quarters with the help of my new table saw. I built a closet in the kid's room and I'm making some built-in shelves in the living room. It seems I'm always running out of places to put things; so, maybe with these new shelves, I'll finally have a place to put everything. The best part of this project has been that I had all the materials I needed from lumber I salvaged from the Island and from the Sycamore Store.

Since the kids are away on Spring break, I took some time off to hike the Towpath. I caught a MARC train at Union Station and rode it fifty miles up river to Brunswick and hiked home from there. It was a great trip steeped in history with excellent views of the river and I didn't even have to drive anywhere. I highly recommend it. Don't forget you too can camp on Sycamore Island; it's your Island — I just live here.

Joe at the Seneca  
Aqueduct

Photo by the Self-  
Timer



# Desolation, the Groover, and at least one Heroine: Canoeing the Rio Grande

By John Cunningham

Ann Marie and I canoed the river last March. We went with an outfitter, who is based in Maine but runs canoe trips all over the world. Only classic open-boat canoe trips are offered – no rafts and no kayaks. We flew into Midland, Texas; met our guides and fellow paddlers at a motel. The next morning we drove south in vans and trucks, hauling all our gear behind, for about five hours through an increasingly empty landscape. The put-in was in a state wildlife management area, just east (that is, down-river) of Big Bend National Park.

Our group consisted of eight client boats, with two in each, and five guide boats. The clients were mostly fifty and up – there was one young couple, from Germany. Considering the physical challenge of paddling and camping for a week, the age of the clients surprised us a bit, but this is a relatively high-cost thing to do, so perhaps that is the explanation.

We knew that all gear and food was brought down the river, and had thought that perhaps a raft or two would be used for some of the stuff. Nope – everything was lashed into the canoes: tents (supplied by the outfitter), sleeping bags, camp chairs, all personal gear, extra paddles, first-aid and other emergency equipment (including a satellite phone for checking on upriver weather conditions), cooking equipment (including the world's largest skillet), and food and beverages for the entire group for a week. We were near the high end of the group in terms of paddling skills and experience, and so were given the honor of loading into and out of our canoe every day two extremely heavy coolers full of food on ice.



Heading downriver, near the start.

The river also surprised us. This is desert country, and we were expecting rock and sand along the banks. Instead, the banks were green and spectacularly muddy, especially since there had been some heavy rainstorms during the previous weeks. The predominant plant along the banks is cane grass, which grows very thick and high and features sharp edges on every blade. The recurrent paddling challenge was to overcome the current's desire to push you into the bank and the grass. The river itself was running fast and muddy. The speed of the current and the river's constant twists and turns were difficult for some of the members of our group – the trip had been advertised as suitable for novices, and some folks were unhappy during the first couple of days, especially since there was only a minimal bit of instruction at the beginning. But, eventually, with some adjustments of how people were paired up, everyone relaxed and settled in. There were a few impassable rapids that had to be portaged or lined, but plenty of smaller ones that provided a nice challenge.

Our trip called for going down-river for about 75 miles to the designated take-out. In "Running the Rivers of North America," Peter Wood describes this stretch of the Rio Grande as "some of the most isolated water in the United States." The land on both sides consists of privately owned cattle ranches, but the land is so harsh – rolling hills covered with sagebrush, cactus, rock outcroppings, and the occasional cottonwood tree – that each cow requires many acres in order to graze adequately. So, the ranches are huge and the homes on them are widely separated. There are no roads anywhere near the river on the Mexican side, and very few on the Texas side. In a week on the river, we saw only one other group of people: Five women paddling together. We saw cattle and one horse along the banks, but no people at all. In places, we could hike up above the river, and could see how the country was a narrow strip



Mike Patterson, guide and champion poler

of green along the river corridor and then the desert rolling away on either side. We thought of the Nile in Egypt as an analogy.

Our separation from civilization was also brought home to us by the fact that, although the Rio Grande marks the border between the United States and Mexico, and although that border raises difficult and contentious issues in our national politics, there was no evidence of any of that on the part of the river we paddled. We camped at least as often in Mexico as we did in Texas, but there was no indication anywhere that we were moving back and forth across an international boundary, and I don't think anyone in our group gave it a moment's thought.

During the first couple of days, there were high mesas and buttes on either side. We had lunch one day in a field of desert marigolds. Starting on the third day, the canyon walls closed in, hundreds of feet high in some places. Near the end of the trip, we passed several colonies of cave swallows, which build pocket-size nests of mud on the rock faces. Except for one thunder-stormy afternoon, the weather was ideal – warm and sunny days, cool nights. No bugs to speak of – an outdoors miracle! In addition to the marigolds, we saw many flowering cacti and other indigenous plants in spring bloom. The bird life was sparse, but this may be another indicator of the harshness and isolation of that part of the world. One night, we heard peccaries (an indigenous wild pig) squealing in the hills above us – a weird sound to hear in the small hours.

Those who camp know that there are two major hassles. The first is food – the planning, packing, cooking, and cleaning up after every meal. It was very nice indeed to have our dinner responsibilities limited to choosing our wine at the beginning of the evening and cleaning our plates and cutlery at the end of the evening. It was very nice indeed to have coffee already brewing over the fire at 6 in the morning. The quality of the food was exceptional – salmon, steaks, chicken, beef stroganoff, omelets, flapjacks, pasta, and so on. There was a Mexican Night, complete with delicious and soul-enhancing margaritas. The other hassle is, of course, the bathroom issue, or, more accurately, the lack-of-bathroom issue. Those who ask will get details of "the groover," but suffice to say here that one adjusts. My heroine on the trip was Amelia, seventy years old. Amelia's husband died a couple of years ago after a long illness, and she is now getting out in the world again. She had never canoed before and had done very little camping, but here she was, sleeping on the ground every night, no bathing for a week, and coping very well with the lack of bathroom. If she can do all that with a constant smile on her face . . . .

People who do this sort of thing tend to be interesting and fun to be around, even if there might not be common ground in the larger world. We enjoyed everyone's company, and hope to nurture some friendships. On the last day, we took out, hauled everything up to the waiting vans, and then had another five-plus hour drive back to Midland. After long showers, we had to decide how many of our clothes were salvageable. The cleaning crews in that motel don't get paid enough.



**Clockwise from Upper Left:**

Canyon walls closing in.

The Cunninghams, staying upright [No surprise, here]. This photo by Kim Kramer; all others by John Cunningham.



Lining up at the head of a rapid.



A campsite in Mexico



## Saturday Relief Caretakers April—May

|                |                       |                                    |              |
|----------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|--------------|
| April 2, 2005  | 10:00 a.m. - 3:00     | Linda and Dick Riegelman           | 301-229-2871 |
|                | 3:00 p.m. - dark      | Norman Metzger                     | 202-544-6027 |
| April 9, 2005  | 10:00 a.m. - 3:00     | Joe Cecil and Judith Friedman      | 202-244-7036 |
|                | 3:00 p.m. - dark      | Jack and Rita Colwell              | 301-229-5129 |
| April 16, 2005 | 10:00 a.m. - 3:00     | Amanda Cannell                     | 301-229-8658 |
|                | 3:00 p.m. - dark      | Bill Kugler                        | 301-652-0132 |
| April 23, 2005 | 10:00 a.m. - 3:00     | Gordon and Linda Phillips          | 301-320-0594 |
|                | 3:00 p.m. - dark      | Renee and George Dunham            | 202-686-6451 |
| April 30, 2005 | 10:00 a.m. - 3:00     | <i>Call to Volunteer!</i>          |              |
|                | 3:00 p.m. - dark      | Holly and Pierre Welch/Faith Earll | 202-541-0313 |
| May 7, 2005    | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | <i>Call to Volunteer!</i>          |              |
|                | 3:00 p.m. - dark      | Holly and Pierre Welch/Faith Earll | 202-541-0313 |
| May 14, 2005   | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | <i>Call to Volunteer!</i>          |              |
|                | 3:00 p.m. - dark      | <i>Call to Volunteer!</i>          |              |
| May 21, 2005   | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | <i>Call to Volunteer!</i>          |              |
|                | 3:00 p.m. - dark      | <i>Call to Volunteer!</i>          |              |
| May 28, 2005   | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | <i>Call to Volunteer!</i>          |              |

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

To volunteer, contact Candy Means 301-320-5270 or [candymeans@comcast.net](mailto:candymeans@comcast.net).

### Large Parties

| Date  | Time              | Who                    | What                                      |
|---|-------------------|------------------------|---|
| April 12                                    | Through midday    | Jane and David Winer   | About 20 from garden club                 |
| May 15th                                    | 10:30 am to noon  | Charlotte Brewer       | Wildflower walk with 25 to 30 people      |
| May 21-22, overnight<br>(Rain date, June 4) | Afternoon/Morning | Faith Earll            | 12 Brownie Girl Scouts and adults camping |
| May 21 <sup>st</sup>                        | 10 a.m. to dark.  | Alan and Caroline Gelb | 35 persons at a graduation party          |

A large party application form may be printed from the Club's web page at  
<http://www.sycamoreisland.org/systems.htm>  
 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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**April 2005**

- Building Plans
- Meet the Groover
- Spring Returns to the Island
- Presenting the War Canoe



The Monocacy Aqueduct

Photo by Joe Hage