

**Fall Workfest**  
**Sunday, November 18, 9 to 2**

**Be There! Your Picture in *The Islander*!**

# *The Sycamore Islander*

*October 2007*

*Volume 86 No 10*

## **President's Letter**

The primary subject of this month's letter is the project to renovate the caretaker's quarters and the clubhouse (the "Project"). But first I want to take a few minutes to recruit members to serve as Club Officers or Supervisors.

In any civic organization, it is to be expected that a core group of members will have the time and feel the commitment to participate actively in running the organization. The Club has been blessed over the years with people who were (and are) truly selfless in giving their time and talents to the Club. However, many of the Club's Officers and Supervisors have held their positions for a long time and would be happy to take time off or to serve in other positions.

This is the time of year when the Club puts together a slate of Officers and Supervisors for approval at the December meeting. We are always looking for new and old members who want to play a more active role in operating and governing the Club. No experience is necessary. Don't be bashful or feel that you are not up to the task.

Now for the main event – the Project. It seems that the Club has been discussing the need to renovate the caretaker's quarters for so long that I cannot remember a time when it was not an issue. Five years ago, Ann Marie Cunningham became President. I was asked to be Vice-President. I was sure that in the two or three years that Ann Marie would be President, the Club would agree on the architectural plans and specifications for renovated and improved caretaker quarters, develop a financing plan, hire a contractor and complete the construction. After all, some planning had already been done; Ann Marie was committed to seeing the Project through. I was confident that the Project would be finished or almost done by the time I became President.

Ann Marie served with distinction for three years as President. I am finishing my second year in office, and we still do not have closure on the Project: not a shovel of dirt from the ground; not a single footing poured. There has been any number of false starts. We went through several building committees, one of which became hopelessly deadlocked over the design of the Project and disbanded. A set of architectural plans was drawn and then rejected. There were innumerable meetings with the County's Department of Permitting Services to gain an understanding of what the Club could and could not do. It turned out that the Club is severely restricted in the scope of the construction that we could undertake on the Island. Essentially, because we are located in a floodplain the Club is limited to building within the footprint of the existing structure.

***The Sycamore Islander*** is a monthly newsletter of the Montgomery Sycamore Island Club. 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 email attachments to [normanmetzger@verizon.net](mailto:normanmetzger@verizon.net). Telephone: 202/544-6027 or 202/445-5436 (cell).

**The deadline for the November issue is Wednesday, October 31.**

With a clearer understanding of the building restrictions, a new Building Committee worked cooperatively to develop two plans – one moved the caretaker’s quarters to a single level in the clubhouse, taking over the club kitchen and the space that is the current women’s bathroom and changing area; the other created a two-level space that moved the caretaker’s kitchen and dining room to the club kitchen area, gave the caretaker larger bedrooms and other living space by reconfiguring the existing caretaker’s quarters and connecting the two levels with an internal staircase.

## **Pros and Cons**

Each proposal had advantages and disadvantages, but cost was not one of them; the Building Committee believed that both of the plans would cost about the same. While the one-level plan did not require the construction of a staircase, placing the caretaker’s entire living quarters on one level would have required some very expensive construction work to meet the Montgomery County Fire Code.

Here is my understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of the two plans that were under consideration. The principal advantage of the one-level plan was that it moved the entire caretaker’s living quarters above the flood level, except for the presumed level of a 100-year flood. (On the Island, there is no such thing as being above the floodplain.) On the negative side, the living space was skimpy; the bedrooms in particular were very small. There were also concerns about the caretaker’s privacy and about noise levels between the caretaker’s and the Club’s sides of the wall. In the one-level plan, the caretaker’s quarters could have been enlarged by taking space from the existing clubhouse configuration; but many were opposed to reducing the public space in the clubhouse.

The principal advantage of the two-level plan is that it gives the caretaker a larger, much more livable apartment and raises the kitchen and dining room (all appliances, food and kitchenware, etc) to the clubhouse level. The two-level plan also expands the north side of the clubhouse. The disadvantage is that the bedrooms and living room remain downstairs and more vulnerable to flooding. Much to my surprise, one of our former caretakers argued strongly in favor of the two-level plan, reasoning that the one-level plan might encourage the caretaker to stay on the Island under potential flood conditions when he or she should leave for safety reasons. This former caretaker also said that as long as the kitchen was not affected, it would be much easier for the caretaker to recover from a flood.

## **Decision for Two-Level Plan**

The issue of which plan to go forward with was debated in the *Islander* and “at meeting assembled.” The Club then voted to go forward with the two-level plan. I am writing this from memory so I cannot give you the exact vote tally, but I recall being surprised by the size of the majority that voted for the two-level plan.

With this mandate, the Building Committee hired an architect and worked with her to develop architectural plans and specifications for the Project. This was a time-consuming process. The Committee also took several iterations of the plans to the Department of Permitting Services for review and comment so that we would not be spending time and effort on plans that would not be approved. Along with the architectural plans, Ann Marie and Tryon Wells put in many hours to develop a bid package for contractors. More time and effort were required to identify responsible contractors who would potentially be interested in the Project.

Finally, in August, we met with three contractors on the Island and gave them the bid package. Two of the contractors submitted bids. The third declined. We received the bids early in September. As noted in the minutes of the September meeting, the bids were for approximately \$250,000 and \$270,000, quite a bit higher than we had hoped for. The Building and Finance Committees met to discuss the bids before the September meeting. The Building Committee is looking into whether the construction could be phased and whether the Club could save money by being our own general contractor and using club labor (and less skilled labor) for some parts of the Project. The jury is out on these questions.

While we may be able to phase the Project, the Club cannot decide to do one or two parts and skip the others because the parts of the Project are interrelated. This is true both of the approved two-level plan and the one-level plan. Both plans place the caretaker’s kitchen and dining room in the space of the existing club kitchen. Unless

the Club wants to go without a kitchen (and aren't picnics a big part of the Island experience?), both plans would build the new club kitchen in the space of the current warming room and women's bathroom. This means that the men's bathroom needs to be renovated (By the way, the cement floor in the men's bathroom is sinking and is a hazard.) And so it goes; the pieces of the puzzle all fit together.

## Financing Plan

The Building Committee will do its best to see if the cost of the project can be pared down. But if the Club has to raise \$250,000 to construct the Project, here is what I understand the Finance Committee would recommend:

1. Raise \$56,000 through a one-time assessment in 2008 of \$300 for Regular Members; \$150 for Senior Members. (The initiation fee for new members would be raised to \$300).
2. Raise \$150,000 internally from members through an unsecured 10-year loan at 7.5% interest with interest and principal repaid annually. Dues would have to be raised by \$120 for regular members and \$60 for senior members to cover the interest and repayment of the loan. The increase would take effect in 2008.
3. Drawdown the Club's surplus by \$30,000. The surplus would be replenished by a dues increase of \$30 per year for regular members beginning in 2009 and would be recovered in approximately five years.
4. Raise \$15,000 to \$60,000 through the sale of Prepaid Access Certificates (PACS) to the Waiting List or some other type of additional upfront payment to become a member without waiting. The governing principle is that no one on the waiting list would have to wait longer to become a member. PACS were explained by the Finance Committee in the September *Islander*.

If the Club was successful in getting upfront payments under Item 4, we could reduce the amount borrowed, which would in turn reduce the dues increase. But for discussion purposes, it is reasonable to assume an annual dues increase of \$150 per regular member plus the one-time assessment. Would this be a big increase? There is no denying it is a 50% increase in 2006 dues, but for many of us \$150 is a weekend's entertainment. It is certainly no more than the cost of a family of four attending a Nationals game and less than the cost of one ticket to a Redskins game. Annual dues of \$450 to maintain and operate the Club appear to be less than the dues and assessments for private swimming clubs.

Would this change the composition of the membership? Possibly. Is this bad? I don't think so, but reasonable minds can disagree. Some members who are marginal users of the Club may decide that membership is not worth \$450. This would open up membership slots for people who want to use the Club more. It could bring in younger families with children and some new members who can provide the next generation of leadership and more muscle to do the physical tasks at work fests. On the other hand, if the members use the Island more, then the Island may be less tranquil on some weekends and holidays. Would this change the character of the Club? I don't think so. The Club should still be affordable. If there is anyone who cannot afford the increase, the officers will find ways to keep them as members.

## Critical Issue

I believe the one thing that will change the character of the Club for the worse is if we cannot fill the position of caretaker with high quality people as we have in the past. The members who have been on past hiring committees will tell you how hard it is to fill the position. How can we keep Joe with us and, inevitably, at some point in the future, attract an excellent replacement if we cannot offer our caretaker a decent place to live? The caretaker's quarters need to be renovated; parts of the existing quarters need to be reconstructed. Moreover, there is a correlation between major floods on the Island and the resignation of caretakers. It is important for the wellbeing and retention of our caretakers to move the kitchen and dining room upstairs to the Club level to make it easier for the caretaker to recover from the effects of a flood.

I hope the members will make the choice to move forward in a positive direction by approving the Project when a formal proposal is presented. I hope the formal proposal will be ready for the next *Islander*; if ready sooner, it will be on the website.

— Jeff Komarow

## Minutes: September 19, 2007

The September meeting was held on the Island, following another happy picnic courtesy of our President Jeff Komarow and caretaker Joe Hage at the grill. The evening sky was exquisite, the river clear and cool, and several of us took what may be our last swim of the season. After a brief performance in the Clubhouse by some of Joe's musical friends, the meeting was called to order at 8:00 p.m.

**Present:** Cecily Abram, Bob Beauchamp, Jim Drew, Bill Eichbaum, Bruce Gaber, Lee Gravatte, Larry Heilman, David Holdridge, Jeff Komarow, Alison Levine, Louise Meyer, Hester Ohbi, Sherry Pettie, Harvey Resnik, Marianne Ross, Paul Stanton, Betsy Stephens, Peggy Thomson, Tryon Wells, and Jane Winer.

**Minutes:** As there was no quorum in August, the July minutes were presented and approved. Several members commented on their extreme brevity and did not appear to do so admiringly; your secretary will attempt more elaboration this month.

**Treasurer's Report:** Alan Gelb, via Jeff Komarow, reported that "everything is normal."

**Canoe Supervisor's Report:** Jim Drew reported that Frank Dasplit taught another of his popular canoe classes last weekend, and that Joe Hage has painted the canoe shed roof. Jeff added that those of us who have not attended Frank's class are really missing something good.

With no more committee reports, Jeff announced that the meeting would move on to the important business at hand:

**A Proposed Change to the Standing Rules:** Jeff elaborated on his proposal for widening the voting opportunity in the case of important Club decisions, which was first announced at the July meeting and later published in the September newsletter. The situation prompting this change is the decision facing the Club on how to finance and whether to go forward with the building project.

The floor was opened for comments. Among them, the question of why not mail out ballots to all members if the desire is for the widest possible participation. Jeff replied that his strong feeling was that members should be willing to make the effort to get to the Club and participate. Another question was why widen the vote at all? Why not leave it to the regular group of 10-15 members who customarily show up and make all other Club decisions? Jeff responded that since the construction project is somewhat controversial, broadening the participation would better legitimize the vote.

At the end of the discussion, Jeff read his proposal aloud [see text below], and the question was called. The vote was 11 in favor, 7 opposed, and 2 abstaining.

### **The motion carried to add a new standing rule on Special Voting Procedures.**

#### Rule 20 [existing Rule 20 becomes Rule 21]: Special Voting Procedures

These special voting procedures shall be used where a proposed action of the Club involves (a) a commitment of \$20,000 or more for capital projects on the Island; (b) entering into a loan agreement, whether with a commercial lending institution or with members or other individuals; (c) the imposition of a building fund assessment or other special assessment over and above the annual dues, or (d) an increase in dues other than an increase approved at the December meeting.

Voting on the proposed action shall take place at the regular meeting and on one or more additional dates and times prior to the next regular meeting, which dates and time shall be established by the President with a view to providing members with a convenient opportunity to vote. If possible, the Island shall be the place at which additional voting will be held. The dates, times, and places of additional voting opportunities shall be published in the *Islander*. Voting shall be conducted by paper ballot with appropriate procedures to ensure that members do not vote more than once. The ballots shall remain sealed and shall not be counted until the voting has been completed.

**Construction Bids Are In:** Club Captain and Building Committee member Tryon Wells reported that two of the three contractors invited to tour the Island and submit bids had done so, and that the size of the bids “put the Building Committee back on their heels.” Tryon passed copies of the bids around: one for \$250,000, and one for \$270,000.

**Financing Scheme:** Jeff said that the Building Finance Committee had met earlier in the week to review the scheme it first developed a couple of years ago when this latest effort to upgrade the caretaker quarters began. The plan includes four sources of funds: (1) A drawdown on the Club reserves, which is to be paid off by a dues increase; (2) a pre-paid dues plan offered to waitlisters; (3) a one-time assessment on members; and (4) a loan, either commercial or in-house, to be paid off by another dues increase.

A too-lengthy-to-report-in-detail member discussion followed. Various opinions were expressed, among them that (1) it’s time for this generation to make a similar capital improvement to that made by Club members in 1936 when all the buildings were swept away by flood; (2) perhaps we should approach the project incrementally; (3) we must take care to protect the Club’s culture; and, (4) this is a lot of money to spend and not accomplish the original objective.

**Stay Tuned for This Important Vote Process:** Jeff’s plan is that the financing proposal will be published in the October *Islander*, discussed at the October meeting, re-published in the November *Islander*, and voted in November.

**Additional Club Business:** A Motion Carried to allow Senior Member status to Martha Holdridge, a member for 30 or 40 years, who had recently given notice that she can no longer make it down to the Island.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:30.

--Sherry Pettie, Recording Secretary



Island Scenes by Laura-Leigh Palmer of A.S.A.P Graphics (top) and Marcia Loeb.



## From Holly Syrrakos, Island Archivist

### From the Archives—76 Years Ago,

#### *The Sycamore Islander, 1931*

The fall of 1931 brought announcements of the regular, annual events: the Sycamore Regatta in September, the Big Halloween Party, and the Wood-Fests.

Speaking of Halloween, the editor Roger Gessford writes, “Our Halloween Dances are always masquerade affairs and while nine out of ten are generally in costume the well-worn gent’s tweeds are welcome.” He also announced, “Another refreshing thing about our Halloween Dances is that one does not have to dance. Last Sunday there was an article in the Star including mention of the early days of Sycamore Island—how the Club was started by Germans back in 1885 and how they used to hold dances. According to the Star their dancing was more like hopping than dancing. Well, that’s just the way it is today and I, for one, am glad to know why even our best families hop so much.”

The *Islander* features trip reports at this time of year and September 1931 was no exception. The catchy title “Nervous Notary Public Neglects Nether Garments,” drew my eye.

“Reese (Thomson) and Dena went upriver with a crowd of Sycamore Islanders Sunday, the upriver destination being Wet Bottom Shoot (sic). The party carried their canoes up to the Angler’s Club on the tops of automobiles, put them in the river at Cupid’s Bower and then went up around the Virginia side of the rapids above Difficult Run, getting up the rapids by pulling their canoes from rock to rock by ropes. After they’d spent about half an hour getting the boats up and things looked well set for an uneventful trip up through the gorge of the historic Potomac, Reese began to fumble around with the rope of his canoe, adjusting knots here and there. When this was completed and he was peacefully coiling up the 30 feet of rope with which Reese feels a canoe should be equipped, someone noticed that Reese’s canoe was back at the foot of the rapids—at the same moment that Reese noticed that he had reached the end of the rope to which the canoe should be tied and that the canoe was not there on the end of the rope!

“Jack and Lucille got in a canoe and went down through the rapids to get Reese’s boat back and after some more struggling and a lot of good advice from his many admirers present, Reese paddled up the river with the party. At Sandy Spring landing, something reminded Reese that his trousers were not with the happy party and he was attired only in a large bathing suit. Nothing to do then but recall where Reese had last been seen with his trousers and the consensus of opinion being that Reese had left them on the rocks a mile down the river. Jack and Reese paddled down to get them since they contained thousands of dollars and hundreds of automobile driver’s licenses and snapshots taken of Reese at ages varying from two until the day he was married.

“Eventually the whole mob including Reese and his canoe and trousers reached Wet Bottom Shoot and all thanked Reese for a day full of humor and memory training.”

May you all remember your trousers, especially on Halloween!

## **In Touch With Joe....**

Friday -- September 7, 2007

It's the year of the grass. I've never seen grass growing in the river here near the Island before this year. I don't know if it's the clear water allowing the sunlight in or what, but this grass is everywhere. I just finished painting the canoe shed roof. It was a big job but things went smoothly and now we have a nice green roof that will be protected for a long time. The siding on the tool shed is my next project; it should be finished by the end of this weekend. I'm also redoing the screen door to the clubhouse. I stripped all the paint from it and now I'm going to repaint it and install new screens. A lot of work for one door but I think it was worth it. They don't make sturdy screen doors like this one anymore.

Sunday -- September 9, 2007

A tree-sized branch broke from the Sycamore by the boardwalk. It was quite a crash when the 18-inch-diameter branch hit the ground. Time to get the chain saw out again. It's funny, a big branch fell last Saturday as well. That one fell by the canoe dock, no storm or wind, just falling branches. I haven't seen a ground hog in months, but I guess it's too much to hope they've left the Island. The mice have been chewing on my wallpaper table. I have a folding table made for hanging wallpaper and it seems the mice are chewing all the residual wallpaper paste.

Tuesday -- September 11, 2007

The rain hasn't affected the river much. The only difference I see from yesterday is that now there are small pieces of grass floating everywhere. They look like lawn mower clippings scattered across the surface of the river. The rain was too much for our "Flamingo Hut"; the blue table awning by the fire pit was crushed by the weight of the rain water trapped in the tarp. I just received a copy of the written report describing the archaeological dig that took place on Ruppert's in the sixties. It's interesting to read about how these Islands were used as work stations for making pottery and stone points for thousands of years. Thousands! I saw a warbler today. First of the migrants, I think. I saw it on the NIH campus. It had flown into a window and was slightly stunned. I couldn't resist picking it up and feeling its feathery weightlessness. How can such a tiny bird travel so far? I thought I would have no trouble identifying it when I got home but these fall warblers all look the same. I'm going with orange-crowned warbler. I saw a hummingbird. It was buzzing up the canal, sampling the orange jewel-weed growing along the canal. Flower by flower this tiny bird worked its way up river.

Wednesday -- September 12, 2007

The good weather brought out the fishermen. I have three boats out right now and I had one this morning. I saw a rare sight last night as I was swimming. Four great white egrets perched together high over the river on the Maryland bank. I love seeing those bright white birds; I hope they decide to stay here. I'm finally finished painting my door. Now I'm ready to put on the screening.

Friday -- September 14, 2007

Another large branch fell. This one fell on the trail some time overnight. It suddenly seems like it's getting dark very early. I looked up the time of sunset: 7:18! That means it's dark by 7:45.

Tuesday -- September 18, 2007

The swimming season is going to come to an abrupt end if this cold weather continues. I jumped in yesterday evening and I was amazed at how much colder the water was. What a difference a day makes. And what a difference five degrees makes. I did swim long enough to see the egrets perched in their spot above the river.

Thursday -- September 20, 2007

I can't get over all this river grass everywhere. I went out canoeing late yesterday and it was like paddling through a kelp forest. The grass is thick out there and some of the plants must be at least six feet tall. Someone called it star grass; the flowers resemble tiny yellow stars. I'm going fishing tonight. I want to catch a few more fish before the season ends.

Saturday -- September 22, 2007

Well, the fish don't seem to be biting like they were. You can still catch fish but you have to work at it. There are actually three types of grass growing under the ferry. There is the star grass that I mentioned as well as wild celery and a third that might be common water weed or hydrilla. Generally, low water is a caretaker's dream, but low water can cause problems for the ferry. One low-water hazard is submerged trees. The water is so low now that sometimes the pontoons get stuck on the submerged trees by the landing. Yesterday I decided to try and move the trees to make a path for the ferry. My first idea was to try and push the offending branch into deeper water and out of the way. So, with a sturdy rope in hand, I jumped off the ferry and lassoed the big end of the branch. The branch didn't look too big and I thought that if I was able to pull it over a little it might slide into deeper water and out of the way. Unfortunately, the branch was wedged and I couldn't budge it. Then I thought that I could cut one of the limbs to allow it to sink. I went back to the tool shed and got a bow saw. While standing on the log with the water up to my waist I began sawing into the limb. I was surprised at how well the saw was cutting, I've never tried to saw under water before. I guess that new blade really helped. Things were going smoothly until I was about three quarters of the way through and the saw got stuck, jammed between the two pieces of wood. I struggled for a long time, pulling and jumping and cursing until I got smart and took my weight off the tree. While lying on the ferry I was able to yank the saw free. I finished cutting the branch from the ferry. I tied a rope around the freshly cut end and dragged the offending branch out to sea — well, out into the deeper part of the channel. It made me so happy to see the path for the ferry now clear of all obstructions.

Monday -- September 24, 2007

I counted the names on the sign-in sheet for yesterday, 65 people! That has to be a record for a non-event day; a record for me anyway. We could be heading into a new era: An era where people actually use the Island. Two and a half feet. We know the river can get lower but we hope that it doesn't. The warblers seem to be passing through now. I saw three over the weekend.



Bass caught by Michael Grant. Photo by Joe Hage.



**Saturday Relief Caretakers October — November**

<b>October</b>		
6	10-2	John and Jyl Pomeroy, 703-243-8256
	2-dark	Scott Chambers. 301-320-1689
13	10-2	Trip Reid, 202-363-8554
	2-dark	David Narrow and Carol Schecter, 301-897-5619
20	10-2	
	2-dark	Mary Ann Stein, 202-783-8488
27	10-2	John and Jyl Pomeroy, 703-243-8256
	2-dark	Brandt/Sarbib Family, 202-363-4289
<b>November</b>		
3	10-2	Par Barry, 301-229-5351
	2-dark	
10	10-2	Sylvija Strikis and Miguel Browne, 703-748-4671
	2-dark	
17	10-2	
	2-dark	
23	10-2	
	2-dark	

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

**To volunteer, contact Maxine Hattery at 202-362-1361 or [hattery@aol.com](mailto:hattery@aol.com)**

**Large Parties**

Alison Levine and Bob Palermo are hosting a 4th Grade Class Campout for 30 students from noon Thursday, Oct. 4 to 11 a.m. Friday, Oct 5.

Joe Hage reports that “thirty kids are coming down from the Waldorf school for a field trip” on Friday, October 12.

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: [johnnoble@comcast.net](mailto:johnnoble@comcast.net), phone: 301-448-8562



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

FIRST CLASS MAIL

### Sycamore Events

October Meeting — Wednesday, October 10, 8 p.m. At the Island

November Meeting — Wednesday, November 14, 8 p.m. Site tbd.

Fall Workfest — Sunday, November 18, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

N.B. General meetings are held at 8 p.m. on the second Wednesday of the month.



Big Foot Was Here! Photo by Marcia Loeb