



The Sycamore Islander

February 2008

Volume 87 No 2

President's Letter, February 2007

We were one person short of a quorum for the January meeting. This may have been a timing problem. The January meeting was very early and the paper copies of the *Islander* did not arrive until the day after. The January meeting was held at the Irish Channel Restaurant and Pub, and we did have a good time. Our thanks to Nell Hennessy and Frank Daspit for hosting the meeting and providing the Guinness and other good things.

We are making progress on finalizing the construction contract and getting the permits. Hopefully, we will have more information on the building permit at the February meeting.

You should have received your dues statement by now. If you haven't received one, you need to contact the Club. Also, if you are receiving electronic copies of the *Islander* and want to continue to receive a paper copy, you need to let the Club know by replying to the email notifying you that the current edition of the *Islander* is available for viewing.

The February meeting will be held at the home of John and Judy Lentz on **February 13th at 8:00 P.M.** Their address is 5424 Mohican Road, Bethesda, MD 20816. Mohican Road intersects with MacArthur Blvd west of the parking lot across from the Sycamore Store. Check Google or Mapquest for better directions. Their telephone number is 301-229-4968 in case you get lost and, unlike me, are willing to ask for directions.

See you at the February meeting (Wednesday, February 13).

Jeff Komarow

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, Amanda Cannell, 5901 Cranston Rd, Bethesda, Md. 20816. 301-229-8658. Text and graphics may be sent as email attachments to acannell@norwoodschool.org.

The deadline for the March issue is Wednesday, February 27th.

Treasurer's Report for 2007

As we move into 2008 I am pleased to report that the Club is still solvent! Sycamore's regular operating budget for calendar year 2007 was \$73,668. As of the end of December, we had spent \$ 71,943, just a little less than the allocated budget. Some expenditures have been lower than budgeted, including capital improvements and grounds. Islander spending is on track, so is our (modest) entertainment spending. Taking into account the completion of some long-overdue painting, our spending on repairs and supplies have come in a little over projections. However, utilities and insurance charges have been costly. So are taxes, especially county property taxes, which have increased steadily in the last years with the rise in area property values. Hopefully we can expect some relief from this trend as property values flatten out.

Moreover, spending includes two exceptional items. We do not include construction project spending in the regular budget, and in 2007 we spent almost \$2,000 for architectural plans. Next year any such spending will be drawn from the construction project budget, which will be calculated separately from the operating budget. We also made a second round of T-shirt purchases (\$899), which will come back to the Club as members buy them. Allowing for these exceptional items, we would have been about \$4,000 under budget.

Turning to the income side, the Treasurer's account received transfers from the Financial Secretary of \$68,000. This is about in line with the level of income received from dues and charges (in 2006 these ended up at about \$67,000), but is considerably below our approved budget. However, we do earn interest and dividends on our working capital and reserve, and these came to a substantial \$5,091. Our total carryover into 2008 is therefore \$73,640, which is very close to the level we carried over into 2007. This means that, allowing for a normal operating carryover, our reserve stands at about \$63,000. Of this, up to \$30,000 will be allocated to fund the construction project expenses. Any reserve drawdown will of course have to be made up in the next few years, as our reserve is our first line of defense against unexpected flooding or other damage.

Alan Gelb

What is happening at the Sycamore store ?



Recently, while driving past the Sycamore Store I noticed several contractor vehicles parked there. Aha, after all this time since acquiring the property Dean Brenneman and Peter Pagenstecher must have finally worked through their travails with the county. We at Sycamore Island have more than a passing notion of the difficulties associated with zoning and building permits. For those of us who look forward to the restoration of the “store,” this achievement is good news.

I decided to go inside and ask about progress, thinking this would be interesting information to the club members. The lead carpenter was courteous but quickly informed me that they could not entertain visitors in the construction area. He was not aware of the project’s overall schedule but he offered his card so I could contact the office.

Dean Brenneman, who once briefed the club about the restoration project at one of our monthly meetings, was able to fill me in on the current status. “As is often the case with historic structures, we have found many, many structural problems with the building and are now undertaking the necessary structural repairs. We have had to strip the entire interior down to the studs, but in the long run we view this as an opportunity to do the best possible work. For example, we will entirely re-wire, re-plumb and re-insulate the building.” He speculated that restoration and renovation will progress over the course of this year, with occupancy expected sometime this fall. He also noted enthusiastically that they look forward to showing off our new offices when they are done.

David Winer

From Holly Syrrakos, Island Archivist

76 Years Ago (and longer)

From the January 1932 Sycamore Islander

The *Islander* took one of its unexplained breaks in publication in February and March of 1932, but there are enough stories in the January and April editions to spread over February and March of '08.

The editor of the *Islander*, Roger Gessford, remembers an adventure 10 years earlier on the Island with one of his stories:

“One Wednesday in August of 1922 the late Kenneth Boyd, then Captain of the Island, put into effect an idea which had been on his mind for some time, i.e., the building of a raft up-river from slabs of lumber at an abandoned sawmill opposite Plummer Island and the floating of the raft down through the rapids to Sycamore. Francis and Cole, then the Island newlyweds, and I were on the Island that afternoon and Kenneth inveigled us into paddling up the canal to Plummer Island ‘just to look at the lumber.’ Kenneth piled plenty of rope, nails and hammers into the canoe and we might have known that he would talk us into building a raft once we got to the sawmill. He did. But we’d had a pleasant paddle up the canal, which was the full of water, and it was only about three o’clock and everyone ought to figure on building a raft at least once in a lifetime, so we set to. It might be noted that Kenneth argued that the lumber in the raft would be great for tent flooring, which it would have been if [it] had not been warped all out of whack.”

“At any rate we build a raft as long as the ferry and half as wide which sank flush with the water when two people stood upon it. The time was then six-thirty [remember, this was August] and the raft drew so much water that we had no expectation of getting it down over the rocks to Sycamore so the Coles went in the canoe to take Kenneth and me off the raft when it got stuck on the rocks.”

“I remember that Kenneth and I were both pretty tired and hot and after we had headed the raft out into the current from its birthplace, that little island off the Virginia shore opposite Plummer, we both stuck our faces in the water for a drink. And the raft almost left us right then when it hit a rock and very nearly knocked us overboard.”

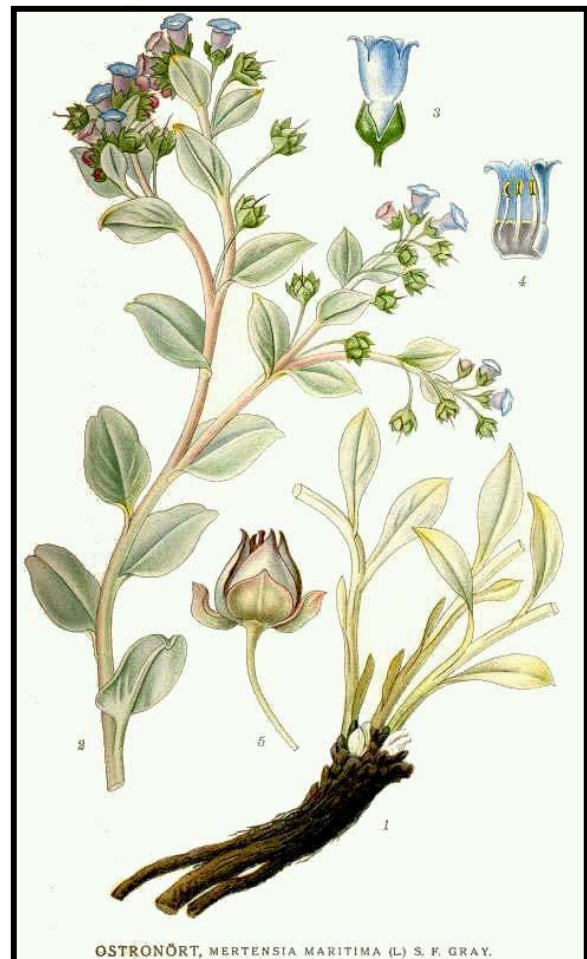


“Somehow or other we had put the boards with the greatest warp and curve in them on the bottom of the raft and when the thing bammed against a rock it merely rode up and over the rock, just like a sled. After this had happened once or twice we agreed that there was nothing to it and that rafting through the rapids was the only way to do it—a deck to slosh around on—great stuff! We signaled the Coles to paddle ahead and get the steak on the stove because we were sitting pretty, but just after they’d gone and we’d gotten into the current above Cabin John Rifle the raft broke into two pieces and the two pieces began to disintegrate and we had a few hectic minutes keeping it together while we got through the riffle and until we could climb off and tie it together again. A few loose pieces bobbed along behind us the rest of the way down to White Rock, but Ed Wilcox met us there—the first pair to come through the rapids on a raft unless that’s something else that George Washington or Dell and Carl once did down at Washington, D.C.”

Flower Walk on Sycamore Island

April 20th, 10-2

Come discover the flowers of Sycamore Island with R.G. Steinman and John Parrish.
Bring a bag lunch.
Rain or Shine
More details will be in the next newsletter.



Mertensia maritima

February Is Spring in Washington

The mathematicians reckon that spring begins March 21, but the mathematicians are a month behind the season the year around. For those who observe the first signs, spring comes earlier than others know. Before the end of January, while the scenery remains desolate and the sun leaves no warmth, the first sparks are already being enkindled in the breasts of songbirds.

It's time. It's time to pick up Louis J. Halle's Spring in Washington and reread it. Halle notes subtle changes in the scene, and cues us on the effusion of birdsong we might miss or take for granted; he makes us see that all around us becomes new again--and brilliant. Quite as fine as Halle's words are the scratchboard illustrations by Francis Lee Jaques; in fact, when you handle the book for the first time, it is the drawings that draw you in.

Spring in Washington was published in 1947 and represents a journal that the author kept some years earlier. We learn about the "death of a leader," for example, on Saturday, April 14, [1945] but Franklin Delano Roosevelt is not mentioned by name. Halle keeps his eye on nature as he writes, "The event touches us all, for the moment, with the sense of all things passing." Then he and his friend Og hop on their bicycles "upon the trail of another funeral." This time he is talking about changes in the weather and the change of season, illustrating "that winter, utterly routed in the morning, was making its last unavailing and convulsive effort to return."

But I digress. Halle's fault. He is full of digressions. One of the most charming is an essay on bicycling, "the nearest approximation I know," he tells us, "to the flight of birds If you want to test the force and direction of the wind, there is not a better way than to circle, banked inward, like a turkey vulture." Perhaps his most important digression--from journaling--is key to his writing:

The appreciation of birds, indeed the appreciation of all the phenomena of spring, cannot be dissociated from the accumulations of memory. The appearance of a familiar bird immediately awakens a train of forgotten associations, and this makes each spring transcend its predecessor. The interest accumulates and is compounded. The first yellow-throated warbler next year will be the more meaningful to me as it brings back that moment in the woods opposite Dyke [Marsh].

And he goes on to point out that the "great function of nature literature and art is to teach us how to see these things, for the beauty of an object, a song, or a dance can never be altogether intrinsic, independent of old associations and acquired understanding."

In support of this assertion, Halle's account of a drake American merganser swimming "in tight circles about the dead body of a female floating on its side so that only an upturned section of its under parts showed above water," and the female returning miraculously to life has illuminated the sighting of any merganser I have seen since!

Jane Winer



In Touch with Joe....Notes from his Island Journal

Monday -- January 14, 2007

I walked down to the foot of the island (doing my daily rounds) just in time to see my flock of geese returning to their evening roosting spot. I'm not crazy about the geese, but to watch them glide onto the water in perfect formation was inspiring. I could hear the wind passing through their wings as they bowed them toward the water to land.

I just watched an amazing program on PBS, *Swim For The River*, a documentary about the Hudson river and pollution. I recommend it for anyone who cares about rivers. I learned that we still have a lot of work to do to enforce the Clean Water Act. Support RIVERKEEPERS!

Friday -- January 25, 2007

The river is green now and I can see the bottom once again. The last two relief caretakers have asked if we had an axe for splitting wood, so this week I made sure I was prepared. I bought a new maul and a wedge to go with it. Now, if someone wants to split wood, we have the tools.

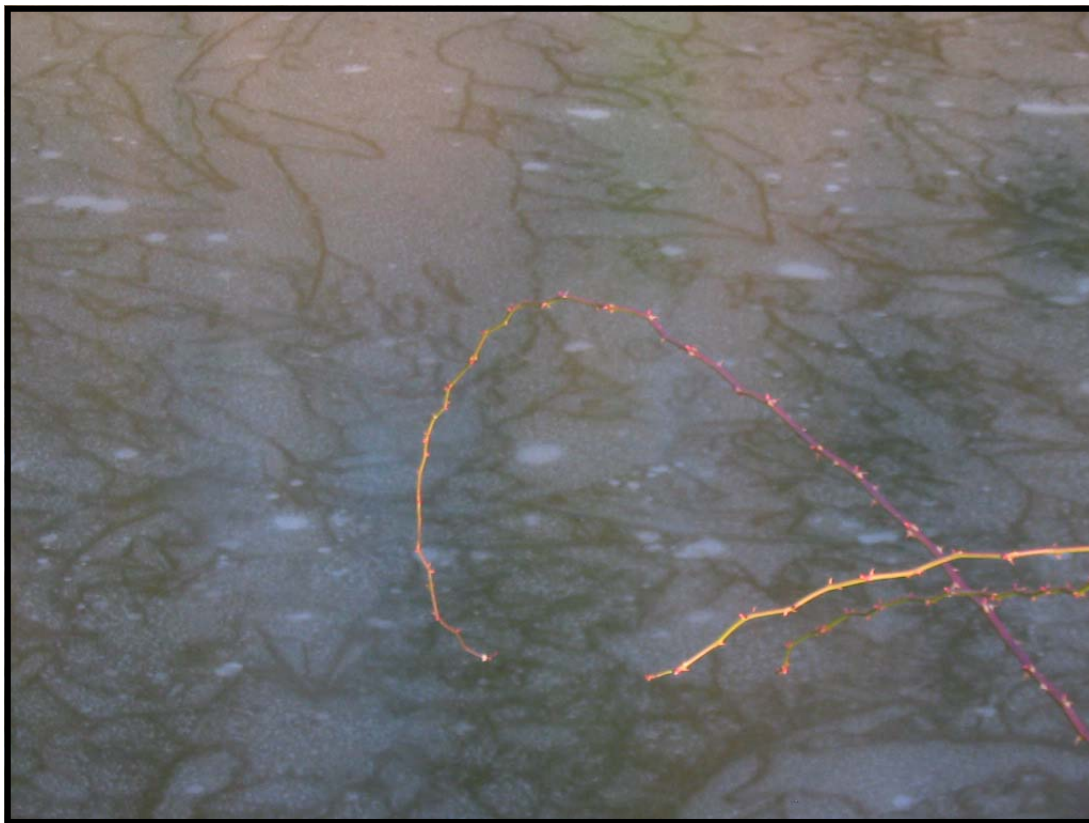


Photo by Joe Hage

Sunday -- January 27, 2007

My water is running again. Last weekend my pipes froze and I spent all day Sunday trying to get them thawed out. I forgot how important it is to block off the crawl space under my bathroom. I piled up some tarps along the up-river side of the clubhouse to keep the wind from pushing all that cold air into my apartment. Once I did that it was a matter of using the blow dryer to get things flowing again.

Great news! I saw two eagles in the nest yesterday. I'm so relieved. I was afraid we might not have a breeding pair this year after the reports last autumn of a dead or injured eagle near Turkey Run. Happily, we have two birds, but one of them is a newcomer.

I know it's not the same bird as last year because this bird still has some of its immature plumage. Now the question is whether the new bird is a male or a female. It would be interesting if it were the female and not the male that was able to stay in her territory and preserve her nest sight. Apparently there are plenty of male suitors to fill the void of one lost adult. Another birding high-light this month, besides all the Buffle Heads, Scaups and Common Mergansers, was spotting five Hooded Mergansers near the shore of the Island. These creatures are so beautiful and delicate-looking that they seem better suited for a china shop window, but here they are in this hostile environment of freezing water and strong winds.

I should knock on wood as I say this, but so far this year I don't have any ground hogs digging under the house, nor do I have any mice to evict from behind the dishwasher.

I'm certified! I just received my Certificate of Accomplishment from the Department of Agriculture for successfully completing the program of Natural History Field Studies.

I just watched another group of Hooded Mergansers as they fed upriver. They are diving ducks, so one minute you see them, and then the next they've all disappeared under the surface of the river. Coincidentally I just found out about a film that was part of last years Banff Mountain Film Festival. Its called "Ride of the Merganser", a short film about this hearty bird that is found only in North America. I ordered a copy of the DVD, maybe I can show it at the next club meeting.



Monday -- January 28, 2007

It's been like a naturalist's paradise around here lately. Eagles across the river, Hooded Mergansers by the ferry at daybreak, song birds at the feeder all day, and at dusk, the skies fill with a variety of water fowl going who-knows-where. I was hiking along the Virginia shore directly across from the Island yesterday and it was clear that the beavers had been very busy there recently. I counted six big trees that had been freshly cut, as well as a few smaller ones. The beaver have been busy on this side of the river as well, demonstrating their tree-cutting skills down by the pumping station. Thankfully, here on the Island, we've been spared the wrath of their monster teeth, at least for now. Maybe the chicken wire really does help.

I cleaned all the gutters and I spent some time splitting logs with our new wedge and maul. That silver maple logs split nicely without too much effort. I don't understand why more people don't have parties here in the winter. Once you get a fire in that wood stove its really quite warm in the clubhouse.

Wednesday -- January 30, 2007

I never got around to telling the story of how I hiked home to Sycamore Island from Whites Ferry, the "ferry to ferry hike". It was January 19 and I had spent the day looking for birds-of-prey in the rolling hills of Loudon County with my sister and brother-in-law. It was a planned field trip led by a naturalist/falconer. We saw several species of raptors that day including Bald Eagles, Red-Tailed Hawks, Red-Shouldered Hawks, Northern Harriers and a Barred Owl, but the peak of the day came just before sunset when we parked on the edge of a field to watch the Short-Eared Owls. These owls do not nest in this area and are rare visitors from Canada. It was the first time many of us had ever seen this species and it was funny to listen to the oow's and ahh's as four owls dipped and darted around us while we stood in the fading light. Finally it was too dark to see anything, the field trip ended and my adventure on the tow-path was about to begin.

Since we were already in Leesburg I asked my sister to drop me at White's Ferry so I could walk home. I guess I was looking for a low-cost adventure (can't afford plane tickets) and walking twenty-nine miles in the cold seemed like the perfect challenge.

I was pumped when the gruff ferry operators gave me the go-ahead to jump on board, and I rushed on in between all the cars. I wasn't so happy when I realized at that moment that I'd forgotten to bring the fuel for my stove (being without a stove in cold weather sometimes means no water). I figured I would be able to start a fire, so I went back to enjoying the ferry ride. Guess how much it costs to be a pedestrian on Whites Ferry, fifty cents. Not bad, but I doubt I could get away with charging that much here.

My plan was to hike the ten miles to Horse Pen Branch campsite that night and get there by about 10:00 pm. I would then walk the other 19 miles on Sunday. After walking for a while I came to the first hiker/biker campsite and to my surprise it wasn't deserted. There were two dads there with half a dozen teenagers sitting around a roaring fire. I walked over to say hi and to congratulate them for being out there on such a cold night. They invited me to warm myself by the fire, but I decided to press on, 4.4 miles to go. I probably should have stayed and cooked some hot food on their fire, oh well. I ate a cold meal before going to bed that night

get a fire started the next morning and I broke camp while I munched on a chunk of cheese, no coffee. After two miles I came to Seneca creek. I pumped my drinking water from the creek into my camelback, but the water soon turned to slush. I stuffed the water bladder into my coat, hoping to keep it from freezing completely. I found a bunch of newspapers near the parking lot there and I was able to start a fire in one of the grills at the Seneca picnic ground. The wind was gusting pretty strong at this point with white caps on the water, but I managed to heat up enough water for my oatmeal and a much deserved cup of coffee. Now it was just a matter of endurance, five hours of hiking and then I could relax and have a beer. I left Seneca at 10:30. I passed Pennyfield, Swain's Lock, Great Falls, Angler's Inn, Carderock, Seven Locks, Cabin John, and finally I reached Sycamore Island at 3:45pm

Joe Hage



Photos by Joe Hage

January Meeting Notes

There are no notes from the January meeting because there was not a quorum.

Saturday Relief Caretakers February-March
Please sign up as soon as possible

| Date | Hours | Caretaker | Phone Number |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------------------------|---|
| February | | | |
| 2 | 11-dark | Richard & Carol Schleicher | 301-229-2385 |
| 9 | 11-dark | Paul Hagen & Christine Jahnke | 202-966-9764 phagen@bdlaw.com |
| 16 | 11-dark | John & Judy Lentz | 31-229-4968 |
| 23 | 11-dark | Richard & Penelope Doolittle | 301-229-5632 |
| March | | | |
| 1 | 10-2 | | |
| | 2-dark | Barbara Fisher | 703-966-4373 (cell) |
| 8 | 10-2 | | |
| | 2-dark | | |
| 15 | 10-2 | | |
| | 2-dark | | |
| 22 | 10-2 | | |
| | 2-dark | | |
| 29 | 10-2 | Lucky & Bill Marmon | 301-654-7893 (Phone) 301-503-6105 (cell) |

****** Caretaker Volunteers ******
To volunteer, contact Maxine Hattery at 202-362-1361
or hattery@aol.com
Tell: 202-362-1361

Large Parties

Star Mitchell is having a large party on February 23rd.

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, phone: 301-448-8562



The Sycamore Islander

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<http://www.sycamoreisland.org>
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

February Meeting : Wednesday,
February 13th at 8:00 PM at the home
of John and Judy Lentz,
5424 Mohican Rd, Bethesda.

March Meeting : Wednesday,
March 12th at 8:00 PM. Site TBD

Flower Walk: April 20th, 10-2
Sycamore Island.



Eagle nest on the Virginia shore
across from Sycamore Island
Photo by Joe Hage