

Environmental Committee Report, Annual Meeting, 26 March 2022

Despite the pandemic, it has been a busy year in the C&O Canal National Historical Park. Visitor numbers have hit record levels. Here are some of the highlights of general interest in the environmental realm from the past year.

1. Washington Canoe Club. The Park and the Canoe Club are preparing flood mitigation and rehabilitation conceptual design plans for the historic structure. I attended an initial meeting on January 31, under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Park staff informs me there will be a parallel exercise under the National Environmental Policy Act, although not necessarily an environmental assessment. We do not plan to comment on this set of NHPA documents. As most of you know, the Association strongly opposed early plans for a new boathouse in Georgetown, even joining a lawsuit against the Park. In short, those earlier plans were for a (1) new, (2) overly large structure in the (3) wrong place and with (4) access limited to Georgetown University staff and students. The plan for the WCC would be limited to its members, but this is to be the rehabilitation (at the club's expense) of an existing historic building, on the same site and in the same footprint (though raised somewhat to get it out of the flood plain). Different situation.
2. Fletcher's Cove. Dr. Catherine Ball, a member of Chapter 3 of the Colonial Dames of America, which conserves and interprets the Abner Cloud House, sent a report to the Park on her research in the Fletcher's Cove area. She found major errors in the waysides by the House and near the site of the mill(s) in the area. Her research shows that, contrary to the waysides, Abner Cloud was probably not a miller, and that his wife certainly did not operate a mill until 1852; Susanna Smallwood Cloud died on 6 January 1817. Dr. Ball suggests that the text for the wayside by the house be corrected and that the one below the vehicle viaduct stress instead the history of the Potomac Company's skirting canal and locks.
3. American Legion Bridge. Maryland and Virginia are planning to widen the Beltway, including the bridge across the Potomac. Their plans include a "shared bicycle and pedestrian pathway" on the bridge. I reasoned that a sidewalk must connect to something at each end and asked the Maryland State Highway Administration where it would connect, especially to the C&O Canal NHP. The answer seems to be that it would connect to the pathway along MacArthur Boulevard, not directly to the towpath. In Virginia, the bike/pedestrian trail would parallel the expanded Beltway, behind the sound barrier, past the GW Parkway, Old Georgetown Pike, and Old Dominion Road, connecting with Fairfax County parks. Ideally, we would like to see the highway designers to follow the model of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge replacement, to include a little in the billion dollar project to improve the Potomac Heritage Trail and the national parks at either end. The footprint of the proposed bridge goes over Plummers Island in the C&O Canal NHP, home of the Washington Biologists Field Club, which opposes this configuration.

4. Potomac River Tunnel. Most of Northwest DC has a combined sewer system, that is, the sanitary sewage from homes and businesses flow to the Bleu Plains treatment plant through the same sewer lines as the stormwater runoff from the streets. This works fine in dry weather, but when it rains the pipes are overwhelmed and raw sewage overflow is dumped into the Potomac, including in C&O Canal parkland. This is not a 100 year flood event — it happens an average of 74 times a year. DC Water is digging a huge tunnel under the river to hold the overflow until it can be processed. One of the key nodes in the system is in the park, between the Alexandria Aqueduct and the Washington Canoe Club. DC Water promises to keep the Capital Crescent Trail open during construction. It will leave a few visible marks, including 8-foot high ventilation shafts in the embankment for the canal.
5. Cumberland Sewage Tank Stalled. Cumberland has a system underway similar to DC's — same problem, same general solution, smaller scale. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in January withdrew its support for a plan to channel combined sewage to a holding tank at the Cumberland Waste Water facility (near the Evitts Creek Aqueduct). The Corps cited a threat to the levee near Canal Place, an integral part of the city's flood control system. The city's engineer stated that the integrity of the levee had already been considered and that this could delay the startup of the system for a year. The city and its contractor have accommodated the Park's concerns, modifying their design and keeping the towpath open during construction.
6. Infrastructure projects. More generally, DOI Secretary Haaland and NPS Director Sams touted the Bilateral Infrastructure Law, which, among other things, "provides for a five-year reauthorization of the Federal Lands Transportation Program, which will help in investing and upgrading NPS roads, bridges, trails and transit systems." (DOI Press Release, 16 December 2021). The Park staff say they have a list of projects (not specified) which meet those criteria. Secretary Haaland and Congressman David Trone visited the park headquarters last November, met with park staff, and rode the launch across the restored Conococheague Aqueduct.
7. Deer Management. This winter was the fourth season of culling the white-tailed deer population at Great Falls. The sharpshooters from the US Department of Agriculture removed 52 deer. The venison was donated to a local food bank.
8. Historic culvert #2. Lastly, this is where the C&O Canal started, where President John Quincy Adams turned the first spade on July 4, 1828. This is arguably the oldest canal structure in the park. It has been severely damaged by the runoff from the Intelligence Community Campus at the top of the hill. We and the Brookmont community neighbors have focused Congressional attention on this problem. We hope the Park will respond.