

THE CONDUIT

NEWSLETTER OF THE PALISADES COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

SEVEN WONDERS OF THE PALISADES

BY JOEL ACHENBACH IN CONSULTATION WITH LYNDA COKINOS, LAURI MENDITTO, ELIZA MCGRAW, MARY STAPP AND DOUG DUPIN

PALISADES: What's in a name?

The Palisades, also known simply as “Palisades” without the arguably pompous and precious “The,” is a neighborhood in the far northwest portion of the District of Columbia with the paradoxical feature of being both historic and The Land That Time Forgot. History here is largely below the surface. It is sometimes literally buried. More often it is written into the landscape as a palimpsest (see The Greenway, below). There are few historic markers. There are no statues. The relatively large number of newly transplanted residents may not immediately grasp the heavy imprint of the past on their quiet leafy neighborhood.

To rectify this, a few of us with tenure here produced a list of the Seven Wonders of the Palisades, which somehow turned out to be the Eleven Wonders. We have focused largely on sites reflecting the history of the neighborhood, but have added some contemporary elements as well. We reserve the right to revise, expand or retract everything we say here and even, if necessary, deny any involvement.

A note on the definition of a “Wonder”: It cannot be a person, however wonderful many of our fellow inhabitants may be (but you surely know that Bill “Take Me Home, Country Roads” Danoff lives here). It cannot be a place of business, which sadly forces us to exclude such treasures as Kotobuki and Addy Bassin’s. It cannot be a transient



PHOTO PROVIDED BY JOEL ACHENBACH

event such as the world-famous Fourth of July Parade.

What is required of a Wonder is that it have a physical presence, one accessible to all, identifiable in some fashion and presenting the observer with something that is uncommon, quirky and/or redolent of the efforts of those who came before us.

The most obvious thing fitting this description is something we have decided to leave off the list: the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal. It is truly Wonder-ish, an engineering triumph, dug with muscle power, its stones carrying messages from laborers, some of them Irish, some of them enslaved. But the canal, which extends for 184.5 miles from Georgetown to Cumberland, Maryland, cannot be claimed by this neighborhood as a proprietary wonder. Moreover, it does not need the amplification of this esteemed publication given the trail’s distinction as a national historical park. For similar reasons we are not including the

splendid Palisades Recreation Center.

A note on the definition of “The Palisades”: Some silly maps define the neighborhood as nothing more than the 20016 zip code, which we should all agree is heinously narrow-minded and which, among other things, would make the Palisades Public Library not technically in The Palisades. We would certainly include everything between Foxhall Road and the River within the District of Columbia boundaries at minimum—which, if you know your history, includes the entirety of the Potomac up to the mean high-water mark on the Virginia bank. The Greater Palisades Cultural Region, a thing we just invented, extends a bit farther up MacArthur into what is technically Bethesda, incorporating the woods behind the water treatment plant and the Dalecarlia Tunnel. (Spring Valley, however, is not part of The Palisades, partly for cultural and socio-economic reasons, but also because you can’t be both a valley and a palisade. You have to choose.)

Herewith, the Seven—make that the Eleven—Wonders of the Palisades:

THE OLD TROLLEY LINE

The trolley line, also known as the Greenway, is an imprint of a past world—unpaved, grassy, occasionally muddy but in some stretches covered in wood chips. It is the path of the Capitol Transit #20 trolley, which once ran from Union Station to Cabin John. It is a dog walker’s best friend. It is also an

essential passage, via a bridge, over too-busy Arizona Avenue, which bisects The Palisades. In some places the Greenway is a back yard for private homes, and in other places a front yard. It is home to the Pig Roast, an annual gathering of Greenway-adjacent residents and their friends—a wonder of community-making that any other neighborhood would greatly envy. We take no formal position on the contentious plan to pave the Greenway, other than to say that this might require its removal, on aesthetic grounds, from the list of Wonders.

THE GLASS FOREST

The handiwork of local artist James McMahon and other contributors, the Glass Forest is in a patch of woods just off the Greenway and a short walk from the Palisades Recreation Center. It's world-famous! It shows up on Google Maps! Tourists from abroad are known to visit it. *Washington Post* columnist John Kelly described the scene in a



ABOVE: THE OLD TROLLEY LINE BEHIND SHERIER OFF GALENA. BELOW, LEFT: THE GLASS FOREST. BELOW, RIGHT: BATTERY MARTIN SCOTT. ALL PHOTOS PROVIDED BY JOEL ACHENBACH

2018 column: "Hanging from horizontal fence posts are large wind chimes made from lengths of bamboo, bicycle frames, spatulas, plumbing pipes, rake tines, the heads of golf clubs and other bits of castoff metal. A tumbled tree trunk has been carved like a totem pole. There's an interesting chunk of wood suspended in a tripod made of bamboo stalks. The wood is shaped like a whale vertebra." The artwork shows signs of wear and tear, as well as the effects of gravity, but it retains a great deal of luster and, like many people in The Palisades, is aging in place nicely.

<https://vimeo.com/128552710>

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/into-the-woods-a-clearing-in-the-palisades-is-home-to-a-curious-art-installation/2018/10/13/d44ee8be-ccf1-11e8-a3e6-44daa3d35ede_story.html

BATTERY KEMBLE

Battery Kemble Park is a Civil War military site, serving today as a fabulous winter sledding hill and a year-round dog park. A sign announces that dogs must be kept on leash, which is a fine example of local humor. The park

features a creek, Maddox Branch, named after the antebellum farmer who owned the land. When the war came, so did the US Army, and it became a "contraband camp" for self-liberating people formerly enslaved in southern states.

The entire Palisades neighborhood served as the front line of the Union during the war; Battery Kemble was part of a ring of military sites protecting the nation's capital from rebel incursions. Earthworks can still be seen along Potomac Avenue directly above Chain Bridge. Old maps show this as the site of Battery Martin Scott. Sibley Hospital sits on the high ground of Battery Vermont.





<https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3851s.la002308/?r=0.119,0.341,0.379,0.159,0>

THE BATTERY KEMBLE CHESTNUT OAK

Arguably underwhelming as a Wonder, on account of being just a tree, the Battery Kemble Chestnut Oak makes the list because it is a champion tree. It's the largest chestnut oak in the nation. You can find it by driving uphill on Chain Bridge Road until you see it on the right, close to the road, with multiple trunks contributing to its extraordinary girth. Its circumference was measured in 2023 at 290 inches, according to Casey Trees, making it not only the largest of its species in the United States but the largest tree of any species in the District.

<https://caseytrees.org/2023/08/and-the-largest-tree-is/>

THE UNION BURIAL SOCIETY OF GEORGETOWN CEMETERY

During the Civil War a Black community called St. Phillips Hill developed around Battery Kemble. In 1865 Black children began attending a school on Chain Bridge Road, replaced in 1923 by a structure that

still stands. According to the DC Preservation League, "In 1940, the 17-year-old building was closed, and its students transferred in mid-year to the Phillips-Wormley School in Georgetown, following a petition that had circulated among the white residents of the suburbanizing area, which cited dubious claims of declining enrollment and poor conditions." There is a small graveyard down the road, a short distance from MacArthur, called the Union Burial Society of Georgetown Cemetery, founded in 1868. The last burial in the cemetery was in 1966.

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/st-phillips-hill-the-palisades-nw-dc.htm>

<https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/>

THE POTOMAC GORGE

Over the course of two million years the Potomac River has cut a gorge running for fifteen miles, from Roosevelt Island to Great Falls, but the term "Potomac Gorge" has never quite caught on. People just don't see it. They think a gorge has to be more canyon-like. More chasmic. As the *Post* noted in an insightful, brilliantly crafted 2004 story, "It appears to be that very rare thing in nature: a secret urban gorge." (And then, finally, someone put up a "Potomac Gorge" sign on Chain Bridge.)

One of the best places to see this geological wonder is The Palisades, the very name of which tells you that



it's gorge-adjacent. Search "Potomac Lookout" in MapQuest and the site may point you to a beguiling spot on the bluff at Potomac Avenue (known to some of us as "Pride Rock") between Cathedral and Macomb. The adventurous explorer can ramble into the heart of the gorge to what is known informally as the Belvedere, the crumbling concrete platform that juts into the river at the foot of Little Falls. Officially it is the Washington Aqueduct Emergency Pumping Station, according to Atlas Obscura. The Belvedere can be accessed from the towpath (itself nicely reached via the old railroad bridge at Arizona Avenue), and via a typically damp spillway. The spillway was blasted out of the river bedrock in the 1960s as part of an eventually abandoned plan to create a backup source of water for an electrical generation plant. The concrete platform has no function, but it is a great spot for a picnicking and fishing and for just admiring the gorgeousness of the gorge.

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BATTERY KEMBLE CHESTNUT OAK; VIEW OF THE POTOMAC GORGE FROM PRIDE ROCK; VIEW OF THE POTOMAC GORGE FROM THE BELVEDERE; THE UNION BURIAL SOCIETY OF GEORGETOWN CEMETERY



Another way to reach the river gorge on foot from MacArthur is via a woody trail along Maddox Branch between MacArthur and Canal Road (the woods are worth a visit just to admire the old-growth trees). Keep going downstream and you will find a secret passage to Fletcher's Boathouse, a culvert beneath Canal Road. Duck your head, mind the gap and you'll go from the bottom of a mossy creek to a gravel road yards from the river. You have to climb over a small fence but it's really easy.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2004/05/09/the-river-view-frequently-gorges/87691b7e-6057-40a8-a6f9-77029a02d2f2/>

<https://www.mapquest.com/us/district-of-columbia/potomac-lookout-434673249>

FLETCHER'S BOATHOUSE

There are multiple wonders at Fletcher's Boathouse, now officially known as Fletcher's Cove. You can rent a rowboat. You can rent a bike and take a ride on the Capital Crescent Trail. You can have a picnic, taking advantage of one of the grills or fire circles. You can visit the historic Abner Cloud House, which dates to 1801. You can wander along the riverbank on trails favored by anglers.

The river here is a spawning ground for shad, an anadromous species that lives in the open sea but comes into the Chesapeake and up the Tidewater rivers every spring. Archeologists have found evidence of human habitation here, and of fishing, for several thousand years. Captain John Smith journeyed to Little Falls of the Potomac in 1608 and reported that the fish were "lying so thicke [sic] with their heads above the water, as for want of nets (our barge driving amongst them) we attempted to catch them with a frying pan." The boathouse was operated for nearly a century and a half by the Fletcher family.

<https://apps.jefpat.maryland.gov/archeobotany/Landscape.aspx>

THE CONDUIT AND RELATED WATERWORKS

No, we are not talking about the excellent neighborhood publication of that name, but about the actual thing beneath MacArthur Boulevard, formerly known as Conduit Road. The conduit predates the Civil War. It brings water from an intake in the river right above Great Falls and carries it to reservoirs in the city, including in our neighborhood. The presence of the conduit beneath the median of MacArthur can be intuited by the curious elevation of the trees planted there. Note how flat the boulevard is: The conduit has a gentle grade over many miles, relying on gravity to do the heavy work of transporting water. There's actually a second conduit that is parallel to the original, having been added in 1923, the same year as the construction of the Dalecarlia Water Treatment Plant.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdkjwWG0c1c>

THE PALISADES HUB AT THE PALISADES COMMUNITY CHURCH

Put on your dancin' shoes! This venerable church has always had a Social Hall, but in the past half-decade, with the founding of the Palisades Hub, it has effloresced, meaning it often gets loud, with great musical acts like the Nighthawks, King Soul, the Messthetics, and Igor and the Red Elvises—plus

a Rocklands truck outside to provide victuals. There are also open mic nights, and a supper club where your neighbors feed you. Upstairs, the "Backstage" talks have featured George Pelecanos, Mayor Bowser, the Slickee Boys, Jon Carroll, Bill Kirchen and a conversation between Walter Egan (who wrote the song "Magnet and Steel") and our neighbor Chris Murray. The church was founded in 1923, when Cathedral Avenue was unpaved and called Jewett Street—according to research by Lynda Cokinos. The neighborhood was then known as Potomac Heights and still had working farms. A group of residents decided they needed to create a "community church" that soon incorporated eleven Christian denominations. "The only churches here were Our Lady of Victory and a small

BELOW, TOP: AD FOR THE HUB SUPPER CLUB; BOTTOM: ADS FOR MULTIPLE HUB EVENTS

HUB SUPPER CLUB
Joel Achenbach presents
The Seven Wonders of The Palisades
February 10th
7-9 pm
\$50
Chefs: James McMahon, Nick Keenan,
and John ReVeal
BYOB + AVAILABLE FOR DONATION

Collage of event posters for the Palisades Hub, including:
- Daryl Davis
- Rock-A-Sonics
- Nighthawks
- King Soul
- Igor and the Red Elvises
- Next Up
- GS
- 19
- Monday, September 18
- Friday, Dec
- February 24th
- Billy Price

outpost of St. Albans. Word spread, and a bunch of neighbors met every weekend in January. They decided to call their enterprise the “Potomac Heights Bible School” Lynda reports. Ground for the current sanctuary was broken in 1938. The DC government changed the name of the neighborhood to Palisades in 1950—just one of the many fun facts you can find on Lynda’s blog.

<https://cokinosgirl.blogspot.com/>

<https://www.palisadeshub.org/about>

THE SECRET STAIRS

The landscape of The Palisades is shaped by two erosional forces acting perpendicularly.

The Potomac over millions of years has eroded the bedrock (“Potomac Bluestone,” famed for its use in construction of federal buildings) to form the Potomac Gorge. The Virginia bank features a nearly vertical cliff, a true “palisade,” while our side of the river has multiple terraces, each marking what was once the riverbed. MacArthur Boulevard is built on a vestigial riverbed.

The other shaper of land are the creeks. They flow to the river. Some are buried beneath pavement and flow in pipes. You can hear the flow by putting your ear to a manhole on, say, Arizona Avenue (watch for cars!), the peculiar curvature of which as it nears Canal Road traces the creek beneath (David Branch, according to the 1891 Aqueduct map on display at the Palisades library).

The creeks gouged gullies and created the roller-coaster landscape east of the Boulevard. The developers of that area liked to create cul-de-sacs on fingers of high ground between the defiles. They wisely added stairs to enable pedestrians to walk between streets staggered at different elevations. See, for example, the stairs between Manning and Partridge Lane, Macomb and Palisade Lane, and Arizona Avenue and Arizona Terrace. These stairs are ideal for anyone wishing to get a quick workout. But first you may have to find them amid dense shrubbery.

<https://www.palisadeshistory.org/post/how-the-palisades-were-made>

THE DALECARLIA RESERVOIR CARETAKER'S DWELLING

This abandoned, dilapidated house, unquestionably haunted, is federal government property, having passed through the hands of different agencies, including the US Army Corps of Engineers, since it was built along with two other identical houses circa 1875–76 along the Washington Aqueduct, according to the *Washington Post*. It is supposedly scheduled for renovations, though we’ll believe it when we see it—because the house doesn’t look like it has had a coat of paint in about a century. Although the house is boarded up and the site is not open to the public, several investigatory visits for the purposes of this article did not incite a security response.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/pour-yourself-a-refreshing-glass-of-water-as-answer-man-spills-this-houses-history/2016/06/18/1295b6ca-3406-11e6-8ff7-7b6c1998b7a0_story.html

LEFT: THE SECRET STAIRS; RIGHT: THE DALECARLIA RESERVOIR CARETAKER'S DWELLING



FROM THE PCA PRESIDENT

HAPPY WINTER, PALISADES!

With word of the snow and cold coming, I was looking forward to being forced to slow down a bit, stay home, do a puzzle with the family, maybe some baking, a nice fire, popcorn and movies It all seemed so charming.

Then the snow came, the ice came, the cold came—and stayed. All my calming thoughts seemed to blow away in the frosty wind with my new anchor being a shovel. Or better put, a pickaxe! I heard more screams of “where is my charger” than “let’s do a puzzle” and my idea of a family movie night turned into my kids convincing me to watch

“Stranger Things” from the beginning with them. I’m likely on an island here, but that show is STRESSFUL to watch!

The snow response wasn’t exactly a home run for the city this time, but the ANC and PCA were hard at work advocating for sidewalk and street clearing as best we could, and we will be ready to jump to best prevent those service gaps should we have another storm this winter.

It was heartwarming to see people outside, helping neighbors clear their steps and cars, sharing soup and cakes, and showing neighborly kindness. Our

listserv served as a conduit for many entrepreneurial teens to flex their ice removal skills, and as our businesses opened, people filled the tables in escape from all that togetherness at home. In this, the storm was definitely a Palisades home run.

Wishing you all long moments of joy during this cold weather!



Jessica Davis



PCA-ORGANIZED OFFERINGS

DEAR NEIGHBORS,

PCA-organized events continued at full force this winter. On December 6, we put on the customary **Holiday Breakfast and Cookie Exchange**, this time at Key School. And Santa showed up! Our much-appreciated sponsor was **Carolyn Schafer of Long & Foster Real Estate**.

February 12 saw Lupo Verde invaded by our first, very lively and loud **Mardi Gras get-together** (cheerful music! excellent finger food! dreamy cocktails!!!). Some people came dressed up in Mardi Gras brightness and sparkliness. No children were allowed! This will no doubt turn into an annual event.

A big thank you goes out to our splendid sponsors **Rachel Levey, Compass**; **Dr. Stro Asburn, Eye Associate of Washington DC**; **Dr. Raha Yousefi, Washington Metro Dental**; and **Lupo Verde Osteria**.

The big affair we failed to manipulate was a **snowstorm** in early February with a lesser repeat a couple of weeks later. It was not easy to enjoy as the weather was cold cold cold. All the more reason to wait for spring (which is surprising us, so that you probably can't curl up with this issue of *The Conduit* in front of the fireplace ...). And we were also ever so surprised and touched to see Buddhist monks taking part in the Walk for Peace go right through the middle of our neighborhood!)

Bring out those bikinis!

—Maya Latynski, Editor



AN ODE TO SNOW

Kids with their sleds and toboggans have been walking down MacArthur past my building all day. They're talking, horsing around, there are some playful shoves and falls, and there's lots of laughter.

I took a walk myself not too long ago. A group of kids were inside and outside Mac Market hanging out, eating and drinking, their sleds leaning up against the windows. All having a blast. Brought back a lot of memories from my childhood in New England.

The best part was when a group of young girls caught up with me and one of them, very earnestly, asked me if I wanted to race her. I wished I had a better answer than, "I'm too old and I don't want to break a hip," and with that, they took off and raced down MacArthur on their own. God bless them and their spirit (and for thinking I was young enough to race)

—Susan Lund



After the weight of snowcrete, we were surprised not only by the sighting of the extremely rare Cedar Waxwing in the Palisades but of spring itself!

PHOTO BY ROBERT BURNETT



IN THE DEEP END: WORLD-CLASS MUSICIAN TOM GRAY

BY MICHAEL DOLAN



The Great Migration of the 1900s saw Black Americans leave the South to escape Jim Crow and find better jobs and living conditions. During the same era, Whites from Appalachia and related environs relocated to eastern seaboard cities like Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, DC.

As African Americans did, these new arrivals brought their culture, including “hillbilly” (now “country”) music played on acoustic guitars, banjos, mandolins, basses and fiddles. When technology changed, some hillbilly artists went electric; others stayed unamplified. A variant with vivid vocal harmonies, supersonic picking and a “high, lonesome sound” was introduced in the 1940s by hillbilly mandolinist Bill Monroe. A native of Kentucky, Monroe called his band the Blue Grass Boys after his home state’s legendary sod. In time the term “bluegrass” came to apply to the musical form they’d pioneered.

Washington and its suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s became a bluegrass hub. At the Shamrock on M Street NW in Georgetown and the Red Fox Inn in Bethesda, at joints clustered around the Greyhound bus terminal at 1100 New York Avenue NW and dotting Northern Virginia, fans reveled in the sounds that sounded like home.

Music historian Joe Sasfy recalls moving to DC in 1974 aiming to get a

handle on the capital’s musical life. For *Unicorn Times*, *Washington City Paper* and other outlets, Sasfy wrote up local musicians and country and bluegrass clubs and larger venues present and past, as well as chronicling the rise of DC-area country radio stations like WGAY and WARL and local TV showcases like Town and Country Time and Country Style, the latter hosted by Texas-born Jimmy Dean (yes, the sausage guy) and instrumental in making stars of Patsy Cline and Roy Clark. Subsequently, a rich bluegrass environment produced individual local stars like mandolinist Buzz Busby and eventually legendary bluegrass bands The Country Gentlemen and later The Seldom Scene.

“The Country Gentlemen and The Seldom Scene were the anchors of bluegrass in DC, playing fast and covering unexpected material like Bob Dylan and the Kingston Trio,” says Sasfy, now a resident of Asheville, North Carolina. “They were funny and clever.” This approach led to the Seldom Scene, which for a long time had a residency at the Birchmere in Alexandria. “For \$2 any Thursday night you could sit in the Birchmere and listen to the best bluegrass band in the world.”

Oh, and a lanky, taciturn fellow who’d done most of his growing up in the Palisades played bass in what are now considered classic lineups of both the Gentlemen and the Scene. He’s the last living member of either band’s primo rosters. His name is Tom Gray. He lives in Kensington, Maryland, and he’s still thumping.



Even if he weren’t a world-class musician, Tom Gray, 84, has a compelling story. He lived a boyhood fantasy of making maps—an intriguing day job for a musician called to pluck the rhythmic patterns that guide bandmates into, through and out of the tunes they play.

Tom and brothers Chet and Gordon were born in Chicago, Illinois, to Harold and Lida Yow Gray. The couple had moved from DC to the City of the Big Shoulders in 1938 when Harold’s employer, the National Highway Users Conference, sent him to Chicago to open a regional office. The family lived in a third-floor walkup on Montrose Avenue, two miles north of downtown and two blocks from Lake Michigan. Middle son Tom arrived February 1, 1941. He and big brother Chet sometimes earned pocket money unearthing worms in the household’s Victory Garden and hawking wrigglers to fishermen. Other times they did what boys do. Lida Gray was a relaxed maternal presence; when neighbors alerted her that young Tom was risking life and limb by climbing atop a billboard, she replied, “He’ll have to get himself back down.”

In 1948, Harold, 31, was summoned back to Washington. He’d grown up there and on The Wayside, the farm where he was born, a stretch of prairie outside the town of Nevada, Missouri, about 95 miles south of Kansas City (and still in the Gray family). He graduated from George Washington University. He and Lida met and wed in the capital in the 1930s; their first date was a paddle in a canoe down and up the Potomac River to hear the National Symphony Orchestra perform on a barge anchored at the Watergate steps. Harold knew his way around the City of the Big Egos. His father, an agricultural lobbyist, had helped found the American Farm Bureau.

The Grays rolled east and bought a house on Fulton Street NW where they lived the rest of their lives. Harold, a born communitarian, fell head over heels for his latest locale. An 1890s development proposed along the river had called itself “the Palisades of the Potomac.” That project cratered, leading the acreage athwart Conduit Road NW (later MacArthur Boulevard) from Foxhall Road to the city line to emerge as a jumble of developer-designated

subdivisions: Berkley, Foxhall Village, Potomac Heights, Dunbarton, Briarcliff, Kent and so on. Seeking a cohesive brand for his neighborhood, whose citizens' association he helped to grow and which he served as president, Harold campaigned successfully to relabel the entire vicinity "The Palisades." Even the Potomac Heights Community Church changed its name. In 1966 the PCA published Harold's *A Brief History of the Palisades, D.C.*, a concise chronicle of the neighborhood's evolution.

The Gray boys also took well to their new setting. Tom's favorite subject at school was geography; he loved to draw maps when he wasn't roaming local hills and dales. He had a favorite spot. "There was a little unnamed stream in a ravine in the woods between Fulton Street, where we lived, and Chain Bridge Road. As a child I walked down by that stream and built a shelter," he recalls of the hideaway he kept mostly secret. "Just me and my older brother Chester, who recently passed away at age 86," he says. Another sweet spot was a spillway down the bluff from the Dalecarlia Aqueduct grounds, onto which a daily chlorine-scented gush of runoff coursed.

"Two of my best friends growing up lived on the grounds at Dalecarlia," Tom says. "We'd play in that stream, build dams and wait. Once a day they'd release this big surge of water, just down the hill from Potomac Avenue, and it would wipe out our dams."

Chet, Tom and Gordon progressed through Key Elementary, Gordon Junior High and Western High; at Western, their mother worked as a secretary.

"The Palisades was a good place to grow up," Tom says. "I was proud of my dad's civic activities. He thrived working with groups of people. He would join a cause and soon would be elected its president. I once told him that if DC ever got a US senator, he'd be elected."

Besides his father, Tom particularly



remembers as influences Troop 61 Scoutmaster John Mack, Community Church pastor Rev. Nelson Pierce and church musical director Frances Walsh. The Grays spent summers at Calvert Beach on the Chesapeake Bay and making seasonal pilgrimages to The Wayside. Through his teens, Tom delivered the *Washington Post* and the *Evening Star*.

The Grays were a musical lot. All played ukelele. Lida and Harold enjoyed nights out at jazz clubs, and at family gatherings the clan sang—and still sings—folk and country songs. At the age of 10, Tom began taking accordion lessons and studying piano with an aunt of his dad's who lived in the Palisades. He played piano at Sunday school.

As an 8th grader at Gordon Junior High, Tom, 14, discovered bluegrass, then still called "hillbilly." He took up guitar, as did Chet and Gordon, and mandolin,

finally settling on bass fiddle. He'd always liked the towering instrument's deep end; often, noodling on a six-string, he'd thump bass lines on the E, A, D and G strings, drawn to the sonorous power down there. "It felt good to play those notes that lead you into the next chord change or the next line of a song," he says. He bought a bass in 1957 and began making the rounds of jam sessions and garage

auditions and performances. He studied the example set by his hero George Shuffler, who had played walking-style upright bass behind the Stanley Brothers in the 1950s. (Much later, Tom similarly heroized eminent DC jazz bassist Keter Betts.) In 1959 Tom talked his way into a one-and-done spot playing with Bill Monroe himself.

Graduating from Western High in 1958, Tom enrolled at George Washington University as a cartography major, but in 1960 withdrew. He hired on with the National Geographic Society's cartographic division, at first assigned beginner's tasks like sticking names on

ABOVE: FROM LEFT, GORDON, TOM AND CHET GRAY, 1949

BELOW: THE SELDOM SCENE AT THE FRONT DOOR OF THE RED FOX, FROM LEFT, TOM GRAY, MIKE AULDRIDGE, JOHN DUFFEY, JOHN STARLING AND BEN ELDRIDGE, 1971





LEFT: THE SELDOM SCENE WITH PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER, CIRCA 1977; BELOW: TOM PLAYING WITH ROB ICKES AND LOU REID AT THE BIRCHMERE, 2013

maps. He advanced to name compiler and then to map editor. A supervisory stint convinced him he was less keen to give orders than he was to make maps, so he returned to production, eventually progressing to hand-drawing drainage, shorelines, roads and boundaries. He worked full-time at Nat Geo until 1992 and for another 17 years freelanced there. He outlived analog map-making; by the time he was inking his last maps in 2010 his handiwork was being scanned by technicians using computers to render them into final form.

On the side he pressed on with the upright bass. Also in 1960, Tom, who had been making a name for himself in DC bluegrass circles, accepted an invitation to join not merely a bluegrass band but an outfit that came to be what many admirers consider THE bluegrass band: The Country Gentlemen. The Gents, whom Tom had followed and sat in with, came to stand apart not only for their spine-tingling vocals, high-speed picking and air of genial mastery, but also because they did not fear to tread in regions traditional bluegrassers considered below the salt.

The original Gents—Charlie Waller (lead vocals, guitar), John Duffey (tenor vocals, mandolin), Bill Emerson (baritone vocals, banjo) and Larry Leahy (bass)—had mustered to fill in at the Admiral Grille in Bailey’s Crossroads on Independence Day 1957 for Buzz

quartet kept at it, building a diverse repertoire and an enthusiastic following for what came to be called their “progressive bluegrass” approach. Among their fans they numbered a tall teenager from far Northwest who played bass well enough that the Gents occasionally invited him to sit in. In 1960, needing a full-time thumper, they waved Tom Gray aboard. He was 19 and living at home when he took on that demanding musical apprenticeship.

“At that age, I overplayed on my bass, wanting to show the world I had chops,” he says now, recalling a whirl of stops on the bluegrass and folk circuit. “During my four years with the Gents, we recorded five albums. When not on tour, we played six nights a week in local nightclubs.” That group, made up of John Duffey, Charlie Waller, Eddie Adcock and Tom Gray, became known as the first classic configuration of the Gents after Tom’s departure in 1964 (he was fired from a later edition of the band by Bill Emerson for playing too many notes), and in 1996 was welcomed into the International Bluegrass Hall of Fame. All told, twenty-some pickers rotated through the Gentlemen’s ranks between 1957 and 2004.

Tom was laid temporarily low by getting the boot but kept on keeping on. His next significant bluegrass group, organized in Bethesda, Maryland, in 1971, was the Seldom Scene, punningly named to reflect

Bisby and his band, who the night before had been knocked out of commission by a car crash. The result sounded so good that the impromptu

members’ wariness about overbooking. They had families and day jobs now. Tom Gray made maps. Mandolinist John Duffey repaired instruments. Banjo man Ben Eldridge was a mathematician. Lead vocalist/guitarist John Starling was a physician. Dobro player Mike Auldridge was a graphic artist. They agreed to play one night a week locally, secure the occasional weekend gig, and make records. They started with six one-nighters at the Rabbit’s Foot in Tenleytown, then moved to the Red Fox Inn in Bethesda for what became a five-year stand leading to that Thursday night residency at Alexandria’s Birchmere. As the Gents had, the Scene ranged far and wide for material. Their cover of John Prine’s “Paradise” could pull tears out of a pumpkin. Seldom Scene album covers sometimes only showed backs and feet in keeping with the group’s name—but the music! A set went by with a whoosh and a jangle, leaving audiences calling for more. “My friend and late bandmate John Duffey wanted to direct his music not to the traditional rural people from the South but to city people who got attracted to the music,” Tom says.

At the same time, the band honored the traditions out of which the group had evolved. “The late Mike Auldridge sang an old song, ‘Treasures Untold,’ that I now like to play and sing, in memory of his uncle, Ellsworth Cousins,



who wrote the song and recorded it in 1928 with Jimmy Rodgers, the father of country music. Jimmy Rodgers made recordings that included jazz players like Louis Armstrong on trumpet, Lil Hardin on piano and a tuba player on bass, and Ellsworth was playing an acoustic slide guitar with a high nut that he could play with a bar. This was just as the Dobro was being invented, and decades later here was Mike playing the Dobro in the Seldom Scene."

The Scene recorded their first seven LPs in five years, one a live long-player documenting a night at M Street's vaunted Cellar Door. Through it all, there loomed Tom Gray beside his big box of bottom, nailing the rhythms to a towering subspecies of bluegrass. He was voted the world's best bluegrass bassist eight times. Around 1980 he bought an electric solid-body Fender bass; finding it not to his taste, he gave it to his son. Not wishing to update to the electric bass guitar, he resigned from the Seldom Scene in 1987, doubtless a more reserved thumper but probably still playing too many notes to suit some people. He plowed



PHOTOS CLOCKWISE, STARTING ABOVE: TOM WITH MARTHA AND EDDIE ADCOCK, 2019; TOM WEARING T-SHIRT WITH A CARICATURE OF KATY DALEY AND GARY HENDERSON, DRAWN BY MIKE AULDRIDGE, 2024; HARD TIMES BAND'S LAST NIGHT AT OUTTA THE WAY CAFE, DERWOOD, MD—ARNOLD JR. (BUDDY) DICKENS, JACOB MCCANDLES, TOM GRAY, KEVIN COSTA AND DAVE GOODMAN, 2025

new musical ground—after years of hearing he played bass as if he were in a New Orleans jazz band, he took up with the Federal Jazz Commission, a trad jazz bunch he was with from 1991 to 2007. He played with Tony Rice. He played with Ricky Skaggs. He played with the Stanley Brothers. He joined Emmylou Harris's band, playing the Grand Ole Opry 2006–2007. Lately he and wife Barb, on mandolin, have been the mainsprings behind Blue Spruce, a bluegrass quintet that performs at venues like the New Deal Café in the old town center in Greenbelt, Maryland;

Brookeville Beer Farm in Brookeville, Maryland; the Outta the Way Café in Derwood; Hank Dietle's venerable roadhouse in North Bethesda; and the Hell's Bottom VFW in Takoma Park. When he's not playing or rehearsing, Tom is working on a memoir to be published in 2026 by University of Illinois Press. He and co-author Randy Barrett of progressive bluegrass outfit Big Howdy are nearly done with editing and choosing illustrations.

"I like to tell stories," Tom says. "Randy's doing a great job of smoothing the copy and keeping me from repeating myself." Just as he looks forward to that achievement and to his current-day appearances onstage, he looks back fondly on his decades in the spotlight.

"The high points of my career were playing with the Country Gentlemen in the 1960s and The Seldom Scene in the '70s and '80s," Tom Gray says. "These two bands established and popularized the Washington sound in bluegrass, more polished and contemporary than the pioneers from down south."



SHIRAZAMATAZ

SHIRAZ—AUSTRALIA’S MAGICAL GRAPE

BY ROBERT WHALE

The grape variety that the rest of the world calls “Syrah” is called “Shiraz” in Australia. Shiraz is a city formerly located in wine-loving Persia, which now finds itself in wine-intolerant Iran. The city of Shiraz was the birthplace of the grape variety known as Syrah, which now makes its home in the Côtes du Rhône in France and in many wine regions in Australia where it is known as Shiraz and where it is the most widely planted grape used for viticulture.

Unlike Europe and the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand have no native grapevines that would be suitable for making wine. For many Europeans, winemaking was simply a matter of taking what nature had to offer from grapevines that had eons to adapt to the local environment. For example: “This is Germany, where the primary grape is Riesling” or “This is Burgundy, where the primary red grape variety is Pinot Noir,” and so on for the Loire Valley—Sauvignon Blanc, Beaujolais-Gamay, etc. Generations have confirmed that the right grapes are in the right place to make the best wine for that region. In other words, no more discussion, the door for importing other grape varieties into these regions is closed and sealed tight.

But this was not the case for Australia, and the leaders of the newly formed colony were keen to steer their charges to more moderate beverages to replace



PHOTO ABOVE LEFT: ROBERT WHALE IN SYDNEY HARBOUR, FEBRUARY 2019; ABOVE RIGHT: SHAW AND SMITH WINES, IMAGE FROM WEBSITE, WWW.SHAWANDSMITH.COM; BOTTOM LEFT: SHIRAZ GRAPES, IMAGE FROM WEBSITE WWW.LACAVE-ECLAIREE.FR



the ever-present and intoxicating rum. Enter James Busby, regarded as the father of the Australian wine industry, who organized vine stock from Spain and France to be shipped to Australia in the 1840s. The vines were planted wherever there were people to tend to them—mainly along the coastal plains and on the slopes of the Great Divide, a range of mountains that stretches along Australia’s East Coast from south to north. The persnickety French varieties of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay fared well in the cool climes of the mountains but could not cope with the summer heat of the coast. However, the Shiraz (Syrah) stock excelled everywhere it was planted, faring well in both hot and cool environments while producing quite different flavors in the two extremes.

Not only is Shiraz the most-planted wine grape variety, but it also boasts of being the oldest continually producing vines in the world from Shiraz vines planted in 1843 and still going strong. (As an aside, Australia’s iconic wine, Penfolds Grange Hermitage, is made from 100% Shiraz.)

For a long time, I refused to join the Shiraz bandwagon, avoiding the 15- to 16-percent alcohol by volume Shiraz

“monsters” that were produced from hot regions in Australia, where it is the only variety that can thrive in the heat. I preferred the more moderate Alc/Vol levels found in Tempranillo and Cabernet Sauvignon.

This was all changed recently by an encounter with a Shiraz from the Adelaide Hills region of South Australia. This region is cool and stunningly verdant. It is bordered in the north by the Barossa Valley and Eden Valley, and on the south by McLaren Vale. Because of its altitude, it differs from its neighbors by being considerably cooler and wetter. A fine example of cool-climate Adelaide Hills Shiraz available in the DC area is the 2023 Shaw and Smith Shiraz. Elegant and spicy with notes of red and black fruits in a mélange of flavors ending with an uplifting, crisp finish. Sealed with a screw cap, this wine will reward fifteen to twenty years of cellaring.

Cheers,

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Robert Whale



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NOVEL STORIES AND HISTORY OF THE PALISADES & BEYOND: LINKING HISTORICAL MAPS OF THE PALISADES TO YOUR HOUSE'S PAST AND PREHISTORY

BY NICHOLAS CARSON

Learning about the history of your house is not as daunting as you might imagine. You can find out all sorts of interesting things by exploring various public archives. To celebrate its birthday when my home turned one hundred in 2023, I did just that. I got great help from the archivists at The People's Archive at Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library and then wandered off to the Library of Congress website, which holds newspaper archives. For burial records, there are websites such as "Find a Grave." I also talked to neighbors, several of whom could remember the days before I moved to the neighborhood.

I found that I was only the third owner of my home on Sherrier Place. I was able to reconstruct a partial timeline of ownership from microfilm copies of the building permit and all its inspections. The permit included the name of the house's first two owners.

Christopher D. (born October 4, 1887) and Mary J. Bartelmes had the house built between 1922 and 1923. Christopher was a fireman at Engines #9, #6 and possibly others, working his way up to captain. Just prior to moving in the couple had their second child. The Bartelmes owned the home from September 1923 to July 1943.

The second owners of my house were John D. (born October 9, 1912) and Betty A. Dulin. John, reportedly a fifth-generation Washingtonian, was said to be a descendant of Francis Scott Key and John Quincy Adams. While working as an elevator operator, he had an accident. Doctors told him that he'd never walk again. But with intensive body building, he managed to live for another fifteen years. He still died young, on May 9, 1948. (For more of his story, see his newspaper obituary,



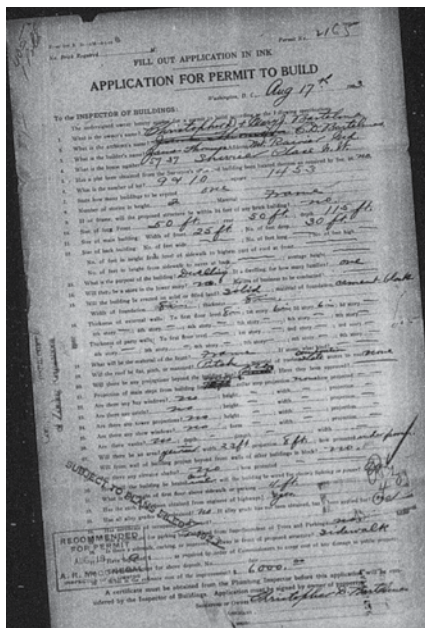
below.) Betty continued living in the house until she died in 1983.

When I bought the home in the fall of 1983 it had four feet of standing water in the cellar, some of the floor structures were completely rotted out by water and none of the radiators worked as they had been allowed to freeze. By 1985, I had completed its restoration, mostly in my spare time. I have now owned the property longer than either of my predecessors.

For those of you who are interested in researching the history of your house, there is a list of resources that should help you through the process on the PCA website (palisadesdc.org/linking-historical-maps/). Even if your home is new, you can still reconstruct the history of what stood in its place before and maybe learn about the people who lived in it.

More broadly, I like to learn about the history and geography of the neighborhood I live in as it grounds me in it and connects me to the people who came before me. To explore the changes in the layout of our neighborhood in the twentieth century, the entire city or individual Palisades pages can be found on this series of historical Baist real estate maps of Washington (links available on the PCA website, palisadesdc.org/linking-historical-maps/). Collectively these maps show the development of our neighborhood over a particularly transformative sixteen-year period in the early 1900s. There are individual building lots and streets, some of which had different names then.

BELOW LEFT: PERMIT FOR MY HOUSE, AUGUST 17, 1923; AT RIGHT: PROFILE FEATURE OF JOHN D. DULIN IN THE EVENING STAR ON MAY 10, 1948; TOP: JOHN DULIN'S GRAVESTONE



A newspaper clipping from The Evening Star dated May 10, 1948. The main headline reads 'John D. Dulin Dies; Fifth-Generation Resident of Capital'. The article describes Dulin's life, his work as an elevator operator, and his recovery from a severe injury. A smaller headline to the right reads 'Mrs. Richman, Then Artist, C' and mentions her work as a painter. Below the main article is a small portrait of John D. Dulin.



PHOTOS TOP TO BOTTOM: 1903, 1907, AND 1909 BAIST'S MAPS OF THE SOUTHWEST CORNER OF THE PALISADES; PHOTO AT RIGHT: DETAIL FROM JOHN SMITH'S 1608 PATAWOMECK RIVER MAP SHOWING THE MANY INDIGENOUS PEOPLES THAT EXISTED IN OUR IMMEDIATE AREA

Going back much much further, into the prehistory of the neighborhood, I found a National Park Service brochure that covers the work done by archeologists around here. (www.nps.gov/articles/rock-creek-park-palisades.htm#:~:text=The%20people%20who%20visited%20the,of%20planting%20and%20harvesting%20corn)

Archeologists began to work in the Washington area in the 1870s and 1880s. Most recently,

In 2004 archeologists exploring a small stream valley just below Little Falls made a startling discovery. Native Americans generally camped on bluffs or by the river's banks, not in narrow valleys, and these archeologists had no plans to do formal testing in this valley. Until, that is, they happened to inspect the root ball of a tree that had recently fallen across the stream. Such root balls provide a glance at the soil hidden under leaves and undergrowth, and sometimes archeologists might see an artifact or two on the exposed soil, hinting at the presence of a site. But on this particular root ball there was much more than just one or two artifacts: three spearpoints and a piece of decorated Indian pottery. This was the first clue to what have turned out to be amazing archeological sites.

They kept on digging in the flat areas by the stream and uncovered thousands of artifacts.

In one 3x3-foot test unit they found 24 spearpoints or knives, 182 pot shards, and 1,673 other artifacts (mostly waste flakes from making stone

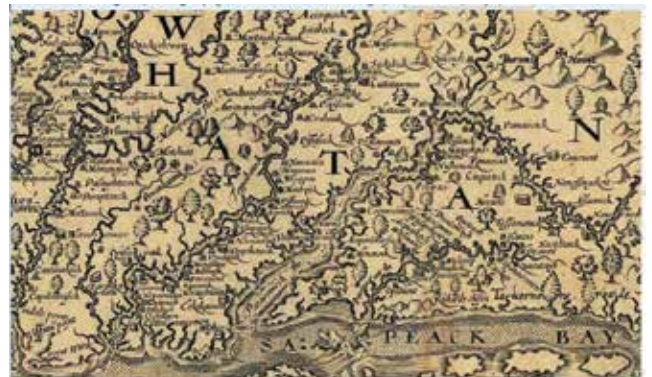
tools). The sites along this stream were used over a period of about 4,000 years, from about 2500 BC to AD 1500.

It turns out that this spot where the stream runs into the Potomac below Little Falls was a perfect stopping point for the many Native Americans traveling upstream by canoe to avoid fighting the current. They stayed longer, as ceramic shards indicate that women prepared food here, a pitted stone was used for grinding nuts, stone tools were made and repaired, and a grooved ax chipped wood.

Another source that includes references to archeological finds at Fletcher's Cove is "Once As It Was" (<http://onceasitwasdc.org/index.html>).

Other than these shards of prehistory, what is left us today is geography and nature. Much has been altered and lost since the coming of Europeans, but some aspects remain untouched. The experience of living right next to the Potomac River is largely unchanged as we immerse ourselves in its bubble to enjoy its beauty, drinking water and bounty just as earlier humans did. **We should pass this forward to new generations through stewardship and conservation of the land!**

IN THE NEXT ISSUE: Spooks on the Potomac



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THE WASHINGTON CANOE CLUB: A SURVIVOR

BY CHRIS BROWN

What historic DC building has faced down an oncoming steam locomotive, blocked four lanes of federal highway access ramps and stood up to a massive sewer line plowing through it? Only one we know of: the Washington Canoe Club (WCC).

The 120-year-old WCC boathouse will be familiar to many Palisades residents who use the Capital Crescent Trail to get into Georgetown. It is the only structure upstream of the stone Aqueduct Arch and one of only two remaining historic boathouses on the Potomac waterfront, which once boasted almost a dozen (the other is the Potomac Boat Club, just downstream of the Arch).

Built in 1904, and with major additions in the decades that followed, the Victorian, shingle-style WCC boathouse is an icon on the Potomac and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

And it is a survivor. Shortly after its members built the original, single-turret structure, the B&O Railroad announced plans to move ahead with a long-delayed spur connecting Georgetown's industrial waterfront with the railroad's main line in Silver Spring. The canoe club had leased only a narrow strip of

flat land from the C&O Canal Co., so members had to build the boathouse on piers over the water, with only its backside perched on dry land. This simply seemed to be insufficient space to share with a train line. Lost to history is exactly how this got worked out, but when the Georgetown Spur was completed in 1910, the WCC was still standing tall, with the new rail traffic running just a few feet behind it.

The boathouse continued to dodge bullets, surviving numerous major ice jams and floods over the years, with the most recent one in 1996. In 1961, WCC's next-door neighbor, Dempsey's Boathouse, burned to the ground; the all-wood WCC narrowly escaped joining the conflagration. The 1960s brought other new threats: a planned interstate highway bridge crossing the Potomac at the Three Sisters islands included access ramps running through the boathouse. Only a sustained, historic citizen protest eventually led to the abandonment of the project. Glover



Archbold Park, as well as the WCC, was saved. And then down the river came a huge, eight-foot-diameter sewer line, the Dulles Interceptor, running along the Potomac shoreline right through the boathouse. WCC pushed a design adjustment which allowed the sewer pipe to briefly zigzag so as to pass on the waterfront side of the boathouse, where it remains to this day.

The boathouse continues its nine lives. In 2010, National Park Service (WCC's landlord ... the club lies within the C&O Canal National Historical Park) declared the building "unsafe for occupancy" due to its very dilapidated condition and evicted the club from all but one small section. And currently DC Water, under court order to clean up the Potomac, has begun construction on a 5.5 mile "Deep Tunnel" to handle polluted stormwater; the project, to run until 2028, now almost totally blocks both the Capital Crescent Trail and access to WCC.

The boathouse itself is now undergoing its first major renovation in 120 years. As it is a landmark structure, there are many requirements to guarantee its historic character; reviews and permitting have already taken over five years. The club is just completing a \$1-million capital campaign and, with other funds, has begun a \$2.5 million Phase 1



PHOTO AT TOP: SKETCH OF THE WASHINGTON CANOE CLUBHOUSE, C. 1904; FAR LEFT: THE DEMPSEY'S BOATHOUSE FIRE, 1961; LEFT TOP: WCC AND THE ICED POTOMAC, C. 1966; LEFT BOTTOM: EARLY SOCIAL PADDLERS, C. 1915

rehabilitation. Work, led by Monarc Construction, began in January 2026 and is expected to take 6–8 months. Ultimately, a Phase 2 will include elevating the entire building to meet codes and raise the second floor above the projected 100-year flood. But when Phase 1 is done, the roof, walls, windows and doors will make the structure snug once more, and members will welcome back indoor showers and toilets.

The WCC boathouse has a remarkable, practically charmed, history. But the club is more than a building. It is also a community of people and a social institution. From the outset, competition has been central to the club's *raison d'être* and WCC paddlers have succeeded at the highest levels of their sport. Twenty-eight members have been on Olympic teams and the club has produced hundreds of national and international champions, including four Olympic medalists. Today, WCC's outrigger teams and kayak, canoe and stand-up paddleboard racers maintain a record of success.

The WCC has also been a family venue that has given generations of adults and kids a respite from the hubbub and hot summers of Washington: a riverfront spot to relax and recharge, and a chance to devote abundant energies to racing, building, repairing and playing. For many of its members, the canoe club has been the hub of their social lives.

The club has also played a valuable role in greater Washington, hosting

wounded warrior competitions and inner-city youth paddlers. For the unprepared, careless or unlucky users of the Potomac, WCC members have again and again acted as first responders to tip-overs and more serious mishaps. Club lore includes countless stories of dramatic rescues.

Thus, the story of the Washington Canoe Club is one of member energy and resilience. Paddling and partying together has built an enduring sense of community and, despite fifteen years with no indoor plumbing (and other inconveniences and indignities), membership has continued to increase and now stands at more than 300.

So Palisades residents and all of DC will continue to have this piece of DC history to enjoy and appreciate for decades to come. And for those interested in learning to paddle, or who continue their lifelong love of being on the water, or who simply want a fresh (from the river) perspective on the Palisades, membership at the canoe club is currently open, at www.washingtoncanoeclub.org/.



Chris Brown, a Foxhall/Palisades resident for 25 years, has worked for American Rivers, the National Park Service and the US Forest Service. He remembers fondly his first visits to the Palisades, when his family moved to DC in the 1950s and he joined craft classes at the Palisades Rec Center.

Copies of his book Washington Canoe Club (Arcadia Publishing, Images of America series) are available on the WCC website: www.washingtoncanoeclub.org/



PHOTOS COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM TOP: WCC'S OUTRIGGER TEAMS AND KAYAK, CANOE AND STAND-UP PADDLEBOARD RACERS AT WOUNDED WARRIORS RACE, 2020; WCC CHILDREN AND ADULTS IN WAR CANOE, C. 2015; WCC WOMENS OUTRIGGER, C. 2015

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