THE CONDUIT
NEWSLETTER OF THE PALISADES COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

THE PALISADES AND THE POTOMAC

BY JOSH COHN

"Catch anything?"

"Where?"

"How many?"

These are the questions that make every angler cringe. When he or she is approached by a random passerby, the angler's response is usually short, sardonic or a straight-up lie—if there is a response at all.

But springtime in Northwest DC brings a very different set of answers, which, to the uninitiated, often sound just as false. To "Catch anything?" the response is almost always "Yes." To the dreaded "Where?" the reply now comes in two syllables: "Fletcher's." And finally, "How many?" begets an answer of a number often in the dozens, occasionally approaching triple digits—numbers that require none of the angler's characteristic embellishments. Anglers who would brush past the curious at any other time of the year now stop simply for this final bit of the conversation. The visage of astonishment that creeps over the questioner—that there might even be fish in the Potomac, that they could be caught in such numbers on rod and reel, and that it would all be done before heading into work in the morning—is the angler's reward for his divulgence.

What brings on this rapid, albeit temporary, change in the springtime? Another single-word answer: abundance. Natural abundance, something so fleeting in the twenty-first century, is demonstrated in perfect form as the shad begin to run up the Potomac River.

The smaller hickory shad and their larger cousins, the American shad, enter the river to spawn by the millions between early April and May. While not quite the pristine fishing the colonists of these shores enjoyed, it is far and above the closest thing a twenty-first-century angler is going to get this side of Alaska. It's all catch and release, which ensures a bigger and better run year over year. Following the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972, the blood, sweat and tears of thousands of individuals and dozens of agencies went into ensuring that the Potomac would once again be

SPRING MAGIC

The cold and vaguely snowy winter is winding down, and spring should bring hope. But I have good memories of cross-country skiers flying along the towpath, home-schooled children building snowmen, the ever-growing accumulation of dogs gambolling in the slush. I have appreciated our community more than ever, all the daily interactions on walks, on zoom and on the phone. Sometimes neighbors were difficult to recognize as hefty hats and layered clothing merged with masks to form shapeless bales on the move, but zoom calls offered the relief of interacting with unmasked faces, however misshapen by technology! Our tiniest citizens cheered me up as they traveled bravely through the neighborhood holding onto their unifying rope. In case you've lost count, this spring will bring us the 17-year cicadas! An annoyance to adults, magic to kids. Here's a link to an encyclopedic article on what to expect (I wish we were the ones publishing it!): http://capitalnaturalist.blogspot.com

Hopefully, Maya Latynski

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worthy of her title as the Nation's River. A river which often bestowed tetanus shots upon its visitors now provides an opportunity for world-class fishing within the District of Columbia—it is truly an unparalleled experience.

Fletcher's Cove is a river eddy that has been fished as long as the Potomac River has been peopled. The boathouse at Fletcher's is ground zero for the Potomac shad run and not just because of the rowboat rentals, though plying the river in those storied red rowboats means as much to some as the fishing itself. The river's geology makes for a perfect rest stop for the fish as they make their final sprint to spawn at the base of Little Falls—the fall line where the tidewater ends. Shore fishing is popular from Walker's Point just downstream of Fletcher's, all the way up to the base of Little Falls itself. Take the utmost caution when fishing from shore, as there are multiple drownings every year; the section downstream from Chain Bridge is best for beginners.

As unique and wonderous as the Potomac is in all its spring glory, the river is still threatened by all the usual culprits that endanger the health of all our freshwater ecosystems. The first is trash. The traditional indicators that the shad run has begun are the blooming of the dogwoods, the arrival of seagulls and cormorants, and the rising water temperature. But now the response many regulars give is, "start fishing when you see fresh trash on the shoreline." It continues to boggle the mind that people will slog a case of beer, a picnic cooler and whatever else out to the river yet feel that they are justified in leaving it on some rock for the river to sweep away come the next high-water event. There are many organized clean-up efforts and multilingual "pack it in, pack it out" signs that pop up with regularity, but this is not enough. We must all educate ourselves and our compatriots on the proper way to treat the river, its fish and each other, if we want to continue enjoying it for years to come.

Growing up in the Palisades I was introduced to the Potomac, as I imagine most are, by my Father. It was a slow start, a summer fling between school years. In those early days I left a trail of hobbies in my wake—Pokemon, skateboarding, World of Warcraft, lacrosse—when one day my friend Sam looked up from his laptop and said: "Why don't we get really good at fishing?" While it didn't take for him, for me the ten-hour-a-day gaming sessions rapidly turned into multi-day fishing trips. My parents' pleas of "go outside, that's enough screen time for today" were supplanted by "you've been camping for three days, please text me back." By 2011, I was working at Fletcher's. Now, a decade down the river, I spend more time there than I ever did as an employee.

The Potomac River's shad run doesn't only draw anglers, as osprey and bald eagles survey from the skies, foxes and deer patrol the riverbank and beavers swim along the shoreline. There are few urban centers that can lay claim to such natural abundance in their immediate environs. And if you ask a shad angler, our Nation's Capital is the best of them.

So, if you are one of the initiated, come spring, when a stranger showers you with questions just because he sees you holding a fishing rod, pay it forward and introduce your neighbor to the wonders just down the trail.

If you are looking for more information on catching shad and other fish in the Potomac, check out Tidal Potomac Fly Rodders or bug me on Instagram @cohnstacklebox.

FROM THE PCA PRESIDENT

Dear Palisades Neighbors,

Is the pandemic over yet?! Sadly, no, but our neighborhood and city have done an amazing job keeping the infection rate down, and the Palisades Community Association has done its part by modifying our usual events that bring us all together. Here is a recap of what we have been up to lately.

We continue to hold our monthly Town Hall meetings over zoom. Rest assured, when we start meeting in person again, we will also keep the zoom option. Attendance has grown significantly during the pandemic because, clearly, the virtual option is more convenient for many people. Our last meeting featured a robust discussion on the potential for DC statehood. A thank-you to speakers **Josh Burch** and **Caleb Rossiter.**

We held our first annual Palisades Holiday Bake Sale. It raised $1,500 for the new Palisades Hub located at the Palisades Community Church. Some serious bakers delivered their creations, and we are so grateful to everyone who stopped by to buy them.

Almost every Sunday the PCA has a tent at the Farmers' Market to sell Palisades masks and collect goods for S.O.M.E. Directed by **Maria Garcia,** the effort has allowed the PCA to deliver more than four carloads of supplies over the past few months, and we also thank all the neighbors who ordered adult undergarments through Amazon and had them sent directly to S.O.M.E. The latest community outreach project is the large "thank you" banner for Sibley Hospital health care workers. Thank you to the **Koczela family** for ordering the banner and thank you to everyone who has stopped by to sign it. When the banner is filled with signatures and messages, we will present it to Sibley.

There is a lot going on at the Palisades Park. **Avi Green** has spearheaded the PCA's effort to submit a proposal to DPR for a dog park. We are certain that the proposal will be approved and funded, and we will keep the neighborhood posted on its progress. If you venture behind the playground, you may notice some new trails blazed through the woods.

The PCA has joined a community working group to address the construction of a new "Foxhall Elementary School" to be located at Q Street and Foxhall Road and the purchase of the old Georgetown Day School Elementary School site, known as the "MacArthur Boulevard School." We will keep our community informed through the listserv on any proposals and decisions made by DCPS.

The Trammell Crow (TCC) development is always on our radar. Currently, TCC is in the permitting process and expects to break ground in July 2021. It is continuing to work on securing a small grocer tenant. The PCA is leading a community working group to work with TCC on their design of the public space on and around the site. It will include new sidewalks, crosswalks and other pedestrian safety measures from U Street all the way around to V Street.

The PCA is committed to hosting community events to bring us together during this pandemic, and you can be sure that we will be ready to really celebrate when we are able to gather en masse.

A special thank you to **Chien de Luxe,** our luxurious neighborhood pet store, for selling the Palisades DC masks for the PCA. Stop by for quality pet food and pet decor and also a new mask!

Sincerely, Tricia Duncan

THIS WONDERFUL BANNER **was donated by the Koczela family. Left to right are Mrs. Ruth Koczela, Jack and Julie. Please stop by the PCA tent at the Farmers' Market to sign it! Once we've collected enough signatures, we will present it to the staff at Sibley Hospital.**

GROWING COMMUNITY: THE PALISADES COMMUNITY GARDEN

BY MICHAEL RUDOLPH

Urban community gardens are an important part of the American landscape and have been since as early as the nineteenth century. Hidden behind the Palisades Recreation Center building is one such small local oasis, which connects people with food and community. The Palisades Community Garden consists of twenty-four public garden plots, administered by the city and neighborhood volunteers, are available to any DC resident interested in exercising a green thumb. The Palisades site is just one of a network of thirty-five DC Parks and Recreation (DPR) gardens spread across the city's eight wards where both new and experienced gardeners can acquire a patch of land and grow some of their own food. In this public/private partnership between residents and the city, the District provides available space at local recreation centers for cultivation and, in return, participants agree to adhere to a set of mutually agreed-upon rules and guidelines including "plant-by" dates and seasonal cleanups. Garden holders also agree to volunteer time for supporting initiatives to preserve and improve natural habitat in the Palisades and the city as a whole. Most importantly, the gardens provide a place of local community where people can share success and failure, learn to collaborate, share some food and get to know one another.

AMERICAN COMMUNITY GARDENS: A BRIEF HISTORY

Some of the first community gardens in the United States were planted in Detroit during the economic recession of the 1890s. The city provided vacant lots, seeds, tools and instruction in three languages to unemployed immigrant laborers, hungry as a result of an economic downturn. Detroit's program was successful enough to be replicated in other American cities from San Francisco to Boston and Philadelphia.

In the early twentieth century, urban school gardens flourished as a method of counterbalancing what some perceived as the deleterious effects of urban living on children. That tradition continues in modern schools today as educators continue to use gardening to promote the sciences and environmental stewardship, and to encourage healthier eating habits and improved nutrition. Both World Wars brought a revival of community gardens as an expression of patriotism when the conflicts led to food shortages in Europe and a boom in American farm exports. Plots known as Liberty and Victory gardens helped feed many on the home front. In the post-war years, participation in community gardens waned considerably with urban flight and the explosion of suburban growth. Since then, environmental activists and grassroots groups have partnered with local governments to promote community gardening in our cities. In many neighborhoods in DC and other large American cities, fast food is ubiquitous, but fresh fruits and vegetables are more difficult to find. Local community gardens can help bridge that gap, especially in underserved neighborhoods. Presently, Detroit is again at the vanguard of community gardening. Although the city has lost almost half of its 1.9-million population since 1950, new homesteading and urban agriculture initiatives are revitalizing many neighborhoods, providing the citizens with fresh food options while fostering small business opportunities.

The gardens provide a place of local community where people can share success and failure, and learn to collaborate.

While Covid restrictions limited most of our activities in 2020, the gardeners are hoping to host more community outreach events like an open house later this summer. Keep an eye on the Palisades listserv for future details.

DC'S URBAN GARDENS TODAY

In 2021, the District is home to a thriving urban agriculture and gardening community. The University of the District of Columbia, established in 1851 with an agricultural focus, still offers a Master Gardener curriculum for residents. The District Urban Garden Network (DUG) is a metro-area newsletter offering monthly updates on educational events and volunteer opportunities, in areas as diverse as beekeeping and food justice. The Sustainable DC program is working toward making the city a healthier and more livable place with initiatives seeking to expand access to healthy food, reduce compostable waste and increase green space. A city-wide community composting cooperative program begun in 2015 gives any resident the option to drop off household food waste after completing a quick class and committing to occasional volunteer time.

Even with the expansion of the Palisades Community Garden site in 2013, which doubled the number of plots, demand for garden space outstrips supply. Community garden plots at the rec center are available via a waitlist, which currently runs from about one year to eighteen months. While no fees are collected for participating, plot holders are required to give eight hours of volunteer time each year. Volunteer activities include weeding common areas, removing park trash and invasive plants, and supporting DPR's after-school and summer camp programs. The Palisades Community Garden has partnered with the DC Department of the Environment and won an Audubon Society grant to establish and maintain a pollinator garden to help support native bee and butterfly populations. The Palisades gardeners continue to cultivate partnerships that will aid in groundwater retention efforts and the reestablishment of habitat along the forest edge for DC's disappearing state bird, the wood thrush.

THE PALISADES POLLINATOR PATHWAY

Funded by a grant from the Palisades Community Fund, the Palisades Pollinator Pathway (PPP) is a new neighborhood project designed to increase habitat and improve the local ecosystem for pollinators, such as bees, bats, butterflies and hummingbirds, and other wildlife. A collaboration with DC Natives—a local non-profit dedicated to supporting a healthy environment by increasing pollinator habitats throughout the District—the PPP will launch this spring, with three components:

1. **A pollinator "demonstration garden"** at the Palisades Recreation Center
2. **A "Block-by-Block" program** to deploy 10 pollinator gardens in neighborhood yards
3. **A gift to support pollinator gardens** in Wards 7 and 8.

Want to know more? Check out https://www.dcnatives.org or contact Jeremy Stanton at mail@jeremystanton.com.

Resources:

To learn more about available DC community garden space:
https://dpr.dc.gov/page/community-gardens

To learn more about DC Community composting cooperatives:
https://dpr.dc.gov/page/community-compost-cooperative-network

To get more involved in urban agriculture in the DC area:
http://dugnetwork.org

THE NEW PALISADES HUB IS ON A ROLL!

BY JULIE SIMONTON

If you've been following news about the Palisades Hub, you know that it will be a new community gathering place to connect, learn and serve together. When I first learned about it, I couldn't wait to be a part of it—and I can't wait for you to be a part of the Hub, too!

What's going on? Tell me more!

Our Palisades neighborhood has the hallmarks of a thriving residential area: tree-lined streets, local stores, charming houses, friendly inhabitants. With a

rich mix of young families and long-time residents, it has been called a small town in a big city. In 2019 the people of the Palisades Community Church, anticipating its hundredth anniversary, began to explore their visions of a new role for the church as a vibrant enterprise to make life even more fulfilling in the neighborhood. After a general internal conversation, followed by the work of a task force, the discussion was opened to the community at large via a survey. The response was lavish, and a concept emerged surprisingly quickly: let's create a new place for people from both Palisades and outside to meet, and call it The Palisades Hub.

An ambitious nonprofit initiative, the Hub will cultivate all kinds of projects. People from across DC will be welcome to join their friends and make new ones in activities that may include classes in

arts and crafts, exercise, history lectures and book groups, live music, film shows and discussions, debates about political and social issues facing District residents, and projects to serve the city.

When did this get rolling?

On February 1, I became the Hub's founding executive director. As the first leader of this initiative, I'm all about nurturing community engagement and relationships in this dynamic neighborhood institution. For me, this opportunity is both a professional and a personal privilege.

Over more than twenty years, I've acquired experience in diverse aspects of nonprofit leadership, communication strategies, event planning and program design for innovative startups. This feels like an ideal fit for the Hub! I've taught locally, nationally and internationally about adaptive and technical fundraising strategies, and now I can't wait to hear your ideas about engaging Palisades neighbors in this community investment.

The people of the Palisades Community Church began to explore their visions of a new role for the church as a vibrant enterprise to make life even more fulfilling...

Where and how do folks connect?

The Hub will function as an independent nonprofit organization operating out of the Palisades Community Church. Founded in 1923 as a progressive congregation with deep roots in the neighborhood, the church is the ideal venue to launch a new initiative.

You know the nooks and crannies of Palisades best—so please call, email or stop by any time to tell me your story and your ideas about how we can make Palisades Hub thrive. I look forward to seeing you!

For starters, you can follow Palisades Hub (@palisadeshub) on social media.

Julie Simonton is Executive Director @ Palisades Hub

JULIE WITH HER DAUGHTERS, EVIE AND MIA

UNCOVERING A LOCAL MYSTERY

BY AVI GREEN

Over the past twenty years, the pace of improvement at the Palisades Recreation Center has been significant. Consider these changes—the addition of a soccer field, the addition of a skateboard park, the expansion of the community garden, the installation of a stormwater retention system, the enlargement/modernization of the field house (yes, we lost the horseshoe pits in the process!), the replacement of the playground, the widening of the park pathways and the conversion of the Jesse Baltimore house into open green space.

While the core area of the park has been steadily enhanced, the park land immediately downhill from the playground has followed a different course. I moved to the neighborhood in 2005, and for me that area was associated with a rudimentary wooden skateboard ramp, impressive in its time but eventually entering a long period of decay, overgrowth and garbage accumulation. During these pandemic months, I have had the opportunity to spend some time in the woods surrounding Palisades Rec, and I came to poking around this patch of land in particular. What soon became apparent at the bottom of the hill is that a paved surface was buried under layers of silt and decomposed leaves. After a few rounds of community clean-up, what we found was even more intriguing. The paved surface is quite large—at least 25 by 30 feet—and mostly in good condition. We also discovered the cement bases of what were speculatively two light posts along with extensive wiring throughout the area.

So, what exactly used to go at this site? One neighbor shared his second-hand knowledge that it had been an outdoor amphitheater. It certainly is not hard to imagine it. Above the "stage" is a hillside that is gently sloping and wraps around as an amphitheater would. The "stage" itself sits on a bluff overlooking the local creek, which would make for a uniquely beautiful performance setting. Trying to pin down the exact history of the site has been confounding. One long-time resident who lives across the street from the park recalls an amphitheater's existence there—possibly dating back to the 1950s or '60s. Neighbors with memories back to the 1970s and '80s do not remember it. The type of wiring within the cement (light post?) pedestals probably dates the installation to the 1970s. The paved surface itself, its asphalt and its condition seem too good to have withstood 70+ years of natural attrition. Historical maps and aerial photos available online have not cleared things up thus far.

One long-time resident who lives across the street from the park recalls an amphitheater's existence there—possibly dating back to the 1950s or '60s.

So, we have a true Palisades mystery on our hands. But the mystery is really a side-thought compared to the question of what this site could be for our community in the future. With just a little bit of neighborhood-driven TLC, this potentially very lovely patch of land could become an integral part of our community again.

VOLUNTEERS CLEANING THE AMPHITHEATER AREA.

BEAUTIFIED "GLASS FOREST" VANDALIZED

BY DOUG DUPIN

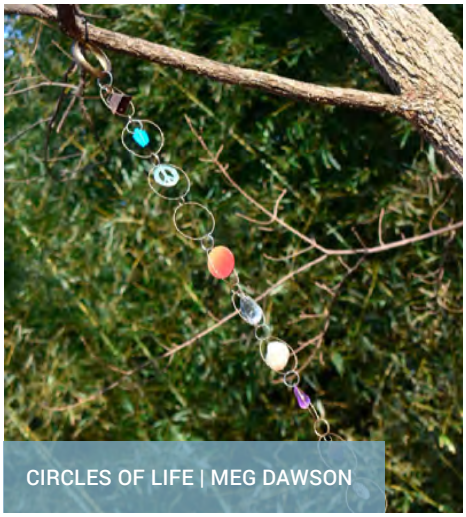
SCAVENGER BIRD | LAURI MENDITTO

For the past twenty years Palisades resident James McMahon has been tinkering in the woods behind his house on Sherier Place near Palisades Park. He refers to his outdoor art gallery as the "shrine," although most who know of it refer to it as the "glass forest"—as do Google Maps and other online sources. As of late, some of the weather-beaten objects have grown tired. This prompted longtime "shrine" admirer Lynda Cokinos to suggest a grounds makeover. The idea took hold with Lauri Menditto, who organized a call to local artists to rejuvenate the space with their own creations. I, along with a dozen others, accepted the challenge and installed works at the end of January.

Harnessing the restiveness of the neighborhood's creatives, the call-for-art gave James's shrine the makeover it needed, and did so in a covid-safe manner. Unfortunately, it was only two weeks before a degenerate looted and destroyed many of the artworks. Three of my four pieces were demolished and had some components stolen. The perpetrator seemed to be motivated by theft since art with "valuable" components like amethyst, shell and glass, was targeted.

But many exceptional pieces still remain unmolested. Go out and enjoy what's there and if you see any barbarians in the gallery, chase them off!

HOMEBODY | DOUG DUPIN



CIRCLES OF LIFE | MEG DAWSON

HERON | CHRISTY HALVORSON ROSS

COVID DISCOBALL | RICK MAEDER

ARTISTS OF THE PALISADES at the Palisades Post Office

DAVID C. HAMMOND February–early April

It's hard to define precisely the vintage work boats of the Chesapeake Bay. While there are a number of styles, including skipjacks, bugeyes and draketails, they are often modified to suit the unique needs of the people using them.

A big part of the fun of model building is doing the research. Many of these boats operated from the early 1800s to the mid-1950s, and only a few are still around. Using old photographs, drawings, paintings and the resources of maritime museums, it is possible to gather enough material to put together an accurate plan, always allowing for some individual creativity. And while the internet provides some of this information, in-person visits to bay museums and docks are invaluable.

The Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michael's, Maryland features a number of restored work boats out on the water. It also puts on shipbuilding workshops and some of the demonstrated techniques can be used in model building. The Calvert Marine Museum in Solomon's Island, Maryland houses a large collection of unrestored vintage boats. A visit allows the model builder to inspect their details closely and take measurements, which is extremely helpful for making accurate drawings. Taking lots of photographs is also very helpful, as details found in different boats might be combined into a single model.

After I draw the plans, I can get most of the materials to make the boats from hardware and art supply stores. Without getting into the weeds, the most important part in building is achieving a symmetrical fair line from stem to stern, something that would be almost impossible to correct later on.

After living in the Palisades for more than thirty years and working in real estate with my wife, Nancy, I like the excuse this hobby gives me to explore the Chesapeake and its history. Model making has much of the same appeal to me as doing cartoons, illustrations and calligraphy. And now there is no pressure! Each project starts out with a rough idea that slowly takes shape. I love the way things change along the way. New ideas, dead ends, reversed course and then—often a surprise at the end! For the better, I hope. And if not, it's time to start over.

PAUL ZAPATKA April–May

Paul Zapatka is a native Washingtonian. His show, "Still Lifes," is inspired or influenced by Henri Matisse, William Bailey and Georgia O'Keeffe and by his own vision, all from life. He is an accomplished painter, who won the "Best in Show" Award for his acrylic painting *Studio Still Life (after Diebenkorn, a California painter)* at the "Habits" art show at The Art League Gallery in Alexandria, Virginia in January 2017 and the Third Place Award for his oil still life *Cherry Blossoms (after William Bailey, a Midwest painter)* also at The Art League Gallery in May 2013.

THE WRITING LIFE: JOEL ACHENBACH

BY ELIZA MCGRAW

Joel Achenbach is the author of several books, including *The Grand Idea, Captured by Aliens* and *A Hole at the Bottom of the Sea*. He writes about science and politics for the *Washington Post's* national desk and has been a staff writer for the *Post* since 1990. He started the newsroom's first online column, Rough Draft, in 1999, and washingtonpost.com's first blog, Achenblog, in 2005.

When did you move to the neighborhood, and how'd you find it?
We got lucky. We almost bought a house in AU Park but the seller backed out. I think often of that tiny, grim, certain-to-be-soul-crushing backyard not nearly big enough for a firepit—a necessary feature, we've learned, during pandemics. It's weird and unsettling to think that if we'd gotten that house, we wouldn't have met all our Palisades friends. No Key School. No views of the gorge, no easy walks to the river. [My wife] Mary says I was the one who suggested looking for a house near the river, but I don't remember that. I just remember we looked first at a house on Carolina down the hill from you [5300 block] and then drove two blocks and walked into this house on Cathedral. Our real-estate agent said, "This is the one." She always said that, of course. She would say that if we walked into a brush-covered lean-to under a bridge. But she was right, it was the one: a sensible, sturdy brick house, the kind that a wolf couldn't blow down as hard as he might huff and puff. It had a well-tended yard, complete with rose garden. For many years I would come across signs of the previous owners—tools tucked away, an old clothesline, pieces of backup molding tucked into the basement rafters because you never know when you might need to replace some molding. The old brick garage, set back by the alley—love the alleys!—is my favorite retreat, and if you look closely in one corner you can see someone's initials etched in the concrete and "1932." That was a rough year for a lot of people in this country, and you can see why someone would build a stand-alone fortress-like garage that could last a century. I tried to keep the roses alive, but they were delicate and gradually went to their reward. The rose garden became a tomato patch. We feel really lucky we found this neighborhood and were able to raise our kids here. Everyone is friendly. It's the kind of neighborhood where the parents can wander off at any time of day or night in search of a party, and the kids in the house don't have to worry about them.

JOEL AT A FILING CENTER ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL, CIRCA 2007.

Your book *The Grand Idea: George Washington's Potomac and the Race to the West*, obviously has a great deal to do with the river. What's your relationship to the river as someone who lives so nearby?
When we first saw the place I hadn't realized how close it was to the river, or how important it would be in our lives. I remember being quite taken with the views from Potomac Avenue, and thinking it was like a little slice of West Virginia. In wintertime, with the brush gone, the historical features come out—the old locks at Fletcher's Boathouse from the original canal that preceded the C&O, for example. There's so much history here, going back thousands of years. I got into the habit of hiking along the river. Mary is a river buff, too, though she kayaks mostly. About twenty years ago I got the notion that the Potomac had a Zelig-like habit of appearing numerous times in crucial moments in the history of the republic and that led me to write the book. Also, I could hike or canoe and pretend I was doing research.

What's special (geologically and historically speaking) about our piece of the Potomac?
Only years later did I learn that what we call "the river" in the Palisades runs through what is known to some geologists as the Potomac Gorge. It runs from roughly Key Bridge to Great Falls, about 12 miles. The folks at the Potomac Conservancy did a great job highlighting the gorge-ness of the river around here, and I wrote about it for the *Post*. The gorge has a crucial ancillary feature: The creeks plunge into it and create ravines that add a special topographical texture to the neighborhood

and complicate large-scale development projects. The lack of a major, freeway-scale bridge in this stretch of the river is another factor in ensuring the quirkiness of the neighborhoods like Palisades and Brookmont and Glen Echo.

Where do you write?
On a laptop. I'm not being sarcastic. I've had a laptop computer surgically attached to my shoulder for many years and I write basically anywhere and everywhere. I think of the many times I've written on the floor at the airport close to an outlet, back before they invented airport work stations. There were a lot of us who were airport floor campers.

Where do you walk?
My go-to hikes are Carderock, Turkey Run, sometimes the Big Woods near Old Angler's, sometimes Swain's Lock. And of course the hills right above us.

What neighborhood memories make you the most nostalgic?
Seeing kids sledding at Dinosaur Park. Going there with my girls during a snow day—many years ago now—was just about the most fun I ever had.

You've been a staff writer for the *Post* since 1990, and, obviously, a lot has changed for newspapers since then. What is something that surprises you?
I am surprised how often we come up with an idea in the morning and work on it all day and file it late in the afternoon and get it edited and copy-edited just in time for the first edition of the print newspaper. As if this were 1990 still. But I'm also surprised that there are so many young people excited about journalism, despite all the problems in the industry. Mary, as you know, has dedicated herself to teaching high school kids the practices and ethics of journalism. Our family believes in journalism and I think somehow the craft is going to survive. The hunger for reliable information seems quite insatiable.

Over the past year, you've written a lot about Covid-19. What's it like to chronicle history as it happens? How has covering the pandemic on a larger scale caused you to see how we in the neighborhood are weathering it as a community?
I spend a lot of time trying to get the story right. I know that sounds obvious. But there are scientific uncertainties and ambiguities in this pandemic. It's also a highly politicized and polarized era, and as a science writer my job is to be as factual and precise as possible while making clear what we know and don't know. I think of what Tony Fauci—not a Palisades resident, but he does hit the towpath—told me in an interview: That the extreme range in disease severity from Covid-19, from asymptomatic to lethal, eats at him. The story is pretty relentless, and in that regard it reminds me a bit of the BP

oil spill in 2010, only that lasted just a few months and we're entering Year Two of the pandemic. I try to pace myself, think ahead, avoid being too reactive to the latest mutation or preprint paper not yet peer-reviewed. As for the Palisades, I think the experience varies from household to household, so I don't want to speak for others. But we are fortunate to have a comfortable and safe space to ride out the pandemic.

Do you call the neighborhood "Palisades" or "the Palisades"?
I believe it carries a "the" classically but language evolves and the younger generation will ultimately decide.

What has recently caused you to say anything along the lines of, "That's so (the) Palisades."
I liked it when my neighbor Lynda Cokinos—another writer!—had chickens. I could take house guests to visit the chickens next door. That felt very Palisades to me. Of course I love the art installation in the woods near the playground. That's definitely one of the Seven Wonders of the Palisades. You know, most neighborhoods have only two or three Wonders at most.

What are you reading right now? Books, articles, anything.
Working on the final installment of two trilogies: The last book in the Hilary Mantel trilogy on Thomas Cromwell and *The Town* by Conrad Richter. Also, I went to Second Story Books in Rockville and bought a stack of books on Einstein's theory of relativity and I kind of dip into them apprehensively. I'm supposed to understand this stuff, but it's hard for me and all I can say is I own a lot of books on relativity now.

There are a lot of writers who live around here. Why do you think that is?
It's true, everyone on my block is a writer, except for me. I'm a newspaper reporter. It's remarkable. Just on my block there's a professional singer, a political pundit, an expert on cocktails who has written a column to that effect for the *Wall Street Journal* and the leader of a jazz orchestra. And that's just Eric Felten! We should definitely turn the old Mount Vernon campus into an internationally recognized writing school. The professors could walk to work. My hunch is that Palisades may become tougher territory for writers, though, as the money moves in, and the houses get bigger. The tech tycoons and private equity partners will "author" books by hiring ghost writers who used to live in the Palisades.

This interview has been edited.

ECO CONNECTIONS: THE LESSONS OF THE RABBIT

BY JEREMY STANTON

Ask the beasts and they will teach you the beauty of this earth. —Francis of Assisi

It was around this time last year that I found what seemed to be the work of a vandal. A black chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*) planted just a few weeks earlier had its tender young stems clipped cleanly at a 45-degree angle, as if with shears. The severed pieces were simply left on the ground in an act of wanton destruction. I fumed. Who would do such a thing!?

The aronia was one of over one hundred mostly native species that I planted in 2019–2020, with the intention to maximize my yard's biodiversity. After doing some research, I learned that its clipped young stems were a telltale sign of rabbits (deer tear plants, leaving behind more ragged edges). This intrigued me. Through various iterations of our home's landscape over the previous eight years—from overgrown invasive plants left by the previous owner to a professionally designed garden using the standard palette of non-native ornamentals—the only rabbit we had seen in our yard was a small garden statue we placed under a boxwood. But that changed quickly when I started planting natives.

EASTERN COTTONTAIL RABBIT LOUNGING IN MY EXPERIMENTAL MEADOW, JUNE 2020.

The eastern cottontail is the most common rabbit species in North America,[1] and the one we see around the Palisades. They eat vegetation almost exclusively, feeding on up to 145 different plant species, eating not only leaves and fruit, but bark, twigs, buds, flowers and seeds. They will even, I learned to my frustration, slice right through small tree saplings up to a half-inch in diameter.

But why eat *my* plants? Surely, wouldn't there be enough food for a rabbit in our surrounding parks? A walk down our trails taught me the reason. Everywhere in the forest around the Palisades, the ground is smothered in plants that rabbits cannot eat: English ivy, Japanese honeysuckle, porcelain berry, oriental bittersweet, knotweed. These are plants from Europe and Asia that escaped from our yards years ago, but eastern cottontail co-evolved with plants native to eastern North America; their bodies are tuned to extract nutrition from those native plants, and not from alien species. *Native plants are food,* and the decrease in native plant populations in our forest means that animals have less and less to eat there. They come to our yards because in the forest they're starving.

Fortunately for rabbits, they have a diversified enough palate to get by. But for North American insects the problem of inedible alien plants is devastating, because insects are what biologists call "specialists"—they can feed on *only* one or two plant species. The best-known example of this specialized relationship is between monarchs and milkweeds.[2] Monarch caterpillars can only feed and develop on milkweed plants. Without milkweeds, there can be no monarch caterpillars, and hence no monarch butterflies. As Douglas W. Tallamy describes in his inspiring new book, *Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard,* this specialization is typical of 90 percent of plant-eating insects. Thus, in order to have many different types of insects, we must have many different types of native host plants. In other words, *the diversity of native plants drives the diversity of insects.*[3]

Why is it important to have so many different kinds of insects? They are, in the words of famed biologist E.O. Wilson, "the little things that run the world." Without them, many other plant and animal populations, including our own, would collapse. Insects are the glue that holds ecosystems together, the channel through which energy, nutrients and genetic information are moved between plants and animals, soil and water. Caterpillars are food for baby birds. Bees transmit pollen that yields our food and forests. Dragonflies keep mosquitos in check. Moths are food for bats. Millipedes recycle leaf litter into nutrients that plants need to grow. Almost every one of the hundreds of insect species in our region plays a unique and important role in making our shared ecosystem thrive.

But as the diversity of insects has declined along with our native plants, our ecosystem has become less able to move energy, nutrients and genetic information to where they are needed. And in this simplified, unbalanced state, the ecosystem is less resilient to stressors and more vulnerable to opportunistic species which, unchecked, can overwhelm the system. Put another way, *declining diversity is an invitation to disease.*

This appears to be true for more than just forest ecosystems. Emerging research on the human microbiome suggests that an increased diversity of microbes in our digestive system is associated with lesser incidence of ailments linked to chronic inflammation, such as obesity, cancer, heart disease, asthma and diabetes.[4] Other research indicates that an increased diversity of microbiota on the skin supports increased immune function.[5] It turns out that this microbial diversity is the product of the diversity of plants we eat and come into contact with. Whether looking at people, forests or wildlife, we are learning that *biodiversity is fundamental to health.*

I witnessed the power of increasing biodiversity unfold in my own yard as that summer of rabbits turned to fall. Early one morning I was startled by a commotion just below my kitchen window: a flurry of huge, striped wings materialized into a large barred owl. We'd been hearing their nighttime hoots—as I'm sure many of you have—through the spring and early fall, but to see one face to face was breathtaking. When I learned that one of these owls' principal sources of food is

rabbits, I couldn't help but make the connection: perhaps as my yard became more welcoming to rabbits, it was supporting predators too.

This episode gives me hope that Tallamy's vision of the Homegrown National Park,[6] where homeowners everywhere turn their yards into conservation corridors, could actually work. By putting our yards in service to life, by aligning them with a purpose beyond ornament, we just might be able to regenerate the rich and varied ecosystem we all need to thrive. In fact, it is in this spirit that the PCA Environment Committee launched the Palisades Pollinator Pathway (see box on page 5 for more info).

Every day science proves we live in a world of miracles, a garden planet alive with an almost infinite variety of beings, each more beautiful than they need to be, each in their very existence creating the conditions for yet more life. I try to remember this when I find a clipped stem or a plant chewed to the ground. I will plant more. For now, I'm content to be a gardener of rabbits.

BARRED OWL SEEN THROUGH MY KITCHEN WINDOW (VIDEO FRAME), SEPTEMBER 2020.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_cottontail

[2] Milkweeds belong to the genus Asclepias, named after Asclepius, the Greek god of healing.

[3] Tallamy, D. W. Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard. Timber Press, 2019.

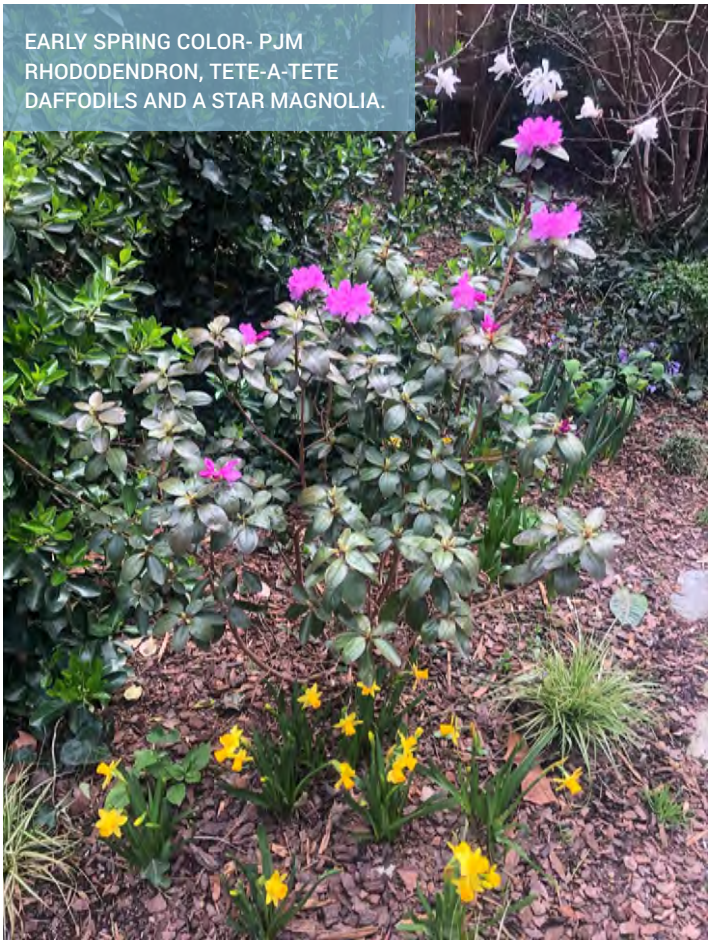
[4] Behar, M. (2020, July 15). Soil health means better human health: New research suggests soil health may have a surprising influence on your food. Successful Farming. Retrieved from https://www.agriculture.com/crops/soil-health/soil-health-means-better-human-health

[5] Shanahan, D.F., Lin, B.B., Bush, R., Gaston, K.J., Dean, J.H., Barber, E., & Fuller, R.A. (2015). Toward improved public health outcomes from urban nature. American Journal of Public Health, 105(3), 470–477. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302324

[6] https://homegrownnationalpark.org/

IN OUR BACKYARDS: SILVER MAPLE

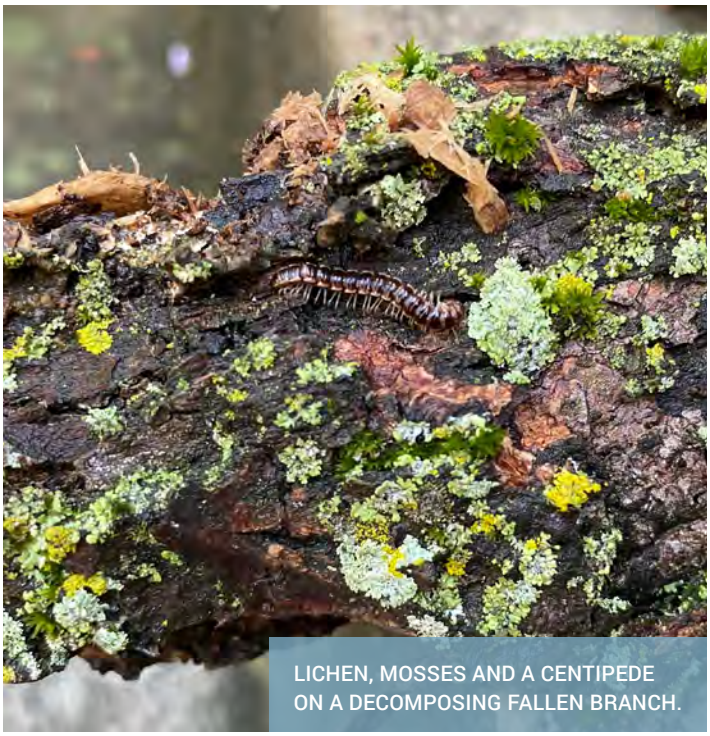
BY LINDSEY TRUITT



EARLY SPRING COLOR- PJM RHODODENDRON, TETE-A-TETE DAFFODILS AND A STAR MAGNOLIA.

Early spring is such an obvious time to look for rebirth and the greening of a new year, and I am finding it in the most unusual place: my dying Silver maple. As the crocus pop up around its roots, grass all around still brown except for the tufts of wild onions, there is much activity in its bare branches. Over the past year I have spied close to thirty species of birds digging around its half-dead branches and perching on its highest outposts. The trunk is hollow, and bright sky can be seen up through the largest limbs. Yes, it is dying but with a bit of annual pruning, and advice from arborists, it stays sound and strong even as it declines.

There is nothing I love more than being surprised by the familiar world around me, and that is what has happened recently with this maple. A branch had fallen on a windy night. When I picked it up to marvel at the complexity and colors of the various lichen on its surface, the bark broke away and revealed wood that was already nearly soil. Soft and fragrant, the branch held centipedes, a small snail and some pill bugs. This tree is turning to soil twenty feet up in the sky—no wonder the birds peck and dig in it!



LICHEN, MOSSES AND A CENTIPEDE ON A DECOMPOSING FALLEN BRANCH.

In forest ecology, a tree like mine is called a snag. I once thought that a snag was just a dead tree, but the DC arborist who checked it for me last year used that word casually as she reassured me that it didn't seem likely to fall down or die anytime soon. It turns out that a snag is any standing dead or dying tree. Besides the insect meals buried in the wood, the hollowed-out branches are important nesting sites for a number of our birds. Over the years I have also seen raccoons, opossums, squirrels, rats and various snakes using its trunk and branches as shelter.

SNOW ON DAFFODILS

I understand that not everyone would want to manage a dying tree on their property; we don't have much actual land around our houses and, of course, we prefer to have healthy living trees and other plants. I have thirty-eight living trees, one dying—this maple—and one dead one. The main worry and nuisance are falling branches. But in the right spot, not overhanging the house or places where people sit, it can be a great addition with all the creatures that are attracted to it.

The early weeks of spring require a bit of patience. When I look back at the photos of my garden from the last five Marches, I see snow covering blooming daffodils, spotty bits of color here and there, a few delicate groupings of blossoming shrubs; it really takes an optimist's eye to feel that spring is really here in March. There is so very little green at first. But the green will come—it is unstoppable, really—and the many blossoms and even our declining Silver maple will burst forth with leaf-covered branches. And in the meantime, the drama and intrigue of all the life that calls that tree home will take the edge off my impatience.

Early Spring Gardening Tasks

Gently cut back any perennials that have been left for the winter and remove branches and leaves from beds. **Rejuvenate the soil in pots and planters.** It is useful to have a large container such as a small kids' pool or a galvanized tub to dump the pots into. Add composted manure, leaf compost, topsoil or even new bagged potting soil. Mix the soil up and repot. If the planter is too large to move, then just remove half the soil and add new soil. **Prune any of the summer-blooming shrubs or trees**—butterfly bush, crape myrtle, roses. Only prune spring-blooming shrubs like azalea and lilac if branches are broken or greatly overgrown.
This is a great time to plant trees and shrubs, so visit a garden center. **Take pictures and make notes** of where your bulbs are coming up and where you wish you had more. You can refer to this in the fall.

IN PRAISE OF NERVY WHITE WINES

BY ROBERT WHALE

"Wine has just one responsibility, and that is to be red!"

So intoned my first wine class teacher back in the mid-70s in the DC area. A committed Francophile in general and a lover of Bordeaux (reds, of course) in particular, he was not alone in his thinking. So pervasive was this view that it would be three decades before I would come into contact with the white wines for which I was craving.

"What," you ask, "is a 'nervy white wine?'" In general, it is a wine that:

A. is made from white (actually green) grapes,

B. has rarely, if ever, seen barrel fermentation or maturation,

C. has rarely, if ever, been through malolactic fermentation.

When a white wine meets all these criteria, it will most likely be a nervy white wine, which means that it will possess a fruit/acid balance that will feel like swarms of microscopic butterflies dancing a samba on your palate, waking it in anticipation of the arrival of the sensuous sweet fruit a millisecond behind. The readily available wines made from the grape varietals of Riesling, Albarino, Grüner Veltliner, Verdelho, Sauvignon Blanc and Vermentino spring to mind.

A word about A, B and C (above).

A. You can make white wine from red grapes by taking the skins out of the fermentation, but why bother? Maybe winemakers just want to show they can, when the opposite is not possible. Blanc De Noir Champagne is a good example, but being a sparkling wine, it forgives a lot of sins.

B. When the Romans built roads throughout Europe, all manner of goods traveled between countries, including wine. Clay pots were the vessel of choice, but they allowed air into the wine causing oxidation, plus the pots broke easily. Oak barrels, used for transporting water, soon became the prime method of transporting and storing wine. Over time, the oak flavors that the staves imparted to the wine became the norm. Burgundy winemakers became masters at choosing and crafting oak to complement their white wines made from Chardonnay grapes.

When the US wine industry emerged in the early 80s, many winemakers (particularly in California) were trying to out-Chardonnay each other with highly alcoholic, monolithic wines fermented and matured in 100% new American oak. These wines were well received by the press and the public alike, despite being incompatible with any food except lobsters in butter. But oak was, and is, expensive, so in order to provide a similar style to the common folk, producers began switching to oak-flavored chemicals in the form of liquid and powdered oak, turning out Chardonnays for less than $10 a bottle with a taste reminiscent of sucking wet cardboard.

C. The primary acidity of grapes and apples is malic acid. The primary acidity of milk is lactic acid. Depending on the desired style, a winemaker can inoculate a fermented wine to induce a process of malolactic fermentation which changes the malic acid (bright, crisp, tart, fresh) into lactic acid (buttery smooth, oily, creamy). This process, which reduces the total level of acidity in the wine, is common with Chardonnay and Viognier, but does not occur with nervy whites. It is common to almost all red wine for two reasons: first, because the acid levels in reds would remove the enamel from your teeth without it, and also because it results in that unctuous mouth feel once unforgettably described to me as: "Liberace walking backwards down your throat in silk pajamas." I'll close on that note.

Spring is coming. Go try some nervy white wines.

In Vino Veritas. Cheers! Robert Whale

THE CONDUIT

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