

The Chesapeake Paddler



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CPA Piracies - recollections and remembrances



CPA "Piracies" began when members in local areas wanted to gather for weekly paddles. Pier 7 in Annapolis was one of the first. Pictured above, members gather under the trademark Pier 7 canopy for food and beer during one of many demo nights with Chesapeake Light Craft of Annapolis.

by Greg Welker

This is the second in a series of articles by Greg Welker on the history of the CPA, the first appeared in the [July issue](#) of the newsletter.

CPA trips were typically scheduled on weekends when most people had the time to paddle. However, there was a desire to paddle with those who were local to each other. The May 1991 newsletter contains the start of a local paddling group concept that evolved into the present-day CPA Piracies:

CPA PADDLE GROUPS AND GROUP LEADERS: *The paddle group you belong to is determined by where you live. We are organizing five paddle groups: Northern Virginia, Washington D.C./Maryland, Annapolis, Baltimore, and the DELMARVA*

peninsula. The purpose of a paddle group is to give you local contact to CPA. Group Leader(s) keep track of the paddlers list for their area and act as CPA representatives. Phone trees will be organized through group leaders.

Group leaders are: Annapolis – Ron Casterline, Maryland/DC Steve and Stephanie Flemming, Northern Virginia Mike Hughes and Baltimore Bill McMillan (No DELMARVA yet).

Later, Don Barker was announced as a Delmarva group leader and a Northern Neck Group was headed by Mike Cox.

So why "Piracies"? Where did this "Pirates" thing come

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from? In the early days of sea kayaking on the Chesapeake we were all trying to figure out what worked best for paddling clothing and kayaking gear. For kayaking gear and parts we would literally wander the aisles of boat shops looking for things that would work. Jack “Jog” Martin was well known for spending a lot of time in Annapolis Performance Sailing’s store in Eastport. His Pintail sea kayak often looked like a test bed of sailboat cams, levers and fittings as he worked to figure out items that would work for kayaking.

Similarly, we were all experimenting with clothing for kayaking. Some wore cotton dress shirts for sun protection, some t-shirts. Cutting edge was the lightest weight poly-pro underwear tops from REI or sporting goods stores. Rash guards and sun block clothing didn’t exist in our culture yet. Hats, and ways to keep the sweat from dripping down into your face were areas of experimentation, particularly if you were female and had long hair.

Beth Morris, a club member, started experimenting with bandannas. They seemed to work, and on one trip which was mostly Pier 7 paddlers she promised to bring everyone a bandanna to use. The largest and cheapest ones she could find happened to have skulls and crossbones on them (sea kayaking clubs have other similarities to motorcycle gangs if you think about it). The bandannas were a hit on the trip, and the pirate jokes started flowing as we picked out sailboats that we could board and plunder!

Ron Casterline dubbed us “the Pirates of Pier 7” as noted in the September 1995 newsletter. Thus, the Pier 7 Piracy came into existence. The paddle-night meals began with a few beers and bags of chips and grew from there. I can remember flipping burgers on a small hibachi-like gas grill (that grill later launched itself into the South River during a spring cleaning when the regulator caught fire and melted). Those informal meals developed into a regular process whereby participants sign up in pairs to provide meals each Wednesday, ranging from hot dogs to chicken and pasta.



After work piracy paddles often race sunset. Pictured above, the Pirates of Sugarloaf landing for a snack on an island upstream of Riley’s Lock in 2017.

As club members established other weeknight paddling groups, they liked the “Piracy” theme and the convention stuck. So far, we’ve only had one parrot that I know of (thanks to Todd Anglehoffer).

Looking back at the CPA newsletter and my log there were several piracies that existed at one time or another. A listing of the piracies, and their years of existence, as well as I know them, are listed below.

Pier 7 Pirates/Pirates of Arundel

Those of us who were local to the Annapolis area started getting together to paddle on weeknights. These paddles were coordinated by Ron Casterline. About mid-day on Wednesdays we would call Ron at work and he would let us know where we would be launching. The paddle locations tended to vary – Carr’s Wharf, Clark’s Landing, Annapolis, Spa Creek. Choices depended on weather and what was happening – we often watched sailboat races in the Annapolis harbor.

In 1991, Ron decided to become a kayak dealer for Seda Kayaks and rented a small room at Pier 7 Marina on the South River. This small room, which was built into the side of the hill and had a deck and nice sand beach to the north, became Ron’s kayak shop – Annapolis Coastal Kayak Center (ACKC). Ron sold Seda boats, gave lessons on weekends, and let the shop serve as a base for the

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Annapolis area weeknight paddlers.

We would gather each Wednesday night at Ron's at Pier 7 and paddle the South River. We also used the sand beach to the north and the area near the MD-2 bridge with its deeper water for rescue practice and rolling lessons. This area became known as "the rolling hole."

By 1993 the Pier 7 location, aka "Rolling at Ron's," was a standard Wednesday night event with paddlers bringing food for dinner. The convenience of Pier 7, with the sand beach, restrooms, and no need to communicate launch locations, quickly replaced the roving Wednesday night launches.

Thus, the Pier 7 chapter of CPA was born. As Ron's business grew, he later moved from the small building in the hill to the main marina building. The building in the hill was used for storing inventory and gradually became used for renting storage spaces for CPA member boats as well.

Ron decided to close Annapolis Kayaks in 1995, but he kept the hill room for kayak storage rentals. As he headed for retirement in 2004, the Pier 7 Pirates had a discussion around the picnic table one Wednesday night and decided that we would like to keep Pier 7 available

for CPA. I volunteered to take over the administration of the kayak storage space and that allowed us to keep paddling from Pier 7 on Wednesday nights.

One of the interesting bits of history associated with CPA's Pier 7 group is our association with the founder of Chesapeake Light Craft (CLC), the Anne Arundel County-based company that is well known as a provider of kits for kayaks and other small craft.

The original founder of CLC, Chris Kulczyk, would bring his early prototype boats down to Pier 7. He would let us paddle them and provide feedback on design, performance, and features. It was a great opportunity to be involved in the development of kayaks that we still see on the water today. His stitch and glue method of assembling a wooden kayak was pretty revolutionary and provided good boats at low prices.

Many CPA members built and paddled his original Cape Charles kayak as found in his 1991 book *The Kayak Shop*. That book was updated in 2001 as *The New Kayak Shop* and is still available at various locations online. CLC boats continue to be built and paddled by many club members.

The Pier 7 Pirates remained at Pier 7 until the summer of 2014, when the marina was sold to new owners and they terminated our lease. Since then, the Pier 7 Pirates have become known as the Pirates of Arundel and have returned to the original roving piracy nights utilizing kayak launches across Anne Arundel county.

Georgetown

This group paddled the Potomac River out of the Georgetown area from a kayak/canoe rental concession known as "Jack's boathouse." I believe this was the second piracy formed, based on this June 1993 newsletter item: "We have been having mid-week paddles on Thursday at Pier 7 Marina near Annapolis and on Wednesday at Thompson Boat Center in Washington DC" (Chris got the days backwards).

Dave Moore remembers this about the Georgetown group when it was at Frank's kayak



Local piracies were also a chance to improve kayaking techniques, such as this Pirates of the Sugarloaf skill session on Greenbriar Lake in 2005. The lady in the blue boat is Deb McKenzie, Pirate Queen at the time.

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concession by the Key bridge:

“The Georgetown Pirates was founded in 1999. We actually started gathering as an offshoot of a divorced person’s social group. The original group name was the Potomac River Rats. Eric Unterberg picked the locale based on using it for his ‘divorce group.’ I started after he asked me to be a safety boat for one of their outings.

“As I recall, Eric subsequently had some serious health issues and this is what sent him elsewhere. We might be the “Rats” today but Laura Butterbaugh really hated the name so we changed it to be in line with the larger CPA. At first, we were sort of a bit outlawish (I guess ‘cause we were true pirates after all!). I recall there was some tension and uncertainty on the part of the larger club with regards to who we were and what we were doing.

“We were all novice paddlers, we did not always require skirts (in deference to Frank’s rental boats). The group certainly contributed a lot of paddlers to the club - in large part I suspect because novices could rent gear and then paddle in an organized group. We did some skills work, too, eventually leading up to what became know I recall as “fall out of your boat night” Prizes were rubber duckies. We also began the 4th of July forays out to watch the fireworks.”

The Georgetown group was also active in working to protect their launch site. “We were all there for the defense of the (Jack’s) Boathouse against the proposal to moor a Clyde’s barge there. We all pitched in when Jack’s periodically got flooded out from a storm.

From Jesse Aronson, another long time Georgetown paddler:

“POG was started in 1999. The founder was Eric Unterberg, but he lasted only one season. David Moore saved us from oblivion in year two by stepping up as the Pirate King. I was new to paddling at the time and found CPA through the piracy. We had our own website and even had a cute river rat logo, sketched by a friend of Eric’s.

“As to core members, the Stephen that David Moore mentions was Rev. Stephen Edmunson, who was a faculty member at Virginia Theological Seminary. I remember going on CPA trips with Stephen where before launch the trip leader would go around and ask people to introduce themselves and give a summary of their paddling skills.

“When they got to Stephen he’d say something along the lines of ‘I’m Stephen, and in case all the rescues the other people mentioned don’t work, I know how to administer last rites.’ Definitely a more fun guy than you’d expect

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Enjoying evenings of paddling is the core of CPA piracies. The Patuxent Pirates heading out toward the Route 4 bridge at Solomons Island in 2009.

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from a seminarian.

“Laura Butterbaugh was an early regular. Yvonne Thayer started showing up pretty early. Joy Hecht (since moved away) and Joan Spinner and Mike Vaca. Barb Foley and Anatoly Ivasyuk (Barb designed the CPA logo, BTW). Nelson and Caroline Labbe were there as early as 2002. Susanita Hicks used to be a Georgetown, as was Marshall Woodruff, but that might have been a little later on.

“In the early years we’d have ‘Ducky Night’, where little rubber duckies were given out for various kayaking feats (fastest rescue, ability to stand up in your boat ...). On a hot summer night we’d have ‘fall out of your boat night’ where no one paddled - we just all did rescues and goofed around in the water near Jack’s. For many years our season ended with a Halloween paddle - we’d paddle in costume past the Georgetown waterfront then have a party on the dock at Jack’s.

“In about 2010 Jack’s lost its lease from the National Park Service which owned the land and the piracy moved to Columbia Island Marina near Alexandria where it still resides in 2014.”

Pirates of the Patuxent

Paddling out of Solomons Island in Calvert County, this group typically launches from the beach at the public parking area near Our Lady of the Star church. It was founded in 1997 by Jenny Plummer-Welker, Joq Martin, Don Polakovics, Cindi Vivaldi, Wayne Higgins and Sylvia Tognetti. There was an earlier weekday paddle group in the area too: From the July 1993 newsletter - “Mid-week paddles are still being held at Pier 7 marina in Edgewater and at Blue Wind in the Solomon’s island area on Wednesday evenings.

Also noted same in the July 1993 newsletter:

Pirates of the Potomac

Paddling out of Belle Haven Marina in Alexandria, this group was established by Bill Dodge. The earliest



Outings often go into the late evening and headlamps are standard fare. Pictured above, the Pirates of Baltimore on Curtis Creek in 2019 led by Jean Wunder, one of the co-captains (with Suzanne Farace).

newsletter mention of this group is from the April 1997 issue. The group paddles out of Bellehaven Marina. From Dick Rock, the Pirate Captain:

“Bill Dodge had the piracy when I started paddling and had been the captain for several years at that time. I joined it in 1999 and took it over in Sept 2000. I picked this piracy because it is 15 minutes from my home. I liked this group because it was low-key and I was just starting to paddle. Bill had peer paddles on weekends and always invited anyone that wanted to paddle to join him.”

Pirates of the Delmarva/Delmarva Paddlers

While almost all of the Piracies have been based on the Western shore of the Chesapeake Bay, there was some early interest on the Eastern shore.

Around 1995 a store on Maryland’s eastern shore in the Salisbury area started selling sea kayaks. At the same time, a couple of people in the area started paddling – Nelson Riggins and Larry Blevin. There was some interest in the area of forming a sea kayaking club and CPA was invited to attend their first organizational meeting. The group was composed of people who paddled canoes, recreational kayaks (think Pungo and Loon) and sea kayaks.

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After some discussion they decided to become affiliated with us. CPA expanded its trip ratings to indicate which trips would be suitable for canoes, and several lower eastern shore paddles were added to the calendar. The eastern shore group, known as the Delmarva Paddlers, were interested in racing canoes and kayaks, and became part of the CPA race series when it existed.

With the decline of the racing circuit this group became more of a recreational paddling group that had members who paddled with CPA and also members who raced in local and regional ACA-affiliated races. The group was also hurt by the pfiesteria outbreaks on several of the lower eastern shore rivers that kept them off local waters for a while and significantly damaged the health of at least one key member.

Through 2013 the Delmarva Paddlers existed as an online group that served as a way to organize local peer paddles and racing events. Currently it exists only as an email group for Delmarva kayak and canoe racing announcements.

Pirates of Baltimore

Paddling from various locations in the Baltimore area, Barry Marsh was the original founder of the group. From Barry Marsh:

"I formed the POB in 2003 or 2004 after realizing there were many paddlers in the Baltimore area who couldn't get to any other Piracies, like Pier 7, due to driving distance and traffic. The original locations were chosen by a poll of the early paddlers - alternating between Canton Waterfront Park, Rocky Point, and Dundee Creek Marina.

"I was the first Captain, followed by Bob Huber, then Jay Gitomer. Bob instituted the skills sessions that Jay and others followed up with; during the two or so years I ran the group it was mostly just evening paddle trips. For a



An article from the CPA newsletter about the first trips in 1995 by the Pirates of the Patuxent.

brief time we were known as the Pirates of the Patapsco since most of the existing Piracies at the time were 'Pirates of the P____,' (Potomac, Patuxent, Pier 7). We changed the name when we realized not many people a) knew Baltimore Harbor is the Patapsco River, and b) 'Pirates of Baltimore' was more inclusive of a larger area."

Pirates of the North

This group paddles from the Perryville/Havre De Grace area. From Bob Shakeshaft, the current pirate captain:

"The PON (Pirates of the North) started in August 2005.

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Wendy Baker Davis posted an invite to folks in the North Bay area. We first met at Perryville but decided Roberts Park in Havre de Grace was a better launch site for several reasons. It was centrally located, it did not close at sunset and the bugs at Perryville were awful.

“We continue to use Roberts Park because it gives us several nice paddling options that let us tailor our trips to the abilities of the paddlers that show up. We paddle up the Susquehanna River, east around Perry Point to Furnace Bay, south across open water to the Battery islands, south along the shore line to Swan Creek and, when we need to stay close, we paddle Garrett Island just across from our launch.

“The early paddlers were Wendy [Baker-Davis], Rob Burford, Kim Palmer, Michael Free and myself. People have come and gone. I am the only regular paddler from the original core but Wendy still comes down once in a while.”

From Wendy Baker-Davis:

“Our very first gathering was at Perryville Park. We managed to meet at the exact moment that 10,000 fly hatchlings greeted the world. We all retreated to our cars and unanimously chose Jean Roberts Park as our pirate port of call.

“As we began our piracy so late in the year (August), we did quite a bit of paddling in the twilight and dark that year. Somewhat unfamiliar with our surroundings, someone always managed to ground themselves on a sandbar or hit an unseen obstruction. This led to an unofficial nickname ‘the kayakers who knock into nuns.’

“One memorable paddle took us up-river into the remains of an old canal paralleling the main channel. There we met an ancient snapping turtle - exploratory hands were quickly snatched back into boats. We often paddle around Garrett Island, and over the years several



Pirate paddles are also a chance to improve safety practices such as this Baltimore Pirates Skill session in Dundee Creek in 2006. Jerry Sweet, in black PFD, from the Pirates of the North (Havre de Grace) is practicing a kayak re-entry.

of us have joined up with RiverSweep to do a one day cleanup of the Island.

“We have done a few weekend excursions - to the Sassafras and up to Holtwood on the Susquehanna. We explored the petroglyphs at Safe Harbor. Other early activities included BBQs at Michael Free’s place near Elkton, Dinners at Coakleys, and an occasional cold beer on Rob Burford’s boat at the Marina.”

Other Piracies

Over the years there were several other piracies in the area, for which I have limited knowledge of their formation and history. These included: the Pirates of Sugarloaf, who paddled the Montgomery county reservoirs and the Potomac around Violets Lock; Pirates of the Eastern Shore, a more northerly group than the Delmarva group; Pirates of the Lakes, who paddled the Susquehanna dam pools above the Conowingo; and the Pirates of the James, below Richmond, Virginia.

Piracies are an integral part of CPA and help maintain the club as a leader in promoting skills, safety and the just plain fun of the sport of sea kayaking. And finally, thanks to all the Pirate Captains and many volunteers who make CPA possible. ♠