

# Brooklyn Daily Eagle

## The guardians of the Gowanus

July 3, 2019 Alex Williamson



"Welcome to Venice, Jerko," the graffiti across from 365 Bond St. reads. Eagle photo by Alex Williamson

When Owen Foote founded the Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club in 1999, the club's inventory consisted of two canoes padlocked to a chain-link fence where Second Street dead ends at the canal.

Twenty years later, the Dredgers have dozens of members, a [calendar packed with events](#) and a fleet of canoes, which they now store on the ground floor of 365 Bond St., a luxury residential building just across the cul-de-sac from their original site.

The group takes Brooklynites out for canal tours, hosts a range of events in their boathouse (including ukulele meetups) and gathers on Sundays for a weekly canoe workout on the canal.

They also “promote waterfront stewardship” and “raise awareness of sewer overflow issues” in the neighborhood, a problem residents worry will be exacerbated by the [city’s rezoning plan](#) for Gowanus, which could bring 20,000 new residents into the neighborhood where the already overtaxed sewage system regularly overflows into the canal after a heavy rain.

The slick [new development](#) at 365 Bond St. is on the site of a former industrial lot that required a spot rezoning. The building boasts rooftop terraces, a yoga studio, a 24/7 concierge and apartments renting for up to \$7,200 a month — a steep price, considering they’re located on the shore of a notoriously toxic waterbody.



Founding Dredger and club treasurer Owen Foote. Eagle photo by Alex Williamson

“Many people are moving into this building thinking that the cleanup is over,” said Foote, a Manhattan-raised architect who turned to canoeing the Gowanus when designing corporate offices left him listless in his early career. “It hasn’t even begun. But it comes down to market forces and there’s only so much land.”

The irony of gentrifying a federal Superfund site isn’t lost on everyone. When the building opened in 2016, residents were greeted with a freshly spray-painted message on a brick wall facing their new home: “Welcome to Venice, Jerko,” the graffiti still reads.

Casey Edwards, who joined the Dredgers on a June paddling voyage, was also thinking of Venice — specifically the eye infection Katharine Hepburn contracted in 1955 when she fell into that canal while shooting “Summertime.”

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“I’m not worried about canoeing, I just don’t want to fall in,” Edwards said. “I think that would be a bad idea.”

According to Foote, no one has fallen into the fetid water from a canoe yet, but people do fall from the steep dock into the canal “between four and 10 times a year.”

Foote comes to the boathouse straight from work at least once a week and canoes the Gowanus in a dress shirt and tie. After a few rainy days, the water on a day in late June was near black and noxious-smelling, topped by an oily sheen — a byproduct of the toxic coal tar sediment at the canal’s bottom.

Foote guided paddlers down the canal and talked them through its history, from its origin as the oyster-rich “Gowanus Creek,” named by the Dutch for the Lenape chief in the area, to its proximity to the Battle of Brooklyn during the Revolutionary War, to its role as a hub for soap factories, tanneries and three coal gas manufacturing plants in the 19th century.

The coal gas plants are responsible for the tarry sludge at the canal’s bottom, and largely responsible for its designation in 2010 as an [EPA Superfund site](#). According to the EPA, the Gowanus is “one of the nation’s most seriously contaminated water bodies” with heavy metals like mercury, lead and copper found at harmful levels in its sediment — not to mention E. Coli.

Foote has given the history tour countless times. His flow on this voyage was only broken when Anna Andres, who tagged along with a friend, asked, “Is that an animal?”

The canoers were paddling through an island of garbage, and in the mix with the plastic cups and cigarette packs was a swollen furry body floating on the surface.

“You may be spotting some carcasses that are going to be contributing to the habitat of fish in New York Harbor,” said Foote. “That’s because it was raining in the city of New York, and when it rains in the city of New York our harbor is polluted.”





Spot the rat. Eagle photo by Alex Williamson

Paddlers spotted several more rats during the tour. Foote explained the rats die in the sewer and are eventually dumped into the canal along with the rest of the area’s combined sewer overflow, a mix of stormwater runoff and raw sewage.

“Most goddamn rats I’ve had on one voyage, and of course I’ve got the press with me,” Foote said later.

According to the club’s captain, Brad Vogel, despite the evident pollution, the Gowanus has supported a variety of wildlife ever since the flushing tunnel was repaired in 1999. Vogel says he and other Dredgers have spotted mussels, clams, crabs, herons, egrets, snails, king fishers, cormorants and once even a seal in the water.

“It’s all about hitting stuff at just the right moment, where the water, the tide, the seasonal conditions are just right,” said Vogel, who likened the canal to a Monet painting. “You keep going out and seeing the haystack and every time it’s different. It’s constantly changing.”

The Dredgers aren’t just observing the canal’s environment. They’ve been monitoring the water quality in partnership with the [NYC Watertrail Association](#) since 2012. The club has found what you’d expect — high levels of E. Coli in the water, but not consistently. The [numbers](#) of bacteria vary widely depending on the time, recent rainfall and where the samples are taken.



The club also partners with the [Billion Oyster Project](#) to bring oysters, which serve as natural water filters, back to the Gowanus. The Dredgers installed a clump of oysters in the canal and have been monitoring their growth and health monthly.

During the tour, canoers pass beneath a variety of bridges — a “little engineers’ museum” according to Dredger Kelly Sanford — by a sanitation plant shipping out trash by the barge, past big box stores like Lowes, and the [S. W. Bowne building](#), an 1880s grain storehouse currently under demolition despite an outcry from preservationists.

“Whatever the owner of the Bowne site does with it in the future, if it’s within my capacity I’ll be there to oppose it,” Vogel said. “It’s shenanigans pure and simple.”

The Dredgers have been front and center during the rezoning input process, mostly pushing hard for community amenities that would allow “interaction with the shoreline,” and increase public canal access, according to Foote.

“We went to over 30 meetings, participated in lengthy discussions, did homework assignments, a whole bunch of different things, and the scoping doc was released just about a month and a half ago and ignored everything that the community has suggested,” he said.



The crowd paddles out into the canal. Eagle photo by Alex Williamson

The Dredgers aren't anti-development or anti-rezoning, but they don't want to see more parking lots like the one Whole Foods constructed on the canal's banks, and they're critical of the "bland as hell" esplanades like the one the developers of 365 Bond built on the shoreline.

"We know [the industrial zoning] is going," said Foote. "It's more a matter of what's coming. We've been arguing for many years, replace it with something equally cool."

"I'm hoping for a canal that's cleaned up but not sanitized or sterilized in a broader life sense," said Vogel.

If the city has its way, there will be a lot more buildings like 365 Bond sprouting up along the canal in the next 20 years. The Department of City Planning's rezoning proposal could bring up to 20,000 new residents into the neighborhood, where the sewage system already dumps roughly [263 million gallons of combined sewer overflow](#) into the canal annually.

The Dredgers have [joined Gowanus residents](#) in calling for the city to stay out of the EPA's way during the cleanup, which won't be completed until 2027 at the earliest. Foote sees canoeing on the canal as one way to get lawmakers' attention.

"We're building a constituency for harbor reclamation," said Foote. "Nobody cares about the waterfront if nobody goes to the waterfront."