

## The Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club



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Can Brooklyn's infamously fetid Gowanus Canal really transform the borough into the "Venice of New York"?

By Howard Halle  
Photographs by Patrick Andrade



He may have been raised on the Upper West Side, but with his ruddy cheeks, Owen Foote looks like a grown-up Huck Finn as he pilots our canoe across the Gowanus Canal. Come again? Gowanus Canal? *Canoe?*

That's right. Foote is a charter member of the Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club, a group of 12 paddling enthusiasts who regularly explore this legendarily fetid stretch of water. Dedicated to restoring the old heart of industrial Brooklyn-through "environmental recreation," as GDCC literature puts it-the members hope that the canal will someday be dredged of decades' worth of toxic sludge. Only then can the area's rebirth as the "Venice of New York" truly begin.

The prospects for a Lido in the borough of Kings have already improved, thanks to the March 2000 reopening of the flushing tunnel. Built in 1911 and equipped with a ship's propeller that pumped fresh water from New York Harbor into the Gowanus, the tunnel had been out of commission for some 30 years.

Foote, an urban planner, doesn't care for the Venice comparison; he's concerned with promoting ecotourism and the return of fish and fowl. "I've seen mama and papa crabs making baby crabs out here," he says cheerfully. But on a sultry June afternoon, as we wend our way out to Gowanus Bay, it's hard to picture procreating crabs among the dead rats and discarded condoms that bob atop slicks of milky scum. At one point, the canoe knifes through a mini-Sargasso Sea of human feces. The bouquet is heady.

Foote is apologetic. Sure, it stinks, he says; it's low tide, and it rained the day before, which means the sewers have backed up and discharged into the canal. All of this comes on top of some recent problems with the flushing tunnel; jammed in May by an errant timber, it's only been back in operation for a few days.

Fast-forward a couple of months: It's high tide on a beautiful Saturday and the water is...practically sparkling. "You could *swim* in this," Foote says. Minnowlike killifish shimmy by. And yes, there are crabs!

High tide and low is as good a metaphor as any for the fortunes of the Gowanus, which have risen, fallen and risen again since the Dutch settled this former creek in the 1600s, naming it for chief Gowanee of the Canarsee tribe. The canal was built before the Civil War; the resulting boom of printing plants, oil-storage facilities and dye works produced so much pollution that the waterway was nicknamed Lavender Lake. By the time the flushing tunnel broke down, the area was already in decline: The Army Corps of Engineers stopped dredging the canal in 1955; waterfront jobs had fled to New Jersey; much of the area was torn down to make way for the low-income Gowanus Houses; and the canal was sealed off from the rest of Brooklyn by construction of the Gowanus Expressway. It became a place to unload garbage-and bodies (the canal was reputedly a favorite dumping ground for the Mafia).

As we paddle along, the first signs of a revival flicker into view. Seagulls and mussels have reappeared. Vestiges of the canal's industrial history-warehouses, cranes-have taken on a timeworn patina of charm. A developer who's converting two storage silos into high-tech offices recently hosted an arts festival on the property. And there's a newly renovated warehouse full of high-end furniture; the owner plans to open a café overlooking the canal.



Moving into Gowanus Bay, we pull alongside an old freighter tied to a pier. It had been confiscated by Port Authority police for smuggling drugs and has been sitting there rusting for months, abandoned except for snarling guard dogs patrolling inside. A huge German Shepard pokes its snout through a porthole and bares its teeth; nearby, an egret snatches a fish. It's all a bit cognitively dissonant, like a Cindy Adams version of an ecosystem: Only in New York, kids, only in New York.

Foote's enthusiasm is infectious. Holding up a glass jar filled with a black aggregate of dredged sludge, he chirps, "You can make bathroom tile with this stuff!" While the idea of a Park Avenue crapper made of Gowanus muck has a nice moral symmetry, you can't help but wonder whether the future Venice of New York will turn out to be Soho by the sea. Foote, however, envisions a promenade running past middle-income housing and light-industrial concerns-and maybe a boathouse for the GDCC. Yup, he's a romantic. And he's a bit of a cornball, too. Bringing up George Washington's 1776 defeat by the British along Gowanus Creek, Foote mentions that if you listen, you can hear muskets in the night. Doesn't he mean gunshots from the Gowanus Houses? "Those are the kind of perceptions," he says, "that we are trying to change." As we pass under the Carroll Street bridge, a pair of teenagers rush over to the rail and shout "Yo, are you stoopid? What are you doing in that @#\*\$%!?" Some perceptions may be harder to change than others.

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