



**Forty Years of
Teaching Wonder:
A Short History of
Sandy Creek Nature Center**

**Compiled by
Suzanne A. Lindsay
September 2013**

Forty Years of Teaching Wonder: A Short History of Sandy Creek Nature Center

Forty years ago, convinced that Athens needed a place to learn about how living things and their environment intertwine and how people can care for the natural world that sustains them, a group of citizens—teachers, conservationists, concerned citizens and governmental officials—came together to found what is now the Sandy Creek Nature Center (SCNC). The story of how SCNC grew from a dream to today's leader in environmental education has two strands. The first is the force of interest and action expressed through cooperation among individuals, the private nonprofit organization that began the Center and now helps to sustain it, and the Athens–Clarke County Government, which owns and operates SCNC as part of its Leisure Services Department. The second is the establishment and growth of the environmental education center itself, including both the physical place and the programs offered there.

The Place Came First

Sandy Creek begins well north of Athens and drops through wetlands and wooded banks to meet the North Oconee River, just above the city proper. In common with most Piedmont streams, lumbering and farming practices of the 19th and early 20th centuries in its watershed loaded the creek and its floodplain with massive amounts of eroded soil. Much of the floodplain became a hardwood swamp. There was severe flooding after heavy rains, coupled with lower water quality. By the late 1960s, the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, cooperating landowners, and Clarke County together proposed, and later built, a series of dams to check erosion and to create a reservoir that would control flooding. This became Lake Chapman, now the centerpiece of Sandy Creek Park and an important water supply for Athens-Clarke County.

Further along the creek, farming and a few small-scale industries occupied the banks. Although early records are sketchy, brick

manufacturing may have begun as early as 1881. From 1906 through the early 1920s, a series of firms made bricks at the confluence of Sandy Creek and the North Oconee River, using patented processes. Clay and water from what is now called the Claypit Pond provided the raw materials. When the brick factory went out of business, its structures gradually disappeared, except for foundations and the remains of the tall chimney that served the kilns. The abandoned pond eventually became a home for beavers, once nearly exterminated but now protected, which moved in from the nearby river. They built dams that raised the water level in the pond, fed on the aquatic plants that established themselves there, and constructed stick lodges and tunnels in the banks of the pond.

High ground above the pond was lumbered and then farmed. The last farmers were the Thurmonds, who from 1953 to 1968 lived in a house (later burned) located where the Allen House now stands. Swanson and Michael Thurmond, the latter the youngest of a large family and later the State Commissioner of Labor, each recall the isolation and wildness of the area. The family raised crops, hens, and hogs, which occasionally escaped to the swamps. They and nearby residents fished in the “Brickyard Lake.” Wild animals abounded, Swanson Thurmond remembers, with sightings of birds; a glimpse of a bobcat; the tracks of an animal, possibly a fox, that raided the hen house; and a nighttime chorus of animal sounds.

Scientific knowledge and appreciation of the natural area surrounding the creek began as early as 1938, when Thomas D. Burleigh described its avian species in “The Birds of Athens” and “The Birds of Georgia”. Faculty and students from the University of Georgia continued to collect specimens and describe the natural history of the area. In 1969, however, the Soil Conservation Service proposed draining the Sandy Creek wetlands and channelizing the creek to control floods. These were accepted methods of the day. Channelization—removing accumulated soil down to bedrock and straightening the streambed, meant that storm water moved quickly down a stream, rather than rising and spreading out over a floodplain.

Local conservationists soon realized that these actions would lower the adjacent water table and destroy wetlands along the creek that served as natural filters and habitat for many plants and animals. In 1970, led by the Athens Chapter of the Georgia Conservancy, concerned biologists looked to the Georgia Natural Areas Council for advice on how to protect the area. The Soil Conservation Service was persuaded to abandon its plans, and the Conservancy began educating local citizens on the potential of the area as a natural laboratory and nature preserve. In 1972, after a study by an environmental design class at the University of Georgia, the Conservancy proposed the creation of a 700-1000 acre Sandy Creek Nature Preserve. Unfortunately, its suggested steward, the University of Georgia, could not buy and maintain such an area.

That same year, Governor Jimmy Carter established the Heritage Trust Advisory Commission to recommend important natural sites for purchase and preservation. Among its first applications was a preliminary proposal to establish the Sandy Creek Nature Preserve. In 1973, the Trust's regional committee put the Sandy Creek Nature Preserve, based on the purchase of 1000 acres, first among its projects for Phase 2 of Heritage Trust funding.

Making A Nature Center Happen

Independently, faculty of the University of Georgia had begun an effort to add more environmental education to University programs, especially to the training of future teachers in the College of Education. One participant was Dr. Walter L. Cook, on whose recollections much of this account of the early history of SCNC is based. Dr. Cook remembers that the University efforts were not getting very far when, in the fall of 1972, Dan Hope (head of the Recreation & Parks Department for the City of Athens) proposed the creation of a local nature center to him. The men attended a meeting of the Natural Science for Youth Foundation in Jacksonville, Florida. John Ripley Forbes, the President of the NSYF and founder

of many nature centers, encouraged them to work toward a center and provided practical advice on how to begin.

In January, 1973 Dr. Cook and Dan Hope brought together the group that became an ad hoc Steering Committee for a proposed regional center. The group formally incorporated as a 501-c-3 private nonprofit entity, the Northeast Georgia Nature Center, Inc. on October 24, 1973. Its charter members were Dr. Charles Aguar, Ben Chappell, Dr. Walter Cook, Mahalah Harrison, Dan Hope, Dr. Al Ike, Suzanne Lindsay, Dr. Robert Saveland, Dr. Don Scott, Dr. Alma Walker, and Mary Lamar West, who together became the first Board of Directors. NECNC, Inc. was, by its incorporation, obligated to raise money to build, equip, staff, and operate a Nature Center. After investigating five potential sites, NEGNC, Inc. recommended the purchase of an estimated 110 acres at the confluence of Sandy Creek and the North Oconee River.

Purchasing the land was complicated by multiple owners, legal requirements, and the need for a sponsoring organization. Although the land lay in Clarke County, outside the city limits, only Athens had a recreation department, one of the Heritage Trust requirements. NEGNC, Inc. secured an option on the tract, a critical step made possible by John Ripley Forbes' loan of \$3,000. The actual purchase from five owners involved not only their public-spirited thinking and goodwill in setting an achievable price, but also funds from three governments. Working out the arrangements took time, but on October 30, 1974, the 102-acre site (its final size) was purchased through NEGNC, Inc., which immediately deeded it to the city. The Heritage Trust provided \$40,000, and the City of Athens and Clarke County shared equally in another \$40,000. Half of the funds purchased the land; the remainder was earmarked for a building.

The site now had a name: Sandy Creek Nature Center. Members of NEGNC, Inc. and other volunteers began cleaning up the area even before the purchase was final. Access was through the unpaved and badly deteriorated Old Commerce Road, which ran down the center

of the tract. The dead-end road had become a trash dump when the new road to Commerce opened in 1940, the covered bridge across Sandy Creek was demolished, and the last farmer moved away. Farming and logging also left scars, and debris and the remains of the old brick factory were scattered through the returning forest. The unpaved road often was impassable for vehicles. Workers walked in on planks laid across mud holes. Volunteers took out load upon load of trash and abandoned materials, hoping that their trucks would not bog down.

Constructing a Building and Program

In July, 1975 NEGNC, Inc. signed a twenty-five year lease with the City of Athens, which required the corporation to build two picnic shelters, a fireplace, toilets, and picnic tables. Working from a master plan drawn by Walter Cook and Charles Aguar, the main shelter — a large L-shaped platform perched above the Claypit Pond -- was designed by David Lunde and built by Glen Bone Construction. The building was designed to disturb the fragile hillside site as little as possible. Forty years later, its massive creosoted pilings and treated lumber floors and roof are as sound as ever, and the no-flush composting toilets installed after considerable negotiation with the Public Utilities and Health Departments still function flawlessly. (The site had no water or sewer service, and the City's planners were understandably concerned that waste disposal might eventually pollute Sandy Creek and enter the water supply through the City pumping station located just above the confluence of creek and river.) Construction of the interpretive building (now Fireside Hall) began in 1976 and was completed in 1977. A much smaller shelter built on the Crossridge Trail stood until 2005. The first trails were cut by volunteers of all ages.

In January, 1977 NEGNC, Inc. opened Sandy Creek Nature Center to the public. The building was ready, and the road had been graded and ditched. Admission to the grounds and building was free, and remains so to this day. Many programs also were free, but others

charged small fees that would help to support the new center, practices that would continue as the Center's operations grew.

Realizing that operating the Nature Center would require both experience in environmental education and more time and organization than volunteers could provide, NEGNC, Inc. hired its first Director, Janice Matthews. She began developing programs and materials and inaugurated the first field trips. The Clarke County School District contracted with SCNC and began bringing busloads of students out for hands-on experiences in the natural world — the start of a relationship that has deepened and developed over the years. To extend the work off-site, Jan also began creating travelling boxes full of information and activities on specific aspects of natural history, such as birds, mammals, and plants, that could be checked out by teachers to explore with their students in their own classrooms.

When Deborah Sheppard succeeded Jan a few months later, she recruited more volunteers and successfully wrote grants that allowed her to add paid staff. Programs expanded and began to outrun the spaces available, especially in bad weather. A donation of \$8,000 from the Athens Junior Assembly (now the Athens Junior League) allowed the enclosing of offices and a classroom on half of the L-shaped platform in 1978.

The Center also expanded physically. Clarke County bought thirty acres along the northern boundary, insulating the lower part of the grounds from potential development along the access road. The Youth Conservation Corps brought in more outside funding and energetic young workers, who constructed a stairway down the hillside from the Interpretive Building to the Claypit Pond, and further up the Pine Ridge Trail, a second connection to a pond boardwalk. A network of trails cut by hand began to emerge.

The Transition to County Operation

When Nancy Blount, the third Director, succeeded Deborah Sheppard in August of 1979, she found an organization thriving in its programming, served by well-trained and enthusiastic staff and volunteers, and well received by the public, but short on money. Efforts to increase paid memberships, which started at \$5 for a student and \$15 for a family, and other special projects, brought in funds, but NEGNC, Inc. had no endowment to support the increasing demand for programs. Nonetheless, Nancy found ways to add new features and equipment. In the fall of 1980, a log house (ca. 1815) but facing destruction was moved onto the Nature Center's grounds, where it provided a new teaching space and inspiration for historically related programs. A grant paid for a van, which became a "Mobile Nature Center", making trips to schools easier. In 1980 SCNC passed a milestone when 20,000 persons participated in its programs over the year.

In the meantime, Clarke County was entering a new era as it prepared to open Sandy Creek Park, scheduled to begin operations in October of 1981. Located four miles north of the Nature Center and built around Lake Chapman, the park included a beach, playing fields, fishing spots, wooded areas with trails, and other recreational features. The county needed a Parks Department to run the new site and to develop its programs. Nancy Blount saw the possibilities for joining the new Park to the Nature Center administratively and financially. With the agreement of NEGNC, Inc., she negotiated the transfer of SCNC to the Clarke County Parks Department in July of 1981. NEGNC, Inc. deeded the Center to the County, which took over its day-to-day operations and expenses, including staff and other operating costs. When Nancy became the first Director of the Clarke County Parks Department, David Riddle succeeded her as Director of Sandy Creek Nature Center.

A New Role for NEGNC, Inc.

NEGNC, Inc. now began a new role as the protector, guide, and supporter of the work of the Center. Without the responsibilities of ownership and operation, the nonprofit group was free to encourage and promote environmental education and conservation in general and at SCNC, including raising funds for special projects and needs that County funding could not cover.

The 1980s saw rapid growth in SCNC programs for children and adults. A traveling exhibit went to every elementary and middle school in the Clarke County School District. StarLab, an inflatable, portable planetarium, began to tour elementary schools. New exhibits were installed in Fireside Hall. After informal earlier camps, Sandy Creek Day Camp began in the summer of 1986, providing hundreds of children with intensive and varied environmental experiences. From the beginning, the Day Camp was accredited by the American Camp Association, ensuring that it met high standards for facilities, program, and safety,

SCNC welcomed a new Director in 1985 when Michael Wharton, an experienced staff member, succeeded David Riddle. Clarke County expanded the Center's site by buying 23 acres of land in 1986 and 44 more in 1987. The current 225 –acre campus was completed when the Champion International Paper Company, the parent corporation of Dairy Pak, an Athens industry, gave the County 25 acres on the eastern side of the North Oconee River.

The 1990's were even busier. In March, 1990, NEGNC, Inc. legally changed its name to Sandy Creek Nature Center, Inc., removing a source of public confusion about its relationship to the Center. SCNC, Inc. members worked hard to establish the 4.1-mile Sandy Creek Greenway, which joined the Nature Center to Sandy Creek Park and opened in 1990. Cook's Trail, part boardwalk and part unpaved trail, ran up the creek. It was named in honor of Dr. Walter L. Cook, its advocate, engineer, and construction supervisor. Sandy Creek Greenway was the first part of the larger North Oconee River

Greenway project to be completed. Dr. Charles Aguar, a founder of NEGNC, Inc., envisioned preservation of the River's edges and a continuous walking/biking trail along the North Oconee River from northern Clarke County, all the way past the University of Georgia. Members of SCNC, Inc. worked vigorously to promote the Greenway, and later helped to guide it until the Greenway Commission was established.

As new programs began and older ones expanded, the teaching facilities were more and more crowded. Planning for a new interpretive building began in 1988. The building was financed entirely by SCNC, Inc., completed and equipped in 1992, and turned over to Clarke County as a gift. Located next to Fireside Hall, it contained a large classroom, offices, and laboratories. It was named the Alma Toevs Walker Discovery Hall in memory of a founder of the Nature Center who had talked the U.S. Soil Conservation Service out of channelizing Sandy Creek and had served many terms on the Board of Directors. A scientist by training, Dr. Walker also was a dedicated, energetic, and effective member of the Georgia Conservancy for many years before her untimely death.

Building Again

Discovery Hall helped, but SCNC still needed more space. In 1993, the now-unified Athens-Clarke County government decided to apply for a Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax. Among the projects included—which could be constructed only if a public referendum approved the tax - was a much larger building for SCNC. The Board of Directors of SCNC, Inc., supported the proposal and volunteered to raise money for exhibits, furnishings, and educational equipment.

The SPLOST passed in 1994 provided \$1.1 million for the new building, which had several purposes. It would give visitors to the Center a new destination, an indoor learning area that supplemented the outdoor trails and ecosystems. To further the Center's educational programs, the plans called not just for larger classrooms and operating

areas, but also for the construction of exhibits centered around five themes: coastal ecology, freshwater wetlands, forestry, agriculture, and urban life. The new building also would demonstrate energy efficient, environmentally friendly design and construction that incorporated recycled materials and innovative features that would make the entire building a teaching tool.

Despite construction delays, funding cutbacks, and a consequent reduction in size, the 11,400 square foot building opened in 1998. It was named the Environment, Natural Science, and Appropriate Technology Center, a descriptive but unwieldy title soon abbreviated to ENSAT. Funds raised by SCNC, Inc. from many sources, including individuals, foundations, state government, and a special “Put a Turtle in the Tank” campaign, paid for equipment and the construction of the first interactive learning center. The coastal exhibit was chosen for its depiction of an environment unfamiliar to many Athenians but vital to the state and to the educational objectives of local schools. Its dramatic centerpiece was and is a large salt-water aquarium that houses an endangered juvenile loggerhead turtle. A special agreement with Georgia’s Department of Natural Resources provides rescued hatchlings and allows them to be exhibited until they are large enough to be returned to the sea. Smaller aquariums contain other marine species. A diorama and interpretive posters depict a dune complex and the nest of a turtle—complete with a lurking predator, a taxidermied raccoon.

A multi-use classroom could be opened to accommodate large groups. Various Athens organizations, such as the Audubon Society, soon were meeting there regularly. An elevated reading platform, given in memory of a SCNC supporter, offered parents and children a cozy place to read about nature, and a puppet theatre beneath it encouraged acting out the stories. Behind the reception desk, the Frog Pond Gift Shop, operated by SCNC, Inc., offered nature-related goods, with profits going to support the nonprofit’s work.

At the entrance to the parking lot, SCNC staff & members created a miniature Piedmont prairie, planting grasses and other plants that once were found in natural and Native American-made openings in the forest. Behind the new building, a butterfly garden attracted children and adults. A demonstration of composting methods educated visitors on recycling organic materials. The increased parking space accommodated large outdoor gatherings and visitors to the increasingly popular public programs.

In 1999, a reorganization of the Athens-Clarke County government created the Natural Resources Division, which included SCNC. Michael Wharton headed the new division, and Randy Smith succeeded him as the Facility Supervisor of Sandy Creek Nature Center.

The Numbers Go Up, Up, Up

More and more visitors took advantage of Sandy Creek Nature Center's new facilities. By 2001, over 600 children attended its day camps and more than 15,000 people took part in general recreational activities. Two years later, SCNC had over 40,000 visitors. The connection to the North Oconee River Greenway was completed with a bridge over Sandy Creek, bringing in bikers, joggers, and explorers of the riverside. The Greenway became a popular location for sponsored foot races, which often began or ended at SCNC. Twice-yearly races soon became another fund-raising opportunity for SCNC, Inc. Over four miles of trails offered access to the Center's many natural environments. An elevated trail constructed to ADA standards opened woods and intermittent wetlands to disabled persons. Programs were available for all ages, from toddlers enrolled in "Babies and Beasties" and school children on trail walks led by volunteer guides, to workshops for elder citizens interested in exploring natural history.

By 2004, over 50,000 people visited SCNC each year. The Athens Visitors and Convention Bureau named SCNC a regional attraction

and added it to its list of 10 most visited areas in Clarke County. Summer day camps filled quickly, with A-CC sponsored scholarships available for qualifying families. Seasonal “minicamps” attracted children during school vacations.

Once again, SCNC was outgrowing its facilities. Construction of the wetlands learning center in 2001, made possible by Athens-Clarke County SPLOST funding and generous grants from individuals, foundations, and the Georgia Power Company, made clear that the remaining space in the exhibit hall could not contain the three additional learning centers SCNC, Inc. had planned. The staff of the A-CC Natural Resource Division had their headquarters in the building, adding to the congestion. Administrative offices and workspaces, especially the animal care facilities, were overcrowded. Storage was severely limited and the building’s entry and lobby could scarcely contain visiting classes. Even the parking lot had problems: school buses and other heavy vehicles wore down its recycled asphalt surface, traffic circulation was poor, and drainage was inadequate.

Growing Again

By the time another SPLOST initiative was announced by the Athens-Clarke County government, the need to expand the ENSAT building was more than clear. SCNC, Inc. undertook to make the case for the expansion to the SPLOST Citizens’ Advisory Committee, which reviewed all applications for the program. Recommended by the CAC and accepted by the Athens-Clarke County government, the expansion won a place on the SPLOST referendum. SCNC, Inc. members then worked vigorously to inform the public of what funding would accomplish. When the SPLOST passed in 2004, it included an estimated \$2.8 million for the expansion (later reduced somewhat). SCNC, Inc. undertook to raise additional funds to make a good project even better.

SPLOST funds were not available for several years, which SCNC staff and the nonprofit used to refine plans for the building. The

project already had a firm basis, since both groups had been working for almost ten years to define the goals and content of the learning centers. SCNC, Inc. mounted an extensive fundraising campaign, “Reach for the Stars”, to supplement public funding. By 2013, with the last phases of the expansion almost complete, the campaign had secured donations of more than \$300,000 from individuals, organizations, and foundations.

As part of the SPLOST process, four SCNC, Inc. members joined a project user group that included SCNC staff and Keith Sanders, the SPLOST construction supervisor assigned to the project. The user group sat in on the selection of the architectural and exhibit construction firms. It then helped plan the building, working with the architect, Greg Walker of Houser Walker Architecture, on successive versions of the plans that turned general concepts into working documents. The committee also planned and checked every word of the exhibits with the exhibit construction firm, Split Rock Studios of Minnesota.

Early planning for the 4,000 square foot expansion had included the three remaining interactive exhibits, urban, forestry, and agriculture, but the final proposal added a small planetarium and interactive exhibits on weather. The physical requirements of the planetarium required clever design and engineering, and the other learning centers had to be fitted around it. The new structure also had to be joined to the existing building. Since LEED certification of the addition was a goal, “green” recycled materials and energy-efficient construction were important. Structural improvements also included an enlarged entry and lobby, improved animal handling facilities, storage, and a small conference and meeting room. SCNC, Inc. paid for the renovation and enlargement of the gift shop. Exterior work included improved drainage, redesigning and resurfacing the parking lot, rerouting the traffic pattern, adding parking spaces, and landscaping the new addition. A pavilion for teaching small groups and loading and unloading visitors into buses was constructed on the lawn near the main building.

Delayed by a temporary hold on new SPLOST projects, construction of the addition finally began in 2010. The completed center and exhibit hall, now named the Education & Visitor Center, was dedicated and opened in October, 2012. In 2013, funds from the Department of Leisure Services, the administrative arm of Athens-Clarke County, completed the ADA Boardwalk connection from the pavilion to the parking lot. Several projects financed by SCNC, Inc. remain to be completed: creation of a managed forest, an outdoor part of the Woodland exhibit and long-term goal of SCNC, Inc.; installation of a new trailhead kiosk where the Nature Center walkways meet the Greenway and grounds of the Allen House, the headquarters of A-CC Department of Leisure Services; and the purchase of Docents' Carts for the exhibit hall.

After 40 Years

After four decades, Sandy Creek Nature Center stands as a leader in environmental education for Athens-Clarke County and the surrounding areas. In 2012, over 50,000 participants used its programs and facilities. 181 volunteers contributed over 2,000 hours of unpaid help, coordinated by five energetic, enthusiastic, and expert A-CC staff members. Many different programs serve visitors of all ages and descriptions, from toddlers to schoolchildren to the elderly; from organizations and residents of Athens-Clarke County and the Northeast Georgia region, to visitors from far-away places.

Always with the goal of leading visitors from inside explanations to outside experiences, the enlarged Education & Visitors Center is a destination for anyone interested in exploring the natural history and environment of the Athens area. SCNC's grounds are indeed a natural laboratory, with scientific projects continuing to investigate the area. Most recently, SCNC has partnered with "Discover Life", a nonprofit natural history group, to study moths and other organisms at the Center. The study already has documented the number and seasonal abundance of 337 species of moths. Public participation is vital to

the research project, which is part of a much larger study that extends from New Hampshire to Costa Rica.

The private nonprofit organization that proposed, created, and first operated the Center has changed its original name but not its purpose. In partnership with the Athens-Clarke County Leisure Services Department, Sandy Creek Nature Center, Inc., remains deeply involved and committed to environmental education and conservation in general and the goals and operations of SCNC in particular. In its forty years, many individuals and groups have supported the organization and its projects. One goal has remained intangible but constant: creating and sustaining what Rachel Carson called “a sense of wonder” among all who experience the natural world through its work. That has been the work of decades, and will remain so for all the years to come.

Compiled by

Suzanne A. Lindsay

September 2013

