

Fast Boats and Flowers: Ancarrow's List

This project was awarded the 2018 Esther M. Plotnick Artist Grant at the ASBA Annual Meeting and Conference in St. Louis.

STORY BY *Judy Thomas and Paula Blair*, Plants of the James River Project

PICTURE THE SCENE: NEW YORK CITY, 1964. Newton Ancarrow sits in a deck chair at the National Motor Boat Show, talking to reporters, guests, boaters, and onlookers who have come to see his famous Ancarrow Speedboats. In the 1960s and '70s, his hand-crafted boats were considered the height of luxury and among the fastest boats made. His clientele included kings, sheiks, and the business elite.

Ancarrow seems an unlikely candidate for a botanical art inspiration. A native of Richmond, Virginia, he had “a need for speed.” An indifferent and problem student when young, he nevertheless majored in chemistry and physics at the University of Richmond. But his desire to build fast boats led him to open Ancarrow Marine, located in Richmond along the James River. Unfortunately, a huge problem arose: Ancarrow's boats, dock, and business property on the James were being fouled by oily pollution. He could not allow his famous clients to visit the boatyard. When oily pollution began to peel the paint off his beautiful wooden boats, his disgust turned to activism and he began in earnest to force the city to clean up the James.

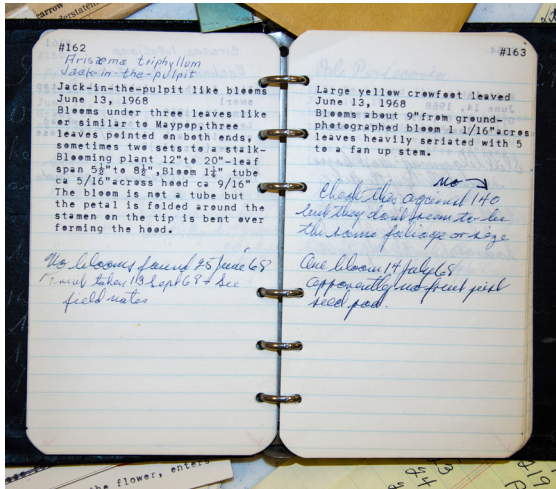
Ancarrow explored the riverbanks and documented where pollutants were being dumped to provide evidence to the city and, later, courts. What he found appalled him. At this time, the city of Richmond was dumping raw sewage into the James River, along with heating oil and industrial chemicals. But what else did he notice as he explored the river banks?



Newton Ancarrow at work. He photographed wildflowers 1968-1971. Courtesy Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden

Wildflowers. River banks and lowlands can be rich in flora, and the James River is no exception. We can guess that Ancarrow experienced the same joy botanical artists experience when we discover a plant new to us. Ancarrow taught himself some botany and photography to document native plants. Eventually, he would photograph over 400 species. Along the way, he realized that these photographs could be a powerful tool to inspire support for cleaning up the James. Ancarrow developed a strategy: he created a slide show of wildflowers and presented it to garden clubs around the state, which produced a growing chorus of voices that eventually led to cleaning the James. Today, 1.8 million annual visitors to the James River Parks System demonstrate Ancarrow's success while they picnic, hike, and shoot the rapids, yet few of these visitors remember the man.

At the 2017 ASBA conference in Pittsburgh, the authors, inspired by members' projects, developed the germ of an idea to illustrate native plants in “our own backyard,” the James River watershed. We recruited two other botanical artists (C.B. Exley and Betsy Lyon) and formed the PJRP in 2017. Several serendipitous contacts later, we rediscovered Ancarrow and his legacy. We



ABOVE, TOP. Ancarrow's field book. **ABOVE, BOTTOM.** Ancarrow archives, courtesy Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden. Photo credits: SR Vrana

were thrilled with the artistic possibilities this opened up for us. Ancarrow's work is important in its own right, and is a valuable tool for researchers and environmental stewards alike. His documentation is considered the most extensive census of plants in the James River Parks System. For example, the list was recently used by Anne Wright, Director of Outreach, Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Life Sciences Center for



Environmental Studies, to head a citizen-science project to find the plants on the list at the James River Parks System. This initiative found about 89 percent of plants on this list. This showed their continued existence, though they are in diminished numbers by invasives, such as English ivy, Japanese honeysuckle, ailanthus, multiflora rose, and many others.

As members of the PJRP, we found Ancarrow's list inspires and informs our work. Finding these plants (despite heat, mosquitoes, and ticks), identifying them, and consulting with experts, has enriched our knowledge of our native environment. It has made us more conscious of our landscape as we travel through it. This project has affected our subject matter, interests, outreach, and even our landscaping choices. We want to motivate regional botanical artists to share the beauty of these plants through their art. We hope to become stewards and educators, to help others understand the ecological contribution of native plants, along with threats to them.

Interest in this project has grown. To date, we have hosted two family events for which we produced all-ages, botanical coloring books (on

invasive and native plants). Local environmental organizations are using our illustrations in their outreach. In the fall of 2019, we are hosting a juried botanical art exhibition open to regional art groups, *Ancarrow's List: Native Plants at the River's Edge* at Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens (LGBG) and VCU's Branch Cabell Library.

In this process, we developed the germ of an idea, and found, at our doorstep, a great tool to help us achieve it. What do you have in your community? 📖

Judy Thomas and Paula Blair are the co-founders of the Plants of the James River Project. They thank Anne Wright of VCU's Life Sciences for Environmental Studies and Janet Woody (retired) of the Lora Robins Library at the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden for consultation, assistance with this article, and for sharing the Ancarrow materials.

The Ancarrow collection is available at: <https://digital.library.vcu.edu/digital/collection/anc>

Ancarrow artifacts are archived at Lewis Ginter <https://www.lewisginter.org/learn/library/library-special-collections/ancarrow-digital-archive/>

ABOVE, TOP. *Cornus florida*, flowering dogwood in fall, colored pencil, ©CB Exley
LEFT. PJRP native plant coloring book; cover illustrations by Maryann Roper and C.B. Exley

