

The Skinny

(the Somewhat delayed, Kind of Intermittent Newsletter for the New Year)

January 28, 2014

from the desk of **Peter Kauffmann**

Another year has come and gone, and despite all the changes out in the world at large there weren't really all that many changes for me personally. However, by virtue of the fact that I put a big ol' "Volume 1" stamp on last year's newsletter I'm bound to send out another annual update to give you the skinny (get it?) on what's going on around here.

Carving out a Niche at Work, plus Some Highlights Like

I'm well into my third year as a transportation engineer at Gorove/Slade Associates in downtown DC. The real estate market has been solid enough in the greater Washington region that things have been running at full steam here just about all year.

It's always good to be busy, and that has allowed us to keep three staff engineers doing work exclusively in DC. Because of this, the project managers are able to assign work to the staff based on our individual strengths, and for me that means I've been able to concentrate on some intriguing, data-intensive, and incredibly diverse elements of our analysis work like traffic signal design, site access management, retail market studies, and loading operations plans. As a result, my time is largely filled with things like making fancy maps, driving virtual trucks around nonexistent loading docks, and lots and lots of Excel. Doesn't that sound like FUN? (Trust me, it is.)



A rendering of The Wharf on the Southwest Waterfront. I designed a lot of their internal roadways and bike access. Hopefully it works?

Most of these things wind up as very carefully worded memos going to the zoning commission or other reviewing agencies, which brings in a fascinating "political" element to the ordinarily dull work of technical writing. One of the main reasons why I got into this field in the first place was because of the ongoing need for interaction with the public, and even as a member of the engineering staff I'm certainly getting plenty of that by having to write concise and convincing arguments without coming off as condescending.

My company is positioned fairly well in the DC market, which means that in addition to the normal compliment of mixed-use apartment complexes and office redevelopments we get to

work on some of the flagship projects in the Washington region. In the past year, I've helped design an expansion to the Kennedy Center, planned access schemes for the new DC United stadium, and played a small role in preparing DC's 2024 Olympic bid for presentation to the US Olympic Committee.

There's also a bunch of work going on for the federal government, but unfortunately just about all that stuff is bound by confidentiality agreements. Hopefully I can tell you more about those projects (they're REALLY COOL) next year.

Perpetual Statelessness Here in DC

Of course, the only way I'll be able to have federal work to talk about is if the government can keep itself running for more than three months at a time. In some ways, government shutdowns are nice because traffic is noticeably lighter and it's much easier to get around, but at the same time since DC is under the jurisdiction of the US Congress that means my local government has to close anytime Congress can't get its act together. So please, those of you who have a vote: please tell your congressperson to be a little more willing to compromise, because not having trash collection or public libraries is really annoying.

Other than that, things in DC are generally going well. I'm still living in the same tiny apartment – I'd forgotten how nice it is not to have to move every 4 months like in college – and I still get to do plenty of urban cycling and transportation tourism. This year, that mostly meant that I finally got around to a bunch of sightseeing I'd been meaning to do for ages. Highlights include:

Finally seeing DC's most noteworthy tourist draws: the Cherry Blossoms during peak bloom in the spring and the big Independence Day fireworks display.



I always thought the fuss was silly, but both events are actually incredibly spectacular. I'll be back again this year if anybody's interested in joining me for the festivities.

Finally seeing the Virginia Side of Great Falls with my cousins.



Great Falls are pretty great, and by “great” I mean “terrifying”.

And finally finishing my tour of all 86 Metro stations, just in time for five new ones to open in Tysons Corner this year.



Eisenhower Avenue: last but not least.

Spring Break: Beach (Half) Week

I thought that after finishing school my Spring Break days were behind me, but on short notice my mom invited me to join her and Brad on a trip down south to Georgia and Florida, ostensibly to visit Brad’s family in Jacksonville. But the real highlight of the trip was the 2-night stop we made on the drive down south, at Cumberland Island for a brief backpacking interlude.



Cumberland Island is, as you might expect, an island.

We set off from St. Marys, Georgia and landed at the ranger station on the island and headed north through the maritime forest to our campsite near the island’s midpoint. We were able to use that location as a base camp to hike through sandy forests and across mosquito-infested marshland to visit some of the stately homes remaining from the island’s earlier years.



Plum Orchard was one of many estates built by the Carnegies.

On our way out, we got to see Cumberland’s most defining feature: its continuous, undeveloped, 17-mile long beach. Not only did the hard-packed sand make for easy travel, spending 3 hours walking by the sea was simply spectacular.



Plus: wild horses

The backpacking portion was fantastic, and it was great to get to meet some of Brad’s relatives and see some of Jacksonville. But instead of hearing about that, wouldn’t you rather see a picture of a wild armadillo?



Seriously, these guys were all over Cumberland Island. Initially, it was “Quick, take a picture!” but eventually it became almost normal.

Summer Trip: Fabulous... Kentucky?

I enjoyed last year’s trip to Yellowstone so much that taking another trip on one of the flagship national parks was a no-brainer. However, some travel constraints from my mom and Brad limited us to parks that were within driving range, and after the three of us sat down to figure out someplace none of us had ever visited we were left with only one option: pack up the car head west to Mammoth Cave.

Don’t get me wrong: Mammoth is still quite a long way away – over 600 miles from Richmond. But that gave us a great opportunity to turn the trip into a tour of the Upland South and hit a number of places on my must-see bucket list. It turned out to be a trip all about finding BIG things.

We started by driving west to camp overnight at Breaks Interstate Park on the VA-KY border.



Breaks is the deepest canyon east of the Mississippi, at 1,600' from the Towers to Russell Fork below. The trees mask the scale.

We then continued south to have lunch at Natural Tunnel.



Natural Tunnel is so big that coal trains pass through the tunnel with 20' to spare on all sides.

That evening, we camped at Cumberland Gap, the historic frontier between the east coast and the inland states.



"We've been traveling for two full days and we're still in Virginia?!"

Considering I'd never been to Kentucky before, crossing over the gap (technically under, using the tunnel they built in the 1990s) was a significant milestone in the trip.



On the way out of the park we were treated to a spectacular cascade of fog literally pouring east over the gap.

We made a few stops on the way across Kentucky to see waterfalls and other sights before arriving at Mammoth Cave.



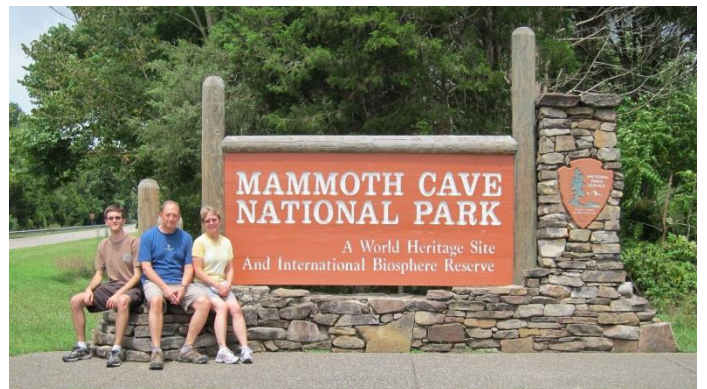
*You can feel the Historic Entrance "breathe".
(this better photo than mine taken by revrev on Flickr)*

In three days at the cave, we saw every inch of cave that's open to the public, totaling over 12 miles. That's still only 3% of the cave, and they're discovering more passages every year.



*The length isn't all that's big – the passages are enormous too!
(this better photo than mine taken by svitebskiy on Flickr)*

We toured through massive sinkholes on the surface, took an evening trip through the cave by candlelight, and even crawled through tiny tunnels on our hands and knees on the 5-mile wild cave tour.



They don't allow cameras on that tour. Here's a group photo instead.

Eventually it came time to shove off from Kentucky and begin our trip back east with all due haste. So naturally we started off driving 100 miles due south to Nashville.



Yes, Nashville has a full-size replica of the Parthenon. What of it?

We visited the Ryman Auditorium, Gaylord Opryland (a seriously BIG hotel), and (at my insistence) took a trip to see the Natchez Trace Parkway Bridge over Birdsong Hollow.



There's no two ways about it: that's one sexy bridge.

We also stopped in Knoxville to break up the 9-hour trip home.



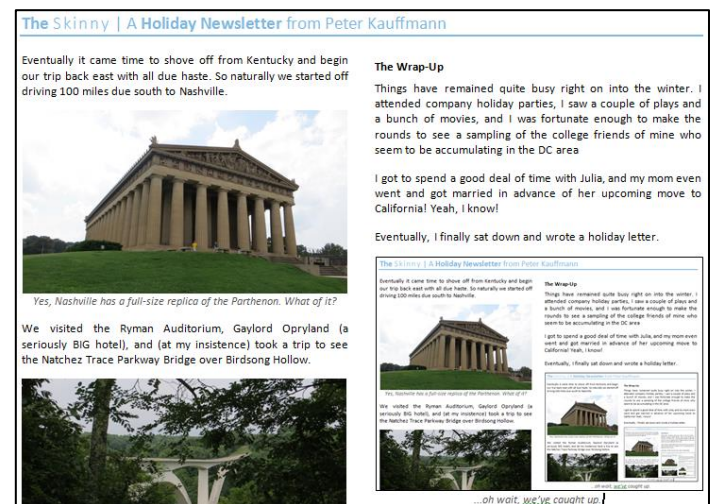
I don't have much to say about Knoxville. Umm... the food was good?

The Wrap-Up

Things have remained quite busy right on into the winter. I attended company holiday parties, I saw a couple of plays and a bunch of movies, and I was fortunate enough to make the rounds to see a sampling of my college friends, many of whom seem to be accumulating in the DC area

I got to spend a good deal of time visiting with Julia up and down the East Coast, and my mom even went and got married in advance of her upcoming move to California! Yeah, I know!

Eventually, I finally sat down and wrote a holiday letter.



...oh wait, we've caught up.

Well, that about does it. Thanks for listening, stay safe in 2014, and be sure to let me know if you're ever passing through the DC area! Take care, and have a happy new year... or at least what's left of it. Perhaps next year I'll start writing before mid-January.