

Special Place, Special People The Monkey House Story

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The Brandywine Zoo has been an attractive destination for Wilmington residents and visitors since 1905. Dr. James H. Morgan first proposed the idea of a zoo just one year earlier. The original boundaries of the zoo were much different than they are today. The main area of the zoo was the area of the old bear pit (across from the current Andean Condor exhibit) and the Exotic Animal House, and extended down the river. Ducks and geese, Belgian hares, a sea turtle, and a sea gull were among the original collection. Over the years, the zoo was operated by several different entities including the Washington Heights civic association, the Wilmington Free Zoological Association, the City of Wilmington and later by New Castle County. It is currently managed by the State of Delaware with the support of the Delaware Zoological Society.

originally dedicated. The Monkey House tree incident has set off a wave of research by a number of historians and we hope to share their findings in future issues of the Zoo News.

Regardless of its origins, the Monkey House has been home to numerous species of primates, reptiles and birds over the years, including a variety of tamarins and marmosets, an iguana, toucan, caiques, a mata mata turtle, boa constrictors and even Burmese pythons. In the early 1970s, the Director of the zoo was Hans Rosenberg. He brought a slightly larger species of old world monkeys including woolly monkeys, mangabees and squirrel monkeys. The building, however, was not open to the public, at that time. It was many years later that another big change occurred and visitors were allowed to enter the building and view the animals kept here.



The events of this past July have given rise to a historical mystery about the origin of the building we formally refer to as the Exotic Animal House but which has been more commonly been known to generations of Wilmingtonians simply as the Monkey House. For many years it has been the accepted belief that the current Monkey House was probably once a zoo "comfort station" prior to its occupation by animals. However, the actual historical record is a little murky. While zoo records refer to many different animal houses, pavilions, and yes, even comfort stations, it is unclear exactly when the existing structure was built and to what use it was

In more recent years, the building has gone through minor cosmetic changes including the updating of the animal enclosures to make them safer for the animals and keepers and more aesthetically appealing for the public, and the addition of a new ventilation system to help with the air quality. In early July, the Exotic Animal Building housed seven different species of New World Primates and one bird species. These included eight Golden Lion Tamarins, two Golden Head Lion Tamarins, three Red Hand Tamarins, a family of four Goeldis Monkeys, two Cotton Top Tamarins, two Geoffroys Marmosets, three Tufted Marmosets, and one toucanet.

Fast forward to the present day:

On July 12, 2013 at approximately 2:00 p.m. a tree came crashing through the roof of the iconic structure on Monkey Hill! One staff member, 24 monkeys and the lone toucanet were in the building when the tree fell. Thankfully our co-worker, Terrance Johnson, was not injured and quickly radioed for help. The resulting response from staff and interns was, to put it simply, amazing! As zoo keepers we have protocols and procedures in place for all types of emergencies that may arise. We even have “mock” emergency drills from time to time and then follow that up with round table discussions so that we are totally ready when such a crisis may present itself. Emergency responders were quickly contacted and assembled. Power to the building had to be shut off because the water pipes had collapsed and the building was flooding. At the go ahead from the fire department, keepers and fire fighters, along with our Delaware Zoological Society Executive Director entered the building from the back door as the front was not accessible. The fire fighters and Executive Director were armed with flashlights, and the keepers with nets, gloves and kennels and no small amount of determination!

We were originally given 20 minutes to evacuate as many animals as we could, all the while knowing that the 36,000 pound tree was sitting precariously just over our heads and might continue its decent towards the ground at any moment. As we worked feverishly inside the building the rest of the zoo employees and interns were galvanizing throughout the zoo. Temporary cages were being assembled and branched at the zoo’s hospital to hold the rescued primates while an assembly line was set up outside of the Exotic House to transport any animals we could save quickly to safety. This line was comprised of Education, Administration and Zoological Society staff. Lucky for us, the zoo’s chief veterinarian was on-site that day to do triage and oversee the care for the frightened and possibly injured animals.



Everyone worked tirelessly and efficiently together with one goal in mind: save the animals!

Those twenty minutes grew to well over an hour, but with everyone working together we were able to get all the animals safely out of the ruined building. Miraculously, none escaped. Even then, the hard work was far from over. We needed to transfer each animal from their rescue kennel, examine them and move

them into temporary housing. We continued to monitor them well into the night.

While this was going on the activity at the Exotic House only increased. A crew with a super-sized crane was brought in to lift the tree off the building and set it safely on the ground. This procedure took until 10:00 p.m. and was accomplished during a

driving rain storm. It was an amazing feat to see and one that we will not soon forget.

In the following days, we sought shelter for some of our displaced monkeys at nearby zoos, while making improvements to their temporary housing here at Brandywine. It should come as no surprise to anyone that the day after the tree fell on the building we kept the zoo closed so that the entire staff could focus all its energies on caring for the animals.

As so often happens in the face of a crisis many people and organizations have come forward with food, supplies and monetary donations. We are all truly touched by the outpouring of caring and sympathy that we here at the zoo have received and continue to receive. Our members, friends and neighbors have been very supportive, as has the zoo community both near and far. The fate of the Exotic Animal House has yet to be determined as we wait for the verdict of the structural engineers and other officials. Plans are in the works to get some of the monkeys back on exhibit within the zoo and placement is being sought for those that we cannot accommodate in a reasonable amount of time.

