



# *The Sycamore Islander*

FEBRUARY 2014 | VOLUME 93 NUMBER 2

## President's Letter

The regular club meeting on Wednesday February 12, 8:00 p.m. will be at home of Ann Lucy, 6520 78th Street, Cabin John, Maryland. Directions are on the website. Lucky and I will be absent, with the good excuse that we are in New Zealand doing the Milford Track, among other things. Vice President Tryon Wells will chair the meeting.

Window is open, through March 31, for new member applications. Application forms are available on the website. 2014 Dues statements have gone out. Please contact Financial Secretary Lisa Kliefoth if you did not receive yours.

Don't miss the winter Bird Walk led by Paul Hagan later this month. (See details inside.)

The March meeting, on Wednesday, March 12, will be held on the Island, assuming no high water (5 feet or over).

BILL MARMON  
President

## Minutes for the January 8 Meeting

**Attendees:** Jane Winer, David Winer, Lucky Marmon, Bill Marmon, Jim Drew, Jody Benjamin, Ann Marie Cunningham, Marianne Ross, Ned Goddard, Tryon Wells, Cindy Bertaut

**Minutes:** The meeting was held at the home of Lucky and Bill Marmon. There was not a quorum. Therefore, no official business could be transacted. The minutes of the December meeting could not be approved.

**Communications:** None

**Treasurer's Report:** Alan Gelb has officially transitioned the Treasurer's responsibilities to Ned Goddard. Following last month's election of new officers, Alan Gelb, Ned Goddard, Bill Marmon, and Bill Eichbaum, the club's Financial Supervisor, met to review the financial records. The transition was approved. Ned and Bill will be following up to review our insurance policies with Maurice's recommended agent and to discuss options for a periodic audit of the books with a licensed CPA. Alan updated the new treasurer's contact information with all vendors, paid the bills received since the

December meeting, sent out bondholder note payments, completed the club's payroll filings for the fourth quarter of 2014, updated the proposed budget, and delivered the club's financial and booking to Ned. Bills for club dues, which were not increased, were sent out the first week in January.

Alan Gelb, assisted by his wife, Caroline, retired from the Treasurer's post, leaving the club in a strong financial position. The club's estimated reserve is \$87,349 (goal of one year's operating budget). Ned will be using Alan's proposed and approved 2014 budget of \$85,086, and expects to follow his recommended bookkeeping and financial guidelines for the Club this year.

Ned praised Alan for his donating his experience and talent to the Club these many years.

Tryon Wells suggested that the position of Financial Supervisor would be an excellent position for a CPA, who hopefully can be recruited from the club's membership.

**Captain's Report:** Captain Jim Drew reports that work on the tool shed is completed. Steve Newman, David Winer, and Rodolfo Castro completed the work, which included rewiring and installing a weatherproof outlet and a new, energy-efficient florescent fixture. Steve made sure there was a ground-fault interruptor. Roof repairs will take place in the Spring.

**Membership Report:** John Noble reports that so far, there are fourteen new applications for membership. The application period extends to March 31st.

**Caretaker's Report:** Jody and Bobby Benjamin thank the following members and waitlisters who volunteered as Saturday caretakers during the past month: Mariam and Alan Pemberton, Joan Barron, Sherry Fizdale, John Lord.

**New Business:** There was a discussion of making the Glen Echo Fire Station more aware of Sycamore Island so that they could have a response plan in case of a fire.

### SAVE THE DATE

Annual Sycamore Island Spring Wildflower walk led by John Parrish and RG Steinman.

Saturday, April 5, 10:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m., rain or shine. We will provide location and direction specifics in the *March Islander*.

Jim Drew felt that we should have some capability on the Island to put out small fires. He recommended a review of this capability.

President Bill Marmon outlined the calendar of events for 2014. It will be published on the Island website and will be published in *The Islander* as soon as dates are confirmed.

#### Scheduled Events

Winter Bird Walk: February 22nd, 8:00 a.m.

Spring Flower Walk: Sunday, April 5th

Spring Work Fest: Sunday, April 13.

Raindate: Sunday, April 27, 9:00 am.

The next meeting will be held on Wednesday, February 12th, at 8:00 p.m. at the home of Ann Lucy, 6520 78th Street, Cabin John, Maryland. Directions: Turn right off MacArthur Boulevard onto 78th Street. House is on the left. If you reach Tomlinson, you have gone too far.

The meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,  
Co-Recording Secretary  
Lucky Marmon

## Our "Other" Island

We call ourselves "The Montgomery Sycamore Island Club." Why, oh why do we ignore poor Ruppert's? Presumably, because naming our club for both islands sounds too wordy or, perhaps, too confusing. Nevertheless, we are stewards for two chunks of land in the Potomac River though honesty compels me to disclose that I've never set foot on the "other" one.

Our club's historical records include the original land grants (called "patents") stating that Matthew Ruppert obtained two islands, Barry's and Ruppert's, from the State of Maryland 126 years ago. Following their official survey on April 2, 1887, both patents were initially certified on August 27, 1888 and subsequently "given" under the Great Seal of the State of Maryland on August 30, 1888; they finally became official on March 12, 1891 when they were recorded upon receipt of a filing fee of \$1.25 per patent, attested by James Anderson, clerk. The patents themselves were signed by J. Thomas Scharf, commissioner of the Land Office and Elihu E. Jackson, governor.

Less than one year after acquiring the islands from the state, Matthew and his wife, Mary Eva, sold them to

## WINTER BIRD WALK

Please join us for the Fifth Annual Sycamore Island Winter Bird Walk scheduled for Saturday, February 22nd, 2014. As in past years, we will begin the outing at 8:00 a.m. with bagels and coffee at the clubhouse. Our plan is



Eastern Bluebird

to walk the Island and the towpath in the vicinity of the Island from 8:30 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. looking for visiting winter waterfowl and other winter resident and migratory birds. Following the walk, we will compare notes on the day's sightings over coffee around the wood stove at the clubhouse. Both beginners and experienced birders are encouraged to join us.

This walk has often delivered good looks at winter visitors such as Ring-neck Ducks, Buffleheads, Hooded Mergansers, Common Mergansers, Grebes, flocks of Blue Birds and a host of resident woodland song birds and woodpeckers. Our resident Bald Eagles are typically back on their nest this time of year just downriver from the Island on the Virginia side. Returning Wood Ducks are also expected. If you would like to attend this year's event, please contact our trip leader Paul Hagen at [phagen@bdlaw.com](mailto:phagen@bdlaw.com) or 202.789.6022 by February 20th.

Bring binoculars if you have them and dress for the weather.

the club for the sum of \$100.00. The fragile two-page handwritten deed, dated May 24, 1889, tells us not only the sale price, but also describes the size of the two islands with precision. The deed refers to Ruppert's, consisting of 4+ acres, as Lot 2 and Barry's, consisting of 3 ½ acres, as Lot 1. Our records also tell us that Matthew Ruppert was one of the original founders of the Sycamore Island Club. While we have no records documenting how long it took Ruppert to secure the land patents from the state or whether obtaining the islands had been part of the founders' original intent, we can say with confidence that they were obtained for the express purpose of providing a home for our club. On the reverse side of the Ruppert's Island patent is the following handwritten text:

“The Montgomery Sycamore Island Club”  
Matthew Ruppert, his Patent  
“Ruppert's Island”  
4 acr 2r, +20ps

And on the reverse side of the Barry's Island patent is the following text, also handwritten:

Matthew Ruppert, his Patent  
“Barry's Island”  
3½ acr

It is likely these notations are contemporaneous with the execution of the patents since the ink (though faded) and handwriting appear to match that in the main text. The patents, which are recorded on heavy parchment and contain still vivid seals (green in the lower left-hand corner and a larger red one nearer the upper right-hand corner), measure 16” x 21” each and are in relatively good condition, despite their age.

A relatively simple web search tells us that a Matthew Ruppert, born in 1837, emigrated as a boy to America from Herbstein, Germany, however no date is given. A marine private, also named Matthew Ruppert, was part of a detachment from the Washington Navy Yard that confronted John Brown and followers in the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia on October 18, 1859. Some reports say that Ruppert was one of two marines wounded in the conflict and was the third marine through the engine house door, led by Colonel Robert E. Lee and Captain J.E.B. Stuart. This same Ruppert is later thought to have become a tavern-



keeper in Washington, D.C., commissioning an architect-designed home at 611 K Street, NW, and operating a restaurant and saloon at 1003 Seventh Street, NW (now a park).

While I found no documents proving that this Ruppert is our Ruppert, it does seem likely given his profession and the timeline involved. He would have been in his early 20s during the 1859 raid, 48 when the club was founded, and is reported to have operated a prosperous business for some time. Moreover, owning a tavern would have put him in touch with many men occupying a wide variety of professions and we know the club's founders included: a shoemaker, a painter, several federal employees, a tinner, a photographer, a stair builder, a harness maker, a restaurateur, and a cigar maker. These descriptions are contained in a history of our club, written 100 years after its founding, by the late John Seabury Thomson, former club president and eminence. It says that Matthew Ruppert's calling was pegged initially as restaurant-owner, but was changed to saloon owner in 1889. It also tells us that J.T. Barry (the shoemaker) was not only one of the founders, but also the namesake of Barry's Island.

Thomson's narrative notes that as late as 1881, the two islands had no names, but a naturalist exploring the area decided to name them based on their dominant vegetation so, for the next few years, Sycamore and Ruppert's were known as Larkspur and Sugar

Maple, respectively. Somewhere in the next four years, Larkspur became Barry's Island but the relationship between nomenclature and ownership may have been "informal" since the land patent tells us conclusively that Matthew Ruppert acquired the islands from the state and not from a private owner. The key date in our history is April 3, 1885, when the 12 founders met for the express purpose of organizing the "Sycamore Island Pleasure Club." However, Thomson goes on to explain that because the state objected to the name, the members agreed to change it to the more neutral-sounding Montgomery Sycamore Island Club.

Perhaps the same thought has occurred to you—was something switched somewhere in our past? Given Ruppert's larger size, why and how did the smaller island, Barry's, become our present-day home? Why not Ruppert's? And given that the Sycamore Island Club notation was recorded on the reverse of the Ruppert patent, and not the Barry's patent, did Barry's somehow muscle in to become our main event? We know the club was already in existence when the words "The Montgomery Sycamore Island Club" were handwritten and carefully centered at the very top of the Ruppert's patent, as if intended as a heading for the whole document. So what happened to make Barry's, and not Ruppert's, our home?

The most likely explanation is the simple one—elevation and proximity to shore. As measured back then, and perhaps still the case today, Barry's not only had higher elevation but also was nearer to "the mainland" than Ruppert's. So, ease of transporting people and materials probably combined to win the day. And that is why we are not the "Montgomery Ruppert's Island Club."

KAREN POSSNER

## Notes from the Island

**Saturday, January 4, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 5.0 Water Temperature: 45**

The ferry is closed for one more day.

I've decided that it isn't worth opening the ferry today. Even though the river will be at or slightly below 5 feet I think it's safer if we don't fight it. Especially since the dock is still covered with an inch of rock solid, frozen mud.

It looks like it will warm up by Sunday and that will give me a chance to get things back to normal, or at least back to the way they were before the recent high water.

**Monday, January 6, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 4.5 Water Temperature: 45**

The ferry is open.

I chipped away all of the frozen mud from the dock and cleared the ice from the steps. The road to the Island is open.

**Tuesday, January 7, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 4.5 Water Temperature: 31**

The ferry is closed on account of ice.

Right now I'm more or less trapped on the Island. The ice is too thick to chop a path for the ferry to the mainland and yet not thick enough to walk on. There is some open water at the bottom of the Island but that seems to be shrinking quickly as well. Luckily I have enough groceries to last a couple of days.

If I get free I'll have to be sure to bring my ice skates with me. Maybe we can skate on the canal now!

**Friday, January 10, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 4.0 Water Temperature: 32**

The channel is still solid ice so the ferry will be closed again tomorrow. I'll try to free it up on Sunday but no promises.

I tried to make my break, literally speaking, by canoeing across the open water at the bottom of the Island. Sadly there was too much thick ice along the shore to reach it. I'm sure I could easily slide off of the ice and into the river but it's the getting back up onto the ice on the opposite shore that's the hard part. I've decided to make my getaway by pulling myself along the ferry rope in a canoe on top of the ice. It works great when the ice is solid but if the ice breaks, same as above, hard to get back up. So far it looks pretty solid all the way across but the crescent shaped ice dam at the head of the channel is showing signs of breaching.

**Sunday, January 12, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 5.2 Water Temperature: 35**

All of the ice is gone from the channel, but now the river has gone up above five feet. The ferry will be closed again today and most of tomorrow.

**Monday, January 13, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 4.8 Water Temperature: 36**

The ferry is open.

The river went down a little faster than predicted so we're back to normal operations.

**Tuesday, January 14, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 4.6 Water Temperature: 36**

We had a spectacular outing yesterday. We took the canoe to Goose Creek and it did not disappoint. Goose Creek used to be an exit off of the C&O Canal. During the heyday of the canals, you could lock out of the C&O, cross the river and follow the canal system up Goose Creek for twelve mile into Virginia!

It's a great run with lots of history. Here is some background that I pulled off of the American Whitewater website:

"This quiet and uncrowded stream is a must for anyone who loves history as well as whitewater. Goose Creek is home to the remains of a 12-mile canal system built by the Little River and Goose Creek Navigation Company between 1849 and 1854. The canal stretched from the Potomac River at Elizabeth Mills all the way to Ball's Mill (now Evergreen Mills) but low water and drought meant that only one boat ever ran the entire length of the system.

The canal's final undoing was the sacking and destruction of the various mills and locks along its length by Union soldiers during the civil war. The ruins can still be seen along the entire watercourse with some of the best examples being the dam and locks at Cooke's Mill (Golf Course Rapid) and Elizabeth's Mill (Old Mill Dam Rapid). Remains of the locks and the bridge that spanned Goose Creek on the famous 'Carolina Road' which has since been moved and re-named US-15."

**Wednesday, January 15, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 4.6 Water Temperature: 36**

It was a nice day today but not one visitor.

I startled two deer near the fire pit late this afternoon. One was a full grown doe, the other was significantly smaller, but bigger than a fawn, with no spots.

The two of them took off running toward the bottom of the Island and I was curious about where they might go since I had seen a doe on the Island just last week. I scanned the river where I thought they might be, but to my surprise they had already swam out to the warning buoys in the middle of the river! I guess

their swimming skills match their running ability.

The wind was blowing strong downstream and with the water level at 4.6, I thought they were in danger of being washed over the dam. I stood watching and I contemplated running to the house to get the binoculars. Luckily I didn't budge, because before I knew it those spunky little deer were on the opposite shore and flashing those big white tails of their namesake. I could see the white from all the way across the river!

**Monday, January 20, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 4.1 Water Temperature: 36**

Happy Martin Luther King Jr. Day!

In the spirit of that great man let us all take time to stand up for our rights and. . . Save Ten Mile Creek!!

Ten Mile Creek is the last best stream in Montgomery county and it is being threaten by the greed of short-sighted developers. This creek is a major source of water for Little Seneca Lake, a lake that is used as an emergency water supply in times of drought. As recently as 2002 it was necessary to release water from this lake to keep the Potomac at it's minimum flow. Not only does this stream provide low cost drinking water, it also has a greater diversity and abundance of aquatic life than any other stream in the county.

Go to [www.savetenmilecreek.com](http://www.savetenmilecreek.com) and get all the facts. Better yet go to [county.council@montgomerycountymd.gov](mailto:county.council@montgomerycountymd.gov) and tell your council member, "I drink water and I vote." There is no time to waste, the planning board will be voting on this land use proposal this month!

**Thursday, January 23, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 3.8 Water Temperature: 32**

The ferry is closed, locked in ice like *The Endurance*.

The strong winds of Tuesday and early Wednesday kept the river from freezing, but as soon as the wind died last night the water begin to crystallize. Now, the channel is solid ice and the ice is growing from the Island on the Virginia side. The main river isn't frozen yet but thousands of ice islands are streaming by.

**Friday, January 24, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 3.8 Water Temperature: 32**

Yesterday I got carried away trying to free the ferry and we actually managed to chop the ice all the way over to the mainland, then it refroze again last night. If I had only left well enough alone, the ice might be thick



enough now to support the weight of a loaded canoe. I guess I'm stuck for a while, waiting until the ice thickens up again.

It can get complicated down here at this time of year but it's neat to be here and watch all of the changes in the river. The trees and plants may be dormant at this time of year but it seems like the river is more alive than ever! Right now the main channel looks like some kind of giant, frozen lava flow, not our good old Potomac.

**Monday, January 27, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 3.5 Water Temperature: ice**

Without the security of a body of water between me and the outside world, I may have to start locking my doors at night. The ice is so thick that one can simply walk over to the Island. Although, it is dicey near the shore by the steps where the river never seems to freeze real hard. Lots of animal tracks on the Island too.

The river ice hasn't been this thick in about 7 years.

The last time I walked or skated across the river was in February 2007! Skating, skiing; I love polar vortexes!

**Tuesday, January 28, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 3.5 Water Temperature: ice**

I just learned that Whites Ferry is closed today because of ice.

Check out Sycamore Island on Facebook! I've posted a few pictures there.

**Friday, January 31, 2014**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 3.5 Water Temperature: ice**

The ferry has now been closed because of ice for an entire week! I don't know if that's a record or not but it seems like it's been a long time. They are predicting warmer weather so the ice should start thinning out, which brings its own set of challenges. Cripes!

JOE HAGE  
Caretaker

# The Sycamore Islander

6613 80th Place  
Cabin John, MD 20818

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## FIRST CLASS MAIL



### Saturday Relief Caretakers **February / March 2014**

FEBRUARY	11 A.M.–DUSK	MARCH	10 A.M.–2 P.M.	2 P.M.–DUSK
FEBRUARY 1	Clayton and Ellen Teague	MARCH 1	Robert and Barbara McCartney	Benjamin Robinson
FEBRUARY 8	Jim Drew	MARCH 8	Please Volunteer	Please Volunteer
FEBRUARY 15	John Lord	MARCH 15	Please Volunteer	Please Volunteer
FEBRUARY 22	Please Volunteer	MARCH 22	Please Volunteer	Please Volunteer
		MARCH 29	Please Volunteer	Please Volunteer

*The Sycamore Islander* is the monthly newsletter of the Montgomery Sycamore Island Club. Every attempt is made to publish *The Islander* before the second Wednesday of the month in advance of the monthly meeting. Text and graphics may be sent as email attachments to: Carol Beehler  
cbeehler@comcast.net  
The deadline for inclusion in the March issue is March 1.

### Large Parties Scheduled



Saturday, February 22,  
Paul E. Hagen, winter  
bird walk, 8:30–11 a.m.