

# The Sycamore Islander

March 2017 | Volume 96 Number 3



Sisters fishing on the southern tip of the island on Presidents' Day. Photo provided by the family.

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## Next Meeting

March 8, 8 p.m.

At the home of  
John and Diane Noble  
**7024 Arandale Road**  
**Bethesda, Maryland**

From the Glen Echo shopping center, go north on MacArthur and turn right on Wilson Lane. Turn left on Broxburn, then right on Arandale. It's the first house on the right.

From the Archives

## The Winter of 1936

## **Newsletter Contents**

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## The Swing and I





Having overhauled the clubhouse once in 1929, architect and member John Loehler had to do it all over again after the March 1936 flood -- one of the worst in the island's history. Read his account [here](#)



An idea for the ferry dock, eagle eggs, a donated canoe & a George Washington theory in Joe Hage's

### Caretaker Log

#### **Meeting Minutes**

February meeting attendees welcomed new members and discussed language about the island always being open to members. Read more: [Meeting Minutes](#)

Dave Winer describes the design & implementation of the tree swing -- and a little inspiration.

## Dates to Remember

**March 8:** March Meeting

**April 3:** Newsletter Deadline

**April 8:** Wildflower Walk

**April 9:** Workfest

**April 12:** April Meeting

**May 19:** Downriver Race

## Large Party

**March 25, 10:30 a.m.**

Sherry Fizdale is hosting 35 guests

## Wildflower Walk



Look for Toothworts, Dutchman's Breeches, Trout Lily, Early Saxifrage, Bloodroot & more on April 8th. Find out more [here!](#)



Photo by Joe Hage

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## Relief Caretakers' Schedule

Contact Madeleine Carter at [madeleinecpcarter@gmail.com](mailto:madeleinecpcarter@gmail.com) to volunteer

### **MARCH**

#### **March 4**

10 a.m - 2 p.m.: Nancy Shute  
2 p.m - dark: Anu & Andrew Umhau

#### **March 11**

10 a.m - 2 p.m: Cindy Bertaut  
2 p.m - dark: Peter Gillon

#### **March 18**

10 a.m - 2 p.m: Meredith Griggs  
2 p.m - dark: Peter Gillon

#### **March 25**

10 a.m - 2 p.m: Trip Reid  
2 p.m - dark: Richard Pappalardo

## **APRIL**

### **April 1**

10 a.m. – 3 p.m: **Please volunteer!**  
3 p.m – dark: **Please volunteer!**

### **April 8**

10 a.m. – 3 p.m: Meredith Griggs  
3 p.m – dark: Fred Pinkney

### **April 15**

10 a.m. – 3 p.m: **Please volunteer!**  
3 p.m – dark: Chris Maggio

### **April 29**

10 a.m. – 3 p.m: John Cunningham  
3 p.m – dark: Jody & Bobby Benjamin

## **MAY IS WIDE OPEN!**

Contact Madeleine Carter at [madeleinecpcarter@gmail.com](mailto:madeleinecpcarter@gmail.com) to volunteer

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## Wildflower Walk

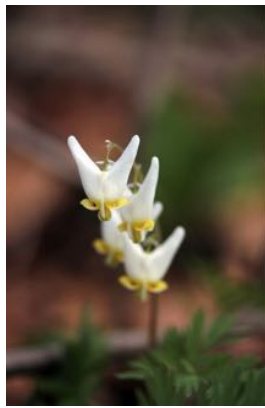
John Parrish and RG Steinman will again lead this Spring's Sycamore Island wildflower walk on Saturday, April 8th, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. RAIN or SHINE!

Bring a lunch or snack, water, and dress for the weather. We will be exploring the area in the vicinity of Plummer's Island near lock 10.

We will meet at the Lock 10 parking area at 9:50 a.m. and depart at 10. The parking area for Lock 10 is on the Clara Barton Parkway just inside the Beltway. It is accessible only from an inbound direction headed toward DC. (The Carderock Exit off the Clara Barton Pkwy is a close by turn-around point.)

We hope to encounter such delights as Spring Beauty, Toothworts, Dutchman's Breeches, Trout Lily, Early Saxifrage, Bloodroot, Trilliums, Golden Ragwort and maybe even Golden Alexanders and Twinleaf.

If the river level remains as low as it is right now, we will be able to rock hop over to Plummer's Island, which is "the most thoroughly studied Island in North America."



Photos by Dave Winer

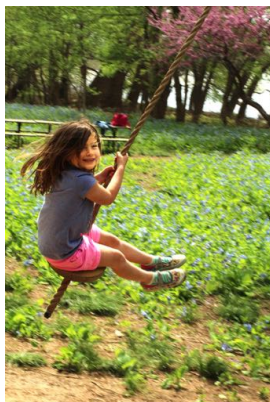
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# The Swing and I

Dave Winer

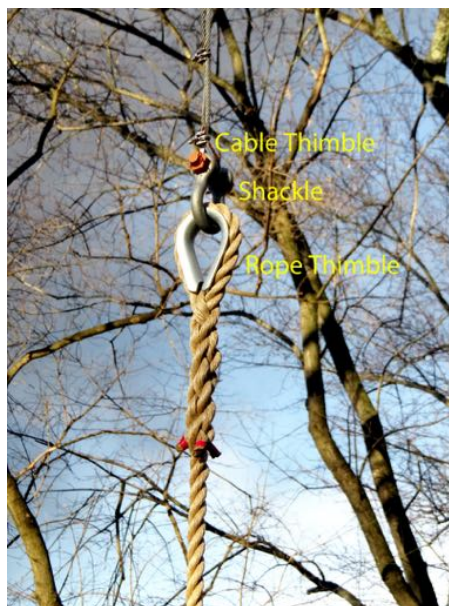
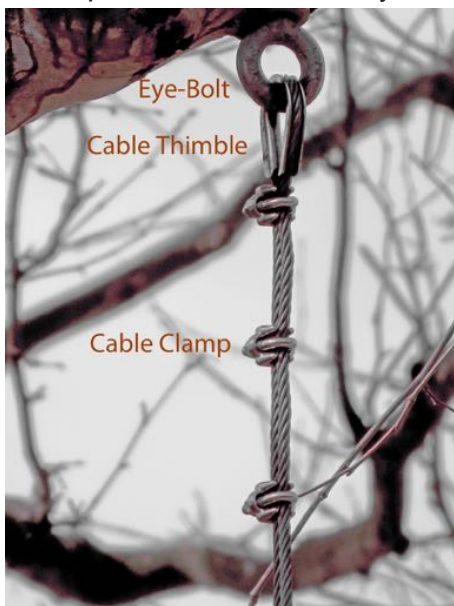
When kids first arrive on the Island they usually head for the rope swing dangling from a sycamore limb near the clubhouse. Banding together, they often line up around the launching platform taking turns for the thrill of flying through the air. And youngsters are not the only ones. Members and guests in ages ranging through octogenarian use the apparatus regularly. This facility is relatively new for the club--do you wonder how it came about?



As I recollect, a few years ago Caretaker Joe Hage managed to put a small rope around the same high limb by first shooting a light line across it with bow and arrow. He then hauled a rope over the limb, installed a wooden disk for a seat, and thus, unceremoniously created a swing. This was the beginning notion of our present more advanced system. That first swing amounted to a "quickie," suitable only for children since it was only lightly constructed. Of concern, was the thin rope with unknowable wear at its attachment high above. As kids quickly put it to use, some of us pondered if that felicitous swing-arc could be converted to a worthy addition to the club's recreational offerings. That's when I began thinking about a robust rope swing for the Island.

No, wait... the idea for a serious swing on the Island came to me from the design in my own back yard--an even longer swing that Jane and I put up over thirty years ago. That swing and launching platform have been enormously popular. No, wait... the idea for a high backyard swing came to me even earlier from a lengthy swing someone had installed in a nearby Arlington woods long ago. That one was exciting, soaring high over a deep gully. That became a visiting site for adventurers all around the city. No, wait.. actually the very first recognition of the joys of bag-swinging came to me from a backyard swing with launching platform that my uncle had built at my grandmother's house in Arkansas when I was around ten years old. What fun we had!

Our lengthy swing at home became the prototype for the Island's. First and foremost, the limb attachment has to be strong, completely reliable, and durable. This part called for a steel eye bolt to be hammered up through a close fitting drilled hole in the limb and then fastened in place with a nut and jam-nut.



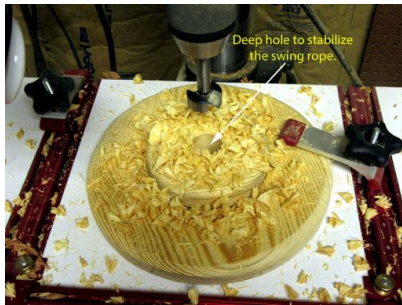
The hole itself required a specially long drill bit to match the bolt diameter. At the Island, we scheduled this activity for a tree surgeon's crew while they were there to take down a dead tree next to the clubhouse. An arborist once assured me that alive limbs form a



bond in this type of connection which can never break loose.

A steel so-called "aircraft" cable wrapped around a thimble connects to the eye bolt and hangs straight down, the cable ending at another thimble which meets the rope portion.

The one-inch thick rope wraps around another (very large) thimble and connects the two lines with a shackle. This combination of steel cable and rope solves two problems: a permanent cable would be painful to a swinger's hands, while the rope is comfortable and may be readily replaced should it become worn out. The business end, a wooden seat, terminates the whole array of parts.



The first tryout swing soon revealed a design deficiency in the seat. Its sharp-edged center hole began wearing the Manila rope fibers as the seat wiggled back and forth through countless swings. A more sophisticated seat is now in place. This one uses a deeper hole to damp flexing at the rope entry, and has a smooth round-over there to reduce wear; after months of heavy use no signs of strain have appeared. Also, an improved weather-resistant poly "Pro-Manila" rope replaces the first natural fiber rope but retains holding-comfort and natural appearance.

Soon after installation, with the seat dangling over level ground, the only way to get a decent swing was to have someone push or pull the swinger. Unsatisfactory! We needed a raised launching platform. I called this my building project at one of our Work Fests. There was no scale drawing for the tree and surroundings so I resorted to a trial-and-error method to determine where and how high to construct the platform. A small boy served to determine the children's height. He volunteered to hop from a temporary rig so we might establish a good working height for a children's jump-off. After that it was a simple matter to dig post holes and build up the "launching pad" on a slope with higher jump-off points to accommodate bigger folks. It needed a ladder too, so I made one in my home workshop and installed it in a couple of more postholes. I planned and expect the launching structure to withstand floods that sometimes reach above its level near the clubhouse. Fingers crossed.

Parts for future maintenance and repair of the swing are not generally found in hardware stores. To beef up the club's corporate knowledge I should reference some sources. The rope came from Knot & Rope Supply in Perrysburg, Ohio ([www.knotandrope.com](http://www.knotandrope.com)). Their folks readily discuss project designs on the phone and offer such services as braiding around thimbles. Cable, shackles, wire clips, and the like are available from E-Rigging ([www.e-rigging.com](http://www.e-rigging.com)) in New Orleans, Louisiana. They offer both stainless and galvanized

for most fittings.



Photos by Dave Winer

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[From the Archives](#)

## The Flood of 1936 and Our New Clubhouse

By John Loehler, 1985, Club Centennial

*John Loehler joined Sycamore Island as a young man just out of college in 1925. This is an excerpt of a story he wrote for the 1985 island centennial newsletter.*

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Photo of Chain Bridge after March 1936 flood.

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The winter of 1936 was a bad one for Sycamore Island. In February the ice conditions were so precarious it was unsafe for a person to cross the river alone and anyone getting to the Island stood a good chance of becoming marooned.

Early in March, 1936 the ice went out of the river and jammed below the Island, causing a brief period of high water and ice was piled on the shores over four feet high. The unusual ice has wreaked havoc on the Island in the way of lost or damaged tent platforms, a hole was stove in the big rowboat, there was breakage of small trees and the uprooting and carrying away of bushes.

The middle of March was a far worse story. Melting ice and snow far up the Potomac Valley, added to rain, caused the river to rise to a flood stage on March 19, 1936 of 28.1 feet, a height unknown since June 1889. On March 20, 1936, Club members were advised by the Secretary that, "the flood waters at Sycamore are receding but it seems quite certain that whatever is left of the Club buildings will be scattered about the Island as wreckage." Rupperts Island, which was just above Sycamore Island, had numerous large trees with trunks two feet in diameter and large branches. When the water hit Rupperts Island, it gouged the surface of the land and tore up numerous large trees, completely uprooting them, and washed them down the river to Sycamore where they acted as battering rams. These trees, moving with the current at considerable speed, tore our buildings apart and carried pieces down the river further. It changed the contour of the upper Island and reduced it in size. It left Sycamore a devastating mess, one that we "old timers" will never forget.

Practically all the members' canoes had been moved into the Club Room but with the Club Room torn loose and wrecked, most of the canoes and other personal property had been lost. The Club House that we so painstakingly restored in 1929 and 1930 was gone! The Island was

left a desolate mass of mud and wreckage as the river returned to its usual placid level.

The buildings that were swept away by the flood consisted of a one-story frame Club House with a porch on two sides; a kitchen with a screened connecting porch, located over the well; a ladies dressing room; a canoe house with racks for possibly 96 canoes; a wide porch and runway to the river; a ladies locker room and store room on the second floor; a large sleeping porch, equipped with cots and mattresses. Most of the tenting colony was also swept away.

Undaunted, we wasted no time bemoaning our fate. Salvage operations started as soon as conditions on the Island permitted. We erected a small house, built mostly from doors recovered from the wrecked locker-rooms, for the caretaker; cleaned out the well and installed a pump; and, having the ferry back in operation, proceeded to sort out the wreckage left on the Island.

We had a Club meeting at a member's house and after considerable discussion I was requested to design a building to safely sustain a flood height of 29 feet -- which was a foot higher than any flood on record. In a few days, preliminary drawings were prepared with an estimate of probable cost completed. The cost was set at \$4,000.00, and it was estimated that at least an additional \$500.00 was needed for other replacements and repairs.

Read the rest of this article at <http://www.sycamoreisland.org/centenl/SC11.htm>

## CARETAKER'S LOG

**Tuesday -- February 14, 2017**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 3.7    Water Temperature: 42**

There is nothing quite like a large body of water when it comes to dramatizing the immense power of a gale-force wind. The wind was blowing hard yesterday morning, and the two foot waves and whitecaps were rolling by the Island like a giant conveyor belt headed downstream. Every time a wave happened upon a log or a rock, the wind would send the water exploding into the air only to be whisked away as if gravity had momentarily lost it's pull.

You can't actually see the wind, of course, but looking out my window at the river yesterday, I knew that the wind was blowing, and hard. I suppose that during the summer months the leaf-filled trees would be my first clue about the wind. But now, with the trees bare, like masts without sails, it was the churning, white-capped waters that stirred my excitement and caught my attention.

Last year at this time we noticed that our resident geese were beginning their mating

rituals, but so far today, no signs of any Canada goose romance on the Island. Happy Valentine's day!

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Waitlisters Maya Lodish and Sonja Barsky with their kids on the ferry.

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**Wednesday -- February 15, 2017**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 4.35    Water Temperature: 40**

The river shot up over night. I guess there was a bit of snow melting up stream somewhere. I can tell you first hand that there was a lot of snow melting at the Savage River State Forest last week.

I spent the last hours of daylight yesterday picking up all of the fallen branches and sticks that fell during that windy day on Monday. There were so many branches strewn across the Island in fact, that I was surprised that there were any branches left on the trees above.

As I was raking up the leaves and sticks I noticed that the first of the bluebells are starting to peak their heads up out of the ground. Just two months until they bloom!

I also noticed the bluebells arch rival, the evil invasive lesser celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*). The celandine can potentially out-compete our bluebells so they are on my kill list. The good news is that there were not that many lesser celandines emerging. It looks like my one-man five-year crusade to eliminate these invasive plants is actually making a difference!

I scrubbed the floors in the Clubhouse, and then applied the protective linseed oil. I say it every year but I sure wish we would sand and finish those floors properly, with some polyurethane. It sure would be easier to maintain them and keep them in good shape.

**Thursday -- February 23, 2017**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 3.5    Water Temperature: 48**

Big news! The eagles have laid their eggs and are now sitting on the nest! I broke out the spotting scope on Monday afternoon and to my delight there were two eagles in the nesting tree, one in the nest and another on a branch nearby. The cool thing is that our birds started incubating their eggs on the same day as the famous eagles down at the National Arboretum. That pair, dubbed George and Martha, began nesting at the Arboretum back in 2014 and were the first pair of eagles to nest within the D.C. limits since 1947. There is a camera on that pair and you can watch them at, <http://www.dceaglecam.org/>. This is the 15th year that our eagle nest will have a breeding pair!

It was stunningly nice this past weekend and the Island was pretty busy, for February. Monday was Presidents day and the Island was hopping. It was great to see all of the waitlisters taking advantage of the strangely warm weather, and since it was a holiday, the dads were able to be here too! Most were disappointed that the canoes were off limits because of the cold water but all seemed to enjoy just being here and letting the kids run around.

We also had the annual bird walk on Saturday and I heard that that was a big success, with lots of members showing up just after dawn. Paul Hagen, as usual, led a great outing, and his knowledge of all of the birds and their voices helped to make it truly special.

On Sunday we got a visit from Fraser Brewer, the daughter of long-time member Charlotte Brewer. Charlotte died last fall and Fraser was in town to settle her affairs. She came down to the Island to ask if the Club would accept the old Brewer canoe as a donation to the Club. I gladly accepted the offer and began to ask her about her memories on the Island. Fraser said that she first came down to the Island when she was 12 years old, now she is 61 so we figured that Charlotte's Grumman canoe has probably been here on Sycamore Island for close to fifty years! What's even more amusing is that a fifty year old canoe is not that rare on Sycamore Island -- some, I'm sure, are even older. Thanks to all of the Brewer Clan for the boat and for all of the support that they've given the Club over the last five decades!

Yesterday was George Washington's birthday and I would like to point out that George Washington probably slept here. Think about it. His pet skirting canal and his Potomac

river gateway to the west started just downstream from here and I'm sure he spent a lot of time supervising the building of his feeder dam and bypass canal around little falls. What better place to crash after a hard day of slave driving than among the still waters just above the dam. It's possible, however, that he may have preferred to cross the river and sleep in his home country of Virginia.

I finished gathering up all of the fallen branches and I've been busy raking up all of the leaves that are piled up around the canoe shed and behind all of the picnic tables and other structures. I want to move the leaves to allow the bluebells to come up. I've also been busy cutting down the limbs that are leaning on the phone lines and power lines.

**Friday -- February 24, 2017**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 3.4    Water Temperature: 52**

This warm weather is warming up the river but the water is still below 55 degrees so the canoes will have to stay locked-up for now.

One of the two support posts for the Island-side dock has rotted out and broken in two. I was preparing to replace the post yesterday when Club Captain, Stan, showed up. He was here to work on shoring up the utility pole that supports our ferry cables. I dropped what I was doing in order to give him a hand. He drove in a new anchor for the pole and



strung a new guy wire to keep the pole from falling over. The work went fast since he had previously delivered most of the tools and materials that he needed.

Before he left I borrowed his 16 pound sledge hammer to drive a new post for the dock. The sledge really came in handy when it came time to drive that 10-foot 4X4 into the hard clay of the river bottom. I bolted the post to the horizontal beams and the dock is sturdy again.

While I was working on the dock it occurred to me that we should seriously consider extending the Island-side dock so that the ferry can avoid the shallow waters by the shore. The Island is obviously growing on that side. The dock extension that John Matthews and I built in 2002 is no longer sufficient and the area in front of the dock is too shallow for the ferry. I was forced to do a lot of dredging last summer, which is back-breaking work. I think a dock extension would be a great solution.

-- Joe Hage

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## Minutes for the February 8, 2017 Meeting of the Sycamore Island Club

**Attendees:** Cindy Bertaut, Anne Waidmann, Marianne Ross, Gerry Barton, Jody Benjamin, Meredith Griggs, Tryon Wells, Drew Walsh, Luca Anderlini, Richard Bertaut, David Winer, Star Mitchell, Alison Levine, Karen Possner, John Beck, Rebecca Carroll, Kathy Carroll, Bob Shanks, Margie Shanks, Stan Fowler, Lucky Marmon, Bill Marmon, John Noble, Molly Newberry, Rodolfo Castro, Jim Drew, Larry Heilman, Jeff Komarow,

President Richard Bertaut called the meeting to order promptly at 8:00

**Minutes:** The January Minutes were unanimously approved.

**Treasurer's Report:** There was no report from the Treasurer. Richard Bertaut reminded members that the dues for 2017 had increased from \$375 to \$400.

**Membership Secretary's Report:** John Noble introduced the new Membership Secretary Anne Waidmann. Anne retired in July from Price Waterhouse, where she did benefits work.

Before handing over the Membership job to Anne, John Noble gave his final report. As of Feb. 8<sup>th</sup>, there were 159 Regular members, 71 Senior members, 21 Inactive members, 59 Wait Listers, and 15 Honorary members. The final numbers will not be available until Feb. 15, when the Financial Secretary Sherry Fizdale will know the final number of resignations and the number of those to have moved to senior membership status.

The following three families were approved unanimously for membership:

- Luca Anderlini and his daughters. Luca grew up in Rome and moved to the United States in 2001. He teaches at Georgetown.
- John Beck grew up in Bethesda and spent his career in community banking. He is a long-time paddler and applied for club membership after participating in a Canoe Cruiser down river race.
- Margie and Bob Shanks. Both are canoers and kayakers as well as lawyers. They have three children.



**Captain's Report:** The club's new Captain is Stan Fowler. He has been on Sycamore Island for more than thirty years. Stan is scoping out the duties of the Captain's job by conferring with members and C&O Canal Park Rangers. He is familiarizing himself with issues regarding swim safety and has for years been involved with river safety. He is a trained life guard. He is familiarizing himself with the Island and what maintenance jobs need to be done. On his list: a new post to hold the ferry.

**Swimming Supervisor's Report:** Swim Supervisor Larry Heilman was pleased that the Captain Stan Fowler also planned to be involved in the "swim safety" issue. Four years ago, Larry wrote detailed report on all safety measures that should be observed and swim safety equipment that should be installed on the island, the swim float, and various docks. This report will be given out to all members who participate in the Feb. 19 bird walk. Hopefully, they will join Larry after the bird walk for a stroll around the island and see for themselves what equipment is in place and perhaps what still needs to be installed. This review of swim safety measures and equipment could be repeated at the Spring work fest.

**Relief Caretaker Supervisor's Report:** Supervisor Madeleine Carter thanks the following people for serving as relief caretakers in February: Steve Newman, Eric Aaserud, Kerry Anne Cox, Miriam and Alan Pemberton.

**Old Business:** There was an extensive discussion about the camping rules and the accessibility of the island to members. While the caretaker does not give permission to campers, standing rules on camping read that a prospective camper must confer with the Party/Camping Supervisor (currently Molly Newberry). If a member decides he/she wants to camp only a day or few hours before he/she plans to camp, he/she also needs to confer with the Caretaker. If neither the Party/Camping Supervisor or Caretaker is reachable, the member can call another club officer. In other words, don't just show up. Checking in with the caretaker as well as the Camping Supervisor would allow the camper to know what other events might be taking place on the island at the same time. That info might affect his plans. If the caretaker gives a negative response, the member is entitled to know why.

All campers must respect the after-hours privacy of the Caretaker.

Some attendees suggested that while the ferry closes at dusk, the island is always open to members. This could mean that members could swim or boat to the Island on their own and stay after the ferry stops operating.

Dave Winer felt that members were not aware of this option and made the following

motion: "It is the sense of the club that Sycamore Island and Ruppert's Island are never closed off to members, except under flooding and other emergency conditions. While in attendance, members must adhere to all ordinary rules of the club, and particularly to those rules related to camping and the caretaker's quarters."

Some members expressed concern that persons arriving on the island on their own would not have signed the waiver which is on the ferry. This could be a problem.

After a lengthy discussion, the motion was defeated 9 to 8.

**New Business:** Summer Solstice Camp-out: Vicky Judson repeated an offer to co-host a camping overnight on the Summer Solstice. Her only requirement is that someone volunteer to be the co-host. If you are willing, call Vicky (301) 320-5787

The Work Fest will be held on April 9<sup>th</sup>. Rain date: April 23<sup>rd</sup>.

The Downriver Race is May 18<sup>th</sup>. Cindy Bertaut recommended volunteering as a Safety Boater. "Great Fun," she says.

Thanks to Vicky Judson and Michael Esch for hosting the February meeting. The turnout was excellent; the food and drink delicious.

The next meeting will be held at the home of John and Diane Noble, 7024 Arandale Rd., Bethesda, MD 20817.

Respectfully submitted,  
Lucky Marmon  
Co-recording Secretary

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