

June 25, 2005

DC Oversight Roundtable – The GU Boathouse Issue

Statement submitted by Dr. Carl A. Linden

Why No Private Boathouse Belongs in the C&O Canal NHP.

Something should be glaringly obvious to anyone who even in a cursory manner takes a look at the question of a GU Boathouse in the C&O Canal National Historical Park. As a matter of overriding principle the National Park Service ought not engage in the business of turning over a prime parcel of national and historical park land for private use. By statute our national parks are set aside for the use and enjoyment of all the public and not just for a few.

The Park Service is now on the verge of violating this ruling principle which it is obligated to observe both by statutory requirement and moral duty. The NPS plans to yield up national park property in the C&O Canal NHP to Georgetown University just below the university. The massive boathouse GU wants to build there, if built as planned, will command the historic riverscape just above Key Bridge. At the same time it will obstruct the view shed from the canal and the Crescent Trail.

The proposed swap of a useless slice of former CSX right-of-way up river is nothing but a thin disguise for a high-handed GU land grab in the national park. The effect of such a misappropriation of park property is not just local, but sets a precedent for our whole national park system. If the plan is carried out, what would prevent private interests demanding, say, the erection of an exclusive hunting lodge in Yellowstone, a white water club in the Grand Canyon, or ski lodge on Mt. McKinley? Why not?

The reason why not is that the private boathouse proposal is at odds with the very notion of the C&O Canal "National Historical" Park, not to speak of our other national parks. The proposal not only runs hard against the intention of the legislation creating the park but goes against the basic policy the NPS pursued for years in removing private in holdings along the canal right-of-way.

The NPS is in contradiction with itself. Instead of the protector of the park, it is now colluding to despoil it. The public looks to the NPS and trusts it defend and preserve, not deal away our precious park lands. Moreover, compromising the public in favor of a private interest can inflict serious damage to the standing of the NPS before the public.

It is self-evident that no necessity demands that there be a private boathouse in the C&O National Historical Park. There are far better locations for such boathouses outside the park. Aside from looking good on GU brochures, the site in the Park is not a good location for a boathouse. Accessibility is severely limited, parking virtually non-existent, and congestion inevitable where motorized vehicles, hikers, cyclers, skaters would all come together in a narrow passage.

Are we citizens, then, compelled to bow before the oft heard local saying that "GU gets what GU wants!" Does GU's claim trump the Park's claim to its own property. Are we looking at a reversal of the power of eminent domain?

Is Georgetown employing various pressure tactics to induce Park Service officials to falter in their bounden duty to protect the public domain under their care? One hopes against hope that they will see the grievous error in fundamental policy they are about to commit and have the fortitude to do what is right.

Note: I have for many the years kept in close touch with the affairs of the C&O Canal NHP. I speak with genuine affection and admiration for the fine rangers and park superintendents, both past and present, who have and are managing the C&O Canal NHP's affairs with great skill and steady devotion to the best ideals of the Park Service.

For the past half century I have been an active member of the C&O Canal Association, which was founded at the initiative of Justice William O. Douglas. For many years I walked with Justice Douglas on our annual hikes to promote the creation of the C&O Canal NHP. I was twice president of the Association and am now a member of the board of directors and chair our projects committee. However, here I speak as an individual citizen. Fred Mopsik, who spoke at the round table, is our designated spokesman on the boathouse issue.

Over the years the narrow ribbon of land containing this 185-mile long park has been subjected to repeated attempts to encroach upon it or even destroy it whether this be done by paving it over, or flooding it with reservoirs, or now by building a mammoth boathouse inside its precincts. Up until now the park has done a good job parrying such attempts. Now the latest is Georgetown's drive to carve out a piece of the national park for its own private boathouse. Will this brazen scheme be allowed to succeed or not? That is the question before us.