

Echoes

RET. TO LEESYLVANIA FILE
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Freestone Point

By Mary Alice Wills

One of the more interesting promontories along the Potomac River is Freestone Point in Prince William County about four miles below Occoquan River. Occoquan River, in Virginia's colonial history, was often referred to as the Western Branch of the Potomac. (The Anacostia River was the Eastern Branch.) Freestone Point got its name either from the presence of easily-quarried sandstone or from a loose translation of the Indian name which was Niabsco or Neabsco, meaning at the point of rock. The creek to the north of Freestone Point now bears that name. The southern boundary of Freestone Point is Powell's Creek, originally called Yosocomico Creek. In an effort to avoid confusing it with the Yeocomico

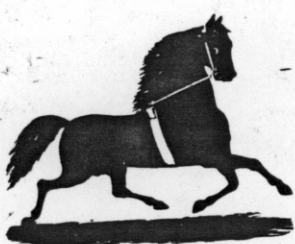


Earthworks for the Confederate battery which was built on Freestone Point in September 1861. (Photo by R. Wills, 1972)

preservation that has failed. Perhaps it is a small loss in the light of more important things to be saved and more important things to be done. Perhaps Captain Donohoe would have been gratified, as he hoisted his cast-iron hand press onto his wagon in 1882, if he could have foreseen that the enterprise he was undertaking would survive for nearly a century.

A. Frank Krause, Jr., now rents the building and uses it as headquarters for Courthouse Realty. Mr. Krause's office (same space) embellished with velvet drapes and Victorian lamps, is a far cry from the editorial office of the historically prosaic *Fairfax Herald*.

¹ To our knowledge, only one rail line ever reached Fairfax. This was the Washington, Arlington and Falls Church electric trolley (at one time known as the Virginia Railway Company) which came through Ballston, Falls Church, Idylwood, Dunn Loring, and Vienna to Fairfax. The unfinished railroad roadbed, constructed in the 1850s, came through the very middle of Fairfax, but no track was ever laid. — Ed.



From The Old Fairfax Herald Print Shop letterhead.

in Northumberland County, the name underwent variations in spelling until it reached the ridiculous "Yosockec-comocoe." Since it became impossible to spell and increasingly difficult to pronounce, the name was changed to Powell's Creek before 1700.

Ownership of Freestone Point can be traced back to 1658. Gervais Dodson had a patent for 2,000 acres between Neabsco and Yosocomico (Powell's) Creeks. Henry Corbin acquired it from him and left it to his daughter, Lettice Lee, who in turn gave it to her son, Henry Lee. He took a regrant in 1718. Some years later he sold 1,000 acres on Powell's Creek to John Wright. Wright's son sold parcels of the land until Henry Lee decided to reacquire the land he had sold. At the time of his death he was able to leave the restored estate to his son, Henry Lee III (1729-1787).

Henry Lee II, who married Lucy Grymes, the "Lowland beauty" who rejected the attentions of George Washington, built a home on Freestone Point and called it Leesylvania. It became the birthplace for many of the Lees whose lives are intertwined in Virginia history.

Perhaps the most famous of the Lees to be born there was the dashing "Light-Horse Harry" Lee (1756-1818), who acquired his nickname because of his daring as a cavalry commander during the American Revolution. From 1786 to 1788 he was a member of the Continental Congress and from 1792-1795, Governor of Virginia. As a Member of Congress, 1799-1801, he wrote the funeral oration declaring George Washington, "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." He was also the father

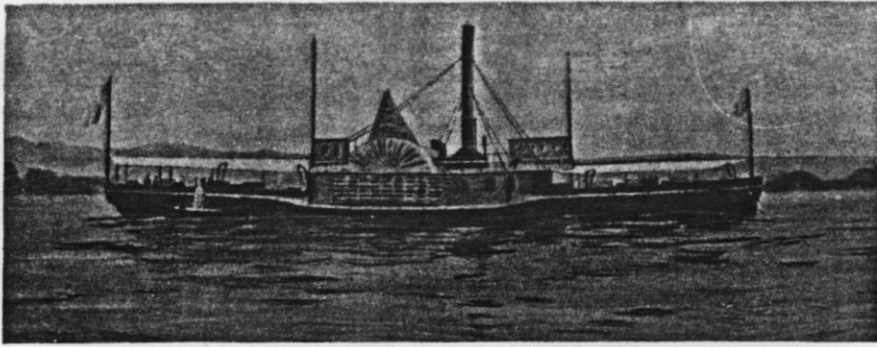
of the most famous Lee in history, Robert E. Lee, and an original member of the first veteran's organization in the United States, the Society of the Cincinnati.

Charles Lee and Richard Bland Lee, "Light Horse Harry's" brothers were also born there. The former was the second Attorney General of the U. S. in Washington's administration and the latter was the first Member of Congress from Northern Virginia. Richard's plantation, Sully, which he inherited from his father, has been preserved in Fairfax County and is open to the public. Other Lees born there were Edmund Jennings who served as Mayor of Alexandria from 1815 until 1818, Theodoric, Mary and Ann.

The Leesylvania mansion burned down in the 1790s and was not rebuilt. A cemetery, which still exists on Freestone Point, minus tombstones which have been stolen, is believed to contain the graves of Henry Lee II and his wife, Lucy, the grandparents of Robert E. Lee.

The Leesylvania tract was acquired in 1825 by Henry Fairfax. The house in which he lived was closer to the Potomac than Leesylvania and burned in 1910. It is possible that the Fairfax house was constructed at an earlier date than Leesylvania. The chimney and foundation, even today, are easily recognizable. The Fairfaxes were originally buried in the Lee cemetery but their graves have been moved.

During the Civil War it was vitally important to the North to keep the Potomac River open. Washington, D.C., the capital of the Union, was a port city and depended upon shipping for almost all of its needs. In May 1861, the U. S. Naval Potomac Flotilla was formed to



The U.S.S. *Jacob Bell*, one of the ships of the Potomac Flotilla which engaged the Confederate battery on September 15, 1861. (O. R. Mavies)

maintain the uninterrupted navigation of the Potomac River. The Confederate forces in Virginia saw an opportunity to harass Union shipping and perhaps even blockade the Potomac River by establishing batteries on the more prominent points along the Virginia shore.

Rumors filtered into Washington That the Potomac would be closed by Confederate guns. On September 23, 1861, the captain of the U.S.S. *Seminole* picked up a party of slaves attempting to cross the river from Virginia to Maryland. They

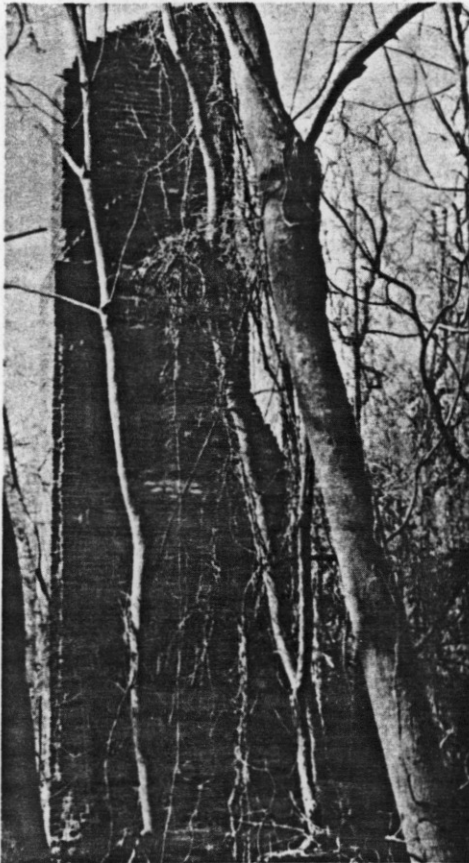
told of two hundred men with two heavy guns having been observed the day before on their master's plantation. The soldiers were on their way to Freestone Point. Two days later, Freestone Point was attacked by the *Seminole* and *Jacob Bell*. Their fire was returned by a battery of four guns which was under the command of Colonel Louis T. Wigfall of the First Texas Regiment. The guns were fired at all ships going up or down the river for the better part of September 25th and frequently for some time thereafter. Although the battery was built on a rather prominent point, the guns were unable to command the channel and were ignored.

Other Confederate batteries were secretly being built at night behind shields of trees with guns that would easily reach the channel of the Potomac. It is thought that the Freestone Point battery was built as a ruse to draw the attention of the Flotilla to it and away from those points being secretly fortified. In October, formidable batteries were revealed farther down the river, the Potomac was block-

aded and the battery on Freestone Point abandoned.

From the Civil War until 1957 when it became the home of the S.S. *Freestone*, formerly the *Tolchester*, Freestone Point was relatively untouched. Gambling and liquor by the drink were forbidden in Virginia but legal in Maryland. Since the original grant of Maryland to Lord Baltimore made the high water line on the Virginia bank the boundary of Maryland, the Potomac River fell under the jurisdiction of Maryland. The S.S. *Freestone*, which was tied up at the end of a long wharf, was subject to the laws of Charles County which permitted slot machines and liquor by the drink. Each week thousands of Virginians made use of the S. S. *Freestone's* facilities which were illegal in their own state. In addition to the boat, other inducements attracted people to Freestone Point. There were three swimming pools, a bath-house, concession stands, a miniature train, and parking lots. With the phasing out of slot machines in the sixties, the S.S. *Freestone* was one of the first establishments to go. Today the boat is gone, the wharf is rotting, and the recreation facilities are in an advanced state of decay.

In more recent years Freestone Point has been the subject of much controversy. Developers have dreamed of high-rise apartment buildings, \$100,000 houses, and homes built on canals with individual boat slips. Others have seen the future of Freestone Point as a major family recreation facility. At the moment the future of Freestone Point with its vestiges of the past is uncertain.



The ruins of a brick chimney and some of the foundation are all that remain of the Fairfax house. Two fireplaces are still visible in the chimney. (Photo by R. Wills, 1972)



Cemetery in which Henry Lee and his wife, Lucy Grymes, grandparents of Robert E. Lee, were buried. The tombstones have been stolen and the Fairfax graves moved. The fence is well maintained, though the author has been unable to learn by whom. (Photo by R. Wills, 1972)