

New milestone for Leesylvania

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Don Curtis, a local historian, has spent more than 10 years of his life on a dream, a dream that will come true Saturday.

His endeavor began in December 1974, with "what I thought was a rather small effort [at the time,]" Mr. Curtis, a member of the Prince William Historical Society, said earlier this week. That was when he approached the state Lee Society about locating and enclosing the old Lee cemetery at Leesylvania Plantation, historic home of the Fairfax and Lee families, and the birthplace of "Light Horse" Harry Lee.

That small effort escalated into a major project, the fruits of which are being dedicated by state officials as Leesylvania State Park at 3 p.m. Saturday. The park is still under construction, which will proceed in several phases before completion, but the finished product should be something to behold.

Leesylvania will eventually have concessions along the beachfront (yes, the park will have a beach), according to Warren Wahl, the park's superintendent. The land will also have a pool complex, an observation pier, nature trails, a visitor center, several overlooks and extensive historic interpretation of the property as it used to be. There will be playgrounds, picnic facilities and shelters.

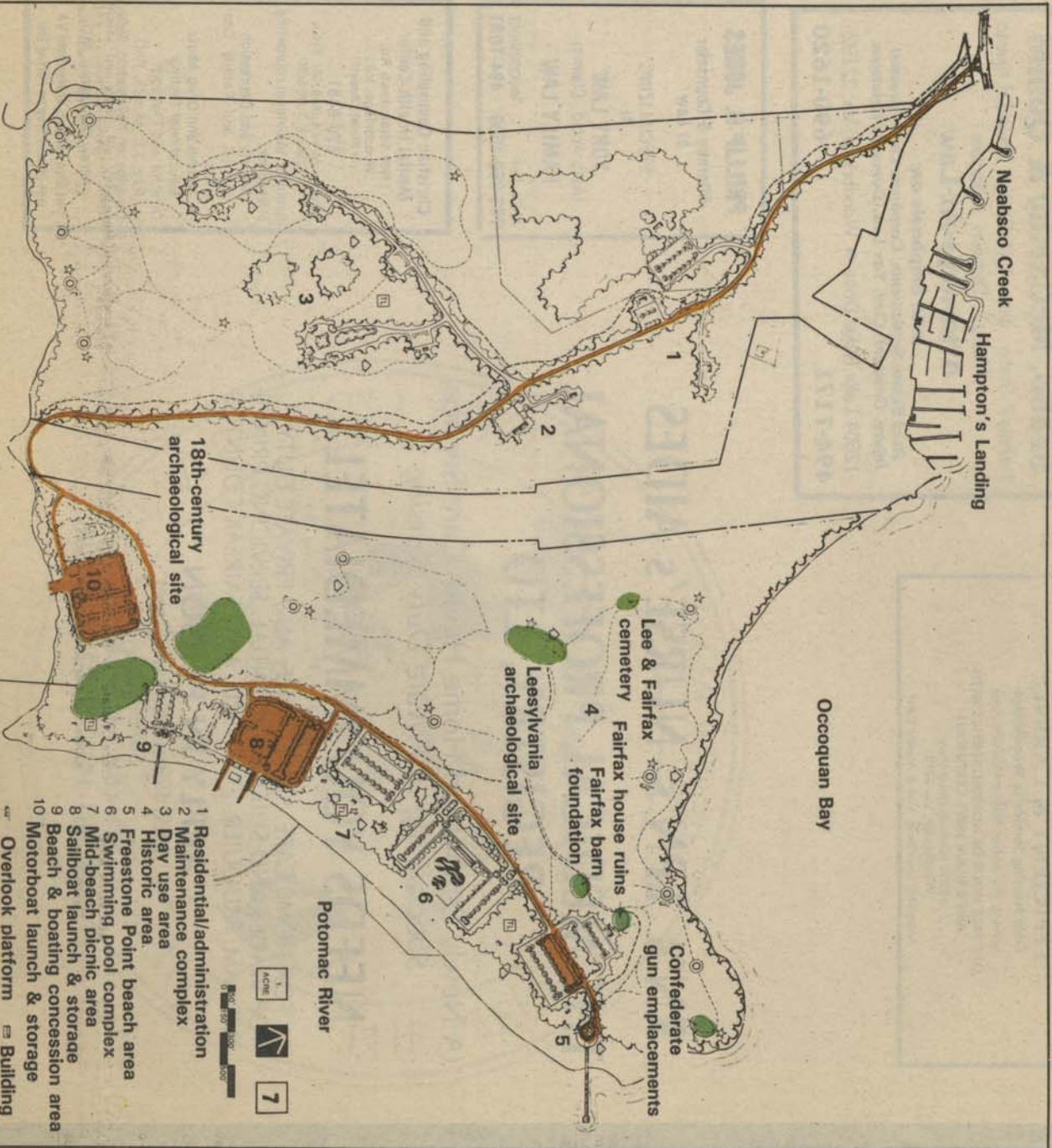
When phase one is completed, the park will be equipped with sailboat and motorboat launch ramps, restroom facilities, access roads and parking areas. And lots of trees and water. The park land lies on Freestone Point between Neasco and Powell's creeks, the Occoquan Bay and the Potomac River.

By Saturday, the park will have a new superintendent, as Mr. Wahl is moving to another park.

Mr. Wahl said that Saturday's ceremony will not open the park to the public. It is a dedication, he said. The park itself will open after phase one is finished, planned for late 1986.

"I always had an interest in getting Leesylvania Plantation the recognition it deserved," Mr. Curtis said. "The land's importance dates at least to 1668, when Captain John Smith passed the point as he sailed up the Potomac River. Capt. Smith's progress was slow, just as Mr. Curtis' progress on reclaiming the land as a park has been slow. Slow, but interesting."

After approaching the Lee Society in 1974, Mr. Curtis met a legal counsel for billionaire Daniel K. Ludwig of the American-Hawaiian Steamship Company, and the two chatted about locating and enclosing the entire Leesylvania tract.



Leesylvania State Park

Areas included in the first phase of development noted in color

PARK / From B1

In 1975, Mr. Curtis was appointed to the Prince William County Chamber of Commerce Bicentennial Committee, which he said "gave me a chance to sow the seeds within the business community to preserve Leesylvania."

The historian joined the county historical commission in 1976, and obtained \$4,000 for a memorial for Light Horse Harry Lee, who is buried on the property. (The cemetery will be recognized and marked with a bronze plaque this weekend — more slow progress.) Mr. Curtis also began lobbying in 1976 for the preservation of some 508 acres, the land which will be dedicated this weekend as Northern Virginia's first state park.

The low point in the project, according to Mr. Curtis, came in 1977. He had obtained an offer from Mr. Ludwig, who planned to give half of the funds necessary for purchasing the land if the state would match the money. The state refused, Mr. Curtis said, because of lack of access to the land.

However, perseverance paid off again, and the state did take up Mr. Ludwig on his offer several months later. In 1978, Gov. John Dalton signed the enabling legislation, and the first milestone had been passed.

The next several years were spent soliciting public opinion on how the land would be used, and nailing down legal problems. Gov.

Charles Robb toured the property in 1983, and last year the General Assembly appropriated almost \$2 million for the first phase of construction at the park.