

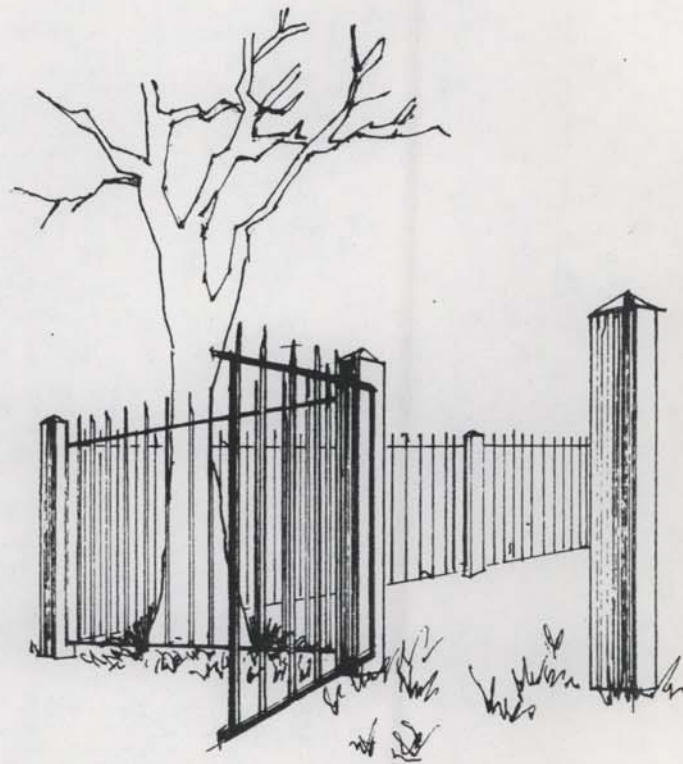
*PWC - Historic Sites
(Leesylvania)*

*Weems-Botts Museum
Collection*

A HISTORY OF LEESYLVANIA



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INTRODUCTION

Leesylvania State Park is a 508 acre tract located approximately 20 miles south of our nation's Capital featuring almost 3 miles of water frontage on the Potomac River between Neabsco and Powell's Creeks, and possessing a rich history. Within the park is the house site of Henry Lee II, father of Light-Horse Harry Lee and grandfather of Robert E. Lee. On a moss covered knoll is the Lee family cemetery. On Freestone Point, a 110 foot bluff overlooking the Potomac, are the eroded earthworks of a Confederate battery of the Civil War. Today, as one of our northernmost state parks, Leesylvania represents both a historical site and a recreational facility.

PART 1. COLONIAL EXPANSION

Archaeological evidence indicates that Leesylvania's wooded ravines and shoreline were visited by ancient Indian tribes. The Potomac River and its adjacent creeks teemed with fish, prompting the first European explorer to write the "abundance of fish lying so thicke with their heads above water . . . we attempted to catch with a frying pan".¹ The abundance of waterfowl and fur-bearing animals such as otter, beaver, and muskrat were another attraction.

As early as 1608, Captain John Smith explored the Potomac, documenting what he saw in his meticulous journal. The richness of the region astonished Smith: "These hills many of them are planted, and yeelde no lesse plenty and variety of fruit then the river exceedeth with abundance of fish."²

England encouraged settlement in order to forestall the rival colonial empires of France and Spain. A major additional incentive arose from popular acceptance of a curious Indian custom, tobacco smoking. Tobacco's dominant role in promoting colonization is exhibited in the "Proclamation Settling the Plantation of Virginia 1625".³ This mandate contributed to the development of the famous Tidewater plantations.

Land was granted by the King as headrights with "50 acres being given for each person transported into the 'Kingdom of Virginia'. The Leesylvania tract comprised four such headright grants. The first was issued in 1654".⁴ In 1658, one Gervais Dobson consolidated the various grants in a purchase of 2,000 acres, which he soon sold to Henry Corbin. Corbin deeded the land that included Leesylvania State Park to his three-year old daughter, Laetitia. The terms of the guardianship stated it would become hers

outright either upon her coming of age or upon her marriage.⁵ In 1674, Laetitia Corbin, married Richard Lee II, the 27-year old son of one of her guardians. The land had passed into the hands of its most famous owners.

For three generations the Lees did not settle on this property. However, title continued to be held by various family members until 1747 when Henry Lee II became the first Lee to reside here. He named the plantation 'Leesylvania', a title meaning Lee's woods. The year 1753 witnessed a momentous occasion when Lee "married Lucy Grymes, the lowland beauty mentioned by Washington Irving as the object of an unsuccessful courtship by the youthful George Washington."⁶ Eight Lee children were born at Leesylvania and the family included a remarkable collection of gifted public servants.

The land at Leesylvania continued to be developed under the guidance of the Lee family. Leesylvania's growth mirrored the economic activities taking place in the county as a whole. The depression in tobacco prices in the 1700s led to economic diversification among the plantations and estates of Prince William County. The closest important port to Leesylvania, Dumfries, became a major shipping center. Local iron deposits, coupled with available water power, spawned an active pig iron industry. This industry, centered along nearby Neabsco Creek, was to cast valuable munitions for the patriot armies during the Revolutionary War.⁷ News of war electrified their busy life in 1775 and propelled one of Leesylvania's sons into the forefront of Revolutionary War history.

PART 2. LEESYLVANIA IN THE REVOLUTION

As revolutionary ardor swept the 13 colonies, prominent citizens of Prince William County met to determine a course of action. A Committee of Safety formed, which included Henry Lee II of Leesylvania and his neighbor, Thomas Blackburn of Rippon Lodge. The Committee acted forcefully to restrict all trade with Great Britain. But there were other benefits stemming from the Committee's activities since it also "was to encourage the improvement of the breed of sheep, improve the methods of agriculture, promote frugality, economy and industry at home".⁸

When news of armed conflict in Boston reached Virginia, the local militia organized into units under Henry Lee II, the County Lieutenant. His first concern was for the important port of Dumfries. Since the British had overwhelming naval superiority in these waters, British ships sailed with impunity along the Potomac and in the Chesapeake Bay. The militia frequently rallied to threatened points to resist possible enemy landings.

In 1781, the practice alarms and excursions paid off. In early April, British raiding vessels appeared on the Potomac. When they attempted to capture an American ship docked at Alexandria, they were discovered and captured. Upon interrogation, their officers revealed their intention to burn George Washington's house at Mount Vernon, ravage Leesylvania, and capture Henry Lee II.⁹ Although the vigilant patriots foiled most of this plan, life was anything but secure in the homes of the patriots along the Potomac.

Henry Lee II had other responsibilities during this period. He served as the Presiding Justice of Prince William County, a member of

the House of Burgesses, and the county representative in the Virginia Revolutionary Conventions. He responded to George Washington's request to build a road from Alexandria to Dumfries in order to facilitate the transport of military goods. This later became Telegraph Road.

But Prince William County's greatest contribution to the Revolution was Henry Lee II's son, Henry Lee III, known as Light-Horse Harry. This patriot was born at Leesylvania on January 29, 1756. Graduating from Princeton at 17, Harry returned home to find the issue of separation from England the dominant topic of concern. A superb horseman, Harry found his skills perfectly meshed with his country's needs when war broke out.

Commissioned as a Captain, Lee hand-picked the members of his 5th Troop of Continental Light Dragoons. After leading each potential recruit on a grueling steeplechase, he would wheel his horse about and charge with drawn sword! If the recruit did anything but meet the challenge steel on steel, he was politely refused into the ranks. In this way, a young, intrepid group of 82 cavalymen was chosen. They quickly showed their mettle.

Dispatched to George Washington's Army, Lee's men demonstrated the classic mounted and dismounted tactics of light dragoons and it was here that young Lee acquired the nickname, "Light-Horse Harry". Among various exploits they seized a convoy of British provisions and brought them back to Valley Forge to feed and cloth the army. Later, after being promoted, Lee led a daring commando style raid against a British fort at Powles (Paulus) Hook near New York City. Again his success provided a valuable tonic to a war weary country. During the Southern Campaign in the Carolinas, Lee's men performed prodigies of valor. He ended the war a hero, receiving a rare Gold Medal of Valor from Congress.

PART 3. THE LEESYLVANIA FAMILY¹⁰

Henry Lee II died in 1787. His wife died five years later. Both were buried at the family graveyard at Leesylvania. A few years later, the Lee home burned down.

Henry Lee III, "Light-Horse Harry", was the first Lee child born at Leesylvania. He served as a member of the Continental Congress in 1786, as Governor of Virginia in 1791, and a member of the United States Congress in 1799. At Washington's funeral he penned the famous eulogy "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen". He was nearly killed in 1812 while defending a Baltimore newspaper editor whose criticisms of national war policy had aroused the wrath of the city mob. The injuries incurred in this defense of the principles of freedom of the press ultimately led to his death in 1818.

After the Revolutionary War, Henry Lee III settled for a time at Stratford, the ancestral home of his 1st wife and 2nd cousin, Matilda Lee, after the Revolutionary War. Following Matilda's early death, Henry married her friend, Anne Hill Carter. She came to Stratford as a bride to care for her two stepchildren, and there she bore her own children, including Robert Edward Lee. Although Robert E. Lee was only five when he last saw his father, he so cherished those memories that he republished his father's books on the Revolution as a memorial.

Charles Lee, born in 1758, was the second son of Leesylvania. Charles pursued a legal career, serving as Collector of Customs for the South Potomac and as George Washington's personal attorney. He should not be confused with the Major General Charles Lee, a contemporary but no relation. His career climaxed when Washington appointed him as United

States Attorney General in 1795. He continued in this position through President Adams' administration. Adams thought so highly of Lee that he appointed him as one of the 16 new Circuit Judges in 1801. Charles Lee further demonstrated his legal ability as one of the lawyers who successfully defended Aaron Burr in his famous treason trial. Charles Lee died in 1814.

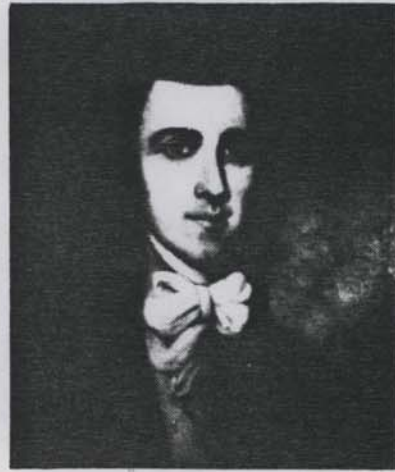
Richard Bland Lee was the third son of the Leesylvania family. Born in 1761, Lee gained prominence when he was elected at age 23 to the Virginia Assembly. He resided in what is today western Fairfax County where he developed the elegant Sully Plantation. At age 28 his public career continued when he was elected to the First Congress. In this capacity he achieved celebrity as the vigorous promoter for a national capital on the banks of the Potomac. Following the War of 1812, Richard served as one of three commissioners to superintend the restoration of public buildings, including the White House and Capitol, burnt by the British during their attack on Washington. President Monroe appointed him as Judge of the Orphans Court of the District of Columbia, a position he held until his death in 1827.

Theoderic Lee was born in 1766. With his three older brothers following public service careers, it is not surprising that this fourth son turned to agricultural pursuits. Since his inherited property was adjacent to Richard B. Lee's, he oversaw the plantation during his brother's absence to Congress and supervised the construction of Sully. He was a man without political ambitions, but with considerable personal charm. Theoderic died in 1849.

Edmund Jennings Lee, the fifth and last son of Leesylvania, was born in 1772. He also pursued a legal career. His legal ability gained him the political prominence to become the Mayor of nearby Alexandria. Active in the Episcopal Church, he was instrumental in



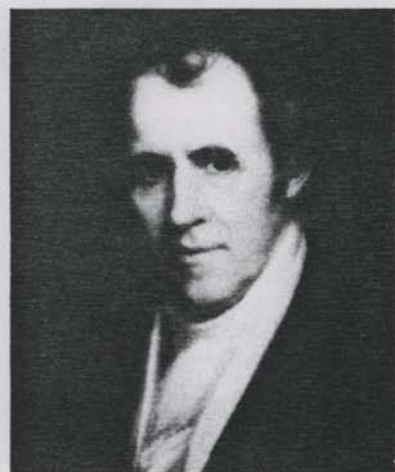
Henry Lee II



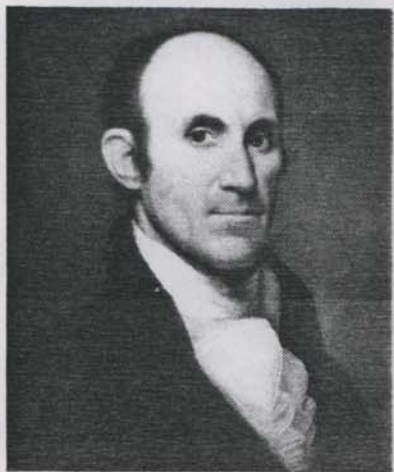
Richard Bland Lee



Henry Lee III-
"Light-Horse Harry"



Theoderic Lee



Charles Lee



Edmund Jennings Lee

preserving the burial grounds of Christ Church of Alexandria from the westward encroachment of Cameron Street. His most outstanding legal accomplishment was saving from state confiscation 516 acres of church land, called the Glebe, in Arlington County. Today the Glebe House is a well preserved architectural attraction.

Two Lee daughters were born at Leesylvania; Mary, born in 1775, and Anne, born one year later. In an era when many women were assessed by the stature of the men they married, both daughters were united with men of prominence. Mary wed at age 16 a wealthy Alexandria banker (Philip Richard Fendall; the Lee-Fendall House is now a museum open to the public) while at age 17 Anne married William Byrd Page. Their home was "Fairfield", one of the beautiful Virginia estates, near Berryville in the Shenandoah Valley.

PART 4. CRISIS ON THE POTOMAC

The martial tradition of Leesylvania continued, albeit somewhat diluted, when Charles Lee's son sold the property in 1825 to Henry Fairfax. His son, John Fairfax, inherited part of the estate in 1847. When the Civil War broke out, Fairfax joined the staff of the famous Confederate General James Longstreet. What Fairfax lacked in formal military training was offset by personal bravery. A fellow staff officer wrote "Major Fairfax was then of middle age, tall, courtly, and rather impressive . . . He lacked nothing in courage, was brave and would go anywhere . . . he was the most pious of churchmen and was a born bon vivant, knowing and liking good things. Whiskey later was hard to get, yet he managed to have always a good supply on hand."¹¹ Taking charge of Longstreet's camp mess, Fairfax presented sumptuous repasts that gained renown throughout the army. His good nature and whiskey did much to maintain staff morale during the long war. The land itself at Leesylvania also played a prominent role in the war since it was for a time the front line of the Confederate army.

The fertile strategic brain of Robert E. Lee recognized the importance of impeding the Union build-up around Washington D.C. On August 22, 1861, Lee issued orders to block the Potomac by building a series of artillery positions that commanded the sailing channel. It is ironic that one of these positions was to be located on the grounds of his ancestral home, Leesylvania. For the next six months, military and political attention focused on the crucial Potomac River passage into the Capital.

On the Virginia shore, several prominent bluffs presented potential artillery sites to control the river. The northernmost of these

was in what is now Leesylvania State Park. From Freestone Point, down river to Chopawamsic Creek, Confederate soldiers and slave laborers began to fell trees and dig fortifications at strategic sites overlooking the river along a six mile front. On Freestone Point a four gun battery position was prepared. Remnants of the earthworks are still visible.

The Confederates hid their activity from the vigilant Federal Navy by working at night and keeping a shield of trees standing between the gun positions and the river. However, confederate engineers realized that guns on Freestone Point would not have the range to reach the shipping channel. This discouraging information was turned to advantage. The Freestone Point battery would be revealed to the Union and thus distract attention from the more important sites at Evansport (now Quantico) and Cockpit Point (now a Virginia Power plant site).

As the main sites neared completion they were armed with heavy guns from the former U. S. Navy yard at Norfolk. The trees in front of the batteries were partially sawn through so when the order to open fire came, the trees could be easily toppled to create a clear field of fire. By October 25, 1861 the guns effectively closed the Potomac to merchant traffic. Soon shortages began to be felt, with Washington's civilians particularly suffering as winter neared. "Every person in Washington is suffering".¹² wrote one beleaguered civilian. Shortages of fodder prompted foraging expeditions into nearby Virginia thus precipitating such large skirmishes as the action at Dranesville. A U.S. Naval officer lamented "so long as the batteries stand, the navigation of the Potomac will be closed".¹³

The Union commanders began to organize counter measures. To determine exactly what they were up against, intrepid officers

accompanied a certain Professor Lowe during ascents of moored, hot air balloons from positions on the river's Maryland shore. From their lofty perches they charted the Confederate positions. Union battery sites were built opposite the Confederates and periodic duels raged across the river.

This state of affairs could not continue. Political pressure from Lincoln forced the ponderous thinking Union commander, General McClellan, to plan a combined land and amphibious thrust against the artillery positions. As winter passed into spring, 1862, intelligence of the Union plans reached the cautious Confederate commander, General Joseph Johnston. Consequently, he drafted orders to evacuate the Potomac position. On March 8, 1862, Lincoln signed the order for McClellan to advance. On March 9, the Confederates retreated from their fortifications, and, according to local legend, abandoned the Freestone Point guns by dumping them into the river (in fact the guns were most likely removed on December 15 when other, more effective Confederate batteries became active). The blockade of Washington had been lifted.

The fortification at Leesylvania reminds the contemporary visitor of a time when the Capital felt itself threatened by enemy action. The Potomac blockade was an attempt to isolate Washington from the bountiful Northern Virginia resources. The six mile section of river that was dominated by the Confederate batteries with their approximately 37 pieces of heavy artillery represents the most effective concentration of anti-shipping guns during the entire war.

PART 5. DEVELOPMENT COMES TO LEESYLVANIA

After the war, John Fairfax returned to his property on the Potomac, dividing time spent there with his other estate near Leesburg, Oak Hill, also the former home of President Monroe. After John's death the Fairfax family leased the land to the Quakers. A rail line connecting Washington with Fredericksburg was completed in 1872 (the contemporary line bisecting the property follows this track). Then the tenants allegedly timbered the entire estate, an activity leading to a lawsuit. Further lumbering operations occurred during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Development slowed when a private hunting and fishing preserve was established at Leesylvania. Wealthy guests stayed in magnificently appointed private Victorian rail cars or at the Fairfax house, which was redesigned as a hunting lodge. Thus the resources that attracted the pre-Colonial Indians brought a new generation of admirers. But this tranquil interlude ended around 1910 when the Fairfax house burned. The house's chimney and stone foundation are all that remain. Until the 1950's the property was unused, becoming covered with the second generation forest and brambles that grow in the Park today.

Perhaps the most controversial chapter in Leesylvania's history now transpired. The Freestone Holding Corporation purchased Leesylvania. The Corporation boasted an ambitious development plan complete with a 600 room hotel, 4 different restaurants, swimming pools, and a "Boat-el". This latter caused the downfall of the development plan: "The operators had taken advantage of the working of the ancient grant of 1632 to Lord Baltimore that gave Maryland legal jurisdiction over the

Potomac River to the high-water mark on the Virginia shore".¹⁴ The Corporation secured a license from Charles County, Maryland (across the Potomac from Leesylvania) and moored a cruise ship off the point, built a dock out to the ship, and opened a gambling hall. The combination of gambling and liquor by the drink (both illegal in Virginia at that time) proved irresistible to many.

"To the distress of the local residents, the ship attracted a boisterous clientele of gamblers to this peaceful area. Outraged Virginians protested, and an amicable solution was reached between the governors of Virginia and Maryland by which the latter agreed to have Charles County void the (gambling) license".¹⁵ The outlawing of gambling casinos off Virginia's shore line plunged the Freestone Holding Corporation into bankruptcy. The Corporation was forced to sell out.

Fortune now smiled on this noble estate. The American-Hawaiian Steamship Company purchased the tract as an investment. The company's attorney, George Hartzog, happened to be the former Director of the National Park Service. This gentleman alerted the owner, Daniel K. Ludwig, a noted philanthropist, about interest in preserving Leesylvania as a park. Preservation efforts were spearheaded by Don Curtis, a local citizen and historian, and Eleanor Lee Templeman of the Society of the Lees of Virginia. Daniel Ludwig proved very sympathetic to these efforts. He donated half of the property's appraised real estate value to the Commonwealth of Virginia. When final papers were signed in 1978, Leesylvania State Park was born. The generous Mr. Ludwig wrote "I have always admired the contributions of the Lees to our nation. It is good to know that an area so significantly involved with the history of this illustrious family will be preserved always as one of the Commonwealth's great parks."¹⁶

PART 6. SUGGESTED READING.

Narratives of Early Virginia; Tyler, Lyon (ed.) (New York, 1907). This contains Captain John Smith's "True Relations and the Description of Virginia". The sights and experiences of the first colonists to Virginia are best described by the written notes kept by their leader John Smith. Smith was a careful observer. Reading his work places one in the front of his canoe as he ascends the Potomac.

Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department of the United States; Lee, Henry (New York, 1869). Lighthorse Harry Lee's campaign account edited by Robert E. Lee. A classic of Revolutionary War history.

Bustling Dumfries during the Revolution; King, Martha E. (Delivered August 3, 1973). This work focuses on Prince William's most important port during the war. Many of Henry Lee II of Leesylvania's wartime deliberations concerned Dumfries' security.

History of Virginia in the Revolution; Randolph, Edmund (Charlottesville, 1970). A description of revolutionary life under constant British peril.

The Confederate Blockade of Washington, D.C. 1861-1862; Wills, Mary Alice (McLean, 1975). The most thorough examination of this subject.

Bull Run Remembers; Hanson, Joseph (Manassas, 1961). This work recounts Civil War military operations in Prince William County and deals extensively with the Potomac blockade.

Recollection of a Confederate Staff Officer; Sorrel, General G. Moxley (NY, 1905). Sorrel served on Longstreet's staff along with John W. Fairfax, one of the residents of Leesylvania. This lively account describes a staff officer's many duties.

Northern Virginia Heritage; Templeman, Eleanor Lee and Netherton, Nan (1966). A complete photographic history of the great estates that graced the Northern Virginia countryside.

Virginia Homes of the Lees; Templeman, Eleanor Lee (1975); 53 illustrations.

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1. Tyler, Lyon (ed.), *Narratives of Early Virginia* (New York, 1907); p. 145.
 2. *Ibid*; p. 86
 3. Reprinted by University of Virginia Press, 1946.
 4. Templeman, Eleanor Lee, *Leesylvania State Park* (Manuscript 1984); p. 2.
 5. *Ibid*.
 6. *Ibid*.; p. 3.
 7. *Ibid*.
 8. Jefferson, Thomas, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1955); p. 28.
 9. King, Martha Eheart, *Bustling Dumfries During the Revolution* (address, Aug. 3, 1973).
 10. This summary is based on the research and writing of the Lee Society historian, Eleanor Lee Templeman.
 11. Sorrel, Gen. G. Moxley, *Recollections of a Confederate Staff Officer* (New York, 1905).
 12. Hanson, Joseph, *Bull Run Remembers* (Manassas, 1961); p. 49.
 13. *Ibid*.
 14. Templeman, Eleanor Lee, *Leesylvania State Park* (manuscript 1984); p. 4.
 15. *Ibid*.
 16. *Ibid*.; p. 5.

Lee portraits courtesy of Eleanor Lee Templeman.