

YLR: 1-15-95
NRHP: 3-17-95

127-455

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

=====

1. Name of Property

historic name Belle Isle

other names/site number Broad Rock Island; Washington's Island; Harvey's Island;
VDHR File No. 127-455; Site 44HN578

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2. Location

street & number James River at US 1/301 not for publication N/A
city or town Richmond vicinity N/A
state Virginia code VA county Richmond(independent city) code 760 zip code 23220

=====

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this x nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property x meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant x nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Julia Samik 2.1.95
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

Virginia Department of Historic Resources
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

=====

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

 entered in the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
 determined eligible for the
 National Register
 See continuation sheet.
 determined not eligible for the
 National Register
 removed from the National Register
 other (explain):

Signature of Keeper Date
of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private, public-local, public-State, public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- building(s), district, site, structure, object

Number of Resources within Property

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows: buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total.

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

- Cat: DEFENSE, Sub: Fortification, Military facility, EXTRACTION, INDUSTRY, TRANSPORTATION, Extractive facility, Energy facility, Manufacturing facility, Waterworks, Rail-related

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

- Cat: LANDSCAPE, RECREATION AND CULTURE, Sub: Park, Outdoor recreation

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: industrial archaeology

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

- foundation CONCRETE, walls STONE: granite, BRICK, roof METAL, other METAL: iron

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
B removed from its original location.
C a birthplace or a grave.
D a cemetery.
E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
F a commemorative property.
G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

INDUSTRY
MILITARY

Period of Significance ca. 1814-1944

Significant Dates ca. 1814
1862
1865

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

- Previous documentation on file (NPS)
preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
previously listed in the National Register
previously determined eligible by the National Register
designated a National Historic Landmark
recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

- Primary Location of Additional Data
State Historic Preservation Office
Other State agency
Federal agency
Local government
University
Other
Name of repository:

=====
 10. Geographical Data
 =====
Acreage of Property 54 acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	18	282620	4156000	2	18	283310 4156470
3	18	283660	4156490	4	18	283440 4156070
5	18	282970	4155940			

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

 =====
 11. Form Prepared By
 =====

 name/title David Dutton, Archaeologist; John Salmon, Historian
 organization Virginia Department of Historic Resources date _____
 street & number 221 Governor Street telephone 804-786-3143
 city or town Richmond state VA zip code 23219

 =====
 Additional Documentation
 =====

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

- A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

 =====
 Property Owner
 =====

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

 name/title Richmond Department of Recreation and Parks
 street & number 900 East Broad Street telephone _____
 city or town Richmond state VA zip code 23219

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 1

Belle Isle
City of Richmond, Virginia

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

Belle Isle, a rocky, fifty-four-acre island, is located in the falls or rapids of the James River in Richmond, Virginia. About half a mile in length and a third of a mile across at its widest, the island is roughly teardrop-shaped. Its eastern third is wider than the western part, relatively flat and sandy, and averages ten to twenty feet above water level. The remainder of the island is narrower, heavily wooded and rocky, and slopes steeply upward from east to west to a high bluff some hundred and twenty feet above water level. There is a deep quarry pit full of water beneath the bluff. Quarrying, carried on in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has chewed away parts of the hill, particularly on its north and south faces near the western end of Belle Isle. Most industrial development took place on the flatter ground around the base of the hill, particularly to its east and southeast, and the ruins of several of these structures are still visible. Their archaeological potential, like that of the Civil War prison camp site, is recognized but unexplored. The island is anchored to the south bank of the river by a vehicle access bridge built atop antebellum railroad piers. The piers of a late-nineteenth-century railroad, absent tracks and trestle, still march across the James to the north bank. The new Robert E. Lee Memorial Bridge spans the river from north to south and traverses the eastern end of the island. Belle Isle is presently a city park; a gravel road circles the base of the hill, which itself is crisscrossed with unimproved hiking and jogging paths. Since all industrial activity has ceased, Belle Isle today is a quiet, pleasant, and popular place to escape the hubbub of the city.

DESCRIPTION

Richmond, Virginia, is thought to be the only sizeable city in the United States with whitewater rapids running through it. Known as the Falls of the James, the rapids marked the farthest point of uninterrupted navigation from the mouth of the river westward. Because the James River is navigable above the falls, European settlers--particularly William Byrd I--realized that the falls marked a good site for a post to trade with the Indians who lived to the west. Eventually a village, and then a city, grew up around Byrd's trading post, but because of periodic flooding most development occurred on the higher ground beyond the riverbanks. Consequently, the river retains much of its spirit and continues to tumble over and around the many rocks and islands that mark the falls, just as it did in Byrd's day.

Most of the "islands" at the falls are in fact large rocks or rocky upthrusts from the river bed. Belle Isle and Mayo's Island are the two largest true islands in the river at Richmond. Mayo's, near the eastern end of the falls in the city, took its name from the family that operated a rickety wooden toll bridge there in the early years of the city. A 1930s-era concrete bridge--the Mayo Bridge--still spans the river at the island, which is broad, flat, and rocky, and has rather more trees on it than it did in the past. Belle Isle, which is located near the western end of the falls, is larger than Mayo's, measuring about half a mile long and a third of a mile across at its widest part. It contains about fifty-four acres of land, and the earliest descriptions and images of it recorded its wooded terrain. The island was first named Broad Rock by the settlers for the huge, unbroken slab of granitic rock on its north bank, and later renamed Belle Isle after the antebellum manufacturing company that occupied it for many years.

The island is unique among its fellows for the high hill that occupies its western two-thirds. Sloping abruptly upward from east to west, the hill terminates in a steep bluff at its upriver end, with a flat area of a few acres below. At its highest, the bluff stands about a hundred and twenty feet above water level. The hill, as verified by eighteenth-century paintings, has been and remains heavily wooded. To the east of the hill and around its eastern base on the north and south banks of the island is a flat, sandy

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**Belle Isle
City of Richmond, Virginia**

area that has always been lightly vegetated due to the scouring action of the river and its seasonal floods. Of perhaps twenty acres, this area averages ten to twenty feet above water level.

Virginia colonists, no doubt like the Native Americans before them, used the island as a fishery and netted and dipped their prey as they leaped up the falls. The first recorded, permanent human occupation on Belle Isle dates from the early nineteenth century. In 1814 ownership of the island changed hands, with the heirs of John Harvie, a known entrepreneur, selling the place to John and Gabriella Brockenbrough, who leased part of it to Jacqueline B. Harvie, Philip Thornton, and John Humes. John Harvie is alleged to have begun a nail factory during his ownership, which ended when he died in 1807. It is not known whether the site of his factory, if indeed he operated it there, still remains or was built over by subsequent owners. It is known, however, that Brockenbrough, Harvie, Thornton, and Humes, who sold out to the Belle Isle Manufacturing Company in 1836, constructed dwellings, a dam, a mill and millrace, and several iron and nail factory buildings between 1814 and 1836.

The foundation of the mill and portions of the millrace remain in place near the center of the south bank of the island. Just to the northeast of the mill site stands the ruin of a brick building traditionally called the Nailery. A few yards to the north of the Nailery is located the brick foundation of a small, vanished building, and about the same distance northeast is the ruin of a stone building thought to be an office. Each of these sites is believed to possess archaeological potential, although none of them has been tested, since little evidence of disturbance is present. It is likewise suspected that they were constructed before the Civil War, either by the pre-1836 owners or by the Belle Isle Manufacturing Company or its successor, the Old Dominion Nail Works.

During the Civil War, the eastern end of the island was used as a camp for captured Union soldiers. Incoming prisoners were processed through Libby Prison. Most officers remained there or were confined in several other warehouse prisons in the city proper. A few officers, along with most enlisted men and noncommissioned officers, were marched south across Mayo's Bridge, west on the south side of the James River through the streets of Manchester, across the railroad bridge connecting Belle Isle to the south riverbank, and past the ironworks buildings to the prison camp. A scattering of support buildings and tents for the camp stood on the northeastern end of the island, and sometime during the war an artillery emplacement (facing west) was constructed on the bluff at the western end.

When the camp first opened in 1862, it occupied a handful of acres near the eastern tip of Belle Isle and was surrounded by a low berm or fence line. It was closed briefly in the spring of 1863 and the prisoners disbursed; when it was reopened in May 1863 it was enlarged to the west of the original camp, and a cemetery was created adjacent to the new section. The new camp, like the old, was enclosed by a berm. The prisoners were housed in tents but because of shortages some of them lived in hovels or virtual holes in the ground. The camp was closed and reopened again in 1864, and closed for good by 10 February 1865.

The artillery emplacement on the bluff remains, and is in good condition. No remnants of the camp or its support buildings are visible above ground. The construction of postwar industrial buildings on part of the campground, as well as trenching performed to build the old and the new Lee bridges in the twentieth century, has undeniably disturbed the site. Archaeological testing has been minimal and inconclusive. A recent dig unearthed what is believed to be a portion of the berm that once stood between the new camp and the cemetery (which is thought to have been emptied of its burials after the war). Other excavations in the area of the camp were made in the 1980s prior to the construction of

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Belle Isle
City of Richmond, Virginia

the new Lee Bridge, but no artifacts dating to the Civil War were recovered. The site of the support buildings and the cemetery have not been tested. It is therefore not possible to reach a conclusion concerning the archaeological potential of the camp site.

After the war, the Old Dominion Iron and Nail Works, which had prospered before, expanded its operations considerably. In the 1850s a railroad spur line reached from the main track of the Richmond and Danville Railroad on the south bank of the James to Belle Isle; it was across this bridge that the prisoners marched. New buildings were constructed northeastwardly from the old ones, and the track was extended among them and across the river to the north bank. In the twentieth century the company built a concrete water holding tank atop the hill, and a picnic area for its employees below the bluff on the western end of the island. During World War II the ironworks, under contract to the Chrysler Corporation, manufactured tank parts in a building constructed for the purpose.

Several ruins survive from the company's postwar building campaigns. They include the railroad bridge piers of stone that once connected the north side of the island to the north riverbank; the metal frame Chrysler building ruin; the ruin of a rolling mill; a concrete pad for another building; the concrete reservoir on the hill; and a metal picnic shelter below the bluff at the western end of the island. The industrial area is considered to possess archaeological potential, but no testing has been performed.

Little is known about the four quarry sites or the brick foundation that appears to be associated with one of them. At least three of the quarries were in operation by 1848, as they appear on a map of that date. As no one familiar with Belle Isle recalls seeing them in operation, they may have ceased functioning by the early twentieth century. No archaeological testing has been done.

In 1904 the Virginia Electric Power Company build a water-powered generating plant on the south shore of Belle Isle, just west of the old millrace and mill site. The company also constructed an elaborate stone and concrete water-intake system of dams in the river. The reinforced-concrete power plant stands in ruins, while the water intake structure is in good condition. No archaeological testing of the site has been undertaken.

The first Robert E. Lee Memorial Bridge was built in the early 1930s. A handsome concrete-arch structure, it was demolished in the late 1980s after the new bridge was completed. The piers of both bridges cut through the prison camp site and the postbellum buildings of the Old Dominion Iron and Nail Works and undoubtedly have affected the integrity of those sites. A gravel road circles the base of the hill but is considered contributing since it follows the bed of older roads that appear on historic maps.

The new Lee Bridge is a noncontributing structure, as is the vehicle access bridge built atop the old stone railroad piers on the south side of the island. There is one noncontributing building on Belle Isle, the Nature Center/lavatory facility constructed in the early 1990s by the Richmond Department of Recreation and Parks.

John S. Salmon

United States Department of the Interior
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Belle Isle
City of Richmond, Virginia

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Belle Isle is located at the falls or rapids of the James River in Richmond, Virginia. At approximately fifty-four acres, it is the largest of several islands in the river there. Acquired by William Byrd I in 1676 and first known as Broad Rock Island, Belle Isle remained in the Byrd family for a century. About 1814 a nail factory was built there, and before the end of the decade John Humes had added a mill. Several granite quarries operated on the island into the twentieth century, and between 1836 and the beginning of the Civil War, the Belle Isle Manufacturing Company made iron products there. Between 1861 and 1864 the island attained national importance as the site of the Belle Isle prisoner-of-war camp, which housed primarily Union enlisted men and noncommissioned officers and was almost equal in notoriety to the infamous camp at Andersonville, Georgia. After the war, the Old Dominion Iron and Nail Company continued the long history of industrial production on Belle Isle until closing in 1972. The island is now a city park. Belle Isle is significant as an early-nineteenth-century industrial center--for which it may also have archaeological potential--and for its association with the Civil War as the site of one of the South's most notorious prison camps.

JUSTIFICATION OF CRITERIA

Belle Isle is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its association with the industrial history of Richmond and because it served as a prisoner-of-war camp for Union soldiers during the Civil War. Its notoriety was surpassed only by the camp at Andersonville, Georgia, after the Belle Isle camp was emptied in 1864 and the prisoners transferred to Andersonville.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Captain John Smith may have been the first non-Native American to see Belle Isle when in 1607 he and Christopher Newport's party explored up the James River to the rapids at the site of present-day Richmond. There they were stopped by the fast, shallow water and the "great craggy stones" that comprise the falls.¹

The first owner of record of Belle Isle was William Byrd I (1652-1704). He inherited an 1,800-acre estate called The Falls on the south side of the river from his father-in-law, Thomas Stegge, in the 1670s. He also acquired land patents totaling more than 7,300 acres extending upriver from Shockoe Creek. His son and heir William Byrd II (1674-1744), the noted diarist, laid out the town of Richmond at the falls in 1737. The new town was bounded by present-day Broad Street on the north, 17th and 25th streets on the east and west, and the James River on the south, in what today is called Shockoe Bottom. It was located in Henrico County, on the north side of the James River from Chesterfield County and Rocky Ridge, later the town of Manchester. In 1732 Byrd visited Belle Isle, which he called "the broad rock island," to prospect for iron ore. He was struck by the island's beauty and wrote of it in his diary:

We walked from one end of the island to the other, being about half a mile in length, and found the soil very good and too high for any flood less than that of Deucalion to do the least damage. There is a very wild prospect both upward and downward, the river being full of rocks over which the stream tumbled with a murmur loud enough to drown the

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Belle Isle
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notes of a scolding wife. This island would make an agreeable hermitage for any good Christian who had a mind to retire from the world.²

The James River continues to tumble wildly over the rocks around Belle Isle. Although nineteenth-century dams have shifted the main channel of the river from the south side of the island to the north, the murmur of the falls remains loud enough to drown the noise of the surrounding city.

On the death of William Byrd II in 1744, his lands (including Broad Rock Island and his house--Belvidere--on the north bluff of the river overlooking the island) passed to his son William Byrd III (1728-1777). The younger Byrd, an inveterate gambler, found himself so heavily in debt by the late 1760s that he sought to raise money by holding a private land lottery. He subdivided some of his landholdings in and around Richmond, numbered the lots 1 through 839 (Broad Rock Island became Lot 322), and endeavored to sell 10,000 lottery tickets at £5 each. After the drawing was held in November 1768, not all of the winners claimed their prizes, and Byrd spent years collecting money from those who bought their tickets on credit. Plagued by continuing debt, Byrd killed himself on 1 January 1777.³

Although the chain of ownership is muddled, it appears that Byrd sold Broad Rock Island, along with Belvidere, to Daniel Lawrence Hylton in September 1776. Hylton sold the properties in July 1793 to James and Elizabeth Overton. In October 1795 Elizabeth Overton confirmed that Bushrod Washington, who was in possession of Broad Rock Island, owned it as well as Belvidere, which had been conveyed earlier, but the deed apparently was not recorded. Bushrod Washington (1762-1829), a nephew of George Washington, was a Richmond lawyer and justice of the United States Supreme Court (1798-1829). After he purchased the island it became known as Washington's Island.⁴

The noted architect B. Henry Latrobe, visiting Richmond in the late 1790s, sketched and described Washington's Island in his journal on 10 April 1796:

The proper name for this Island is Broadrock. This name is derived from an immense flat rock on the Northern shore extending near 100 feet each way without a fissure. It is covered by a rich carpet of Moss and surrounded on three sides with beautiful Trees. The basis of Washington's Island is an immense Pile of Granite, abrupt and bare at the West end, but gradually sloping and covered in most places with Mould on every other side. Towards the East is a fruitful hanging plain of about 15 Acres; skirted round the edge with trees. The West end appears to have formerly with stood many a tremendous Attack from the Western Waters; huge fragments of rock that seem to have been violently torn from the Cliff cover its foot.⁵

During his stay in Richmond, Latrobe saw fisheries being operated from Washington's Island, as well as from other islands and rocks in the river. Fishermen stood on them and used seines and skim nets to catch shad and other fish as they fought their way up the rapids.⁶

About 1799, Bushrod Washington sold part or all of the island to Henry ("Light Horse Harry") Lee, the father of Robert E. Lee. Henry Lee sold it about 1801 to John Harvie; when he died at Belvidere in 1807, Harvie's estate passed to Julia Harvie, then to Margaret Harvie. The latter sold the island about 1814 to John and Gabriella Brockenbrough, who then leased part of their tract to Jacqueline B. Harvie, Philip Thornton, and John Humes. Thornton transferred his lease to Harvie in 1818 and Humes followed suit in 1833. Harvie sold his part of Broad Rock Island to John B. and Mary G. (Randolph)

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Belle Isle
City of Richmond, Virginia

Chapman, and the Belle Isle Manufacturing Company, in 1836. He and his wife, Mary, also conveyed all the improvements built on the island since 1816, including the

dam, race (or Canal) tail race and Nail Manufactory, with all the various machinery, rolling machinery, blacksmith shop, tools and implements of every description, and the dwelling house and other houses situated on the said portion of the Island . . . [and also the right to] abut or cause to be abutted a Bridge on the north side of the James River at some point below the Water Works of the city of Richmond . . . [and] an inclined plane, with other fixtures and buildings for the convenience of the said company.⁷

Several maps drawn during the first half of the nineteenth century documented the changes wrought upon the island by Brockenbrough, Harvie, Humes, and the Belle Isle Manufacturing Company. For example, part of Broad Rock Island appeared on Richard Young's 1817 "Map of the City of Richmond." It showed Brockenbrough's and Humes's portions, and indicated that a mill race and a structure (probably a mill) stood near the south-central bank of the island on Humes's lot. The ruins of the mill foundation and the mill race are visible today. An 1819 map of the Manchester Canal by Thomas Moore and Isaac Briggs showed a structure resembling a house standing on what the mapmakers called Harvey's Island. Charles S. Morgan's 1848 "Plan of Richmond" clearly illustrated the mill race and buildings then owned by the Belle Isle Manufacturing Company. One building and the ruins of another still stand. Morgan's map also showed three quarries on the north side and western end of the island that were chewing away at Latrobe's granite "Broadrock." A large pond created by the quarries is still extant at the island's western extremity, as are other marks of quarrying.⁸

The Belle Isle Manufacturing Company was incorporated on 19 March 1832. Within seven years it built on the island "the earliest chartered rolling and puddling mills" in the Richmond area. By the early 1840s the company was producing nails, bar iron, boiler plate, and other works of iron. It experienced periodic financial difficulties, however. Beginning in 1839 John R. Triplett and Son operated the factory with success for several years, but in 1852 it was sold at public auction to William H. Macfarland and Bolling W. Haxall. Two years later they sold it to Hugh W. Fry, who hired William S. Triplett, the son of John R. Triplett, and Douglas Baird, to run it. Fry allegedly advanced \$25,000 to the Richmond and Danville Railroad to help construct that company's bridge across the James River. In return, by 1856 the railroad built a spur line from the southern bank of the river to the factory doors of the Old Dominion Nail Works, as the Belle Isle Manufacturing Company had become known. The original stone piers of the railroad bridge remain, although the tracks and the bridge itself have been replaced by a vehicle bridge.⁹

By 1860, having undergone another name change, the Old Dominion Iron and Nail Works was one of the premier nail manufacturers in the country. Among its island resources were seven puddling furnaces, three heating furnaces, forty-eight nail machines, a rolling mill, a keg factory, and several sawmills. In 1860 the company consumed 5,000 tons of pig iron valued at \$140,000. Using water to power its equipment, which took some 200 free and 21 slave laborers to operate it, the company produced 75,000 kegs of nails valued at \$213,750. Not only would the company's newfound prosperity continue into the twentieth century, but even the advent of the Civil War did not disrupt its operation. The nail works supplied the Southern civilian market while across the river in the city the Tredegar Iron Works made munitions for the Confederacy.¹⁰

By the time the war began, the island's old name of Broad Rock Island had been supplanted by Belle Isle, after the old ironworks, on contemporary maps. The exact source of the name remains a mystery,

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**Belle Isle
City of Richmond, Virginia**

unless it was whimsy on the part of the owners of the ironworks. For more than a year after hostilities erupted, Belle Isle remained a center of industry. Quarrying continued in the northwestern corner, and perhaps some fishermen still dipped fish from its banks. In mid-1862, however, the character of the place changed dramatically when Union soldiers arrived on the island as prisoners.

When the war first started, neither side had the facilities to house prisoners, and exchanges of captured soldiers were made quickly and informally. After the First Battle of Bull Run or Manassas in July 1861, however, the Confederates decided to send captured federal soldiers and officers to Richmond for safekeeping until they could be exchanged. The prisoners were housed in the Henrico County jail and in warehouses in the city, and were reasonably well cared for. The South, however, was no more prepared than the North to handle the huge numbers of men captured as the war progressed, and soon the facilities were hopelessly overcrowded. Bureaucrats on both sides tried to reach a formal agreement for exchanges, but it was 22 July 1862 before a cartel was signed. In the meantime, the warehouses of Richmond overflowed with captives, who began to compete with local citizens and the Confederate army for increasingly scarce commodities. Some prisoners were paroled and a few hundred were transferred to other Southern cities, but new prisoners arrived daily to overwhelm the resources.

The Confederate authorities appointed Brig. Gen. John H. Winder as commandant of the prison system. He assembled a staff of young, inexperienced officers to administer the warehouse prisons. Lt. Thomas P. Turner was placed in charge, with Pvt. Richard R. Turner (no relation) as second-in-command.¹¹

In the spring of 1862, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan's hundred-thousand-man Union army ground its way up the Peninsula from Fort Monroe to the gates of Richmond. It may have been at this time that an artillery emplacement was built on the high ground of Belle Isle, facing west to guard against an attack from that quarter. Despite winning every battle he fought, by late June McClellan and his men were retreating the way they came in the face of spirited attacks by the new commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, Gen. Robert E. Lee. The Seven Days' Campaign, 25 June-1 July 1862, brought not only embarrassment to McClellan, it brought enormous numbers of Union prisoners to Richmond. Commandant Winder decided to encamp the captured enlisted men on the eastern end of Belle Isle. By the end of July some five thousand soldiers were jammed into three or four acres of Latrobe's "fruitful hanging plain."¹²

At first, life out of doors on the island was preferable to confinement in the close quarters of such warehouses and chandleries as Castle Thunder and Libby Prison. The weather was tolerable, the prisoners were issued tents, they dug wells for fresh water, and the guards allowed them to bathe in the river. Food rations were adequate, and the prisoners could purchase provisions at sutlers's shacks that stood nearby.

In August 1862, Lt. Turner was transferred to Lynchburg to bring order to the prison system there, and Captain Heinrich H. Wirz took his place in Richmond. Henry Wirz, as he was known, was a native of Zurich, Switzerland, who emigrated to the United States in 1849. He worked first as a mill hand in Massachusetts, then as a physician's assistant in Kentucky, and finally drifted to Louisiana, where he claimed to be a doctor and worked on a plantation. When the war came, he enlisted in the 4th Louisiana Infantry. His right arm was shattered at Seven Pines, and while he recuperated in Richmond, he volunteered to serve on Winder's staff. Wirz was promoted to captain and assumed Turner's position, which he held until December, when he was given another assignment.¹³

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Belle Isle
City of Richmond, Virginia

The prisoner exchange cartel bore fruit in September 1862, when some 3,300 Union soldiers were traded for captured Confederates. The number of prisoners in Richmond was so reduced that the Belle Isle camp was closed on 23 September.¹⁴

In December, however, Confederate President Jefferson Davis abruptly terminated the cartel in retaliation for what Davis considered the unpardonable behavior of Union Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler as military commander of New Orleans. Soon the prison population mushroomed, and in mid-January 1863 captured Union soldiers were once again housed in tents on Belle Isle until they could be transferred to the warehouse prisons. On 17 April 1863 Gen. Ulysses S. Grant ordered a halt to prisoner exchanges (they were not resumed until February 1865). By early spring, just before the campaign season opened, Belle Isle once again was deactivated and reverted to its role as an industrial center.¹⁵

A dramatic change came after the Battle of Chancellorsville on 1-3 May 1863, when hordes of Union prisoners descended on Richmond. On 13 May Belle Isle was reactivated as a prison, under the command of Lt. Virginius Bossieux. This time the camp took on an air of permanence, as tents were lined up in neat streets, the camp was expanded in size, trenches were dug to mark the prison bounds, and guards were posted every forty feet. A string of frame and tent support buildings straggled along the eastern and northern edges of the camp, and a cemetery took shape at the northwestern end (the bodies were removed after the war). Although the prisoners still were allowed access to the river, the camp took on a harder edge, with the guards seemingly more ready to use their muskets. This change may have been due in part to the bitterness that the long, hard war was engendering, in part to the real privations that were striking the Confederate capital, and in part to the increasing numbers of foreign-born prisoners. As in most wars, the guards were not the best troops, and their attitude toward the prisoners--particularly those who did not speak adequate English--ranged from callousness to brutality.¹⁶

Newly captured soldiers were processed at Libby Prison, then marched west on Cary Street, across the Mayo Bridge to Manchester, west to the Richmond and Danville Railroad spur line, and across the bridge to Belle Isle. One of them, Gilbert E. Sabre, of the 2d Rhode Island Cavalry, described the transfer of his own group of prisoners:

After considerable delay, late in the evening we were in motion. It was ten o'clock at night when we left the gloomy precincts of Libby, and marched through one of the principal streets of the rebel capital. On our route every thing was perfectly quiet. There were but few people on the streets. they took but little notice of us. Occasionally we would pass a night patrol; he would perhaps halt for a moment out of curiosity and then pass on without remark, or even an evidence of feeling for the horrors which awaited us at our destination. Having marched about a half an hour we crossed the main bridge over the James River, to Manchester. Thence following along the river a short distance on the south side, we crossed another bridge, which spanned the southern channel and terminated on Belle Island.¹⁷

It did not take long for the numbers of new prisoners to overwhelm the resources of the camp and the guards' ability to manage so many men. By the fall of 1863 some 6,300 enlisted men and noncommissioned officers were packed into Belle Isle, instead of the 3,000 that the camp was planned to hold. Soon the living conditions there descended into squalor. Sabre, who arrived in mid-September, described the scene:

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Belle Island, an oblong tract of land--the whole dimension but one mile in length, and less than one-fourth of a mile in breadth--is situated in the James River, between Richmond and Manchester; the channel passing on the Richmond side being nearly one-third wider than between the island and the south bank. The island was reached alone from the Manchester side of the river, and by a rickety bridge, upon which was laid a branch of the Danville Railroad for the convenience of the Old Dominion Iron Works, which were located on the upper end of the island. The prison camp was situated on the extreme lower end of the island. The site seemed to have been chosen for its capability of adding to the wretchedness to which our brave men were compelled to submit. The ground was low, wet, and flat, and calculated to breed every character of fatal diseases. The area occupied by the prisoners was not over the size of an ordinary regimental camp--say about four acres. Around the whole was an embankment about three feet in height, somewhat resembling in appearance a hasty field defence. The ditch lay inside, and was about two feet in depth. The ditch and bank formed the boundary, beyond which it was death for a prisoner to wander. Here was the fatal 'dead-line,' outside of which, encircling the whole camp, were a chain of sentinels, ready to carry out their instructions to kill at every opportunity. The death of a Union prisoner always secured a furlough. Still further from this were the guard and officers' quarters, cook house, hospital, and graveyard. A ridge of low hills surrounded and overlooked the camp. Here were posted, at different points, four pieces of artillery, charged with shell and canister, and pointed to rake all parts of the camp. Cannoneers were always at the pieces, ready at an instant to open upon any indications of a revolt. North of the camp was the graveyard, in plain view, and thickly marked with evidences of its dense population of bodies wantonly deprived of life. West of the graveyard was the hospital, the stepping-stone from the camp to the grave.¹⁸

Sabre's memoir of his life in the prison camps is highly colored by his low opinion of the Confederacy, which he considered a treasonous conspiracy, and of Southerners, who he thought were hopelessly ignorant and deliberately cruel. Although his assignments of motives are suspect, Sabre's depiction of the privations of camp life are corroborated by other memoirs, reports of trials, and prison records.¹⁹

By the fall of 1863 overcrowding on the island had obliterated the neat city of tents, many of which the prisoners had torn apart in their efforts to obtain a share of the shelter. Sabre reported that men were huddled together in shacks or "hovels" built from scraps of wood and the remains of tents. Some hovels resembled small earthworks. Many men, however, had no shelter and suffered from the cold, which began in earnest in late November. Simultaneously, according to his account, the food ration shrank, adding to the misery of the prisoners. After the new year the ranks of prisoners swelled to some eight thousand or more. The depths of privation were reached in January 1864, when during one night of especially bitter cold, it seemed to Sabre that half the camp was roaming about in a futile effort to stay warm. Shelterless men pleaded with those more fortunate to take them in, and a large number simply threw themselves in a heap on the ground, where they fought to burrow into the human pile and get a little warmth from the bodies of others. In the morning, Sabre found that several men had frozen to death. When a Confederate burial party searched the camp for corpses, it often was unable to distinguish between the dead and the exhausted living, and shook stupefied men awake with the query, "Hello, there, are you dead yet?"²⁰

Periodic efforts to relieve the suffering on Belle Isle were made by both sides. Two issues of clothing and blankets were made during the winter, and prisoners could receive packages from outside the camp, but these events did little to mitigate the chronic shortages of food, shelter, clothing, and firewood, and the diseases caused by overcrowding and the lack of sanitation. Groups of men formed outlaw bands and terrorized the camp, stealing provisions from the weak. Sometime during the winter several

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prisoners enticed the pet poodle of the commandant, Lt. Bossieux, across the dead line, and killed, skinned, and ate it.²¹

The scarcity of food struck the civilian population of the Confederate capital and culminated in the Bread Riot of 2 April 1864. Frustrated in their failure to control or reduce the huge numbers of Union prisoners in the city, Confederate authorities earlier in the winter decided to disperse them to other parts of the South. On 7 February 1864 the first group of 400 men left Belle Isle for the newly enlarged prison camp in southwestern Georgia, near the town of Andersonville. There they would encounter the former commandant of Belle Isle, Henry Wirz. On 1 March, the ill-fated Dahlgren-Kilpatrick raid on Richmond, which was approved by the Lincoln administration in part to free the Union prisoners held on Belle Isle and in the city, was foiled by Confederate defenders and inclement weather. The last prisoners evacuated Belle Isle on 24 March and the camp was again closed.²²

Grant opened his spring offensive on 4 May 1864 with the Battle of the Wilderness. Before long, federal prisoners marched into Richmond, and on 7 June Belle Isle was reactivated as a prison camp for the last time. By October most of the men were gone, transferred to other Southern prisons, and only a handful were held over the winter. On 10 February 1865 the island was returned to the Old Dominion Iron and Nail Works, thus ending its role as a prison.²³

After the war ended in the spring of 1865, the victors began a search for those who they thought had mistreated Union captives in Southern prisons. Former prisoners claimed they had been tortured, starved, executed, and generally treated inhumanely. They charged that their captors had stolen their money and other property, and had refused to clothe, feed, and house them adequately. The outcry in the North was loud, especially when the public saw photographs and woodcuts of the living skeletons who were newly released from such places as Belle Isle and Andersonville. In the Northern litany of Southern atrocities and war crimes, Belle Isle was in the first rank. On 28 May 1865 the *New York Times* captured the prevailing opinion in an editorial:

The spirit which prompted the maltreatment of national prisoners was essentially fiendish. Nobody, at this day, has the audacity to deny the facts. It is no more certain that this war has taken place than that tens of thousands of national soldiers, who were made prisoners in it were deliberately and wantonly shot to death, as at Fort Pillow, or frozen to death as at Belle Isle, or starved to death as at Andersonville, or sickened to death by swamp malaria, as in South Carolina.²⁴

Such memoirs as Gilbert Sabre's, which was printed in 1865, and Warren Goss's, published the next year, together with congressional hearings, kept public interest at a high level and fixed the horrors of the Southern prisons in the civilian imagination. In the trial of Henry Wirz, the former commander at Belle Isle and Andersonville, and his subsequent execution on 10 November 1865 for "impairing the health and destroying the lives of prisoners,"²⁵ the former captives exacted their revenge. The truth, in fact, was that neither side in the war was prepared for the capture of such huge numbers of men, and the conditions in such Northern prisons as Point Lookout, Maryland, and Rock Island, Illinois, were about as bad as any the South had to offer.

The truth, however, was less important than the perception by a victorious Northern public of what they considered Southern atrocities. In terms of raw statistics concerning casualties, Belle Isle appears significantly less deadly than other Southern camps. For example, among Southern prisons, only Andersonville and perhaps Salisbury, North Carolina, seemed to exceed or match it in terms of

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population and privation. At its peak, Andersonville held some thirty-two thousand men, and more than thirteen thousand died of disease and starvation. In 1864 about ten thousand men occupied a handful of acres on Belle Isle; more than thirty thousand were confined there during the course of the war. Of these, less than a thousand perished of starvation, disease, and cold, some four hundred during the winter of 1863-1864. No doubt many died because, despite being located in a city with hospitals, medical care was not extended to them. The small size of the camp and the lack of adequate shelter and food were the major contributors to the numbers of deaths. The numbers would have been higher had not the camp been closed so frequently and the prisoners transferred to die in other camps. Many of these prisons' occupants, however, arrived from Belle Isle in a sickly and debilitated condition, and soon their new home finished what the old had started. Belle Isle deserved its reputation as one of the deadliest prison camps in the South. More importantly, it was less the fact of death than the manner of death, from hunger and cold and neglect, that angered Northerners so and fixed Belle Isle's image in their minds.²⁶

Today there are few physical reminders of the prison system that once existed in Richmond. Libby Prison and Castle Thunder and the other notorious warehouse prisons are long gone. On Belle Isle, however, the earthen boundaries of the camp have been reconstructed by the Richmond Department of Recreation and Parks.

Once the war ended and the Old Dominion Iron and Nail Works resumed its activities on the island, the company continued to thrive. By 1870 its financial position had improved dramatically over 1860, with its investment capital rising from \$150,000 to \$250,000. The raw materials used in manufacture included pig iron (6,000 tons valued at \$198,000), scrap metal (3,000 tons at \$11,400), and coal (300,000 bushels at \$2,000). The company produced 2,000 tons of bar iron valued at \$160,000 and 100,000 kegs of nails at \$425,000. Most significantly, in 1870 the works employed about 320 laborers (including children and youths), and paid \$150,000 in wages as opposed to \$5,000 in 1860.²⁷

The increasing prosperity of the ironworks enabled it to construct several new buildings after the war, partially covering the site of the prison camp. By the early 1870s the railroad spur had been extended northeastward across the island and the north channel of the James River to the Tredegar Iron Works on the north bank. Most of the new buildings sprawled along the railroad bed across the eastern end of the island. In the twentieth century the ironworks probably dug the water holding pond, constructed of concrete, that is visible on top of the hill above the prison camp site. The company also built an employees' picnic and recreation area near the western end of Belle Isle; a shelter still stands there today. The other island industry, quarrying, continued apace, and by 1925 had created the large pond near the picnic area.²⁸

In 1904 the Virginia Electric Power Company built a plant on the south shore of Belle Isle, just upriver from the antebellum mill site. The plant used water-driven turbines to generate electricity for more than sixty years until the plant closed in 1967.²⁹

To connect the north and south banks of the James River for motor traffic, the Robert E. Lee Memorial Bridge was constructed in 1933-1934. It closely paralleled the route of the railroad between Cowardin Avenue on the south bank, northeast across Belle Isle, to Belvidere Street near the Tredegar Iron Works on the north. The bridge stood for more than fifty years, until a new bridge was completed in 1988 and the old one demolished the following year.

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The Old Dominion Iron and Nail Works continued in operation until 1972. During World War II, it manufactured parts for tanks. After it closed, most of its late-nineteenth-century buildings fell victim to time and vandalism, and several were demolished for the construction of the new Lee Bridge. Other island structures that came and went over the years include the WANT radio tower and a large advertising billboard. In 1972-1973 the City of Richmond purchased the island and it became a part of the James River Park system of the Department of Recreation and Parks.

Today Belle Isle constitutes one of the city's most popular park facilities. Public access is provided by a foot bridge suspended beneath the new Lee Bridge. A nature study center has been constructed near the western edge of the prison camp site. The old road that linked the industrial sites and quarries has been graded, and a new hiking-jogging trail built. A handful of ruins--the mill, three ironworks buildings, and the abandoned electric plant--constitute the standing resources at the eastern end of the island. The city has marked the approximate boundaries of the prison camp beneath the Lee Bridge with small mounds of earth reminiscent of the berms that once marked the "dead line." In 1992 the William Byrd Branch of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities sponsored an archaeological examination of the camp site that located part of the berm that once separated the camp from the cemetery.

Belle Isle remains a remarkable reminder of events significant in the history of Richmond and America. After serving local residents as a fishery, its role as an industrial center for the city began in the early nineteenth century and extended almost to the fourth quarter of the twentieth century. In the twentieth century it helped provide electric power to the city's residents. Most importantly, during the Civil War it was the site of one of the most notorious prisoner-of-war camps of that conflict, and was rivaled in the South only by Andersonville. The standing structures, the ruins, the quarries, and the known and suspected archaeological sites on Belle Isle, provide a firm foundation for interpreting and understanding the island's industrial and wartime past.

John S. Salmon

ENDNOTES

1. Philip L. Barbour, ed., *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580-1631) in Three Volumes* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 1:29.
2. Louis B. Wright, *The Prose Works of William Byrd of Westover* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966), 341. In ancient mythology, Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha were the sole survivors of a flood sent by Zeus that destroyed the rest of the human race.
3. Drew St. John Carneal, forthcoming illustrated history of Richmond's Fan District, first chapter.
4. Carneal, in his forthcoming history of the Fan District, explains the muddled chain of ownership of Belvidere and Broad Rock Island. The source for his statement about the transfer from Byrd to Hylton is not documented but the other deeds cited are as follows: Henrico County, Deed Book 4, 1792-1796, Reel 12, pp. 282-284, Archives Branch, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va. (LVA); and *ibid.*, Deed Book 5, 1796-1800, Reel 13, pp. 60-61.
5. Edward C. Carter II, ed., *The Virginia Journals of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1795-1798* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 1:91.
6. *Ibid.*, 94-95.
7. Auditor of Public Accounts, Land Tax Books, Henrico County, 1799-1836 (LVA); Henrico County, Deed Book 38, 1836, Reel 28, pp. 93-98 (LVA).
8. Richard Young, "Map of the City of Richmond and its jurisdiction, including Manchester," 1817, LVA; *ibid.*, Thomas Moore and Isaac Briggs, "A Map of the Manchester Canal," 1819; *ibid.*, Charles S. Morgan, "Plan of Richmond, Henrico County, Manchester and Springhill, Virginia," 1848.

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9. Kathleen Bruce, *Virginia Iron Manufacture in the Slave Era* (New York: The Century Co., 1930; New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968), 140, 290-294.
 10. *Ibid.*; United States Census, Virginia, Industry Schedules, 1860, Richmond, Reel 236, LVA; Auditor of Public Accounts, Personal Property Tax Books, Richmond, 1860, LVA.
 11. Sandra V. Parker, *Richmond's Civil War Prisons* (Lynchburg, Va.: H. E. Howard, Inc., 1990), 11.
 12. Warren L. Goss, *The Soldier's Story of His Captivity at Andersonville, Belle Isle, and Other Rebel Prisons* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1866), 32-33 (Goss, captured during the Seven Days' Campaign in 1862 and imprisoned on the island until the fall, mentioned the gun emplacement); Parker, *Prisons*, 14-15; Carter, *Virginia Journals*, 91.
 13. Patricia L. Faust, ed., *Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 837; Parker, *Prisons*, 17.
 14. Parker, *Prisons*, 19.
 15. *Ibid.*, 22, 25.
 16. *Ibid.*, 33-34.
 17. Gilbert E. Sabre, *Nineteen Months a Prisoner of War* (New York: The American News Co., 1865), 22.
 18. *Ibid.*, 23-24.
 19. For example, see John Ransom, *Andersonville Diary* (Middlebury, Vt.: Paul S. Ericksson, 1986) and Warren L. Goss, *The Soldier's Story of His Captivity at Andersonville, Belle Isle, and Other Rebel Prisons* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1866). Official Confederate reports concerning the Richmond prisons are in the National Archives and are quoted throughout Sandra V. Parker, *Richmond's Civil War Prisons* (Lynchburg, Va.: H. E. Howard, Inc., 1990).
 20. Sabre, *Prisoner of War*, 45-47.
 21. *Ibid.*, 53-55, 63-67; Parker, *Prisons*, 53.
 22. Parker, *Prisons*, 62-63.
 23. *Ibid.*, 65.
 24. Quoted in William B. Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1930; New York: Frederick Unger Publishing, 1964), 237.
 25. Faust, *Encyclopedia of the Civil War*, 837.
 26. The camp at Salisbury held roughly the same number of men, and the casualties may have been as high, but exact numbers are impossible to come by. However, after the war one fairly conservative estimate held that about 12 percent of the prisoners held in the North died, and about 15.5 percent of those held in the South. Applying the latter percentage to the estimated population of Belle Isle, more than 3,100 may have perished there during the war. See Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons*, 255-256.
 27. United States Census, Virginia, Industry Schedules, 1860, 1870, Richmond, Reels 236, 243, LVA.
 28. J. F. Z. Caracristi, "Office Map of the City of Richmond, Va., and Surroundings," 1873, LVA; E. C. Clarke, "Map of Richmond, Va.," 1925, LVA.
 29. Browning & Associates, *Phase I Archaeological Reconnaissance Survey, Robert E. Lee Bridge, U.S. Route 1, City of Richmond, Virginia* (Richmond, Va.: [1983]), 33.

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GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundaries of the nominated area correspond to the perimeter of the island as indicated on the Richmond, VA, Quadrangle Map of the USGS Topographic 7.5 Minute Series and also includes the piers of the North Railroad bridge that formerly crossed the James River at Belle Isle.

Boundary Justification

The boundaries were chosen to include all of the resources historically associated with the island.

4159
32'30"
4158
4157
4156
4155
430 000
FEET
4154

LEE ISLE
CITY OF RICHMOND, VA
M REFEERENCES:
18 282620 4156000
18 283310 4156470
18 283660 4156490
18 283440 4156070
18 283970 4155940

