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brought to light

Restoration sought for site of skirmish during War of 1812

Cecil museum envisioned

By JAY APPERSON
SUN STAFF

ELKTON — Anybody who knows anything about Maryland history and the War of 1812 can tell how a certain national anthem was composed beneath the rockets' red glare. They might even know how a band of citizen-soldiers helped save Baltimore from British invaders at the Battle of North Point.

But how many could find Elk Landing on a map?

Mike Dixon is preparing a little history lesson, and it comes with a sunken ship, a 19th-century cannonball and a trove of records, writings and knickknacks — all newly discovered and part of a planned "living history" museum an hour's drive north of Baltimore.

Elk Landing, where Big and Little Elk creeks meet in Cecil County, is where a band of townspeople turned back British marauders during the United States' second war.

"It truly is a little-known history, even from a local perspective," said Dixon, a Cecil historian and a leader in the effort to turn the 42-acre Elk Landing site into a tourist destination. "We want to interpret the role this region, the Chesapeake, played in some of the formative events that shaped the nation's history."

Elk Landing now consists of two ramshackle houses surrounded by fields, marsh and river in the shadow of the county jail. Hoping to combine history with economic development, Dixon and the nonprofit Historic Elk Landing Foundation, with Elkton and Cecil County officials, envision a Williamsburg-style park where history buffs roam through restored buildings and mingle with actors in period dress. The foundation hopes to raise about \$2 million in private donations and government grants for the project.

The goal is to celebrate the area's history, from Native American hunting ground through the town's period as a Colonial transportation center to its successful defense against the British in 1813. The organizers hope the site will be listed with the federal park system's planned "Star-Spangled Banner Trail," a [See History, 2B]

Elk Landing's obscure history brought to light

[History, from Page 1a]

190-mile tour of more than two dozen historic sites in Maryland and Washington.

Last week, two archaeologists bundled themselves against the cold and dug for more clues to the property's history. Excavating near the 18th-century Hollingsworth House, Dwayne Pickett and his assistant, Keith Heinrich, picked through a family's two-century-old trash in search of history.

Finding artifacts

They found shards of porcelain, probably imported from China during the 18th or 19th centuries. They found an animal's tooth and some rib bones, remains of family meals. They found a button made of bone.

Swedes and Finns established a trading post on the land in the 17th century, according to the Elk Landing Foundation.

In the early 18th century, Zebulon Hollingsworth bought property there. He built a brick house that, despite a fire in 1848, still stands, though enlarged and covered with stucco. Also on the property are the remains of a stone building believed to have been built in 1697 and used as a tavern.

In Colonial times, the area was, in Dixon's words, "the I-95 of the Eastern seaboard." Located on the Mid-Atlantic's northernmost navigable inland waterway, and a stop on the preferred route of north-and-south travel, armies, flour and whiskey flowed through Elk Landing, the foundation's studies show. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and the Marquis de Lafayette all traveled through the region.

Fighting at Elk Landing

In August 1777, more than 15,000 British troops passed through the area on their way to the capture of the then-American capital of Philadelphia. Thirty-six years later, on April 29, 1813, the British returned to the Elkton area, attacking and burning nearby Frenchtown.

But when they continued up the Elk River, they were repelled by a gun battery at Fort Hollingsworth, an earthen redoubt at Elk Landing.

Christine Hughes, a historian with the Naval Historical Center in Washington, said the British carried out dozens of such hit-and-run attacks in the Chesapeake during the War of 1812. Any town with a warehouse or storage of tobacco was a possible target. Many of these skirmishes aren't widely known, she said, because they often weren't proud moments for the locals' forefathers.

"If they didn't resist, they don't like to promote that in their history," she said.

The town of Elkton bought the Elk Landing site about three years ago, thinking it would make a nice park, town planner Jeanne Minner said. But the Hollingsworth house yielded a treasure of records describing, for instance, the property's role as a Colonial hub of commerce.

In January, the Elk Landing Foundation signed a 99-year lease to operate the site as an interpretive living history museum.

Around that time, underwater archaeologists from the Maryland Historical Trust surveying the Elk River for a planned dredging project found the remains of a 60-foot-long packet boat in about 10 feet of water. The vessel apparently was sunk by the British during the 1813 battle, underwater archaeologist Stephen Bilicki said.

He said the boat will likely remain in the river. Engineers reworked their plans so the dredging would not disturb the wreckage.

In January, Pickett, the archaeologist, began surveying the property as part of the area's nomination for the National Park Service's Star-Spangled Banner Trail. Digging where Fort Hollingsworth once stood, Pickett found a cannonball about the size of a large orange 8 inches below the surface.

Historic trail stop

The Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail will eventually link more than 30 landmarks from the War of 1812, such as the Howard County home of Commodore Joshua Barney, who scuttled his entire flotilla to render the ships



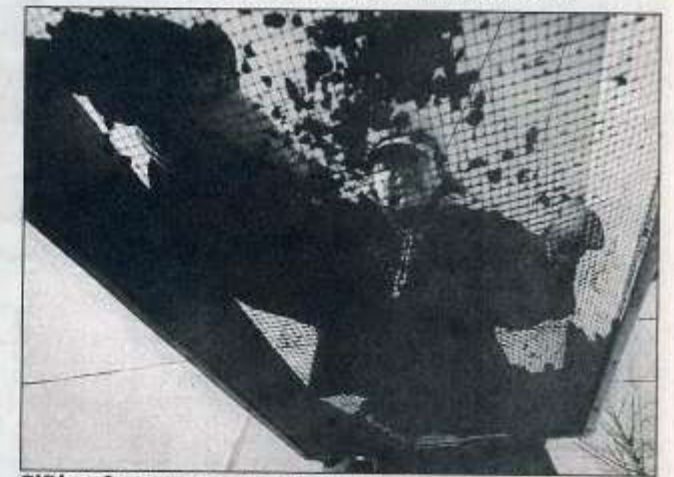
Landmark: The Historic Elk Landing Foundation hopes to restore the 18th-century Hollingsworth House and make it part of a living-history museum. Site manager Gary Storke is shown leaving the building.



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useless to the British, and the site of the Battle of North Point in Baltimore County. Hearings on proposed sites are scheduled to begin next month.

Cecil County tourism officials hope the Elk Landing project will operate as a museum within five years, and will attract thousands of tourists. Minner, the town planner, said the project also will help distinguish Elkton.



Sifting clues: Archaeologist Keith Heinrich searches through earth taken from around the Hollingsworth House for artifacts.

"Without the role your locale played in forming history, nothing will separate one town from another," she said. "They all have the Wal-Marts and the 7-Elevens and the strip malls and the shopping centers. Your history is what gives you your identity."



Salvage: Some items in the historical society's collection were on the verge of being discarded by the courthouse. "We try not to think about" what wasn't caught in time, says executive director Michael Walczak.

Historical society looks toward the future

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