



PRELIMINARY INFORMATION FORM (PIF) for HISTORIC DISTRICTS

Note: PIFs are prepared by applicants and evaluated by DHR staff and the State Review Board based on information known at the time of preparation. Recommendations concerning PIFs are subject to change if new information becomes available.

DHR No. (to be completed by DHR staff) 051-0001

1. General Information

District name(s): Belle Isle (Nomination Update)

Main Streets and/or Routes: Belle Isle Road, Creek Landing Road, Bel Air Road

City or Town: Lancaster

Name of the Independent City or County where the property is located: Lancaster

2. Physical Aspects

Acreage: 889

Setting (choose only one of the following):

Urban ☐ Suburban ☐ Town ☐ Village ☐ Hamlet ☐ Rural ☒

Briefly describe the district's overall setting, including any notable landscape features:

Belle Isle is located along the Rappahannock River on a wide peninsula between Deep Creek and Mulberry Creek (also known as Mud Creek). The landscape is a mix of open cultivated fields, woods, and marsh, with extensive water frontage and sparse construction. The main road from the park entrance, Belle Isle Road, curves north around the historic Belle Isle manor house and then heads southwest towards the river and the picnic area. Creek Landing Road leads southeast off the main road to the Visitor Center and boat ramp on Deep Creek, and northwest to the campground and kayak launch on Mulberry Creek. Bel Air Road leads past several non-historic houses used as ranger residences to the Bel Air Mansion and Guest House along Deep Creek. Park-related construction, which dates to the 1990s and later, is mostly clustered at the ends of these roads. There is a primitive campground, that is walk-in/boat-in only, at the northwest tip of the park and only accessible by trail or authorized State Park vehicle. The 18th-century Belle Isle manor house and dependencies are located close to the park entrance. The original straight axial driveway remains and is accessible from Bel Air Road, though only open to authorized vehicles. Behind the house are the remains of formal, terraced gardens and a pond that was fed by a creek or spring and was part of the designed landscape. The landscape to the rear of the historic manor is wooded and overgrown, though restoration is about to begin.

3. Architectural/Physical Description

Architectural Style(s): Georgian, Colonial Revival

If any individual properties within the district were designed by an architect, landscape architect, engineer, or other professional, please list here: Bel Air Mansion and Bel Air Guest House and interior restoration of Belle Isle manor house by Thomas T. Waterman, 1941

If any builders or developers are known, please list here:

Date(s) of construction (can be approximate): 1767, 1802, ca. 1830, 1941, 1998-2010s

Are there any known threats to this district? No

Narrative Description:

In the space below, briefly describe the general characteristics of the entire historic district, such as building patterns, types, features, and the general architectural quality of the proposed district. Include prominent materials and noteworthy building details within the district, as well as typical updates, additions, remodelings, or other alterations that characterize the district.

Belle Isle was listed on the National Register in 1973 when the property was all under private ownership. Land acquisition for Belle Isle State Park started in 1993, the park opened in 1995, and was expanded to include the historic manor house in 2015. The old nomination indicated that the property was significant at the statewide level in the area of Architecture with a period of significance of "18th century;" the listed boundaries included 1000 acres and are roughly the same as the State Park boundaries today (the total acreage per GIS today is 889; the difference is probably a result of both erosion along the waterfront and rounding and estimation at the time of the original nomination). The typical, very brief 1973 nomination only described the 18th-century manor house and the two brick dependencies and mentioned the terraced gardens, the 1941 Waterman-designed Colonial Revival house, and the former tenant house as also being on the property. The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) is embarking on a grant-funded restoration of the historic manor house and, as part of that undertaking, desires to update the National Register nomination to expand the description of the property to include all historic resources, correct any incorrect historical information, expand the period of significance, and conduct additional historic research to explore other possible areas of significance.

Belle Isle includes several different groupings of buildings and sites that tend to be both functionally and temporally related. The oldest building is the Georgian-style Belle Isle manor house. Dendrochronology has dated the main block to 1767 and the flanking wings to 1802. The two-story, three-bay main block is laid in Flemish bond with a beveled water table and a projecting belt course and has a hipped roof above a modillioned cornice. Two tall interior brick chimneys bracket the main block. The highly symmetrical east and west elevations have central entrances; the west elevation has a pedimented entry porch. Matching one-story, four-bay wings were added on the north and south elevations of the main block around 1802. The wings are also laid in Flemish bond and have interior end chimneys on the ends of side gabled roofs. They feature modillioned cornices very similar to the main block. Each has a secondary entrance in the bay closest to the main block. The interior floorplan of the house is believed to be largely intact with three unevenly sized rooms and a corner stair passage on the first floor. The stair passage, which is where the main entrance on the east elevation enters, includes the dog-leg stair to the second floor and doorways leading to the two best rooms on the first floor – the hall and the dining room. A chamber is tucked behind the dining room and only accessible from this room. The added wings include a large dining room or entertaining

space in the south wing and a kitchen and service spaces in the north wing, while three bedchambers are located upstairs. All the trim from the first floor was removed and sold to Henry Francis du Pont for his Winterthur estate in the late 1920s, but the second-floor trim, including fully paneled walls around the fireplaces, is supposedly original. The house was restored by noted architectural historian Thomas T. Waterman in 1941, and all of the trim on the first floor dates to this period.

Very similar one-story, three-bay brick dependencies with clipped gable roofs are located to the east of the house and set perpendicularly to it to create a forecourt. The dependencies are also laid in Flemish bond and are believed to be contemporary with either the main block or the wings. The north dependency is referred to as a “school” in a Mutual Assurance Policy from 1818, while the south one is referred to as a kitchen. The kitchen had an interior end brick chimney; the stack has been removed due to structural issues. The school has an exterior end brick chimney on the east side. To the rear of the house are the remains of terraced gardens; the terrace closest to the house is still clearly visible and it is edged with boxwoods. There are three additional secondary resources in close proximity to the manor house – a white garage (ca. 1940s, poor condition), a two-story barn (ca. 1900, poor condition), and a stable (date unknown, ruinous). A family cemetery is located northeast of the house in the middle of an agricultural field; it includes three marked graves related to the Downman family dating from the 1850s and 1860s and is encircled by a 20th-century concrete and metal fence.

The building used today as a camp store was constructed as an early-mid 19th-century tenant house on the Belle Isle property. The 1 ½ story, three bay frame house has two exterior end brick chimneys laid in common bond and two gabled dormers. Beside the house is a large red frame barn on massive brick piers that also appears to date to the first half of the 19th century. The barn has a side gabled roof and a dog-trot form with two pens flanking a pull-through bay.

In the 1940s when Thomas Waterman was working on restoring the Belle Isle manor house for the Boatwrights, he also constructed two additional dwellings on the property, Bel Air Mansion and Bel Air Guest House. They are located on a peninsula to the south of the main house complex. The mansion is a Colonial Revival style frame house on a raised brick foundation. It has a two-story, five-bay main block with a gambrel roof and brick end chimneys, flanked by matching one-story, three-bay wings with hipped roofs. The interior is in excellent condition and the house is used as a rental by the Park. The Guest House is a modest, one-story, gable-roofed frame dwelling located right beside the creek. It is also used as a rental by the Park.

Belle Isle State Park was first established in 1995 when the state acquired some of the acreage of the original Belle Isle property, but not the Belle Isle Manor House. The park-related construction, which is scattered around the 889 acres but most often located along the water, dates from the 1990s to the 2010s. The visitor center was built in 2007, while other development includes a campground from 2006, a concession/restroom building and boat ramp from 1998, a picnic area with shelters and tables from 2000, and a boardwalk and kayak launch from the 2000s. The state acquired the Belle Isle manor house and the associated historic resources around it on a 90-acre parcel in 2015 and no modern, park-related construction has taken place in this area. The area around the Bel Air dwellings also does not feature any non-historic development.

Discuss the district’s general setting and/or streetscapes, including current property uses (and historic uses if different), such as industrial, residential, commercial, religious, etc. For rural historic districts, please include a description of land uses.

Belle Isle State Park is now protected public land offering recreational opportunities including camping, hiking, fishing, picnicking, and boating, but the overall character of the acreage is still rural agricultural. Because the Park leases out cultivated fields to local farmers, the setting of open

agricultural fields edged by woods and marsh (as you get close to the water) remains much as it has been for centuries. The straight axial driveway to the manor house is preserved, along with the associated views of the house from afar. The historic importance of river access is preserved in the area of the manor house complex and Bel Air Mansion and perpetuated by the Park's continued efforts to make the river accessible to the public through boat launches, trails, and river views. The non-historic park-related construction has emphasized accessibility to the natural resources of the park, in the form of a campground and boat launches, rather than the more intrusive and destructive construction of soccer fields, parking lots, and other athletic facilities.

4. District's History and Significance

In the space below, briefly describe the history of the district, such as when it was established, how it developed over time, and significant events, persons, and/or families associated with the property. Please list all sources of information used to research the history of the property. (It is not necessary to attach lengthy articles or family genealogies to this form.) Normally, only information contained on this form is forwarded to the State Review Board.

If the district is important for its architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, or other aspects of design, please include a brief explanation of this aspect.

A plantation was first established on 500 acres that form the core of Belle Isle in 1650 by Thomas Powell. That plantation was acquired by John Bertrand, a French Huguenot, by 1692 and Bertrand and his wife Charlotte operated a prosperous plantation and landing where Deep Creek intersects the Rappahannock River. Archaeological remains of this plantation, including a brick lined well and a brick floored cellar, have been identified and recommended eligible for listing on the National Register under Criterion D with a period of significance of ca. 1690-1730 (site 44LA0147). The Bertrands called the plantation Deep Creek. Following the death of John Bertrand, his wife Charlotte ran the plantation until their children, William and Mary Ann reached maturity. William Bertrand received 125 acres of the plantation in a deed of gift from his mother in 1712, and married Susannah Foushee the following year. William and Susannah prospered as planters on the Deep Creek plantation and were respected members of the gentry class. They had one child who lived to adulthood, Mary Ann Bertrand, who married Leroy Griffin in 1734. The Griffin's had at least five sons who lived to adulthood, but both Mary Ann and Leroy predeceased William Bertrand. Susannah also died some time before William and when William's will was presented in court in April 1761 he named his five grandsons as his only heirs and left the Deep Creek plantation to the eldest, Thomas Bertrand Griffin.

The inventory of William's personal goods after his death indicates that his house had two principal rooms downstairs and two chambers upstairs, with an exterior entry tower, an architectural feature found in late 17th century gentry houses that had fallen out of favor by the mid-18th century. Thomas Bertrand Griffin wanted a more fashionable dwelling. In 1766 he married Judith Burwell of Carter's Grove and commissioned construction of a new house on the Deep Creek plantation the following year. Dendrochronology indicates that the timbers used in the construction of the center block of Belle Isle date to 1767.

Griffin's new house was constructed in the Georgian style with a variation on a central passage plan. Visitors arriving from the land-side of the house entered a stair passage that occupied the front corner of the house and provided direct access to both the large and elaborately decorated hall behind it and the equally fashionable dining room beside it. Behind the dining room was a small chamber. Several surviving photos from 1928 show the fully paneled stair passage with an open string stair and turned balusters, a fully paneled hall with elaborate crown molding with dentils, and the dining room with a paneled wainscot and fully paneled fireplace wall with paneled, arched niches around the windows. Architectural historian Camille Wells, who studied the house in conjunction with the dendrochronology in the early 2000s noted that the architectural evidence suggests that Griffin always intended to construct flanking one-story wings or hyphens on the north and south sides of the house – the windows abutting the wings on these side elevations are significantly narrower than they would be otherwise and she noted evidence of brick racking that Griffin had bonded into the walls at the time of construction. Unfortunately, Griffin's wife, Judith, died in 1769, either at the same time as their two young children or soon after, and Griffin does not seem to have remarried. He noted in his will that Judith, their son, LeRoy, and daughter, Lucy, all were buried at Belle Isle and requested that his remains "be deposited in the vault on the plantation whereon I live, with my ever remembered

wife Judith Griffin and children.” Griffin never made the planned additions to the main house, but he continued to be a prosperous planter and respected member of the gentry class, and an enslaver. He purchased additional land and enslaved people over the years and increased the plantation to 920 acres. He served as a county magistrate and, in 1775, he was appointed Clerk of Lancaster County court. He served for only three years before his death in 1778. He left his plantation to his brother, Corbin Griffin. Corbin Griffin, however, was not interested in the property and advertised it for sale in the Virginia Gazette only two months after his brother’s will was probated. The property changed hands a couple of times before it was purchased by Rawleigh William Downman in 1786.

Downman was descended from prominent Lancaster County families, and it was he who renamed the plantation Belle Isle. He lived in the house for around 15 years before he commissioned the construction of the one-story north and south wings in 1802 (dated via dendrochronology), finally completing Griffin’s original vision from over 30 years ago. According to Wells’ research, the south wing was intended to serve a social function as a ballroom or large dining space, while the north wing held more private family spaces, such as chambers or sitting rooms. Architecturally, this design of a central block with flanking one-story wings differentiated between public and private use is significant in the evolution of Virginia architecture and is found on other period examples.

Downman lived at Belle Isle for more than 50 years, until his death in 1840. He was married at least twice and had several children. In his will he left Belle Isle to his grandson, William Yates Downman. The property was auctioned off in 1876 following the death of William Yates Downman; the advertisement notes that it includes 972 acres and a “large brick mansion.” It changed hands several times over the next several decades and in 1928 all of the elaborate paneling on the first story of the manor house was purchased and removed by representatives of Henry Francis du Pont for his estate, Winterthur, in Delaware (it still remains in the Winterthur Museum.) The land continued to be farmed but the house had suffered significant neglect by the time it was purchased by Herbert Lee Boatwright and his wife, Suzanne Pollard Boatwright, in 1939.

The Boatwright’s engaged well-respected Virginia architectural historian Thomas T. Waterman to restore the house in 1940. Waterman featured Belle Isle in his book Mansions of Virginia, 1706-1776 published in 1946, and instead of trying to replicate the missing paneling, designed replacement trim based on a simplified Georgian style. He also designed the Bel Air Mansion and Guest House on the Belle Isle property for the Boatwrights.

Waterman started his career as an architect apprenticed to Ralph Adams Cram with the firm Cram and Ferguson in Boston. At the same time, he became interested in historic preservation and worked with the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities to preserve and restore the historic buildings in Boston. Between 1928 and 1933 he worked for the firm Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn on the restoration and reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg, and later with the National Park Service and the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). Waterman also worked with Henry Francis Du Pont selecting and installing historic interiors at his Delaware estate, Winterthur. At this time, it isn’t known if he was involved in the removal of the paneling from Belle Isle for Winterthur in the late 1920s or 1930s. Waterman was in private practice for years and published several books on the historic architecture of Virginia, including Mansions of Virginia and Domestic Colonial Architecture of Tidewater Virginia. His work to both document and restore early Virginia dwellings had a significant impact on how future generations would experience 18th and 19th century architecture.

The Boatwrights used the restored Belle Isle manor house as their primary residence for the next 45 years. The Bel Air Mansion was the residence of John Garland Pollard, Jr. and his family. (John Garland Pollard, Jr. and Suzanne Pollard Boatwright are the children of former Virginia Governor John Garland Pollard.) In 1987, the Boatwright’s sold Belle Isle to Edward and Rosemary Gruis. The

acreage of the original Belle Isle was subdivided in the 1970s and 1980s but the Gruis' retained ownership of the Belle Isle manor house and surrounding 150 acres until 2014. The State began acquiring pieces of the former Belle Isle plantation in 1993 when they purchased a 674-acre parcel that had been proposed for a residential subdivision. Over time they were able to acquire the other parcels of the former Belle Isle property. The 150 acres with the Belle Isle manor house didn't come into State ownership until 2015, but with its acquisition the original Belle Isle tract was complete once again. Belle Isle State Park first opened in 1995.

Based on the current condition of the property and preliminary research, Belle Isle remains eligible for listing in the Registers. The nomination update could have a tentative Period of Significance beginning in ca. 1690, to capture the estimated date of the eligible archaeological site, 44LA0147, representing the remains of John and Charlotte Bertrand's Deep Creek Landing, through ca. 1941, to capture the restoration of the Belle Isle manor house and the construction of the Bel Air Mansion and Guest House by Waterman. The end date, in particular, will be adjusted as the details and chronology of the Waterman restoration are researched further. Belle Isle remains significant under Criterion C at the statewide level in the area of Architecture as an excellent example of a Georgian plantation in Tidewater Virginia; it is also eligible under Criterion C in the area of Architecture as an example of a Colonial house restored in the 1940s by Thomas T. Waterman, whose work is significant within the context of historic preservation. Criterion B for Waterman might be a possibility, but due to the significant number of historic properties that he worked on, developing the necessary context within which to evaluate Belle Isle would be outside the goals of this project. Additional research will probably reveal other potential areas of significance, possibly under Criterion A. Very little research into the enslaved population at Belle Isle has been done to date, and very little is known about the 19th century history of the property and the period of the Downman's ownership. These are avenues for further research as part of this project. Because there is an archaeological site on the property that has already been investigated and recommended eligible for listing, Belle Isle would also be eligible under Criterion D.

While the continued eligibility of Belle Isle does not seem in question, there are other issues with the proposed nomination update that will need to be overcome. First, while 99% of the property listed in 1973 is now owned by the State, the small family cemetery in the middle of the agricultural field to the northeast of the Belle Isle manor house is not. This very small parcel is actually under private ownership by a bank as a trustee; and while the bank is trying to transfer the cemetery to DCR, that transfer is unlikely to take place for several years. There is no known reason why the bank, as the legal owner of the property, should object to the listing of this proposed district. Second, unlike most eligible historic districts, this district will have a large number of noncontributing resources (essentially all park-related construction) that will outweigh the number of contributing resources. At this time, it is estimated that there are more than 20 noncontributing resources within the boundaries and around 10 contributing resources. There are also issues with how the resources within the Park have been recorded before now – some have been recorded as secondary resources under the Belle Isle number (051-0001), others have been issued tertiary numbers under that number but not entered into VCRIS, and the camp store and red barn were recorded under a separate seven-digit number – 051-5092. The consultant will work with DHR's survey manager to correct all of this numbering and determine how best to record the many noncontributing structures related to the Park that are now within the historic boundaries of Belle Isle.

Sources

“Acquisition History: Belle Isle,” 2017, provided by DCR.

Higgins, Thomas F., III and Joe B. Jones. Interim Management Summary: Archaeological Evaluation of Site 44LA0147, Associated with the Proposed Belle Isle State Park Shoreline Stabilization Project, Lancaster County, Virginia. William and Mary Center for Archaeological Research, 2020.

Lee, Lonnie H. A Brief History of Belle Isle Plantation, Lancaster County, Virginia, 1650-1782. Heritage Books, 2020.

Waterman, Thomas T. Mansions of Virginia, 1706-1776. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1946.

Wells, Camille. “Belle Isle.” October 2008. On file at DHR Archives, 051-0001.

5. Property Ownership (Check as many categories as apply):

Private: X Public\Local Public\State X Public\Federal

6. Applicant/Sponsor (Individual and/or organization sponsoring preparation of the PIF, with contact information. For more than one sponsor, please list each below or on an additional sheet.)


name/title: Dr. Melissa Baker, Director

organization: Virginia State Parks

street & number: Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation,
600 E. Main Street, 24th Floor

city or town: Richmond state: VA zip code: 23219

e-mail: melissa.baker@dcr.virginia.gov telephone: 804-786-5555

Applicant's Signature: 

Date: 2-13-2024

• • *Signature required for processing all applications.* • •

In the event of organization sponsorship, you must provide the name and title of the appropriate contact person.

Contact person: Katherine Shepard

Daytime Telephone: 804-724-9192

Applicant Information (Individual completing form if other than applicant/sponsor listed above)

name/title: Kristin H. Kirchen, Architectural Historian

organization: Iron Dog Preservation, LLC

street & number: 532 Pantela Drive

city or town: N. Chesterfield state: VA zip code: 23235

e-mail: irondogpreservation@gmail.com telephone: 804-516-8200

Date: February 2025

7. Notification

In some circumstances, it may be necessary for DHR to confer with or notify local officials of proposed listings of properties within their jurisdiction. In the following space, please provide the contact information for the local County Administrator, City Manager, and/or Town Manager.

name/title: Don G. Gill, County Administrator

locality: Lancaster County

street & number: County Administration Building, Main Floor 8311 Mary Ball Rd


city or town: Lancaster state: VA zip code: 22503

telephone: (804) 462-5129



Belle Isle Nomination Update
Lancaster County, VA
DHR ID# 051-0001

 NRHP Boundary

0 1,000 2,000
 Feet



Belle Isle State Park

Trail Name	Mileage	Usage	Difficulty	Blaze Color
Bluebird Trail	0.9	H,B,E	●	Light Blue
Brewer's Trail	0.5	H,B,E	●	Purple
Deep Creek Trail	0.9	H,B,E	●	Silver
Mud Creek Trail	1.9	H,B,E	●	Yellow
Mulberry Creek Boardwalk	0.2	H,B	●	Burgundy
Neck Fields Trail	1.2	H,B,E	●	Forest Green
Neck Fields Loop	1.2	H,B,E	●	Lime Green
Porpoise Creek Trail	0.4	H,B,E	●	Dark Blue
Watch House Loop	1.0	H,B,E	●	Tan
Watch House Trail	0.6	H,B,E	●	Red
White Oak Swamp Loop	0.6	H,B,E	●	White
Campground Spur Trail	0.1	H,B	●	Yellow

H = Hiking, B = Biking, E = Equestrian
● = Easy

Legend

	Accessible		Fishing Pier		Point of Interest		Main Roads
	Amphitheater		Hand Launch/Small Boat Launch		Pollinator Habitat		Park Roads
	Boat Dock		Lodging		Restroom		Bodies of Water
	Boat Launch		Overlook		Scenic Viewpoint		Estuarine and Marine Wetland
	Camp Store		Parking		Showers/Bathhouse		0-10 ft. above sea level
	Campground		Picnic Shelter		Visitor Center		10-20 ft. above sea level
	Contact Station		Playground		Park Boundary		

0 0.25 0.5 Miles





Belle Isle Road

Belle Isle State Park

Cemetery

Dependency
"School"

Belle Isle Manor
House

Dependency
"Kitchen"

Bel Air Road



Belle Isle, Lancaster Co.

051-0001

Inset map showing area of main house, dependencies and cemetery

