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BATTERSEA HISTORY TO BE UNEARTHED

PETERSBURG-The first in-depth assessment of the site of Battersea, the 1768 estate of Col. John Banister is beginning this week in Petersburg. Banister was Petersburg's first Mayor and a prominent figure in colonial Virginia: a businessman, barrister, patriot and Revolutionary War leader.

The archaeological investigation of the Battersea villa and its 37 acres, owned by the City of Petersburg since 1985, is made possible by a \$30,000 grant from the Cameron Foundation, a non-profit devoted to benefit Petersburg and the tri-cities area. Cultural Resources Inc., of Richmond was contracted by Battersea Inc. to conduct the survey.

Archaeologists began a comprehensive survey of the entire site, adjacent to the Appomattox River in western Petersburg, on June 23rd. They hope to uncover more evidence of early Native American settlement, history of the property under several Banister generations, information on nineteenth-century agriculture and commerce on the site, and social and cultural relationships with the neighborhoods, the City, and the growing nation.

"Study of the site is critical to understanding the story of Battersea and to help determine future uses for the Battersea site as a public, community resource," said John J. Zeugner of Richmond, chairman of the Battersea Inc. archaeological steering committee.

Battersea Inc., a nonprofit organized in 2006 to partner with the City of Petersburg to protect and renovate the site and its structures, has initiated several Battersea studies of the main building and the site and has started emergency stabilization repairs. Battersea Inc. assembled a panel of preservation architects, historians, and archaeologists to perform a preliminary dig adjacent to the main building and sought funding for the Phase I Survey of the entire grounds in 2007.

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The architecture of Battersea is highly unusual for its period of construction, and its influence in colonial America. Its design reflects the architectural theories of Andrea Palladio, the 16th Century Italian Renaissance architect who codified and disseminated the lessons of Greek and Roman architecture – temple fronts, proportion and decoration, and five-part buildings. Palladio also pioneered the “suburban” villa in Italy, and John Banister, following Palladio in the design of his small, pristine villa and his selection of a site, was at least decades ahead of his contemporaries. Battersea is listed as a Virginia Landmark and is on the National Register of Historic Places. Recently, its importance was elevated by the National Park Service by being designated “Nationally Significant.”

Battersea Inc. is comprised of a 23-member board of archaeologists, historians, architects, educators, community leaders and preservationists who have extensive experience in state and national preservation efforts. President of the Board is Robert B. Lambeth Jr. of Bedford; Barbara Pomeroy-Moseley of Petersburg is vice-president, and many board members live in Petersburg and Richmond. Battersea’s main objective is raising funds for the stabilization and protection of the building and site, on behalf of the City of Petersburg.

“Battersea Inc. has no intention of creating another house museum”, Zeugner said. “The house and grounds offer important opportunities as a community resource and complement cultural and historic attractions in the City. Input from the Battersea neighborhood, community leaders and the City will guide the sensitive and appropriate use of the property.”

Josh Duncan, the archaeologist with Cultural Resources, Inc supervising the Battersea survey said, “What’s really exciting is that we’ll get a much better picture of how the villa evolved, how it was organized, its social and economic structure, and early uses of out-buildings and the landscape.” Banister, born in 1734 in Dinwiddie County, was the grandson of a botanist and clergyman, John Banister I, renowned author of one of the first books surveying and studying botanicals of the New World. It is believed that exploration of the grounds may produce evidence of collected plant species, gardens and plant research areas, and other surprises.

The City of Petersburg is assisting Battersea Inc. in the archaeological survey. Kevin G. Kirby, Petersburg’s director of tourism and museum and visitor services, said, “We are trying to do the first, full archaeological assessment of the Battersea site. An exciting aspect of the survey is that the” property is fairly undisturbed.” He expects the survey to produce information about the early Native American residents “by virtue of the property’s location on the banks of the Appomattox River.”

The archeological survey will continue for three or four weeks. An “Archaeology Open House” will be held for the public during the last week of the survey work on July 16, 2008. Also, in October, during Archaeology Month, an event will be held at Battersea to report on the findings of the research and to display artifacts from the survey.