

Norris, Former Leonardtown Mayor, Passes Away

By Guy Leonard
Staff Writer

J. Harry Norris, III one of Leonardtown's longest serving mayors and a lifelong St. Mary's County resident died Oct. 2.

Norris served Leonardtown for 17 years as its chief elected leader, serving from 1995 to 2012.

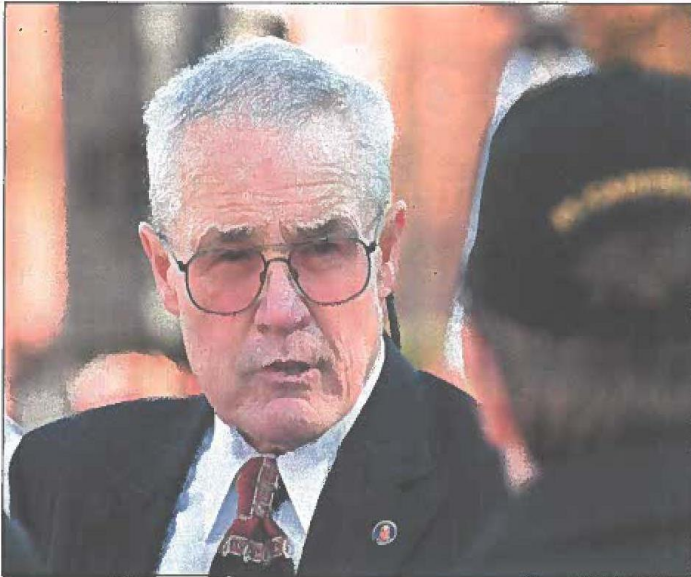
He and wife Jannette Norris, who predeceased him, served as county treasurer while he was mayor, making them a political power couple.

The former mayor also served on the town council from 1971 to 1978 and then as president of the town council — a position which transformed into mayor — from 1978 to 1981.

On his second tenure as mayor Norris came into office when the town was facing serious economic problems and one of his main priorities was its revitalization.

He was faced with a downtown with shuttered businesses, boarded up buildings and even homeless who would camp on the lawn of the Circuit Court.

"To me one of the most significant stories about Chip when he came back in 1995, he and Jan were trying to decide where to go and he looked around and saw empty buildings and people sleeping in boxes on the town square," said Town Administrator Laschelle McKay, whom Norris hired in



2000. "He told me he looked around and said: 'Somebody's got to do something.'"

He fought to keep government anchors like the court house and the post office in the downtown area — there was a move to consolidate those services in the county governmental center close to the District Court building at that time — to ensure that there was both vehicular and pedestrian traffic to

keep it viable.

There were key businesses such as the Bell Motor Co., Mattingley Gardiner Funeral Home and First National Bank of St. Mary's that Norris also fought to keep anchored in the town square, she said.

"He knew the downtown would die without them," she said of her former boss.

His daughter, Kelly Loveless, remem-

bered how "Chip," as he was often referred to as, recruited both her and her sister Kristin Caton, in his and their mother's political campaigns.

"He made us knock on doors to get names of people who would back him up [in his quest to keep the court house in the downtown]," Loveless said. "We hated it; but in hindsight we're very proud of what he did."

They would also be put to work putting out campaign signs for their mother's political run for treasurer, a seat she would hold for many years.

"You could tell the passion that he had," Loveless said. "He was way more proud of my mom than anything he did."

She credited her father with the progress that Leonardtown has made over the past several decades.

"My dad literally saved this town and the court house," Loveless said.

More than that, Norris's style of leadership has helped set the tempo for how the town does business with citizens and businesses to this day.

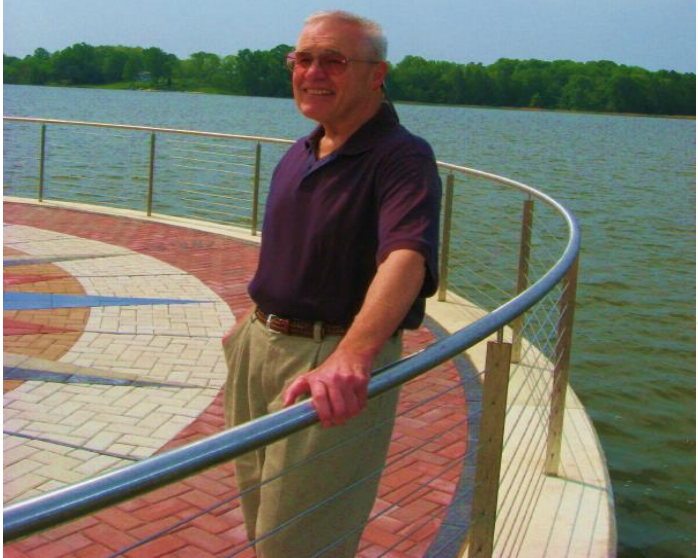
"He was definitely my mentor," McKay said. "He had a natural ability to bring people together and he just knew what the right thing to do for the town was."

McKay said Norris found ways to make sure the town government was a facilitator

See Norris, page 9

MAYOR CHIP NORRIS LOVED LEONARDTOWN AND LEFT A LEGACY

Will be missed but never forgotten



Norris

Continued from page 7

for business and economic growth rather than a dispenser of "red tape."

His work, along with that of the town council, helped to bring about a kind of renaissance in Leonardtown, especially when businesses like Café Des Artistes, a French restaurant, opened on the town square.

This kind of local economic victory helped to bring interest back to the downtown and reinvigorated interest in it as a dinner and boutique shopping destination.

But, McKay said, it was difficult to decide just which of his accomplishments was his greatest because there were so many.

When the state pulled out of a project to build a hotel, conference center and golf course at what is now the Tudor Hall property on Breton Bay, Norris worked to ensure that the land was turned over to the town.

Now the town has hundreds of acres of waterfront property to help support economic growth and revitalization, she said.

"He knew it could be more than just a boat ramp," McKay said. "He wanted a public park down there."

"It wasn't easy."

One of his most well-known accomplishments in public service was helping to bring about the Port of Leonardtown Winery on McIntosh Run on Route 5 in cooperation with then President of the Commissioners of St. Mary's County, Thomas F. McKay, which converted an old state highway facility into what has become a significant agritourism driver in the region that has garnered St. Mary's and Leonardtown praise for its award-winning wines.

Norris' work in town government helped lay the groundwork for much of the success Leonardtown enjoys today, including its state Mainstreet Community designation as well as its state Arts and Entertainment District moniker.

McKay remembered a man who was completely dedicated to his town and its success.

Norris always kept a busy schedule, whether it was attending meetings with the town council, Leonardtown Business Association, or many of the town events such as the Veterans Day Parade or the Christmas on the Square tree lighting ceremony.

"He was always at every event," she said. "He was right in the middle of it."

"In later years he loved bringing his



grandkids to those events."

Norris's legacy of service helped to shape the town as it is today.

"His enthusiasm for the town was infectious," McKay said. "This was where he wanted to be."

"It was ingrained in him to make sure this town was successful."

guyleonard@countytimes.net