

The Atlanta Journal and Constitution

April 3, 1998, Friday, ALL EDITIONS

Stone Mountain to light up again Season kicks off: Tonight's laser show to be first under private management.

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SECTION: LOCAL NEWS; Pg. 02E; Pg. 02E

LENGTH: 484 words

When the light beams rise to bathe the granite face of Stone Mountain tonight to kick off the year's first laser show, it will also mark the first time many visitors have been to the park since it has been under a private company's management. Patrons won't likely notice any big changes at the 3,200-acre facility this year, said Jack Morris, spokesman for Silver Dollar City Inc., the company picked by the state to manage the park's commercial attractions. "We've basically added a fresh coat of paint to everything, but we're not building any new attractions in 1998," said Morris, Stone Mountain's veteran marketing director, who was retained when Silver Dollar City took over park operations in January. "People may not notice anything new visually, but things will run better."

Morris said that the company has been hiring new, permanent employees to staff existing attractions. For example, the Antebellum Plantation this year is expected to feature costumed demonstrators and expert crafters, including a blacksmith, weavers and a soap maker, Morris said.

The park retained about 85 percent of the former state employees, he said. The new management plans to refurbish the park's train system this year, clean up its entry gates and educate employees on how to be better hosts, said Morris.

Meanwhile, the Marriott Corp. has started running the park's inns, restaurants and golf course, and Zoo Atlanta has taken over the

petting zoo. The only new event to be added to the park schedule is an as-yet-unnamed children's festival, which will run for four weekends between July 17 and Aug. 16, Morris said. Some critics of the park privatization are already expressing some dissatisfaction with its new managers. "Our biggest complaints are that Confederate Hall is now closed weekdays and is inaccessible, the Road to Tara Museum was tossed out and no one seems to know what's going on with the Carillon," said Jim Reddick of Friends of Stone Mountain, a citizen's park advocacy group.

"There was a wonderful woman named Mabel who played the Carillon (a giant musical instrument with over 700 bells that can be operated with a keyboard), but they've either been playing recorded music or none at all lately." The Confederate Hall may have been closed at times for maintenance, but it is scheduled to remain open during the week, Morris said. He said the decision to relocate the Tara Museum to Jonesboro was made as a "mutual decision" with the museum's owner.

And he added that **Mabel Sharp** was recently hired as a permanent park employee, with benefits, to play the Carillon on Saturdays and Sundays.

The laser show, free with park admission, will run Fridays and Saturdays at 9 p.m. through May 1. Then, the show will expand to include Sundays. On May 22, the shows will start running nightly through Sept. 7, when they will go back to Fridays and Saturdays through Oct. 31.

TICKER: MAR (NYSE) (66%); HST (NYSE) (66%); MAR (NASDAQ) (66%);

INDUSTRY: NAICS721211 RV (RECREATIONAL VEHICLE) PARKS & CAMPGROUNDS (83%); SIC7999 AMUSEMENT & RECREATION SERVICES, NEC (83%); SIC7033 RECREATIONAL VEHICLE PARKS & CAMPSITES (83%); NAICS721110 HOTELS (EXCEPT CASINO HOTELS) & MOTELS (66%); SIC7011 HOTELS & MOTELS (66%);

COUNTRY: UNITED STATES (79%);

STATE: GEORGIA, USA (79%);

CITY: ATLANTA, GA, USA (79%);

COMPANY: SILVER DOLLAR CITY INC (83%); MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL INC (66%); HOST HOTELS & RESORTS INC (66%);

SUBJECT: DESTINATIONS & ATTRACTIONS (90%); MUSEUMS & GALLERIES (89%); PARKS & PLAYGROUNDS (89%); MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS (87%); KEYBOARD INSTRUMENTS (85%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (75%); MUSIC INDUSTRY (74%); EMPLOYEE TRAINING (72%); RECRUITMENT & HIRING (72%); RESTAURANTS (71%); RELOCATIONS (71%); FESTIVALS (69%); SOAPS & DETERGENTS (69%); MUSIC (60%); MANAGERS & SUPERVISORS (77%);

LOAD-DATE: April 4, 1998

LANGUAGE: **ENGLISH**

SERIES: Metro Final Today's News

GRAPHIC: Photo :

On the light side: Stone Mountain's laser show will run Fridays and Saturdays at 9 p.m. through May 1. Expanded show times will follow. Season kicks off: Tonight's laser show to be first under private management./ File