

# What's so historic about Bristow? The 'evidence' looks dubious

By Patricia A. Bradburn

The unrelenting Civil War of 1863 has struck honest Prince William landowners once again. This time it has rifled through the holdings of 58 property owners, and a black cloud of historic designation has been dumped on their 1,126 acres of farmland in Bristow, near the Manassas Airport.

An unsolicited nomination by the Battlefield Coalition put this land into an historic district without the landowners' permission. Even after two hearings in Richmond in defense of their rightful land, with valid proof indicating little of historical significance occurred there, the land suddenly became historical.

Once again, as with William Center, the truth fell on deaf ears and closed minds.

The state Department of Historic Resources cited James McPherson, author of "Battle Cry of Freedom," as one of the historic scholars affecting its decision.

In the preface of his book, McPherson writes, "The importance of Antietam and of several other battles in deciding the destinies of the continent for centuries also justifies the space given to military campaigns in this book."

And in the book's index, Bristow is not even listed, thereby defining its lack of significance to the author.

Obviously some "new found" history has again been conjured up by McPherson, as it was with William Center. In 1988, before a U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing, Mr. McPherson set his "Battle Cry" Bible on the table and recounted the

Second Battle of Manassas at length.

Yet nowhere in the 2½ pages dedicated to this "battle" did McPherson mention Robert E. Lee's having his headquarters on Stuart's Hill. He never even mentioned Stuart's Hill in the entire book. This "sudden" history is now costing taxpayers \$227,000 per acre for unusable park land.

What has now happened at Bristow to landowners weary of fighting to save their rightful land is a disgrace. Because of its historic designation, the uses possible for the land are indeed limited to its owners. It also becomes a financial loss to the county, as the land now can never bring a reasonable and suitable tax return for those acres.

Most devastating is the loss of one's constitutional right to own

property. Imagine, here in our county, it is still possible to lose land to the voracious Civil War. Actually it is not the war itself, but those today who continue to profit by it.

If this land is so valuable, the Civil War hobbyists should purchase it outright.

And isn't it curious how history just seems to keep flowing from Mr. McPherson. It appears anyone can write about what happened 127 years ago, merely upon request, any day of the week. This latest history arrived just before the hearing on this land.

Yet the Department of Historic Resources could not even consistently notify all those attending sessions since last October of future meetings and accurate times of the meetings. At the April 17 meeting, originally

scheduled for February, then March, April 16 and finally the 17th, the agenda listed the meeting time as 10 a.m. and the sign-up sheet outside the hearing room as 10:30 a.m. Some landowners received notices of both different times — most received no notice at all.

This may seem unimportant, yet on the map of the 1,126 acres involved, someone wrote in exactly what happened on that land and the exact time, within 15-minute increments. It was so impressive to know that in the heat of battle on Oct. 14, 1863, for two and three-quarters hours, those brave soldiers not only fought, but kept an eye on the clock and wrote everything down.

Actually, the department was not all that concerned about all that time involved, but most importantly only

the time that day from 20 minutes to one hour! We waited that long just for the hearing to begin.

What has again happened at Bristow is indeed historical. Good, honest people have lost the value from the efforts of their many years of labor and hopes of a secure retirement future to the greedy profiteers of an undying war that continues to devour thousands of acres at a time all over Virginia and our nation.

Not only does this adversely affect the lives and futures of many hard-working land owners, it devalues the land for the county and smacks at basic American principles.

It seems we can never change the past . . . unless we are writing history.

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