

The Voices of Portici

by Edmund Raus



"Portici": "The massive chimneys of the house give the impression of stability and of confidence in the future." A wartime photograph. Library of Congress.

In a corner of Manassas National Battlefield Park, overlooking the rolling Virginia landscape, sits the parcel of land known historically as "Portici." The past structures and inhabitants of the Portici plantation weave through the rich tapestry of Virginia history, following the course of antebellum elegance through the traumatic and destructive experience of the Civil War.

The Portici property was originally a speck in the vast land holdings of Robert Carter I. At his death in 1732, "King" Carter left about 300,000 acres to be divided among his four sons. Carter's grandson, Robert "Councillor" Carter, inherited the Lower Bull Run Tract which included much of the present battlefield park, and Portici.

The first Carter to reside on the site was "Councillor" Carter's daughter, Elizabeth Landon Carter, and her husband Spencer Ball. Their home "Pohoke" was ever lively with the activities of their seven children and the gaiety of frequent guests and parties. Mr. John Davis, a schoolmaster living at Pohoke, wrote in 1802 of the "hospitable plantation of Mr. Ball who never yet shut his door against the houseless stranger."

It was during the Ball tenancy that the house named Portici was built. The name supposedly came from a town in Italy named Portici that was known for its history of destructive fires. The Ball house, shown in a familiar Civil War photograph, reflects no such pessimism. It stands upon a commanding ridge with broad fields in front sloping down to Bull Run stream, 800 yards distant. The massive chimneys of the house give the impression of stability and of confidence in the future.

When the Civil War began, recruits

from across the South arrived at Manassas Junction to form the Army of the Potomac under the command of General Pierre G. T. Beauregard. Beauregard intended to guard the railroad junction and defend the area against a Union thrust from Washington, D.C. To accomplish this, Beauregard stretched his army on a seven-mile line along Bull Run. Virginia troops of General P. St. George Cocke's Brigade guarded Lewis and Ball's Fords near Portici, about midpoint in the northern sector of the line.

Private William N. Wood of the 19th Virginia Infantry was one of Cocke's troops stationed at Lewis Ford. Pvt. Wood represented the "citizen soldiers" who made up most of the army. He joined his unit at Bull Run on July 19, 1861, without a minute of training or any of the trappings of a soldier, save for a military cap and a "minnie musket." He had left his home and employment to slay the enemy in what most thought would be the one deciding battle of the war. Much to his chagrin, Wood's first military action against the enemy came at the handle of a shovel used to throw up breastworks overlooking the crossing: "Putting on a pair of buck gloves I worked most earnestly for a few minutes, but the July sun was so intense that I welcomed the 'relief' most cordially." The first battle of Manassas ended all such naive innocence; the nation learned the reality of war.

Lewis Ford was named for the Civil War owners of Portici, Frank and Fannie Lewis. Before the war Frank's adventurous spirit had carried him to the gold fields of California before he finally married and settled down with Fannie at Portici around 1858. Caught up in the early enthusiasm for the war, Frank found a position in the local Confederate supply department.

In mid-July 1861, Union General Irvin McDowell began his expected advance from the Washington, D.C. area. On July 18, forward units of his 37,000-man army probed the Confederate line at Blackburn's Ford, downstream from Portici. Fannie was abed during the fighting, awaiting the birth of her fourth child. At the sound of the guns, according to family tradition, servants led Fannie from the house to a shelter of branches in a gully nearby and there she gave birth to John Lewis, who was

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given the middle name Beauregard in honor of the Confederate commander. Once the child was born, the family abandoned Portici and Fannie and the Children went to live with her father at nearby "Snow Hill" farm.

On July 19 and 20, the opposing armies maneuvered for position along the Bull Run line. The Confederate commanders, Generals Joseph E. Johnston and P.G.T. Beauregard, planned to mass the bulk of their army of about 35,000 men on the southern sector of the line for a strike across Bull Run against the Union left. Coincidentally, General McDowell ordered a similar flank attack against the Confederate left. McDowell's troops jumped off first on the morning of July 21st. As a result, the battle developed on the Confederate left at Matthews and Henry hills, approximately one-half mile northwest of Portici.

When the first artillery fire boomed down Bull Run from near the Stone Bridge, the defenders at Ball's and Lewis Fords prepared for battle. Soon musket fire intensified. Confederate defenders fell back to Henry Hill, where fresh troops of General Thomas J. Jackson's Virginia brigade had established a battle line. It was a point of crisis for the Confederate commanders. General Beauregard remained on the battlefield to direct the fighting while General Johnston rode back to Portici to establish a command post and shuttle troops from the right to the beleaguered left of the line. Johnston wrote that he chose Portici as army headquarters because standing on high ground near the house his view "embraced the position of the enemy beyond the stream and the approaches to the Stone Bridge, a point of especial importance. I could see the advances of our troops far down the valley in the direction of Manassas, and observe the progress of the action and the maneuvers of the enemy."

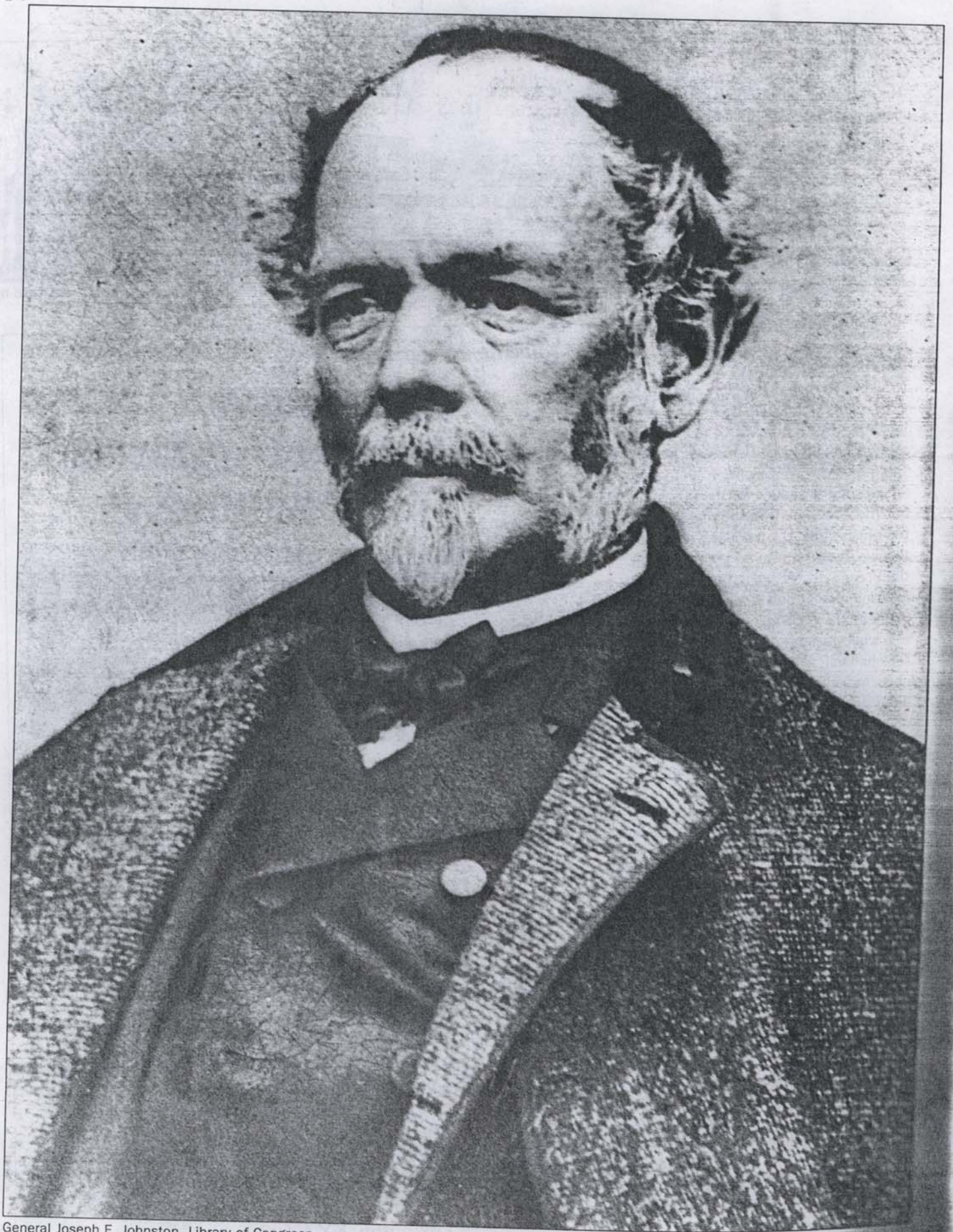
For much of that fateful day Portici was the scene of chaos and confusion. Staff officers and orderlies were constantly coming and going. Column after column of troops came up from the south, wound past the house, then down to Holkums Branch and the woods beyond—heading toward the fighting on Henry Hill. Artillery batteries rumbled back and forth across the property, settling into positions southeast and north of the house. Late in the morning Union troops of General Robert C. Schenck's command demonstrated against Lewis Ford, but were driven off by the 19th Virginia Infantry and Capt. H.G. Latham's Lynchburg Artillery.

In late afternoon, with McDowell's army in full retreat, Confederate President Jefferson Davis arrived at Portici from Manassas Junction.

Riding down toward Holkums Branch, Davis noticed that thousands of wounded and demoralized troops were resting along the stream. Unnoticed among the throng was general "Stonewall" Jackson, who was having his wounded finger treated by his chief surgeon, Doctor Hunter H. McGuire. According to McGuire, the President "had been told along the route by stragglers that we were defeated. He came on down the little hill which led



P. T. Beauregard. Library of Congress.



General Joseph E. Johnston. Library of Congress.

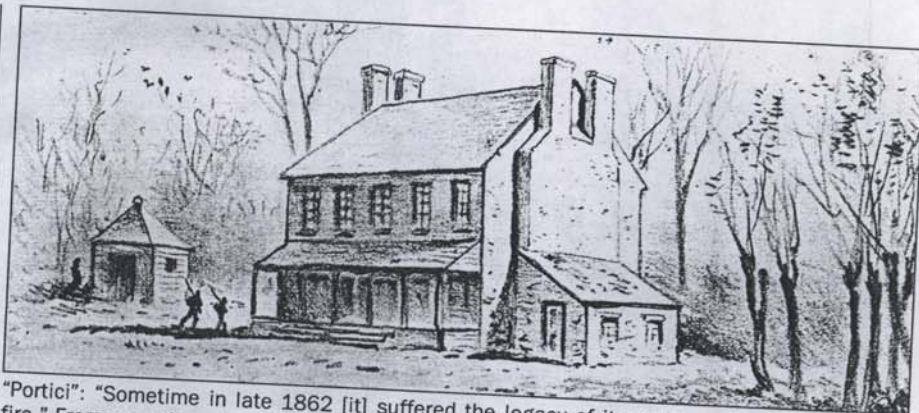
to this stream in a rapid gallop, stopped when he got to the stream and looked around at this great crowd of soldiers. His face was deadly pale and his eyes flashing. He stood up in his stirrups, glanced over the crowd and said: 'I am President Davis; all of you who are able follow me back to the field!'

"Jackson was a little deaf, and didn't know who Davis was or what he had said until I told him. He stood up at once, took off his cap and saluted the President and said: 'We have whipped them; they ran like dogs. Give me ten thousand men a I will take Washington City tomorrow.'" If Jackson's advice had been heeded, perhaps the war would have ended that July of 1861.

Arriving at Portici, Davis was overwhelmed by the crowd of officers and men on hand to greet him. Col. R.C.W. Radford's Virginia Cavalry tried to stage an impromptu review for the President, but the excitement of the moment was too much. Soon the troopers, according to one eyewitness, "... rode around the President, wrapped their flags about him and almost pulled him off his horse in their enthusiasm. The President all the while making a mock effort to protect himself. We were all shouting and cheering and full of enthusiasm." It had been a difficult road for the new President to the green fields of Portici. Here, amid the swirling, jubilant cries of victory, Davis found confirmation of the Southern cause and strength and hope for the new Confederacy. For many, not just a battle had been won along Bull Run, but the war.

That evening, as the cheering ended and the fleeing Union troops neared safe harbor in the Washington defenses, the Confederates began the sobering task of burying the dead and caring for the wounded. Southern surgeons occupied Portici and prepared operating tables for the bloody work ahead. A cannoneer from the Rockbridge Artillery remembered that miserable night the men spent in the rain and mud bivouacked next to Portici. In the morning they found no potable drinking water: "The water which we hoped to get from the roof of the Lewis house had been stained by blood which oozed from the several limbs which the surgeons had thrown out on a part of the roof."

The many scenes of horror inside the



"Portici": "Sometime in late 1862 [it] suffered the legacy of its name and was destroyed by fire." From a wartime sketch. Library of Congress.

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James B. Ricketts and Frances "Fanny" Ricketts. "Fanny received the welcome news that her husband was indeed alive and being cared for at the Lewis house." Library of Congress.

house during this period are best described in the journal of Frances "Fanny" Ricketts, wife of Capt. James B. Ricketts, Battery I, 1st U.S. Artillery. Fanny was living in Washington, D.C., when she learned of the Bull Run disaster. The earliest information indicated that her husband was mortally wounded. Then an officer arrived at her door and with downcast eyes presented the captain's sword. Fanny refused to believe her husband was dead. She grasped at other reports that the captain, although severely wounded, was still alive and in the hands of the enemy. Mrs. Ricketts finally could wait no

longer. At 10 a.m. on July 25, 1861, she set out alone from Washington for Manassas Junction. Through audacity, perseverance and the assistance of Confederate officers the Ricketts had known in the "old army," she arrived at Confederate headquarters near Manassas at 9 p.m. There she received the welcome news that her husband was indeed alive and being cared for at the Lewis house. Fanny spent a sleepless, fearful night at headquarters in anticipation of her ordeal.

Early the next morning Fanny stood on the porch of Portici, her journey over. Gathering her courage she stepped

inside and was confronted with the reality of war stripped of any glory. "Two men dead and covered with blood were carried down the stairs as I waited to let them pass. On a table in the open hall, a man was undergoing amputation of the leg. At the foot of the stairs, two bloody legs lay; and through it all I went to my husband." Slowly she climbed the stairs, the sickening smell of death all around her. Upstairs she brushed past a pile of bloody cloths and a severed arm before entering the room occupied by her husband and Col. Orlando B. Willcox of the 1st Michigan Infantry. "I found my dear husband lying on a hospital stretcher, still covered with blood!"

The surgeons working at Portici were taken aback by Fanny's arrival. One wrote in his journal: "Mrs. Ricketts came and cheered and surprised us all. . . . There isn't a bed within miles, nor anything fit to eat that we can get. All this seems to concern her least of anyone—she being well content to find the capt. in a fair way to recover." At the end of the first exhausting day, Fanny described the scene in that awful room: "Colonel Willcox is on straw ticking, Captain (William H.) Withington is on the floor by his side, two doctors are in a coma by the fireside, and I am to sleep on a blanket by my husband's side on the same floor." Fanny would endure a week of such heartrending scenes before accompanying her husband to a Richmond prison.

Portici suffered extensively during the winter of 1861-1862. Confederate soldiers cut down surrounding trees to build huts for quarters. When they withdrew with the army from Manassas in the spring of 1862, Union soldiers soon arrived to take their places. On the stormy evening of March 14, 200 men of the 20th N.Y. Infantry came across Bull Run and stopped at Portici. The enlisted men bedded down in the abandoned huts while the officers made themselves comfortable in the house. A local black family was commissioned to provide the officers a meal of bacon, hoe cake and coffee. One officer remembered that in "vast fireplaces were piled cartloads of wood, and roaring fires, regardless of insurances, soon gave us warmth and light, while our savory supper smoked upon the improvised table. The boisterous March winds beat like