

HISTORIC SITE FILE: J. Robinson House BULL RUN REG LID

Battlefield "VA" house being dismantled

Artifacts could give clue
to life of freed slaves

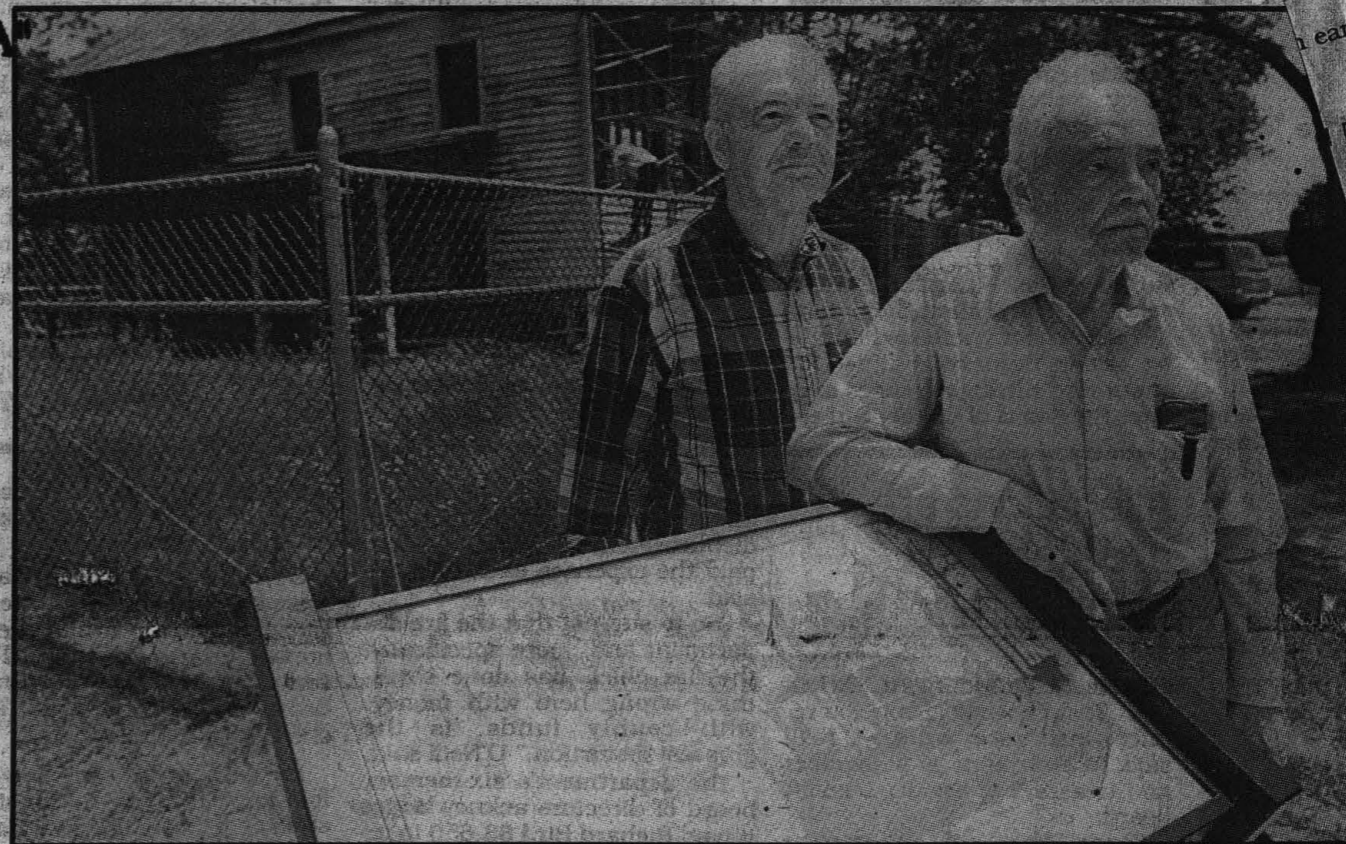
By MIKE FUCHS
Manassas Bureau

Gainesville resident Bladen Oswald Robinson and his son Richard peered at the newly discovered notes handwritten by their ancestor, a freed slave whose farm was caught in the bloody crossfire of two Civil War battles.

Preservation officials at Manassas National Battlefield Park on Tuesday had carefully placed the notes inside a plastic bag to be examined later.

Most of the scraps were too crumpled, torn and creased to decipher. But the Robinsons could make out the neatly written signature of James Robinson, better known as "Gentleman Jim," the great-grandfather of 84-year-old Bladen Robinson.

The notes were discovered after officials with the National Park Service's Williamsport Preservation Training Center recently began photographing and removing pieces of the vacant Robinson House, which was mostly gutted in a fire caused



By Chris Moorhead-Potomac News

Workers dismantle the historic Robinson House behind Bladen Oswald Robinson, right, and son Richard. A 1993 arson nearly destroyed the house, built on the site of their ancestor's log cabin.

by an unknown arsonist last summer.

It was the first step toward the eventual piece-by-piece dismantling of the 68-year-old house by the end

of July. Though unnecessary, the Park Service sought and received the Robinson family's written approval of the move last December.

Park Superintendent Kenneth

Apschnikat said removing the house was more appropriate than trying to restore a mostly ruined structure.

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Leaning on a cane several feet from the house, Bladen Robinson said his ancestors lived on a strategically sensitive site during the five-year Civil War that began in 1861.

The house overlooks rolling hills that stretch to Bull Run Mountain to the west. A park statue of Confederate Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson stands less than a mile to the south. The house sits several hundred feet west of U.S. 29, a major thoroughfare used by Confederate and Union forces during the Civil War.

"This is the only true example of a minority population being pinpointed at a pivotal spot during the war and the part they played in it," said Robinson, a retired teacher and retired principal at Louise Archer Elementary School in Vienna.

James Robinson's 180-acre property was part of rolling farm fields and woods that stood between Union troops seeking control of the prized Manassas Gap Railroad junction to the south and defending Confederate soldiers, according to historians.

Confederate soldiers successfully fended off the advancing Union army during the July 21, 1861, First Battle of Manassas. The Robinson House sustained little damage from the surrounding battle.

The home was ransacked, however, by Union troops during the August 1862 Second Battle of Manassas. Congress later compensated the Robinson family for property damages.

During the war, Union soldiers used the house as a field hospital. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's great-grandfather, Union Lt. John V. Bouvier, was cared for by the Robinsons after being wounded during the second battle, according to historians.

The Robinsons hope the Park Service will build a replica of the original log cabin as a tribute to their distinctive heritage.

Apschnikat said it's too early to tell whether the agency will build a replica or use some other means to recognize the site.

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"VA"
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Historic house being dismantled

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The Robinsons and park officials said taking apart the house may also reveal valuable clues, such as the notes, that will better piece together scant information on how freed slaves coped during and after the Civil War.

They added that the house's removal will also unearth the foundation of the original Robinson House, a log cabin Gentleman Jim built before the Civil War.

James Robinson, son of his white owner and a black woman slave, was freed in 1850 and eventually married and raised six children there.

"The background of a freed black family caught up in this war and right in the midst of two terrible battles of that war is part of a story I think is very important and certainly has not gotten that much attention," said Brian Pohanka, former president and co-founder of the Association for the Preservation of Civil War sites and a television consultant on Civil War history.

He added that focusing more on freed blacks' travails is timely when much attention of late has concentrated on commemorating Monday's 50th anniversary of the World War II D-Day invasion.

That battle left thousands of soldiers dead on the beaches of Normandy, France, while scores of French civilians perished in the midst of the fierce fighting.

"Our own people experienced similar horrors 130 years ago," Pohanka said.

"There was this family that was in the gist of all this turmoil associated with the war and all of its horrors, and it managed to survive and prosper," added Richard Robinson, 56, a retired Army colonel and retired U.S. Census Bureau security director. "I think it's the strong will and fortitude of our ancestors."

At the house Tuesday, several park officials began peeling off the yellow-pine siding. Scraps of plaster and boards lie in heaps around the two-story white frame house, with half its exterior charcoal black from last year's fire.