

Manassas hopes to save Civil War graffiti

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MANASSAS — Across the nation, towns and cities have spent time, money and effort scrubbing graffiti from bridges, water towers, buses and bathroom walls.

So why is Manassas pledging thousands of dollars to preserve some graffiti scrawled on the walls of a historic house?

The pencil signatures are vandalism left by Union soldiers during the Civil War, said Liz Via, a preservation specialist with the Prince William County Park Authority.

"Soldiers are young people, and young people tend to write graffiti," Ms. Via said.

Northern Kilroys defaced nearly every room in the Ben Lomond Manor House, a stone mansion built in 1837. Their signatures probably once covered the whitewashed walls top to bottom, but most have faded or peeled away, Ms. Via said.

The word "Philadelphia" is written large in the home's stairwell, and names such as "Chas." appear nearby in spidery script.

The house may have been used as a hospital at one point in the war, and was probably temporary quarters for soldiers on both sides as armies moved through the strategic area, said Jim Burgess, curator at the Manassas National Battlefield Park.

If Confederate soldiers occupied the house, they probably did not write on the walls, Burgess said.

Ben Lomond was owned by a Southern farmer and his family, who fled to live with relatives in Richmond when fighting got too close.

"They might have had more respect for the property of a fellow Southerner ... but there is probably plenty of Southern graffiti on walls on Pennsylvania," Burgess said.

The Union soldiers at Ben Lomond probably left their marks in the spring or summer of 1862, while thousands of Union troops camped around the Manassas railroad depot, Burgess said.

"The troops then were not that much different from troops today.

"They definitely took pleasure in damaging property and leaving something for posterity," Burgess said.