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Sheri Petasnick-Journal Messenger

The Brawner House, built circa 1868, sits on the site of the second battle of Manassas. All boarded up after being abandoned for at least nine years, the building is unsafe for visitors and it would cost too much to restore it.

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Prince William Library
Manassas, Virginia

Dilapidated Brawner House may be facing destruction

By **SHERI PETASNICK**
Staff Writer

The Brawner House may soon see its last curious visitor peeking in its boarded up windows.

The National Park Service is thinking of tearing down the dilapidated house that sits adjacent to the spot on the Manassas Battlefield where Stonewall Jackson saw Union soldiers approaching and decided to attack, starting the Second Battle of Manassas.

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doned for at least nine years, the building is unsafe for visitors and it would cost too much to restore it.

According to the Park Service, the house isn't even the original. That house was destroyed during the fighting in August 1862. This one was built on a portion of the original house's foundation in 1868 and added on to in 1905.

"If we knew this house was here, we would ... try to restore it to its appearance," Ken Apschnikat, speaking for the Park Service sta-

tioned at the battlefield, said. But just to stabilize it by repairing the roof and foundation could cost up to \$250,000 — money the Park Service doesn't have to spend on a structure that wasn't on the field at the time of the battle and that serves no purpose for those studying the battle, he said.

"We have to put money into the Stone House, the Stone Bridge and other historic structures first that ac-

See HOUSE on Page A9

HOUSE

Continued from Page A1

tually were part of the battle as opposed to after-the-Civil-War structures," Apschnikat said. The Brawner House, he said, "does not serve any purpose because it is inaccurate."

"We don't know enough about the original structure. If we don't know about the original structure we don't put it up," he said. "We try to make it accurate. We don't put it back how we think it looked like. We try to be accurate using documentation." But none exists for the house, he said.

The Park Service has not decided that it will tear down the house. The agency has four options: It could allow a historic preservation group to dismantle it and use it to learn about Civil War-era building techniques, it could simply bulldoze it and throw the wood away, it could stabilize it or it could leave it as it is.

Though no final decision has been made, Apschnikat seemed to disfavor the last option. The building is a safety hazard, he said. The wood at the base of the house is rotting and on the upper house it is deteriorating. The foundation has holes in it, the roof is falling apart and curious people have plied away the wood nailed over the doors and windows. The Park Service plans to put a 6-foot fence around the house within the next few weeks to prevent people from getting in.

Dismantling the house will require public input and the Park Service wants to encourage people to speak up. If enough people are concerned, the agency would hold public meetings. Any action would take a long time because after the Park Service — a federal government agency — makes its decision, it has to consult with the state's historic preservation officer.

Now isn't too soon, however, for at least some local residents to get upset.

"It seems like [the Park Service] is bent on destroying whatever is there," Pat Bradburn of Catharpin said. "If they thought the house was not a viable historic resource then the land shouldn't have been acquired."

"I guess I just have a major problem with their philosophy on historic preservation."

Tearing down the house and using it to train preservationists would cost \$50,000, Apschnikat said. Bradburn can't see spending that much taxpayer money to destroy the structure. She sounded skeptical that stabilizing it would cost \$250,000.

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Bradburn dismissed Apschnikat's argument that the building did not stand on the field during the battle in 1862. "That's what they bought. It may have been the land but the house was on there and it was the package they paid for." She said the house was historic nonetheless and important enough to stay.

"It's important in order to visualize the building at that time ... to understand what happened and how [the soldiers] took shelter. It's difficult to interpret when you look at an empty field," she said. Fellow Catharpin resident Betty Duley, who lives adjacent to the battlefield, agreed.

"People really like to relate to a structure when at all possible," Duley said. "When you see a historic structure it gives you more of a feeling of being able to relate to a historic event ... than a hill of rocks or open land. There's no way that significance should be gone."

Apschnikat knocked down their argument. "What if the house was built in 1940? It doesn't help the visitor understand the battle any more. There are people who are concerned about being accurate."

The battlefield must be managed for the purpose in which it was established — to protect, preserve and interpret the battles of Manassas, Apschnikat said. "There are areas in the park that don't have anything on it because it was a battlefield and there was nothing there."

Apschnikat's argument means nothing to Don White, who was Gainesville District supervisor when the Park Service acquired the land with the house in 1985. The Board of Supervisors had fought the move but at the time, he recalled, the agency argued that part of the house was built on part of the original structure, White said.

"Anytime they want to expand they can come up with some reason why they should," he said about the agency. "I don't understand how it could be of historic significance back [when they acquired it] and it isn't now."

If the land was taken with that position, White said, the house ought to stand. "If it was of historical significance and we knew it at that time, why didn't we put something in the budget to restore it? It was too much money to take it. So what we do now is, we don't have money so we tear it down."