

# Critic, county played loose with the facts on Bristoe Station

By JAN TOWNSEND

The following is a response to Manassas resident Mathias Rollins' July 22 letter, "Historic districts harm landowners," of which someone recently send me a copy.

Despite Mr. Rollins' claim to the contrary, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, department director Hugh Miller and the Virginia Board of Historic Resources support the historical importance of Bristoe Station battlefield and always have. In fact, Bristoe Station's historical significance was again accepted and endorsed by the Board of Historic Resources following the department's recent release of Senate Document 3, a report prompted by legislation sponsored by Sen. Charles J. Colgan, D-Prince William.

As Mr. Rollins stated, the College of William and Mary did an archaeological study in the Bristow area. To be more precise, in 1990, William and Mary archaeologists did a Phase I archaeological study on two small battlefield parcels that were proposed for commuter-rail stations; they did the study for the Virginia Department of Transportation. The archaeologists concluded that the prehistoric (Indian) sites were not significant; a conclusion that did not refer to the Civil War battlefield, as Mr. Rollins claims.

The William and Mary archaeologists noted that a National Register nomination had been prepared for the battlefield, and that the Transportation Department needed to take this into consideration. They also stated that evaluating the battlefield was "beyond the scope" of their contract, and they

did not do so.

Mr. Rollins' statement that the tract's soils are too shallow for graves is inconsistent with the fact that three known cemeteries are located on the battlefield — two on land owned by members of the Rollins family. Mr. Rollins says that human bones have not been turned up during cultivation; he may not know that bone decays rapidly in acidic soils. Stains from the bones and items buried with the soldiers may be intact. And even with acidic soils, the absence of human bone cannot be assumed — pockets of non-acidic soil may be present.

Mr. Rollins claims that I stated in Prince William County's environmental review for a proposed landfill on the property "that there were no graves and nothing environmentally significant about the Bristoe area."

First, I did not state or write anything in the environmental review report. Second, on Oct. 1, 1987, I informed the county Debris Landfill Citizen's Advisory Committee that two proposed landfill alternative sites (G and N) were on a "major Civil War battlefield." The battlefield was Bristoe Station. This information was passed along to the county Public Works Department and the private consultant preparing the report. Shortly before the elections in November, the Board of County Supervisors decided to put the landfill in then-Gainesville Supervisor Tony Guiffre's district, near Haymarket.

On Jan. 12, 1988, the newly elected board voted to move the landfill to Site G on the Bristoe Station battlefield, which is in Brentsville Supervisor William Becker's district. Members of the Rollins family and others contacted

the press, the supervisors and county staff members, demanding to know why the Board of County Supervisors would put a landfill on such an important historic site.

On Feb. 2, 1988, the board decided that because Site G had "been determined to be of historical significance to Prince William County" and the board "does encourage the preservation of this area," that Site G should be excluded from consideration as a landfill site.

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The board also asked the county executive to find out why the county's landfill report omitted the fact that Site G was located on an important Civil War battlefield. Meetings were held.

The explanation was simple; representatives of the Public Works Department and the county's consultant had decided that the presence of a "major Civil War battlefield" was unimportant information, and decided not to include it in their report.

Nonetheless, the Battle of Bristoe Station was a significant event in America's Civil War. It occurred on Oct.

14, 1863, a few months after Gettysburg. The battle stopped Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's Bristoe Campaign, in which more than 100,000 men, Union and Confederate, took part.

Gen. A.P. Hill commanded the Confederate army during the battle. To seize what seemed to be a great opportunity, Hill ordered an immediate attack, but misread the Union's strength and, more importantly, the positioning and proximity of the rest of the Confederate army.

After the battle, the South had more than 1,300 dead, wounded and missing soldiers; the North lost approximately 600 men. One regiment, the 27th North Carolina, lost from a third to a half of its men.

The deficiencies displayed by the Confederate military command in the Battle of Bristoe Station would be repeated as the war moved south to Richmond. Lee, upon viewing the battleground where the dead lay, curtly instructed Hill to "bury these poor men and let us say no more about it."

Another significant engagement occurred in the hamlet of Bristoe Station shortly before the Battle of Second Manassas. On Aug. 27, 1862, Union Gen. Joseph Hooker was lured into battle at Bristoe Station, which had been captured by Confederate commander Stonewall Jackson's troops the previous day. As result, Hooker was delayed in moving to the Manassas battlefield, giving the Confederates time to consolidate their troops and to position them advantageously for the Battle of Second Manassas. And earlier, in 1861, Bristoe

Station was a central camp area for a number of Confederate units. After the Union seized control, Confederate Col. John Singleton Mosby skirmished with federal troops at Bristoe Station.

Throughout the war, under both Confederate and Union control, Bristoe Station was an important station along the Orange & Alexandria Railroad. What is now the small, rural community of Bristow (its post-Civil War spelling) was a busy and important center of military activity. This is fact; it will remain so no matter how many times and how vehemently this fact is denied.

Removing Bristoe Station from Virginia's historic landmarks list does not make the battlefield any less important historically. It simply means that property owners who want the benefits of owning part of a Virginia Historic Landmark will be denied those benefits, and that land speculators will buy property there without the knowledge that they are buying part of an important Civil War battlefield.

But then, isn't this the point? Ignorance is bliss — if you are the seller, keeping the history of a piece of land secret is no different than keeping secret its kinds of soils and the amount of taxes you paid. Next year, perhaps Virginia's delegates and senators will be lobbied to enact a law allowing landowners to hide how much they paid in property taxes and the fact that their tracts' soils will not perk.

■ Townsend, an Alexandria resident, was formerly Prince William County's staff archaeologist.