

LOCAL HISTORIAN UNCOVERS EVIDENCE

Conner House: Was it Gen. Johnston's Headquarters?

REFERENCE

As a result of research on a book he is doing for the City of Manassas, describing the way the little community looked and its way of life in 1861-62, VanLoan Naisawald has uncovered strong evidence that an old red fieldstone house, known as the Conner House or Blooms Farm, was the headquarters and residence of Confederate Gen. Joseph E. Johnston from July 1861 until November of that year.

Naisawald, a former Historian at the Manassas Battlefield Park and teacher of the Civil War, says that this dwelling then, was the headquarters of the Confederate Army for the first 5 or 6 months of its existence.

The army was then known as the Confederate States Army of the Potomac.

After the wounding of Gen. Johnston the following spring at the Battle of Seven Pines, Gen. R. E. Lee replaced him in command, and the reorganized army became the vaunted Confederate Army of Northern Virginia.

The first evidence emerged when Naisawald consulted the papers of George C. Round, an early citizen and civic figure of Manassas.

These contained a reference to a stone house, east of the present city, that had, along with Liberia, survived the war and was standing in 1865.

In reviewing Johnston's correspondence for details of activities in the Manassas area during the period July 1861-March 1862, it emerged that Johnston was frequently dating his papers "The Duncan House—Manassas." This evidence caused Naisawald to begin to believe there might be a tie-in.

The clincher came when he went back to the census data for Tudor Hall—as the area was called on the 1860 census. Strong evidence—corroborating evidence to Naisawald's mind, emerged that Mr. Duncan's house was none other than the one that still stands, though in bad condition, just east of Osbourn Park High School.

The origin of the dwelling, now unoccupied but owned by the City of Manassas park, is unknown.

But it may date as far back as 1810.

A wing was added to the original structure in 1858, the cornerstone of which is in the possession of the Connor heirs.

The Garden Club of the City of Manassas Park has taken on the project of trying to preserve and eventually restore the old building.

A roof has been added in the past few years. However, the significance of the house was unknown until Naisawald's discovery.

Johnston was the senior Confederate field general when he arrived in Manassas on July 20, 1861, with a small army from Winchester.

His forces combined with those of Gen. Beauregard, already at Manassas, to defeat the Federals under Gen. McDowell in the First Battle of Manassas (Bull Run), on July 21, 1861.

Following the battle both Johnston and Beauregard remained in the Manassas area, in a strange command relationship.

living

Johnston was termed the commander of the Confederate Army of the Potomac and commander of the 2d Corps of that army—his own troops from Winchester; Beauregard called himself the commander of the 1st Corps, Army of the Potomac, though no orders from Richmond ever confirmed their relationship.

However, both generals stayed in the Manassas area until early winter of 1861-62, when Centreville was chosen as the site for the winter encampment of their forces. At that time Johnston moved to the Mt. Gilead house in the village of Centreville, while Beauregard apparently moved to the Summer house called Level Green—now the Stull family home, just south of the village.

Naisawald's extensive research has also confirmed his earlier belief that the frequently labelled photograph of Beauregard's Headquarters at the McLean House—Yorkshire, is not Yorkshire at all but Liberia.

This belief, he says, is shared by Park Service historians who aided him in photographic research on the house.

He bases his belief on detailed comparison of photographs of the so-called Yorkshire house with those of Liberia taken over a wide span of years, a comparison of brick courses, tree pattern, and painting.

Additionally, Beauregard used Yorkshire for only a short time during the skirmish at Blackburn's Ford on July 18th.

The balance of the time his main headquarters was Liberia.

During the main battle on July 21st, he and Johnston initially used Liberia, but left it about 8 a.m. for a hill overlooking Mitchell's Ford, just off what is today Old Centreville Road.

They then moved to the battlefield proper, Beauregard taking field command and Johnston setting up his headquarters as overall commander in the nearby Portici house, which no longer stands. Afterwards both generals returned to Manassas, Beauregard to Liberia and Johnston probably initially to a tent and thence to the Duncan house—a substantial dwelling close by.

The original photographic negative of the so-called Yorkshire house, in the Library of Congress, carries the label "Beauregard's Headquarters in Manassas." The mislabelling began, either intentionally or unintentionally, says Naisawald, with the flood of published memoirs of the war in the 1880s.

It was then that someone recalled Beauregard had been at the McLean house, Yorkshire, on the 18th—an affair the Confederate records call the Battle of Bull Run, whereas the major fight they termed the Battle of Manassas.

Since the war had ended in a house also owned by McLean—the one at Appomattox, it was a good ploy to label the one where the first shots were fired as McLean's too. A good ploy but bad history, says Naisawald.

Naisawald feels that Yorkshire was beyond question a frame structure that stood where a small two story frame dwelling now stands at the intersection of East Rugby and Chestnut Streets, close by the remaining stone foundations to the vanished wooden McLean barn.

The present house is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Charles Martin.

Naisawald's manuscript, which he intends to deliver to the City's Historical Commission shortly, will be the first written account of the way the community looked in 1861-62.

Much of the data came from 1860 census records, photographic archives, and historical documents, covering

the Tudor Hall area—an area that extended roughly from Westgate to Yorkshire to Manassas and Manassas Park and almost to Independent Hill.

Since the area's soil was poor, not suitable for vast tobacco or cotton plantations, the slave population was thin in comparison with other areas of the State.

Corn and wheat were the area's primary crops. Mr. William Weir, owner of Liberia plantation, showed holdings of 80 slaves, but this was most unusual for this part of the Commonwealth.

In addition to his manuscript, Naisawald plans to deliver to the Manassas City Museum, a large hand-drawn map of the community showing its railroad trackbed layout, forts, redoubts, and other features as they appeared in 1862. With this will be an overlay sheet reflecting what is on these sites now.



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