

Historic frame house could be demolished

By CLINT SCHEMMER
of the Potomac News

Carried to the field hospital atop a litter of muskets, Confederate Maj. Robideau Wheat lay bleeding profusely from chest wounds, with one lung collapsed.

A rifle minie ball had pierced the stout Rebel officer as he led five Louisiana infantry companies against Union soldiers, outnumbering them 3-to-1 on the morning of July 21, 1861.

Examining Maj. Wheat in a requisitioned farmhouse not far from the battle, the field surgeons shook their heads at the hopelessness of his wounds, concluding they would prove fatal.

"I don't feel like dying yet," protested the commander, who lived another 11 months, only to die in action at Richmond.

Today, the house where Confederate physicians labored to save Maj. Wheat's life stands vacant, a target for vandals who've broken its windows and ransacked its rooms.

Soon, a Washington, D.C., firm may raze the two-story clapboard dwelling, which at least one prominent local historian believes to be the oldest frame structure still standing around Manassas. Saved from demolition 11 years ago by its previous owner, the house stands in the way of renewed plans to develop the land around it.

The neglected historic landmark, known locally as Fairview or the Conrad House, lies half a mile south of Manas-

VIRGINIANA FILE

PWC-Historic Buildings
(Conrad House)



By Clint Schemmer—Potomac News

Betty Duley of the Prince William Historical Commission stands before the Conrad House

sas National Battlefield Park and within a stone's throw of the Interstate 66 exit serving Manassas.

The Holladay Corp. intends to build office complexes and possibly a motel on the 132 acres surrounding the Conrad House, according to company officers and county officials.

"As far as I know, there's nothing of historic significance left in the house," said company president Wallace F. Holladay. "To the extent that it's not his-

toric, it would be my recommendation to bulldoze it."

Talk about the Conrad House's future is premature because the firm has yet to decide how it will develop the property, Mr. Holladay said. The Holladay Corp. bought Conrad House from Falls Church real-estate agent Carroll Wright, who lived there until about four years ago.

Last month, the company submitted subdivision plans to the Prince William County Development Administration Depart-

ment showing a road looping through its land from Sudley Road to VanDorn Lane. County officials are eyeing automobile traffic that the project, currently dubbed Battlefield Business Park, will bring.

The Holladay Corp. probably first will develop the nine commercially-zoned lots along Sudley Road that include the Conrad House parcel, said DDA official Bruce Drummond.

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Neither the company nor its consultants has designed anything to replace the circa-1820 farmhouse, according to Tom Derrickson, a landscape architect hired by the company. "But I would love for them to move it," he said.

Later, the firm may seek to rezone agricultural land it owns east of the Manassas Holiday Inn, Mr. Derrickson said. Eventually, the whole tract could boast a shopping center, a hotel or an office park, he said.

Should Conrad House prove to be of genuine historical significance, the firm might renovate the dwelling to house its Manassas-area offices, Mr. Holladay said.

"Obviously, if the house is a designated national or state historic landmark, we'll have to deal with that," he said. "But if not, we want to get it off the property because there's no question that it's in the way."

Manassas National Battlefield Park Superintendent Rolland Swain favors renovation of the Conrad House, which his predecessor had recommended be moved in 1974 and used as a second visitors' center for the Civil War battlefield. Mr. Wright proposed then to develop his property and either demolish or move the house.

No one remembers the reason now, but National Park Service officials scrapped their house-moving plan. The project's cost, opposition from state agencies, and new park policy objecting to changes in the historical scene may all have played a role, park ranger Jim Burgess said.

Superintendent Swain opposes such a plan today, saying he believes the best approach to saving the Conrad House is to find a new use for it.

"If Mr. Holladay would do something like that, we could talk to him," Mr. Swain said. "We certainly don't want to lose the building. There are so few of them left, it's a shame when one is bulldozed or destroyed."

"It is a historic structure, and every adaptive use that's reasonable for that structure ought to be explored. So often the attitude's taken where people say 'let's just clean it off.' I would urge them to explore renovation before they flatten it."

The key to the house's preserva-

tion lies in financial advantages that The Holladay Corporation might gain through tax laws crediting property owners who renovate historic structures, the superintendent said.

Betty Duley, vice-president of the Prince William Historical Commission, supports Superintendent Swain's suggestion.

"I have a great deal of concern for the house," said Mrs. Duley, a Catharpin resident who lives near the battlefield. "I will do my utmost to see if we can work out something with the builders through the historical commission. I think it has great possibilities."

There is "no doubt" that Confederate surgeons operating in the Conrad House treated Maj. Wheat and other soldiers wounded during the First Battle of Manassas, Mr. Burgess said.

During that fight, the Fauquier Black Horse Troop and Chesterfield Cavalry used grounds just south of the house as the staging area for a charge that chased par-icky Union soldiers across Bull Run, according to a map from the era and a later federal history of Prince William County.

Nearly a year later, the Union

army used the house as a field hospital during the Second Battle of Manassas, wrote Henry J. Magaziner, the Park Service's former regional architect.

During the second battle's third day, the property around Conrad House was the site of fierce cavalry action as a Confederate brigade fought desperately against two federal regiments that had hidden behind a ridge, one popular battlefield history states.

The Conrad House, which is registered with the state Historic Landmarks Commission, is important for another reason as well, said Don Wilson, an amateur historian who works as Virginia librarian for the Prince William County Library.

"Based on information from our files in the library, it probably is the oldest frame building still standing in the Manassas area," said Mr. Wilson. "Practically every wooden building in the area was burnt during the war, so the Conrad House is unique in that respect."

"It is one of the few wooden structures left from that period. Most of the others have been torn down."