

Saving the battlefield—136 acres at a time

By MICHELLE BAKER
Observer staff

The Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT) made a big to-do last week about snapping up 136 historic acres on Featherbed Lane to add to the acreage at Manassas National Battlefield Park. But if it weren't for Greg Gorham, a sharp-eyed new resident of the area, and members of the Sudley Mountain and Stony Ridge Civic Association, the land deal might never have been consummated.

In 1998, after seeing a For Sale

sign, Gorham called Manassas Realtor John Weber and Manassas attorneys Russell N. Wells and Joseph M. McManus, the court appointed Commissioners of Sale, for the particulars. He decided he wanted to preserve the tract. Known previously as the Moss Place and now as the "Davis Property," the property had landed in the court system to be sold after heirs were unable to divide the land among themselves. Months of negotiations wrought a ratified and court approved contract in early 2000.

In the beginning, Gorham did

not let the fact that he did not have the money to purchase the land, nor any immediate prospects of securing the needed \$600,000 stop him from trying to buy the property, adjacent to the Manassas Battlefield and which saw action in the Second Battle of Manassas.

He turned his neighbors in the Sudley Mountain and Stony Ridge Civic Association for help. The association chipped in to provide the escrow that allowed Gorham the time to seek additional funding

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*Bull Run Observer
Wed, Dec. 6, 2000*

*HISTORIC SITE FILE: Manassas National
PRINCE WILLIAM PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM
RELIC/Bull Run Reg Lib Manassas, VA Battlefield Park*

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RELIC/Bull Run Reg Lib Manassas, VA*

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New resident, civic association spark coalition to preserve historic land

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for the \$600,000 purchase price set by the court.

The civic association raised a great deal of money in very short time; however, as Sept. 30 approached, not enough money had been secured. One Sudley Springs resident, who wished to remain anonymous, wrote a check for \$30,000, which was placed in escrow so a time extension could be obtained.

Jack Hermansen, president of the civic association and C.J. "Brad" Bradshaw began fundraising in true earnest, because now there was \$30,000 at risk if the purchase fell through. Days before the closing, the men discovered that the amount raised would fall short of the needed down payment.

Various foundations were contacted, but in the end only the Civil War Preservation Trust agreed to help save the land from development. The land contract between Gregory Lee Gorham L.L.C. and the court was assigned to the CWPT in an agreement on Oct. 18, making CWPT the contract purchaser.

On Nov. 17, 2000, Prince William Circuit Court Judge Richard A. Potter approved the sale of the 136 acres to the Civil War Preservation Trust. The court action finalized one portion of a court case that was concluded May 31, 1996.

According to Gorham, several

courses of actions were considered by the original group of conservationists including a plan to subdivide the property with local developer, Landmark Communities of Alexandria which would have attempted to divide out the most sacred portion of the land for potential 10-acre home sites to pay for the other portion of the land. It was planned that the revenue generated by the sale of the lots would finance the purchase and dedication of the balance of the property. Gorham said because he couldn't get the united support of the civic association, he once again turned to raising the needed funds from contributions.

"There were many times this thing looked like it was going to flop," said Gorham. "I was advised to cut my losses many times, and when the neighbors resisted the combined development idea, I really thought it was dead," he added. "Without the huge effort of the CWPT and the SMSRCA this day would not be so bright."

The land purchase was made possible by a combination of efforts from a coalition that included the National Park Service, the Sudley Mountain/Stony Ridge Civic Association, the Conservation Fund, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, the CWPT and individual citizens.

A news conference to announce rescue of the 136 acres took place in the visitor center Tuesday, Nov. 28, at 10 a.m. with dignitaries lining the



Michelle Baker/the Bull Run Observer
Sudley Springs resident Greg Gorham stage.

CWPT Board Chairman Carrington Williams, a former member of the House of Delegates, CWPT President James Lighthizer along with Manassas National Battlefield Park Superintendent Robert Sutton, author and historian John Hennessy, and former Prince William Delegate David Brickley, now Director of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, all spoke about the magnitude of the event.

Williams praised Gorham and the civic association members, saying "Americans love leadership and love leaders. This is a prime example of leadership and initiative that's all too rare in this country."

"The Davis tract is at the top of the list of unprotected land at Manassas," said John Hennessy, author of

Return to Bull Run. "You would be hard pressed to find a more significant tract."

The land is the site of the Second Battle of Manassas where Stonewall Jackson squared off again John Pope's Union Army of Virginia according to the Hallowed Ground, a CWPT publication. This battle, that ended in a Confederate victory, was a precursor for Robert E. Lee's Antietam Campaign.

When Sutton took the podium he recalled his telephone conversation with Gorham a year ago. Many times people call with questions concerning battlefield land, he said, but he rarely hears from them again. He said he advised Gorham that he couldn't be much help, that acquiring land through the park was a fairly complicated process and that the land in question was not within the "boundaries of approved property" that Congress had established. It wasn't until some research that Sutton realized just how important this particular piece of property was to the Second Battle of Manassas. "It was very, very significant. Something that needed to be preserved," said Sutton. He added that when he attended the civic meeting he was "surprised people were willing to put a mortgage on their house" to save the land.

"This is truly an historic day," added Brickley, DCR, which administers federal Land and Water Conservation funds, passed through a \$200,000 contribution in matching

funds for the project.

After the third speaker, Lighthizer invited Gorham to stand up and be recognized from where he was seated in the audience. "We wouldn't be here without Greg," he said. He also introduced Hermansen, president of the civic association which has committed \$130,000 and has raised \$80,000, and Bradshaw, who is spearheading the civic group's fundraising efforts.

"Surrounded by urban sprawl, Manassas remains one of the most endangered of this nation's Civil War battlefields," said Lighthizer.

According to the CWPT 4,356 acres of land in and around Manassas National Battlefield Park (MNBFP) are within the park boundaries; however 2,500 areas of battlefield continues to be exposed to development, he added.

A thank you list distributed by the CWPT acknowledged the generous donations of local residents Mr. and Mrs. James Turner, Mr. and Mrs. Bob Moler, Mary LeKander, Richard Squires, Dr. Del Pilar, Gene Suarez Mr. and Mrs. John Bradshaw, John and Hilda Pickeral and William and Karen Marshal, many of whom were in the audience along with Prince William County Supervisor Ruth Griggs.

The Civil War Preservation Trust is serving as the nonprofit recipient of all donations. Contributions can be sent to CWPT, 1515 Wilson Blvd., Suite 350, Arlington, VA 22209.