



# COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

*Department of Conservation and Historic Resources*

*Division of Historic Landmarks*

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## WILLIAM CENTER TRACT IN PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY

### ANALYSIS OF HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE

We have completed our staff review of the Hazel/Peterson Companies' three-volume report on the cultural history of the tract which is proposed for development, the brief report on the William Center Tract prepared by John Hennessey, formerly of the National Park Service, as well as additional primary and secondary sources in our library and the Virginia State Library that pertain to the Battle of Second Manassas (Bull Run).

Our assessment of these reports and our evaluation of the significance of the William Center Tract addressed two major questions: 1) Is the William Center Tract, in whole or in part, eligible for placement on the National Register of Historic Places? and 2) Is the tract, in whole or in part, a component of a larger resource, that is the Manassas National Battlefield, which is already represented on the National Register? The answer to these questions is yes, in our opinion, and the case for the site's significance is well documented both by the Hazel/Peterson and Hennessey reports.

In our judgment the tract is an integral part of a nationally significant historic site—the Manassas Battlefield—and the tract is eligible individually under criteria established by the National Park Service for assessing the importance of historic resources. Under Criterion A—association with significant events—this tract is significant because of its intimate association with the greatest national crisis in our country's history, the Civil War, and with one of the most significant battles of that war, the Battle of Second Manassas. The Confederate victory at Second Manassas resulted in the replacement of the Union commander, signaled the end of what had been a largely defensive war on the part of the Confederate army, and led directly to that army's invasion of Maryland.

Under Criterion B—association with significant individuals—the William Center tract possesses significance because of its association with three of the greatest field commanders in American history.—Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and J. E. B. Stuart—whose reputations have attained almost mythic proportions in the national consciousness. From about 10:00 A.M. on 29 August 1862 until about 4:30 P.M. the next day, that part of the tract known as Stuart's Hill was Lee's headquarters; there he met with his lieutenants, watched the progress of the battle, altered his tactics as the battlefield situation changed, and launched Longstreet's troops on the attack that won

the battle for the Confederacy. Below the hill on and to the south of the William Center tract, Longstreet's command had spent 29-30 August deploying and reconnoitering for its anticipated assault upon the Union army.

The Hazel/Peterson report, particularly that portion of the "Second Manassas" volume titled "Part I: The Battle," documents very well what is summarized above. The authors, however, made no attempt to evaluate the significance of what occurred on the tract, other than to point out that

although the heaviest fighting occurred to the north and east of the study area, William Center was nevertheless the scene of considerable activity by both armies. It is estimated that as many as 43,000 soldiers from both sides made their way onto the property over the course of the battle. (A Summary of "Second Manassas" and "Man and the Land", p. 3.)

In our opinion, this attention to the numbers of men marching, while pertinent, overlooks the larger significance of the William Center tract, which lies not so much in the fact that 43,000 troops marched over it, nor in the fact that relatively little actual fighting took place there. It is significant as the site where the South's greatest general planned and executed one of his most important tactical victories; it is significant because, as the documentation clearly illustrates, its heights were a place of relative repose where Lee could observe, confer, think, and plan; and its lowlands (as well as the land to the south of them) were significant because there the instrument to execute Lee's plan—Longstreet's command—rested, organized itself, recognized the weakness of the Union line, and marched across the tract and through the woods to assault the Union army's left flank on 30 August.

The lowlands as well as Stuart's Hill were integral to the battle's climax. On the William Center land, and on adjacent property to the south of it, is where the bulk of Longstreet's wing assembled to contest the field. The failure of the federal forces to acknowledge or to defend against Confederate forces on the William Center tract and adjacent lands was the key factor in deciding the battle, which may otherwise have had a different outcome. Because of this federal failure, however, Longstreet was able to assemble his forces in good order, with full artillery support, and to wait for the ideal moment, when Pope's last attacks on Jackson's lines were wavering, to launch his assault. It was this assault from the William Center tract and from the property to its south that won the battle.

The assembled Confederate forces on the William Center land also thwarted Pope's early efforts to turn Jackson's right flank. General Fitz-John Porter was ordered to attack that right flank; he perceived that his line of attack was directly across the front of large concentrations of enemy troops (Longstreet's), and declined to attack; but Pope failed to believe the reports of enemy concentrations, accused Porter of cowardice, and had him court-martialed. Had there been no Confederate troops on the William Center tract, Porter might well have pressed his attack; Jackson might have been defeated; Pope's army might have advanced in triumph; and in coordination with McClellan's, might have pressed on to Richmond, giving a different turn to momentous events.

In our judgment, the nature of the William Center land was critical for this maneuvering. Jackson chose the unfinished railroad cut north and east of the William Center lands as an excellent defensive position against Pope's converging forces. Lee and Longstreet approached the battle from Thoroughfare Gap in the west, coming up on Jackson's right (and on Pope's vulnerable left flank), at the William Center lands. The gently rolling and slightly elevated farmland was secure from federal attack, and at the same time threatening to the federal position—ideal for gathering Longstreet's wing and for launching the conclusive assault. To the north of Jackson's battle line were broad streams, difficult to ford, which would have hindered offensive maneuvers. Troop maneuvers won this battle; Lee, Jackson, and Longstreet were much better at that than was Pope. We do not think that the progress of the battlefield maneuvering, or the nature of Lee's strategy, can be understood without close attention to the significance of the William Center tract, as well as to the property to its south, where Longstreet's right flank was anchored.

That the tract was integrally related to the larger field of battle is also indicated, according to Mr. Hennessey's report, by evidence for the likelihood of human burials on the tract—the human remains of men in battle—evidence that he argues convincingly is overlooked or discounted in the Hazel/Peterson report.

The answer to the second question is contained in our answer to the first. The present boundaries of the National Battlefield Park do not in fact define the actual boundaries of the historic battlefield. The historic activities that occurred on and to the south of the William Center tract cannot be understood fully in isolation from the historic activities on the adjacent park land, nor can what happened on the park lands be appreciated in isolation from what happened on and to the south of the William Center tract. This was where the conclusive decisions of Second Manassas were made, where the Confederate forces were gathered, and where the conclusive assault was launched. It is not so much a question of how many men died on these lands, or how many were buried here; what happened here decided the battle.

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