

Potomac News

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Park superintendent touts history as a hands-on experience

By MATTHEW COX
Manassas Bureau

For Robert Sutton, the only way to understand the riches of the Manassas National Battlefield Park is through the eyes of those who fought and died there.

There is no greater history lesson than walking along the trails Confederate Gen. Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson traveled as he led his brigade to victory in the First and Second Battles of Manassas.

"To me, it is just amazing what we have here. You can really get a sense of what happened by what has survived," said Sutton.

As the newly appointed superintendent of the national park, he plans to apply this philosophy to his goals of preserving and improving upon the historic Civil War site.

Sutton, 48, of Maryland has been

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serving as the park's acting superintendent for the past six months. During that time, he said he has determined the biggest challenge facing him is preserving the setting of the battlefield.

"With everything that has gone on over the past 30 years, somehow the park has been able to maintain the setting that was here in 1861 and 1862,"

he said.

If the Walt Disney Co. had not withdrawn its plans in September for a 3,006-acre theme park just west of the battlefield, Sutton said he was sure a compromise could have been worked out to preserve the battlefield's surroundings.

Though he continues to monitor the development of the land adjacent to the park's borders, he said he is confident that communication will keep the surroundings of the battlefield secure.

Turning to the inside of the park, Sutton said he would like to place more emphasis on interpretive history.

Flag signaling was an effective form of communication for the South during the Second Battle of Manassas.

Soldiers using signal flags sent messages from Gen. Robert E. Lee's headquarters on Stuart's Hill to Jackson's headquarters located 1/2 mile away at Brawner Farm.

Sutton said that after demonstrations are held, visitors could take a class in the art and do some signaling of their own.

"I think it is something that would have great appeal to tourists," he said.

In addition, Sutton said he hopes to expand the park's elementary education program which now serves Prince William County, Manassas and Manassas Park schools. Sutton said the park has recently received letters of interest from school systems including Fairfax and Montgomery counties and Washington, D.C.

The program caters to fifth-graders and relies on a film in which students portray television reporters covering the battles.

After students watch the film, they

also visit the battlefield.

"It is a wonderful experience for students because we don't concentrate so much on the battle, but what they would feel if they were a soldier at the time," he said.

Before joining the Park Service in 1981, Sutton worked as a historian at Oregon State Park from 1974-79. He then completed his doctorate in history at Washington State University.

Besides historian jobs in parks located in New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and Maryland, Sutton has taught history at Arizona State University and currently teaches part-time at George Mason University.

Sutton said he enjoys mixing the university setting with the park setting because it allows him to teach history on a much wider scale.

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Matt Ondrof's future

■ *Our View: The Prince William County School Board has a tough call. But what's to be solved by firing Matt Ondrof, when the problem of "The Well" is so much larger than one person?*

Tomorrow, the Prince William County School Board will hear the plea of Matt Ondrof, a popular teacher and coach at Brentsville District High School, to be reinstated as a member of the school's faculty. To make his case, Mr. Ondrof has requested a public hearing, the first such session in at least two decades — perhaps ever.

We expect Mr. Ondrof's lawyers to paint the issue as a battle between their client and the *Potomac News*, which broke the story of how Brentsville's varsity baseball team — the 1995 state champions — used as a good-luck charm a symbol that players and Coach Ondrof have said was racist.

A teacher's livelihood and reputation, and a community's soul, will be changed by what happens when the School Board hears what Mr. Ondrof has to say and decides whether to approve Schools Superintendent Edward Kelly's recommendation that he be fired.

But for the record, we note that the *Potomac News* has no stake in any particular outcome of the hearing before the School Board. The newspaper's only interest, as it was at the start of this controversy nearly three months ago, is in telling the community what happened — accurately and fairly.

We would be satisfied to see Mr. Ondrof reinstated, especially if he were given the opportunity to work in a multicultural program of the kind that Larry Bell administers in Prince William public schools.

Lee Galloway, the Brentsville

EDITORIAL

Tigers' former third baseman, wrote School Board Chairwoman Lucy Beauchamp, "Don't make an innocent man the scapegoat for the actions of a few dumb teen-agers." That's powerful stuff from this 1995 Brentsville graduate, one of the players who — in an interview with *Potomac News* Sports Editor Tom Clark — acknowledged his team's use of "The Well" symbol, and knowing it was wrong.

The problem of racial insensitivity is endemic to our community — and to American society, so it doesn't do much good to discipline one person and hope the problem will go away.

That, of course, is not to justify or condone the Tigers' unseemly "tradition." If swept under the rug, such simple acts can lead to far worse, the Prince William County Human Rights Commission warned last week, expressing its grave concern about recent, local acts of racial intolerance.

"Although there's no reason to believe that these incidents are a departure from the norm," said commission chair Curtis Porter, "what does seem to be increasing is the willingness of our neighbors to report and condemn them rather than just standing by and tolerating random acts of hatred, bigotry or violence." That role — of reporter — is the *Potomac News'* only role and only stake in this matter.