

Battle lines drawn over protecting park

Officials take their stands on Manassas battlefield

By CLINT SCHEMMER
of the Potomac News

It was right after Rolland Swain had made yet another brief speech urging Prince William supervisors to oppose high-rise offices visible from Manassas National Battlefield, the federal park under his care.

As Swain settled back into his seat in the Woodbridge board chambers, his wife turned to him and said, "Rolland, they just don't understand; you're not getting through to them."

Despite Swain's appeal, the board voted to let the high-rises be built.

These days, as at that public hearing more than a year ago, getting across his message — to preserve the battlefield — remains Swain's chief frustration and primary mission.

In pursuing his goal, Swain has been branded an obstructionist by developers and as unrealistic by county officials. Conversely, some Civil War buffs say the park superintendent knuckled under to builders and have called for his ouster.

Swain's predicament mirrors that of the park, more controversial than ever, 47 years after its creation, 125 years to the week after Union and Confederate troops waged the last battle there.

The normally low-key superintendent, a biologist by schooling, has been thrown into the limelight by debate over the suburbia at the park's front door.

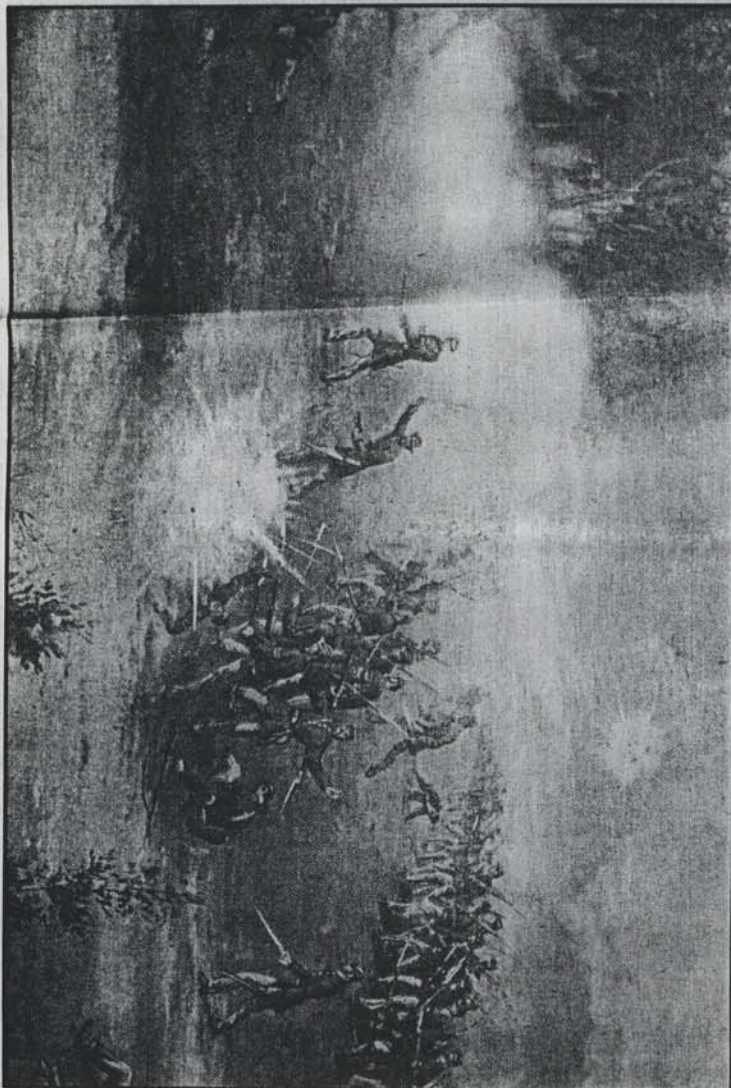
Neighboring development is the biggest single threat today to Manassas and the National Park Service's 18 other Civil War battlefields. Swain and other superintendents agree. The crisis at Manassas is greater than at any other battlefield park, according to Robert Meinhard, a Minnesota history professor who's studied the issue nationwide.

"We're suffering, no doubt about it," says Ed Raus, the park's chief historian. "We're in a bear hug with development, and as we look to the future of the Manassas area, it seems it's only going to get worse."

Northern Virginia's building boom already has transformed the park's surroundings.

Sudley Road, formerly a winding country lane that led past dairy farms to the battlefield, is a commercial strip bristling with fast-food restaurants, shopping centers and homes. Traffic on already congested Interstate 66, just south of the park, is expected to

—See PROTECT, Page E6



This painting depicts General Jackson and his troops in the Second Battle of Manassas. Artist: Don Prechtel.

By Michael Harrison—Potomac News

PWC-MANASSAS NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD PARK

REFERENCE

OTECT / From E1

are than double within 18 years. Between the park and I-66, the Holladay Group is clearing ground for its 13-acre Battlefield Business Center, a high-technology office park that trades on the battlefield's historic backdrop.

It will house 1.4-million square feet of stores, warehouses and offices, including an 85-foot-high Holiday Inn and five 10-story buildings at the entrance to the battlefield. Across Sudley Road, Manassas Growth Partners is bidding its time to develop Park Ridge, a 48-acre wedge slated for a first-class hotel and about 750,000 square feet of offices.

To the northwest lies William Center, 542 acres that will become the largest office complex ever built in the county. The Hazel-Peterson Companies are supposed to break ground this fall on the 560 homes and 2.9-million square feet of offices, stores and hotel rooms they will build there.

William Center lies across U.S. 29 from the park's newest addition, the Branner farm where Lt. Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson launched the Second Battle of Manassas on Aug. 28, 1862.

Along that stretch of the old Warrenton Turnpike, traffic engineers

figure that by 2006 William Center and other developments will add 4,000 cars a day to the 6,370 that routinely drive U.S. 29. That prediction, by a Hazel-Peterson consultant, assumes major road improvements will be in place by then, including the Va. 234 Bypass between U.S. 29 and Dumfries Road south of Manassas.

On Va. 234 next to the park's Visitor Center, Hazel-Peterson's expert says that 2,600 fewer cars a day will drive by 18 years from now than do today. Another developer's consultant predicts nearly twice as much traffic there — 11,000 cars a day.

At the heart of the battlefield, the Virginia Department of Transportation plans to widen the congested crossroads where Va. 234 and U.S. 29 intersect. The project, requested by county supervisors, will destroy the last vestiges of a rural crossroads that was key to both battles, Swain and his rangers say.

To them, the neighboring projects and the western county's suburban boom threaten the Park Service's mandate — to keep the battlefield's landscape much as it was during the war years of 1861 and 1862.

That unspoiled setting is imperative, they say, for visitors to get a clean view of the pivotal military

history played out on this ground. If traffic jams, high-rises on the skyline or noise from gravel trucks intrude, the park's role as a mental catalyst is diminished, they say.

"Imagination is critical to understanding what went on here," says Swain, the park's superintendent since 1980. "Unless something goes on in your head, you can't appreciate what the men fighting here saw and felt."

Critics, including county supervisors and Prince William's planning director, say the park staff carries that view to extremes.

They ridicule the notion of saving battlefield's vistas, noting that jets from Washington Dulles International Airport fly low over the battlefield every day. They criticize the park's plan to chop down 317 acres of trees — trees that weren't on the battlefield in the 1860s — as going too far in the name of restoring the historic landscape.

The park's philosophy — that aesthetics should take precedence over economics — runs headlong into traditional American values. Those values — the rights of private property owners and the belief that economic prosperity improves quality of life — are held in high regard by critics of the park's philosophy.

It's a tough argument to win, ac-

knowledge Swain and his boss, National Park Service Director William Penn Mott.

Nowhere has the division been more clear than when Prince William supervisors, on two occasions, granted permits for Battlefield Business Park for high-rises that a park study says visitors will see from Chinn Ridge, Matthews Hill, Van Pel Hill and other sites within the battlefield.

But tourists won't be able to see the office buildings from Henry Hill, the most visited area of the park, the developer's consultant told the supervisors. That was good enough for the board, and still is for County Executive Robert S. Noe.

At the time, Noe said he hoped Prince William would soon boast buildings visible from the battlefield, calling such prestige projects "an integral part" of the county's campaign to lure new commerce.

Today, Noe remains convinced that growth comes first. "If I had to choose between preserving the battlefield and pursuing economic development ... my recommendation would be to support high-rises," he says. "It's nice to protect the integrity of the park, but a more compelling argument, in my mind, is that the people here in 1867 need jobs."

Besides, Noe believes the coun-

ty's done no wrong. "Nothing has been done to violate the integrity of the park," he says. "How do they reach that conclusion? What's been done to destroy the battlefield? At this point, I can think of little or nothing, except what's been conjured up by those who articulate (that argument)."

The park's most prominent local supporter, disagrees. "The Board of Supervisors could care less," she says. "They've always been hostile toward the battlefield, ignoring its significance as a tourist attraction. They don't realize it's a goose that lays golden eggs for the county; they're busy throttling the goose."

County Attorney John Foote takes a different perspective. "Park preservation is almost a question of whose ox is being gored," says Foote. "The board's taken the view that they haven't severely damaged the battlefield, but to people up there, anything that smells like concrete damages the park."

To Mott in Washington and Swain on Henry Hill, bridging the gulf between the two points of view is of paramount importance. To that end, Swain and his staff have offered movies, hikes, special tours and "living history" events

designed to appeal to area residents. The new programs, they hope, will help local people appreciate the battlefield's Civil War heritage and build support for its protection.

The initiative meshes with the Park Service's current approach: to enlist help from national and community groups to pressure politicians to protect parkland, while trying to convince local governments of the long-term benefits of saving parkland vs. enlarging its tax base.

If development interests prevail or politicians are unsympathetic, the strategy has a clear drawback, officials acknowledge.

"William Mott said it best last summer (in a speech) at Manassas," says Jerry Rogers, the Park Service's associate director for cultural resources. "Like it or not, national significant values are currently at the mercy of local officials."

Swain, still hoping for the best, isn't optimistic about what's to come. "The county's number-one priority is economic development," he says. "Eventually what you're going to end up with here is a green island in a residential-commercial sea."

This painting depicts General Jackson and his troops in the Second Battle of Manassas. Artist: Don Prochitel.



Prince William Manassas

crans. Conversely, some Civil War buffs say the park superintendent knuckled under to builders and have called for his ouster.

Swain's predicament mirrors that of the park, more controversial than ever, 47 years after its creation, 125 years to the week after Union and Confederate troops waged the last battle there.

See PROTECT, Page E6

By Michael Harrison—Potomac News