

McManus denies she accused horse patrol members of setting fire

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J. Robinson House
BOBBY McMANUS

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Gainesville District Supervisor Bobby McManus has denied accusing Manassas National Battlefield horse patrol members of setting fire to the historic Robinson House. McManus lambasted a story in the Wednesday edition of the Potomac News, saying it misquoted her opinion of who may have burned the home Monday night.

Potomac News Editor Luke West said his paper stands behind the story and the quote attributed to McManus. McManus told the Journal Messenger she believes the blaze, which fire officials have called suspicious, is related to the controversial issue whether to dismantle the horse patrol program at the battlefield. She said she has no evidence a member of the horse patrol started the fire and is not accusing a member of doing so.

"I said I thought the vandalisms and the fire had something to do with the horse patrol issue," said McManus, who supports pleasure riding on the horse paths, but will not state an opinion on the patrols. "The vandals could be for or against the program. I don't know. I'm not pointing a finger at anyone or any side. (The vandalisms and fire) seemed to surface right after the horse patrols became an issue. That's just my opinion."

The Potomac News reported McManus said "It's probably someone on the mounted patrol who did this." The story said that quote was read back to McManus during the

interview and she confirmed it.

The story also reported McManus explained the motive for setting the fire would be to show a serious crime problem existed which would prove the need for motorized and mounted patrols.

The usefulness of the patrols came underfire this year, prompting a federal study of the program. Supporters of horse patrols say they prevent criminal activity. Opponents argue they are a costly and ineffective deterrent.

The National Park Service in March scaled back the area in which the patrols could ride, limiting them to horse paths. The patrols used to roam off the trails and around the battlefield, but opponents said the horses were destroying the historical site.

Park Superintendent Kenneth Apschnikat said he could not speculate if the fire was related to the horse patrol controversy.

"At the same time the horse patrols became an issue we were also putting pressure on the illegal sexual activity at the park," Apschnikat said. "It doesn't mean they did it either. We're looking into everything right now."

Citizens have written letters to the editor blaming the reining-in of the patrols for the rash of vandalisms at the park. During the past two months vandals have painted graffiti on the Robinson House and on tombstones at the Groveton Cemetery and kicked in the door to the Henry House.

Apschnikat said he cannot specu-

late if the free-roaming patrols would have prevented the fire and vandalisms.

"Who knows?" Apschnikat said.

Apschnikat added the horse patrols generally end by late afternoon and probably would not have been running at the time the fire started.

The blaze which gutted the home broke out about 8 p.m. in a first-floor room, according to the Prince William County Fire Marshal's Office.

County fire Lt. Tim Hattwick called the fire "suspicious" following an initial investigation. The park service, which is leading the investigation, has called in state and federal agencies to assist. Investigators have sifted through the debris, but have not, yet, explained what caused the fire, Apschnikat said.

Park officials are now deciding what to do with the charred skeleton that remains.