

August 15, 1993

HISTORIC SITE FILE: *J. Robinson House*
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Arson can't destroy family memories

By LEIGH ANNE LARANCE
Staff Writer

Charred wood and the lingering scent of ash set the scene as a park ranger shared fragments of history with the descendants of a free black who lived to see two Civil War battles sweep across his front yard.

Family members clustered around the site of James Robinson's home as Ranger Michael Litterst talked about the man believed to be the son of plantation owner Landon Carter and his slave mistress.

Litterst told them Robinson had the advantage of education, and rather than take Carter's name as his own chose the name of a favorite tutor.

He told them about the battles of First and Second Manassas, of how soldiers battled in Robinson's drive and steadied their muskets on his fence, and of how the U.S. government reimbursed Robinson after his home was ransacked by Union troops.

And the ranger told them about the latest ransacking, this time by an unknown arsonist on July 26.

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By Larry Kobelka-Staff Photographer

Oswald Robinson, host of the family reunion, sits on the porch of the old Robinson house.

Reward is offered for info on fire

By LEIGH ANNE LARANCE
Staff Writer

The National Park Service is offering a reward for information leading to an arrest in the July 26 arson that destroyed the Robinson House at Manassas National Battlefield Park.

Free black James Robinson built a cabin on the site in 1855, and soldiers ransacked and nearly destroyed it in August 1862 during the Battle of Second Manassas. Robinson's descendants built the current structure in 1926.

July's fire gutted the interior of that two-story white farmhouse, caused heavy smoke and water damage and left Park Service officials debating whether to rebuild the house or tear it down to expose the foundation of Robinson's original cabin.

"We are very anxious to hear from the public anything anyone in that area may remember," state police spokeswoman Lucy Caldwell said.

The Park Service did not give a dollar amount for the reward, Caldwell and park rangers said.

She said the FBI is making up posters announcing the reward that will have pictures of the house before and after the fire.

Caldwell said police are investigating a range of possible motives. "We haven't ruled anything out," she said.

Investigators are also seeking photographs of the fire in progress and the crowd watching it; rangers and other park workers at the scene did not have cameras that night, but several onlookers did.

Park Superintendent Kenneth E. Apschnikat said earlier this month that no park employees had cameras because the 7:50 p.m. fire happened so quickly and because many workers came straight from home. He said he ordered one ranger, who may have had a camera, to stay at home by her telephone to provide radio-equipped park personnel at the scene with indirect access to a telephone.

Apschnikat said he stands by that decision, though it may have cost investigators photographs of the arson suspect or suspects, who may have been watching firefighters' efforts to knock down the blaze.

Meanwhile, the Park Service has asked the Robinson family for input about what to do with the gutted remains of the home off U.S. 29.

Family members planned to discuss the matter at their reunion banquet Saturday night and submit their recommendations within a month.

Anyone with information is asked to call (703) 323-4500.

■ Staff writer Brian Kelley contributed to this report.



Photos by Larry Kobelka-Staff Photographer

Diane Davis and husband Robert, of Orlando, Fla., look at an inscription made by her grandfather, Bernard S. Robinson, on the chimney of the Robinson house during Saturday's reunion.

Family meets at burned landmark

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But while reports that fire destroyed a part of their heritage left some disappointed, it didn't leave them dispirited.

The weekend was still a time for celebration.

"They can burn the house, but they can't burn the history," said Louie Robinson, James Robinson's great-grandson.

Like most, the Robinson-Naylor-Harris family reunion had its potato salad picnic and get-togethers where moms, uncles, grandpas and cousins could catch up on one another's lives and share family stories.

But this family's stories are particularly rich.

Almost 500 family members came for the weekend celebration from around the country, and even from Britain and Germany, Lawrence and Evangeline Robinson said.

Even for those who could recite family history by heart, there were revelations.

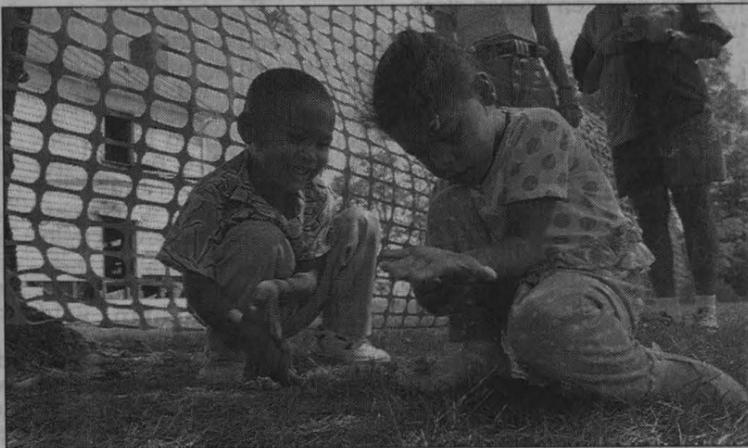
They oohed, aahed and clapped yesterday when they learned of a new historical link recently discovered by Manassas National Battlefield Park chief historian Ed Raus.

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's great-grandfather, Union soldier Lt. John V. Bouvier, was cared for by the Robinsons after being wounded during the Second Battle of Manassas.

In "The Bouviers: Portrait of an American Family," author John H. Davis cites a diary entry by Bouvier's commanding officer, Gen. Marsena Patrick:

"I may say here in relation to Bouvier that Capt. Kimball and McClure on Sat. found a nice place for him near Bull Run, with a very neat family of free negroes ..."

"The only freed blacks who



At the home of their ancestors, the Robinson house, four-year-old T.J. Demby, left, and Shanell Roberts, 3, perform their own archeological dig, which yielded a few ants.

lived around the battlefield were the Robinsons," Litterst said.

California resident Anthony Robinson, 31, recorded Litterst's talk on video and soaked up history on his first visit to his ancestor's property.

"If they ever do it once, they'll do it again," Louie Robinson said.

That's what the older generations are counting on — that they will infuse their children with an insatiable curiosity about their past.