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Prince William Public Library
Manassas, Va.

By Steve Mawyer—Potomac News

William Penn Mott, director of the National Park Service, talks about the task of protecting national historic landmarks.

People need to preserve their parks, Mott says

By CLINT SCHEMMER
of the Potomac News

WASHINGTON — Not so long ago, when once a national park was created, its resources were thought preserved for all time. The people who campaigned to protect the site could relax. It was up to Uncle Sam's caretaker, the National Park Service, to protect the place.

That attitude, still prevalent among most Americans, won't suffice today, says William Penn Mott Jr., director of the National Park Service.

Years ago, for instance, Yellowstone National Park's superintendent could rest easy in caring for that geologic wonder "as a little isolated island," Mott said during an interview in his third-floor office at the U.S. Department of the Interior.

"We can't do that any more," he said.

"We've got to be concerned about what's happening on the outside, to do the very best we can to get people to understand they have a responsibility to the national parks, for protecting their values.

"They can't take them for granted; there are just too many pressures being brought to bear on the National Park Service that we alone can't handle."

Across the country, whether at Glacier or Grand Canyon or Manassas National Battlefield, projects on land outside the parks now threaten them as surely as any problem within, say park supporters and officials of the Park Service.

Encroaching development, an urban dilemma no one envisioned decades ago, is the single greatest threat to Manassas and the 18 other Civil War battle-

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PWC-MANASSAS NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD PARK

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fields held by the Park Service, Mott said.

"If they build condominiums, high-rises and other buildings around a park's periphery, that changes its ambience, its setting... to the point where it's very difficult to understand the battle, because it wasn't that way when the battle took place. That's the problem we're facing."

Park rangers say preservation of such rural settings, which they call the historic scene, is crucial to visitors' comprehension of the fierce infantry, cavalry and artillery clashes that swept across the American countryside 125 years ago.

Look out over a battlefield unchanged from that time, and with a little help from a history book or a park ranger, a battlefield visitor can get a glimmer of how it was, of where and why Yankees and Rebels fought and died. Take away that setting, break

the mood, and the mental imagery is gone. A lively chapter in the Civil War, the bloodiest conflict that Americans have known, becomes so much more dry, dull history, the rangers say.

To Mott and his crew, ensuring that doesn't happen is what preserving the nation's Civil War battlefields is all about. Their significance transcends wherever they happen to lie, they say.

"That story, the terrible struggle that people had to endure to preserve this union, is very important for future generations to know about," Mott said. "Both sides so believed they were right that they were willing to risk their lives under the most trying conditions. And we have to be able to provide a scene that helps people understand that."

Of course, no one brooded over urbanization or the historic scene when Interior Secretary Harold Ickes set aside 2,755 acres as Manassas National Battlefield Park on May 10, 1940. Who could foresee that hotels, industry, office towers

and four-lane highways would soon border what had been farmland since colonial times?

But with office buildings for neighbors, the park is becoming increasingly out of character with its surroundings, a green oasis amid the suburban hustle. And the Park Service finds itself hamstringed, unable to do much to soften the impact of projects outside of its control.

The Park Service lacks money to buy more land as a buffer. Besides, its officials still smart from the bitter fight waged to gain the park's present 4,525 acres, which purposefully excluded the tracts where major office complexes are now slated or under construction.

For better or worse, control over the park's surroundings is in the hands of Prince William and Fairfax counties. The Park Service relies on county supervisors and planning commissioners to protect the battlefield through zoning and other land-use controls, Mott said. "Our managers now must look at what's happening outside the

park," he said. "They've got to become involved in the local scene. They've got to try and educate local politicians and residents, transmit to them our mission and what we're trying to accomplish. A lot of people don't know that."

At Manassas, as with other parks, Mott said the battlefield's natural setting is a big part of what drew developers and their clients. But convincing local officials not to disturb the battlefield, he acknowledged, may be an uphill fight.

"They say, 'Let's use that land outside the park, let's build high-rises, we're going to get all these taxes,'" Mott said. "They don't realize they're destroying the very values that have made this land interesting to developers."

The conflict is an old one: short-term economic benefits vs. intangible, long-term qualities that don't readily convert into numbers on a balance sheet. "How do we know how much Manassas National Battlefield is worth to the people of the United States? I can't put it in dollars and

cents, but I'm absolutely convinced we've got to preserve it for future generations," Mott said.

That's what he has to deal with — intrinsic values against a people who have been brought up to recognize everything on the basis of money.

For Mott, the story's a familiar one. The 78-year-old landscape architect, long recognized as one of the nation's foremost conservationists, made parks his career in 1933.

After seven years with the Park Service, Mott went into private practice to design recreation areas and then became superintendent of Oakland's city parks. He moved on to manage a regional park system, then served eight years as California's state parks chief under Gov. Ronald Reagan. Mott returned to work for his old boss, now in the White House, in May 1985, becoming the 12th director of the National Park Service since its creation in 1916. Comfortable in his latest role, Mott said he hopes Prince William

officials will broaden their view of the local interest, to consider that the national park in their midst also deserves protection for its value to the community.

He wants Prince William County to think of the battlefield as more than just a federal enclave, as someone else's responsibility. Established for all Americans, it draws visitors from around the world, but most benefits local people, he said.

By nature an optimist, Mott also realizes that local governments can often be unsympathetic to the Park Service's point of view, particularly when they get into dollars and cents.

"We simply we do the best job we can as professionals, giving advice to legislatures, to Congress, to planning commissions and to everyone else. We may or may not prevail," he concludes. "Some we win, some we lose." One thing's for sure: Mott isn't about to give up, at Manassas or anywhere else.