



Battles over

The fight to save Civil War sites from developers



by STEVE NASH

HIDDEN IN A TUMBLE of downed trees and vines on the crest of a ridge, a Confederate brigade waits. Below, the 21st Massachusetts advances through unfamiliar territory, unaware they are climbing into an ambush. As they near, the Confederates loose a terrifying volley, much of it from less than thirty feet away. Then they are stunned by the speed and intensity of the return fire. But the natural advantage of the terrain allows them to stand their ground and eventually drive the federals back.

Henry Brown, a nineteen-year-old private with the 21st, later wrote of the Battle of Ox Hill, of which this was a part, in a letter home: "It was a scene I shall never forget. It was wholesale murder to stand at the muzzle of the enemy's guns and have a volley poured into us. I had a very narrow escape of my life." (A Confederate shot, likely a Minié ball, had passed through his collar.) At nearby Fairfax Station, Clara Barton was tending Union wounded. In her journal she wrote: "of a sudden, air and earth and all about us shook with one mingled crash of God's and man's artillery. The lightning played and the thunder rolled incessantly and the cannon roared louder and nearer each

minute...with what desperation our men fought hour after hour in the rain and darkness!"

Almost nothing within the three hundred acres of the Battle of Ox Hill was preserved during the development boom that began there in the late 1980s, despite the efforts of people like amateur archaeologist Mario Espinola, who over the past quarter-century has researched the battle, documented the obliteration of the site, and protested the development. Today, traffic is always heavy on West Ox Road, one of dozens of feeder routes for the endless northern Virginia urbzone, part of a familiar lattice of asphalt and strip malls. The sound of passing cars penetrates a few acres of forgotten pine woods where the ridge-line battle took place on September 1, 1862. Recently, where the woods meet the road, there was a sign bearing notice of a public hearing to develop this last remaining parcel of battlefield. "I was wondering when that was going to happen," Espinola said. "There is no doubt that the Ox Hill battlefield was hallowed ground and should have never been developed." The next round of chainsaws and bulldozers in this patch of woods is just the last chapter in an old story. In fact, it's also becoming an old story at many Civil War battlefields that are not already protected as



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state or federal parks.

Frank McManamon, the National Park Service's chief archaeologist, has watched the progress of this disappearing act during his twenty-five-year career with the Interior Department. "The resource is finite. It's being used up," he says. "Unless there is some sort of preservation scheme for the landscapes and the sites embedded in them, they will be lost."

There is no national policy on Civil War battlefield preservation. Instead, there's a helter-skelter, high-stakes, and often high-volume debate among local and national interests: landowners, developers, Civil War reenactors, relic hunters, history buffs, highway lobbyists, tourism promoters, preservationists, the Sons of Union Veterans and United Daughters of the Confederacy, to cite a few of the players. In deceptively simple terms, they are debating these questions: how much land do you save, and how much are you willing to spend to save it?

In its 1993 report, a Congressional commission catalogued 10,500 Civil War battle and skirmish sites, tagging 384 of them as "principal battlefields." It concluded: "This nation's Civil War heritage is in grave danger...more than one-third of all principal Civil War battlefields are either lost or are hanging onto existence by the slenderest of threads...within ten years we may lose fully

two-thirds of the principal battlefields." Those ten years have passed. Instead of the \$90 million that the commission recommended be spent for land acquisitions during that period, only some \$20 million was appropriated and spent. (Congress allocated an additional \$2 million in federal funds for battlefield acquisitions during 2004.) How much has been lost since 1993 won't be clear until a new study by the National Park Service is completed in a couple of years, but tens of thousands of acres is a safe estimate.

Would too much land be sequestered if more battlefields were protected? The non-profit Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT) estimates that it will be lucky if ten percent of the country's 249 most important unprotected battlefields, roughly 28,000 acres, can be preserved during the coming decade. Whether that looks like a bid to save everything and lock it up forever, as critics sometimes claim, depends on your point of view. Doing even this much, however, would require about \$50 million from Congress, and an equal amount from state, local, and private sources. (For comparison, the total is about the same amount of money it took to produce the Hollywood Civil War epic *Cold Mountain*.) Meanwhile, the level of support from the Bush administration has been hard to assess. It has asked Congress for \$5 million in matching funds during the 2005 fis-



Henry Brown, above, was nearly killed at the Battle of Ox Hill, a sharp engagement after the second Union defeat at Manassas (top) that foiled Stonewall Jackson's attempt to cut off the retreating federals from Washington.



cal year to buy Civil War battlefield sites, but critics say it hasn't done enough to support National Park Service efforts to take care of battlefields already under federal government control (see "Park Service Retirees Protest Cuts," opposite page).

Preservation advocates often point out that tourism dollars make big economic ripples, justifying more acquisitions. A recent analysis sponsored by the CWPT looked at a handful of both lesser-known and nationally known battlefield parks. At Kentucky's Mill Springs, 4,300 annual battle-site visitors support four full-time jobs, generate \$83,000 in other local income, and yield \$25,000 in local and state tax revenues. At the other end of the scale, there's Gettysburg National Military Park: 1.6 million visitors, 2,653 full-time jobs, \$52.2 million in local income, and \$17 million in local and state tax revenues. Whether this outranks the potential income from roads, houses, office parks, or strip-mining that Civil War battlefields might also be used for is another matter, since each local economy and each site are unique. The unquantifiable part of the equation is, what price tag do you hang on your own national heritage?

BACKCOUNTRY LOUISIANA—brushfields, oaks shrouded in kudzu vine, and small, lone houses under tin roofs—laps at the edges of the sleepy hamlet of Mansfield, scene of the northernmost battle of the Union army and navy's Red River campaign in April 1864, and arguably the last major Confederate victory in the war. The federals brought 40,000 men up the river in ninety boats to try to take Shreveport. But the vessels were nearly stranded in low water, the Union troops were routed, and the campaign, says local historian Gary Joiner, was "a pretty dismal thing, primarily because the Union General Nathaniel Banks was inept. On his best day, he was inept."

Housing developments and strip malls have devoured most of the Ox Hill battlefield. Here, in what is now suburban backyard, Union Major General Philip Kearney was killed leading his men against the Confederates. Artifacts gleaned from construction sites on the battlefield by amateur archaeologist Mario Espinola include shot and a button inscribed with the initials "FE" and a house.



At Mansfield and other sites, new technology is part of the preservationist's tool kit. Joiner is also a geographer and has worked at several Civil War sites using geographic information system (GIS) maps. These are visual displays of multiple layers of data on, for example, battle lines, archaeological finds, creeks, and fences or houses from the Civil War period. Those layers are overlain by others, showing contemporary data on property ownerships, existing buildings, and parcels that might be available for purchase. The resulting picture often clarifies priorities: what's important historically, where are there likely to be undisturbed archaeological deposits, what's available for protection, and who owns it. The nonprofit Conservation Fund, which describes itself as a group that "creates public and private partnerships to demonstrate sustainable conservation solutions," is using the same techniques to capture local data on dozens of threatened battle sites across the Southeast. In the past couple of years it has completed forty-nine GIS-based "rapid assessments" of Civil War battlefields.

At the Battle of Mansfield, the most significant events took place on something like 1,500 acres of ground, and much of the battlefield looks today as it did then. But that's changing quickly. Only about 180 acres are protected, as a state commemorative area, and underlying the battlefield is a broad seam of lignite coal. Two enormous coal shovels have already strip-mined thousands of acres, operating with a kind of ponderous precision, hollowing out the land to a depth of about twenty feet, and producing three million tons of lignite each year to feed a power plant whose stacks are visible to the south.

The Southwestern Electric Power Company, a subsidiary of American Electric Power of Columbus, Ohio, says its mining at Mansfield is "practiced

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responsibly, in accordance with the wishes of those who own the property and in compliance with all federal and state laws.” It argues that its strip mine helps keep down the cost of electric power in the region and provides employment for 173 people earning an annual payroll of \$10 million. “Nobody working on this issue wants to harm jobs or the power plant,” counters Joiner, who identifies himself as a conservative, probusiness Republican. “They’ve got thousands and thousands of acres of a good coal seam. All we’re saying is, leave what is historically important.”

Joiner and the group he organized just last year, the three-hundred-strong Friends of Mansfield Battlefield—mostly locals, but now some business and organizational members throughout the U.S. and even in Europe—are challenging the mine before state and federal authorities, and courting landowners. “History, to a lot of folks, is important until the dollar sign gets in the way,” he observes. “But there comes a time when you have to have a social conscience. At some point we have to figure out, as a culture, that everything does not belong in a big box—WalMart, or Home Depot. This is not a Confederate thing, it’s not a Union thing, it’s an American thing. If we don’t protect this land, who’s going to? Who will be the guardians of American history if the American people don’t do it? It’s going to have to be protected from guys in three-piece suits in boardrooms, making decisions about what *they* consider to be important and unimportant on a local, regional, and national scale.”

AT TIMES THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE has done an outstanding job of protecting battlefields, or portions of them, already within its domain. Today, that includes sixteen designated as National Historic Land-

marks and another fifty-eight in national parks. But the federal role in enlarging protected areas, limited always by available funds, also depends heavily on local sentiment.

The government is loath to involve itself where local support is lacking. For example, one of the great success stories in Civil War battlefield archaeology preservation is occurring now with the creation of the Moccasin Bend National Archaeological District along the Tennessee River. It will be added to 9,000-acre Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park, the scene of an epic

Park Service Retirees Protest Cuts

THIS PAST SPRING, a coalition of more than 250 retired career employees of the National Park Service released a report, based on their analysis of conditions at a representative sample of sites, charging that federal cutbacks are imperiling national battlefield parks as well as natural parks, despite official statements to the contrary.

The coalition includes several dozen former Park Service directors, deputy directors, regional directors, division chiefs, park superintendents, and assistant superintendents. For Gettysburg, they cite a 75 percent reduction in operating funds to hire seasonal employees and the deferring of maintenance and protection for historic structures and objects such as deteriorating cannons. And, the report charges, “The irreplaceable archival collection is now in serious jeopardy, with inadequate funds and staff to properly care for it.”

In the face of advancing decay at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, funds for historic masonry repair have been cut 40 percent. The park has a half-million visitors a year, but the seasonal workforce paid from operating funds has declined from seventeen to two, visitor center hours are being reduced by 20 percent, and interpretive programs have declined by a third.

Elaine Sevy, a Park Service spokesperson, defends the administration, saying that NPS budgets have gone up every year since 2000, and maintenance budgets in particular have gone up 60 percent during that period. While conceding that there is a long-standing maintenance backlog, she also says, “We do live in a post-9/11 world. We are in a wartime situation right now, and budgets are tight throughout the federal government.” But coalition spokesman Bill Wade calls that “regurgitating the party line.” A thirty-year NPS veteran when he retired recently as a park superintendent, Wade claims that the NPS’s own figures show that 85 percent of park sites are operating with less money this year than last.—S.N.



A broken cannon at Stone's River National Battlefield

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contest in 1863 involving more than 100,000 troops, when the Confederates attempted, in vain, to stop the Union advance on Chattanooga, a major rail and supply center. Chattanooga archaeologist Lawrence Alexander notes that the Park Service—constrained by limited budgets and other priorities—initially opposed the idea. Pressure channeled through an enthusiastic and well-connected local Republican congressman, Zach Wamp, who serves on the

House Appropriations Committee, forced its hand.

The same armies clashed a hundred miles north, at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, but there the preservation story line turns upside down. At Stone’s River National Battlefield, local pressure has led to development of land that the Park Service had earmarked as crucial to understanding the December 31, 1862–January 2, 1863 battle, which involved 80,000 troops and resulted in 24,000 casualties.

Ten Most Threatened Sites

Each year the nonprofit Civil War Preservation Trust releases the report America’s Most Endangered Battlefields. Here are the top ten from the 2004 list.

CHANCELLORSVILLE, VIRGINIA, April 30–May 6, 1863

Robert E. Lee defeats Joseph Hooker, but “Stonewall” Jackson is mortally wounded. A developer is now seeking to buy a 790-acre parcel of the battlefield.

FORT DONELSON, TENNESSEE, February 11–16, 1862

Grant’s successful siege leads to the surrender of 15,000 Confederates. The National Park Service controls only one-quarter of the site; most of the Union siege line is unprotected.



Luxury homes are planned for a tract of land that includes the site of Fort Wagner on an island in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina.

MANSFIELD, LOUISIANA, April 8, 1864

Richard Taylor’s victory over Union forces secures the Red River Valley for the Confederacy. Coal mining has already destroyed large parts of the battlefield.

MORRIS ISLAND, SOUTH CAROLINA, July 10–September 7, 1863

Scene of the assault on Fort Wagner by the 54th Massachusetts, an African American regiment (portrayed in the 1990 film *Glory*). Twenty luxury mansions are slated for a development that includes the site of the fort.

FRANKLIN, TENNESSEE, November 30, 1864

John B. Hood orders a disastrous assault on Union earthworks, losing 6,000 men. Past local governments have rejected attempts to preserve portions of the battlefield.

GLENDALE, VIRGINIA, June 30, 1862

Lee nearly breaks the Union line during its retreat to Malvern Hill. Most of the battlefield is unprotected, and a 107-acre housing development has begun on part of it.

THE HELL HOLE, GEORGIA, May 25–June 1, 1864

Joseph E. Johnston tries to halt William T. Sherman’s advance on Atlanta. Unprotected parts of the battlefield face commercial and residential development and roadway construction.

NEW BERN, NORTH CAROLINA, March 14, 1862

Union troops seize the strategic port and rail hub. Only twenty-seven acres of the battlefield are protected; commercial development threatens remaining portions.

SOUTH MOUNTAIN, MARYLAND, September 14, 1862

Confederates delay George B. McClellan’s advance against Lee; the two armies clash days later at Antietam. Burgeoning Washington, D.C., bedroom communities may overwhelm unprotected areas.

WILSON’S CREEK, MISSOURI, August 10, 1861

The first major battle west of the Mississippi and a Confederate victory. A planned 1,500-house development on 2,333 acres will encroach on the battlefield.

A lone victory during a bleak time for the Union military, it was a turning point Lincoln was able to capitalize on to maintain support for the war. The current park includes 700 acres—less than 20 percent of the battlefield. “The proposed development land is where most of the Confederate units were positioned during the battle of Stone’s River,” a preservation-minded citizen wrote the *Nashville Tennessean* of one project. “Can you imagine this taking place next door to the Gettysburg National Battlefield, or the Saint Laurent Cemetery in Normandy, France?”

Jim Ogden, the historian at Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park, has worked on many archaeological digs in the region and visits Stone’s River a couple of times a year. “Every time I go, another portion of the battlefield has disappeared to some development,” he says. “The [local] government there is even working to build a big medical campus on a portion of the historic battlefield, as we speak. The bulldozers are pushing the dirt.” House sites, fence lines, and property lines that might have helped refine our understanding of that battle are disappearing, Ogden says. Speaking personally, he poses a question: “Has the National Park Service been proactive enough to be ahead of these threats? My answer to that is no.”

Archaeology can supply data that are often missing from war records, newspaper stories, and personal accounts, even where these historical records about a particular battle are plentiful. But advances in archaeological techniques in recent years can’t be used on sites that are sold off and paved before they’re reconnoitered, notes Park Service archaeologist David Orr, who is also on the faculty at Temple University. For example: working with Orr, Park Service archaeologists Doug Campana and Julie Steele and geophysicist Bruce Bevan measured electrical resistance and magnetism in the soils around Fort Morton at the Petersburg, Virginia, battlefield. They also employed ground-penetrating radar. In a field, they located the fort itself, the “bombproof” shelters within the fort, battle trenches, a well full of iron artifacts, and a house near the outer fortifications. “It’s a very important fort in the siege of Petersburg,” he says. “We found it in only three or four days.”

Such archaeological discoveries can only be made if the site is preserved, which is where the Park Service’s American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) comes in. ABPP provides seed money as well as organizational and research expertise for local groups that have organized themselves to try to protect battle sites of all eras, not just the Civil War. It has a staff of just four, and a half-million dollars a year for grants. That amount covered only about a third of the eligible requests for help last year.

The program politely excuses itself from the role of outside agitator in local fights over battle sites. Its job is to



Historian Gary Joiner watches strip-mining in progress at Mansfield, Louisiana.

find ways to preserve them without having to spend federal money buying them. “The good news is that something is available to citizens to take advantage of,” says Frank McManamon, the top federal archaeologist. But while the government provides some tools and modest funding, local initiative, he points out, is pivotal. And that’s one of the lessons suggested by these fights over Civil War landscapes: Despite some federal help and the work of private, state, and national groups such as the CWPT, a grass-roots effort is indispensable for many preservation projects, especially in their initial stages.

The second point—the one archaeology can make most strongly—is that this enterprise is more than just a hobby for history buffs or a narrow academic quest. The details that come out of the ground are, advocates say, one of the few ways future generations can hope to come to grips with the meaning of a war on our own land, among our own citizens, that cost 620,000 lives.

When Kristen Stevens, staff archaeologist for the ABPP, worked at the Gettysburg National Military Park a few years ago, some human remains were discovered along a railroad cut. Public interest was exceptionally strong. “People were hounding us,” she says. “They were riveted, trying to figure out whose family that soldier might have belonged to, which side he might have represented. It’s a compelling thing. I think it’s just a matter of wanting to identify. You want to really understand that person’s story.” But the analysis was tenuous. “We based most of our observations on the slimmest of evidence, just the shadows of what was on the human remains and the bones—an undershirt button and the heel of a shoe,” recalls Stevens. “To me, it really heightened the importance of every scrap of evidence. Every Minié ball counts.” ■

STEVE NASH teaches in the journalism and environmental studies programs at the University of Richmond.