

# On the Skirmish Line

The Newsletter of the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust

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## The Next Challenge

In the Fredericksburg area, land speculation is running rampant, fed by promises of publicly funded roads and utilities. Unfortunately, historic terrain is as susceptible to development pressure as any other nearby land. Through such subsidies, a portion of an old farm along modern Route 3 (once known as the Orange Turnpike) had attained great potential for commercial use.

The Central Virginia Battlefields Trust (CVBT) stepped in and placed a contract on this 100 acre tract, committing itself to a \$450,000 purchase price. We have until January 20<sup>th</sup> 1998 to close on the property, with an option to delay until March 20<sup>th</sup>, if need be, but at an additional cost of \$50,000. The cost is high, but the terrain under contract is historically invaluable.

The significance of this acreage is more fully described on pages 2 and 3. Briefly, though, this tract is a portion of the Chancellorsville battlefield that represents all three general phases of that battle. First, it was the scene of the initial Union advance, on May 1, 1863, as well as the Confederate counterthrust

that same day. On May 2, a portion of the Confederate army held this area and fixed the Union army in place as Stonewall Jackson executed his daring flank march. Finally, on May 3, Southern troops attacked across this terrain as part of the climactic Confederate assaults that converged on the Chancellorsville crossroads and forced the Union army from the field.

The CVBT has renamed this area McLaws' Wedge to identify its Civil War significance.

## Willis Hill Update

The CVBT has been able to forward its share of the Willis Hill purchase to the Civil War Trust, thanks to the timely generosity of its members. The Civil War Trust had given us until September 30<sup>th</sup> to deliver the \$20,000 we had pledged to provide. Members have been extremely responsive, though, and the full amount was forwarded by September 4<sup>th</sup>. The following members donated \$250 or more, but were not previously recognized in our July newsletter:

- ✓ Ken Haack, Fredericksburg  
Historical Prints
- ✓ David P. Harrington  
University Park, MD
- ✓ Fr. William B. Holberton  
Bethlehem, PA
- ✓ Frank A. O'Reilly  
Woodford, VA
- ✓ David H. Rankin, Jr.  
Charlotte, NC
- ✓ James P. Sikorski  
Bridgeton, NJ

Also of note is a contribution from Milton and Betty Ford, of Stafford County, VA. Their donation was made in the name of one of their forebears, a Private Garrett L. Terrell, Company H, 10<sup>th</sup> New York National Zouave Regiment. This Union soldier was wounded in the second assault on Marye's Heights on 13 December 1862. This level of specific detail brings home the reason we all seek to preserve these precious sites.

## From the Archives

Historian Bob Krick has found an interesting item from a newly discovered historical manuscript. Massachusetts businessman and politician Fred W. Cross was fascinated with the local battlefields and visited here frequently. In a letter to Dr. Douglas Southall Freeman that has just turned up, Cross repeated stories told him by local civilians about construction of earthworks on the battlefield at Spotsylvania Court House.

George W. Perry, who grew up on the Spindle Farm just opposite the Sedgwick Monument and Brock Road, told Cross:

the Confederates in constructing that hasty line of works May 8, 1864 [behind the Spindle House, running from Brock Road to the Po River], took all the furniture out of the houses thereabouts - bureaus, bedsteads, tables, chairs, etc - and used them as the core of their hurriedly built breastworks. He said that after the battle they dug even feather beds out of the abandoned works. Other old people in that vicinity have told me the same story - of houses being dismantled, stripped of their furnishings, and even the boards and timbers taken where they could be loosened easily and used as the core of the earthworks. Sometimes the Federals did it and sometimes the Confederates.

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## Historic Significance of McLaws' Wedge

On the eve of the Chancellorsville Campaign, the acreage now called McLaws' Wedge was uninhabited and wooded. A Confederate officer who would lead troops across the property described it as "a dense wood thickly set with undergrowth." The Orange Turnpike (modern Route 3) ran along its northern boundary. The Orange Plank Road (modern Route 610) was to the south. Furnace Road (modern McLaws Drive) coursed along a ridge just to the east and its western boundary disappeared into what was known as Big Meadow Swamp.

On April 30, 1863, elements of Major General Joseph Hooker's Army of the Potomac moved into this area, having crossed the Rappahannock River far upstream of the formidable Confederate defenses. Three Federal columns were driving east toward Fredericksburg. Major General George Sykes' division, of the Union Fifth Corps, pushing out along the Orange Turnpike.

The Confederate commander, Robert E. Lee, reacted to the Union offensive by sending Major General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson to gather what forces he could to halt them. In typical fashion, Jackson took control of the fight by attacking. Major General Lafayette McLaws deployed his division across the Turnpike and confronted the advancing Federals (some of the Regular Army soldiers in Sykes' division had been in McLaws command in the pre-Civil War army). As Sykes took his line of battle forward, Major General Winfield Scott Hancock moved up in his support by bringing his Second Corps division up to the ridge traversed by the Furnace Road. Following a sharp fight, Sykes fell back and reformed behind Hancock.

The Federals found the ground here to their liking. It was situated out of the Wilderness and their artillery could be brought to bear with clear advantage. Hooker, however, soon ordered these advance elements back to Chancellorsville. The Second Corps commander, Major General Darius Couch, was reluctant to give up the high ground, but the Union column (Major General Henry Slocum's Twelfth Corps) that had been advancing to his right on the Orange Plank Road, had already withdrawn. In the late afternoon, Brigadier General Joseph B. Kershaw reinforced McLaws with his South Carolina brigade and their combined force subsequently attacked Hancock's position. The Federals withdrew in turn and the Confederates bivouacked on the Furnace Road heights.

During the night of May 1/2, the Union army realigned itself. The Fifth Corps elements facing McLaws shifted to their left and the Second Corps filled the gap. On the morning of May 2<sup>nd</sup>, the area between the Orange Turnpike and the Orange Plank Road was held by Brigadier General John C. Caldwell's brigade. The Union Twelfth Corps was to his right and the rest of the Second Corps to his left.

On May 1<sup>st</sup>, Hooker had hesitated, curtailing his advance and pulling back to a defensive position. The Army of Northern Virginia quickly seized the opening thus provided. Early the next morning, Lee issued orders for the troops in this vicinity to engage and distract the enemy, while Stonewall Jackson secretly led fully two-thirds of the available Confederate forces on a 12-mile march to get onto the thinly held Union right.

While Jackson got his column underway, the Confederate divisions of

McLaws and Major General Richard H. Anderson (approximately 12,000 troops) spread out to cover the front. Their task was to distract nearly 50,000 Federal troops, by maintaining an extremely strong and aggressive skirmish line. Throughout the day, they gave the impression of a much larger force about to launch a major attack. The ruse was critical because a determined Union thrust would have punched through the thin Southern line.

The Confederates in this area traded lives for the precious time Jackson needed to deploy on the distant Union flank. They did so through a series of probing attacks that left many of their number dead and dying in the woods. Their success was measured by the Federals remaining convinced they were holding a powerful force at bay.

Late in the afternoon of May 2<sup>nd</sup>, both Union and Confederate troops heard the crash of musketry that signalled the onset of Jackson's attack. McLaws had his troops cheer and shout and renew their aggressive posturing, to prevent any of the Union troops from being detached to stem the assault in their rear.

Jackson pressed his attack into the night. In addition to a bright moon, the dark sky was lit by the continuing battle. A Federal soldier recalled the scene: "over the tree tops in the distance, the shells were bursting in air or with fiery trail falling and exploding in the woods; the volleys of musketry, the shouts of the combatants, thrilling in the extreme, filled us with apprehension." Tragically, this night's confusion claimed Jackson as one its casualties.

The hard-fought battle on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, was a prelude to even more brutal fighting on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. At dawn, Southern artillery opened fire and was followed shortly by the advance of Confederate infantry. Lee remained separated from the bulk of his army and wanted





### A Reminder...

The CVBT is a dirt and grass organization rather than a member service one. We endeavor to keep our overhead down, by operating as an all-volunteer group. Our intent is to continue to reassure our members that their contributions will go toward the purchase of real estate. Response to this policy has thus far been quite positive. Let us know what you think.

### Organization

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Charter memberships are available during 1997 only. Persons who contribute at the Charter Member level or above will be permanently identified as Charter Members.

The CVBT is chartered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. All contributions are tax deductible.



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