

# On The Skirmish Line

The Newsletter of the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust

## Fighting Along the Po River: The CVBT Acquires Land at Spotsylvania Court House

The campaign fought around Spotsylvania Court House began on May 8, 1864, as the two armies maneuvered into position after departing the burning Wilderness. Over the next two weeks, there occurred a series of sharp battles including the fight at Laurel Hill, Upton's surprise attack on the salient, the gruesome ordeal at the Bloody Angle, operations near the Ni River, and an effort by the Union Second Corps south of the Po River. The Trust has purchased 20 acres of this latter battlefield.

On May 8, 1864, Confederate forces entrenched at Laurel Hill, across the Federal line of advance. Initial Union attacks proved unsuccessful and the Union commander, Lieutenant General U.S. Grant sought ways to gain a tactical advantage. He ordered Major General Winfield Scott Hancock to cross the Po River with his Second Corps, to threaten the Confederate left flank. The Po,

however, bends back upon itself in this sector, which required Hancock to cross this stream twice before he would be in position to attack. A crossing called the Block House Bridge became a key feature during subsequent events.

On May 9<sup>th</sup>, Hancock's engineers constructed a pontoon bridge, west of Laurel Hill and the infantry began to cross in the late afternoon. Thus warned of the Federal movement, General Robert E. Lee redeployed troops from the Fredericksburg Road (on his right flank) during the night. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, General William Mahone had a force in position at the Block House Bridge while General Henry Heth maneuvered his division to try to attack Hancock from the south.

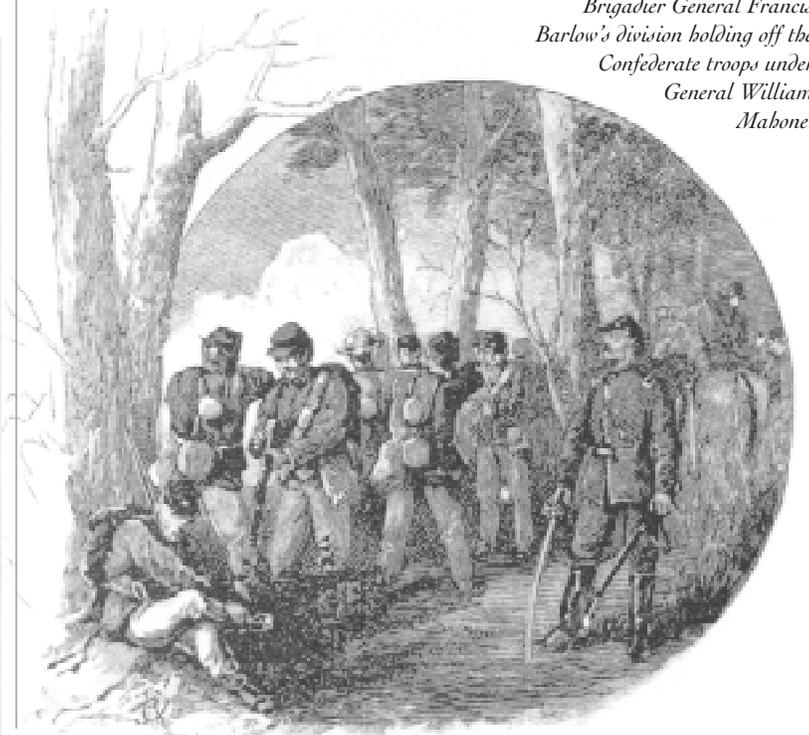
Later that day Grant determined he would

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## Smith Run Battlefield *Saved by CVBT*

In the late afternoon of May 4, 1863, Louisiana troops of General Harry Hay's division swarmed up a slope near Smith Run, just west of Fredericksburg. Awaiting them were the veteran troops of the Army of the Potomac's Vermont Brigade. The onrushing Confederates had already overrun the Union Sixth Corps' first line of defense, on the eastern side of the creek and had splashed across to the other side. The Vermont men lay in solid ranks, the sun at their back, holding their fire while the Southerners advanced into a killing zone. They then rose up and delivered several volleys that

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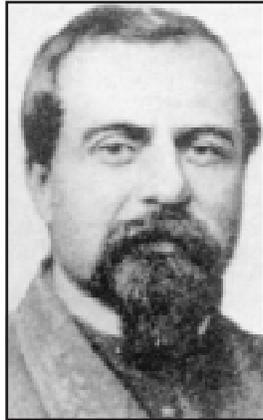


*Brigadier General Francis Barlow's division holding off the Confederate troops under General William Mahone.*

# The CVBT Needs Your Help

*to Pay off the Po River Property!*

**T**he Central Virginia Battlefields Trust has purchased 20 acres of battlefield land on the Po River. The purchase price is \$80,000. This acquisition is our first at Spotsylvania Court House. We have now preserved historic terrain at all four local battlefields (Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Wilderness, and Spotsylvania Court House).



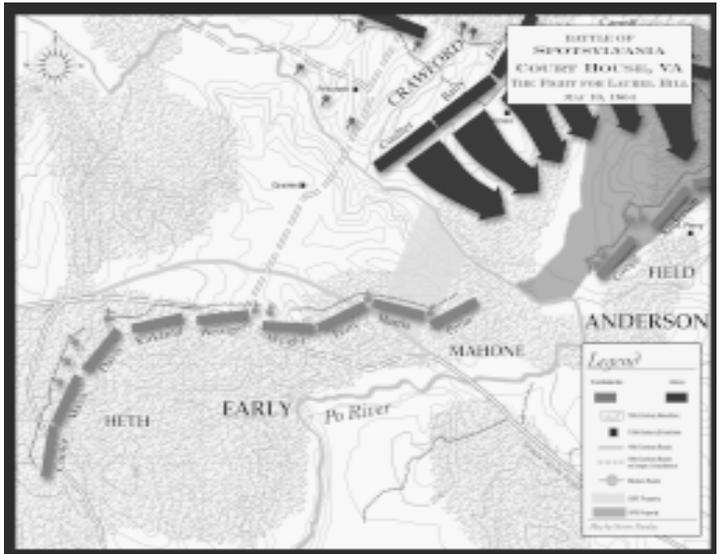
*Confederate Brigadier General Nathaniel Harris commanded the Mississippi brigade of Mahone's Division entrenched on newly acquired CVBT property.*

On May 10, 1864, General Nelson Miles withdrew his regiments

of New York, Michigan, and Pennsylvania troops across this property to the Federal pontoon bridge over the Po River. General William Mahone's Virginians subsequently moved into this area and entrenched. Their well-preserved earthworks course across the Trust's new acquisition. In addition, a picket post near the

river includes a set of clearly defined fighting holes. World War Two veterans often call them foxholes. It is rare to find these types of features so well preserved and their historic context so clear. We are quite pleased.

The CVBT Board invites the Trust's members to help pay off this property by the end of 2001. As you know, we operate without paid staff. The result is that your donations are used to purchase dirt and grass. By paying off this property as soon as possible, we will realize significant savings in interest costs. Our intent is to be as efficient with your donations as possible. In this way, we can move on to the next acquisition as soon as possible.



*Membership Categories*

Annual Member	\$35
Active Member	\$135
Sustaining Member	\$250
Patron	\$500
Benefactor	\$1,000
Life Member	\$5,000
Life Patron	\$10,000
Corporate Member	\$500
Corporate Patron	\$1,000

### The Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, Inc. Board of Directors

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## Smith Run Saved

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left the ground strewn with dead and dying soldiers. This brief action bought the Union Sixth Corps a brief respite in which to begin a withdrawal, which would effectively bring the Chancellorsville Campaign to a close.

An 11-acre portion of this battlefield has recently been preserved through a partnership of state and local governments and the CVBT. The price of this land is high - \$300,000 - but not as high as the cost in blood 138 years ago. Earlier this year, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation provided half of this purchase price, or \$150,000. On September 20, the Fredericksburg City Council appropriated \$100,000 as their contribution to the purchase of this ground. The remaining \$50,000

will be paid by the CVBT. Member donations have made it possible to pay the full amount at closing, thus avoiding any interest costs whatsoever.

There has been some controversy over this battlefield because a four-lane road will cut through this area. The CVBT is sensitive to these concerns, but notes that most of the May 4<sup>th</sup> battlefield has been developed over the past few decades with houses, a school, and apartments. The preserved land will only be representative of a much larger battlefield that encompassed much of modern day Fredericksburg. This site, however, is exceptionally well preserved. As Fredericksburg grew, the Smith Run area remained isolated by its topography. As a consequence, this small area retains its historical integrity and can be interpreted with a high degree of accuracy. The Trust is also looking to purchase additional nearby

acreage, to take full advantage of an opportunity to preserve an amazingly intact part of the battlefield.

This acquisition will allow visitors to gain a fuller understanding of the Chancellorsville Campaign and the role played by the Union Sixth Corps. This Federal formation suffered fully 25 percent of the Federal casualties sustained during this campaign. At Smith Run, this part of their battle history can finally be told.

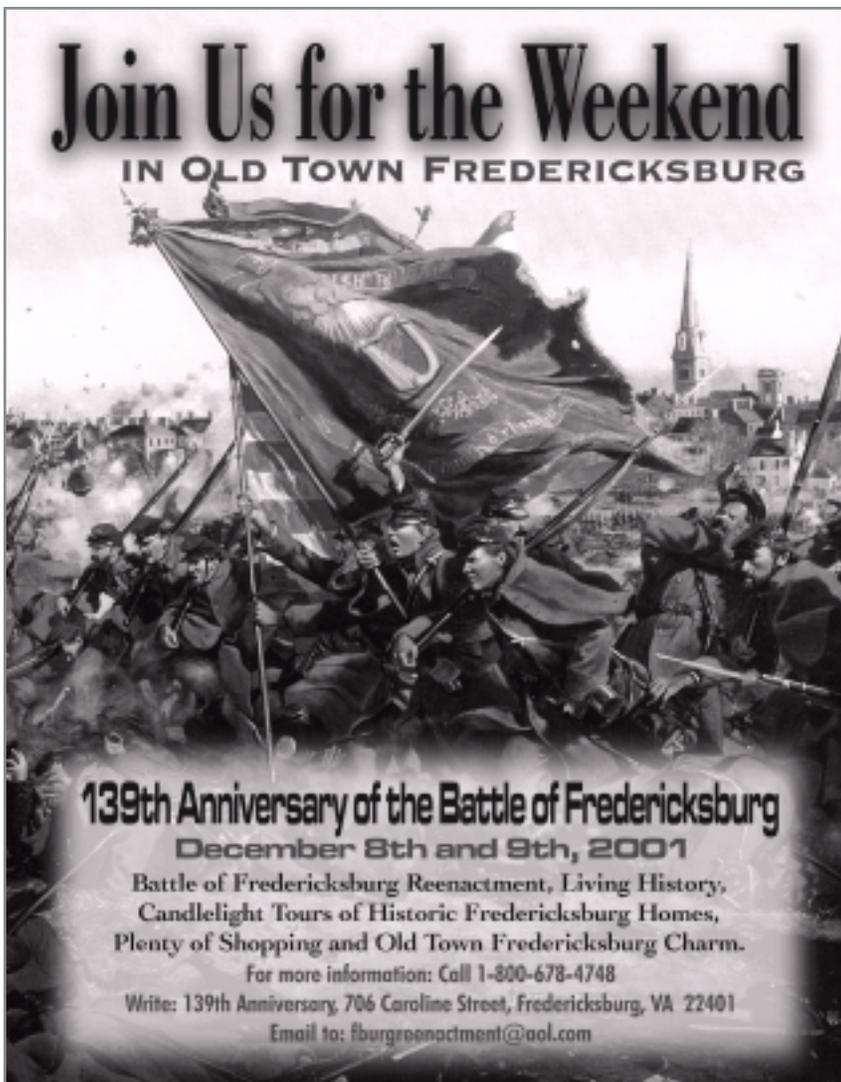
Instrumental in this success is the City of Fredericksburg. In 1996, the Fredericksburg City Council set aside a

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### *Renewal Note*

*Please check your mailing label to see if your membership is due for renewal. The date appears in the upper right hand corner of the label. Clip out the renewal form and send it back.*

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Write: 139th Anniversary, 706 Caroline Street, Fredericksburg, VA 22401  
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# CVBT Saves Property Along the Po River

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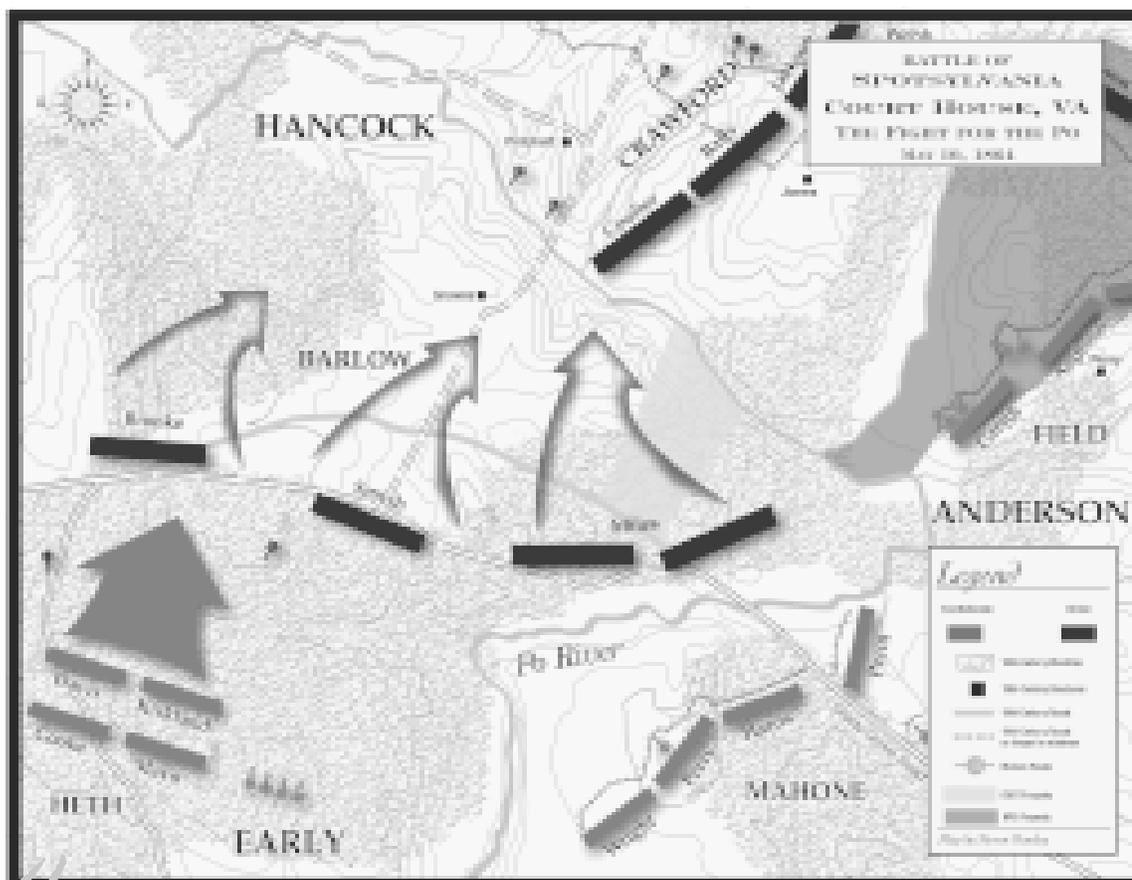
attack the Confederate center, believing his opponents had weakened their lines to threaten his troops south of the Po. He wanted to give these assaults as much weight as possible and ordered Hancock to withdraw two of his three divisions, leaving only Brigadier General Francis Barlow's division south of the Po River (Hancock's fourth division was then reinforcing the Union Sixth Corps and had never crossed the Po). While the Federal units moved back, Heth's Confederates began probing Barlow's now isolated position.

Barlow had established his line along the Shady Grove Church Road, from Block House Bridge to Waite's Shop. As noted before, Mahone's Confederates blocked the Union advance at the bridge. From a hilltop east of the bridge, Confederate artillery was able to enfilade the Federal line. When Hancock learned his remaining units below the Po River were being attacked, he decided

to extricate Barlow's force. Two brigades pulled back to a new position north of the road and entrenched while another brigade moved back to the pontoon bridge and also dug protective earthworks. Heth pushed his Confederate brigades forward and assaulted the newly dug Federal works. During this action, General Nelson Miles' brigade held Mahone at the Block House Bridge.

During this combat, artillery fire caught the woods on fire, adding a hellish dimension to the battleground. Union troops retreated through the burning trees, but, as in the Wilderness, flames consumed many of the wounded soldiers who could not get themselves clear. When all of Barlow's other units had pulled back, Miles relinquished his position near the Block House Bridge and moved quickly toward the pontoon crossing. Entrenched artillery provided effective covering fire and Miles was able to hustle his force to the north side of the Po River.

During its retreat, one of the division's batteries lost a cannon when the piece became wedged between two trees. Union gunners were unable to cut it free before the advancing Confederate infantry closed in. The artillerymen reluctantly spiked the gun and left it to the enemy. Mahone's Virginia troops moved into the area and entrenched, but the battle action was over. The Confederates held this position until the morning of May 12, when they were recalled to more active areas of the field.



# Local Developer Donates Acreage to CVBT in the Wilderness Battlefield

Under a hot August sun, Fredericksburg developer Larry Silver formally handed over a deed for six acres of land upon which a small group of preservationists had gathered on the Wilderness battlefield. John D. Mitchell, CVBT president, accepted this deed, which became the first outright gift of land the CVBT has ever received.

During this brief ceremony, Mr. Silver acknowledged that developers are in the business of changing the ground. All of us use grocery stores, service stations, and other retail and service establishments. He noted, however, that some areas are worth preserving and he welcomed the opportunity to work with an established organization like the CVBT that is able to identify areas that are historically significant, while differentiat-

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## Smith Run Saved

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4.5-acre preservation area near an elementary school. This land includes a representative section of the terrain across which Confederate troops attacked and will remain in its natural state. In 2001, this governing body has stepped forward again, this time with generous funding, to preserve yet more of this intriguing battlefield. Trails through wooded terrain will soon link these sites.

The Commonwealth of Virginia and the Fredericksburg City Council deserve our thanks. Our CVBT membership, however, should not be forgotten. They too have come forward with hard earned donations to complete this purchase. The CVBT will also continue its efforts to add to this initial purchase. Our intent is to preserve even more of this terrain where men from Vermont and Louisiana clashed in a desperate action, a short battle so intense that Medals of Honor would subsequently be awarded to four soldiers who fought there. We appreciate our member donations that have made this victory possible and which will be needed for additional purchases in this area.

ing them from areas that can logically be developed.

In this instance, an area at the intersection of modern day Routes 3 and 20 will soon have a restaurant and a service station. Those who are familiar with the Wilderness battlefield know that the historic crossroads remains preserved, several hundred yards to the east. This new development will occur at the newer intersection. In addition, the signs for this development will be kept low, so they do not intrude into any battlefield line-of-sight.

The CVBT has never sought to acquire the land upon which this new development will occur. It is simply not historic. The focus of the National Park Service and the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust in this area has been to preserve the terrain where the modern Route 20 becomes the gateway to the Wilderness battlefield.

The donated property fulfills this function by expanding the preserved ground around what is called Grant's Knoll. On May 4, 1864, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant established his headquarters in this area during his first confrontation with General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia. Mr. Silver's gift enhances this historic site by effectively preventing development from encroaching into this dramatic setting.

The Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield were also in attendance at the ceremony transferring the Grant's Knoll property to the CVBT. Tom Van Winkle and John Campbell both expressed their support and desire to assist with site interpretation, when such plans are developed.

Friends of the battlefield, developer Larry Silver, the National Park Service, and the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust certainly represent a broad community-based partnership that can bring together a variety of assets to preserve historic ground. The CVBT Board is proud to be associated with these partners and extends its sincere thanks to Mr. Silver for his gift of land.

**www.cvbt.org**

*Our web page continues to expand, through the generosity of member Gary Embry. The CVBT web site is well worth a visit and includes an inordinate number of links to other Civil War web sites. Pay us a visit. You will not be disappointed.*

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SUSTAINING MEMBER - \$250

PATRON - \$500

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LIFE MEMBER - \$5,000

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CORPORATE MEMBER - \$500

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METHOD OF PAYMENT:

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Please return completed renewal form with credit card information or a check payable to: **Central Virginia Battlefields Trust.**

Mail completed form to: **Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, 604A William Street, Suite 1, Fredericksburg, VA 22401.**

In a constant endeavor to keep our costs down, the CVBT publishes a renewal form in all issues of "On The Skirmish Line". Please check your mailing label to see if your membership is due for renewal and clip out the form above and send it back to our office. If your membership is current, but you know of someone who would like to join, please pass this membership form on to them. The CVBT would be glad to include them in our ever growing list of members.



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