
On the Skirmish Line

The Newsletter of the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust

1 July 1997

Volume 1, Number 1

A New Organization: Lean and Efficient

Some CVBT members, especially those located in distant states and out of reach of local newspapers, certainly must be wondering what has become of their donations and memberships. As early as January, funds began to come in from supporters in Florida, Michigan, New York, and other far-flung outposts. Other than seeing their checks cashed, and receiving an acknowledgment letter, some of those donors will have heard little about CVBT's progress. There has been a great deal of progress, including the spectacular success in preserving the Willis Hill-Marye's Heights Ridge. Some of those results are highlighted elsewhere in this newsletter, but the Trust simply is

not designed as a member-service organization.

The Trust is, of course, eager to keep its membership apprised of the progress, challenges, and opportunities that face us. The quarterly newsletter, of which this is the first issue, is intended to fill that need. Other than the newsletter, however, the plain fact is the Trust is dedicated to an all-volunteer operation with little overhead. The various preservation groups with highly paid full-time staff, and payrolls into six figures (or more) can offer their members a wide array of amenities. We cannot.

The CVBT is determined to work feverishly to buy battlefield land. Our informal motto is "dirt and grass, not offices and staff." We hope that will satisfy - even delight - the membership.

From the President

F r e d e r i c k s b u r g ,
Chancellorsville, Wilderness,
Spotsylvania Court House - names forever ingrained in American history and lore. They denote romance, courage, dedication, perseverance, as well as violence, death and destruction. Whatever they may bring to mind, they all have one common characteristic - they are acres of real estate upon which Civil War battles were fought in 1862, 1863 and 1864.

After the armies moved elsewhere, these sites reverted to their natural settings. Trees sprouted and grass grew to cover the scarred land where so many men had fought and

died. They remained largely untouched for decades. Finally, in the 1920s, Congress realized they were worth saving so Americans could visit the battlefields and ponder the sacrifices made by those who fought there. Alas, neither Congress nor anyone else could have foreseen what would happen in the course of time.

We all know what happened - the ascendancy of the automobile with the corresponding sprawl of development that is sweeping over these battlefields. Should we try to save them or let them be destroyed? This debate has now raged for decades. Destruction has largely prevailed but now, hopefully, the pendulum may shift. The Battlefields Trust believes they should be preserved because they are a vital part of our country's history. Preserving them will take perseverance, courage, dedication and sacrifice. Let it not be said that we did not possess those traits to meet the challenges of protecting our heritage.

Enos Richardson

Victory at Willis Hill

On June 21st, the People of the United States gained ownership of 8.5 acres of land that once comprised the heart of the Confederate defenses at Fredericksburg. A ceremony atop that decisive hilltop featured Pulitzer-Prize winning author James M. McPherson as the keynote speaker. Also speaking were Fredericksburg Mayor H. William Greenup, Congressman Herbert H. Bateman, Senator Charles S. Robb, Edgar M. Andrews of the Civil War Trust, and

In this issue...

A New Organization: Lean and Efficient	1
From the President	1
Victory at Willis Hill	1
Mort Kunstler: Generous Artist ..	2
Low-Maintenance, Not Low-Tech. .	3
The Historic Significance of Willis Hill	3
Annual Meeting.	4
Organization.	4
Membership Categories.	4

Enos Richardson of the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust.

Such an outcome was never assured. This acreage came on the market because the private school which had occupied that site for decades needed more room. The timing was critical because this sale would very likely be the last time the property would be available for purchase. The CVBT was determined that a portion of this terrain ought to be accessible to the public, but the potential buyer was not interested in allowing an easement.

Still, there were compelling reasons to press on. The historic ground at Willis Hill is among the most hotly contested soil in any of the Fredericksburg area battlefields. Thousands of soldiers North and South fought and bled on this site. The property is essential for understanding the nationally significant events played out at Fredericksburg during the Civil War.

The importance of Willis Hill as an integral part of the Fredericksburg battlefield is even greater for modern visitation. The end of the ridge on which the National Cemetery lies has been the only high ground accessible to visitors. That southern extremity of the hill, however, bends away from the main battle action; visitors looking out from the Cemetery are looking away from the scene of massed Federal attacks. Putting visitors on Willis Hill, at the heart of the Confederate line, would afford them a view right down on the battlefield and the city's evocative skyline.

As the various negotiations unfolded, an opportunity emerged to acquire the entire 8.5 acres for incorporation into the Fredericksburg-Spotsylvania National Military Park. A partnership between the National Park Service, the Civil War Trust, and the CVBT finally provided the means to meet the asking price.

With a membership of less than 100 persons and organizations, the CVBT has pledged to deliver \$20,000 as its share of the purchase by September 30th. We have been extremely gratified by the

generous response to help meet this financial obligation. The following members have donated \$250 or more to the Willis Hill purchase:

Central Delaware Civil War Round Table

J. Michael Dervan, Arlington, VA
Paula Felder, Fredericksburg, VA
Joe Fulginiti, Fredericksburg, VA
Claude and Cindy Love Foster,
Plano, TX

J. Michael Greenfield,
Spotsylvania, VA

Carroll & Caroline Hayden,
Spotsylvania, VA

Lemuel W. Houston, F'burg, VA
Robert K. Krick, F'burg, VA
Mort Kunstler, Long Island, NY
Made in Virginia Store, F'burg,
Greg Mertz, Spotsylvania, VA
John D. Mitchell, Stafford, VA
North Shore Civil War Round
Table, Huntington, NY

James M. Pates, F'burg, VA

James S. Pates, F'burg, VA
Brian C. Pohanka, Alexandria, VA
Rappahannock Valley Civil War
Round Table, F'burg, VA

Enos Richardson, F'burg, VA
Josiah & Anne Rowe, III,
Fredericksburg, VA

Michael P. Stevens, F'burg, VA
Frank and Bernice Walker, Jr.

Orange, VA

David M. West, Richmond, VA

Our fundraising continues. Persons who would like to help with the Willis Hill purchase may do so by joining the Trust. During 1997, persons who contribute \$135 or more will be recognized as Charter Members. When the full \$20,000 is in hand, the Trust intends to look toward potential land acquisitions on the tremendously threatened Chancellorsville battlefield. Willis Hill is only the beginning of our drive to save historically significant terrain in central Virginia. Join us and be part of this battlefield preservation effort.

Mort Kunstler: Generous Artist

On May 23 and 24, the Fredericksburg Area Museum and Cultural Center hosted an event during which Mort Kunstler signed copies of his new print, "Lee's Lieutenants." This handsome painting shows Lee and his principal commanders on the morning of December 13, 1862.

Mr. Kunstler generously donated a significant portion of the proceeds he received from the sale of these prints to the CVBT. Ken Haack, of the Fredericksburg Historical Prints, also donated a portion of what he received for framing orders those days. The Trust thanks both Mr. Kunstler and Mr. Haack as well as the Fredericksburg Area Museum and Cultural Center for their support.

Low-Maintenance, Not Low-Tech

While the Trust is committed to limiting overhead expenses, two members (Michael P. Stevens and Gary Graham) have donated their time and resources to set up a state-of-the-art site on the Internet. For persons with access to the World Wide Web, the CVBT has an inviting presence on the Net that is well worth examining. Our address in this medium is www.cvbt.org.

The Historic Significance of Willis Hill

Real estate is at a premium in central Virginia which makes our task of preserving some of it that much more challenging. Still, why did the CVBT and others expend so much time and effort to purchase Willis Hill at a cost of \$1.65 million? What follows is a brief justification.

Colonel Henry Willis first settled Willis Hill in the early eighteenth century. The Willis Cemetery on that hilltop contains 35 stones, the earliest dating from 1756.

In December 1862, Confederate artillery bristled along the crest of Willis Hill and neighboring Marye's Hill. Captain Charles W. Squires, of the elite Washington Artillery, posted two 3-inch rifled guns in front of the Willis Cemetery and beside one of the many brick structures on the crest. The Southerners hid their ammunition and horses behind the cover of the brick wall enclosing the cemetery. Their position dominated the town so completely that artilleryman E. P. Alexander wrote, he "felt the elation of a certain and easy victory."

On December 13th, the Union army, under the command of General Ambrose Burnside, attacked what the soldiers referred to as Marye's Heights and bled itself in a series of forlorn headlong assaults. Confederate artillery on Willis Hill and elsewhere mowed down the Northerners in wholesale slaughter. Federal guns desperately tried to blast the Confederate gunners from their fortifications. One soldier confessed that "amidst shrieking shells and singing rifle-balls," the area around the Willis Cemetery was "a frightful scene to traverse, -every inch of ground

continually struck, apparently by bullets and fragments of shells....It looked like certain death, or ghastly wounds" to expose oneself outside the gunpits.

Confederate infantry also ventured across "that storm-swept plain" on the crest of Willis Hill. North Carolina infantry, under General Robert Ransom, initially supported the Louisiana artillery. When they advanced a portion of their force to join the troops already occupying the sunken road at the foot of the hill, fresh infantry moved in to take their place. General Joseph B. Kershaw led his South Carolina brigade up the back of the hill, using a road recently cut through the ravine. When his troops reached the cemetery, they immediately took shelter behind its brick walls. Later, Kershaw deployed his troops closer to the guns and below them in the sunken road. The South Carolinians suffered their worst losses along the summits of Willis and Marye's Hills, standing exposed "under one of the heaviest shellings the troops ever experienced."

As night fell, the battle lapsed into a fitful quiet. A Georgia infantryman availed himself of the Willis Cemetery to bury a comrade who had died fighting at the stone wall. A rough stone still stands, bearing the simple legend: "___ Coffee, Co. E, 24th Georgia."

In the Spring of 1863, the Union army's new leader, General Joseph Hooker, advanced a portion of his army across the Rappahannock at Fredericksburg while the bulk of his force crossed far to the west. As Lee's Confederates countered this Union offensive at Chancellorsville, a thin veil of Southern troops held the fortified defenses behind the town.

The Washington Artillery again held their old gunpits with Captain Charles W. Squires stationed once more in front of the Willis Cemetery. On May 3, 1863, Union troops prepared to attack the heights in the same manner that had failed Burnside in December. Lieutenant William M. Owens watched the Federals massing for battle and remembered that "it was a beautiful sight, but a terrible one for us."

The first Northern attacks met with the same devastating fire that ensured Southern victory in December. Union artillery pummeled the Southern positions and scoured the heights. A Southern soldier wrote after the battle that the headstones "and everything of the kind were torn to pieces." Still, the Confederate guns continued to belch a murderous fire at the aggressive Federals.

Another Union attack caught the Confederates overextended and unable to stop the Northerners from penetrating the line at several points. One Federal thrust broke across the stone wall and lunged up the ravine between Marye's and Willis hills. A bloody hand-to-hand fight broke out over Captain Squires' guns until the Louisiana gunners found themselves surrounded by soldiers of the 6th Maine Volunteers. The Federals captured many of the Confederates along with six cannon. The storied Washington Artillery had lost their first guns captured in battle. After regrouping, the Federal columns moved off toward Chancellorsville.

In 1868, Douglas H. Gordon sold twelve acres of Willis Hill to the United States for a National Cemetery. The present Willis Hill dwelling stands on the foundation of the old Willis home site and dates from sometime after the Civil War. The last private owner, Mr. Campbell Spratt extensively renovated the building which was then occupied by the Montfort Academy until this year. The old Willis Cemetery still bears the marks on its walls from the fighting in 1862 and 1863, and near the house the remnants of Captain Squires' gunpits have been incorporated into modern terracing.

The price to acquire this property was high. Enos Richardson, president of the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust put the amount in perspective, though, on the occasion of its transfer to the National Park Service. At that time he noted: "We believe that these places are the soul of our country." In these terms, the cost was not too great.

Annual Meeting

The Trust held its annual meeting on May 3rd, 1997, in Fredericksburg, Virginia. At that time, the Trust's membership stood at 67 persons and organizations.

Those members present were briefed on the Trust's organizational history, its non-profit status, and current fund-raising efforts. A Board of Director (shown at right), was elected for a two year term. Additional board members will be sought to ensure comprehensive representation.

Refreshments were served after the annual membership meeting adjourned. Shortly thereafter the newly elected Board of Directors convened to commence work. There is much to be done.

Organization

The Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, Inc. Board of Director
 Enos Richardson, Jr., President
 James M. Pates, Vice-President
 Michael P. Stevens, MD, Treasurer
 Erik F. Nelson, Secretary
 F. Baldwin Harrington, MD
 John D. Mitchell
 Anne W. Rowe

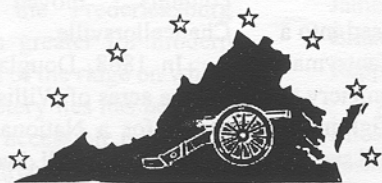
"On the Skirmish Line" is published for the CVBT membership at 604-A William Street, Suite 1, Fredericksburg, VA 22401. Telephone numbers are 540-374-0900 (local), 888-374-0900 (toll free).

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

Membership Categories

Annual Member.....	\$35
Charter 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

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



CENTRAL VIRGINIA BATTLEFIELDS TRUST

604-A William Street, Suite 1 • Fredericksburg, VA 22401