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Project Links Battlefield, Museum

Civil War-Era Effort Helped Map Future For Aviation Center

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The National Air and Space Museum's new annex at Dulles International Airport might not even exist were it not for the obsessive quest of a Civil War general once court-martialed for cowardice.

In a strange confluence of history, swamps and supersonic jetliners, the Smithsonian Institution has paid to restore part of Manassas National Battlefield Park to make up for the wetlands disturbed to build the annex, which opens tomorrow.

Over the past year, the Smithsonian has restored 115 acres—down to the shrub and within an inch of slope—to the way it was during the Second Battle of Manassas in August 1862. The land was bulldozed during the 1980s by a developer planning a mall and subdivision.

To do it right, engineers matched modern computerized mapping with a series of remarkably detailed maps of the battlefield that had been lying in a drawer for 125 years. That the maps were there at all is the fortuitous product of a quirk of Civil War history: the 15-year effort of Union Maj. Gen. Fitz-John Porter to clear his name.

"It's amazing how the dots connect, from aviation history to the Civil War," said Lin Ezell, the museum official who first contacted battlefield officials about the deal.

The story begins with Porter, a general serving under Union commander Gen. John Pope. The two men disliked and distrusted each other. During the battle, Pope ordered Porter to cut off Confederate reinforcements and launch an attack that would break their line and win the day.

Instead, Confederate Gen. James Longstreet swept down with 30,000 troops, crushing the Union line and winning the battle for the South.

PHOTOS BY RICH LIPSKI—THE WASHINGTON POST

Robert Sutton, superintendent of Manassas National Battlefield Park, surveys some of the 115 acres that were meticulously returned to their 1860s state.

Pope blamed Porter for the defeat and ordered him court-martialed for disobeying orders and showing cowardice in the face of the enemy. Porter was kicked out of the Army and spent the next 15 years trying to reverse the verdict.

In 1878, Porter won a historic retrial. To help, his supporters commissioned a series of extraordinarily detailed maps of the battleground that showed every rise and patch of trees. During the retrial, the maps were used to show the terrain and exact positions of both armies. Along with the testimony of dozens of witnesses, the maps convinced a panel of generals that Porter's army would have been crushed if he had followed Pope's orders.

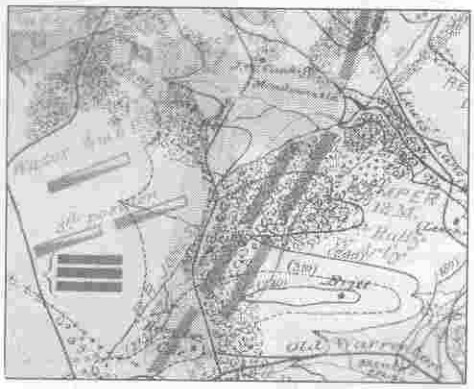
After Porter was exonerated and his position restored, the maps were tucked away in the National Archives.

The land didn't change much from the end of the Civil War until 1988, when developer John T. "Til" Hazel bought property west of the battlefield park, between Interstate 66 and Route 29, and began building the William Center, a giant mall and subdivision.

Though the Hazel land was private and not part of the park, historians said it was integral to understanding the Second Battle of Manassas and included grounds where Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's headquarters had stood. The development plan led to a national outcry by preservationists, including neighbor Annie Snyder, who wept in front of a congressional committee. The images of backhoes and bulldozers ripping up a Civil War battlefield galvanized the public.

Soon, Congress, in an extraordinary move, seized the land from Hazel and gave it to the National Park Service.

By the time the bulldozers were silenced, about 125 acres of the battlefield had been flattened. Whole hills 15-feet high had been removed, streams rerouted. Hundreds of mature trees had been plucked from the ground, sewers installed, foundations laid and utility lines buried.



Crews used 125-year-old maps of the area that were made to help a court-martialed Union general who was fighting to restore his name.

"We were kind of stuck with what we were given," park Superintendent Robert Sutton said. "It was very difficult to tell the story of what happened there."

The Park Service hired a team from the University of Georgia to figure out how to restore the land. Members of the team recalled reviewing the Porter maps in a metal cage at the National Archives and realizing what a gold mine they had.

"It was a wonderful happenstance, an invaluable starting point," said Ian Firth, a University of Georgia professor who was part of the team. "If Fitz-John Porter hadn't been court-martialed and hadn't had the retrial, there wouldn't be these wonderful maps."

Despite the blueprint for restoring the battlefield, the Park Service, perpetually short of cash and with many other competing priorities,

couldn't afford to fund the work. Nothing was done.

Then, 13 years later, Lin Ezell missed her exit.

Ezell, a pilot who used to work for NASA, was charged with some of the planning for the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center, also known as the new Smithsonian Air and Space Museum at Dulles. Early in the planning, Ezell and other executives found out that the museum site included seven acres classified as "emergent wetlands." Under complex federal environmental regulations, the Smithsonian would have to restore wetlands in the same watershed.

Airport officials refused to allow any wetlands to be created at Dulles. Wetlands come with birds, and birds don't get along with jets. Buying land in the same watershed—in pricey Fairfax or Loudoun counties—was financially out of the question.

Ezell's mind was thinking about solutions when she missed the Dulles exit on Route 50 and saw a brown road sign. It said: Manassas National Battlefield Park.

"A light went on," she said. She called Superintendent Sutton.

Of course the battlefield had land to be restored, Sutton told Ezell. There was just one catch: Instead of just restoring the wetlands areas, the project must restore the land to the condition it was in 1862.

By this spring, giant yellow earthmoving machinery was crawling over the site.

"This was a real mess right here," said Al Fox, steering a six-wheel-drive vehicle called a Gator. "And now we have to put everything back."

Fox is the site manager for Environmental Quality Resources, a company that specializes in restoring wetlands. Its workers have spent most of the year rearranging 90,000 cubic yards of dirt across a 110-acre section of the battlefield at a cost of more than $1.4 million.

They were charged not only with re-creating every hill, berm and divot but with restoring nature's original plumbing on the site, making sure that places that were wet in 1862 will be wet in the future. To get it right, they can't be more than an inch off.

In the middle of one the fastest-developing parts of Northern Virginia, heavy equipment has been used not to build acres of townhouses, but to erase their footprints. Instead of building up, they are ripping out sewer lines and manholes, filling in rises removed for access roads and restoring the gently galloping hills that once filled the spyglasses of opposing cavalry officers in August 1862.

This fall, they planted 8,000 trees and shrubs and 52,000 plants. In the far corner of the restoration area, plants are growing in a marshy depression, helped along by the wet summer and mild autumn.

"Imagine a 30-foot-high dirt pile right here," Sutton said, walking around an area that had been planted with native grasses and plants six weeks earlier. "The landscape was just clobbered by the developer."

He said having the museum pay for restoring the battlefield is "an amazing juxtaposition not only from a historic point of view, but it's about the importance of protecting all of our resources."

The workers are happy, too. "A lot of the guys were very excited about the project; a number of them are history buffs," said Rick Scaffidi, one of the consultants. "Normally, you're tearing everything apart; now you're finally restoring something."

The crews finished their work a few weeks ago. Now, as the Udvar-Hazy Center prepares to open and welcome its thousands of visitors to see the space shuttle Enterprise, the Enola Gay and a Concorde, a few miles down the road it is a calmer scene.

Today, the hills and rises look much as they once did.

"To me it's just a wonderful thing," Sutton said. "We're re-creating something that was here, but it will also have long-term benefits for the natural environment. And it was one of those things that to get Park Service funding would have taken forever."