

Manassas Battlefield To Relocate Woodlot

By Deborah Fitts

MANASSAS, Va. — Officials at Manassas National Battlefield Park are moving ahead with plans to remove a stand of pine trees planted in the wrong place nearly 35 years ago.

The 8 acres of loblolly pines were planted on Matthew's Hill in 1968 as part of a landscape restoration project. But according to Assistant Superintendent Karen Cucurullo, most of the actual historic woodlot was located south of the pines, and consisted of oaks, hickories and other hardwoods.

Removal of the pines will be followed by the planting, immediately to the south, of 6.2 acres of hardwood forest. The cleared land will be added to the park's program to lease property to local farmers. The site is off Sudley Road about a third of a mile northeast of the park's famous Stone House, at the intersection of routes 29 and 234.

Cucurullo noted that by the 1930s, most of the historic Matthews woodlot had been cleared. The park purchased the Matthews Hill area in the 1960s and began an effort to restore the landscape. Park historians later concluded that wartime maps showed the pines had been planted too far north.

The removal is just one of several clear-cuts called for in the park's General Management Plan. The plan dates from the 1980s, but the cuts were never carried out. Today, however, the Matthews Hill area is "a major interpretive and visitor use site within the battlefield," according to the park's Environmental Assessment of the pine-removal proposal.

An interpretive trail skirts the northern part of the project area, the report notes, and the "non-historic ground-cover ... hinders the interpretation of the battle story."

Cucurullo said comments received during a public review period that ended Sept. 20 were largely in favor of the cutting. "I think that visitors understand that to understand these battles, you have to have the land as it was in the 1860s," she said. She noted also that Prince William County has been losing its meadowland, and

this project will help provide that dwindling type of wildlife habitat.

During the first battle of Manassas, July 21, 1861, Confederate troops under Col. Nathan Evans struck a Union force on the southern slope of Matthews Hill. Federals took the crest of the hill, and despite reinforcements from the brigades of Gen. Barnard Bee and Col. Francis Bartow, the Confederates eventually fell back to Henry Hill, one mile south.

During Second Manassas, Aug. 28-30, 1862, Matthews Hill and adjacent Dogan Ridge served as staging areas for Union assaults on Confederate Gen. Stonewall Jackson's troops positioned along the Unfinished Railroad, to the northwest. At the close of the battle, Union troops fell back across the Matthews farm on a retreat to Bull

Run.

Cucurullo noted that the park has undertaken one other clear-cut, a removal in 1995 of about 5 acres of trees near the Second Manassas visitor center. The clearing gives visitors a view of the Brawner Farm.

The Management Plan calls for other reductions, including a significant removal of trees behind the Brawner Farm. Artillery was placed in areas that are now wooded, making interpretation difficult. If the public accepts the Matthews Hill project, Cucurullo indicated, other non-historic woods may be targeted in the future.

"We're really hopeful that people will understand what we're trying to do, and embrace it," she said. The pines will be cut by a private contractor, either this fall or early next spring.