

# Ox Hill/Chantilly Battlefield Is Moving Toward Being Full Park

By Deborah Fitts

FAIRFAX COUNTY, Va. — For nearly 20 years Ox Hill (or Chantilly) has been the poster child for a battlefield that gets no respect. But at long last Fairfax County officials are preparing to make good on a promise to create a fully interpreted battlefield park. — even if only 5 acres are all that's left.

In January the Fairfax County Park Authority approved a first-ever general management plan for the park. A four-member panel was named to begin drafting interpretive exhibits. And in May the county let a contract for engineering and site design, with actual work to lay out the park expected next year.

The sudden burst of activity is remarkable for a tiny scrap of battlefield that was all but overwhelmed by the rapid urban development that swept this Washington suburb in the 1980s and 90s. High-rise office buildings, four-lane highways, shopping malls and rows of townhouses have obliterated nearly all of the ground

where 15,500 Union and Confederate troops clashed in a driving thunderstorm Sept. 1, 1862.

And although in the 1980s Chantilly became the poster child for a battlefield lost to development, the dogged struggle by a few individuals who were determined to save what they could has paid off.

"We can hardly believe it," said Ed Wenzel of the Chantilly Battlefield Association. "It seems like we're finally on track after all these years." For the last two decades Wenzel has spearheaded the effort to create and interpret the small park.

"Obviously, the battlefield's been destroyed," he said. "We've got 1.5 percent of the heavy combat area. That's minuscule. You can't interpret a battle from a postage-stamp park.

"But we have a critical piece of the battlefield at the core area, where [Union Gen. Isaac] Stevens was killed. And if you can recreate the farm fields and re-erect the fences, we're envisioning a time

warp here, where you can walk into 1862."

Supporters of the park have always been fortunate in that, in 1885, the site of Stevens's death was marked by a pile of boulders. (The pile remains today.) The diminutive general was killed as he charged through a meadow at the head of his troops, carrying the national flag, against Confederates massed in the woods.

In 1915 two granite monuments were erected near the pile of boulders to Stevens and also to the one-armed Union Gen. Philip Kearny, who, later in the battle, was shot dead from his horse in a cornfield 150 yards west of the park.

So in the early 1980s when developers came calling with big plans for the land along U.S. 50 and West Ox Road, the monuments gave preservationists a rallying point. A proposal by developers to move the monuments provoked a backlash, and they eventually

master plan, acknowledged in mid-May, "There were higher priorities of the county. It wasn't that it was totally ignored. In the first 10 years we did what we could to preserve what little remained of the battlefield. But there's a serious commitment at this point to plan and develop the park site."

Grandfield said the creation of the park "is largely to Ed Wenzel's credit, and the Chantilly Battlefield Association. They did a good job of showing the importance of the resource, and the park authority agreed." The tiny battlefield organization has since its inception in 1986 consisted of Civil War preservationists Wenzel, Brian Pohanka, Clark B. "Bud" Hall and the Bull Run Civil War Round Table.

Plans for the park include a small parking area, an interpretive kiosk, a walking trail, and reconstruction of two fences that will follow the original fence lines of the meadow and the adjacent cornfield. Selected brush and trees will be removed to recreate the open ground of 1862. And the lawn will be replaced with some sort of suitable grasses to designate the meadow and cornfield.

Wenzel noted the good fortune in having portions of two of the battlefield's most important fence lines included within the park.

"Once those fences are up, the visitor entering the park will be instantly oriented to the battlefield," Wenzel said. "All the maps show the fences — even though the sliver of cornfield that we have, at the western edge of the park, is fairly small."

Wenzel is also planning a private fundraising initiative to erect two granite obelisks to the Union and Confederate casualties at Ox Hill.

The county has \$274,000 available for the park, which has an estimated price tag of \$400,000. Grandfield said he was "very optimistic" that the shortfall would be found elsewhere in the park authority budget.

Wenzel is serving on the four-member panel that will draft the interpretive exhibits. He indicated that he intends to do what he can to ensure that the county pursues the park plan appropriately.

Ox Hill, or Chantilly, "was the only major battle fought in Fairfax County," Wenzel said. "We need to protect what we have and do it up right."

*(Deborah Fitts is the wife of Chantilly Battlefield Association director Bud Hall.)*

## Ox Hill

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agreed to leave the stones be and to donate to the county 2.4 acres for a battlefield park. In 1994 the county acquired an adjoining 2.4 acres, and the park was born.

Ten years would pass in relative inactivity, however, with the park authority's attention focused on recreational areas and other sites in the county's sprawling park system.

Irish Grandfield, project manager for the Ox Hill Battlefield Park