

## **Bull Run Civil War Round Table (BRCWRT) Preservation Corner**

**April 20, 2020**

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### **The Historic Conner House**

(photographs courtesy of Blake Myers unless otherwise noted)

Recently a potential threat to Manassas Park's historic Conner House has emerged. This article summarizes the history and significance of the Conner House, its current preservation status and the potential threat to this historic structure.

The Conner House, located in the vicinity of 8220 Conner Drive in the City of Manassas Park, served from July to November 1861 as the headquarters of Confederate General Joseph E. Eggleston, at that time the commander of the Confederate Army of the Shenandoah, and in August 1862 as the headquarters of Colonel Lewis B. Pierce, commander of the 12<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Cavalry. The house also saw service as a field hospital during the Civil War, and is one of the few remaining antebellum homes in the Manassas region.



*Conner House (May 2017)*

The Conner House stands on land owned in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the Hooe family, one of the first families to settle in Prince William County. The Hooes owned an extensive (100-acre) tract of land, then known as Mayfield, southwest of the house. It was on this tract of land that Manassas Junction, linking the Manassas Gap Railroad to the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, was built in 1851. The house was built, likely by slave labor, ca. 1810 probably as an overseer's house, and survives as an example of a dwelling type indigenous to the Manassas area.

The original structure was built on a "side-hall plan" with an exterior end chimney and a steeply pitched, heavily timbered roof. The structure was modified c. 1855 with the addition of the two-story stone wing with an interior end chimney and one room per floor, an alteration typical of many farm homes in Virginia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to meet the space demands of growing families.

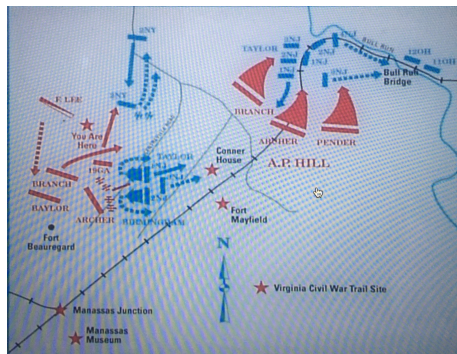
The Civil War significance of the house was not fully known until L. VanLoan Naisawald, a local historian and former National Park Service employee, consulted the papers of George Carr Round, a Union Veteran who settled in the Manassas area in 1868 and became a prominent civic figure and leader in Manassas. Round's papers contained a reference to the stone house east of the city, that had, along with Liberia, survived the war and was standing in 1865. In reviewing General Johnston's correspondence for details of activities in the Manassas area during the period July 1861 - March 1862, Naisawald noted that Johnston frequently cited his correspondence "The Duncan House - Manassas". In reviewing the census data for Tudor Hall, the area's name during the time of the 1860 Census, Naisawald verified that the Duncan House and the Conner House were one in the same.

General Johnston arrived in the Manassas Area in July 1861 with four brigades of the Army of the Shenandoah to reinforce Brigadier General P.G.T. Beauregard's Army of the Potomac in its defense against the advance of Brigadier General Irvin McDowell's Army of Northeastern Virginia. Johnston's arrival and reinforcement of Beauregard's defense along the Bull Run was just in time to blunt the Federal army's advance and turn the tide at the 1<sup>st</sup> Battle of Manassas fought on July 21, 1861. Johnson remained in the area after this Confederate victory as the nominal Commander of the Army of the Potomac as well as Commander of the Army of the Shenandoah, using the Conner (Duncan) House as his headquarters, until November 1861.



*"General Johnston" revisits his old HQ at the Conner (Duncan) House in August 2015  
(photograph courtesy of Mark Whitenton)*

In August 1862, the Conner House was used by Colonel Lewis B. Pierce, Commander of the 12th Pennsylvania Cavalry that was posted at Bristoe Station performing picket duty, as his headquarters and a hospital. On the night of August 26, Pierce lay ill in the house as Major General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's Confederate force approached Manassas Junction from the southwest. Having successfully raided Bristoe Station on the Orange and Alexandria Railroad line that very afternoon, Jackson ordered a rare night movement to capture the large Federal supply depot at Manassas Junction, a mere four miles from Bristoe Station. General Isaac R. Trimble's Brigade led the movement and successfully captured the lightly defended depot in the early morning hours of August 27, capturing eight cannon and some 300 Federal soldiers. Led by Jackson, the divisions of Major General A.P. Hill and Brigadier General William B. Taliaferro arrived at Manassas Junction that morning, deploying and defeating Federal forces arriving from Centreville on the ground surrounding plantation Liberia and at the Bull Run Railroad Bridge near Union Mills, with the Conner (Duncan) House sandwiched in between (see map, below).



*Battle of Bull Run Bridge - Liberia, August 27 1862*

After spending most of the day on August 27 liberating the foodstuffs and supplies at Manassas Junction depot, late that afternoon Jackson moved his forces north to the high ground of Sandy Ridge on the familiar battlefield of Manassas (Bull Run) to await the arrival of Longstreet's Corps. Within 24 hours the fight at the Brawner Farm would initiate the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Manassas (Bull Run).

With its commanding position overlooking the Orange and Alexandria Railroad (now the Southern Railway), the property known as Mayfield served as the site of Confederate encampments throughout the war and as the site of a field hospital. A Timothy O'Sullivan photograph, dated July 1862, and labeled 'the Yellow Hospital', is a photograph of the Conner (Duncan) House.



*Manassas, VA, Yellow Hospital, July 1862, Timothy L. Sullivan (Library of Congress)*

In this photograph a one-story frame addition appears on the house's north end, and among the other visible structures there is a one-story log structure west of the house and a small, frame, weatherboard structure off the southwest corner of the house. Up through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century civil war artifacts were routinely found in the yard around the house and on the surrounding property.

Following the Civil War until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the property was owned by the Butlers, Greenes, Rickards, Bennetts, and Rouses. Throughout this period the property may also have been attached to Bloom's Grove, a commercial stone quarry that operated in Manassas from the Reconstruction era into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The name Conner refers to the family that owned the property from 1914 - 1973. Under the ownership of E. R. Conner, the property became the center of a 400-acre dairy farm, one of the



largest in Prince William County. Milk from the dairy farm was shipped to Washington, D.C. from Bloom's Crossing, a railroad stop Conner established at the front of the hill near his house.

After 1971 the Conner Farm was divided, with the larger portion being sold to the Prince William School Board (for what is now Osbourn Park High School and its athletic fields). All of the farm buildings except the house were demolished, including the old log kitchen which sat behind the house. In 1973 the Town (now City) of Manassas Park purchased the Conner House and its remaining yard, which were later preserved and placed under the care of the City of Manassas Park Parks and Recreation Department. The house was preserved, and the exterior restored, largely through the efforts of the Manassas Park Women's Club and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places (Ref# 81000645) on October 6, 1981. The Conner House is currently closed to the public pending the completion of restoration of the structure's interior. The BRCWRT and Past-President Mark Trbovich were instrumental in getting two Civil War Trails signs installed at the Conner House in 2003.



*Conner House and Civil War Trails (CWT) Signs (May 2017)*

A March 31, 2020 *Potomac Local News* article indicated that the City of Manassas Park was considering a plan to redevelop the area around the current City Hall at 1 Park Center Court in a four-phased project that envisions replacing the current City Hall with a new multi-story City Hall, retail stores, a city square public plaza, an apartment complex and a nine-screen movie theater, with no mention or indication of the historic Conner House. In this article, the City of Manassas Park's Mayor was quoted as indicating the historical Conner House would not be a consideration in future commercial development plans for the area due to, *"....the Stone House is in very bad structural condition. It will fall down eventually, and that might be sooner if a strong storm hits the area. The Governing body knows that restoration work is very expensive and could be a million dollars or more to get that house to where it needs to be. The City just cannot afford to fix all those problems. And if it actually falls down prematurely, then the City would have to use taxpayer dollars to remove the rubble...."*

Manassas Park City Manager Laszlo Palko discussed the plan during a public meeting conducted at City Hall on March 31, 2020 at 7:00 pm. Due to coronavirus pandemic restrictions public access to this meeting was virtual via the City's Facebook and YouTube pages. The City Manager's presentation can be viewed and downloaded at

<http://cityofmanassaspark.us/agendas/197-2020-agendas/1960-agenda-march-31-2020.html>.



*Conner House - Then and Now*

In response to inquiries from the Bull Run Civil War Round Table, on April 18, 2020 the City of Manassas Park's Director Public Works and Community Planning replied that the city has no plans for the Conner House at this time, other than long-standing and often deferred capital investment plans for restoration. A developer's proposed concept was submitted to the City Manager for a potential future phase of development in the City Center Redevelopment District. This proposed concept, which is not part of Manassas Park's Comprehensive Plan, depicted an apartment complex in the area of the Conner House. The concept submitted to the City Manager is not an official public or private proposal and has not been formalized through any application. No review has been undertaken or initiated by the City of Manassas Park staff and no action has been taken by the governing body regarding this proposed concept.

BRCWRT members, and in particular members who are residents of the City of Manassas Park, are encouraged to review the plan submitted, and to contact their respective City Council representative and/or the Mayor to advocate for, and express their support of, preserving and completing the restoration of the historic Conner House. Contact information for the Mayor and City Council members can be found at <http://cityofmanassaspark.us/mpgovernment/governing-body.html>.

Stay tuned for updates as this we continue to monitor this potential preservation threat and gain additional information through our interaction with the City of Manassas Park.