



Volume 1, Number 1

Winter 2002

## Richmond's Battlefields:

# Desperate Encounters for the War's Greatest Prize

In May 1862, with its armies hard pressed, and frequently beaten, by Federal forces, and with the largest army in United States history to that point already on Southern soil and meeting ineffective opposition, the government of the Confederate States of America prepared to abandon its capital city, Richmond. Virginia Workers packed up state documents and sent them South the treasury prepared to move its assets. President Jefferson Davis sent his wife and children to North Carolina. But at a meeting with the president and his cabinet, the usually restrained General Robert E. Lee offered an impassioned protest-part plea, part declaration that "Richmond most not be given up."

Thus the die was cast. The Confederates would fight for Richmond that year, and the next and the next. The Federals would never shift the Confederate capital very far from the center of their strategic thinking, and throughout the war a series of gener-



Casey's Redoubt, near the Twin Houses, was overrun by the Confederates in the battle of Seven Pines.

were in the last ditch inspired the Confederate defenders to supreme efforts, while the Federals, seeing their objective almost within reach and understanding all that the capture of Richmond would mean to their cause, fought as well, or better, around Richmond as it did anywhere else in the eastern theater.

### 1862 Campaign

"Previous generations have done good and conscientious work in saving historic ground at Antietam and Shiloh and Gettysburg and elsewhere," RBA President Julie Krick says, "but they did less well at Richmond."

als in blue would grasp at the biggest prize available to them: Richmond. As a result, the fields around the city became a place of carnage. In more than 30 engagements, including enormous battles like Seven Pines, Gaines's Mill, Malvern Hill and Cold Harbor, 100,000 men fell casualty. Survivors spoke of the ferocity of the battles around Richmond. Knowing that they

gigantic Army of the Potomac that had prompted the Confederate politicians to think about leaving the city in 1862. Though, by mid-June, McClellan's army had come within six miles of the Confederate capital, so close that his men could hear the church bells on Sundays, his deliberate pace and habitual caution enabled the Confederates to steal the initiative.

George B. McClellan was the first Federal general to come within striking distance of Richmond. It was his

## Welcome to our First Issue

This is the first issue of the Richmond Battlefields Association newsletter "On Richmond's Battle Line". The directors of the Association hope that you enjoy this premier issue and all future issues. One note of interest is our masthead, each issue will feature a different historic photo from the Richmond battlefields. This issue the photo is the guns of McCarthy's Battery C, 1st PA Light Artillery, positioned behind the earthworks erected after the Battle of Seven Pines.

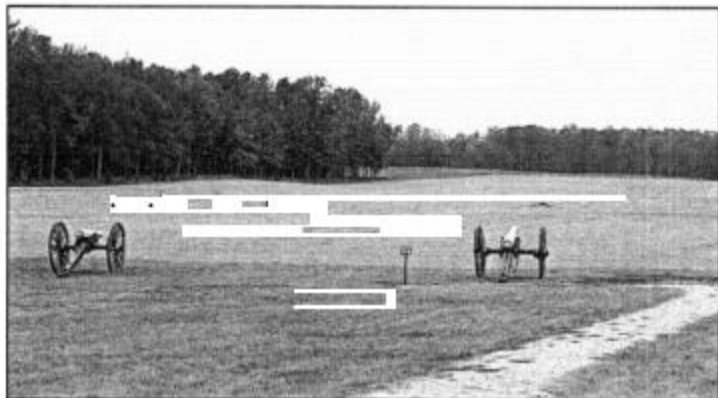
Gen. Joseph E. Johnston attacked at Seven Pines (Fair Oaks) and might have had one a stunning victory had it not been for a forced march over a swollen river by a portion of the Federal army. In two days of fighting, 11,000 Americans were killed, wounded or missing. One of them was Joe Johnston.

Gen. Robert E. Lee replaced Johnston in field command and immediately made plans to retain the initiative. He planned to attack as soon as practical. McClellan did nothing to

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A History of

# Richmond Battlefield Preservation



Without preservation efforts, battlefields such as Malvern Hill (above) would be lost to future generations.

For more than half a century after the Civil War ended, the numerous battlefields around Richmond remained as the armies had left them. Visitors to Seven Pines enjoyed guided tours of the field and took home artifacts as mementoes of their visit. Veterans walked the ground at Cold Harbor and marvelled at the zig-zag fortifications they had built decades before. Those history-laden sites stood in no immediate threat of extinction, yet their preservation became a subject of growing local concern. In the years immediately following World War One, that sentiment swelled into action. Richmonders banded together to identify, mark, and protect some of the more visible spots in the thousands of battlefield acres outside Richmond.

Noted historian and newspaperman Douglas Southall Freeman—still many years shy of receiving his first Pulitzer prize—stood as the most prominent member of what became the Richmond Battlefield Parks Corporation, a spin-off from the Rotary Club of Richmond. The Rotarians erected about five dozen markers on the area battlefields as a method of bringing public attention to the historic sites. By 1928, the corporation moved ahead still more and began to collect parcels of battlefield land. Within four years the group had gathered 572 acres that became, in time, the keystone of the national park at Richmond.

The Richmond Battlefield Parks Corporation turned over its holdings to the Commonwealth of Virginia for conversion into a

state park, in 1932. But the United States War Department also recommended setting aside those acres as the core of a new national park. Nearly 2000 additional acres would round-out the process, making a large and useful battlefield park. Although the Richmond National Battlefield Park was born in 1936, the extra acres were omitted, leaving Richmond as one of the smallest battlefield parks in the country. Meanwhile Seven Pines was destroyed in the 1930's, victim to the sprawl associated with the airport and its associated military base. Most of the serpentine earthworks at Bethesda Church, so admired by returning veterans, were obliterated in the 1980's and 1990's.

In recent years the aspect of affairs has changed. For more than 50 years the park's options to preserve battlefields were limited.

It could receive donated lands, or use donated funds to buy land, but it could not directly purchase threatened battlefield property at any price. In the decade 1991-2001, local and national organizations, e.g. the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities and the Civil War Trust, secured for donation to the park approximately 1000 acres to add to the park-owned 763 acres. Authority for the National Park Service to use federal funds to buy land was created by Congressional legislation in 2000. The same legislation has created a fixed boundary that identifies more than 7000 battlefield acres around Richmond. Those new authorizations provide the framework for future preservation efforts in the Richmond area. Given willing sellers and available funding (sometimes a difficult combination to achieve), Richmond NBP now itself can enter the preservation arena.

Eighty years ago protecting battlefields first became an issue around Richmond. Interstate highways, tanning parlors, and fast food buildings probably were beyond anyone's imagination. Back then it was a matter of drawing attention to the sites. Now it is a contest to protect as much of the surviving battlefields as possible before they inevitably fall prey to the expansion of Virginia's capital city.

# War's Greatest Prize

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interfere with these plans until June 25, 1862 when, having gotten wind of Lee's aggressive intentions, he launched a probe of the Confederate lines west of Seven Pines. This small battle, called Oak Grove or King's School House, was later dubbed "the battle of casualties" because it produced nothing except 1,000 killed, wounded or missing.

The next day, June 26, Lee launched his offensive. It would come to be called the Seven Days Battles. For a week the two armies would bludgeon each other, maneuver and then bludgeon again. At Beaver Dam Creek (Mechanicsville) McClellan's Federals stood firm and punished Lee's attackers. The next day, June 27, at Gaines's Mill, the Federals again held off the Southerners until late in the day Lee was able to put all his men into line and drive forward. This was the bloodiest battle fought in the east to that point, second in slaughter only to Shiloh. Lee lost 9,000 men in an afternoon. The Federals lost 6,000 more.

On June 29 at Savage's Station and again the next day at Glendale (Frayser's Farm), the army's clashed. On July 1, Lee made a final, supreme effort to shatter the Federal defenders at Malvern Hill. The waves of Confederate attackers, flags flying and weapons glinting in the sun, made a grand spectacle as they attacked uphill against the long lines of Federal cannon. At the end of the day, however, Southern valor and marksmanship, both present in abundance, failed to win victory. At Malvern Hill 8,500 more Americans had fallen, Confederates predominating by a 5:3 margin.

## 1864-65

In May 1864 Gen. U.S. Grant again set the Federal army's sights on Richmond. His chief goal was Lee's army, which he hoped to wear down and destroy. Grant understood that by 1864 Lee was forced to interpose his army between Richmond and the invading Northerners. If Richmond fell at this late stage of the war, the Confederacy had no hope. Grant understood this, and he was certain that Lee understood it as well. Grant directed his efforts at Richmond.

Grant drove the Army of the Potomac southward into the Wilderness in early May, through Spotsylvania Court House and past the North Anna River. In the last days of May, he had come again to Cold Harbor, where the armies had fought almost precisely

two years earlier at Gaines's Mill. For almost a week, Grant launched attacks at Lee's prepared lines, and 13,000 of his men fell, at least 7,000 of the Federals on June 3rd alone. Thousands more soldiers fell this same week, from the furious cavalry action at Haw's Shop (May 28, 750 casualties) to the intense infantry fighting at Bethesda Church (May 28-30, 2,200 casualties).

By mid-June, the Federals had advanced so far southward in such strength that

## The Big Battles & Their Casualties

Cold Harbor (May 31-June 12, 1864, Grant's Overland Campaign)	16,000
Gaines's Mill (June 27, 1862, Peninsula Campaign)	15,500
Seven Pines (Fair Oaks) (May 31-June 1, 1862, Peninsula Campaign)	13,756
Malvern Hill (July 1, 1862, Peninsula Campaign)	8,500
Drewry's Bluff (May 12-16, 1864, Bermuda Hundred Campaign)	6,660
Glendale (Frayser's Farm) (June 30, 1862, Peninsula Campaign)	6,500
Seven Days Battles (June 25-July 1, 1862)	35,000

## Lost Battlefields

Seven Pines • Savage's Station • Oak Grove  
Portions of Bethesda Church

they were able to shift their line of advance upon Richmond to the east. They now followed, roughly, the path McClellan had blazed two years earlier. In July and August, the armies fought at Deep Bottom on the James River. Through the summer and into the autumn they continually clashed in Henrico County on the outskirts of Richmond. In late September, at Chaffin's Farm (New Market Heights), 4,400 Northerners and Southerners fell. Many of the former were black troops, who fought superbly. Congress awarded them 14 Medals of Honor for their heroism in this battle.

Because Richmond was the focal point of the Federal war effort in the east, the armies struggled on these and many nearby fields with a ferocity and desperation rarely seen in history, and more than 100,000 men fell as casualties. Yet, history has all but ignored Richmond's battlefields. The field of

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## War's Greatest Prize

Seven Pines, one of the meat battles in American history, has been obliterated by commercial development, as has Savage's Station, Oak Grove and major portions of Beaver Dam Creek and Bethesda Church. The National Park Service protects merely 1,633 of the tens of thousands of acres contested by the armies around Richmond. Some of these thousands of acres have been completely destroyed by development. Forever. Those that survive exist under the imminent threat of obliteration.

The Richmond Battlefields Association seeks to fight for every remaining acre.

Founded early in 2001 by a group of citizens, the RBA has as its goal to preserve and protect the battlefields near Richmond and to educate the public as to their importance. According to Julie Krick, president

of the RBA, this effort to preserve Richmond's battlefields is long overdue. "Previous generations have done good and conscientious work in saving historic ground at Antietam and Shiloh and Gettysburg and elsewhere," she says, "but they did less well at Richmond." As examples, Brian C. Pohanka, a member of the group's board of directors, cites the three really enormous battles fought on the outskirts of the Confederate capital: Seven Pines, Gaines's Mill and Cold Harbor. "Seven Pines," he says, "has been destroyed forever by development and the other two are almost entirely unprotected." Others are gone, as well. "Oak Grove sits under the runways of Richmond's airport," says board member William J. Miller, "Savage's Station lies beneath Interstate 64, and more of Beaver Dam Creek and Bethesda Church disappear every year."

**Yes!** I WANT TO HELP PRESERVE OUR NATION'S HERITAGE, PLEASE SIGN ME UP.

*(Please print)*

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 \$1000 Benefactor     \$500 Patron     \$250 Sustaining Member     \$100 Active Member     \$35 Annual Member  
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