



Seven Pines Issue:

The Battle of Seven Pines

Each issue of "On Richmond's Front Line" is devoted to one of the many battlefields around Virginia's capital city. Thus far the sites profiled have been places in the preservation spotlight—battlefields that are threatened, or that have potential for protection. Seven Pines, on the other hand, is one of the country's classic examples of what the RBA and other organizations fight to avoid: a featureless, paved over, irretrievably lost battlefield. Its destruction is a painful reminder for us to cherish and appreciate the sites we still have.

The rough outline of what happened at Seven Pines on May 31 and June 1, 1862, deserves review. With the Union army only four miles east of Richmond, Confederate commander Joseph E. Johnston determined, with uncharacteristic vigor, to strike his foe before a true siege of the city ensued. Geography assisted Johnston. The Chickahominy River bisected George McClellan's Union army, leaving only two corps on the Richmond side of the river to face all of Johnston's force. The unpredictable river further aided the Confederate cause on the night of May 30, when violent thunderstorms produced flash flooding and converted the sluggish river into a boiling mass of muddy water.

The principal Confederates at Seven Pines would argue for decades about what happened on the morning



The famous "Twin Houses" stood on the south side of the Williamsburg Road, in the path of the Confederate advance.

of the 31st. Johnston's elaborate plan faltered in the face of reality. A chain of mistakes among subordinates—colliding columns, missed assignments, disputes over relative rank, and poor communication—left the Southern army weak and indecisive. When D. H. Hill's Confederate division finally struck along the Williamsburg Road east of Richmond, it hammered the unprepared men of Siles Casey's Fourth Corps division. The subsequent fighting there looked more like real combat than anything seen in Virginia prior to that day. Overwhelming casualties in both divisions introduced everyone involved to the reality of Civil War battle. The 4th North Carolina lost

24 of its 25 officers, with future general Bryan Grimes being the only officer in the regiment to remain unscathed at sunset.

With unflinching determination, Edwin V. Sumner led part of his Second Corps across the roiling Chickahominy. In a classic moment in the Union army's history, his lead regiments crossed the river on a military bridge they could not see, submerged by a few inches beneath the water. Once across, Sedgwick's division protected the northern flank of the Federal position above Fair Oaks Station, on the Richmond and York River Railroad. The timely arrival of Sedgwick's men blunted the last

Continued on page 4

"A Living Wall of Flame"

A great many of the men who fought at Seven Pines had not been in combat before. It should not be surprising, then, to learn that an enormous number of those soldiers sat down and wrote about what they saw and did. The paragraphs below, taken from a letter written one week after the battle by a Georgia officer, remind us of the intensity of the Battle of Seven Pines--a contest all but forgotten today because of the destruction of the battlefield.

....On the evening of the 31st, the enemy...finally took refuge in a strongly entrenched camp situated in a densely wooded thicket near the Chickahominy. Here he made his last stand and with his whole force awaited our attack. Hampton's Brigade, which had just arrived on the ground, after a double quick of nearly three miles, were immediately ordered to charge a battery, which the enemy had opened on us from his stronghold. The Legion and the 14th Georgia formed their line, and supported by the 10th Georgia and the 16th North Carolina, charged at a rapid pace over an intervening marsh and into the woods which concealed the hostile battery. When within forty yards of the object of our search, a most withering and destructive fire from thousands of well aimed guns met our advancing line, and our men, seen falling in every direction, showed with what fatal precision their pieces had been pointed. Our men seeing the enemy behind their entrenchments (which consisted of logs piled one upon another) immediately discontinued the bayonet charge and opened a vigorous fire upon the line of the foe, which still continued to present the appearance of a living wall of flame, from the great number and rapidity of their discharges. Nearly all of our casualties were occasioned from this first fire. After an action of some ten min-

utes, finding that we were opposed to an overwhelmingly superior force, we fell back some fifty yards and reformed. Again the order to charge was given, and, assisted by the 16th North Carolina and 10th Georgia, we again dashed in, but the odds were against us and we fell back to a line of fence some fifty yards in the rear,

recorded in history.

[The author of this account, Robert W. Folsom, became one of the Confederate heroes of the Battle of Cedar Mountain nine weeks later. He was mortally wounded on May 6, 1864, during the fighting in the Wilderness, while serving as colonel



One of the homes on the Seven Pines battlefield in use as a hospital a few days later. Note the fenced enclosure on the left (mostly cropped out) which was a cemetery.

reformed, and the order to charge being repeated, a third time we advanced at double quick into this valley of death. After a tremendous struggle of some fifteen minutes duration, during which our men fought like demons, some of them actually succeeding in forcing their way to within twenty steps of the battery, the order to withdraw was given and we fell back to make way for Gen. Hatton's Tennessee brigade and Gen. Whiting's old brigade....The ground immediately in front of the hostile battery and where the most of the hard fighting was done, was necessarily occupied by the enemy, and we were therefore unavoidably compelled to leave many of our gallant dead and wounded on the field....Mr. McClellan may take Richmond, but it will only be after the most desperate, protracted and bloody contest ever

of the 14th Georgia Infantry. The ground so vividly described by Folsom is north and west of Fair Oaks. Long rows of townhomes occupy the land where Folsom saw the "living wall of flame," and his "valley of death." Now 75-year-old houses stand in abundance in every direction.]

Membership Renewal

Many small organizations rely on a "self service" renewal process, and the RBA is no exception. Check the mailing label on the outside of this newsletter to see if your membership has expired. Your renewal date will be on the label next to your name.

Annual Summer Tour

The RBA will have its annual summer meeting/talk/tour at the Fort Harrison battlefield on Saturday, June 14, 2003. The time will be determined at a later date. There will be a short business meeting, probably at the National Park Service's Old Log Cabin near the entrance to the fort. Dr. Richard J. Sommers, a member of the RBA's advisory board and well known author of the standard book on the fighting at Fort Harrison (*Richmond Redeemed*), will deliver a talk on that subject. After the meeting and the talk, we will tour the fort on foot and venture down the hill onto the property just acquired by the RBA. This should be a great opportunity for our members to see what their dollars helped save. It also will be a good chance to interact with each other and with the board of directors. Please check your calendar for June 14, and make plans to attend if you are able.

Help Spread the Word

The RBA has no budget for advertising, of course. Most of the organization's members hear about the RBA at some Civil War event, such as a battlefield tour. If you belong to a roundtable, or have some other opportunity to tell others about the RBA and the battlefields around Richmond, please spread the word. If you need brochures or old newsletters to hand around, let us know.

Letter from A Member

The following short note with a sizable check arrived at our mailbox in mid-December. It provides a chuckle, but it also illustrates the sort of modest goodwill that is an important part of any preservation organization.

Dear RBA,

I was about to spend this money on one of my kids for Christmas. Then I thought how foolish, when have my kids done anything worthwhile? This year instead of a Christmas present I will tell them I used the money to help buy dirt in Virginia. They will be thrilled. Have a Merry Christmas and keep up the good work in the New Year.

Best Regards....

A Note from the Treasurer

The Richmond Battlefields Association (RBA) has stayed on a sound financial foundation since its inception in 2001. We are a volunteer organization; hence the funds you donate to us are largely used to acquire land. Virtually the only money we do not spend on this pursuit goes to brochures, newsletters, mailing and stationery.

The first big event in our history was the purchase of 9.2 acres at Fort Harrison for just over \$56 thousand. We have settled on this property with the funds you have donated to the RBA and a \$45 thousand no-interest loan from the Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT). By the time you are reading this newsletter, we will have reduced this loan by \$20 thousand leaving a balance of \$25 thousand. It is our hope to someday sell this property to the National Park Service and recycle the money in another land purchase. We currently have some modest funds on deposit in case another opportunity arises in the near future.

I want to thank you for expressing your confidence in the RBA by supporting us in our endeavors to save the threatened battlefields in the Richmond area. Keep those donations coming in 2003! Your continuing support is what will enable us to help save other historically significant sites around Richmond.

On *Richmond's* FRONT LINE

is published for the RBA membership at P.O. Box 13945, Richmond, VA 23225. The web address is: www.saverichmondbattlefields.org. The RBA is chartered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. All contributions are tax deductible. A financial statement is available, upon request, from the Virginia Office of Consumer Affairs.

The Richmond Battlefields
Association Board of
Directors

Julie A. Krick
President
Derek E. Leake
Vice President
David M. West
Treasurer
Patricia Walenista
Secretary
Claude Foster
C. Hobson Goddin
Robert K. Krick
William J. Miller
Don Pierce
Brian Pohanka
Robin Reed

The Battle of Seven Pines

Continued from page 1

strong Confederate attack of the day, launched northwest of the station by Gustavus W. Smith's portion of the army. Army commander Joe Johnston went down with painful wounds just before sunset while observing part of this fight near the station. The fighting on May 31 ended indecisively.

The next day fresh gray-clad infantry tried to consolidate their gains of the previous day by capturing the railroad east of Fair Oaks and north of Seven Pines. The brigades of Mahone and Armistead, among

others, fought a piecemeal affair at the railroad. O. O. Howard's brigade, together with the famous Irishmen of Meagher's brigade, stopped the Confederates in their tracks and ended the battle. General Howard lost his arm in this affair.

By almost any system of reckoning, the action at Seven Pines was a draw. After the June 1 fighting the lines returned to their pre-battle configuration. The Union army had not been evicted from the outskirts of Richmond, nor was it any closer. Two days of fighting had cost the armies approximately 11,000 men killed, wounded, and captured to

reach this indecisive conclusion.

Today there is no monument to their collective sacrifices. Even the battlefield at Franklin, Tennessee, which is famous for its deplorable condition, is well preserved in comparison to Seven Pines. A national cemetery established just after the war, a few terse highway markers, and street signs bearing the names of prominent generals are all that stand to remind travelers of what happened at Seven Pines 141 years ago. There are no historic homes, no earthworks, and no undeveloped vistas.

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

(Please print)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Daytime Phone _____ E-mail Address _____

Type of Membership:

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

Additional Contribution: _____

Please return completed membership form with a check payable to: Richmond Battlefields Association
Mail completed form to: Richmond Battlefields Association, P.O. Box 13945 Richmond, Virginia 23225

Richmond
Battlefields
ASSOCIATION

Richmond Battlefields Association
P.O. Box 13945
Richmond, VA 23225

