

On Richmond's FRONT LINE

Volume 2, Number 2

Spring 2003

Annual Summer Tour

The RBA will have its annual summer **Meeting, Talk and Tour** at the **Fort Harrison battlefield** on Saturday, **June 14, 2003**. The festivities will begin at the Varina Episcopal Church at 2835 Mill Road (corner of Mill Road & Route 5) at 1:00pm. We will start with a talk given by 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*). After the talk, we will head over to the fort for a tour on foot and venture down the hill onto the property just acquired by the RBA. The tour will be led by Dr. Sommers with assistance from local historian Robert E. L. Krick. We recommend that you wear boots or good footwear because of the steep hill and thick underbrush. This should be a great opportunity for our members to see what their dollars helped save. After the tour of the fort, we will head back over to the church for our annual business meeting, which all of our members are invited to stay for. The event should be over by 4:00pm. And like last year, it is **FREE**.

Directions: Varina Episcopal Church at 2835 Mill Road (corner of Mill Road & Route 5) at 1:00pm. **Tour:** Will start around 2:00pm-2:30pm after the talk. From the church turn left on Mill Road until you come to Varina Road and turn left. Turn right on Picnic Road. Turn left on Battlefield Park Road and into the NPS parking lot. (See map)



Update on RBA Property

We continue to make progress toward retiring the debt on the 9.2 acres purchased at Fort Harrison. With another \$10 thousand raised since the last newsletter, the RBA now has only \$15 thousand remaining to pay off the property. Although the membership has been generous (\$30 thousand dollars in six months), we always welcome

more funds to further the work of preservation. Money is our life blood. Please keep the RBA in mind as you ponder your giving for 2003.

The property continues to improve physically. A small group of volunteers has been cleaning up the land, cutting briars and vines, and otherwise sprucing up the battlefield in anticipation of the annual meeting in June.

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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.

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Richmond Threatened in 1864-Again Heavy Fighting at Fussell's Mill

Sometimes it is difficult to sort out the seemingly endless series of battles fought north of the James River in 1864. In addition to First and Second Deep Bottom, the armies clashed at the first and second battles of Darbytown Road, and in the largely forgotten episode known as Second Fair Oaks. To further complicate matters, most of these affairs had multiple names. First Deep Bottom, for example, is frequently called Enroughy's Farm, Strawberry Plains or Gravel Hill Church. This issue of "On Richmond's Front Line" is dedicated to elevating the Second Battle of Deep Bottom, also known as Fussell's Mill, Charles City Road, and White's Tavern, from among the mass of late-1864 battles near Richmond.

By mid-August the armies had been locked in a tedious contest at Petersburg for two months. An initial effort to shake things up in late-July failed at the Crater and First Deep Bottom. Although that Union offensive ended unhappily for Ulysses Grant, he remained committed to the concept of simultaneous operations on both sides of the James River. The best way to ensure success at Petersburg was to stay aggressive near Richmond. A two-front war aided the more powerful Union army by stretching Confederate lines even tauter. With that in mind, Grant arranged another two-headed effort.

The respected and able Winfield S. Hancock led a force consisting of his own Second Corps and most of the Tenth Corps from the Army of the James, across the river on August 14. Hancock's command looked impressive on paper, but events showed that even numerical superiority and experienced leadership were not enough to ensure victory.

After crossing the famous river on

August 14, the lead units of the Tenth Corps fell upon Confederate defenders from General Charles Field's division. In a peculiar episode along the River Road (modern Route 5), New York troops captured several large seacoast howitzers employed by the ordnance-poor Confederate army. This promising start raised Union hopes. But brutal, soggy, August heat made aggressive marching difficult. One experienced New York regiment suffered greatly: "Many



Colonel William C. Oates, famous as a memoirist, commanded an Alabama regiment at Fussell's Mill. He wrote that a monument to the bravery of the Alabamians should be erected there. This crude sketch appeared in his book.

officers as well as non-commissioned officers and privates, succumbed to the heat, and were led or carried to the rear. Some were taken with spasms, and sometimes whole groups fell together...." Meanwhile General Field wisely arranged his line into a compact formation, which forced Hancock to attempt an end-around to the north and entailed still more marching. Sapped of his usual brisk decisiveness, General Hancock failed to achieve anything on August 15. Confederate reinforcements hustled northward from Petersburg to protect Richmond, as General Grant had hoped they would.

The heaviest fighting of the campaign-and some of the stiffest action north of the James at any point during the last ten months of the war-occurred on August 16. With a mixed Confederate force from several different divisions blocking his way, Hancock finally struck the northern end of the Confederate

infantry line near the Darbytown Road. A bold frontal assault by the men of Alfred H. Terry's division shattered the Southerners' line. Newly promoted general Victor J. B. Girardey, commanding a Georgia brigade, fell dead while attempting to rally his whipped troops.

Parts of several Confederate brigades responded to the crisis, drawn to the fracture in their line from all parts of the field. The fresh regiments restored the line after a

tough fight. Hancock, Terry, and the many brigade commanders involved on the Federal side of things could blame the unhappy conclusion on their own failure to exploit the breakthrough, or on their inability to at least occupy the attention of the adjacent Confederate

infantry and prevent it from responding to the breakthrough. Field's men (buoyed by the presence of R. E. Lee on the 16th) felt as if they had saved Richmond, although the true extent of the Federal threat is debatable.

While the infantry struggled, the one Union cavalry division that accompanied Hancock north of the James fought a separate battle to the north, on the Charles City Road. The blue-clad horsemen were supposed to ride north of Richmond and wreck a railroad, though they never came close to achieving that. Another Confederate general-in this case John Chambliss from Virginia-was slain in this action.

Four days of inactivity finished the Second Deep Bottom Campaign. When Hancock returned south of the James on August 20, he counted 2900 casualties in his command, one-quarter of them prisoners of war.

Continued on page 4

An Unwelcome Letter

The following letter pertains directly to the fight at Fussell's Mill, yet it is only one example of thousands of such letters written from all over Virginia during the war. The author served in the 9th Maine Infantry. His rough and hasty penmanship has been partially cleaned up for easier reading, though many misspellings are retained.

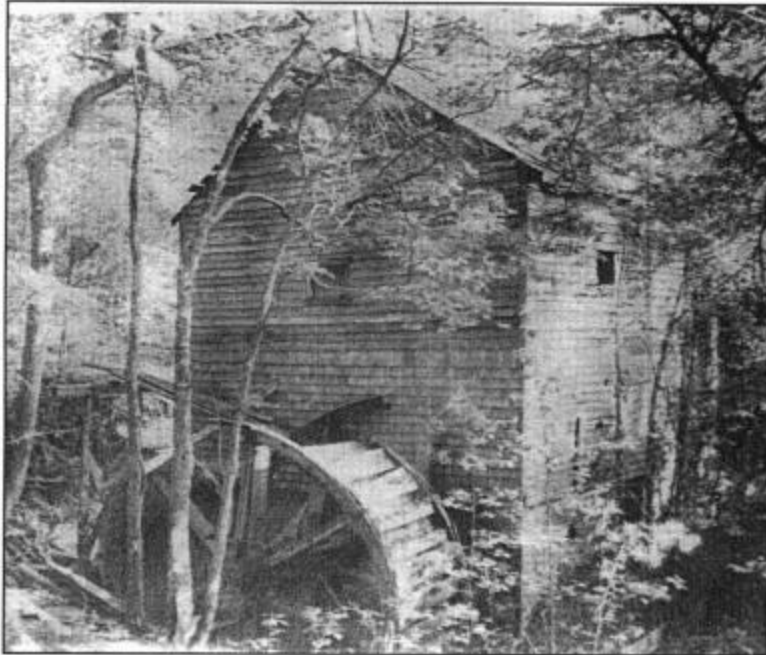
Bermuda Hundreds,
Va.
August 24, 1864

Mrs. Barrows:

Tis with a sad heart that I write you this morning. Oh that I could write something to cheer your sad heart but such cannot be the case. Our Noble Commander was never in better spirits in the morning just before the battle he even expressed a desire to go in a battle he said he thought we could gain a good name if we were engaged. At last the order came for us to advance which we did in splended manner. Our gallant commander taking leaf of our little company. We came nearer the enemy. They open a deadly fire on our thin ranks but still we press forward determined to drive the foe. At last the order comes for us to charge. Cheer after cheer went up. Then the charge was made. Our Captin was in advance of the Regiment some five yards. Shouting and swinging his hat he looked noble. Most all of the Officers were shot and the command fell to Him. He like a hero fought us till we were

surounded and were obliged to retreat which we don in good order. We went off the field singing the good old song Rally round the Flag. The mesengers of death were thining our ranks fast and it pains me to say Our Beloved Captin fell not very far from the rebels works. The face of

make them happy. Rest assured that [the] Company mourn with you they feel your loss and it grieves us very much. Oh when is this war going to come to a close. God speed the day. The town of Sumner have great cause to weep. Her best sons are falling and bleeding every day for



The only known photograph of what is believed to be the original Fussell's Mill. The local pronunciation is Fub-sell.

every man was sad the boys loved him as a father tears droped from those hardy cheeks. He was the pride of the regiment. The Brigade thought very highly of him. But alas he has gon he fills a Soldiers grave.

and got his body but I was carrying the Colors and did not miss him till twas too late. Oh tis sad times. Oh the company all mourn his loss and wish to let you know that they are mourners with you and his friends. I

"we were surounded and were obliged to retreat which we don in good order. We went off the field singing the good old song Rally round the Flag."

He fell and died like a Hero. Oh the Company mourn his loss. He was our Father. He could not do enough for his boys. Twas his study to know how he could please the boys and

fill a soldiers grave so soon. I have been hit twice....Please accept the kind wishes of the Company. I am your friend....

their Country and flag. Captin was the Hero of Sumner. He willingly gave up his life for his Country. He possessed all the good qualities that man could have. He was kind gentle honest and true to his Flag. We was in hopes we could recover his Body but I believe the rebels buried him. They discribed his body to some of the boys. If I had seen him fall I would have gone

cannot but help thinking of those happy days we spent at home. Little did I think so many of my comrads would

