



# On Richmond's FRONT LINE

Volume 5, Number 3

Fall 2006

The long summer gap between issues of "On Richmond's Front Line" accounts for the rambling miscellany that fills most of this edition. The editor usually tries to produce a reasonable mixture of historical items and preservation news relating to the Richmond area. But the large number of accumulated newsy updates leaves little room for any substantial historical topic this time. The first number of the 2007 newsletter undoubtedly will return to the usual format.

## Book Notes

Fresh scholarship and a visiting public are the two most important elements in nurturing Civil War battlefield preservation. Those two ingredients operate in tandem, too. A good book about Malvern Hill, for instance, would inspire people to visit the site. The greater the recognition and visibility of the battlefield, the easier it is to generate momentum and support for preservation. This symbiotic relationship is dependent, in part, on the existence of good books. Richmond's battlefields are far behind the other eastern campaigns of the Civil War in that respect, but the publication of well researched and popular books on Cold Harbor and the Seven Days Campaign in recent years has narrowed the deficit. Here are several new or pending titles that should interest readers and hopefully will play some part in directing national attention toward our favorite subject.

--Michael Hardy's new book *The Battle of Hanover Court House: Turning Point of the Peninsula Campaign, May 27, 1862*

(Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2006) is a study of the fight known to Confederates as Slash Church. Fitz John Porter's Fifth Corps roughly handled Lawrence Branch's brigade of North Carolinians in a fight along the Virginia Central Railroad. The surprisingly fierce little battle produced nearly 1000 casualties. No part of the battlefield is yet preserved, and although veterans of the fight would be surprised to see it identified as the turning point of the entire campaign, they undoubtedly would be gratified to notice the battle examined in book length format.

--Richmond National Battlefield Park, in collaboration with the non-profit cooperating association Eastern National, has published a full color set of six maps that document the troop movements and positions at the Battle of Beaver Dam Creek (also known as Mechanicsville, or Ellerson's Mill). The maps incorporate modern research and excellent graphics to show positions at the regimental and battery level for both armies. The set is only avail-

able at the park's bookstores, or by telephone order. The set retails for \$19.95.

--Perhaps the most common question overheard on area battlefield tours and at area Civil War events pertains to the status of Gordon Rhea's next book in his series on the Overland Campaign. The fourth volume ended on June 3, 1864, in the midst of Cold Harbor. Participants at the RBA's annual meeting and tour in June 2005 interrogated Gordon for a progress report then. In a moment of investigative ardor, the editor of "On Richmond's Front Line" checked with Gordon recently for a further update. Rhea reports that he continues to work steadily and enthusiastically on the next volume, but that he has not finished the manuscript and is unwilling to commit to any exact timetable for that. The next book will cover June 4, 1864, through the crossing of the James River, and on to the early actions around Petersburg. Much of the book will deal with the under-

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appreciated battles of June 15, 16, 17, and 18 east of Petersburg. That vague progress report is offset by this:

available by late-autumn 2007, in time (Rhea says hopefully), for an enormous holiday buying frenzy.

--The University of Tennessee Press has just released *Echoes of*

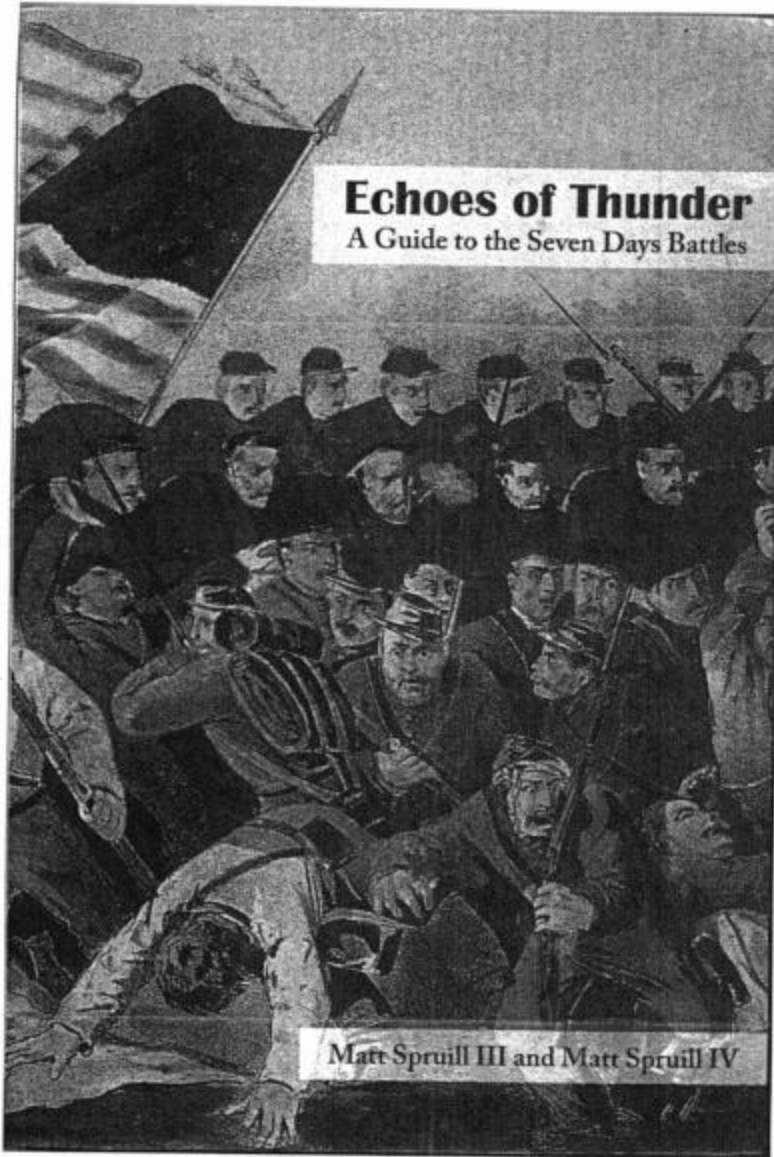
Seven Days battlefields. This can only be helpful in attracting folks to the sites. The authors are Matt Spruill, III and Matt Spruill, IV. Their book is 384 pages long, is softcover, has many maps, and is

reasonably detailed. It is modeled, in part, on the old Army War College guides that have been popular for Gettysburg and other high profile battlefields. Brian Burton, the author of the Seven Days book *Extraordinary Circumstances*, has a similar (but notably different) guidebook at press which will be available soon, too. The Spruill book sells for \$24.95.

--Frank A. O'Reilly, who led the splendid tour at Malvern Hill in June, has publicly said that Malvern Hill will be his next book project. This sorely needed volume probably will be released somewhere near the

battle's sesqui-centennial, at a guess.

--Gordon Rhea does expect to have a new book on the Overland Campaign in print in 2007. Its tentative title is *In the Footsteps of Grant and Lee*, and Louisiana State University Press will publish it. This will be something of a "coffeetable" book, with an emphasis on photographs (both historic and modern). The book is a two man effort. Noted battlefield photographer Chris Heisey will supply the many modern photographs. Heisey's work can be seen on Civil War calendars and in Civil War magazines everywhere for at least the past decade. Rhea wrote the 10,000 words of accompanying text. This book should be



*Thunder: A Guide to the Seven Days Battles*, which is the first modern handbook for use in touring the

Congratulations to our friends at the Civil War Preservation Trust, who recently purchased a small parcel of land at the Fussell's Mill/Second Deep Bottom battlefield. This might have been a nice project for the RBA, but the landowners contacted the CWPT because they had heard of that national organization--and they had not heard of the RBA. The property was listed for public sale almost at once, and CWPT had to make an offer and put the land under contract within 2 or 3 days. Fast action saved that portion of the interesting August 1864 battlefield. There is much more preservation work to do there. The RBA has spoken to landowners at that battlefield, and made site visits in the past, but without results thus far.

## Lands Update

Periodically we issue reminders of the task at hand. At some battlefields, future preservation is focused on plugging holes in a park setting. Around Richmond, the reverse often is true. Far-famed Civil War battles like Cold Harbor and Gaines's Mill, to name the best examples, have less than ten percent of their historic soil protected. Preservation there is a matter of expanding outward from slender holdings rather than filling in missing pieces. The battlefield park at Richmond currently owns about 1930 acres of battlefield land, covering all of the various actions and campaigns around the capital city. Nearly half of that land is at Malvern Hill. There are only about 200 preserved acres at all of the other Seven Days battlefields combined.

Here are a few examples of how things stand. At the Cold Harbor battlefield, the National Park Service presently owns approximately 285 acres, of which nearly 100 are swampland. Congress has authorized the NPS to preserve up to 1415 acres at Cold Harbor. The Gaines's Mill battlefield is in even worse shape from a preservation standpoint. The NPS owns 60 acres there, out of an authorized total of 1182.

That land at Gaines's Mill and Cold Harbor is split into nearly 110 separate, privately owned parcels. Many will never be preserved. Because the two battlefields overlap geographically, a large percentage of those 110 properties contain acreage that is significant to both battlefields, giving any preservation or destruction a two-for-one impact. It is a massive conservation deficit to overcome.

Nor does the land within the NPS "authorized boundary" account for all the significant property. There are more than a few historic parcels associated with those two battles that were not included in the checklist

approved by Congress for the NPS. The historic Gaines farm ("Powhite") falls into that category. So do many of the entrenchments—both Union and Confederate—that survive in the



*Professor Lowe, Union army "aeronaut," making an ascension on the Gaines Farm.*

central portion of the Cold Harbor battlefield.

Gaines's Mill and Cold Harbor stand out as the most ineffectively preserved major battlefield sites in the Richmond area. But there are several smaller sites in even worse condition. They include Haw's Shop, where not a foot of that landmark cavalry battlefield is protected; First Deep Bottom, from July 1864, which also has no form of preservation; and Second Deep Bottom, where the six acres recently preserved by CWPT is the first protection of any portion of that battlefield. The North Anna battlefield also has little preservation. The splendid Hanover County park at Ox Ford is a major achievement, but the heaviest fighting of the battle occurred at Jericho Mill and Henagan's Redoubt. Both sites are in fine condition, but without a shred of protection.

All of these statistics show the level of opportunity around Richmond. The progress in the past 15 years is heartening: nearly 750 acres preserved at Malvern Hill; 130 at Cold Harbor; 15 at Mechanicsville; 140 at Frayser's Farm; 9 at Fort Harrison (by the RBA); and 124 at Totopotomoy

Creek. That incomplete listing is cause for optimism. A second 15 years with similar results can make Richmond's Civil War battlefields one of the great success stories in the history of such endeavors.

The RBA's annual meeting occurred five months ago at the Malvern Hill battlefield. Everything went smoothly, with Frank O'Reilly giving a memorable tour of the Poindexter Farm and the southeastern end of the battlefield. There were plenty of snake skins lying about, but no live reptiles interrupted the proceedings.

The 2007 annual meeting will occur on Saturday, June 10. There are no particulars yet, but the RBA board is working on an agenda. Details will be forthcoming, probably in the next newsletter.

## *On Richmond's* FRONT

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## Land Saved at Glendale / Frayser's Farm

Since the last issue, RBA treasurer David West has mailed a final check covering the balance of the RBA's responsibility for the Sykes Farm purchase at the Frayser's Farm/Glendale battlefield. Our initial payment of \$100,000 went out earlier in the year, the final \$75,000 in October. This collaborative project with the Civil War Preservation Trust went smoothly, and there is abundant reason for self-congratulation. Within the previous 50 years, only the two purchases at

Malvern Hill (one by the old Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites and the other by its successor, the Civil War Preservation Trust) are of equal or greater significance than this 40 acre triumph at Frayser's Farm/Glendale. There have been other preservation achievements around Richmond that protected more acres than this, but the Sykes Farm has a critical mixture of importance, integrity, and threat that add extra weight to each acre saved. See volume 5, #1

of "On Richmond's Front Line" for a refresher on the many layers of amazing combat that occurred there on June 30, 1862.

Access to the site is limited at the moment for several reasons, and the dense, non-historic growth that covers all 40 acres hinders movement and ruins sight lines. But the land is preserved forever, and in time will become a standard stop for anyone touring Richmond's Civil War area battlefields.

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

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