

Sacred Ground:

Preserving America's Civil War Heritage, Part I

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Introduction

Since 1992 a concerted effort has been made to preserve, manage, and interpret America's Civil War historical and cultural resources. This effort has been skillfully guided by the National Park Service's American Battlefield Preservation Program (ABPP). This effort has not been fueled by huge government funds and the promise of new national parks, but rather by careful use of limited funds and very specific technical assistance. In order for this tiny government program to work, the individual state historic preservation offices had to "buy in." In most cases this is what has happened, and the people in the SHPOs (State Historic Preservation Offices) have, in turn, guided statewide Civil War preservation programs. But to absolutely ensure success, the local people—the folks who are doing the real work of preserving America's Civil War sites and battlefields—had to "buy in" too. They are the ones who have to build support among local governments and in the communities with Civil War sites.

As this set of articles will attest, real work is being done at all levels to help Americans preserve this important part of their heritage. This effort has empowered people at the grassroots level to preserve and interpret resources within their communities. In the case of the American Battlefield Protection Program, the liability of a congressional bailout to the tune of \$120 million was turned into a modest, proactive program that has reached out to states, counties, cities, and private nonprofits to help them

find solutions to their problems. This program is limited in scope: perhaps "focused" is a better term. The funds it disburses can only be used for preservation planning and other technical assistance; they cannot be used to purchase land. Yet, without a doubt this program has been highly successful and has served as a catalyst for the preservation of many battlefields, the acquisition by state and local governments and nonprofit community groups of thousands of acres of land, and the creation of preserva-

tion easements covering thousands of additional acres. The Civil War Trust and the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites, two national membership organizations, have also played important roles in the preservation of Civil War battlefields and other sites. In many states this effort has been aided by the use of Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) funds for land acquisition and interpretation.

Because of its tight focus, the ABPP has spurred states to create their own programs to work with the many sites that do not fall within the ABPP's parameters, as well as with those that do. Kentucky, Tennessee, Maryland, Georgia, and Arkansas, to name a few, have very successful in-state programs that reach out to assist groups that cannot utilize ABPP funding.

These in-state efforts work because of the partnerships they create. Consensus-building in communities with Civil War sites has been a key in helping Civil War sites to be seen as community assets to be protected and interpreted, rather than built over in the name of "progress and growth." Partnership-building is an important part of this process. Local nonprofits, local and state governments, and other organizations work together to find ways to protect and preserve these resources. Their efforts will help ensure that the tangible reminders of the Civil War are around not only to help our generation un-

derstand that watershed in American history, but for our children and our grandchildren as well.

The efforts underway to preserve Civil War sites are accompanied by a surge of interest in research and writing on the war. Hundreds of volumes and thousands and thousands of pages are published every year. A number of glossy magazines appear each month. There is no shortage of material for those who want to read about the war and study it from his or her easy chair. Yet, James McPherson tells a story that drives home the value of the tangible resources we seek to preserve. One summer he took a group of his graduate students to Gettysburg. One student, who was writing a dissertation on Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, was so moved when she stood on Little Round Top, she broke down in tears.

Few of us have ever been to a battlefield and not felt that twinge of connection between the present and the past. In order for visitors to make the connection, the resource must retain its character. Nothing can replace the real thing once it is gone. You can read about the battles and the hardships that soldiers on both sides endured for their cause, but nothing brings these things home more powerfully than visiting the places where the battles were fought and following in their footsteps, seeing what they saw.

In Franklin, Tennessee, where Confederate General John Bell Hood

"punished" his army for what he thought had been a poor performance in an earlier engagement, the battlefield has been fragmented by development. Only scattered bits and pieces are preserved. When interpreters relate the tragic and brutal story of this battle, they explain that Confederate General Patrick Cleburne was killed down by the Pizza Hut. There are all too many examples like this that could be cited.

Historical and cultural resources can be polluted and destroyed, just as natural wonders, and often by the same forces of development. Both are fragile, non-renewable parts of our legacy from the past and our legacy to the future. Protecting and preserving battlefields and Civil War sites is part of the effort to build a better future for all.

The articles published in this and the next issue of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM provide overviews of work in progress across the country at various levels. Tanya Gossett discusses the work of the ABPP, the key national agency involved. For those not familiar with the program, her essay is a useful introduction to the work of an agency which is pioneering how the new, smaller federal government works by partnering with state and local agencies and organizations.

Kentucky has been one of the more successful states in developing these partnerships and preserving and interpreting its rich Civil War re-

sources. At the beginning of the decade, small state parks at Columbus and Perryville were the sum of Civil War preservation and interpretation in the state. Today, more than twenty sites are being protected and actively interpreted, nearly all by community groups. Joseph Brent discusses how Kentucky has identified and protected its Civil War heritage by working with local groups and using a variety of existing programs effectively.

Many cultural resources are linear. Chris Calkins provides an account of the development of a very innovative interpretation program for one such resource—the route followed by Robert E. Lee from Petersburg to Appomattox Court House. Using ISTEA funds and innovative technology, "Lee's Retreat" brought a number of local governments together.

In the next issue of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM the discussion will continue. The western theater of the Civil War has begun to attract increasing attention from both scholars and tourists. One problem with understanding the western theater and promoting it for visitors is its tremendous scale—from southern Illinois to Louisiana. Working through their respective lieutenant governors' offices, Sharon Calcote organized a seven-state task force which produced a common promotional brochure and map for the sites related to the western theater.

In addition to prominent battles and campaigns, the Civil War was an ever-present part of life for many communities along the Ohio River. Steve Thompson will discuss how the states of Illinois and Kentucky are working together to identify the many locally important, but often neglected, sites in the counties that border the Ohio. Linking these sites together makes their significance more apparent and makes publicizing them easier.

An integral part of the preservation of sites is their interpretation—developing and presenting their story. William Mulligan presents two cases, one expanding the interpretation offered at an existing state park and the other developing two interpretive driving tours for an area without an

existing focal point for an interpretive program.

One of the key issues in battlefield preservation is protection from deterioration due to economic development around them. Terry Winschel discusses the situation in Mississippi, a state with a very large number of sites whose importance is coming to be recognized and where economic development pressures have been increasing.

We hope that this and the forthcoming issue of *THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM* will make more people aware of the work being done across the country to preserve our Civil War heritage, as well as encourage more people to join this important effort.

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Articles forthcoming in Part 2 (Volume 15, Number 3, September 1998):

Thousand-Mile Front: Civil War in the Lower Mississippi Valley
Sharon A. Calcote, Louisiana Office of Tourism Development

Bilateral Resource Management and Development: The Illinois-Kentucky Civil War Heritage Trail
Stephen A. Thompson, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

Interpretation and Preservation of Civil War Sites: Two Case Studies from West Kentucky
William H. Mulligan, Jr., Murray State University

Preserving Mississippi's Civil War Heritage
Terrence J. Winschel, Vicksburg National Military Park