

Falling Waters Battlefield

By Gary Gimbel

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Anyone who is familiar with the Battle of Falling Waters knows that with the exception of a parcel of land at the center, this battlefield has already been heavily developed. However, even some Civil War buffs may not know exactly the engagement I am referring to.

Falling Waters was the first Civil War engagement in the Shenandoah Valley, fought on July 2, 1861, approximately five miles south of the Potomac River in what is now West Virginia. The majority of the fighting was around the Porterfield House, a large log structure built by the grandfather of the Alamo's Davy Crockett.

This battle, actually little more than a skirmish by later standards, was quickly overshadowed by the Battle of Manassas (Bull Run) less than three weeks later.

Although generally known, both now and during the war, as Falling Waters, this little battle was given a number of names, which has helped to keep it obscure. Of course the use of different conventions by the North and South to name battles is a lot of the issue.

For example the Confederate rank and file frequently called the battle "Hainesville" after the last village they passed through as they marched toward the engagement. The Harper's Weekly correspondent called it "Hoke's Run," referring to the first water Federal troops encountered after the fight as they pursued the withdrawing Confederates.

Falling Waters, a tiny hamlet not far north of the site and containing a small waterfall, conveniently met both naming criteria.

In 1993 when the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission was prioritizing sites according to their historic significance and state of preservation, they chose to use the name Hoke's Run in order to differentiate it from the 1863 Battle of Falling Waters Road fought in Washington County, Maryland. That battle had no alternate name to use.

In 2008 and 2009 the Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT) included Falling Waters in their annual report "History Under Siege" which names the most endangered Civil War battlefields.

While being included on the list is somewhat of a dubious honor, this much-needed attention has definitely helped with the local preservation efforts. The CWPT recognizes the battlefield as Hoke's Run on the list of "Fifteen Additional at Risk Sites."

Unlike some sites that are just recently being threatened, Falling Waters has been facing various waves of development for a long time. Although there has been a lot of recent development, much of the site had already been disturbed.

Like many battlefields in the Shenandoah Valley, such as Cedar Creek, New Market, and Fisher's Hill, the construction of Interstate 81 cut right through the site.

Then the highway brought commercial growth in the form of motels, convenience stores and gas stations. So Falling Waters had already seen development 50 years ago. A large truck stop that stood next to I-81 for many years just recently was replaced by a Wal-Mart.

Now a thriving residential community has sprung up on the site of the first engagement in the Shenandoah Valley.

Although from a preservation perspective that may sound grim, a lot of progress has been made at Falling Waters. Last year Stumpy's Hollow, where JEB Stuart and the 1st Virginia Cavalry surprised and captured most of Co. I, 15th Pennsylvania Infantry, was donated to the Falling Waters Battlefield Association (FWBA).

In addition, two West Virginia Civil War Trails interpretive signs have been placed on the site and two more are scheduled to be installed in March 2010. Fortunately 14 acres of farmland still surround the Porterfield House at the core of the battlefield, at least for now.

Although I am specifically addressing Falling Waters, there are a number of battlefields that, except for a postage stamp-sized piece of land, have virtually ceased to exist. Yellow Tavern in Richmond, Salem Church outside Fredericksburg and Chantilly (Ox Hill) quickly come to mind. Although there has been some recent preservation at Chantilly, those sites were "lost" a long time ago.

Just because those sites have been developed does not mean we should ignore them. Development does not erase what happened there. Even though a site may be developed, it can still be interpreted. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines interpret as "to explain or tell the meaning of," which is exactly what needs to happen at these heavily developed sites.

This brings me to the question I want to address. Why should we preserve, or even interpret, a heavily developed battlefield?

On occasion I am asked: why spend any effort on a site that is mostly "gone"? Of course a Civil War buff knows the answer, but actually that is a very reasonable question. There are a number of good reasons, the first being education.

Many times when our FWBA booth is set up at events I hear a member of the public say something to the effect of, "I've lived here all my life and I didn't know a battle was fought here."

After we take a few minutes to explain the battle and use modern landmarks to describe exactly where it was fought, we often hear something like, "Wow, we have a battlefield!" You can clearly hear the pride in their voice.

What changed? The battlefield has been there for almost 150 years. What changed is they learned something they did not previously know.

This is the best example I can give of the importance of education. If the public is not aware of a battlefield it certainly will not be preserved. Interpretation is the best way to create awareness.

Another good reason to interpret a site is the often overused term "heritage tourism." Proximity to I-81 has insured the Falling Waters area will be in demand, but it also makes it a prime candidate for heritage tourism.

Believe it or not, even a small site like Falling Waters in its current state attracts tourism. I am frequently contacted by someone who will be traveling through the area and would like

to swing by the Falling Waters Battlefield. Heritage tourism is very real and does bring money into the local economy.

With a small site travelers can stop to read the interpretive markers and then grab a meal or fill up their vehicle before heading on their way. In addition local government does not have to provide additional schools, roads, utilities or other infra-structure to support this influx of revenue.

Of course any battlefield preservation implies green space, a small amount of grass on which a couple of interpretive signs can sit. Even this small amount of landscaping would provide a welcome respite in an area of neon signs and commercial development.

The FWBA has approached local garden clubs to help us develop landscaping plans using native, low maintenance and drought- resistant vegetation for our various patches of land.

Remembering the battlefield also honors the soldiers who fought there. Regardless of which side they fought for, these men were all American soldiers and deserve to be remembered.

Whether on the Porterfield farm or later in a hospital or prison camp some of them gave their “last full measure of devotion.” If we allow where they fought and died to be forgotten, we are neglecting their memory as well. Interpretation of the battlefield honors these soldiers.

The last reason to interpret a battlefield that is already heavily developed may sound a little crazy, but is not as far-fetched as it may seem. At some point in the future parts of a developed battlefield could be reclaimed.

Reclaiming a battlefield is not as good as preserving it in the first place, but reclamation does exactly what it says. Part of the battlefield is restored.

Recently there have been a number of unlikely reclamations. Probably the best known example is the removal of the Pizza Hut at Franklin, Tenn. A car dealership was removed at Gettysburg. Both of these projects, and there are others, required both herculean efforts and wheelbarrows full of money by the groups involved, but they prove it is possible to reclaim sacred ground.

However, if a battlefield is allowed to be “forgotten” just because it has been developed, there will be no chance for reclamation.

These are all good reasons to preserve and interpret any battlefield, much less one that has been heavily developed. By preserving what we can, and interpreting what we can't, we are hoping to help the local economy and improve the appearance of where we live.

The interpretation of a heavily developed battlefield like Falling Waters educates the current generation while at the same time honoring the endeavors of the past generation.

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