

Effectively Incorporation Battlefield Preservation into County and City Comprehensive Plans

From 1989 until 2011, I served as Planning Director in Clarke County, one of Virginia's most proudly rural counties with less than 15,000 people on 175 square miles. Located between Loudoun and Frederick Counties, on the west side of Blue Ridge, and at the north end of Virginia's portion of the Shenandoah Valley, Clarke County has actively protected its agricultural and forested character for more than 30 years. This commitment stems from a history of European settlement since the 1740s, a settlement pattern unique to the Shenandoah Valley with direct family connections to the landed gentry of Tidewater Virginia, and an independent streak expressed in Clarke's separation from Frederick County in 1836.

In 1997, Clarence Geier, Joseph Whitehorne, and Ann McCleary of James Madison University prepared the National Register Nomination for the Cool Spring Battlefield, Clarke County's most significant Civil War event. Their nomination documents the events of July 16-20, 1864. My remarks describing this battle rely on their work. The battlefield is on both sides of the Shenandoah River in the northeast corner of Clarke County. It is located north of Route

7, two miles west of the crest of the Blue Ridge, and five miles east of Berryville, the largest town in Clarke County.

The conflict at Cool Spring focused on a three mile stretch of the Shenandoah River, located primarily on the lands of two plantations. The farm on the west bank, known as Cool Spring, was owned by the locally prominent farmer Frances McCormick, whose family owned multiple properties in this portion of the County. Cool Spring house is an early 19th century stone structure. For the past 60 years the house and its remaining 1200 acres have been the setting for Holy Cross Abbey, a home about a dozen Cistercian monks.

The lands on the east bank were owned by Judge Richard Parker, whose plantation, called The Retreat, included a pair of low islands, jointly referenced as Parkers Island. These islands lay midway in the flow of the river, with Parkers Hole lying east of the north end of the northern most island. This river feature would prove tragically deadly for Union forces. [WHO WAS JUDGE PARKER?] Judge Parker sat at the 1859 trial of John Brown. The irony of the insurrection John Brown sought, coming to his judge's front door

almost five years after the trial should be remembered. The Retreat house was initially constructed in 1799 with many high-style federal features and is currently privately owned. The adjoining 200 acres along the river was a golf course for 60 years until it was acquired in 2012 by the Civil War Trust. The Trust transferred the property to Shenandoah University of Winchester, VA for permanent stewardship. The University is allowing the property to return to a natural state and intends to use it for environmental studies.

The 4,064 acre area included within the Cool Spring Battlefield was the site of an event of historic significance at both a local and national level. The battle was fought on July 18, 1864. Its 822 casualties mark it as the most significant Civil War engagement to take place in Clarke County.

This battle is both a beginning and an end to historically significant events associated with the Civil War in 1864. On one hand, the Battle of Cool Spring is the end point in confederate general Jubal Early's daring and politically devastating (for the Union) raid against Washington D.C., in July 1864. From this point to its demise in March 1865, Early's Army of the Valley would be principally active

within the confines of the Shenandoah Valley. Union forces commanded by General Philip Sheridan inflicted a pivotal defeat on Early's Army on September 19, 1864 at the Battle of Third Winchester, and with the final rout of Early one month later on October 19, at the Battle of Cedar Creek.

In addition to the recognition of the historic value of this property, the County has led the efforts to place an additional 42,751 acres, almost 67 square miles, in four rural national register historic districts. In addition, almost 300 acres are in four urban historic districts and over 30 properties are individually listed. These individual listings include two National Historic Landmarks: Greenway Court, the site of the 1747 home of Thomas Lord Fairfax, Proprietor of the Northern Neck, the royal grant of all of Virginia north of the Rappahannock. At Greenway Court today, you can stand in Lord Fairfax's 1764 limestone Land Office, where the tenants of his five million acre estate paid their rents. His money chest is in the museum of the county historical association. The second landmark is Saratoga, the 1782 limestone home of Revolutionary War general Daniel Morgan.

All of this work has resulted in almost 40% of Clarke County's 175 square miles being placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Does this make Clarke County the most historic county in Virginia? I'm sure our friends in James City County, York County, and Albemarle County would not concur. But, I would assert that this percentage makes Clarke the Virginia county that most strongly embraces its history. There is little concern that documenting history will hurt property values or be bad for business: negative perceptions about the National Register that constantly challenge the preservation community.

In addition to documenting its history, the county has been single minded in maintaining its rural character. Since 1980, Clarke has significantly limited the number of dwellings than can be divided off of rural properties. In fact, the calculation is a sliding scale so that the larger your property the fewer dwelling unit rights you control. Initially there was great hesitation about embracing development limits. But, the community came to understand that preserving its social system had value and that limiting supply of rural housing

meant the price per unit would remain strong. A second and more recent effort in the past 10 years to preserve the character of the county is a very active conservation easement program. Almost 25% of the county is under state or local easements that further preclude development.

These man-made controls and Clarke's natural limit on rural septic systems, with clay soils and common rock outcrops, has preserved the county's rural character allowing its historic features, such as the Cool Spring Battlefield, to remain plainly evident.

How has Clarke effectively incorporated Battlefield Preservation into its Comprehensive Plan: by understanding what it values and just saying no to development and by saying yes to documenting its history. There are no complex policies or formulas. There just is a relatively small community that has achieved a consensus that is summarized by the local historical association catch phrase: 'our land is our legacy'. With this concept as its theme, the county has simply done what was needed to be done.

I have been in my position as Planning Director in Fredericksburg only a little more than a year and have become increasingly familiar with the character of this community. Currently, the City is in the midst of updating and rewriting the City's Comprehensive Plan. The Civil War events in Fredericksburg need no documentation from me as they are well known chapters of the larger story. In the midst of an energetic city, the 120 acres of federally owned battlefield land, dedicated by Calvin Coolidge, as well as numerous signage displays have attempted to preserve and interpret the core areas of the Civil War events. City Council is very aware of the historic value of these areas and works to keep development from dominating them. However, the city wants to be known for more than just the events of 150 years ago. The area was long occupied by Native Americans and first settled by Europeans in 1671. The City was founded in 1728 and became a regionally significant port in the 18th century and industrial center in the 19th century. Using all of its history to define its character is seen as the challenge for the city today. How we respond to this challenge is the next installment.