

VIRGINIA'S EARLY BATTLEFIELD MARKERS

"Virginia roads improved for automobile touring... Richmond a centre of good roads to many places of great historic interest... with the improvement of Virginia roads, Richmond is destined to become an important tourist gateway between the North and the South."

— New York Times, 10/15/1915

Virginia's Civil War battlefields were destined to become a major attraction for the growing automobile touring movement thanks to the efforts of a group of civic-minded citizens following WWI. It was about this time that two Richmond Rotary Club members, Douglas Southall Freeman and J. Ambler Johnston, began regular Sunday outings to "tramp around the forlorn and desolate fields" of Richmond's Civil War

battlegrounds. Johnston agreed to show Freeman what he knew about the 1864 battlegrounds and Freeman in turn would share his knowledge of the 1862 action. Subsequently, Freeman and Johnston persuaded their fellow Rotarians to explore the area battlegrounds. Enlisting the aid of dozens of Confederate veterans from the Soldiers' Home, a caravan of twenty-one automobiles set out for Hanover and

Henrico Counties on Labor Day 1921. Some of the roads were impassable and as Johnston described it on a previous "trip from Mechanicsville to Ellerson's Mill there was a mudhole about 250 feet long in the road so deep that a detour into a field had to be made around it, and someone had put up a pole in the mudhole with a sign reading 'No fishin aloud.'" The group wisely brought along a tow truck.

In March 1924, after an appeal by Freeman, the Richmond Rotary Club enthusiastically adopted a plan to identify and mark these historic sites and appointed

a committee to oversee the project. They straightaway collected \$2,000 from the members. In April the effort was enlarged by incorporation of the Battlefield Markers Association, whose purpose was to "identify points of interest on various battlefields of Virginia and to place thereon suitable markers". The board of trustees consisted of representatives from the City of Richmond, Hanover and Henrico Counties, memorial

societies, Confederate veterans groups, merchants associations, professional groups, and other civic organizations. The officers were all Rotarians, including the president, E. Tucker Harrison. The Rotary Club raised \$5,000 for the endeavor and the Richmond City Council provided an additional \$5,000.



A very early view of the historic Watt House at Gaines's Mill, looking west. A newly placed Freeman marker is visible on the right.

Over the next three years, the association erected 59 roadside markers in the Richmond area. The markers, designed to be read from an automobile, consist of cast iron inscription tablets (2'3" x 3'5") with 2" headings and 1" text. The iron plate is set at an angle on a large concrete capstone (4' x 3') which rest on a granite base approximately 4 feet high. Employees of the Richmond Stove Works donated their time to manufacture the cast iron plates. The Economy Concrete Company provided the capstones, and Boscobel Quarries donated the rough granite. The association spent countless hours researching locations, negotiating with landowners, verifying

names and dates, and supervising erection of the markers. According to Johnston, "Not a single person has failed to give permission for the erection of a marker on their land, and not a person has charged the Association a dollar for any services rendered." The association did, however, pay truckers to haul the stone and stonemasons to construct the bases. Freeman wrote most of the marker text as later recounted by Johnston, "Doug furnished the brains, the rest of us did the foot work." Markers were placed for the Seven Pines Battlefield, Seven Day's Battles, Stuart's Ride Around McClellan, Cold Harbor Campaign, Drewry's Bluff, Chaffin's Bluff, and the Defensive Fortifications encircling Richmond. These "Freeman Markers", as they are commonly called, were the first highway markers in Virginia.

An invitation to dedicate the battlefield markers was extended to President Coolidge by Freeman explaining, "We believe if you would come to Richmond and deliver this address it would have a profound effect on feeling, north and south and would strengthen all the ties that have been forged in half a century." It can be assumed that the President politely declined. Nonetheless, on November 6, 1925 a ceremony was held at the Walnut Grove Baptist Church in Hanover County for the "Dedication of Markers Commemorating the Seven Days' Campaign of 1862". The invocation was given by 87-year old Rev. Giles B. Cooke, a former major on General Lee's staff. Both E. Tucker Harrison and Douglas S. Freeman spoke. Dr. John F. Bright, Mayor of Richmond presented the markers to Virginia Governor E. Lee Trinkle, who in turn, gave custody of them to Hanover and Henrico Counties. Robert E. Lee's grandson, Dr. George Bolling Lee, unveiled the marker commemorating the meeting of Lee and Jackson at Walnut Grove Church on June 17, 1862.

The success of the Richmond association inspired others in the state to organize. In September of 1925, the Battlefield Markers Association (Western Division) was formed by C.B. Linney of Charlottesville and R.M. Colvin of Harrisonburg. Its purpose was "to raise funds for the purchase of bronze tablets with appropriate historic inscriptions, to be placed on the bases erected by the Daughters of the Confederacy, D.A.R., and Memorial Association on

the principal battlefields of Virginia." With Hollis Rinehart as president, they erected 25 markers from Bull Run to Appomattox and throughout the Shenandoah Valley. These markers, though similar in design to those in Richmond, are slightly larger and consist of heavy bronze tablets atop white granite block bases. The tops of these monuments also incline toward the reader. On the 64th anniversary of the Battle of Chancellorsville (05/03/1927), Douglas S. Freeman was the keynote speaker at the dedication of five such markers: Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Salem Church, Wilderness, and Spotsylvania. The 2,000 spectators "enjoyed ham, chicken, and pies supplied by the ladies of Spotsylvania County" while being regaled by the musical offerings of the Stonewall Brigade Band and a children's choral group.

Back in Richmond, the mission "to acquire historic sites for preservation and restoration" began in earnest with the 1927 purchase of Fort Harrison at public auction for \$18,000. The effort to preserve Civil War sites advanced with the creation of the Richmond Battlefield Parks Corporation, a "non-profit organization to preserve and make accessible the battlefields around Richmond". Under the leadership of T.M. Carrington, they solicited funds to purchase land and resurrected an earlier idea to connect these sites with a battlefield road. Hanover, Henrico and Chesterfield Counties donated their 1929 annual proceeds from a gasoline tax toward construction of a battlefield route. In 1930 the Richmond Battlefield Parks Corporation published an automobile tour guide. That same year they constructed a log cabin at Fort Harrison to use as their headquarters. The National Park Service, after recent renovation, has reopened the log cabin as a Visitor Center.

In 1932, the Richmond Battlefield Parks Corporation donated their acquired 720 acres of land to the Commonwealth of Virginia to establish the first state park — Richmond Battlefield State Park. The following year, the Highway Department designated the battlefield tour route, State Route 156 (still in use today). On July 14, 1944, the accomplishments of these pioneering battlefield preservationists culminated in the establishment of the Richmond National Battlefield Park.

What of those early battlefield markers? One of the Seven Pines markers was destroyed during construction of the Richmond Army Air Base during WWII. It was later replaced, only to fall victim to vandalism and theft decades later. A 1956 report by the Richmond Civil War Round Table states that two damaged markers were replaced by City of Richmond and publicly unveiled. Elsewhere, the Chancellorsville plate was stolen in the 1970s and as recently as 2006, the Port Republic marker was destroyed by a tractor trailer. Several of the markers have been moved from their original locations due to road projects and development.

Winston Churchill, a keen student of American history, spent most of October 1929 touring Virginia's Civil War battlefields. He later wrote of the Richmond area battlefields, "It was with deep interest that I followed these memorable operations. No one can understand what happened merely through reading

books and studying maps. You must see the ground; you must cover the distances in person; you must measure the rivers, and see what the swamps were really like."

When the Battlefield Markers Association dedicated the roadside marker at Walnut Grove Church in 1929, they could little have imagined the suburban scene today. The once quiet crossroads, where Generals Hill, Jackson, and Lee met to plan the attack at Gaines' Mill, now sees more than 11,000 cars each day. The work of those early 20th century preservationists continues through the efforts of the Richmond Battlefields Association. Thanks to the generosity and dedication of the members, future generations will also one day "see the ground" and "cover the distances in person" when studying our great national struggle.❖

Please join us at this critical time to help save America's endangered Civil War battlefields!

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

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