

# Battle Over Harpers Ferry Development

By Hunter Barrat

Harpers Ferry is no stranger to enemy forces fighting over control of its landscape. During the Civil War, Union and Confederate troops both wanted it, and the town changed hands eight times between 1861 and 1865. Now, 142 years later, another battle is raging, this time between the Harpers Ferry National Historic Park and developers, over 411 acres of land adjacent to the park.

The developers claim their "Old Standard" project, which would include more than two million square feet of commercial space, would clean up an area blighted by past industrial development and bring much needed jobs and tax revenue to the area. The park insists that the project would compromise the views from the battlefield's historic lands, which would in turn negatively impact the economic benefits from tourism that the area now enjoys. According to a National Park Service report, a 1996 economic impact analysis indicated total sales benefits in the area by visitors to the park and park operations were about \$32.7 million, which the park estimates

has likely increased over the past 11 years.

In September 2004, its boundaries were expanded by 1,240 acres as a result of the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Revision Act. According to Donald Campbell, park superintendent, the National Park Service tried to buy this old quarry and the surrounding area then. In 1862 it was the site of a Stonewall Jackson-ordered flanking maneuver around Union troops on Bolivar Heights. "The previous owners were in bankruptcy proceedings, so we couldn't purchase it at that time," Campbell said. Consequently, Harpers Ferry park land surrounds this area on three sides.

Developers Gene Capriotti, Herb Jonkers, and Jim Gibson, who acquired the land in 2003, have proposed a \$200-million development on the parcel that would include 2.3 million square feet of commercial space. Last August, they laid water and sewer pipes to the site for almost 2,000 feet across park lands. Part of the development would be a 60,000 square-foot signature office building. The land has a

lake, resulting from the quarry operation, that is about a mile long, and the plan proposes a 150-room hotel and a 22,500 square-foot conference center along the lake, as well as other office buildings along the lake and the Shenandoah River. The developers first proposed to have Charles Town annex that property as well as two other parcels, Buglers Rest and Allstadt's Corner, for a total of 638 acres. This failed when the Charles Town City Council rejected the annexation bid on April 2. The developers dropped the smaller parcels and are now requesting that the Jefferson County Commission rezone the quarry area, 411 acres, from high-density residential and rural status to commercial.

Campbell has spoken against the development at the many planning, annexation, and zoning hearings held to consider the project. "It is out of character with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century landscape of Harpers Ferry and incompatible with the surroundings. If it is developed, when visitors stand on the ridge and walk along the trails, trying to understand the battle and the history of our nation, they will instead see office buildings and parking lots," he said. Campbell described the parcel as about 75 percent pristine Civil War battlefield, in the sense that the battle was fought there, and 25 percent of it, where the old quarry was, as brownfield.

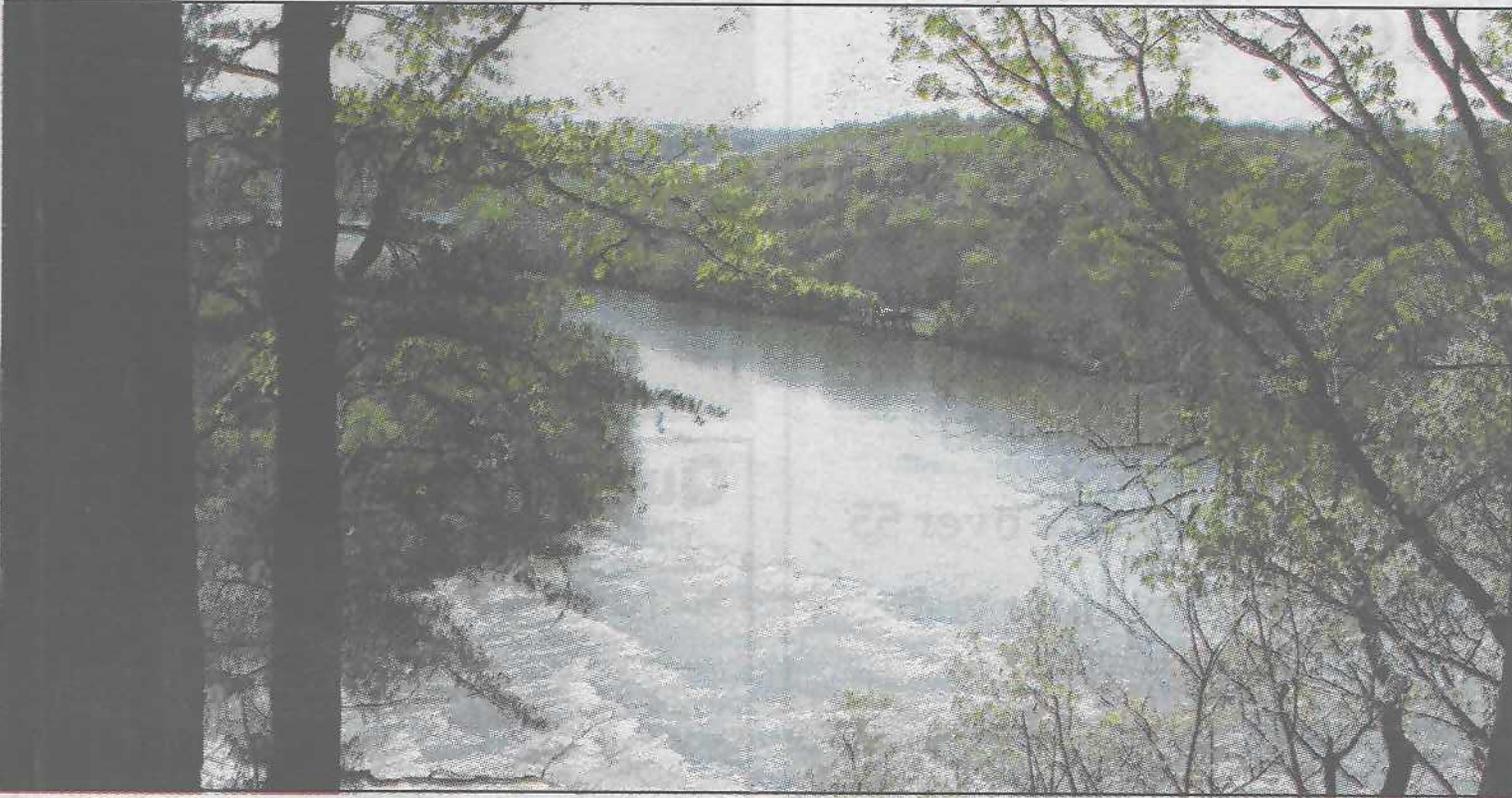


Green Areas: Proposed Commercial/Residential Developments Within Harpers Ferry National Historical Park; Red areas: existing park. Source: National Park Service

"The integrity of that area is more compromised," he said.

For their part, the developers maintain that the area, with piles of burnt limestone and ruined buildings, as well as sections that once were part of the county landfill, cannot be described as pristine battlefields and should never have been zoned as rural.

*Location of Old Standard development, far side of Shenandoah River. Photo provided by National Park Service*



According to Michael Cassell, their lawyer, one side of the lake is the old quarry site, the other side is the former county dump, which was capped in the early 1980s. "Nothing will grow in this soil—it is too high in ph," he said. No government entity has made a move to clean up this area, and the developers have been involved in voluntary remediation with the Department of Environmental Protection, he said. "The battlefield described in the 1860s is not how the area looks now. Our position is that our remediation will enhance the properties around it," Cassell said.

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park has been supported in its fight by the mayors of Bolivar and Harpers Ferry as well as the National Parks Conservation Association, Civil War Preservation Trust, and National Trust for Historic Preservation.

"Rezoning Old Standard will bring massive traffic congestion and two million square feet of commercial development—roughly equivalent to 13 1/2 super Wal-Marts—to the middle of the Harpers Ferry battlefield, an already-thriving tourist destination that generates \$37

million annually for the state and local economy," said Nell Ziehl, field representative in the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Southern Field Office, "Why sacrifice the successful tourism industry for an unknown benefit? There are better places for new commercial development."

The developers say their project would create thousands of well-paying jobs and generate about \$4.4 million dollars in real estate and hotel tax revenue. Currently, they do not have specific plans on what entity would occupy their office space or what types of jobs would be generated there, but they say that they want to provide employment opportunities for local residents so they do not have to commute to the Washington and Baltimore areas. Though it has not taken a position on the project, the Jefferson County

Development Authority agrees that the county needs more office space. The developers also say that they plan to set aside 20 acres and about 1.4 miles along the Shenandoah River as a park-like setting that would be open to the public, with hiking trails, boat ramps, and restrooms.

The Jefferson County Commission is continuing to debate the plans, and another public hearing is set for some time around June 12. Commented Jefferson County Commissioner Jim Surkamp, "I heard comments at the Charles Town hearing on annexation on this property from both the NPS and the developers. There are clear differences in how the property is portrayed that make the public hearing scheduled in the first Tuesday in June before the County Planning Commission essential."

### A Short History Of Harpers Ferry

Congress created Harpers Ferry National Historical Park in 1944 as a "national public memorial commemorating historical events at or near Harpers Ferry" (16 U.S.C. 450-bb).

Harpers Ferry's location, at the convergence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, has made it a spot prized by both commercial interests and seekers of natural beauty since its early days. The establishment of the United States Armory and Arsenal in 1799 turned Harpers Ferry into an industrial center. Between 1801 and 1861 the armory produced hundreds of thousands of muskets, rifles, and pistols in an infrastructure of workshops known collectively as the U.S. Musket Factory that employed as many as 400 workers at its peak. A tannery and iron foundry thrived there; the rivers produced power for a sawmill, flour mill, and two cotton mills; plentiful lumber from the mountains provided charcoal and fuel for industry; and shale was the source of high-quality building material. By the mid-1830s the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, the Winchester & Potomac Railroad, and the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal all served the area, transporting goods and people in a period of economic and industrial growth that lasted until the Civil War.

Thomas Jefferson visited Harpers Ferry in 1783, and described it thus in 1785: "The

passage of the Patowmac through the Blue Ridge is perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in Nature. You stand on a very high point of land. On your right comes up the Shenandoah, having ranged along the foot of the mountain a hundred miles to seek a vent. On your left approaches the Patowmac in quest of a passage also. In the moment of their junction they rush together against the mountain, rend it asunder and pass off to the sea."

As was the case with so many bustling towns in strategic locations, Harpers Ferry's industries were destroyed in the Civil War. The armory and arsenal made the town a prime target, and on April 18, 1861, less than 24 hours after Virginia seceded from the Union, Federal soldiers burned the armory and arsenal so Confederate troops could not use the weapons. When Confederate forces left the town two months later, they burned most of the factory buildings and blew up the railroad bridge. This destruction, combined with a series of damaging floods over the years that swept away bridges, closed the canals, and washed out businesses, sealed the town's fate; Harpers Ferry never recovered its former economic status. In the 1880s a quarry was established nearby; it closed in 1974. For over a century, the area has consisted primarily of farmland and open spaces.