

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 19th-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

