

Manassas Civil War battlefield threatened by real estate development

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The 5,000-acre Manassas National Battlefield Park (MNBP) in northern Virginia, the location of two bloody battles during the Civil War, is currently threatened by private real estate developers intent on building a massive data center.

Kansas-based QTS Realty Trust initiated the proposed real estate development, dubbed PW Digital Gateway. The plan is supported by wealthy landowners who wish to see their property values increased. They have filed a request with Prince William County to alter the present land usage from agricultural to technology zoning to make way for the development.

The re-zoning request covers 2,100 acres of land, which would secure space for the massive 27.6 million square-foot data center complex, impacting both Manassas National Battlefield Park, Prince William Forest Park, and other historic areas including Civil War and slave cemeteries. The total square footage would equal the cumulative footprint of data centers in neighboring Loudoun County, which boasts the world's largest concentration of such facilities. So far, Prince William County has not ruled on the proposal.

The two battles of Manassas—or Bull Run, as they were more commonly called in the North—are of great historic significance. The first, taking place on July 21, 1861, was the first major battle between Union and Confederate forces during the American Civil War. The Confederates prevailed but were unable to capitalize. The defeat stunned the North. To both sides, the battle demonstrated the war would not be easily won. Within three days President Abraham Lincoln signed two separate bills calling for 1 million volunteers for three years' service to put down the slaveholders' rebellion.

Second Manassas happened over a year later, from August 28-30, 1862, and resulted in yet another Confederate victory. Emboldened, General Robert E.

Lee would subsequently invade Maryland, culminating in the bloodiest single-day battle in American history, the Battle of Antietam. Lee limped back to Virginia, and Lincoln would issue one of the most revolutionary documents in American history, the Emancipation Proclamation.

None of this is of much interest to QTS Realty Trust, which was recently bought by Blackstone Funds in a \$10 billion transaction. The firm describes itself as “a leading provider of data center solutions across a diverse footprint spanning more than 7 million square feet of owned mega scale data center space throughout North America and Europe. Through its software defined technology platform, QTS is able to deliver secure, compliant infrastructure solutions, robust connectivity and premium customer service to leading hyperscale technology companies, enterprises and government entities.”

Nonprofits including Preservation Virginia, National Parks Conservation Association, and American Battlefield Trust, along with Acting Superintendent of Manassas National Battlefield Park, Raquel Montez, organized a public event in early May to highlight the issues potentially impacting the Manassas battlefield and other historic locations. At the moment, Montez is merely asking the county government to include the National Park Service (NPS) in the planning efforts to “compromise” on the harmful effects it will have on the battlefield.

Last December, former park superintendent Brandon Bies, in a more urgent plea, expressed “grave concerns” about the “potential irreparable harm” and “the single greatest threat to Manassas National Battlefield Park in nearly three decades.”

Residents have also opposed the proposed development. In a public news conference, Prince

William County resident Kathy Kulick said, “It’s a total and complete change of the character,” pointing to the potential ruination of the watershed and wildlife in addition to the loss of the battlefields’ historic character. “People who are going to live next to that are afraid,” she continued. “They didn’t move out here to live next to the world’s largest data center industrial zone. Nobody did.”

The conservation group Preservation Virginia labels Manassas Battlefield as one of the most at-risk sites in its annual list “Virginia’s Most Endangered Historic Places.” Its 2022 list includes many important places that could be lost to posterity: Dunnington Mansion, Ivy Cliff Slave Dwelling, Parker Sydnor Cabin, Reedville Grand Order of Odd Fellows Lodge/African American School, Preston-Crockett House, among others.

According to the nonprofit, 50 percent of sites on its list have been saved for the moment, 10 percent were lost, and 40 percent are being watched. The trend is not favorable. In nearby Culpeper County, the local government has approved a request from Amazon to build data centers on 230 acres of historic farmland, overcoming objections from both the public and eight national, regional, and local preservation organizations.

While both big-business parties, Democrats and Republicans—without public debate or discussion—can instantly supply Ukraine with \$40 billion of taxpayer money in weapons for the ongoing proxy war against Russia, history and arts funding is viewed as a drain on resources and profit accumulation. Parks and museums receive scant funding from federal, state, and local governments— if any at all. They instead rely on corporate-funded nonprofits and high admission prices. Their employees are grossly underpaid.

Last February, the Alliance of Museums released a statement warning that 33 percent of US museums were at risk of closing permanently without immediate financial support. With them, 12,000 museums and 124,000 jobs would be obliterated.

Even before the COVID pandemic, under both the Trump and Obama administrations, the National Park Service had its budget axed. In 2013 a budget impasse forced it to furlough 21,000 workers and temporarily close 410 national parks, including the Smithsonian in Washington D.C., the Statue of Liberty, and

Yellowstone National Park.

In 2017, the Trump administration enacted a hiring freeze on the NPS and proposed a 12 percent cut to the budget of the Department of the Interior, the department under which the NPS functions. As a result, Independence National Historic Park, the birthplace of the United States, and Declaration House, the spot where Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, were temporarily closed.

Similar attacks on history and culture are taking place all over the world. A report earlier this year by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization stated that in 2020, 10 million arts jobs were lost—a year in which capitalist governments filled up the coffers of the corporations and finance houses as their favored “cure” for the COVID pandemic.



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