

Virginia county greenlights massive data center, imperiling Civil War battlefield

Douglas Lyons, Tom Mackaman

17 December 2023

Virginia's Manassas National Battlefield Park, the location of two major battles in the American Civil War, is facing a grave threat with the greenlighting last week of a massive complex of data center warehouses to be built adjacent to the historic battlefield. The Prince William County Board of Supervisors approved the zoning plan on December 12, after a 28-hour public discussion in which passionate opposition from residents and historians was aired.

The vote passed 4-3 with one abstention. All four yes votes came from Democratic Party board members, as did the abstention. Three Republican board members voted against the measure for political purposes, safe in the knowledge that it would go through. The state's Republican governor, Glenn Youngkin, has in fact spearheaded data center industrialization in the area, offering tax breaks and exemptions to Amazon and other corporate behemoths with no strings attached.

Those joining the Democrats and Republicans in this vandals' campaign against history include the tech corporations, QTS and Compass Datacenters, Inc., and area landowners looking to get rich quick. Rural areas offer lower land prices, enticing these tech giants to move outside traditional industrial zones. When the facilities are completed, Prince William County will become the data center kingpin of the world, beating out nearby Loudoun County for the title. Seventy percent of the world's internet activity currently passes through data centers in the Northern Virginia region.

The corporations now have the go-ahead to start developing over 2,100 acres of land, 107 acres of which witnessed battlefield action in the Civil War but have not yet been officially incorporated into Manassas National Park. The data center farm will encroach on the boundaries of the National Park and bulldoze unprotected land, diminishing the park's historic significance, defacing its history, and becoming an obstacle for the

millions of international visitors looking to understand the progressive revolutionary history of the United States. It will ultimately open the doors for more devastating activities at Manassas and historic sites around the country, which are seen by politicians both as an intolerable drain on public resources and an unwelcome reminder of the revolutionary traditions of the United States.

In a comment to the *World Socialist Web Site*, historian James McPherson condemned the decision. "It looks like we are facing the Third Battle of Manassas to prevent that historic battlefield from desecration by greedy modern developers," he said.

There is mass public opposition to the data center. In a poll conducted this May by the National Parks Conservation Association, 86 percent of residents in northern Virginia opposed the construction of data centers within one mile of historic sites and national parks.

The WSWS reached out to a resident of the city of Manassas for comment. "This is just so disappointing, they are literally erasing history," the resident wrote. "The civil war was one of the bloodiest [wars] in US history. It's basically a graveyard! Not only that but this battle was very important, and should not be just taken down!"

The Virginia Data Center Reform Coalition, an umbrella organization of environmental, historic preservation and climate groups, cited significant concerns ranging from the immense consumption of electricity and water, higher utility rates, noise and air pollution, and the general degradation of the climate. These groups have also noted that there is minimal, if any, governmental regulation and oversight of these corporations, which are given carte blanche.

Film documentarian Ken Burns, whose well-known achievements include the popular series *The Civil War* and *National Park Service*, wrote a protest letter

saying,

As a student and chronicler of American history for more than 40 years, I can attest to how fragile our precious heritage is and how susceptible it can be to the ravages of ‘progress.’ I learned while making my documentary series *The Civil War* in the late 1980s—and again when I made my 2009 series on the history of the national parks—how crucial the preservation of our historic landscapes is, and I fear the devastating impact the development of up to 2,133 acres of data centers will have on this hallowed ground.

With the rapid increase in data centers being developed by Amazon, Google, Microsoft, and Meta in the area, many more Civil War historic sites are endangered, including the Wilderness Battlefield, Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park, North Anna Battlefield, and Richmond National Battlefield Park.

But what is the particular historical significance of Manassas?

There were two battles fought there in the Civil War, both also known as Bull Run, and both major Confederate victories. The First Battle of Manassas, or First Bull Run, took place on July 21, 1861, the first major battle of the Civil War. With some 5,000 soldiers falling dead and wounded on both sides, Manassas announced that the Civil War would be a long and bloody struggle. Just three months earlier, after the Battle of Fort Sumter, Lincoln had called for 75,000 volunteers for 90 days’ service to put down the slaveholders’ rebellion. After Manassas, Lincoln put out a call for 1 million volunteers for three years’ service.

Second Manassas, or Second Bull Run, took place August 28-30, 1862. Two-thirds of the roughly 21,000 casualties were Union soldiers. One of Robert E. Lee’s greatest victories, it set the stage for his ill-fated Maryland campaign, which culminated in Confederate defeat at the Battle of Antietam, September 17, 1862. Seizing on the victory, five days after Antietam Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation for the first time declaring openly that the destruction of slavery would be the central objective of a restored Union.

The two battles of Manassas thus demonstrate the dynamic between counterrevolution and revolution in the Civil War. The very successes of the Confederate armies,

witnessed at both battles, brought forth in response from Lincoln and the North ever more revolutionary responses—the mass mobilization of a citizens’ army after First Manassas, and the proclamation calling for the destruction of chattel slavery after Second Manassas. Little wonder the reactionary philistines who control Virginia politics would want to crowd this history out.

The physical destruction of history coincides with its ideological destruction, falsification and its subordination to the profit motive of modern-day capitalism.

In 2019, the *New York Times* and journalist Nicole Hannah-Jones unveiled the 1619 Project to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of slaves to Point Comfort, Virginia, then a British colony. From the beginning, the *Times*’ lucrative and heavily franchised foray into history sought to project into the past a racist falsification characterizing all white people as racist and declaring the two American Revolutions, the War for Independence and the Civil War, were counterrevolutions seeking to perpetuate slavery and racism. In response, the WSWS led the charge to defend the revolutionary heritage of the United States, interviewing prominent historians of the American Revolution and Civil War, including James McPherson, Gordon Wood, James Oakes, Victoria Bynum, Adolph Reed Jr., Clayborne Carson and Richard Carwardine.

While technological progress is a positive development within society, which, if liberated from the profit imperative, could be used for the betterment of the entire planet, the corporations and their political agents in the Democratic and Republican parties subordinate everything, including historic sites and their preservation, to the insatiable money-making pursuit of private investors, disregarding the general interests and well-being of the population.

The defense of history, both in its physical patrimony and in its objective, truthful presentation, falls to the working class—which alone can uphold the revolutionary heritage of the past while freeing technological advancement for the greater good of society.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact