

"Blood was spilled outside of the boundaries of the park where this data center will be built"

## Historian Robert Sutton speaks on commercial real estate threat to Civil War battlefield at Manassas

**Douglas Lyons**  
28 January 2024

*The World Socialist Web Site recently spoke to Robert Sutton, former Superintendent of Manassas National Battlefield Park and former Chief Historian of the National Park Service (NPS), on the proposal to build a giant data center on the Manassas battlefield, the state of historical preservation, interpretation in public history, and the 1619 Project of the New York Times. The transcript has been edited for clarity.*

**Douglas Lyons:** Describe your background and experience at Manassas. And how did you become interested in history and the Civil War?

**Robert Sutton:** Well, let me start with Manassas. I've been interested in history since I was a little kid, and that I glommed onto when I started junior high school. My family was on the Oregon Trail. Both my great-grandparents were on the Oregon Trail. My great-grandfather was 17 and my great-grandmother was 3 weeks old when they left on the Oregon Trail.

The park service was really my place to be, because the other thing I enjoyed was a variety of history—not just focusing on one thing, but on a variety. I went to Manassas in 1995 as the acting superintendent. I was going to be there for like six months, and that was going to be it. I ended up being there for 12-and-a-half years. If I had to pick a part of my career that I enjoyed the most and felt like I probably did the most good, it was probably those years at Manassas.

**Douglas:** You've also written two books.

**Robert:** Well, I've actually edited a whole bunch of books and the most recent one was *Nazis on the Potomac*. It is directly related to the Park Service, because it talks about a site, a National Park Service site, Fort Hunt, which is between Washington, DC and Mount Vernon on the George Washington Parkway.

During World War II they brought in the highest value Nazis to interrogate and eavesdrop on their conversations. And then they also had another section that translated thousands upon thousands of captured German documents. And it was top secret, so top secret, the Park Service didn't know a thing about the story until very, very recently. They were then able to contact a number of the soldiers who were stationed there and did oral histories with them. So we have this wonderful collection of oral histories, and they were just kind of sitting there. I decided it would be really important to tell the story. So I did, and it's done very, very well, in fact, so well that I just did a revision and added a whole section to it for the next edition of that book.

**Douglas:** The other book is *Stark Mad Abolitionists: Lawrence, Kansas, and the Battle Over Slavery in the Civil War*. That's more related to the

topic at hand.

**Robert:** It's a wonderful book. I got an award from Kansas, one of the top state awards for that book which I was very proud of. On the other side of the family, on my dad's side of the family, they went to Kansas during Bleeding Kansas. So that was part of the interest in that book.

**Douglas Lyons:** What makes Manassas an important national historical park?

**Robert:** There were two major battles at Manassas. One was the first major battle of the war, fought there in 1861. And then, a little over a year later, the second battle on virtually the same ground. And that's, I think, what makes it so important.

**Douglas:** The first battle of Manassas, or Bull Run, you had a whole bunch of spectators come out because they thought it would be a quick war and a quick battle. But it showed that this was going to be a very long struggle for the North and that revolutionary methods directed against slavery would be needed to preserve the Union and defeat the Confederacy.

**Robert:** Yes, the Civil War was fought over slavery. There's no question about it. There's an interesting back story. Manassas originally was owned by the Sons of the Confederacy. When they deeded it to the National Park Service they had a couple of conditions on it, one being that there had to be a "balanced" interpretation. And so, when I was saying that slavery was the major cause of the Civil War, I got a lot of push back from them as well. Saying that slavery was the cause of the Civil War and having it come from the Park Service, which is a government agency, caused a lot of controversy among a lot of different groups.

**Douglas:** If you have the Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy holding the battlefield, they're going to interpret it based on the Lost Cause, that slavery was not the issue. It's historically accurate to say the war was about slavery. If people say States' rights, well, it's States' rights to own slaves.

At the second battle of Manassas, Lee had another stunning victory. In terms of casualties the Confederacy had about half of the Union casualties. I think it was like 14,000 for the Union, and maybe like 7,000 for the Confederacy. And then Lee went up north and led his campaign into Maryland. And then that's when Lincoln issued, after Lee's defeat at Antietam, the Emancipation Proclamation, which really did turn the war not just to preserve the Union but into a war to overthrow slavery.

**Robert:** The second battle was a tremendous victory for the South. But it's really fascinating to me. I don't get into the what ifs because I think

history happened, and that's that. But you know "what would have happened" makes a good question, if Lee wouldn't have seen the opportunity to go North. Did he really lose Antietam? Yes, because he left the field. But it really was a draw. Yet Lincoln looked at it as the opportunity to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, because technically it was a Union victory. And so yes, I think the main thing about Second Manassas: it emboldened Lee to go North, and it was not a good thing for him.

**Douglas:** The second time Lee went north ended with the Battle of Gettysburg, the high-water mark of the Confederacy, and turning point in the Civil War, especially when you combine it with what took place out west with Vicksburg, Mississippi. Grant's victory cut the Confederacy in half.

In the article on the data-center construction, James McPherson told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "we are facing a third battle of Manassas from modern greedy developers." Can you explain what these companies are doing? Did you see a lot of changes to the battlefield in terms of its preservation or its destruction while you were superintendent?

**Robert:** The first thing I had to deal with when I got there was cell towers. Companies wanted to build cell towers all around the battlefield. For the most part I was able to keep them far enough away that they couldn't be seen. There was one that was built in Fairfax County, and I was not able to defeat that one, but I was able to get some mitigation money from them because of it. So that was the first thing I had to deal with, cell towers.

The other thing: they were beginning to build computer centers at Manassas, just south of the battlefield. A couple were built and the zoning would have allowed 10-story buildings. They actually built low-level ones. They really couldn't even be seen from the battlefield. So I don't know if it was really a victory. The companies just decided they didn't want to build anything that high. So that was an issue.

There was a strip mall. It was built just south of the battlefield and that was interesting, because I had a lot of pressure on me to try to keep that from being built. But when I worked with the developers on all of the structures in that complex, the only thing that was visible was like a Wendy's hamburger place right near the entrance. I was able to get them to agree to keep the height of all these buildings at a level that couldn't be seen on the battlefield. So yes, I was not happy that it was built, but, on the other hand, it was not visible.

One thing that I was very, very proud of—although I was not directly involved in—was at the time called the Third Battle of Manassas, when a developer was going to build a huge shopping mall on what was part of the battlefield called Stuart's Hill. Congress actually did a "Congressional taking." They actually took the land from this, from this mall at quite a substantial expense. But a lot of it became a national issue. I wasn't there at the time. I think it happened in 1988.

A lot of reporters came to Manassas afterwards, and I'd show them around, and they would look around, and say, you know, this is amazing. You can't really see any development around the battlefield, and that was something I was very, very proud of. Everywhere you would look on the battlefield you could not really see any modern development. And to me, that was a great victory. The new tech center just really makes me very upset.

**Douglas:** When I was doing some research for our article I found that there's a lot of land that had battlefield actions on it, where soldiers from the North and South fought one another, and it hasn't been incorporated within the National Park Service. There were, I believe, 107 acres of land that we know of that were actually part of the battle. And there could be additional parcels of land.

**Robert:** There's quite a bit of land that is not part of the battlefield, but there were certainly places where people spilled a lot of blood. This is where they are proposing this tech center. There's no question in my mind

that soldiers bled and died on the land.

The other thing: For years and years, there was a neighbor next to the battlefield. Her name was Annie Snyder. She and her family literally live right across the road from Manassas, from Brawner Farm, at the far-western end of the battlefield. She was very heavily involved with everything that happened at the battlefield. She was actually very instrumental in adding Brawner Farm to the battlefield and Stuart's Hill to the battlefield. We negotiated with the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to deal with the intersection in the middle of the battlefield. She always was one of the greatest supporters of the battlefield. From early on, until unfortunately, she passed away, I think in 1998 or 1999.

In 1980, when the battlefield purchased Brawner Farm, there was a specific piece of legislation that said they could not change the legislative boundaries of the battlefield except with the Congressional Act. And so that really had an issue for acquiring extra land, that was a real problem for me, because there are several things that I really wanted to acquire that we couldn't acquire, because it was outside of the legislative boundary. But anyway, Annie Snyder was very, very instrumental.

One thing I said in the article I published in the *Washington Post* is that a lot of people think that the land within a Civil War battlefield is where all the battles were fought, within that land. Nothing could be further from the truth. They've tried to include the land but it is not where all the Civil War battles happened. And that's the point I was trying to make about this data center: That yes, the boundaries are at such and such a location. But blood was spilled outside of the boundaries of the park where this data center will be built. And I think that's important for people to understand, and I don't think they do. So there you go.

**Douglas:** There's massive opposition to it. You described some of the local residents. I don't know if you can just give the general atmosphere of the mood of opposition in the public at Manassas and throughout the United States. Ken Burns even wrote a protest letter against this data-center construction on the battlefield.

**Robert:** I'll tell you what really upsets me. I can't tell you how much time I spent on issues dealing with the area around the battlefield. One thing that I did when I was there: the legislation that brought Stuart's Hill into the NPS included language to build a bypass around the park. And so while I was there we were able to get money from legislation to do a study to relocate both Route 29 and Business Route 234 around the battlefield. We spent several years on it. I got the approval of both counties, which was a challenge, Fairfax and Prince William County, and then the Commonwealth Transportation Board, which is a real challenge, because they don't usually look at anything that doesn't come from VDOT. This one came from the Park Service and when I left it had been approved by all these different entities, but there was no money to build it.

Had that happened, I don't think the data center could have been built because it would have been no way to build it, because the parkway with an entrance at one end of Route 29 and entrance of the other end of Route 29, and maybe two road exits off of it, and that would be it. There couldn't be any development that would come as a result of this parkway and so I think it would have been really, really difficult to build this data center.

**Douglas:** And now the data center is going ahead. The local Board of Supervisors in the county approved it. So unless something changes, construction is going to start soon. And it's not only Manassas that's going to be impacted by data centers or the privatization of history.

Why do you think state or federal governments don't step in to try to stop this? Why are they giving it the green light? And what other historic sites in Virginia will be affected? There's many that could be impacted from this data center.

**Robert:** Absolutely. The unfortunate thing is Prince William County. When I was there, there was the chair of the County Board of Supervisors,

Sean Connaughton. He became a very good friend, and we worked very closely together. He recognized the value of the battlefield. Now, Prince William County has had this inferiority complex, and they look at the battlefield as the impediment in the way of development.

So the shopping center on Stuart's Hill didn't happen. There was supposed to be a Marriott amusement park that didn't happen. Disney was going to build something that didn't happen. And so they've always looked at the battlefield as the impediment to development.

**Douglas:** I think this leads into the next question. In respect to government funding for history, the National Park Service, which is under the Department of the Interior, is always the first to be axed in terms of their budget. How does this impact the National Park Service and the general preservation of history from private profit? Because, in effect, the NPS has to rely on private institutions to try to preserve history, which isn't a good thing.

**Robert:** One of the problems at Manassas was that we had no success at all getting any kind of private money. One thing that I think is just really a shame about the Park Service is that there have been so many opportunities when they could have really made it a case for more funding. I remember at one point I read a statistic that said one B-2 bomber costs more than the entire budget of the National Park Service.

I know that every single time the press talks about a possible government shutdown the first thing they say, the very first thing they always say is, that you can't go to national parks during the government shutdown. And everybody gets all upset, but nothing comes of it. And in my mind just one of these really crazy things.

I don't know if you know about Mission 66? The director of the park service, Conrad Wirth, went to the White House. He convinced President Eisenhower and the cabinet to support a project called Mission 66, in 1956, that would put a billion dollars into national parks between 1956 and 1966, which was the fiftieth anniversary of the National Park Service. Now, in 1956, a billion dollars was some serious money. And so they went to Congress. Congress passed it, and Mission 66 was born, and most of the visitor centers and different things that you see around the entire National Park Service came as a result of Mission 66. And you know what we've missed? I think the Centennial in 2016 was another serious miss of getting the government to put more money into the NPS.

Any private money that goes into the Park Service, they want to put money somewhere where it's gonna be visible, right? And so all the big parks get the money. The little parks like Manassas get absolutely nothing. And to me that's just one of the really big problems.

**Douglas:** You hit the nail on the head by comparing it to government spending in all these overseas wars for destruction. They don't want to use it to preserve history for the American people. It's a big contradiction.

**Robert:** People get upset when they've learned what the Park Service budget is, but nothing happens. And it's very troubling. I dealt with that the whole time I was in the Park Service. I was pretty lucky. I was able to get quite a bit of government money to do restoration work in the park. But I just had no success in getting any outside money.

I think there's nothing that does as much for visitors as to go on a tour of a civil war battlefield with an interpreter, with a ranger. I just don't think there's anything that compares to that, no matter how wonderful the technology is. And that's, I think, one of the things that we're losing.

**Douglas:** They're the ones that give the audience the historical feel of what happened. But in case of the interpretive rangers, at least at Gettysburg, they've been trying to cut them as well.

**Robert:** The big thing now is to have law enforcement rangers. I don't know if you want to hear this story, but when I was in graduate school at Portland State, 50 plus years ago, one of my professors called me in 1970 and asked if I wanted to work weekends and holidays at Fort Vancouver, which was a national park in Vancouver, Washington, right across the river from Portland. I went over there and was hired on the spot to work

weekends and holidays, and then I came in the next day.

The Chief Ranger—they're only half a dozen or so people who work in the whole park—showed me around. He said, okay, here's a key to this desk. Now, in this desk is the gun, if you need it. I go: Huh? He says: Well, you have full law enforcement authority, too, and if you need to use the gun here it is. I said, okay. That was law enforcement in 1970. How about that? Of course, things have changed since then. But I think that there's been a lot more emphasis on law enforcement than interpretation. It's not to say it's not important, I mean, I think it is important. But if you put a lot of money into law enforcement rangers and less into interpretive rangers, you've got a problem. And that's my take.

**Douglas:** What are your thoughts on the current climate of historical interpretation relating to American history? Have you read the 1619 Project? And if so, what are your thoughts?

**Robert:** Unfortunately, right now we're at a bad place with American history. Do you look at what people know? The percentage of people who know basic things like when the Declaration of Independence was written? When did the Civil War take place? What was the Civil War about? The percentage of people who know the answer is just frighteningly low.

I've looked at the 1619 Project. From what I understand, it's kind of a liberal "beat ourselves up over what we did" sort of thing. There are reasons to do that. But I think it's too much emphasis on that.

**Douglas:** I think it goes along with these data centers. It's the physical destruction of history, but it's also the ideological destruction of history. And in this case, it's a falsification and a racist falsification of the two American revolutions, saying they were counterrevolutions.

**Robert:** That's kind of my impression, a kind of liberals beating their breasts, saying, "we did so many horrible things back then." Well, how about what you're doing now?

**Douglas:** It completely ignores the revolutionary role of the Founding Fathers and Lincoln and the Radical Republicans in eliminating slavery...

**Robert:** I'm from Portland, Oregon. When I saw that they took down the statue of Abraham Lincoln in Portland, Oregon, I just about cried, because you know what? Why would they have a statue of Abraham Lincoln in Portland? Well, most people don't know this, but he was offered the very first Territorial Governorship of Oregon, the very first Territorial Secretary. He turned it down.

But that was his offer, and he was very important, you know, in the early history of Oregon. He knew a lot of people and so forth, and to take his statue down because he didn't at first support the immediate ending of slavery to me is just cuckoo. But they did that. They did that in San Francisco. They've taken down Grant's monument because he owned a slave. He didn't even want the slave, you know. The slave was given to him, and he ended up giving him his freedom. I think we realize now that Grant did a lot more during Reconstruction to benefit blacks than he has ever been given credit for, and to take his monument down, to take Lincoln's monument down, is just bizarre to me.

**Douglas:** Thank you for taking the time to speak to us.



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