

Fortifying Fisher's Hill

BY KIM A. O'CONNELL

Not far from Strasburg, Virginia, at the throat of the Shenandoah Valley, the Fisher's Hill battlefield lies in a remote spot high on a bluff. Remnants of the historic Valley Pike offer evidence of the September 1864 battle (story, P. 34). Confederate soldiers under General Jubal Early had dug in along the road in an ultimately vain attempt to keep Union General Phil Sheridan at bay.

Today ongoing preservation efforts have saved a key portion of that landscape, including an abandoned section of the Valley Pike, as well as still-

visible retaining walls, bridge abutments and artillery emplacements. But the proposed expansion of another, vastly different road—Interstate 81—threatens to overwhelm the rolling, rural character of the Fisher's Hill battlefield.

The battlefield surrounds Fisher's Hill, which still contains period mills, stone walls and barns. Aside from a few new tract houses, the rapid development that has vexed many Valley residents has not yet

touched the battlefield. Although the site is bisected by I-81, the divided road sits low in the landscape, as unobtrusive as a four-lane highway can be.

Much of the credit for the site's relatively unspoiled nature goes to the actions of forward-thinking preservationists 15 years ago. In 1991 the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites, the precursor to the Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT), acquired nearly 200 acres of land adjacent

to I-81 that was recently turned over to Shenandoah County. The site, known as Ramseur's Hill, preserves the location where snookered Confederates met a flank attack from Union General George Crook. Confederate entrenchments are still visible here, amid fields bordered by Tumbling Run. "It really is like traveling back in time," says CWPT spokesman Jim Campi. "It's a hidden jewel." The Virginia Department of Transportation is now studying the environmental impact of a major I-81 expansion, and the CWPT is working to ensure the protection of the many Civil War sites along the interstate.

In the meantime, Fisher's Hill benefits from its inclusion in the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District, which includes 10 battlefields from Winchester and Kernstown down to McDowell and Port Republic. The nonprofit Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation has been working closely with local landowners to protect Fisher's Hill, either through outright purchase from willing sellers or through cooperative agreements. Most recently, the foundation acquired the 22-acre site of Sheridan's command post, as well as 25 acres of the panoramic bluff and a segment of the Valley Pike.

The foundation listens to local views. "What we've found is there is great interest from landowners in protecting Fisher's Hill," says Howard Kittell, the foundation's executive director. "We're seeing a tremendous amount of development happening around Strasburg. The landowners around Fisher's Hill want to see their land stay as it is. We've been able to show them that there are ways to achieve their vision."

To this end, the foundation recently produced a preservation plan that gives landowners numerous options to protect the landscape, including conservation easements and voluntary agreements that allow compatible activities like farming to continue. Already Kittell reports that several landowners have approached the foundation after hearing about the plan.

But a future for Fisher's Hill is by no means assured. Only 286 acres of the core battlefield—just about 10 percent—have been protected. If a major I-81 expansion is approved without provisions to protect Civil War battlefields, the quiet character of Fisher's Hill could be lost.

For more information, visit www.shenandoahatwar.org or www.civilwar.org. □

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Tumbling Run appears to be a misnomer in this photo of the tranquil Fisher's Hill battlefield. A major interstate expansion threatens the important 1864 site.