

Preserving History through Conservation Corridors

One state's approach to a multi-state effort



Source: www.hallowedground.org/content/view/98/1/

The Journey Through Hallowed Ground National Heritage Area traverses the Chesapeake Bay countryside from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, through the state of Maryland to Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia. The 175-mile historic route celebrates an extraordinary landscape of American history shared by the three states. Collectively, the states have partnered with the National Park Service, local businesses, historic societies, educators, localities, land trusts and landowners to create an historic and cultural conservation corridor to permanently preserve this significant segment of our nation's history. These combined efforts have led the Hallowed Ground region to be among the leaders in the country for conserving land.

A Catalyst for Conservation

Most of the counties that make up this historic region are also actively partnering with their residents to conserve open spaces, such as battlefields and working landscapes. For instance, in Pennsylvania's Adams County over 58,000 acres of lands are permanently protected including 6,000 acres in Gettysburg National Military Park; over 20 percent of Carroll County, Maryland has been preserved (more than 65,000 acres); and in Fauquier County, Virginia over 92,500 acres of privately-owned lands are in conservation easements. Much of the preserved land remains in agricultural production as it was during the Civil War. With ten of the 15 Hallowed Ground counties located in Virginia, land conservation efforts in the Commonwealth have been integral to securing its success.



Sky Meadows State Park, VA DCR

Recognizing the significant role Virginia has played in the making of our nation's history since the founding of Jamestown, a strong effort exists in the Commonwealth to preserve its past. Cities and counties share concern over the disappearance of limited historic and natural resources and play a major role protecting historic landscapes, heritage sites and battlefields. The

Journey Through Hallowed Ground is a regional concept that has spurred local action to connect generations to the history, culture and beauty of the region.

Conservation of lands in Virginia has been possible because of the many land conservation tools and funding sources that have been created over the years. Many localities use zoning, comprehensive plans and conservation easements to preserve open spaces. Another tool that localities can adopt for preserving agricultural and forested lands in Virginia is a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program. A PDR program is a voluntary program that pays landowners to protect their working lands from development. It allows landowners to enter into agreements to sell and retire the development rights of their property to the locality while maintaining the right to continue to own and use the property. In addition to the cash PDR payments, landowners may be able to qualify for state land conservation tax credits. The purpose of the PDR program is to protect farmland and forests, and retain the needed critical mass for the industries' continued operation and economic viability.

In 2007, through the Office of Farmland Preservation, Virginia invested \$4.25 million to match local PDR programs. Localities were eager to respond by pledging 10 times that amount in matching funds. The state requires counties to match dollar for dollar the amount that is granted to them by the Commonwealth. State funding levels have continued to drop since 2007, however, with only \$100,000 allocated for 2011. Regardless, some localities, including Albemarle and Fauquier Counties in the Hallowed Ground corridor, have made PDR programs a priority of their local government and have advanced successful programs. As more localities develop PDR programs, reliable and consistent funding is needed at both the state and local levels to maximize the potential to conserve working farm and forest lands, which make up the Commonwealth's largest industry—agriculture and forestry.

Virginia's Land Preservation Tax Credit program has become a hugely successful tool since its inception in 1999, with over half a million acres of land protected to date. These lands include historic landscapes and scenic open spaces, agricultural and forested lands, natural habitat and biologically diverse lands, as well as lands devoted to watershed preservation and natural-resource based outdoor recreation and education. The tax credit law allows an income tax credit for 40 percent of the value of donated land or conservation easements. Taxpayers may use up to \$50,000 per year for the year of the sale, and then for subsequent tax years. Unused tax credits may be sold, providing a cash stream for those landowners with little or no state income tax burden.

Land that is restricted by a conservation easement may also be eligible for reduced real property taxes. Localities that have land-use tax assessment programs are required to enroll land that is protected with a conservation easement in their land-use program. Localities that do not have a land-use tax assessment program are required to recognize the reduced value of land with a conservation easement in place, which should decrease real estate taxes.

The Virginia Land Conservation Foundation is another critical component of the Commonwealth's land protection tools. The Foundation administers the Virginia Land Conservation Fund to provide matching grants to localities and land trusts, and full grants to state agencies to purchase conservation easements or fee simple title of lands that are historic areas, farmlands, forests, natural areas, or open spaces and parklands. Monies for the Fund come from the state budget, with grant requests far exceeding available funds three times over. Grant awards are based on applications for 50 percent or less of total project costs pursuant to specific criteria.

The Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF) plays an integral role in facilitating the donation of conservation easements throughout the state by working closely with landowners, localities and land trusts. VOF may help landowners cover the costs associated with conveying conservation easements, such as legal costs and appraisal fees. VOF also holds about 75 percent of all conservation easements in the Commonwealth and is obligated to be the steward of those lands under their protection. VOF's stewardship program assists easement property owners with the continued stewardship of their land and assures in perpetuity that the conservation goals stated in the easement are upheld.

The Civil War Historic Site Preservation Fund is the newest land preservation tool in Virginia. Created in 2010, the fund targets preserving significant historic and cultural sites from the Civil War. The Department of Historic Resources awards grants to non-profit organizations on a

one-to-one matching basis to purchase battlefields or to acquire historic preservation easements. Several land trusts in Virginia focus on battlefield preservation and have helped to protect thousands of acres in the Commonwealth, including the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation, the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, Piedmont Environmental Council, the Civil War Preservation Trust and The Conservation Fund.

Cultural Significance Expands Partnership Opportunities

Because the Hallowed Ground partnership was designated as the nation's 38th National Heritage Area in 2008, it is eligible for special federal funding. One million dollars per year for the next 15 years is available as a matching fund to support core operations and to promote heritage tourism and educational programs. The region boasts rich history and heritage sites including nine Presidential homes, the largest collection of Civil War sites in the country, significant African American and Native American history, 73 National Historic Districts and links to the Revolutionary War and War of 1812, as well as numerous scenic roads, rivers and landscapes. There is much interest in the economic benefits to be gained from heritage tourism and visitors who come to experience the abundant natural resources.

In 2009, the U.S. Secretary of Transportation named the main roads running through the heritage area as a National Scenic Byway. This is one of the



Manassas Battlefield, Andreas Welch

highest designations the U.S. Secretary of Transportation can bestow upon a public road. The region is now included in a world-wide marketing campaign attracting visitors from around the globe. It also means local jurisdictions along the Journey receive elevated status when applying for federal funding for projects that benefit the byway traveler's experience. This could include corridor planning and management of the intrinsic qualities that support the byway's designation, interpret the story for visitors or improve visitor facilities. Funds can also be used for marketing heritage tourism to expand economic development opportunities.

By appealing to a multitude of different interests, efforts to preserve open space can be enhanced. Whether the intent is to preserve historic battlefields, Presidential homesteads or working landscapes, multitasking landscapes preserved in perpetuity can be enjoyed for their

cultural, ecological, educational, recreational and scenic resources. All are part of the successful multistate effort to raise awareness of American historic resources through the Journey Through Hallowed Ground National Heritage Area as well as state, regional and local efforts to amplify land conservation and heritage tourism. Protecting the region's irreplaceable battlefields not only preserves touch points of our nation's history, it also can enhance restoration of water quality in our streams, rivers and the Chesapeake Bay, and it supports agriculture, forestry and tourism, the largest economic drivers of the region.

Snapshots of Recent Success

Below is a list of a few sites in Virginia that are now permanently protected historic sites along the Journey Through Hallowed Ground. Many of them were made possible only because of the recent downturn in the real estate development market. Prospective developers and other land owners caught with vast landholdings and little income during these challenging economic times have become willing sellers or enthusiastic seekers of valuable conservation tax incentives.

-  Listed as a top preservation priority by the Congressional Civil War Sites Advisory Commission, the Battle of Brandy Station was the largest cavalry engagement of the Civil War, and first battle of the Gettysburg Campaign. Two parcels of the expansive Culpeper County battleground were voluntarily placed under conservation easements in 2010, adding 782 acres to the 1,000 acres already preserved. The northern tract includes nearly a mile of river frontage, providing additional conservation benefits for water quality. The southern tract comprises 433 acres that had been slated for commercial development but will now remain in agriculture. The deals were arranged with the Civil War Preservation Trust, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, and other land conservation organizations.

-  In Fauquier County, Rappahannock Station Battlefield Park, a 26-acre tract on the Rappahannock River, was transferred to the county to become a public park. The new park will provide public open space and the only public access to the river in the county. The battlefield property provided a unique opportunity for the county to combine the protection of a key portion of a Civil War battlefield with the preservation of a significant stretch of the Rappahannock River. The park is expected to enhance the prospects for heritage tourism as well as recreational opportunities.

-  Forging a public-private partnership, a land trust organization and two state agencies purchased conservation easements on four parcels surrounding Montpelier, home of President James Madison. The partnership was successful in protecting and ensuring

continued public access to over 700 acres including riparian streams, forests, a Civil War encampment and the home of one of Madison's emancipated slaves, George Gilmore. These cultural assets, water quality benefits and the forested viewshed were preserved through private donations and a grant from the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation.

-  Montalto is the “high mountain” that makes up the viewshed from the backyard of Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello or “little mountain” in Charlottesville. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation partnered with the Piedmont Environmental Council to permanently protect 150 acres of Montalto's most visible lands with a conservation easement. Visitors to Monticello and the public throughout Charlottesville and Albemarle County benefit from the preservation of this historic landscape where the gently sloping 1,278 foot high mountain can be viewed. A portion of the protected land is accessible by public walking trails at the base of the mountain.
-  Gilberts Corner in Loudoun County was purchased from a developer at foreclosure by Piedmont Environmental Council in 2009. Now a public park, it will be combined with adjoining parkland in a partnership with the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority to provide over 150 acres of public access to the rolling countryside. The scenic area is rich in Civil War history and is an important gateway to the Journey Through Hallowed Ground National Heritage Area.
-  268 acres of farmland near the Town of Orange was proposed to be developed into a subdivision of 319 homes. However, the plans were never approved and development became economically unfeasible. In 2009, the landowner chose to transfer the farmland to a local land trust, permanently preserving the open space in perpetuity. By placing a conservation easement on the property, the former owner received land preservation tax credits.