

*Agency Official 106 Effect Report*

*Construct Support Structure for Historic Chatham Catalpa Tree – 2011*

**U.S. Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County Battlefields Memorial National Military Park  
120 Chatham Lane  
Fredericksburg, Virginia 22405**

## **Description and Purpose of Undertaking**

### **Purpose**

Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County Battlefields Memorial National Military Park (FRSP) was authorized by an act of Congress on February 14, 1927 (44 Stat. 1091). The purpose of the park, as stated in the act, is “mark and preserve historical points connected with the battles of Fredericksburg, Spotsylvania Court House, Wilderness, and Chancellorsville, including Salem Church ...” By Executive Order 6166 in 1933 the park was transferred from the War Department to the Department of the Interior to be administered by the National Park Service.

In 1975, FRSP took possession of Chatham and opened the site to the public the following year. Since then, Chatham has remained open as a visitor contact site and has also operated as the park administrative headquarters.

### **Need**

The two Catalpa trees, located in front of the main house Chatham, are part of the historic landscape and are "witness trees." Both trees were planted prior to 1861 and "witnessed" the historic events that took place at Chatham during the Civil War. Walt Whitman, the famous American poet, served as a nurse at Chatham following the December 1862 Battle of Fredericksburg. In his book *The Wound Dresser*, Whitman referenced these two trees: "One of the first things that met my eyes in camp was a heap of feet, arms, legs, etc., under a tree in front of a hospital, the Lacy house." Both trees are rapidly declining in health, but their public image and the attachment the public has to them encourages the park to do what it can to assist the trees.

Last summer (2010), a park visitor informed us that one of the Catalpas seemed to be leaning at a rather exaggerated angle. The park called in a local botanist who concluded that the root system was dying and failing on one side of the tree, causing it to lack support and lean heavily in that direction. The park staff constructed a temporary wood support system to keep the tree from leaning further. The wood support is bulky and was built as a temporary measure until a decision could be made about the tree's future.

FRSP now proposes to install a more permanent support structure for the leaning Catalpa.

### **Property Description**

A. Major Physical Components – Chatham sits on 85.01 acres in Stafford County, Va. The tract is a mixture of open fields and wood lots, bisected by a few ravines that feed rainwater runoff to the Rappahannock River. East of the house is a maintained enclosed garden. Most of the open fields are under cultivation. The house itself is open to the public seven days a week.

B. Historical Significance – The house was constructed by William Fitzhugh, a prominent plantation owner in 18<sup>th</sup> century Virginia. Among his guests at Chatham were George

Washington and Thomas Jefferson. During the Civil War, the Union army occupied Chatham beginning in the spring of 1862. President Abraham Lincoln visited his generals at Chatham during that period. In December 1862, Union generals again made Chatham headquarters and both during and after the Battle of Fredericksburg the house and grounds became a hospital for wounded soldiers. Both Clara Barton and the poet Walt Whitman cared for the wounded at Chatham.

C. Archaeological Significance – Numerous archaeological investigations have occurred on the grounds of Chatham. Most have focused on testing for the installation of interpretive signs. In 1977, archaeological investigations occurred around the foundation of the main house in preparation of NPS work to provide adequate drainage for the building's foundation. In 1979, an overall archaeological survey of the Chatham property was undertaken. Chatham is a significant archaeological site.

D. Historic Landscape Significance – Chatham has not been the subject of a Cultural Landscape Report or a Cultural Landscape Inventory. It can be assumed that the property does contain some significant landscapes and features. Certainly, many of the ornamental plantings would qualify as significant features.

## **Description of Alternatives**

### **Alternative A – No Action**

This alternative would involve the removal of the temporary wood support system. It would fail to solve the rapidly declining condition of the historic Catalpa tree. This will accelerate the tree's deterioration and lead to its death and removal.

### **Alternative B – Wood Support Structure**

This alternative would involve leaving the temporary wood support system in place. The bulk of the structure makes it quite visible and prominent. It was also designed to be a temporary structure and will deteriorate and rot over time itself, thus presenting a possibly hazardous situation.

### **Alternative C – Metal Support Structure (Preferred)**

This alternative would involve the removal of the temporary wood support system and replacing it with a metal singular pole system. This metal system is currently used by the University of Mary Washington in supporting a historic tree on its campus. The system consists of a singular black metal pipe with a U-shaped cradle at one end. The trunk of the catalpa will rest in the cradle, while the support pipe will extend, at an angle, to the ground at a distance of about 5-6 feet from the trunk. The bottom of the support pipe will be attached to a 16" x 16" x 1/2" steel plate, which will be driven into the ground at an angle. Two metal legs will extend off the support pipe, providing additional stability. Given the tree's canopy when leafed out, it is the park's belief that the new support will not be a significant visual intrusion.

### Alternative D – Remove the Tree

This alternative would involve simply cutting down the declining Catalpa tree. Certainly, this alternative would not be popular with the local community and would involve the removal of a truly historic landscape planting.

### **Description of Mitigation Measures**

A. The park plans to propagate a seedling from the Catalpa in order to have a descendent waiting when, and if, the health of the tree continues to decline and the tree ultimately dies. The descendant will be available to be planted as a replacement tree.

### **Park Consultation**

The proposal is being circulated to the park's Section-106 advisor for archaeology and landscape architecture.

The proposal is going through a 30-day public comment and review period. During this time, the project is being placed on the NPS public website. The park has contacted representatives of interested local organizations, such as the University of Mary Washington's Department of Historic Preservation, the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table, the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, and the Friends of the Fredericksburg Battlefield.

The project will go through a 30-day comment and review period with the Virginia SHPO.

### **Effect Analysis**

It is park's opinion that the preferred alternative will have "no adverse effect" on the historic properties of Chatham.

### **Report Prepared By**

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