

Agency Official 106 Effect Report

Rehabilitate Chatham Bottomlands and Vista

**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 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 “to commemorate the Civil War battles of Fredericksburg, Spotsylvania Court House, Wilderness, and Chancellorsville, including Salem Church ... to survey, locate, and preserve the lines of the opposing armies in said battles, to open, construct, and repair such roads, highways, paths, and other approaches as may be necessary to make the historical points accessible to the public and to students of said battles ...” By Executive Order 6166 in 1933 the park was transferred to the Department of the Interior to be administered by the National Park Service.

Need

Chatham is an 18th century plantation house and property. Three of the structures (the main house, laundry and kitchen) date to 1768-1771. The structures were built atop Stafford Heights, a ridgeline that parallels the Rappahannock River, and have a commanding view across the river and into the town of Fredericksburg. During the Civil War, Union generals and army commanders chose Chatham as a headquarters location because of the view afforded from the front of the main house and the grounds.

In 1964, Chatham’s final private owner, John Lee Pratt, donated a 23-acre strip of ground to the National Park Service (NPS). This piece of ground sits at the base of Stafford Heights between the Rappahannock River and River Road (County Route 607). Historically, the land along the river had been used for farming and was devoid of tall vegetation. In 1975, Pratt died and the NPS took control of the Chatham buildings and additional property. In the past forty years, the NPS has struggled to maintain Chatham’s bottom land along the river. Four ditches that serve to drain the fields along the river have become clogged. Damaged culverts have also contributed to the problem and result in flooded fields during wet and rainy periods. The swampy nature of the fields has made access to the fields, maintenance and cutting difficult and has resulted in overgrown vegetation and trees. These trees, along with other unchecked vegetation along the forward slope of Chatham, have reduced the vistas and views that have historically characterized the property and linked Chatham with Fredericksburg for two hundred years. The park now proposes to address and correct the drainage issues on Chatham’s bottomland, improve access to the bottomland, as well as reopen the historic views. This will entail clearing and fixing the drainage ditches, installing gravel to stabilize access points to the bottomland, as well as cutting and removing trees in the bottom land as well along the forward slope of Chatham.

Description

The park proposes to rehabilitate the Chatham bottomland and vistas. To accomplish this, the park is proposing to improve drainage in the Chatham bottomland by replacing broken and non-functional culverts at four locations, as well as cleaning and clearing the four ditches of downed trees, branches and other vegetation. The park also proposes to re-establish the views and vistas that linked Chatham and Fredericksburg for nearly two hundred years. To accomplish this, the park proposes the cutting of trees and vegetation along Chatham's bottomlands and along the forward slope of the property.

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. The property east of the house includes a maintained enclosed garden and open fields that are under cultivation. The property west of the house drops 80 feet to the Rappahannock River. The forward slopes of Chatham include a variety of vegetation to include large mature trees. The bottomland is bordered by the Rappahannock River and River Road (County Route 607). The bottomland is predominantly grassland with a number of mature trees. Both the forward slope and the bottomland receive cutting a couple times a year. The house itself is open to the public seven days a week.

B. Architectural Significance – The main structures at Chatham were constructed between 1768 and 1771 and served as a domestic site for over 200 years. In the most recent draft of the park's National Register of Historic Places documentation update, Chatham (NR # FR0138) is considered a contributing structure.

C. Historical Significance – The house was constructed by William Fitzhugh, a prominent plantation owner in 18th 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. From the front porch of the house, and from its grounds, Union generals observed and directed the Battle of Fredericksburg, as it took place across the river. From the bottomland in front of Chatham, Union engineers constructed pontoon bridges that carried troops and material across the river into Fredericksburg. These temporary bridges were built in May 1862, December 1862, May 1863 and May 1864.

Description of Alternatives

Alternative A – No Action

This alternative would maintain the Chatham bottomland as it currently exists. This would involve continued non-functional drainage ditches that result in flooded fields. The flooded fields would result in continued difficulty for mowing schedules and the results in the continued growth of vegetation and the reduction of vistas from Chatham. Unchecked growth of vegetation on the forward slopes of Chatham would also contribute the reduction of Chatham's historic views and vistas. This would also hinder the ability to effectively interpret the history and resources directly tied to the historic views from Chatham and to Fredericksburg.

Alternative B – Rehabilitate the Drainage Culverts, Improve Access and Thin Vegetation in Front of Chatham

Under this alternative, the park would fix the drainage ditches by installing new culverts and cleaning the ditches of debris and vegetation. The park would also improve access to the bottomland by installing a layer of gravel where the access to the fields meets River Road (County Route 607). The park would also selectively prune and thin out the stands of woods on the forward slope of Chatham. This would provide for better viewing through the wooded areas and improve views of Fredericksburg. This alternative, however, would be a short-term solution, as vegetation would continue to grow and eventually those views would once again close. Also, under this alternative management and maintenance of the views and vistas would remain difficult with mowing necessary within the stands of woods to retard growth from the ground.

Alternative C – Rehabilitate the Drainage Culverts, Improve Access and Cut Corridors

Under this alternative, the park would fix the drainage ditches by installing new culverts and cleaning the ditches of debris and vegetation. The park would also improve access to the bottomland by installing a layer of gravel where the access to the fields meets River Road (County Route 607). The park would also cut trees and create corridors through the wood stands on the forward slope of Chatham that would provide views of Fredericksburg and far bank of the Rappahannock River. While this alternative would provide viewing, it is the management approach the park has used for the past forty years. The corridors have reduced and closed due to vegetation growth and failure of long-term maintenance of the corridors.

Alternative D – Preferred Alternative

Under this alternative, the park would fix the drainage ditches by installing new culverts and cleaning the ditches of debris and vegetation. The park would also improve access to the bottomland by installing a layer of gravel where the access to the fields meets River Road (County Route 607). The park would also remove vegetation from the forward slope of Chatham.

Finally, the park would develop improved access to the Chatham bottomland. The park proposes to accomplish this by:

1. Cutting of 90 trees of mixed pines, cedars and hardwoods from the forward slope of Chatham, as well as 33 hardwood trees in the bottomland. The trees will be cut to grade and stumps will be treated with an herbicide or ground to within 3 inches below grade. The removal of these trees will occur on the forward (western) slope of Chatham and along the Chatham bottomland. The removal of this vegetation will reopen the vistas that connect Chatham to Fredericksburg, the historic pontoon crossing site and to the Chatham Bridge (aka State Route 3 Bridge).

2. The headwalls and buried culverts for four ditches that help to control drainage in the Chatham bottomland will be replaced. Some of these concrete culverts have collapsed and need to be replaced. Once installed, the culverts will be covered with clean fill and the ground stabilized for vehicular use by park maintenance.

3. The four drainage ditches will be cleaned of vegetation and downed trees and limbs. This will help to re-establish functional drainage patterns in the bottomland.

4. Two vehicular access points for the Chatham bottomland will be rehabilitated. This will involve depositing a layer of gravel where the access meets River Road (County Route 607) and extending down the grade of the earthen ramp into the Chatham bottomland. This layer of gravel will provide stability for future access by maintenance vehicles. The gravel layer will then be covered with soil and grass seed to facilitate growth of grass and weeds to help blend the access areas into the surround landscape.

Description of Mitigation Measures

A. All treatment of tree stumps will involve application of herbicides and/or grinding of the stumps. Not stumps will be pulled or moved.

B. All work in the bottomland will be done during dry periods, so as to minimize disturbance of the grounds.

C. Staging areas for the contractors will occur close to the access points and where planned ground stabilization through the use of gravel will occur.

Park Consultation

The proposal is being circulated among the park's Section-106 advisor for archaeology and historic landscape architecture for their review and comments.

The proposal is being addressed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), coordinated by the Federal Highways Administration.

The park has consulted with the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and no permit is required.

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

The project will undergo a 30-day comment and review period to the Virginia SHPO.

Effect Analysis

It is the park's opinion that, as proposed, this project will have "no adverse effect" upon historic resources.

Report Prepared By

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