

ANTIETAM: Army of volunteers places candles on 23,100 graves

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quickly to catch Lee before he could reunite his army.

On the morning of Sept. 17, 1862, the two armies collided among the ridges above Sharpsburg and along Antietam Creek. Intense fighting took place in the cornfields, woods, creeks and roads and around a country church. Bloody Lane, Sunken Road, the Cornfield, West Woods, Burnside Bridge: The names are now familiar. Federal losses were 12,410, Confederate casualties numbered 10,700.

The Battle of Antietam ended the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia's first invasion of the North, and led ultimately to Abraham Lincoln's issuance of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

THE ILLUMINATION

Saturday, Dec. 6, 2008, marks the 20th anniversary of the Antietam National Battlefield Memorial Illumination.

The first illumination was held in 1988, when founder and general chairperson Georgene Charles coordinated elementary schoolchildren to release 23,110 balloons at the battlefield. The next year luminarias

were substituted, and the lighting has become a tradition on the first Saturday in December.

"I never realized this would be an annual event, nor did I realize the magnitude of the experience. But every year people wanted more. The interest has not diminished; in fact, it grows every year," Charles says.

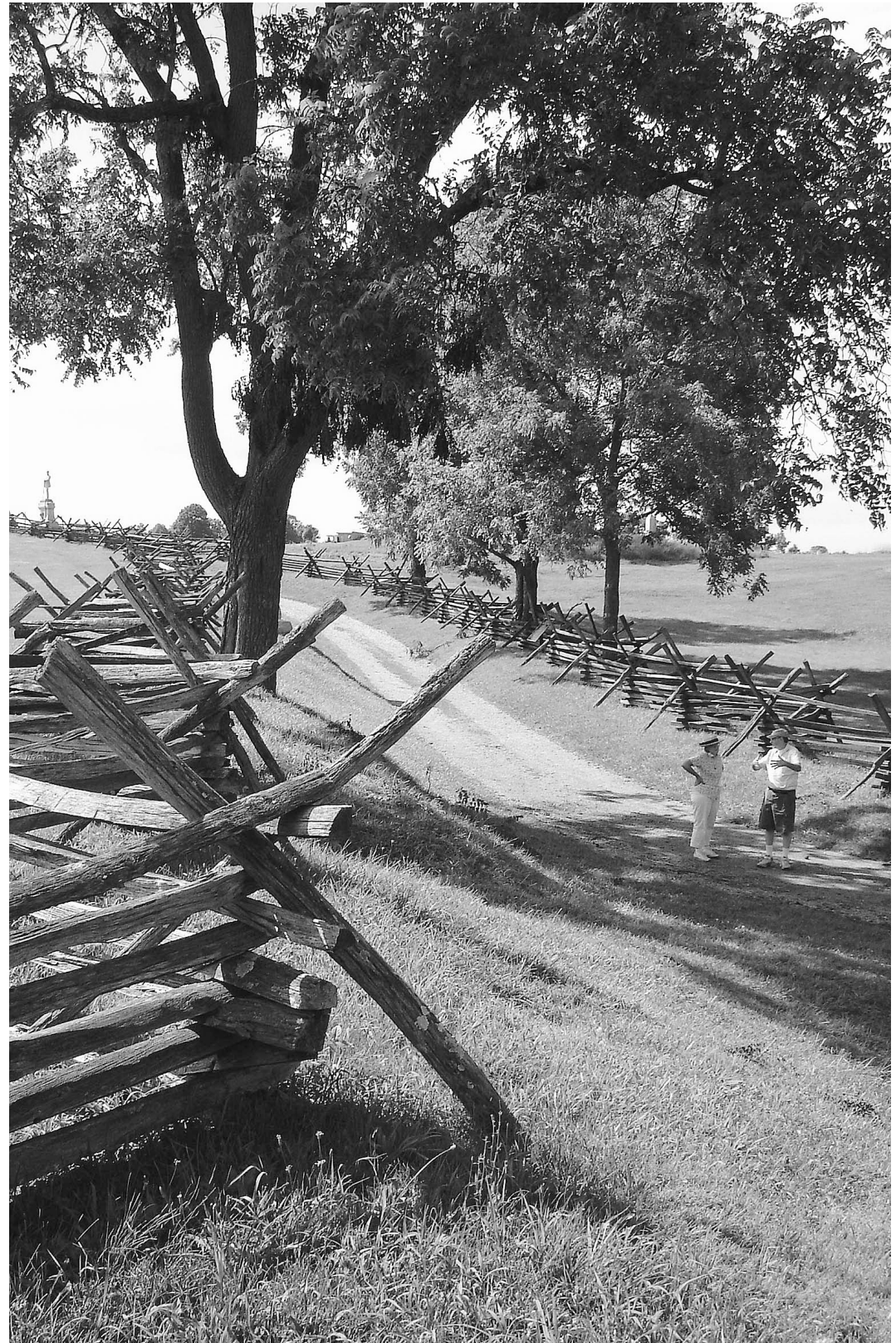
Cars line up for miles awaiting the 6 p.m. opening of the battlefield driving tour. On average about 8,500 vehicles crawl the 5.8-mile, 20-minute-long tour to view the lights and pass vignettes staged by Civil War re-enactors representing actual Northern and Southern encampments of 1862.

The route begins at the main entrance at Richardson Avenue, off Maryland Route 34, and visitors can expect to wait up to two hours to get in. Drivers are encouraged to use their parking lights only, or to cover their headlights. More than 20,000 visitors are recorded each year.

THE VOLUNTEER ARMY

It takes a virtual army of up to 1,400 volunteers from around the country to pull off this yearly event. Volunteers

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PHOTOS BY LINDA BARRETT

The serenity modern visitors find at the Antietam Visitors Center belies the bloody conflict that occurred on the battlefield.

Bloody Lane at Antietam National Battlefield was the scene of intense fighting on Sept. 17, 1862, during the Civil War.