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# Time Perspectivism, Temporal Dynamics, and Battlefield Archaeology: A Case Study from the Santiago Campaign of 1898

William E. Altizer

*Abstract: Given the unique ability of archaeology to illuminate temporal processes, archaeologists have begun employing a number of theoretical models to understand the nature of these processes, and the ways in which the modern archaeological landscape retains their physical traces. Battlefields, as discrete temporal events taking place in physical settings with their own history, offer an intriguing avenue to explore archaeological temporality. This paper reviews the ways in which archaeologists have employed the Annales approach and time perspectivism, and considers a case study in battlefield archaeology – the 1898 battlefield of El Caney, Cuba.*

## *Introduction*

The unique time depth associated with archaeology provides access to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the human past. Curiously, however, archaeologists have been slow to seize upon this feature of the discipline; sustained theoretical treatments of time in archaeology have been scarce, although there has been an increase in recent years. The nature of the archaeological record has been considered at length as a physical manifestation of forces playing out over an extended time scale. The nature of that time scale, however, and (particularly) how archaeologists can discern time(s) in the archaeological record itself, has often gone unexamined.

Some archaeologists have adapted concepts developed by the French historian Fernand Braudel in order to explicate the ways in which a hierarchical temporal structure might be assembled and applied (see particularly Knapp 1992 and Bintliff 1991, 1997, 2004). This *Annales* approach (named after the influential French journal with

which Braudel was associated) has allowed archaeologists to understand the ways in which time operates differently at different scales, and how those different scales might be visible in the archaeological record. However, others have criticized this approach for its lack of explicit theorizing and the more deterministic elements they discern in the approach's higher-level temporal scales (the *longue durée*, or long term).

A conceptually similar but operationally more flexible approach was developed by archaeologist Geoff Bailey in a series of articles beginning in the early 1980s (Bailey 1981, 1983, 1987). This approach – time perspectivism – acknowledges as the *Annales* approach does the multiple frequencies and scales at which time can be discerned operating through the physical world. Bailey's approach, however, acknowledges a dynamism within the system largely lacking in the traditional *Annales* approach. For Bailey, even the longest of long terms is in constant flux, even if the rhythms of change are practically invisible at the level of the individual archaeological site.

Given the state of research on time in archaeology, the archaeological study of battlefields offers an interesting way to approach the problem. A battle is a discrete temporal event - it begins, proceeds, and ends in some fashion, at a relatively small temporal scale. The longest events that can still be considered "battles" (extended sieges, for example) typically last no more than a number of months, a brief duration in the sense of archaeological time. If the material remains of such a brief event can shed light on that event, might they not also allow the archaeologist to glimpse other temporal layers and, perhaps, the dynamic relationships between those layers? A battle event does not occur in a vacuum; it is played out against a landscape that already possesses a past of its own. As we shall see, the physical manifestations of that past can influence the battle event, just as the battle event leaves its mark on the landscape.

In this paper attempts are made to understand this discursive dynamic between multiple temporalities as viewed through the lens of battlefield archaeology. After a discussion of the *Annales* and time-perspectivism approaches, several case studies of battlefield investigations are presented, and conclusions drawn about the potential temporal resolution of battlefield archaeological investigations. Finally, a specific historical landscape – the area of southeastern Cuba in which the 1898 battle of El Caney occurred – is examined in detail. The events of the Santiago campaign unfolded against a Cuban landscape already imbued with a deep human and natural history; the

archaeological expression of that campaign is a set of material traces both informed by that past and interacting dynamically with it.

*Time Perspectivism, and Annales: Structure and Event*

The *Annales* approach, pioneered by historian Fernand Braudel, represents an attempt to understand temporal processes as nested within a hierarchical structure; each component of that structure has its own temporal rhythm and must be analyzed at a different scale (Smith 1992; Stoianovich 1976; Wandsnider 2004). Braudel's classic formulation identified three basic temporal layers: the *longue durée*, or very long term (*mentalité* or geological processes, for example), the conjuncture (a middle range that includes political, economic and social structures), and the event (the small-scale individual actions of which history had traditionally been comprised) (Braudel 1972; Duke 1991). Historian Traian Stoianovich (1976) characterizes Braudel's understanding of "duration" as

[D]uration at a quasi-immobile level of structures and traditions, with the ponderous action of the cosmos, geography, biology, collective psychology, and sociology; a level of middle-range duration of conjunctures or periodic cycles of varying length but rarely exceeding several generations; a level of short duration of events, at which almost every action is boom, bang, flash, gnash, news, and noise, but often exerts only a temporary impact [109].

Thus stability and change can be understood as playing out at three rates – “episodic, conjunctural (cyclical), and structural” (Stoianovich 1976:94). Braudel himself acknowledged that this tripartite scheme was a conceptual tool, not a mathematical model; indeed, he was well-aware that these three terms could be understood as *categories* encompassing any number of temporal layers and processes. He tended to focus his research on the larger structural components of this temporal scheme, and the ways in which middle-range conjunctures are ultimately shaped by those deeper structures (a prime example is Braudel 1984). For this he and others who have applied the *Annales* approach have been criticized for taking a deterministic view of history. Human agency, visible only at the level of the event, is essentially subject to the forces operating at higher temporal levels, even though the connections between those layers are often unclear.

This is a key criticism leveled by archaeologist Jan Harding (2005) at fellow archaeologists who have employed the *Annales* approach. For Harding, the fundamental question driving discussions of change in human societies through time is the relationship between the structure and the event. *Annalists* and archaeologists informed by this approach tend to privilege the former at the expense of the latter. The event, however, is the level at which individual human agency is expressed. A conceptual scheme which focuses its attention elsewhere will be coldly mechanistic and ultimately lacking in explanatory power, according to Harding. Conversely, an approach that focuses exclusively on the level of the event fails to account for the ways in which large-scale forces shape that event. As Harding (2005:90) writes,

Therefore to advocate the primacy of either the ‘time of the event’ or the ‘time of the structure’ is actually to under-theorise what is, in reality, a recursive and complex network of relationships. And to do so is to invoke either a reductionist or determinist understanding of social processes.

Harding (2005:95) concludes that the Braudelian hierarchical approach – “more concerned with being historical than being temporal” – should be discarded in favor of an approach that attempts to understand the unfolding of events as experienced by participants.

Working independently of the *Annalists*, archaeologist Geoff Bailey formulated a not dissimilar conception of time beginning with a 1981 article. This approach, refined and elaborated upon in a further series of articles, he dubbed “time perspectivism” (Bailey 1981, 1983, 1987). At its core this is an approach that accepts and builds into its analytical model the complexities of events operating at different temporal scales. Unlike the *Annales* approach, time perspectivism does not neatly categorize phenomena into three temporal categories; rather, it is expected that a multitude of temporal scales exist. The scale chosen for analysis depends on the research question being asked, as well as the nature of the archaeological deposit being analyzed. In his initial formulation of this approach, Bailey (1981) spells out how different processes operating at different time scales can lead to a false dichotomy within the discipline. That is, researchers concerned with large-scale change can be characterized as environmental determinists, for example, while those whose research interests are more concerned with the particulars of historic events are assailed for their lack of

large-scale theorizing. Time perspectivism offers a third way, an acknowledgement of different yet equally valid scales of analysis. The virtues of this approach, Bailey concludes, are threefold:

First, it reasserts the importance of the historical dimension in archaeological data, without committing us to the fate of an idiographic discipline. Secondly, it allows for the co-existence of diversity of theoretical points of view without undermining the search for integration. Thirdly, it challenges us to justify our theories in archaeological terms regardless of the support they may derive from adjacent disciplines [Bailey 1981:111].

Note that Bailey does not advocate relinquishing archaeology's concern for empirical data and testable hypotheses; time perspectivism is not a prescription for unfounded speculation based on the inherent relativism of temporal studies. Rather, by folding a more nuanced view of temporal dynamics into a scientific approach to understanding the past, Bailey believes that we can begin to understand the ways in which complex temporal hierarchies operate, and how those operations can be accessed through the archaeological record.

### *The Battle as Event*

How then does the archaeological investigation of battlefields fit into this theoretical framework? Battles by their very nature (as mentioned earlier) are discrete temporal events. As such, they would seem to fit naturally into the smaller scale analytical frameworks of both the *Annales* approach and time perspectivism as developed by Bailey. In other words, battles (and their material remains) are not obviously related to higher-level layers of temporal processes. They exist at the level of human agency and individual action; while their implications may be significant in terms of larger political or social structures, battles themselves do not clearly transcend their temporal niche.

There has, however, been some discussion by archaeologists of the larger dynamics inherent in battles and battlefields. Archaeologist John Carman (1999), for example, attempts to place the battle event within a larger narrative that includes anticipation and memory. He constructs a model of battlefield temporality in which the battle event itself serves as a "lens through which specific

contemporary concerns are focused, transforming them into meaningful associations for their future and into our present” (Carman 1999:236). That is, “questions of legitimacy” of various kinds are posed, and the “decisive moment” of the battle serves to clarify the issues and resolve those questions. In the aftermath of battle, the battlefield as a place memorializing that “decisive moment” as well as the cultural memory of the events that transpired there ensure that the battle event is remembered and carries meaning into the present.

In one sense, battles can be seen as the manifestation of larger social dynamics, a kind of microcosm of social and political conflict made visible and concrete. The Spanish-American War, for example, represents the confluence of several historical trends and national political trajectories. The fundamental causes of the war involved questions of American, Spanish and Cuban national interests and national “personalities”; the first, in the aftermath of Reconstruction and westward expansion, was prepared to take its place on the world stage as a “great power”, the second saw its historical significance as a great power beginning to wane and took a defensive, intransigent international posture, and the third was driven by a nascent sense of national identity and a desire to break free of the yoke of Spanish colonialism (see especially May 1961; Perez 1995; Trask 1981).

The mechanics of warfare, as well, represented a critical moment in the development of military technology and tactics, as the linear formations of the mid-nineteenth century at last began to give way in the face of rapid-fire machine guns and barbed wire entanglements (Jamieson 1994). New styles of loose-order tactics and skirmish lines taking advantage of natural cover can provide through their material remains archaeological evidence of these larger changes in society and culture, a way for the archaeological observer to move from the event to the larger structures.

There is, however, another way in which these larger-scale temporal dynamics can be understood – through an analysis of the battlefield landscape itself and the ways in which the battlefield event is imprinted on the landscape above and below the traces of other historical processes. The battle as event thus becomes one thread in a temporal tapestry represented on the landscape, the means of entry for the archaeologist to gain access to deeper temporal structures.

### *Time Perspectivism and Battlefield Archaeology*

Before examining the Cuban battlefield landscape in detail, it may be enlightening to review some of the archaeological studies that

have been conducted of other nineteenth-century battlefields. By examining the ways in which archaeologists have used the material record to reconstruct battle events, we can begin to get some sense of the degree of temporal resolution offered by battlefield archaeological assemblages.

Perhaps the most well-known examples of battlefield archaeology are the studies carried out at the site of the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn in Montana (Scott and Fox 1987; Scott et al. 1989). Archaeologists Douglas Scott and Richard Fox conducted a systematic metal-detector survey over a part of the battlefield that had been cleared of underbrush by a wildfire. Both the distribution of artifacts across the battlefield and the archaeologists' ability to identify unique firearm signatures allowed Scott and Fox to interpret the events of the battle with a remarkable level of detail. The ebb and flow of the action at the Little Bighorn (in which one detachment of American soldiers had been completely annihilated) had long remained an enigma, known only from Native American accounts which could not be convincingly reconciled with Euroamerican conceptions of space, time and movement. Analysis of artifact distributions suggested the way the American and Native American forces were deployed, how they moved around the battlefield, and how the action unfolded. The ability to identify unique firearms and thus reconstruct the movements of individuals across the landscape allowed Scott and Fox to study the Little Bighorn Battlefield at a high level of temporal resolution.

Similarly, archaeologists Stephen R. Potter and Douglas W. Owsley (2000) were able to examine a Civil War burial from the battlefield of Antietam, Maryland, with a level of detail that allowed them access to a very precise slice of time. By analyzing the personal effects found with the dead individual (a Union soldier) as well as the injuries he had sustained, Potter and Owsley were able to tentatively place this individual in a New York infantry regiment who was killed during a Confederate counterattack in the vicinity of the Sunken Road at Antietam on the morning of September 17, 1862. In addition to the structural dynamics that can be discerned in this archaeological assemblage (issues of socioeconomic status, the nature of Civil War warfare, and burial of the dead, etc), the specificity of the event-level dynamics is remarkable.

This in turn raises a number of interpretive issues. Both of these examples, as well as others from the American Civil War and the hostilities with Native Americans in the American West, date from the latter half of the nineteenth century (for example, Geier and Potter 2000; Geier and Winter 2004; Greene and Scott 2004; Scott et al.



2007). Firing pin marks on metallic cartridges and other artifacts identifiable (and datable) with the assistance of historical documents simplify some of the temporal issues involved in interpreting these assemblages. Would the same level of detail be available at a medieval battlefield site, or the site of a Roman engagement? These are questions to bear in mind as the discussion turns to the battlefield landscape of El Caney, Cuba. Like the landscapes at the Little Bighorn and Antietam, this is a historically documented landscape across which a reasonably well-documented battle raged during the late nineteenth century. What can archaeology tell us about the multiple temporalities interacting on that kind of landscape?

*Case Study: El Caney, Cuba, July 1, 1898*

Given a battle event that occurred upon a given landscape, we might be able to parse out the different temporal layers (and interlayer dynamics) of that landscape. The battle of El Caney, which took place on July 1, 1898, offers just such an opportunity. A battle which lasted most of the day was fought against a backdrop imbued with its own rich history. Indeed, the physical traces of that history helped shape the events of the battle, just as the battle itself has informed the later use of the same landscape. To understand how this might be so, it is necessary first to put the battle of July 1 in a larger historical and geographical context.

El Caney is a small town located about four miles northeast of Santiago de Cuba. In July 1898, the town occupied a strategic location along the road between Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo to the east (Cosmas 1986; Trask 1981). Likewise, El Caney was a key point of defense covering Santiago de Cuba's vulnerable water supply. After three years of desultory guerilla warfare with Cuban revolutionary forces, El Caney, like many other Cuban villages, had been fortified by Spanish troops. Five blockhouses had been constructed around the town's perimeter, and an eighteenth-century stone fort atop a commanding eminence known as El Viso was occupied as another blockhouse; the entire network of defenses was likewise fortified with a series of trenches and barbed-wire entanglements.

Historically, the fight at El Caney is considered a sidelight to the more famous action occurring simultaneously at San Juan Hill to the southwest. Both battles represented the climactic events of the 1898 Santiago campaign, in which an American expedition landed in southern Cuba and endeavored to surround and reduce the Spanish garrison at Santiago de Cuba (Trask 1981). Deployed to the north to

eliminate a Spanish outpost hovering beyond the American right flank, Brigadier General Henry W. Lawton's American division became bogged down in an intense engagement with a much smaller Spanish force under Brigadier General Joaquin Vara de Rey. The Spanish forces were solidly entrenched around the small town of El Caney; the Spanish blockhouses and stone fort effectively commanded the approaches to the town. Lacking sufficient artillery support, Lawton methodically pushed his forces closer to the Spanish lines. Ultimately the Americans' sheer preponderance of numbers decided the battle, as El Viso was taken (rendering the town untenable) and the Spanish forces withdrew towards Santiago de Cuba. The unexpected vigor of the Spanish defense of El Caney occupied Lawton's division for most of the day, and prevented his men from participating in the primary American assault on the Spanish lines around Santiago de Cuba.

An examination of the landscape around El Caney reveals multiple temporal layers and a complex series of interrelationships between those layers. Discussion of the El Caney battlefield from an archaeological perspective must at the moment remain largely hypothetical. Nevertheless, enough remains of the physical traces of the temporal complexity of the landscape around El Caney to permit an analysis of how the archaeological remains of the battle event of July 1 would fit into a larger network of interlocking temporal structures. These traces include the town of El Caney itself, the stone fort called El Viso, the network of roads and agricultural fields surrounding the town, and the existence of a historical park which preserves part of the battlefield. I will begin by touching on each of these aspects of the landscape's history, and the ways in which the physical remains of that history continued to shape events playing out across the landscape. Hopefully, it will be possible to glimpse other temporal layers through this archaeological record, and (possibly) the nature of the dynamic connections between them.

### *Cuban Temporalities*

An examination of the El Caney landscape as a network of temporal connections and layers must begin with the town itself, which has a rich history dating back to the sixteenth-century period of early Spanish colonial rule (Perez 1995). The stone fort, which dates from somewhat later, likewise exists within a larger interplay of structures. Indeed, it is important to remember, as anthropologist Tim Ingold (1993) points out, that the landscape (or "taskscape", as he phrases it) is not a static assemblage of numerous temporal layers quietly piled one

upon the other. Rather, there is a constant interplay between forces (both man-made and natural), each shaping and shaped by the next. The first order of business is to identify these layers; then we can attempt to understand the dynamics of their interactions.

### Understanding the “Longue Durée”

The deepest underlying temporal structure is that of the “longue durée”, the long term identified by Fernand Braudel and characterized by him as possessing a serene, static quality, unmoved by the forces operating at lower levels of the temporal hierarchy (Braudel 1972). As has been pointed out before, however, time perspectivism allows us to understand that even at the level of the highest-order temporal layer, there is always change and motion (Bailey 1983). Whether that motion is cyclical or non-linear, it is detectable only if one is attuned to the appropriate temporal scale.

The deepest processes embedded within the Cuban countryside are the geological forces which created and shaped the islands of the Caribbean, and which continue to sculpt the physical landscape. The largest of the Caribbean islands, Cuba is remarkable for the flatness of its topography (Blume 1974). This fact, coupled with an ideal climate, ensured that large-scale agriculture would flourish during the Spanish colonial and early national periods. The most obvious change in the physical landscape of Cuba since the beginning of the historic era has been the removal of natural forest cover, which, according to geographer Helmut Blume, “has disappeared for various reasons: the early beef farming, the supply of wood to the sugar boiling houses during the nineteenth century, the expansion of the area under sugar cane cultivation in the twentieth century, and the production of charcoal” (124).

Moving from long-term physical forces to the long-term human history of Cuba, archaeologist Samuel M. Wilson (2007) describes how more technologically complex Taino peoples from Hispaniola gradually replaced or assimilated the earlier preceramic populations of Cuba beginning around 600 A.D. (see also Dacal and Rivero 1996). After Spanish colonization of the island in the early sixteenth century, the native Taino population gradually disappeared, to be replaced by large numbers of African slaves (particularly as agricultural productivity increased in the eighteenth century) (McNeill 1985).

It is difficult to say, based on the satellite and aerial images available of the El Caney area, if any of these long-term natural and

human processes are clearly visible on the landscape. The roads and fields in the countryside around the village have not changed significantly since 1898, and still retain the agricultural character they would have had throughout the historic period. Certainly archaeological investigations on the ground would reveal evidence of the prehistoric human past, and geomorphological analysis would shed light on past and present geological processes. Yet for now a simple awareness of these forces operating in the background offers a richer understanding of the Cuban past.

### The Spanish Colonial Past

Santiago de Cuba was settled in 1515, and the village of El Caney must have been established soon afterward (Perez 1995). A local legend maintains that Spanish *conquistador* Hernán Cortés worshipped in the village church before departing for the conquest of Mexico in 1519 (Bonsal 1899). After the colonial capital was moved from Santiago de Cuba to Havana in 1565, southeastern Cuba appears to have slumbered in relative obscurity until the eighteenth century, when a tremendous boom in sugar production led to an increase in the population and wealth of the Santiago area (Kuethe 1986; McNeill 1985). The stone fort atop El Viso, which possibly dates from the eighteenth century or earlier (it was considered “old” and “medieval” by the 1890s), offers an intriguing glimpse at this era of Cuban history. At first glance, it seems somewhat odd that an inland fortification like this would have been built long before the outbreak of armed rebellion against Spanish rule. Yet the 1740s-1760s, for example, marked a period of international strife during which British expeditionary forces repeatedly threatened the Cuban ports of Havana and Santiago de Cuba. El Caney and El Viso are strategically situated astride the road between Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo (where Admiral Vernon and General Wentworth landed their ill-fated British invasion force in 1741), so the stone fort may plausibly have been constructed as an interior defensive work around this time (Pares 1963).

The eighteenth century colonial past persisted into the battlefield landscape of El Caney through Spanish reuse of the crumbling stone fort as a blockhouse, first as a defense against Cuban guerillas, then as the key to their position against Lawton’s American soldiers. The American strategy for taking El Caney centered around this prominent landmark; in this way past and present engaged in an intriguing temporal dialectic that left material remains (the evidence of

the American assault on El Viso) informed by older material remains (the stone fort itself).

### Memory and Memorialization

This notion of reuse of the past finds further expression in the aftermath of the 1898 battle. The stone fort and the area immediately surrounding it are preserved as an historical park; other key areas of the battlefield have not been so preserved. An elevation known on some maps as the “Alto Coronal” (e.g. McCook 1899; see Figure 1), and which served as the key to the American Twelfth Infantry’s maneuvers against the Spanish troops at El Viso, is now occupied by what appears to be a Communist-era Cuban military installation. In this case evidence of the nineteenth-century military past had been obliterated in the name of twentieth century military needs (whether Cuban or Soviet).

As for the preservation and memorialization of El Viso, it is enlightening to briefly discuss modern Cuban memories of the 1898 campaign (Carlson-Drexler 2008; Scott and Carlson-Drexler 2007). In the aftermath of Spanish defeat in Cuba and their relinquishment of the island, the United States maintained Cuba as an American protectorate well into the twentieth century. On the fiftieth anniversary of the battle for San Juan Hill, the Cuban government collaborated with the American government to erect monuments to the American troops who fought in that campaign.

Modern Cuban interest in the battle, by contrast, is focused on the Cuban revolutionary forces that fought alongside the Americans at both San Juan Hill and El Caney. American participants’ reports and reminiscent accounts, reflecting the biases of their day, often fail to mention (or mention in disparaging terms) the contributions of these Cuban forces (e.g. Bigelow 1899; Parker 1898; War Department 1898). For modern Cubans, those who participated in the rebellion against Spain (which took place more or less continuously during the last three decades of the nineteenth century) are honored as patriots and as the precursors of the Communist revolutionaries who established the modern Cuban state in 1959 (Perez 1995).

### Temporal Dynamics

I have discussed briefly some of the ways in which past and present interact across the landscape of El Caney. The old stone fort at El Viso dictated the flow of battle in 1898, and is now preserved in the

context of that battle, not the context of its original use (although, oddly enough, the fort is now outfitted with an eighteenth-century cannon for which the fort was not designed and which appears to be a modern memorial historically inappropriate to neither era of use) (Peter Bleed and Douglas Scott, personal communication 2006). Differential preservation and memorialization of 1898-related sites around Santiago de Cuba suggests a selective interest in the past (perhaps reflecting a selective utility) on the part of modern Cubans.

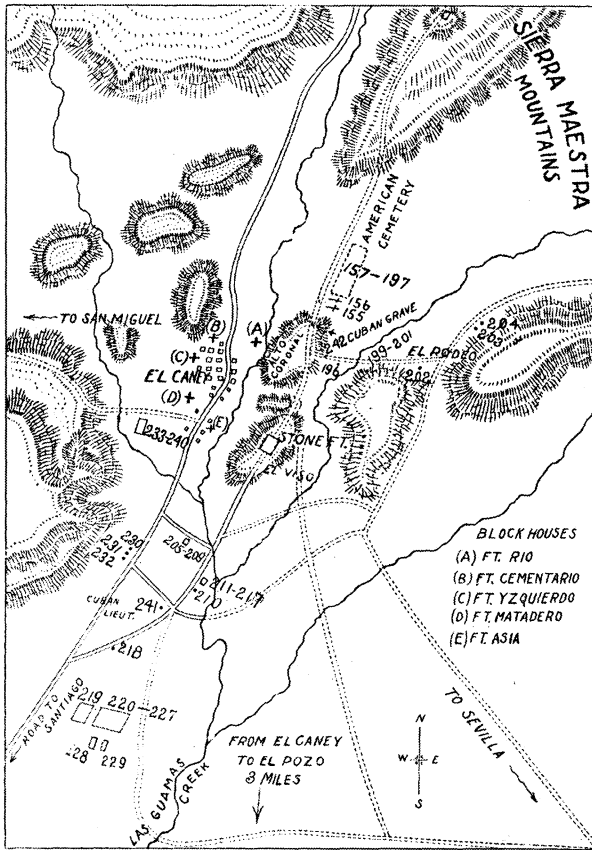


FIG. 97  
Map showing approximately the location of graves on the firing line around Caney.

Figure 1. Map of El Caney by Henry C. McCook, U.S. Army chaplain (McCook 1899:176).

Both of these examples suggest ways in which disparate temporal scales can inform one another. One material expression of the past (a stone fort, for example) carries within it evidence of a single, hours-long event (the battle for El Caney) as well as evidence of larger-scale structural history (Spanish colonial defense strategies during the eighteenth century and twentieth-century Cuban conceptions of their past). These interactions are not precisely linear, and in the absence of historical documentation it might be difficult to make the connections. Nevertheless, it seems clear that some archaeological evidence of temporal dynamics is visible on the battlefield landscape of El Caney.

### *Conclusion*

Given the potential of a time perspectivism approach to illuminate the archaeological record, it seems as if a battlefield landscape would provide an intriguing palimpsest of temporalities to unpack. Indeed, the temporally discrete events of the battle proper cannot be understood in isolation from the past(s) which are already a part of that landscape. A battle represents an event driven by human agency, and yet informed by larger-scale structures (and informing those structures in turn). The nature and mechanisms of those intertemporal relationships remain to be fully elucidated. This analysis of the temporal landscape of El Caney must remain tentative, given the difficulties of obtaining access to Cuba for archaeological fieldwork. Historical records of the Santiago campaign of 1898 (and Cuban history more generally), as well as analysis of historical and modern imagery of the area around El Caney, still offer a rich set of resources for an attempt to understand temporal dynamics in a battlefield context. Ultimately, battlefield archaeological studies offer a unique opportunity to take full advantage of the time depth of archaeology as a discipline, as well as an opportunity to gain fresh insights into the relationship between human societies and the past.

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