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# Defining a Civil War battlefield: recent archaeological investigations at the Pickett's Mill State Historic Site, Paulding County, Georgia.

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**DEFINING A CIVIL WAR BATTLEFIELD: RECENT  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT THE PICKETT'S MILL  
STATE HISTORIC SITE, PAULDING COUNTY, GEORGIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Recent investigations at the Pickett's Mill State Historic Site have yielded new insights into the Civil War battle that occurred in May 1864. Military and historical sources have documented that the major battle took place in a ravine, but that skirmishes also occurred in adjacent areas, including a large, open wheat field. Some reports have suggested that Confederate soldiers had forced Union troops out of the ravine into this field where they became exposed. In the summer of 2006 a variety of different archaeological techniques were employed to determine what role the wheat field played in the battle. This paper describes the archaeological techniques that were used and their effectiveness in identifying and recovering military items associated with the battle. Among them, metal detectors proved to be the most effective tool with hundreds of artifacts being recovered from the site.

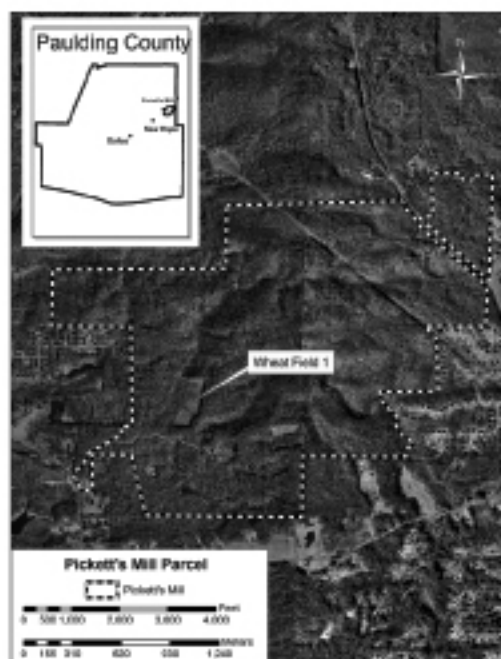
Key Words: Civil War, battlefield, Pickett's Mill, archaeological survey, metal detecting.

**INTRODUCTION**

In 2006, archaeologists and student assistants from Kennesaw State University (KSU) conducted a Phase I archaeological survey of portions of the 765 acre Pickett's Mill State Historic Site, located in Paulding County, Georgia (Figure 1). Pickett's Mill State Historic Site was established in 1990, and has been expanded by acquisition of adjacent properties to its present size. Pickett's Mill State Historic Site is owned and operated by the Department of Natural Resources. The State Historic Site contains the remains of two grist mills (Pickett's and Leverett's), Confederate and Union earthworks, several historic house sites, Civil War era roads, a Union field hospital, military

grave sites, and one prehistoric lithic scatter (occupation date unknown) (Figure 2).

**Figure 1.** Aerial map of Pickett's Mill State Historic Site, Paulding County, Georgia.



**Figure 2.** Location of cultural resources at Pickett's Mill (after Dickens and Worthy 1984:Figure 2).



To date, very limited archaeological investigations have been conducted at Pickett's Mill (1-3). Given the nearly complete lack of information about the cultural resources inside the park, the site manager, Charles Winchester, has determined that some or all of them need to be investigated to better interpret and manage the resources as well as enhance visitor experience. He requires information about the mill sites, the historic house sites, and the cultural features associated with the battlefield (e.g., Confederate and Union earthworks and artillery emplacements) within the park boundary. In 2005, the senior author was invited by the State Archaeologist, Dr. David Crass, to conduct archaeological investigations at the park.

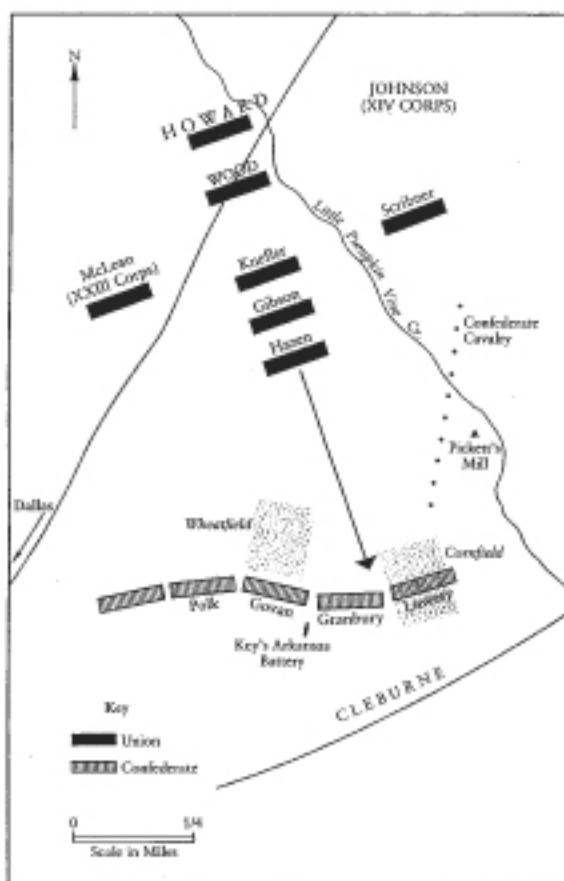
### **The Battle of Pickett's Mill**

Paulding County was the site of several battles during the Civil War. Union General William Sherman and Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston's troops fought each other three times in Paulding County in the spring of 1864 (New Hope Church, Dallas, and Pickett's Mill). In May 1864, Union General William T. Sherman moved one hundred thousand soldiers through Paulding County during his Atlanta Campaign. In opposition to him were Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston and his sixty thousand soldiers. For nearly two weeks, these two armies opposed one another along ten miles of parallel lines in Paulding County. During this time, three bloody battles were fought: New Hope Church, May 25th; Pickett's Mill, May 27th; and Dallas, May 28th. Although the battle of Pickett's Mill is considered to have been a minor engagement in the Atlanta Campaign of 1864, it is regarded as one of the best preserved Civil War battlefields in the nation.

Pickett's Mill State Historic Site was the scene of fierce fighting during the Civil War (4-10). Union troops, supplied by rail as they marched on Atlanta from the Chattanooga area, had left their supply train in an attempt to skirt around the heavily defended Allatoona Pass. Confederate commanders, notified of the Union action by cavalry observers, moved troops west to intercept the Union force. Union forces attacked the Confederate lines in the vicinity of Pickett's Mill in late May of 1864 (Figure 3). The area was, and remains, mostly wooded rolling hills with intervening valleys. Several small farms were scattered throughout the area. As the Union troops moved toward the defenders, they became scattered among the woods. Command broke down and the attacking troops lost cohesion as a functioning unit. As they came off a ridge and into a ravine, they exposed themselves to intense fire from defenders along the opposite ridge and from those positioned at the head of the ravine. Confederate defenders were massed shoulder to shoulder, with a front line firing while a back line reloaded rifles and passed them forward. The intense fire from both directions was devastating to the Union soldiers who had become trapped in the ravine. The battle of Pickett's Mill was a terrible defeat for the Union army, which fell back toward its supply area. An estimated 1600 Federal troops were killed at Pickett's Mill; Confederate losses were about 500 (5, 7, 10). After the battle, many of the approximately

1600 Union dead were buried in a mass grave along the ravine where they had fallen. Others may have been buried elsewhere on the battlefield.

**Figure 3.** The battle of Pickett's Mill on May 27, 1864, showing troop movements (after Scaife 2004).



Two years after the battle, some of the fallen were disinterred and relocated to formal cemeteries that had been established in the area; however, the reburial detail had no success in locating the mass grave of approximately 400 Union dead. The officer in charge of the detail stated that he did not believe the story of the mass grave.

### Previous Investigations

The first archaeological investigations at Pickett's Mill began in the early 1970s. In 1973, an archaeological survey of state-owned property was conducted to identify, record, and evaluate all cultural resources pertaining to the

development and interpretation of the Pickett's Mill Site. Sydney Kerksis was contracted with the Historic Preservation Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources to provide consultation on the military history of the site (11). Richard Williams of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources was assigned the task of developing a plan for public use of the site (12).

In 1979, a metal detector survey was conducted on a widened section of Colonial Pipeline right-of-way across the state property (13). The most thorough archaeological research at Pickett's Mill was conducted by Roy Dickens and Linda Worthy (7). Their report includes results of the 1973 cultural resources survey of the property and the 1977-78 investigations of the Zachariah Brand House (9PA2), a small mid-19th century farmstead which stood in the area of military activities. Several features were identified during the excavations of the Brand House, including the remains of a mud-and-stone chimney and a root cellar. The work was implemented under agreement between the Department of Anthropology at Georgia State University and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, with Roy Dickens serving as Principal Investigator (7).

In 1989, a Phase II archaeological survey was conducted of an access road and visitor's center at the state park (14). Fieldwork consisted of shovel testing, small test pits at two chimney falls, and a metal detector survey of the project area prior to construction. No artifacts related to the battle were recovered at either of the two chimney falls or in the shovel tests, but numerous artifacts related to the battle were recovered and mapped in the construction areas.

### **Archaeological Survey**

Fieldwork at Pickett's Mill was conducted in two stages. Both stages of fieldwork involved surveying a large open wheat field, located adjacent to the ravine where the main battle took place. The initial stage of fieldwork involved a Phase I shovel test survey and the second stage involved a Phase I metal detector survey.

One of the main objectives of the current archaeological research at Pickett's Mill is to determine the nature and extent of the battle that occurred within the boundaries of the state park. This is no easy task, given the size of the park, but military and historic records provide significant insight into the actual location of the main battle. Our goal, over the next five years, is to conduct a comprehensive survey in those areas identified historically as being part of the battle. In other words, we want to ground-truth what has been written in the military and historic records.

The main battle at Pickett's Mill occurred in a deep ravine. Military sources have stated that some skirmishes spilled out of this ravine and into a large, open wheat field. Some reports have suggested that Confederate soldiers forced Union troops out of the ravine into this field where they became exposed. Since we know where the main battle took place, we thought it would be best to begin our survey where the skirmishing took place. In this way,

we could get a reasonable idea of what was occurring in these peripheral locations before moving into the area of the main battle.

In the summer of 2006, we began by conducting a shovel survey of the wheat field, designated as Wheat Field 1. Wheat Field 1 is about 300 meters long north-south by 100 meters wide east-west (Figure 4). Each shovel test is 30 cm in diameter and placed at 15 meter intervals. Shovel testing took place in areas which were undisturbed, relatively flat (less than 20% grade), with no standing water, and with poor visibility (less than 75%). All soils are screened through 1/4 inch mesh hardware cloth (Figure 5). Records of each shovel test were kept in field notebooks, including information on content (e.g., presence or absence of artifacts, artifact descriptions) and context (i.e., soil color and texture descriptions, depth of definable levels, observed features). All shovel tests were backfilled upon completion.

**Figure 4.** View of Wheat Field 1, looking north. The pin flags mark the location of metal detector finds.





**Figure 5.** Student assistants conducting shovel test survey.



After surveying half of the field (or roughly 15,000 square meters), not one subsurface artifact was recovered. We found this to be curious since skirmishing was thought to have taken place here. While we were optimistic about the high recovery rate of artifacts, we were concerned that treasure hunters had already looted this particular area. Prior to our shovel survey, many local residents had told us that this spot had been heavily looted since the end of WWII.

Given the lack of artifactual information, we redesigned our approach to surveying the wheat field, one that would impact our research for the coming years. We came to the conclusion that either the wheat field had been completely looted over the past fifty years or our current technique of artifact recovery was not precise enough. In consultation with the State Archaeologist, we came up with an alternative technique, the use of metal detectors. Metal detectors, when used in a systematic manner, have proven to be very effective remote sensing tools on military sites (e.g., they were used at the site of the Battle of Little Bighorn) (15). Not only are they effective in identifying and recovering military items associated with the battle, but in accurately defining the boundaries of it as well (16).

Wheat Field 1 is regularly mowed, thus providing optimal conditions for locating and recovering both military and personal items related to the battle. In order to maximize our recovery of artifactual material, we decided

to use metal detectors. We placed a 20 meter grid system across the entire southern half of the wheat field. Using string, we then further subdivided each of these grids into smaller 5 by 20 m grids. This allowed a team to cover a defined area of the grid; in most cases, the teams were able to overlap along grid lines to ensure 100% coverage. A team consisted of three students: one to use the metal detector; one to hold a trowel and/or shovel to excavate the artifact(s); and one to record the location and artifact type (Figure 6). A total of ten 20 meter grids (designated as Blocks A-J) were surveyed with metal detectors.

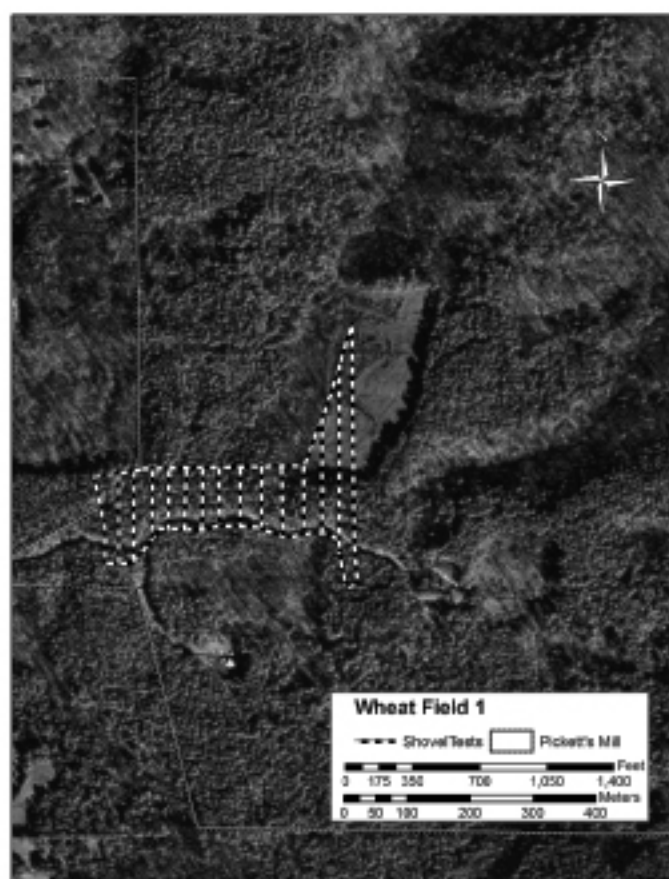
**Figure 6.** A team of four student assistants conduct metal detector survey in Wheat Field 1.



## RESULTS

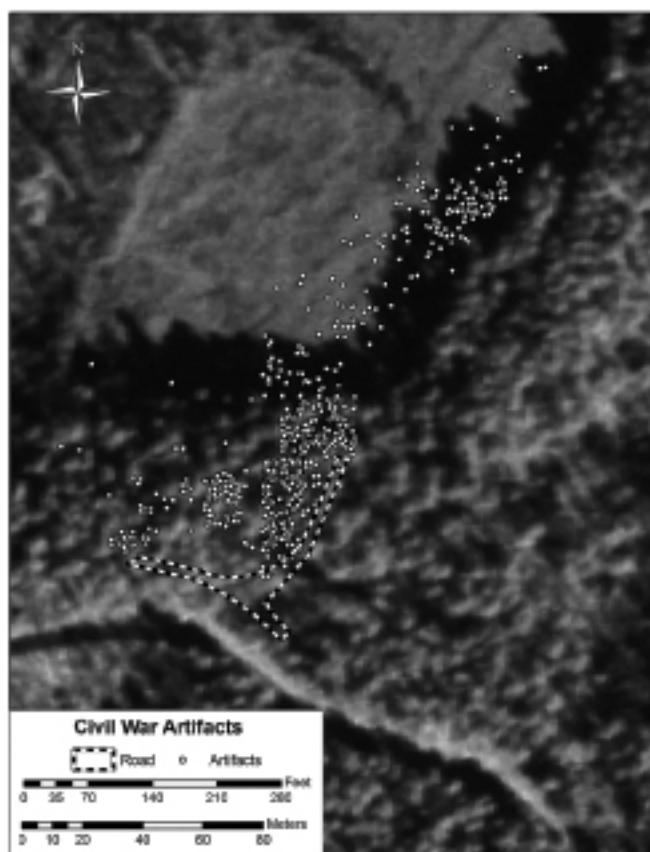
The survey consisted of screened shovel tests at 30 meter intervals and 15 meter intervals when finding positive shovel tests. The shovel tests were placed across portions of Wheat Field 1. All of the shovel tests were run north-south, paralleling the west boundary of the park. No areas were avoided due to disturbance. A total of 79 shovel tests was excavated (Figure 7). None of the shovel tests produced artifacts, although a metal hoe was found on the surface between two shovel tests.

**Figure 7.** Aerial map of Pickett's Mill showing shovel test locations in Wheat Field 1 (bottom left).

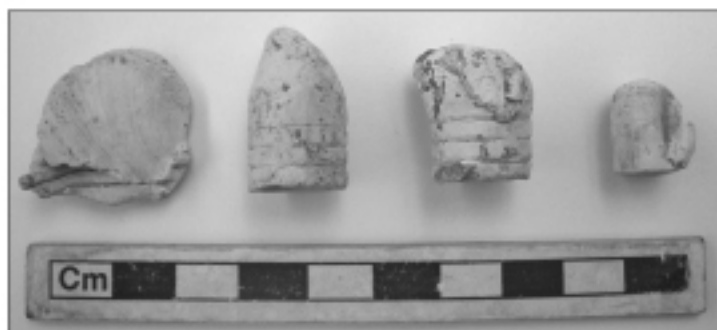


The area surveyed with metal detectors covered approximately 12,800 square meters, or roughly the same amount of area we originally shovel tested. A total of 152 hits were made with the metal detectors in Wheat Field 1 (Figure 8). The majority of these positive hits contained a single artifact, while others produced multiple items. The majority of them were military items (e.g., fired Minnie balls, Confederate belt buckles, and cannon ball fragments) associated with the battle (Figures 9 and 10); however, others were identified as modern materials (e.g., percussion caps, primers, and aluminum foil) related to the Civil War reenactments that regularly take place in this part of the park. Although many of the hits we had were from these reenactments, it helped the field crews to hone their metal detector skills.

**Figure 8.** Map of Wheat Field 1 showing the location of metal detector finds.



**Figure 9.** A representative sample of fired rounds recovered from Wheat Field 1. Left: Three Confederate Minnie balls; Right: A single Confederate Carbine round.



**Figure 10.** Two Confederate belt buckles from the metal detector survey in Wheat Field 1.



The metal detector program was extended southward into the woods where a Civil War-era house (9PA480) is located (1). This house was standing, but abandoned, at the time of the battle, and occupied by Confederate troops. Two 20 meter grids were set up adjacent to the original block of ten 20 meter units. Both of these grids were located immediately to the east of the house site (see Figure 8). Compared to the wheat field, we found more metal objects near the house. There was a total of 350 hits with the metal detectors in this area. In general, the military items (e.g., fired Minnie balls, unfired Minnie balls, belt buckles, unidentified brass, and shrapnel) were found as isolated items. However, many of the hits also contained multiple historic items (e.g., square nails, stove fragments, lead-glazed earthenware, and mason jar lids) related to the occupation of the house.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As stated earlier, the main objective of the current archaeological research at Pickett's Mill is to determine the nature and extent of the battle that occurred within the boundaries of this state historic site. The first season of investigations by Kennesaw State University at Pickett's Mill has yielded new information about the battle that took place on May 27th, 1864. Military records have stated that skirmishes took place outside of the ravine where the main battle occurred. The metal detector program that we initiated in Wheat Field 1, located to the west of the ravine, supports these historical documents. The recovery of dozens of Minnie balls, along with other military items, indicates that Confederate and Union troops were indeed fighting in this open field. While historical documents mention the skirmishing, we have, through our metal detector program, precisely located the extent of it. Our investigations have shown that the skirmishes extended approximately 40 meters into the wheat field. Judging by the number of fired rounds the fighting may have been much more intense than previously reported, with Union troops on the defensive. How do we know this? Most of the fired Minnie balls found in the wheat field came from Confederate rifles. Several

of the rounds were concentrated around a few large boulders located in the southeast portion of the wheat field. It is in this spot that we suspect a few Union troops were pinned down; the presence of a couple of dropped shots (or unfired rounds) supports this contention.

Overall, a total of 502 metal detector hits were recorded, many of them related to the battle. We have been encouraged by the number of recovered military items. The high recovery rate suggests to us that the battlefield, at least the peripheral areas where the skirmishing took place, has maintained some degree of integrity. In other words, looting has not been a major problem to date. Of course, some treasure hunting has no doubt taken place for many decades, but probably not as substantial as local residents would suggest. It is important to note that the main fighting took place over the course of a day so the amount of artifactual remains (e.g., spent ammunition) available for recovery is much less than we would expect at a place like Kennesaw Mountain where fighting was sustained for about a month (4).

Both the shovel test survey and metal detector survey have resulted in the removal of a sample of the significant information contained at the Pickett's Mill State Historic Site. Our investigations have been designed to recover as much information as possible about the battle of Pickett's Mill. The survey that we conducted provides valuable comparative artifactual and architectural data, as well as materials for exhibits or interpretative panels for the park. These investigations also provide opportunities for visitors to view archaeological fieldwork in progress. Charles Winchester, the site manager of Pickett's Mill, supports the goals of the fieldwork as they will help him and his staff with the preservation of the site and its interpretation to the public.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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