Raymond's Battlefield Detectives Dig For Clues

A Preserved Battlefield Reveals its Hidden History

Parker Hills *Alan Polk* *Jason Polk*

In 2009, the Friends of Raymond worked with the Civil War Trust (now the American Battlefield Trust) to save 67 acres of core battlefield property at Raymond, Mississippi. Now, thanks to the efforts of a local historian and some amateur archaeologists, the history of this battlefield has been rediscovered.

by

PARKER HILLS

Over several years a team composed of members of Friends of Raymond (FOR) of Raymond, Mississippi, has been conducting an archaeological study of the Raymond battlefield, where one of five battles of the Vicksburg Campaign was fought in the spring of 1863. Prior to 1998, not a single square foot of the battlefield had been preserved, but since FOR's formation that year, and with the help of the American Battlefield Trust, almost 200 acres of the Raymond battlefield have since been saved. The most recent purchase was in early 2021, when 43+ acres were saved, including the Artillery Ridge cannon line.

One of the more significant preservation victories occurred in 2009, when Friends of Raymond and the Trust saved 67 acres of core battlefield property, which went on the market on Pearl Harbor day of 2006. Fortunately for history, the property, which had been subdivided for residential lots, did not sell before Friends of Raymond could act.

When the "For Sale" sign went up on the 67-acre tract, FOR immediately went to work. Within months the American Battlefield Trust (Civil War Trust at the time) rolled up its sleeves and joined hands with FOR in the preservation effort. A Trust Color Bearers tour visited Raymond in September 2007, and the preservation-minded members quickly saw the need to save the land. The fund-raising began, and eventually the efforts of the two organizations came to fruition when the property purchase was finalized almost two years later in June 2009.

The following year The Gaddis Farms of Bolton, Mississippi, always good stewards of the land, worked with FOR to clear the jungle of grass and brush off the recently-purchased property, and by the spring of 2011 the former fields of sedge grass and scrub growth had been transformed into rolling, verdant fields of soybeans to replenish the long-lost nitrogen in the soil. The bean crop was to be followed by cotton or corn the next year. This was historically proper, because at the time of the Battle of Raymond these fields were farmland. Early in the war cotton had been the money crop, but by 1863 corn took the place of "white gold" because cotton could not be sold and certainly could not be eaten.

In the fall 0f 2011, an astonishing "battlefield detectives" opportunity was presented after the soybean crop had been harvested. At last the fields were clear and the acres were just waiting to reveal their secrets.

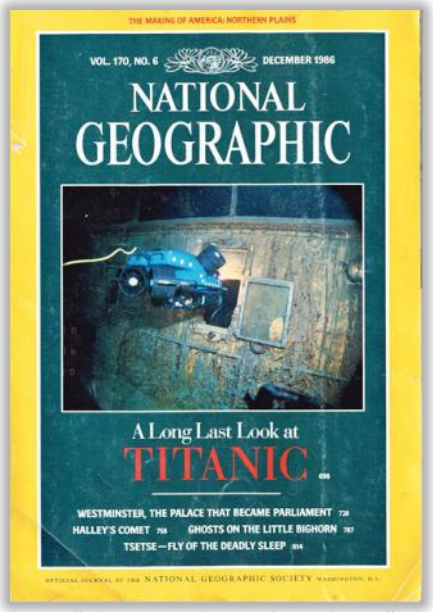
67 acre tract before the 2011 clearing


67 acre tract after the 2011 clearing

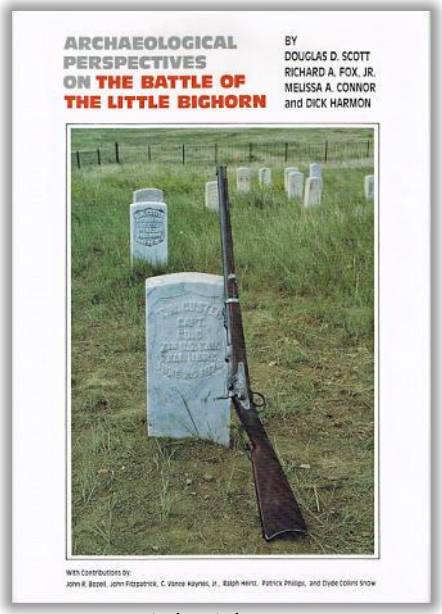
These are the acres over which Maj. Gen. James McPherson's 17th Corps fought Brig. Gen. John Gregg's Confederate brigade in close-quarter combat for six hours. These are the acres that, for several years after the battle, blanketed almost 150 dead of both Union and Confederate soldiers in shallow battlefield graves. Although the bodies were later disinterred for proper burial in the Vicksburg National Military Cemetery and the Raymond City Cemetery, these are the acres that remained as a silent witnesses to the valor and sacrifice of that twelfth day of

May 1863. Clearly, this ground had to be saved, but who knew at the time that these acres also would have a new story to tell?

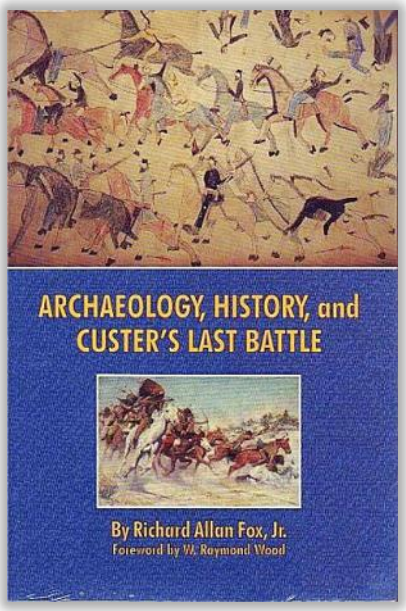
Seeing the cleared fields for the first time provided the inspiration for the formation of an amateur archaeology team, led by retired Army Brigadier General Parker Hills. Hills, a resident of Clinton, MS, and a past president of FOR, had for years studied the remarkable archaeology work performed on a faraway battlefield—Little Bighorn in Montana. That work rewrote the interpretation of the famous battle and was initiated in 1984 after a prairie fire burned off the concealing cover of sagebrush the previous year. Over a quarter century later, in 2011, the newly-cleared fields of Raymond presented the same opportunity. This was clearly the opportunity of a lifetime, and the Friends of Raymond archaeology team did not let it pass.



"Ghosts on the Little Bighorn," December 1986



Little Bighorn 1989 archaeology study



Little Bighorn 1993 archaeology study

Hills made plans with two relic-hunting experts, and the trio went to work by slogging into the muddy fields south of Raymond during the December holiday season of 2011. With Hills were Jason Polk, D.D.S. of Richland, MS, and his brother, Alan, a Raymond lawyer. The brothers brought their metal detectors, while Hills lugged the equipment to record and store the finds. On occasion another friend from Madison, MS, Tom Hughes, brought his detecting machine and assisted in the work

Before the first metal detector was switched to the "ON" position, the team was informed by locals that the battlefield had been previously scoured clean of artifacts by relic hunters almost four decades earlier. If true, that would be a shame for history, because even the rarest of bullets, buckles, buttons, or weapons pulled from the ground without recording the information and the GPS coordinates are just pieces of lead, brass, or iron to be sold at a flea market or over the internet. Without recording the necessary data, the usefulness of relics for interpreting history is forever lost. So, most of the pages of the sole copy of Raymond's "history book in the

ground" could have already been forever torn out. Whatever the case, Raymond's archaeology team decided to attempt to read what remained of Raymond's lone history book in the soil.

The team's efforts were to be especially significant, because, unlike the nation's major battlefields, the acreage of the Raymond battlefield was preserved over 50 years after the death of the last of the Civil War veterans. Thus, unlike the battlefields saved in the late 19th century, none of the combatants were alive to return and identify where their units had fought. Battlefield interpretation, therefore, had to rely upon *Official Records* reports, diary accounts, and a few sketches of the battle that were rendered by an on-the-ground newspaper artist and an Ohio soldier. All of this information, while valuable, was not voluminous, so the team went to work to "interview" the ground with the hope that the archaeological evidence was still present and would help tell the story.

Despite a nagging concern that the fields may have been picked clean, on December 17, 2011, the team began its work. The trio planned around their work schedules and in almost ankle-deep mud hunted the soggy fields on Friday afternoons, holidays, and virtually every weekend that December and into January of 2012. Almost immediately their efforts were rewarded. Laboriously and carefully, bullets and buckshot were coaxed from their muddy graves, and after fifteen decades this historic ground, which was arbitrarily divided and named as the Upper, Middle, Lower, and Triangular Fields, gave up its treasure. Most of the relics were found approximately three inches below the surface, and that made perfect sense. In the Mississippi climate, falling leaves and dying grass will produce about one inch of dirt every 50 years, and of course the battle was fought 150 years ago.

On a cool but sunny December day, Jason Polk digs for an elusive artifact.

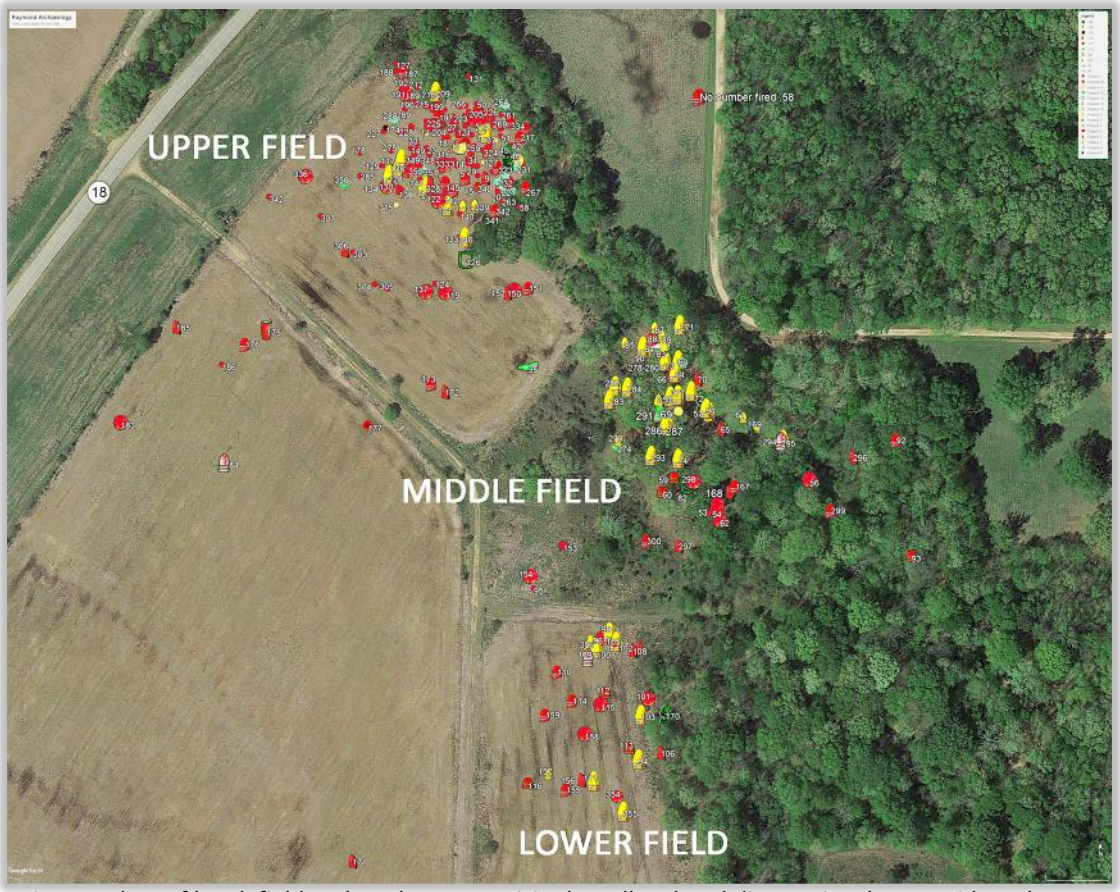
Alan Polk searches in the mud on an unusually warm day.

The team utilized the archaeological procedures that were used to study the Little Bighorn battlefield, but with a major exception. A hand-held GPS device took the place of the old surveying transit. Each day a planned grid was searched, and the site of every projectile and artifact was marked with a wire flag and recorded. The flags helped the team stay on its planned search grid, and also helped to interpret the "actions" in the field.

When extracted from the ground, each relic was logged onto a dated sheet with GPS coordinates and description, after which the item was placed in an individual, numbered, Ziploc bag. Each night the artifacts were carefully cleaned with soap, water, and if necessary a soft toothbrush. Using Google Earth technology, symbols denoting the relics were then placed by GPS coordinates on a computer map of the battlefield. The combat actions become clearer with every item found, with red custom developed symbols indicating fired projectiles, and yellow symbols indicating dropped, or unfired, projectiles. Green symbols were used to indicate other items, such as a belt or bridle buckle, a cartridge box finial, melted lead, or personal items.

RELIC SYMBOLS for GOOGLE EARTH MAP

dropped & fired Minié *dropped & fired Enfield* *dropped & fired buckshot* *dropped & fired pistol* *belt buckle* *melted lead*



This map is a product of battlefield archaeology--surprisingly well-ordered discoveries that provide a clear image of historical hot-spots.

After the location, description, and weight of the items were recorded, the relics were photographed and replaced in their individual bags, which were then placed in larger, Ziploc bags with the date they were found written on the bag. With the realization that technology is developing at an incredibly rapid pace, the relics were stored safely away for future study and analysis. After all, the relics are the first "witnesses" to appear since the combatants put ink to paper in the late 19th century, and the more they can eventually tell the better the interpretation.

When the weather turned pleasant, the team sometimes invited young visitors to observe the archaeology process, and the team members were eager to teach. Alan Polk is shown excavating a relic while possible future preservationists observe. The youngster at the bottom was quite impressed upon hearing Alan say that he had found a "mushroomed" .58 caliber Minié ball. When the boy returned to his kindergarten a few days later, he was asked to report to his class what he had done over the Holidays. He proudly reported, "I hunted mushrooms at Raymond."

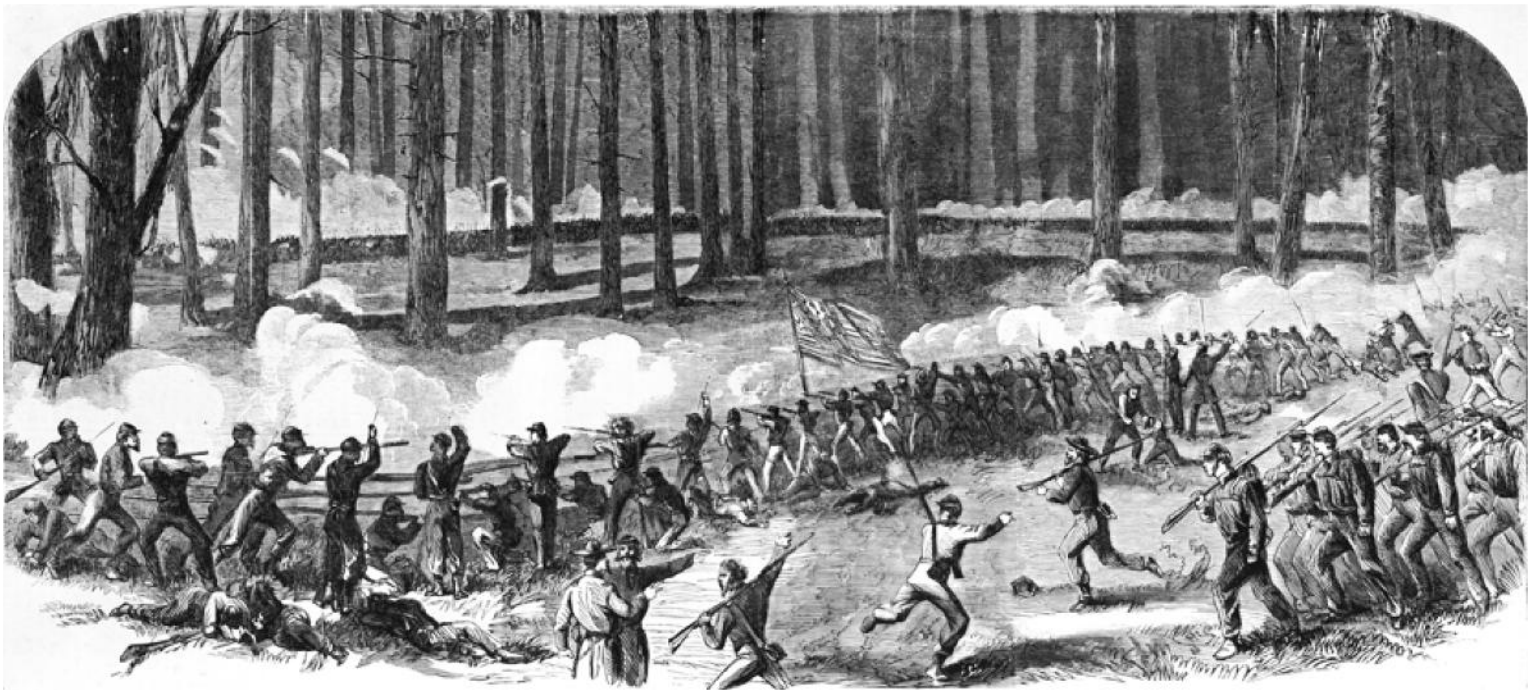
flattened or "mushroomed" Minié

So what did the team learn? Several soldier diary accounts spoke of a split rail fence behind which the Union soldiers sought shelter, and that fence was vividly depicted in a drawing and a subsequent engraving from the sketch of on-the-scene newspaper artist, Theodore Davis. However, the location of the fence had been in question since the battle. Then a diary account of a soldier from the 20th Illinois was found that stated; "The fence caught fire from our guns." The fence was not a bull-proof, heavy post and rail construction, such as can be seen at Gettysburg, thus, long-lost post holes could not be sought.

Serendipitously, the team located the elusive fence line in the Upper Field when a Union soldier's diary made its way into Hills' hands. Hills simply followed the extremely unusual and very specific clues in the diary of Sergeant Allen Morgan Geer of the 20th Illinois Infantry. Geer, who was wounded in the neck a few yards in front of the fence, wrote: "They [the Confederates] advanced to the bed of a creek not 20 paces in front, and our line fell back two or three rods behind a fence and held its ground." Exact measurements had been provided.

The day following the revelations of Sergeant Geer, the team broke away from its planned search grid of the day and measured the described distance in paces and rods from Fourteenmile Creek. Almost immediately, and within inches of Geer's recorded measurements, a line of dropped .58 caliber Minié balls was uncovered. A few inches in front of that line were discovered flattened .69 caliber smoothbore balls and fired buckshot Metal detectors and the GPS device were laid down for a few moments as the team paused to envision the skirmish line

of the 20th Ohio as it skedaddled out of the trees along the southern bank of the creek, having been rudely evicted from the comfortable shade by the sudden and savage attack of the 7th Texas. It was one of those "Eureka moments" because the archaeology team could almost see and hear the desperate soldiers in blue as they raced their way to the meager shelter of the fence and clambered over the top rails, all the while harassed by buckshot as ferocious as a swarm of outraged bees. The astonished team could almost hear the reverberating sounds of .69 caliber balls and buckshot splattering against the rails, throwing splinters in all directions and causing many a Federal soldier to drop his .58 caliber Minié ball while attempting to load his rife-musket. The line of dropped and smashed balls told quite a story! And near the eastern end of the newly-identified fence line were found dropped .36 caliber pistol bullets —testament to the fact that the officer posted there was just as nervous as his troops.



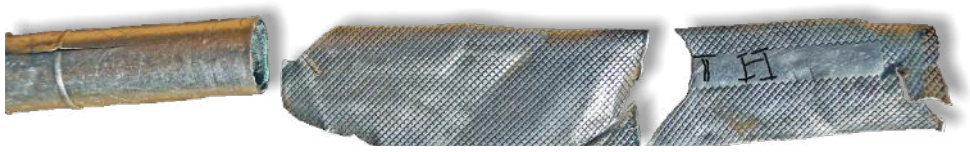
In this drawing by on-the-ground newspaper artist Theodore Davis, the Upper Field fence line can be clearly seen. The Confederates can be seen attacking from the distant tree line.

In addition to the fence line in the Upper Field, the team found a battle line just south of Fourteenmile Creek where the infantrymen of the 20th Ohio hunkered down at the beginning of the fight. This line was vividly described by a soldier from the 20th Ohio, both in words and in a sketch, and sure enough, a straight line of dropped ammunition was found in that area, laced with unfired .58 caliber Minié balls and .36 caliber Army Colt pistol bullets, indicating that both officers and troops were having a tough time loading their weapons in the smoke and fire of the ferocious close-quarter combat that occurred along the sandy banks of the creek.

This sketch by LT Henry O. Dwight of the 20th Ohio shows the fighting along the banks of Fourteenmile Creek.

As the work progressed, in the Middle Field the team found six brass buttons of varying size. In the same spot the remnants of an expensive silver mechanical pencil were discovered. Also found was part of the mechanical pencil nose, which still encased three pieces of graphite lead. With it were the remnant of a brass “housewife,” or thimble, as well as several unfired .36 caliber pistol balls. These items were almost certainly the pocket contents of a jacket left on the field, the shell of which was too covered with gore to be salvaged. The jacket most probably belonged to a Confederate officer or non-commissioned officer due to the location of the finds and the many non-standard button sizes, the expensive silver pencil, and the pistol balls.

Only fragments of the silver pencil skin with a snakeskin pattern were found, but one piece tantalizingly sported the last two letters of the owner's name, which were crudely scratched by hand into a smooth rectangular area of the silver—an area specifically left for engraving. The letters in that area were "T" and "H," and an examination of the records of the 7th Texas offered a probable explanation. Captain William H. Smith of the 7th Texas was killed at Raymond, and according to his commander, Colonel Hiram Granbury, Captain Smith, “after acting with marked gallantry, fell, pierced by three balls.”



Remnants of silver mechanical pencil found where the 7th Texas Infantry fought. The letters “T” and “H” are highlighted in black on this photograph

Gravestone in the Raymond Confederate Cemetery of Captain (posthumously promoted to major) William H. Smith, 7th Texas Infantry, killed at the Battle of Raymond, May 12, 1863.

fragment of "housewife"(thimble)

jacket buttons

Not far from the area where the mechanical pencil was found, and just south of Fourteenmile Creek, the team excavated melted lead and a .58 caliber Minié ball that had been painstakingly carved by a soldier into a makeshift chess piece. Also found was a layer of charcoal indicating the site of a campfire. This was undoubtedly the Federal campsite of a burial detail—usually around 15 soldiers who would have been sent out on the night following the battle to render what assistance they could to the wounded during the hours of darkness and to bury the dead the next day. The proximity of the creek ensured a readily available water source for the boiling of coffee, which was a much-needed tonic to steel the nerves of the detail as it performed its grisly work throughout the night. The ambulances would not arrive until the next morning, which was a precaution against rolling over wounded soldiers in the black of night. The melted lead was evidence that the fire was started with powder from a rifle-musket cartridge, and the carved bullet showed that the attendant, who kept the campfire going and the coffee hot, had some time to kill. And, since it was May, the burning gunpowder of an occasional cartridge thrown into the campfire helped keep the pesky mosquitoes at bay.

Melted .58 caliber Minié ball

Carved .58 caliber Minié ball

The team found a fired .58 caliber Minié ball 180 yards downrange from the Upper Field, but this bullet was unusual and it deserved special consideration. The badly-bent bullet was photographed and the images were dispatched to an expert, Peter C. George, co-author of *Field Artillery Projectiles of the Civil War*. The team's suspicions were confirmed when "Pete" George patiently advised that the Minié ball had an unmistakable "cup" marking on the nose, caused when a .58 caliber Springfield Minié ball was "hard-rammed" by a .577 caliber Enfield ramrod.

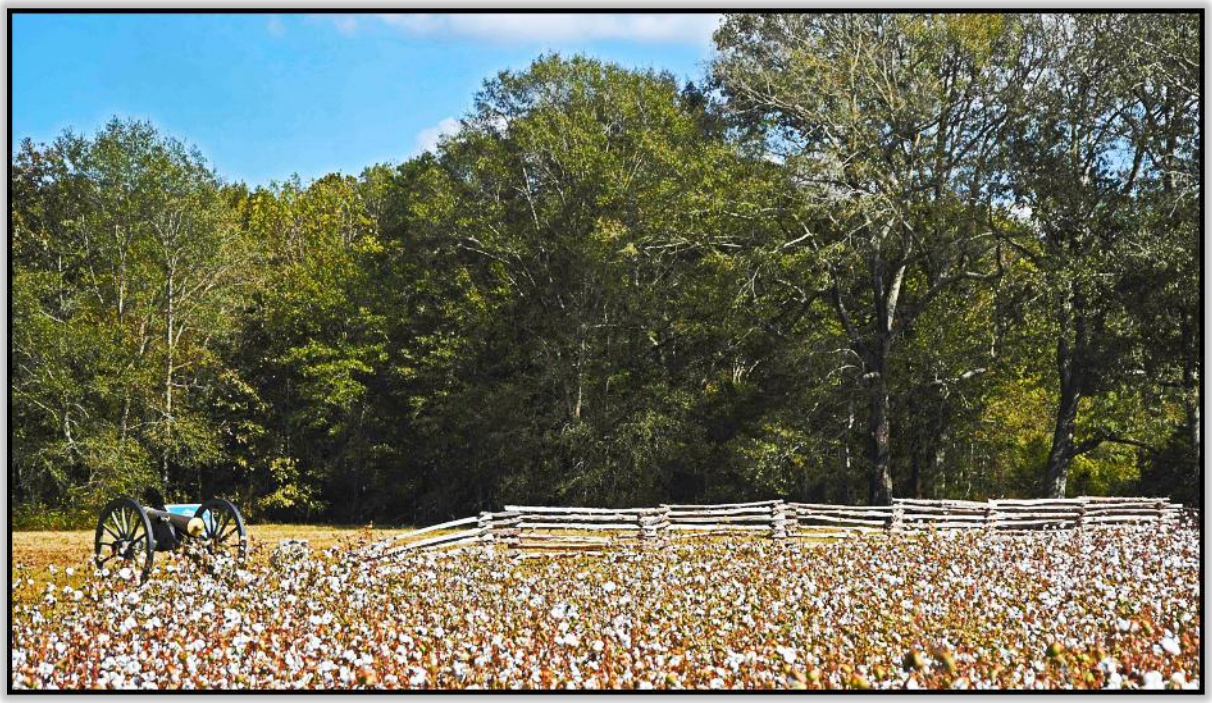
In fact, Colonel Granbury of the 7th Texas wrote, "I held the position on the bluff of the creek until the men had exhausted their own ammunition and emptied the cartridge boxes of the dead of the enemy and of our own killed and wounded." "Hard-rammed" means that the musket barrel, after continued firing, was so fouled with black powder residue that the bullet had to be shoved hard down the constricted barrel. One could almost picture a sweating and battle-begrimed Tennessee Confederate, who was out of ammunition after continued fighting, scavenging through the cartridge box of a downed or captured Union soldier to find some .58 caliber Minié balls, then loading these balls with great difficulty into his fouled musket.

"Hard rammed" .58 caliber Minié with Enfield cupping on nose

Reverse wormed .58 caliber Minié

Also found was a .58 caliber Minié ball that was "reversed wormed," that is, the bullet had been accidentally loaded into the weapon upside down and had to be "wormed," or removed from the barrel with a corkscrew-like device at the end of the ramrod, with the "worm" digging into the bullet. That would be consistent with a .58 caliber Minié loaded in a .577 caliber Enfield, because the Enfield bullet was situated in the paper cartridge upside down, while a .58 caliber Minié ball was right side up. A Confederate soldier using captured .58 caliber Minié ball ammunition might, through force of habit of flipping the Enfield bullet over, turn the Minié ball upside down and load it incorrectly. Almost every relic, therefore, provided a clue to the action, but only when considered in its exact location to the other relics found in the field.

Across this field ran a rail fence used by Federal soldiers for the sparse cover it provided, while Confederates blasted the fence line from the distant tree line just south of Fourteenmile Creek. Close observation of the ground reveals the team's red flags, which marked the first relic finds in 2011-2012.



Using the information provided by the archaeology work, the rail fence was reconstructed in the Upper Field in May 2017. Behind the mature cotton crop the right gun and blue interpretive marker of CPT Samuel De Golyer's 8th Michigan Battery can be seen at the far left.

In the Lower Field the team discovered an unusual line of bullets; notable in that the line ran perpendicular to the main battle line. This aberrant line denotes where the soldiers of the 31st Illinois Infantry performed a left wheel to fire into the left flank and rear of the 3rd Tennessee as that regiment charged across Fourteenmile Creek. During the smoke and confusion of battle, the aggressive Tennesseans charged across the creek and out of the bordering woods south of the creek. They routed the 23rd Indiana, then pivoted west out of the Middle Field toward the Upper Field, only to be fired upon by the unseen Illini soldiers in the Lower Field. Colonel Walker of the 3rd Tennessee recalled that, "upon reaching the edge of the woods, I received a heavy volley into the rear of my left flank." This volley was fired by Colonel Edwin McCook's 31st Illinois. Once again, the team paused to envision the surprise of the 31st Illinois upon the receipt of this unexpected battlefield "gift," as well as the horror of the 3rd Tennessee upon experiencing the devastating rifle fire in its flank and rear.

Marker, "Flanking Maneuvers," at the site where the 31st Illinois changed front and fired into the left flank and rear of the 3d Tennessee, which was a mere 70 yards in front of this marker.

Art, archives, and archaeology were melded to provide an answer to an archaeological mystery found near the fence in the Upper Field. A Union naval button was found in the field on January 20, 2015. But since there was no naval action at the Battle of Raymond, there were no sailors or naval officers present. Then an 1889 article provided a valuable clue. It was found in *St. Nicholas: An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks*, and was written by Theodore Davis, the newspaper artist at Raymond. Davis had sketched the action in the Upper Field, and his sketch

appeared in the magazine article, entitled “How a Battle is Sketched.” He had notes on his sketch, one of which identified “Col. Ed. McCook” with an arrow, and Davis wrote that McCook was “at the moment limping away, wounded, and had taken two muskets for crutches.”

On-the-scene newspaper artist Theodore Davis’ sketch of the fighting in the Upper Field. COL McCook is at center.

Union naval button found where McCook is shown in the sketch, limping away using two rifle-muskets as crutches.

Bridle buckle found near the fallen horse and rider in the sketch. Wells Leggett, age 16 and volunteer aide to his father, Brig. Gen. Mortimer Leggett, later wrote that “the first shell that was thrown at us struck a fence . . . and threw me from my horse onto the ground and knocked my horse onto its haunches.”

The button was found at virtually the same location that McCook is shown in the sketch. But the key to the mystery was that McCook was the only officer on the Raymond battlefield who had been educated at the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. McCook was so proud of this fact that he was also a member of the Naval Lodge #69 of the Freemasons in New York City. McCook's pride in his naval training explained the unique button on the Raymond battlefield.

It took a century and a half for Raymond's fields to tell "the rest of the story," but the stage was set for much more accurate battlefield interpretation. Both the pages and the dirt were turned to tell the story, and today 46 interpretive markers and 25 cannon, all in the correct location, accurately describe the action. Piece by piece, the puzzle has been assembled, and finally, the actions on the Battle of Raymond can be seen with a refreshing new clarity.