



Looting A Moment in Time

"...pushing forward the Third and Fifth Missouri ...we charged their extreme right division, composed of one six-gun battery and twelve regiments of infantry. The first line (four regiments) was routed; the second wavered and gradually gave way; the third held its place, and forced us, after a protracted contest, to retire."

-Brig. Gen. John S. Bowen



The Moment: May 1, 1863

Col. Francis M. Cockrell's Missourians fought desperately to hold their advanced position, along the brushy creek bottom, delivering crushing volleys into the advancing Federal lines. However, Cockrell's ability to hold his line was steadily failing. His casualties mounted, and waves of fresh Federal infantry pressed forward against the southern line. A few moments more would decide the issue of victory...

From the start, Cockrell's counterattack had bought valuable time for Brig. Gen. John S. Bowen's defense of the river roads west of the small Mississippi town of Port Gibson. The vicious assault caved in the right flank of Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's invading Union army, and sent the Federals reeling. The Missourians, sensing confusion in their enemy, crossed over White Branch and drove back the Federal infantry into the chaotic jumble of disorganized regiments.

However, Cockrell's small force lacked the strength in numbers necessary to continue forward west of the creek, and here the southern advance ground to a halt, as the men from Missouri slammed against an immobile mass of Federals that no longer gave ground. For the next forty minutes, unable to advance and too stubborn to retire, the Missourians held the hard won piece of ground on the west side of the creek and continued to maul the yanks with musketry.

Responding to the threat to his crippled flank,

Gen. Grant ordered in his reserves, and soon, fresh Union brigades struggled forward into the cane choked creek bottom. Cockrell's assault wave crested.

Gen. Bowen glanced behind him, up the dusty road leading back to Port Gibson, hoping to see re-enforcements marching forward to relieve his small command, but there would be none coming. Cockrell's breakthrough would not be exploited. The Missourians had been the last hope. Now exhaustion gripped the southern troops, weary from a long day of battling a superior Federal army. The issue was decided, U. S. Grant had won a secure foothold in Mississippi.

Decisively, Grant's reserves forced Cockrell's veterans to hastily depart. The Missourians fell back over the creek to the safety of the main Confederate line, where Gen. Bowen reluctantly issued the order to retire. His troops had bought fortress Vicksburg one more day of freedom. Within three weeks Grant's victorious army would besiege the intrenched city and eventually force the surrender of the Confederate garrison on July 4th.

A turning point in the Union campaign to secure free navigation of the Mississippi River was achieved at Port Gibson. The battle, which secured Grant's beachhead in Mississippi and final Federal victory at Vicksburg, was now history. Just another moment in time...

The Looting: 100 Years Later

Two men slowly wormed their way up the brushy creek bank. Each listened intently for the soft tone signals which would alert them of the presence, and location, of hidden metal treasures lying beneath the surface of the peaceful old forgotten battleground.

The day was uneventful so far. No major find had been made. Only an unfired minie ball and a piece of rusted canister shot had been extracted from the fine loess soil so common to this region of the Mississippi Valley. Both men had visited the area several times. It was one of their favorite places to hunt Civil War relics. That it was someone else's property didn't matter. In the rugged backcountry of Claiborne County, Mississippi, vast portions of land lay wild, and unoccupied, being primarily owned by timber companies or private hunting clubs. Two men could easily slip into the jungle of timbered ridges, vine, and cane, without being noticed.

Clunk! Suddenly one of the metal detectors struck a hard object protruding from the ground. What was it? Reaching down one of the men pulled free from its ancient resting place a long metal rod, now rusted from decades of exposure to the wet humid climate. With astonishment, he called over to his partner that what he now held in his hand was an iron ramrod from a 19th century, military issue, rifle musket. What a find!

When his companion joined him to admire the relic, both noticed that, not more than a couple of yards away, in plain view, was another ramrod. Like the first, it too was partially exposed and sticking up above the surface of the forest floor. The excitement grew when upon the recovery of this second relic they found a third. Now their search intensified, as each began to systematically comb the western side of the creek bottom, in search for other exciting historic discoveries.

Not all of the relics they recovered over the next few moments were as easily located and removed as the first, but in a very short span of time, the two men had collected a couple of dozen ramrods. Many of the ramrods were found, like the first one, with the rammer head partially protruding up from the ground. Others were lying flat, buried by soil and leaf deposits. All were found located along a fairly straight line, parallel with the creek, and from beginning to end, covered a distance of a couple of hundred feet. What a find?

Both hunters were ecstatic. This type of discovery was extremely rare. Nothing like this had ever been recovered upon the rugged battlefield of Port Gibson before. The two men drove home that evening quite satisfied with their discovery. They decided to hunt upon the old forgotten battlefield soon...

The Epilogue: Knowledge Lost

" The looting of Shiloh is an intentional attempt to steal a part of your history... an invasion and destruction of hallowed ground."

Today, Port Gibson battlefield is mostly private land. Like the majority of historic or prehistoric sites in the United States, whether publicly or privately owned, the battlefield is subject to intense trespass and the illegal removal of archaeological artifacts. Unlike a selected number of significant Civil War battle sites, such as Shiloh or Gettysburg, Port Gibson was never set aside to be preserved as a National or State Park. Likewise, few battle veterans returned to the area after the war, and important firsthand knowledge of the various landscape features such as topography, buildings, fields, woodlots, and roads, present during the battle, was never recorded. As a result, neither the battle, nor the field it was fought on, received much attention or the detailed study required to accurately interpret the battle, as fought, on May 1, 1863. Our present knowledge is limited to making interpretations based on after- action battle reports, letters, diaries, regimental histories, and maps found in the historical record.

What then had the two relic hunters discovered upon this battlefield? Several Civil War ramrods of course, but in what context had those ramrods been left on the battlefield in 1863? Context is vital to interpreting knowledge from the physical remains (material objects) of past human activity. The material objects themselves are called "artifacts". Artifacts are the objects made, modified, and used by people through time, and are physical keys that help unlock our understanding of past human events. However, that past behavior, or the processes by which people lived and interacted within an environment, is reflected, not with the identity of the artifacts themselves, but in how each separate artifact identified within a given location, is arranged (deposited), in respect to all the other artifacts found there. By analyzing the relationships (context) between artifacts, archaeologists can reconstruct the past human behavior associated with the site. This is accomplished by carefully analyzing and documenting each artifact, in place (in context) and undisturbed, within the site. The stories artifacts can tell, if studied in proper context, are unique "moments in time..."

What then, was the importance of the placement and relationship of the ramrods discovered on the Port Gibson battlefield? What story could these artifacts have told an archaeologist? We know, from the historical record, that it was common for many soldiers using muzzle-loading muskets, and standing and fighting within a fixed battleline, not to return the ramrod to its proper place on the musket following its use in loading. To save time and avoid fumbling around, confident veteran soldiers would at times stick the ramrod in the ground beside them. After firing the musket, they simply grabbed up the ramrod

and loaded the weapon again. Therefore, the Port Gibson ramrods probably marked a battleline! But whose battleline? The general facts concerning the activities of the two armies that day, and who fought who are known, but no exact troop positions were ever precisely re-located upon the battlefield.

However, accounts from battle participants does document that one unit did fight from a stationary battleline, in the proximity where the ramrods were found. One brigade did make a determined stand-up fight there at mid-afternoon. Fighting stubbornly to hold that small piece of brushy ground on the Confederate left flank, west of the creek, stood the 3rd and 5th Missouri Infantry of Col. Francis M. Cockrell's tough veteran brigade. Later, as Cockrell's position was overrun by the Federal counterattack, the overpowered Missourians hastily fell back to the main Confederate line east of the creek. In the chaos and confusion many of Cockrell's men accidentally left their ramrods, the same artifacts discovered 100 years later, still marking their participation in that brief "moment in time."

What a find! A major discovery had been made, for the two relic hunters had, quite by chance, stumbled across the first truly identifiable unit position to be located on the Port Gibson battlefield. A discovery which, if properly documented, and with careful preservation of the remaining site would provide a permanent landmark to accurately place other military organizations of both armies, spatially in context, in the positions they occupied on the battlefield that day. This would provide the means to make far more thorough and accurate interpretations of the actual events as they occurred, in context, on the battlefield.

Ah! But remember, those ramrods were looted from the context in which they were left on the battlefield in 1863. Today, neither relic hunter, both growing old, can locate the exact area where they made the great find. Each has lost the memory of the location, and another "moment in time" is lost to looters of our historical heritage, with no chance for recovery. Everyone loses. Present and future generations have lost irreplaceable knowledge, and the generation which fought the war, loses a portion of the integrity in which their devotion to duty and sacrifice left to the pages of our historical heritage. All for the few dollars those ramrods brought at a Civil War relic show marked: "Battlefield dug, Port Gibson, Mississippi."

How many more "moments in time" have been lost labeled, "Battlefield dug, Shiloh, Tennessee"? How many can we afford to lose?

The Archaeological Resources Protection Act: Public Law 96-95 - Oct. 31, 1979

16 USC 470ee Sec. 6.

- (a) No person may excavate, remove, damage, or otherwise alter or deface , or attempt to excavate, remove, damage, or otherwise alter or deface any archaeological resource located on public lands or Indian lands...*
- (b) No person may sell, purchase, exchange, transport, receive, or offer to sell, purchase, or exchange any archaeological resource if such resource was excavated or removed from public lands or Indian lands...*
- (c) No person may sell, purchase, exchange, transport, receive, or offer to sell, purchase or exchange in interstate or foreign commerce, any archaeological resource excavated, removed, sold, purchased, exchanged, transported, or received in violation of any provision, rule, regulation, ordinance, or permit in effect under State or local law.*

HELP PRESERVE YOUR AMERICAN HERITAGE: REPORT ALL LOOTERS AND VANDALS TO A PARK RANGER YOU CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE.

