

The forgotten graves of soldiers killed 157 years ago, during the oppressively hot Battle of Blackburn's Ford

By Kevin Ambrose

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The remains of one of six soldiers from the 1st Massachusetts Regiment found in Centreville, Va., in 1997. The soldiers were believed to have been killed in the Battle of Blackburn's Ford, which occurred on July 18, 1861. The soldiers were later reburied in the Massachusetts National Cemetery in Bourne, Mass. in 2006. (Fairfax County/Mike Johnson)

On this day 157 years ago, the Battle of Blackburn's Ford was fought during an extremely hot and humid afternoon. The battle occurred several miles south of Centreville, Va., near where present-day Route 28 crosses Bull Run. There were 83 casualties for the Union and 68 casualties for the Confederacy during the small but fierce battle, which lasted a few hours.

After the battle, some of the Union dead were buried in shallow graves on the south side of Centreville. As the decades passed, the soldiers' gravesite transformed from a field into a patch of scrubby, pine woods, and the grave markers disappeared. Over time, the graves were forgotten.

Fast-forward to June 1994, and I was metal-detecting a wooded lot on the south side of Centreville with the hope of finding Civil War relics. My detector signaled deep, ferrous readings. I dug a large hole about 15 inches into the ground and discovered a group of large nails. They were coffin nails. They surrounded a well-preserved skeleton wearing a faded, partially decomposed wool uniform with brass, military eagle buttons. It was a ghastly and unsettling discovery.

I filled in the hole and reported the grave. Two years later, teams from the Smithsonian Institution and Fairfax County supervised an archaeological dig to excavate the grave. In the process, five more graves were found.



A sketch of the Battle of Blackburn's Ford, which occurred near Bull Run south of Centreville. (Library of Congress)

The soldiers in the graves did not have ID tags, which did exist during the Civil War, but a variety of clues found in their graves, including forensic data from analysis of the bones at the Smithsonian Institution, helped identify the soldiers.

Their deaths were tracked to one of the first battles of the Civil War — the Battle of Blackburn's Ford — which occurred July 18, 1861, and the hot weather may have played a role in determining why the soldiers were buried in shallow graves in Centreville.

The soldiers were later dubbed the "Centreville Six," and below is an abbreviated story of how the men were killed, how they were identified and how the soldiers were returned home for burial in 2006, 145 years after their deaths.



The author, left, shows members of the Smithsonian Institution and Fairfax County where the remains of a Civil War soldier was found. (Chuck Thompson)

The soldiers' death and burial in Centreville

The Battle of Blackburn's Ford was a small one, more like a large skirmish, and it occurred when Union forces were exploring the Confederate defenses along Bull Run. Confederate soldiers, concealed in the woods near Blackburn's Ford, surprised the advancing Union soldiers, and a sharp fight ensued as both armies fired artillery shells across Bull Run at each other.

The Confederates ultimately held the field of battle and pushed the Union forces back toward Centreville. The 1st Massachusetts Infantry was at the center of the fighting and lost 13 men, but some of their dead could not be retrieved from the field. Their bodies were too close to the Confederate line.

The regimental history of the 1st Massachusetts Infantry described the heat during the afternoon of the battle as "extremely oppressive" and noted that "water was so scarce that many eagerly appropriated the contents of puddles in the road."



The Centreville dig site in January 1997. The graves of six Civil War soldiers were carefully excavated and the remains exhumed before the land was developed into a McDonald's. (Chuck Thompson)

For two days, the dead Massachusetts soldiers baked on the battlefield under the hot, July sun. During the afternoon of July 20, 1861, a brief truce was called to allow the fallen soldiers to be retrieved, but by that time the dead soldiers were so bloated by their exposure to the hot weather that they were completely unrecognizable, as described by the regimental history of the 1st Massachusetts Infantry.

This was very early in the Civil War, and death on the battlefield was not a common sight. At that time, communication with families to bring their loved ones home for formal burial did occur, but the dead Massachusetts soldiers who stayed on the battlefield for two days were so unrecognizable that a quick burial was thought to be best.

The regimental history of the 1st Massachusetts Infantry described the burial location on a hill just south of Centreville, which matched the location where the graves were found in the 1990s. The grave markers were probably wooden crosses, but the type of marker was not documented by the regimental history.

Soon after the burial, the 1st Massachusetts Infantry joined the disorganized retreat back to Washington after the Confederate victory at the Battle of First Manassas. Note, the 1st Massachusetts Infantry did not fight in the Battle of First Manassas; they stayed in Centreville during that battle.



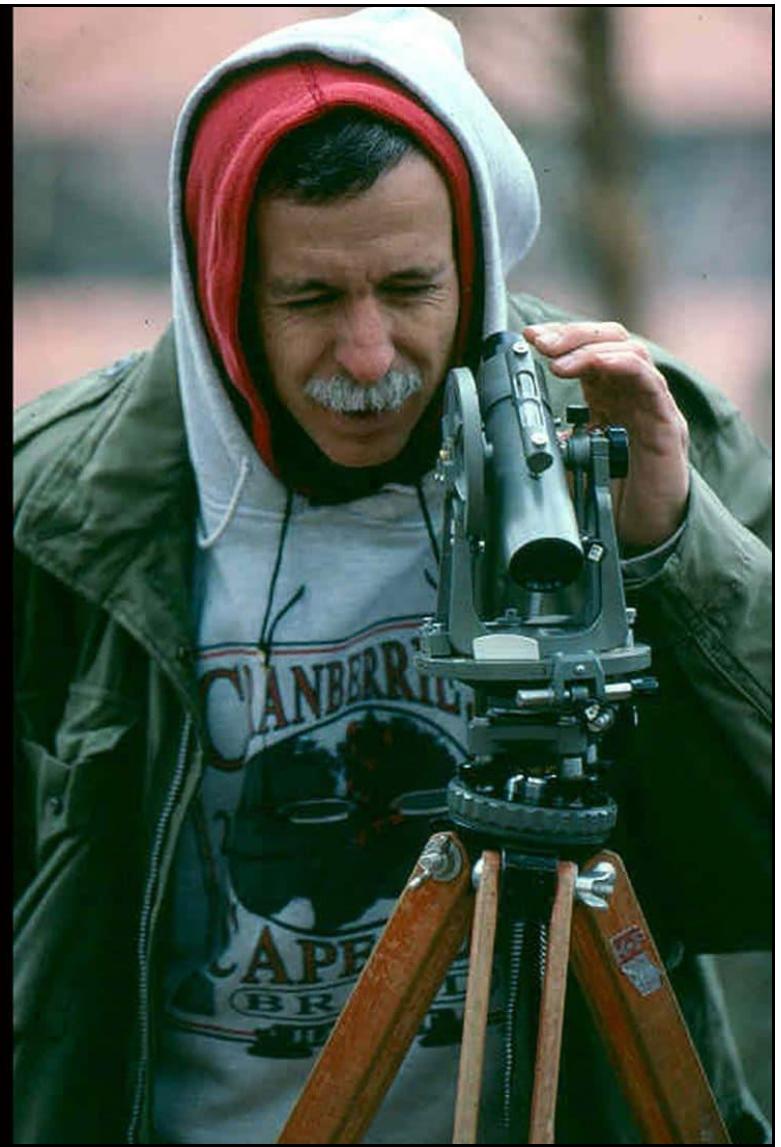
Taking measurements before exhuming the remains. (Chuck Thompson)

The archaeological excavation

After the first grave was found, the Smithsonian Institution's forensic anthropology team, led by the head of physical anthropology at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, Doug Owsley, supervised the grave excavation with Fairfax County archaeologist, Mike Johnson. With the use of a probe (see photo below), five more graves were found next to the first grave.

The grave dig lasted three days and was watched by hundreds of spectators. Dozens of volunteers helped with the dig, including members of the Northern Virginia Relic Hunters Association and local kids. D.C.-area media, both TV and newspaper, provided coverage of the excavation, and Fairfax County police provided the police lines and security. Here's a three-minute video of the dig, courtesy of NVRHA.

The six graves were found arranged in a line. It took three days to excavate the remains from the graves. Later, a forensic analysis of the remains was conducted at the Smithsonian Institution, which showed that the soldiers were very young men, and one was killed by a gunshot wound to the head.



Doug Owsley, left, and Mike Johnson led the excavation. (Fairfax County/Mike Johnson)

The soldiers in the graves were wearing an early style U.S. uniform with small eagle buttons down the front and on the shoulder, no belt or shoulder plates, and one soldier was wearing sports shoes — an early style of baseball shoe with canvas tops.

No personal possessions were found on the soldiers with the exception of an arrowhead that was in a soldier's pocket. It was probably a souvenir picked up on the march.



A bow saw was used to cut a root that had grown through one of the skulls. (Chuck Thompson)

Determining the soldiers' identities

Most people associated with the excavation of the graves assumed the soldiers' identities would remain unknown. Dalton Rector, a member of the NVRHA, however, was not one of those people. He went on a mission to figure out the identities of the soldiers using clues from the grave. Here are the important clues that were used to determine that these soldiers were from the 1st Massachusetts Infantry:

1. The forensic data from the Smithsonian Institution showed a gunshot wound to the head for one of the soldiers. The possible cause for the wound is battle. The Battle of Blackburn's Ford is the closest battle to Centreville.
2. The uniforms worn by the soldiers in the graves were an early and unique style of U.S. uniform with small buttons down the front and on the shoulders. That type of uniform was worn by the 1st Massachusetts Infantry, and the 1st Massachusetts fought in the Battle of Blackburn's Ford.
3. The ages of the dead soldiers in the graves, as determined by forensic analysis at the Smithsonian, matched the ages of Massachusetts soldiers killed at the Battle of Blackburn's Ford. The forensic analysis also showed one soldier was between the ages of 16 and 18. Albert Wentworth of the 1st Massachusetts, killed at the Blackburn's Ford, was 17 years old.
4. One of the soldiers was wearing baseball shoes. That was very uncommon during the Civil War, particularly in battle. One of the Massachusetts soldiers killed in the Blackburn's Ford was on a club baseball team in Boston just before the war.
5. After researching the regimental history of the 1st Massachusetts Infantry, the document described the burial of the soldiers after the battle at the location where the graves were found.

Returning home to Massachusetts

Frank Haley, a member of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, Rector and Johnson worked to bring the remains of the soldiers back to Massachusetts. In 2006, Massachusetts National Cemetery Director Paul McFarland agreed to accept the soldiers into his cemetery in Bourne, Mass.

A parade and military burial followed. Johnson and Rector attended the event. Because DNA testing was not done on the soldiers' remains — it was more expensive and less available over a decade ago — the soldiers were buried as unknown. However, by aligning ages of the soldiers from the Smithsonian's forensic data with that of the soldiers killed at Blackburn's Ford, these were suggested as the names of the soldiers in the graves in Bourne, Mass.:

- William A. Smart, Company G., 20, of Cambridge.
- Albert F. Wentworth, 17, Company H, of Chelsea.
- Thomas Roome, 30, Company G, of Boston.
- George Bacon, 22, Company H, of Chelsea.
- Gordon Forrest, 22, Company G, of Malden
- James Silvey, 23, Company G, of Boston.



Funeral procession in Bourne, Mass. (Fairfax County/Mike Johnson)

A McDonald's stands on the site in Centreville where the graves were discovered, next to Route 28, just south of Route 29. There is an effort to place a Civil War Trails marker at that location.



The burial service for the Centreville Six at the Massachusetts National Cemetery in Bourne, Mass. (Fairfax County/Mike Johnson)



The burial service at the Massachusetts National Cemetery in Bourne, Mass. (Fairfax County/Mike Johnson)

BLACKBURN'S FORD

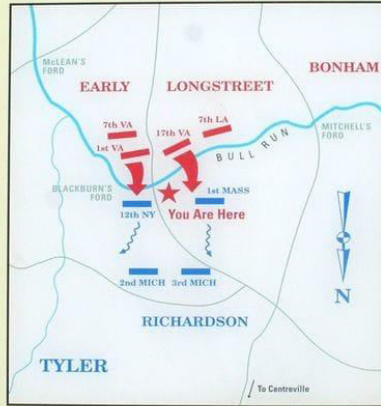


Bullets "Humming Like a Bee-hive"



On July 18, 1861, Gen. Irvin McDowell, the Union army commander, learned that the Confederate army had withdrawn from its Centreville earthworks to a strong defensive position behind Bull Run. McDowell ordered Gen. Daniel Tyler to reconnoiter the stream but not bring on an engagement. Tyler accompanied Col. Israel Richardson's brigade to Blackburn's Ford. Arriving about noon, Tyler and Richardson found a cleared field sloping down from woods to the creek's banks, which were thick with underbrush and trees. Tyler decided to test the Confederate position after seeing enemy artillery in the distance.

Two Federal cannon opened fire, and a brief artillery duel was followed by a Union infantry attack as the novice soldiers of the 1st Massachusetts Infantry swept down the hillside toward the ford. Suddenly a volley of Confederate musketry erupted from the woods across the creek. Repeated attempts to take the ford failed when volley after volley of bullets "humming like a bee-hive" forced the New Englanders back. The contest ended about 4:00 when the Federals



withdrew. Each side had engaged about 3,000 men; the thick vegetation helped reduce the casualties (68 Confederates and 83 Federals).

The clash at Blackburn's Ford proved a moral victory for the Southerners, who celebrated



U.S. Col. Israel Richardson



C.S. Col. James Longstreet

Three days later, on July 21, there again was action at Blackburn's Ford when Confederates approached it to flank the Federals. The 5th South Carolina and the 17th and 18th Mississippi under command of Gen. D.R. Jones attacked Col. Thomas Davies' New York regiments at Grigsby's Hill and were repulsed. During the Federal retreat, Confederate forces under command of Gen. Milledge Bonham and Col. James Longstreet moved across the fords to break the Union line of retreat, but Federal forces had established a new line of defense on the outskirts of Centreville.

the Union repulse as a major battle. It demoralized the Federals, who experienced their first combat and learned that the Bull Run fords would be fiercely contested. Two Union soldiers received the Medal of Honor for their bravery.

A sign at the site of the Battle of Blackburn's Ford describes the battle. (Kevin Ambrose)