

An Integrant Part: Using Cultural Landscapes in Interpretation of Difficult History

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IN HER 1886 NOVEL, *WHERE THE BATTLE WAS FOUGHT*, MARY NOILLES MURFREE, WRITING under the pseudonym Charles Egbert, described a dark and dreary scene of a former battlefield landscape, resting years after the battle devastated the land. She wrote, “A great brick house, dismantled and desolate, rises starkly above the dismantled desolation of the plain. Despite the tragic aspect of this building, it offers a certain grotesque suggestion.... There is no embowering shrubbery about it, no inclosing [sic] fence. It is an integrant part of the surrounding ruin...” (Egbert 1886, 2). She further detailed the place as a former home site, difficult to distinguish from the surrounding natural growth. Murfree’s description could be a metaphor for the history and the landscape. The stories contained within the landscape amalgamate with the landscape itself. To tell only a piece of the story without also understanding the significance of the place would be like only seeing a part of the Murfree’s house without seeing its connection to the devastated landscape, or understanding the stories contained within. Each of these stories and their relationship to the landscape remain “integrant parts” of the whole history connected to a place.

Maintaining the landscape as a character when interpreting the history of a place allows the site an opportunity to engage visitors with the “layers” of history. In order to demonstrate this idea, the following examination of the histories contained within Stones River National Battlefield, land now managed by the National Park Service (NPS), will serve as a case study for a cultural landscape approach in interpretation. In addition to being the site of a major Civil War battle, the place provided the land for an African American community to reside for decades after the Civil War ended, as well as a landscape that hosts several markers and monuments, reflecting the Civil War veterans’ commemoration activities nationwide in the years following the Civil War. Previous scholars who have written about the ideas of Civil War “memory” on the land, and ideas about cultural landscape, include David Blight, Paul Shackel, J.B. Jackson, Paul Groth, Denis Cosgrove, Robert Melnick, and Arnold Alanen.

A brief history

Approximately 81,000 soldiers met and fought at the Battle of Stones River between December 31, 1862, and January 2, 1863. The Union victory secured Middle Tennessee for the Union army,

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bolstered Union morale, and gave weight to President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation that took effect on January 1, 1863. At the end of the war, the War Department established Stones River National Cemetery on a small portion of the over 4,000 acres on which the battle had been fought. Members of the 111th regiment of the United States Colored Troops (USCT) built the cemetery. A community developed on the battlefield land over the next few years, as the soldiers gathered Union bodies from the surrounding area to reinter them at the national cemetery. At the height of this community, in 1880, over 2,000 individuals lived on about 1,000 acres of land. The community, called Cemetery, existed on the former battlefield land until 1927, when Congress authorized a little over 350 acres for Stones River National Military Park as a site to interpret the Battle of Stones River. The War Department paid landowners for their property, and removed several members of Cemetery in order to establish the military park. This property included several small tracts owned by African Americans (Figure 1) and two churches. The combination of removing houses of worship and residents damaged what could be considered the heart of the community.

Significance in the landscape

The landscape's significance in Cemetery's story becomes evident after an examination of the connection between the landscape and the history of the land. The community's origins rest in the national cemetery in the same way the national cemetery's location is related to the battle fought on those grounds. As the 111th USCT gathered the Union dead from as far as ninety miles away for reburial at the national cemetery, families of the soldiers began to settle around the area and claim the land as their own. The national cemetery served as a flag stop on the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railroad, initially to aid the soldiers in their reinterment efforts, and to allow for travelers along the railroad to visit the national cemetery. This evolved into a train station in the later part of the nineteenth century that would have provided community members access to the larger cities of Murfreesboro and Nashville.

Figure 1. This photograph from the 1890s shows members of the Cemetery community on the former battlefield land in Murfreesboro. (Albert Kern, photographer). From the Albert Kern Collection at Dayton History.



The physical nature of the land suggests another reason why the members of Cemetery would have an easier time acquiring land here than in other places. Limestone abounds throughout middle Tennessee, and makes a significant appearance on the battlefield landscape. The area where members of Cemetery settled did not contain much value as agriculture land, and was probably easier for the African American individuals to purchase. The African Americans who did acquire land did not have anybody trying to reclaim that land because of its low value. How the community members acquired the land remains unknown; this is one of many aspects of the community's history that requires further research.

Another reason for the undesirability of the land, beyond the poor soil, comes from the idea that soldiers waged war on this land. After the battle devastated the area, the battle remnants would have included unexploded artillery pieces, broken wagons and carriages, and destroyed forests. A colonel visited Murfreesboro in April, commenting "There is a fearful stench in many places near here, arising from decaying horses and mules, which have not been buried at all . . . the country for miles around is strewn with dead animals, and the warm weather is beginning to tell on them" (Beatty 1946, 184). The mess would have been difficult, unpleasant, and potentially dangerous to clean up. The members of the 111th USCT, and their families, who stayed on the land because of proximity to the national cemetery, would have had to deal with cleaning the site. For some, that would have been a small price to pay for living as free blacks.

The ideological associations of the battlefield held by locals also provided reasons for the African American community to stay. The Union army occupied Murfreesboro for two years after their victory at the Battle of Stones River. During the occupation period, a large number of contrabands, former slaves who had freed themselves and were seeking asylum, migrated to the area. Local citizens viewed the battlefield as a representation of Confederate loss. Murfreesboro citizens did not express much interest in commemorating or preserving the space in the years following the war. The fact that Stones River National Cemetery, or what some would refer to as "that Yankee graveyard," existed on the battlefield land would further discourage Murfreesboro citizens from visiting the site. Their lack of interest would have also provided a buffer for Cemetery. The African American community would have been able to function with little interference from the Murfreesboro citizens.

The physical location of the battlefield, as well as the population of Cemetery, also presented forms of safety for the community. The battlefield rested almost three miles north of the city of Murfreesboro. This granted a haven for the African Americans in the community to start their lives anew by way of isolation. The distance from the concentration of Rutherford County's white population in Murfreesboro provided some safety for the residents of Cemetery. Cemetery's population of nearly 2,000 individuals amounted to another form of protection for the community.

While the community remained mostly isolated, it did not remain untouched. Over the six decades of the community's existence on the battlefield, veterans made a few efforts to commemorate the battle by way of monuments. The first monument established on the battlefield preceded the national cemetery; the men of Hazen's Brigade built a monument in 1863 dedicated to their efforts and the fallen soldiers of their brigade. In 1886, the United States Regular Troops built a monument in the national cemetery, dedicated to their brothers in arms who were buried in the national cemetery. And in 1906, the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railroad built an obelisk on the site where the Union artillery line blasted into the charging Confederates on the last day of battle, ending the battle in the Union victory. The Artillery Monument could originally be accessed by both railroad and road, and stood within the confines of the Cemetery community.

The community found a "homeplace" within the boundaries of the former battlefield. They settled on the land and called it their own. After the War Department removed a sizeable portion of the community in 1927, with the establishment of Stones River National Military Park, the

land physically remained the same, with some alterations to the human material resting on the landscape. The human understandings of the site's significance shifted with the change. "Honor," "respect," and "commemorate" replaced the word "home" in relation to the place. The War Department managed the place as memorial of the events that took place from December 31, 1862, to January 2, 1862. When the NPS began managing the site in 1933, their focus remained on the battle, less on the Civil War, and not at all on the Cemetery community, or the effects of the war in that place. Not until the 1990s, through initiatives driven by contemporary historical scholarship, did management begin to contextualize the story of the battle.

Current interpretation

Though the current museum briefly mentions the efforts of the 111th USCT, as well as the social and cultural effects of the war, it does not tell the story of Cemetery. Few remnants on the landscape show the lives that followed the Civil War. Among the physical remains of the community include decaying wood boards, rusty barbed wire, and various types of rubbish throughout the wooded areas of the battlefield, covered in moss, waiting for discovery. The remaining house sites of Cemetery are hardly accessible by the public; the natural growth interferes with inquiry, while protecting the sites for future archeological investigations.

Currently, the park has found some effective ways of telling the stories of Cemetery, and continues to seek methods to tell this history more holistically in relation to the battle and the Civil War. The park maintains a relationship with Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) History Department and Public History program. Researchers from the school have provided, and continue to provide, information about the community. The university has developed an online database of Cemetery information. Interpreters from the park have used that research to expand formal interpretive programs. Interpreters also use the research to engage the public in informal conversations about the broader meanings of the Civil War. In recent years, the park erected a wayside exhibit about William Holland, a member of Cemetery, by his headstone, near the Hazen Brigade Monument. In 2009, students collaborated with the park to develop a traveling exhibit that focused on the layers of history contained within the battlefield landscape. The exhibit utilized quotes about the place and pictures of the land as a way to keep the landscape as a character throughout the exhibit.

Allowing the landscape to inform interpretation, the park looks at its future interpretive projects contextually. Within the next few years, the park has plans to develop and implement a long-range interpretive plan that reflects current scholarship. Specifically, several planned projects will enlighten visitors about the African American community and its role on the land after the war. A cultural resources management class from MTSU is designing a wayside exhibit portraying life within the community. The inherent nature of a historic wayside site provides the viewer a chance to experience his or her surroundings while learning about what took place at that location. The park has also discussed using digital media to provide user-friendly access to some of the more complex community stories. Through its relationship with MTSU, the park may interpret the site through a public interface which houses park research data.

Landscape as integrant part

Understanding how a landscape reveals itself as an "integrant part" of the history of a place helps historians approach the story more holistically. Using a cultural landscape approach to tell the stories of a place brings many benefits. When looking at the landscape as a character in the story, interpreters can contextualize stories and show how they relate to each other. Cemetery's story is not complete without the battle story in the same way that the battle's story is not complete without looking at its effects. As a character in the story, the landscape serves as a way to seamlessly share these stories.

Using the landscape as a character in the story also helps maintain objectivity in relating the story. Interpreters can contextualize difficult histories by utilizing the cultural landscape approach. By keeping the landscape a character in the “telling” of a difficult history, interpreters can remove blame and victimization. By removing these subjective themes, interpreters make it easier for visitors to engage in the story, and can give visitors a basis for understanding contested history. Visitors have an easier time accepting that there were no “good guys” or “bad guys,” and can seek the broader story when they experience the place, and consider the events that played out there.

Finally, visitors will make a better connection to the place and to the story when interpreters use the landscape as a character in their story. People “experience” the history when they visit these historic places. Visitors have a more informed encounter when interpretive materials and programs integrate the stories of history with the significance of the place. Learning a site’s stories while in that place gives visitors a chance to “experience” history. When the landscape becomes a part of the story, visitors can also understand their own history in the making by being in that place. By visiting, they have contributed to one of many layers of history at that site. The NPS can better interpret their resources when they think of the landscape as a character in their interpretations of a place.

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