

# Archeology at Antietam

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Antietam National Battlefield  
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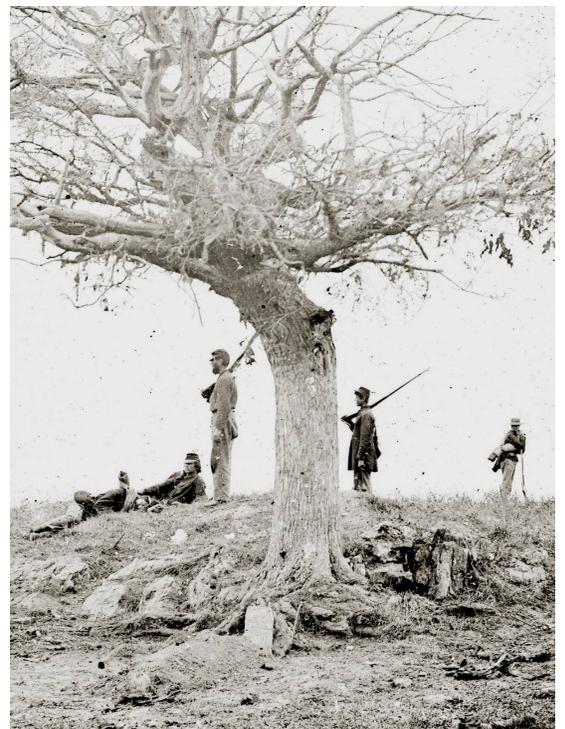


## The Antietam Battlefield

Today the Antietam National Battlefield is an idyllic rural landscape, dotted with lovely old farms and groves of stately trees. For one day in 1862, it was hell on earth. On these fields the Army of the Potomac under George McClellan and Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia came together like lumbering, angry beasts and mauled each other until neither could take any more. At least 4,000 men were killed and 19,000 more wounded and missing, making September 17, 1862 the bloodiest day in American history. Tactically the battle was fought to a draw, but strategically that worked to the Union's advantage. The Confederates had to abandon their invasion of the North and march back to Virginia. Lincoln was emboldened by this victory to issue the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, a revolutionary act that changed the political character of the war.

## The Dead of Antietam

The 4,000 men who died at Antietam were buried close to where they fell, in temporary graves. After the war, the bodies were exhumed and moved to permanent places of rest in formal cemeteries. Thanks to Alexander Gardner's famous photographs (right), they have continued to haunt the nation's imagination like the dead of few other battles. Some of them still inhabit the battlefield physically as well. The process of moving bodies was not perfect, and many were missed. In recent years the remains of five Union soldiers have been found on the battlefield. One was a middle-aged soldier of the Irish Brigade who fell while attacking the sunken road; among his possessions were a rosary, a crucifix and a Catholic medal. Another was a young New Yorker, 17 to 19 years old, who had already seen enough action to replace four of his seven New York coat buttons with standard-issue US buttons. These finds remind us that we should tread carefully on the battlefield, since the men who fell in the fighting may still be lying beneath our feet.

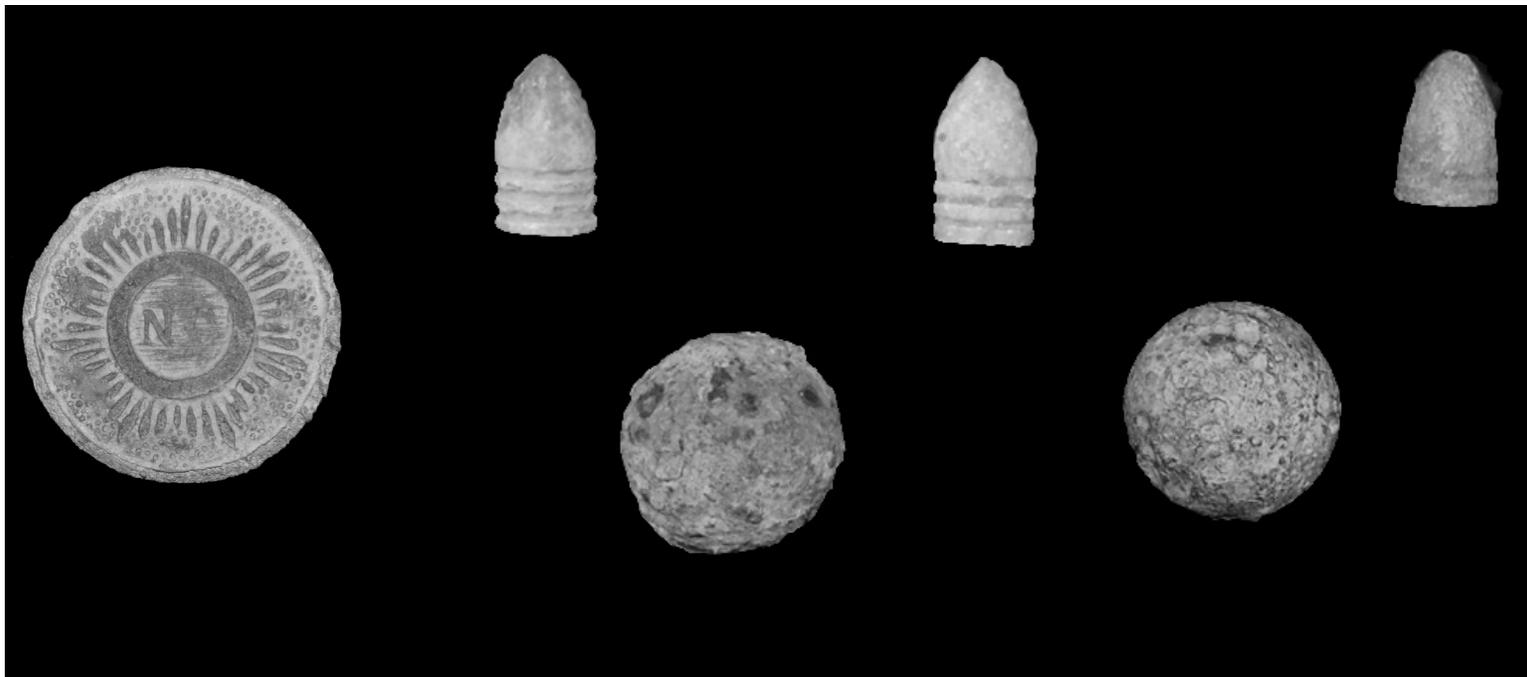


## Battlefield Archeology

People have been picking up souvenirs from battlefields since the first battles were fought. During the Civil War, the collecting often began within hours of the guns falling silent. But the serious study of battlefields by archeologists dates only to the 1970s. Since then archeology has been carried out on every sort of battlefield from forests where Roman legions clashed with Germanic tribesmen to the Pacific islands where Americans and Japanese fought during World War II.

What archeology offers to military history is geographical precision. Modern surveying techniques make it easy to map exactly where every bullet or ballista bolt was found, and this precision allows us to map the events of a battle in great detail. In the heat of battle soldiers often did not know exactly where they were, or misremembered when

they came to write about their experiences days or years later. Even for well-documented battles it can therefore be difficult to make a precise map of events, or to place historical markers just where a particular regiment or battery took its stand. Archeology gives us this precision. Finds of dropped bullets and percussion caps show where soldiers were standing when they loaded and fired their guns; finds of spent bullets show where they were aiming. Artillery shell fragments show what places were brought under fire. Using this information, archeologists can create richly detailed, highly accurate maps of battlefields. Artifacts from the field also connect us to the violent events of the past in a direct, physical way: here, we can say, is a bullet that fell from the trembling hand of a young soldier as he tried to load his gun, on this exact spot, on the 17th of September more than 150 years ago.



Civil War artifacts from the Antietam Battlefield. At left, a North Carolina button. At right, dropped Union bullets and fired Confederate canister shot from the route of the Ninth Corps advance on Sharpsburg .

### Willcox's Advance

During a recent archeological exploration of the Antietam Battlefield, particular attention was paid to one part of the park. This was the fields north of what is now called Burnside Bridge Road. During the afternoon phase of the battle, Willcox's Second Division of the Union Ninth Corps advanced along this road with orders to "seize the heights" around the town of Sharpsburg. Had they managed to take the town, they would have controlled the only convenient roads the Confederates could use to retreat, placing them in great danger. Because so few Confederate infantry remained in this part of the field, the defense relied heavily on

artillery. This was reflected in the artifacts recovered, which included numerous shell fragments and several bullets dropped by Union soldiers, but only one bullet that had definitely been fired by a Confederate infantryman. Particularly interesting were several pieces of cannister shot found out of cannister range of any known Confederate battery, suggesting that our maps of Confederate forces are not entirely accurate. Despite the heavy artillery fire Willcox's men reached the outskirts of the town, but without further orders they went no farther. They stayed where they were on the high ground until A.P. Hill's flank attack caused the whole Ninth Corps to be withdrawn back toward the creek.

### The Farms of Antietam

Besides remains of the fighting, the Antietam Battlefield contains an amazing collection of old farms, with houses and barns built as long ago as the 1760s. By studying them, archeologists and historians can learn much about the lives of people who lived around Sharpsburg in the 1700s and 1800s. Archeology reveals now vanished buildings, such as the tenant houses that once stood on the Roulette, Miller, and Newcomer properties (below), and many missing kitchens and sheds. The refined side of nineteenth-century life is revealed through sherds of fancy teacups and other dishes that turn up in the soil. Taking tea with neighbors was a regular part of life for these farm folk. Decorated buttons and bits of jewelry remind us of the finery they wore to those teas, and to church.

But these were working farms, and life on them also had its coarse side. Test excavations in the yards of some of Antietam's houses show that in the 1700s and early 1800s people threw much of their trash out the door, leaving their yards strewn with pottery and animal bones. By the front porch of the Joseph Poffenberger House, excavators found hundreds of small pieces of ceramic dishes; it seems that any dirt on the floor was just swept right out the door and off the porch, into the yard. Messy tasks like butchering were done right by the house, and animals roamed everywhere. The neat, grassy yards that surround these houses today were created at a later time. The world revealed by archeology is both cruder and more elegant than what one might imagine looking at these farms today. It was a different era, and people lived differently.



Farmstead Archeology at Antietam: Left, neck of a stoneware jug from the Keplinger Tenant house on the Newcomer property, dating to around 1865; center, sherds of decorated teacups and saucers from the Poffenberger House, c. 1850; cellar of the Clip Tenant House on the Roulette Property, built around 1830.

### Protect Our Sites

The Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 makes it a federal crime to damage archeological sites on federal lands or to remove artifacts from federal

property. Unauthorized metal detecting and artifact collecting are strictly forbidden in the park and on all other federal property.