



The Hornet’s Nest



The Hornet’s Nest

There is perhaps no more famous Civil War icon than the Hornet’s Nest at Shiloh. Ranking with Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg, Bloody Lane at Antietam, and the Stone Wall at Fredericksburg, Shiloh’s Hornet’s Nest is well known to even the most amateur of Civil War buffs.

Shiloh’s Hornet’s Nest lies in the center of the battlefield and was the scene of heavy combat on both days of the battle. On the first day, elements of three Union divisions manned the line along a little-used farm road that ran through the J.R. Duncan land. Duncan and his family worked a small cotton field that bordered

the road to the south. With its open fields of fire and road cover, there is little wonder that the Duncan plot became one of the most important localities on the battlefield.

Heavy fighting raged in the area of the Hornet’s Nest on the first day, with no less that eight distinct Confederate attacks turned back by the determined defenders of the Sunken Road. Attesting to the fury in the area, Confederates so named the location because, they said, the enemy’s bullets sounded like swarms of angry hornets.

Household Names

The terms “Hornet’s Nest” and “Sunken Road” are loosely used to mean the same geographical area. In reality, they are much different entities. The Sunken Road, meaning Duncan’s farm road, extended for three-fifths of a mile, connecting the Corinth Road and the River Road. The actual Hornet’s Nest, by comparison, refers to the nearly six-hundred-yard stretch of road in the center. This position, atop a small rise and fronting an almost impenetrable undergrowth, became the target of the numerous

Confederate attacks on April 6. The terms did not come into regular use until after the Civil War, however. The name “Hornet’s Nest” pre-dates that of the “Sunken Road.” Confederates themselves used the term “Hornet’s Nest,” and by the 1880s, veteran groups used the name regularly. There was even an annual “Hornet’s Nest Brigade” reunion. The term “Sunken Road” did not come into general use until after Congress established the national military park in 1894.

The Hornet’s Nest
Legacy

Almost as soon as the battle ended, key participants began describing the action at the Hornet’s Nest as the central event of the battle. Defenders of the area, such as Brigadier General Benjamin Prentiss, openly argued that their stand made against so many brave Confederate attacks held the Union line long enough for army commander Major General Ulysses S. Grant to establish a last line of defense.

Eventually, a park preserved the battlefield, including the Hornet’s Nest. The area then gained tangible status when park commissioners placed first wooden and then iron road signs marking prominent places on the battlefield. Still standing even today, the iron road sign on the Eastern Corinth Road marks the “Hornet’s

Nest: Center of Union Line.”

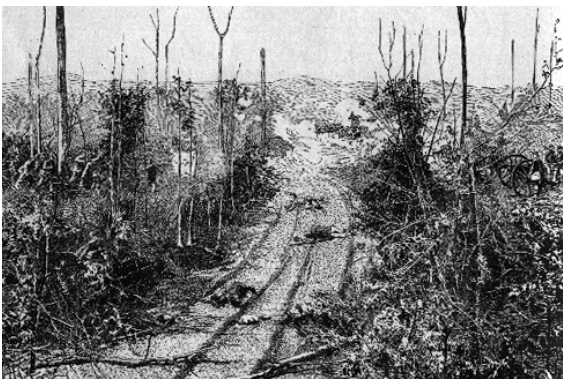
Historians have expanded on the veteran’s remembrances and continue to argue the importance of the Hornet’s Nest. Almost all the major monographs on the battle, as well as media presentations such as *Shiloh: Portrait of a Battle*, focus on the action that took place in the center of the battlefield. These works even portray the action in the area as a series of Confederate attacks across the open Duncan farmland. When these attacks failed, they argue, the Confederates had to assemble the largest concentration of artillery ever to appear on the North American continent. In portraying the Hornet’s Nest as the savior of Grant’s army, historians made it an American icon.

Myth or Reality?

Despite the emphasis on the Hornet’s Nest’s importance, a different story probably took place. Historians have recently begun to question the Hornet’s Nest’s role in the battle. Several pieces of evidence offer insight into the Sunken Road and Hornet’s Nest in the context of the battle as a whole.

The number of dead and wounded in the area shows that the Hornet’s Nest did not see the heaviest fighting at Shiloh. An 1867 document produced by laborers locating bodies on the battlefield states that the heaviest concentrations of dead lay on the eastern and western sectors of the battlefield and that the dead were fairly light in the center, where the Hornet’s Nest was located. That in itself states that casualties were fewer in the center where, according to myth, the heaviest and most important fighting took place. Supporting this point are casualty figures for the units engaged in the Hornet’s Nest. Colonel James M. Tuttle’s brigade of four Iowa regiments, which held the Hornet’s Nest and the Sunken Road in front of Duncan Field, sustained a total of 235 killed and wounded in the battle - a number less than some individual regiments sustained on other parts of the field.

Troop positions also shows that the Hornet’s Nest and Sunken Road was not the critical area on the field for most of the day. When they went into action, Colonel Thomas W. Sweeny’s Union brigade of six regiments, positioned in Duncan Field north of the Corinth road, did



not have ample room to deploy. As a result, only two regiments went on line; Sweeny held the other four in reserve for most of the day. Once the Union line began to fall apart on either side of the Hornet’s Nest, Sweeny began to send his reserve regiments as reinforcements for the other more critical areas. He sent two Illinois regiments to the Peach Orchard sector and one to the north to aid Major General John A. McClernand. Only one regiment went to aid the Hornet’s Nest. Had the Hornet’s Nest been a critical point with desperate and severe fighting, Sweeny probably would not have sent his regiments away from the area. Furthermore, troop position tablets show that very little action took place in Duncan Field. Confederate officers, knowing what would happen to charges across open ground, chose to seek cover while making their attacks. Duncan Field, where myth states that so many Confederate charges took place, has no Confederate tablets denoting troop positions.

Why the Hornet’s Nest?

If the Hornet’s Nest was not the central event in the Battle of Shiloh, why then did it become so important to historians? The answer is simple. For years after the Civil War, veterans of the Hornet’s Nest emphasized their role in the battle, claiming that their sacrifice had provided Grant with enough time to establish a last line of defense. Division commander Brigadier General Benjamin M. Prentiss wrote a widely-circulated report after the battle, which emphasized his role in the battle as well as that of his troops. Even after the war, veterans still claimed the defense of the Hornet’s Nest was the central event of Shiloh. A veterans’ organization, the “Hornet’s Nest Brigade,” even held annual reunions.

Congress established Shiloh National Military Park in 1894 to preserve the battlefield, and the Secretary of War appointed a commission to oversee building and development. Although made up of veterans, the commission relied heavily on its appointed historian, who wielded much power in locating troop positions, making sense of the confusing reports, and inter-

preting the battle to the public. The historian appointed by the Secretary of War was David W. Reed, a member of the 12th Iowa, which had fought squarely in the Hornet’s Nest. With images of battle in his mind and a growing consensus that the Hornet’s Nest was the central event of Shiloh, Reed developed the Hornet’s Nest interpretation of the battle, which still dominates Shiloh historiography today. Reed’s main medium was his government-published history of the battle, *The Battle of Shiloh and the Organizations Engaged*.



D.W. Reed beside his regiment’s monument at Shiloh

In Context

The new interpretations of the Hornet’s Nest and the Sunken Road do not minimize the role of the fighting in the center of the battlefield. The area was indeed important, especially later in the day when almost every Confederate unit on the battlefield concentrated at that point. Many Confederate charges swept forward into the grueling Federal fire, only to be turned

away. Hundreds of brave men and boys lost their lives in the Hornet’s Nest. For all these reasons, the Hornet’s Nest was very important, but perhaps not as important as other, less well-known operations taking place simultaneously on other parts of the battlefield. Taken in the context of the entire battle, the Hornet’s Nest may be more myth than reality.