

# **Earthworks and Arrowheads: Fort Blunt and Its Defense in July 1863**

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Oklahoma Historical Society

Paper presented at the Society for Historical Archaeology  
Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology, Mobile, January 2002

The pivotal battle of the Civil War in the Indian Territory was the result of a Union move to thwart a Confederate attack on Fort Blunt. This paper examines the nature of Fort Blunt and of the fighting making up the Battle of Honey Springs. Almost the entire garrison from Fort Gibson moved against the Confederates positioned at their headquarters at Honey Springs. Fort Blunt, known before and after the war as Fort Gibson, is shown by plan to have been an elaborate earthwork fort. Whether this earthwork was actually constructed has never been demonstrated. The nature of the fighting that makes up the Battle of Honey Springs is reviewed, with focus on the armaments used in the battle's final engagement. Evidence is presented for the use of the bow and arrow, presumably at the hands of one of the numerous Native American regiments engaged at Honey Springs.

In 1863, the Federal Army established Fort Blunt on the site of Fort Gibson, abandoned by the War Department in 1857. In July of 1863, the troops at Fort Blunt moved south to engage Confederate forces at Honey Springs Depot. The Battle of Honey Springs ensued as the armies clashed just north of the Confederate headquarters. The Federal intention was to preempt Confederate plans to attack and capture Fort Blunt. In a very real sense, the Battle of Honey Springs was the battle for Fort Blunt.

Like other Civil War events in the Indian Territory, accounts of Fort Blunt and the Battle of Honey Springs are sparse. Here, I will begin to fill the gap based on insights into Fort Blunt itself and the Battle of Honey Springs from a series of archaeological investigations. Comments on Fort Blunt are based on very superficial archaeological study, and hopefully will be superceded by more extensive comment in a future paper. Comment on Honey Springs will focus on the final action of what I see as a three-engagement battle.

## **FORT BLUNT**

Fort Gibson was established in 1824 to protect the new western frontier. It served an important mission in the 1830s and 1840s related to the removal of the Five Tribes to the territory. In the 1840s, work was begun on a new fort with stone masonry buildings that were to replace a decaying log fort situated on low-lying ground below the new site. Work on this new fort was incomplete when Gibson was abandoned in 1857.

When Colonel William Phillips moved on Fort Gibson in April of 1863, he dislodged some 200 Rebel defenders (OR April 12, 1863). He moved quickly to construct fortifications, and by the end of the month he reported to Major General James G. Blunt, "*I am erecting a strong earthwork here, including a strong and large commissary building. In a week it will be almost impregnable. It is constructed on scientific principles* (OR April 27, 1863)." On May 1, he informed Blunt that these were "*...strong works ... that cannot be taken; inclosed 15 or 16 acres; water, and strong commissary*

*buildings. Made three ferry-boats on the Grand River, under the works... (OR May 1, 1863)."* A few days later, he promised to send Blunt surveys and plans of the works when they were completed (OR May 9, 1863). On May 14, Phillips issued a General Order renaming Gibson as Fort Blunt. In most Civil War reports, however, this place was still known as Fort Gibson.

Almost a year later, U.S. Major-General Samuel R. Curtis, in a report to Major-General H.W. Halleck, noted, "*Fort Gibson has been fortified by the volunteers, making it a pretty safe position; but some finishing and repairing are necessary, and two or three good siege guns would be a great additional strength (OR Feb 15, 1864).*" The earthwork fort was, it seems, far from complete as Curtis informed Blunt in March that "*I gave orders at Fort Gibson to have the fort completed, and will write Col. Phillips in reply to his letter to me concerning the matter, as he understands my directions given on the ground (OR March 8, 1864).*" Phillips in fact wrote Curtis immediately to say that as soon as provisions arrived he would begin this work (OR March 9, 1864), but Blunt ordered him to postpone until an engineer could be dispatched to his assistance (OR March 30, 1864). Phillips wrote to Curtis informing him of his predicament in regards to Blunt countermanding Curtis' order, and making it known that he did not need the aid of an engineer as he was qualified in this area (OR April 5, 1864). Blunt almost simultaneously ordered him to follow on Curtis' orders, and informed him that the promised engineer would not be dispatched (OR April 3, 1864). By June of 1864, it was noted, "*Fort Gibson is now well fortified (OR June 26, 1864).*"

Confederate comment on the works at Fort Gibson are also noteworthy. By June, Brigadier General William Steele reported that "*Col. Phillips (the Federal commander) has had time to fortify himself at Fort Gibson, a central position with regard to the Indian tribes, from which he can, with the greater resources of the Northern Government, put his well clothed and supplied allies in contrast with the poorly clothed and badly equipped Indians who have remained true to the south*" "*Phillips is now intrenched in a manner which will, I fear, enable him to hold his position against the small guns at my command (OR June 8, 1863).*" In August, after the Confederate defeat at Honey Springs, Brigadier General Stand Watie, writing as Principal Chief of the Cherokees, reported to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, "*In April last a small force of hostile Indians, Negroes, and one battalion of Kansas troops, in all about 2,000 men, took possession of Fort Gibson, in the Cherokee country. They have held this place, and consequently the Cherokee Nation almost unmolested. There have been no vigorous efforts made to dislodge them, and they have at leisure strengthened and fortified their position. This mongrel force has laid waste our country, driven the women and children from their homes, and kept the other Nations, which have yet escaped invasion, in a continual state of alarm (OR August 8, 1863).*"

The next year, J.N. Hildebrand reported to General Douglas H. Cooper, "*There were some 600 negroes expected at Fort Gibson to renew their fortification (OR April 6, 1864).*" In July of 1864, in an address to the National Committee and Council of the Cherokee Nation, Brigadier General Watie, in reviewing the history of the war in the

Cherokee Nation, noted that the Spring of 1863 “...*saw the enemy strongly intrenched at Fort Gibson* (OR August 7, 1864).”

A plan of Fort Blunt prepared sometime prior to the end of 1865 shows an extensive earthwork with both ends anchored on the Grand or Neosho River. This work measures 6,000 feet in length and rises from the floodplain of the Neosho to enclose an area of prominent high ground. Within the work are the Dragoon barracks and commissary building, on which construction began in 1845, and a powder magazine, constructed as part of the U.S. improvements of 1863. Most of the buildings of the original log Fort Gibson, constructed in the 1820s and 1830s, were outside of the work. Most of these were probably no longer standing in 1863.

It can be presumed that this plan of Fort Blunt documents the earthwork fort as it was constructed. Nonetheless, it is apparent from the accounts that while construction of the works began immediately on the U.S. occupation of Gibson, completion became an issue a year later. Unfortunately, we have yet to find any good description of the extent or nature of the works that were constructed.

Following the close of the Civil War, Fort Gibson was reactivated and extensive construction occurred over the area that was Fort Blunt. No photographs from this period show any vestiges of the earthworks, and it seems probable that most of the works were rapidly eradicated following the close of hostilities.

One section of preserved earthwork does remain, however, on the lower end of the fort as the ground begins to slope to the floodplain of the Neosho. Preliminary testing in this area demonstrates the presence of a sandstone bed just under the surface which was broken through to construct the ditch of the works. The ditch is silted in some 107 cms, and the adjacent rampart and parapet is considerably diminished. The downslope end of the work is eradicated by a railroad grade, and the upslope end of the work ends abruptly as if filled beyond this point. What appears to be the ghost of a salient beyond this point exists on the modern landscape, thought testing to date has yet to confirm this interpretation. An extensive testing program will be required to document the extent of the works, and to determine if the prepared plan accurately reflects its finished form.

## **THE BATTLE OF HONEY SPRINGS**

Confederate strategy against Fort Blunt focused on preventing the resupply of its garrison. A particular focus of this effort was the resupply trains from Fort Scott, Kansas. Stand Watie's cavalry made repeated harassment of this train a priority, resulting in a failed attack in early July, 1863, at Cabin Creek and a successful capture of a 300 wagon train at this same place in September 1864. These and similar efforts resulted in frequent reports that troops at Fort Blunt were on half-rations or worse. Confederate forces also constantly harassed Union pickets and parties sent out for wood and hay.

In summer of 1863, Confederates under General Cooper planned a direct assault on Fort Blunt. Cooper was congregating forces for this attack at his headquarters at Honey

Springs, located on the Texas Road some 15 miles south of Fort Blunt. In July of 1863, he had some 6,000 troops on hand, and was waiting for another 3,000 under Brigadier-General W.L. Cabell before moving north along the Texas Road to attack Fort Blunt. U.S. Major General Blunt concurrently moved his headquarters to Fort Gibson, and the garrison was significantly reinforced.

Blunt decided almost immediately to take the offensive against Cooper's position before he could be reinforced, and thus preempt the planned attack on Fort Blunt. Blunt moved his troops south along the Texas Road in a forced, overnight march, and engaged the Confederates on the morning of July 17. U.S. troops engaged included the First, Second, and Third Indian Home Guard, First Kansas (Colored) Volunteer Infantry, detachments of the Second Colorado, Sixth Kansas, and Third Wisconsin Cavalry, Hopkins' battery of four guns, two sections of the Second Kansas Battery, and four howitzers attached to the cavalry. Confederates engaged included the First and Second Cherokee Regiments, First and Second Creek Regiments, Twentieth Texas dismounted cavalry, Twenty-Ninth Texas Cavalry, First Texas Partisan Rangers, Scanlan's squadron (cavalry), Gillett's squadron (cavalry), and the First Choctaw and Chickasaw Regiment.

Archaeological study using a now-standard metal detector survey at Honey Springs has documented evidence of battle stretching along the Texas Road for some two miles north of Cooper's headquarters at Honey Springs Depot. This research has further shown that the Battle of Honey Springs can best be seen as three spatially independent actions:

- 1) The initial battle north of Elk Creek. Here the First Kansas Colored came head-to-head with two Texas regiments, and won decisively.
- 2) A Confederate holding action at the bridge across Elk Creek to the south of the initial or main engagement. In addition to evidence of the fighting, debris from the camps of the Confederate defenders was also discovered.
- 3) A final Confederate holding action just north of Honey Springs Depot.

Most of the historical accounts describe the first, or main battle, and give some attention to the fight at Elk Creek. The final action is very poorly described, and is the focus here.

In his report on the Battle of Honey Springs, Cooper describes this final action:

*“Captain Gillett's squadron, arriving promptly, was formed on the road, and for a short time held the advance of the enemy in check. The Choctaw, under Colonel Walker, opportunely arrived at this time, and under my personal direction charged the enemy, who had now planted a battery upon the timbered ridge about 1,000 yards north of Honey Springs. With their usual intrepidity, the Choctaws went at them, giving the war-whoop, and succeeded in checking the advance of the enemy until their force could be concentrated and all brought up. The Choctaws,*

*discouraged on account of the worthless ammunition, then gave way, and were moved to fall back with the others ...”*

Archaeological survey of this area shows fighting confined to an area of some 160 acres with the Texas Road, its location shown by a series of swales, running through the center of the artifact distribution.

This overall distribution is more properly seen as a series of clusters which can be better defined by looking at the locations of classes of artifacts. Two general classes, artillery, and musket and rifle balls tend to be located east of the road—the artillery is from 6 and 12 lb guns; the larger are with certainty from Federal guns. The balls include conical Minie, Enfield, Sharps, and Picket bullets, as well as round balls fired in rifled and smoothbore weapons of a variety of calibers, and including buck and ball. Very few of these ball are unfired.

The vast majority of the bullets at this location are, however, from revolvers, and include a few conical bullets from .44 caliber weapons and a vast majority of round balls for a variety of calibers between .31 and .44. Fired balls show patch marks and/or land and groove marks. Once again, a vast majority of these are fired. These revolver rounds are evenly distributed over the area and are thus prominent on both sides of the Texas Road.

Buckshot, less than .31 caliber, is also found on both sides of the Texas Road and matches well the distribution of revolver bullets. The importance of this type of ammunition is probably underrepresented due to its small size and attendant difficulty of discovery.

The view of battle that emerges from this is one in which Union artillery was minimally involved and was probably intended to drive forming Confederate lines off the ridge. The balance of the evidence speaks of an action that is heavily weighted towards close cavalry fighting with revolvers, and some, probably two squadrons of Texas cavalry in Cooper's reserve, armed with shotguns.

Of further interest on this battlefield are five rolled copper arrow points. Two of these points were also found at the engagement at Elk Creek and one at the main battle. There are no accounts of the use of the bow and arrow at Honey Springs but the suggestion that they were in use there is not at all surprising.

The use of the bow and arrow in Plains warfare at this time and later is well documented, although the form of the metal points in use is different. The 1864 Sand Creek massacre site recently studied by Doug Scott provides a perfect case study of the diverse weaponry, including the bow and arrow, carried by Cheyenne during the Civil War years. Less well know is the degree of use of this weapon by the eastern tribes during this same time period.

The bow and arrow was a common armament in the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations during the Antebellum period and, in fact, until well after the Civil War:

*“I never saw any kind of weapon except bow and arrow and the old muzzle loading rifle until I was grown” (IHP 26:255).*

*“There were a few old Choctaw Warriors near Stringtown, who still used the bow and arrow, but most of the Indians in the early seventies adopted the Winchesters, carrying them in scabbards attached to their saddle” (IHP 2:122).*

At a Choctaw house site dating from the 1830s to 1850s, three rolled metal points similar to those from Honey Springs were found (Haikey personal communication 2001).

At Chustenalah, December 1861, Indian refugees engaging the 9<sup>th</sup> Texas Cavalry used both bullets and arrows (Sparks). General Pike’s Confederates used bow and arrow at Pea Ridge in March 1862 (IHP 11:288): *“General Pike also had a fight in Arkansas and they called it Pea Ridge. His Indian troops fought Indian style with bow and arrow, and the North whipped them there” (IHP 11:288).* Metal points are known from Cabin Creek where major battles were fought in 1863 and 1864 (Lees, personal files).

Opportunity was only one factor; Confederate complaints of bad powder have already been mentioned. An account by Confederate Commissioner of Indian Affairs S.S. Scott further illustrates this frustration:

*“The powder is perfectly worthless. The mere charging of the gun grinds it into the finest dust, which is little likely to explode; and, should it do so, its power is scarcely more than sufficient to drive the ball out of the piece. A surgeon was left behind, after the late skirmish [Honey Springs], by Gen. Cooper, to take care of his wounded, who states that balls were extracted from the bodies of wounded Yankees, in his presence, which were not even buried in the flesh. The Indians have taken up the idea, which I endeavored to overcome, that the powder (which came from Matamoras) was made at the North, and sent out especially to be sold to our army (OR August 8, 1863).”*

Thus, the bow and arrow, if present among the arms carried by Choctaw and Chickasaws at this final engagement, would be an expected response to poor performance of firearms.

## **SUMMATION**

Both U.S. and Confederate assessments in early 1863 concluded that Fort Blunt was too strong to take by assault. Nonetheless, Confederate General Cooper was determined enough about the importance of taking this place that he planned an attack in mid-July. And U.S. Major General Blunt was nervous enough about the strength of his fort and its defenders to risk a preemptive strike against a numerically superior force. The result was that the works at Fort Blunt were never to be tested, and the Confederate army was proven incapable of defeating the U.S. garrison at a battlefield miles away.

Revealing the true nature of the works at Gibson will await detailed archaeological field work. The nature of the true Battle for Fort Blunt, known in the record as the Battle of Honey Springs, has been revealed by extensive study. This nature differs from what might be reconstructed based solely on the documents. At the site of the final action, the importance of cavalry armed with revolver and shotgun emerges as the defining characteristic of this part of the Battle of Honey Springs . The use of the bow and arrow in this engagement is argued at this location and is entirely consistent with what could be expected, though no mention of this is made in the battle accounts or reminiscences.

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