CONFRONTING THE STEREOTYPE: 
A Proper Context for the Study of the Civil War
(and other Military Conflicts) in the West

William B. Lees, Ph.D., RPA
Cultural Resource Analysts, Inc.
151 Walton Avenue
Lexington, KY 40502
wblees@crai-ky.com

How often have I tried to explain why I was wasting my time on an obscure battlefield in Oklahoma that had little or no impact on the outcome at Appomattox? While the Civil War was an epic event of at least national importance, its expression and meaning in the west was not necessarily the same as in the east. When we jettison the question of Appomattox as irrelevant to our studies, we gain entry into a regionally relevant research context that may ultimately allow us to help reinterpret the Civil War in bold new ways.

After lecturing to an undergraduate history class on the archaeology of Civil War battlefields in Oklahoma and Kansas, I was confronted with the question: given that my example battles had no real effect on the outcome of the Civil War, why is it important to understand in detail their physical imprints? More simply put, why the effort on something that did not count? This is not an easy question given that most people see the Civil War as a monolithic event that started with the cannonade on Fort Sumter and ended when Lee surrendered at Appomattox.

There was in reality a lot of fighting west of the Mississippi: to say that it did not count is to make a lot of people in history look foolish and raises the possibility that many of the soldiers fighting in this noble conflict died in vain. The question is not if these western conflicts counted—because it most certainly did for those who were involved—but why they counted.
The approach to western history ushered in by Patricia Limerick, Richard White, and others deconstructed another monolith of history—the frontier of Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb—and showed the west to be a very local and diverse phenomenon. In the same fashion, it is useful in dealing with the Civil War in the west to search for local meaning. Important too, this local meaning need not reference anything in the east. This in itself has been a struggle for an historical archaeology that has its intellectual origins firmly rooted in the eastern tidewater, in areas settled by the English.

In the next few moments, I will very briefly review several examples of armed conflict in the far west that occurred during the Civil War. In the process I hope to illustrate that these conflicts generally have meaning beyond that traditionally considered by scholars of that conflict. There is a great anthropological and archaeological challenge inherent in this, which I also hope will become clear. In the time I have, I will touch only on a number of sites in Oklahoma, but I suspect that other sites of conflict throughout the west would serve equally well to make the same points.

The Flight of Opotleyahola

My first example is one for which there has unfortunately been no archaeological study. In November and December of 1861, what by some is known as the Opotleyahola campaign occurred in the northern Indian Territory. This was a conflict between Creek and Seminole under Chief Opotleyahola (usually referred to as pro-Union) and Confederate Indians
under Col. Douglas H. Cooper and Col. James Q. McIntosh. Ostensibly, Cooper set out to compel submission of Opothleyahola’s Creeks or drive them from the Indian Territory. Three armed encounters resulted: Round Mountains on November 19, Chusto-Talasah on December 9, and Chustenalah on December 26. Each involved the Confederate affiliated Indians attacking Opothleyahola’s encamped warriors and non-combatants. Cooper was the Confederate commander in the first two engagements and McIntosh in the third. Each is termed a Confederate victory because of the flight of Opothleyahola’s people.

As pointed out by Oklahoma Historical Society Native American Historian Mary Jane Warde, the pattern of fighting in these engagements is difficult to understand if one is a scholar of the Civil War. It is nonetheless familiar to those well versed in the Indian Wars (Mary Jane Warde, personal communication with the author 2003). Here, threat to, or attack of an encampment is defended by warriors whose stance may be offensive or defensive, but whose purpose is to buy time for the withdrawal to safety of non-combatants. Once this has begun, the warriors themselves withdraw. In Civil War scholarship, however, whoever holds the field is the victor. This model is not relevant or even meaningful in our context.

Further, when it is realized that Creeks under Opothleyahola opposed Creeks under McIntosh in these engagements, the Civil War as motive is revealed as a thin veneer overlying a much older conflict between the Upper and Lower Creek dating to negotiations over an 1825 removal treaty. This treaty, involving the Creek homeland in Georgia, was opposed by Opothleyahola himself for the Upper Creek in open confrontation with Chief
William McIntosh of the Lower Creek. The result was resilient tensions between the Upper Creek and the Lower Creek or "McIntosh faction."

Was the fighting at Round Mountains, Chusto-Talasah, and Chustenalah really about the Civil War that Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis were overseeing, or was it an eruption of a much older civil war between Upper and Lower Creek that had smoldered since 1825? Because this event occurred in the early months of the Civil War and because a prominent if inept Confederate commander (Cooper) was involved, attempts have been successfully made to describe this as a campaign composed of battles such as one would find on the Peninsula of Virginia in 1862. Nothing could be, I think, further from the truth.

The promise of events such as this, however, lies not in fitting them to the stereotype but rather in being able to understand the way in which a conflict such as the Civil War was interpreted and perhaps even renegotiated locally in order to confront local issues and needs. Archaeologically, the task is to find evidence of a battlefield pattern that would betray this difference and to refocus the history on a context where the Civil War is rationale rather than cause and, in the above example, where the non-combatant Creek are as important to understanding the event are the actions of their warriors.

The Battle of Honey Springs

The Battle of Honey Springs offers different lessons. Honey Springs was fought on July 17, 1863, between Union forces under Maj. Gen. James G.
Blunt from Fort Gibson and Confederate forces under Brig. Gen. Douglas Cooper at Honey Springs Depot. Cooper had been massing troops at Honey Springs for a planned attack on Fort Gibson. Already outnumbered, Blunt chose to travel the 25 miles to Honey Springs and attack the Confederates before Cooper could be further reinforced.

The battle was a decisive Union victory and its core was a lopsided artillery battle followed by an infantry engagement pitting at the center the Union 1st Kansas Colored Infantry versus the 20th and 29th Texas regiments. Historical accounts describe the opposing troops deployed in line of battle stretching for one and one-half miles. Archaeology, however, showed little evidence of fighting beyond the center, which is where the 1st Kansas and Texas regiments tangled. Retreat ensued after collapse of the Confederate line at the center. Archaeology has identified two brief holding actions south of the original Confederate lines, with the last overlooking Honey Springs Depot, two miles south of the initial lines.

The lack of engagement on the flanks shown archaeologically is not adequately explained in the historical record. Native American regiments formed the Confederate flanks and it is possible that they fell back in order to slow rather than prevent the advance of the Union troops similar to the process described for the attacks on Opothleyahola. The final engagement in the Battle of Honey Springs may be interpreted similarly. The Choctaw and Chickasaw regiment, held in reserve, placed themselves between the advancing Union cavalry and Honey Springs Depot, and fought long enough for other Confederate troops to withdraw and stores to be destroyed. There is also evidence that the Choctaw and Chickasaw
regiment compensated for the poor gunpowder that General Cooper later
cursed as a cause of his defeat by using the bow and arrow. This weapon
also is known to have been used by Opothleyahola’s Creeks and
Seminoles and was a common weapon of Choctaws and Chickasaws until
well after the Civil War.

What of the motives of those engaged at Honey Springs? The combatants
included Native Americans from a number of tribes, and especially the
Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek. Representatives from each
tribe were present on both sides of the fighting. Indians present for the
Union were units of the Indian Home Guard, formed from southern Kansas’
Indian refugees from the Indian Territory—including, to be certain, warriors
from Opothleyahola’s Creek and Seminole. Were the same old tribal
factions and tensions at play at Honey Springs as in the flight of
Opothleyahola? Of this there can be little question, and it is also certain
that similar factions and lethal tensions, also the result of removal, were as
strong among the Cherokee as the Creek.

Combatants also included African Americans from the 1st Kansas. This
regiment was formed from free blacks and escaped slaves from Missouri
and the Indian Territory. The motive of blacks fighting in the Civil War has
been discussed in length but many escaped slaves from the Indian
Territory had been held by Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, and Creek
owners. The fighting at Honey Springs is known to have actually pitted—in
the same battle—former slave and former owner. Not to be overlooked is
the presence of several African Americans in the Confederate lines.
Combatants also included Anglo-Americans on both sides, and certainly Hispanics among the Texas troops. The final and really incredible lesson from this battle follows this review of the makeup of the opposing armies: the cultural, ethnic, and racial composition of the combatants was profoundly diverse, and was really not noticed. It was not noticed because it was status quo in this part of the world at this time.

Unlike the Opothleyahola tragedy, Honey Springs does fit well within the military concepts of the Civil War. But Honey Springs and all of the Civil War in the west is so inherently different that it deserves a new objectifying examination using archaeology and anthropology as the focal point of historical scholarship.

Findings

There is no doubt in my mind that the Civil War in the Indian Territory was very, very different than it was anywhere else in the country. As different as it was, however, I also believe that for many reasons the Indian Territory was more similar than not to events occurring elsewhere in the far west during this period:

- Cultural, ethnic, and racial makeup of participants was diverse, yet was to a real degree unnoticed because of the historical diversity of the region. Identifying what went unnoticed and the fact that it went unnoticed may be key in interpreting these events.
- Motives of armed conflict were more complex than elsewhere. These included to a varying degree those motives stereotypical of the Civil
War in general but including very significant local motives. These local motives generally relate to struggles to negotiate relationships between groups of people, with these struggles becoming overtly armed during the Civil War.

- Armed conflict looks different because of differences in cultural traditions on the one hand (different tradition of tactics, weapons) and due to the nature of the local motives, which often included a ration of vengeance for past wrongs or perceived evils.

My examples have shown historical tribal conflicts, Native American traditions of conflict, the lack of notice of incredible cultural and racial diversity, and other factors to characterize armed conflict during the Civil War in the Indian Territory. Some of these issues relating to Native American cultural history and tradition are seen elsewhere in the west at places such as Sand Creek in Colorado (1864), in the Sioux Uprising in Minnesota (1862), and operations against the Sioux in North Dakota (1863, 1864). But it is not just a Native American thread that makes the west different. Quantrill’s raid on Lawrence in 1864 was mostly about revenge for a decade of border warfare between Missouri and Kansas, and Chivington’s campaign into New Mexico probably had more to do with maintaining local control of the Colorado gold fields than with military control of the southwest.

Clearly what is called for is a wide-open examination of local context for events of armed conflict in the far west—something at which we, as anthropologists, should excel. One of the key values of historical archaeology has become invoking physical remains as a way to confront
stereotypes. Archaeology is here a catalyst that results in a new understanding of past events. This is the case even should its use not result in profound new historical facts speaking for the disenfranchised, answering unresolved questions, or correcting historical errors or omissions.

Of course this sort of broadening of context has been taking place throughout National Park Service controlled Civil War sites. Here the goal has been to discuss more thoroughly the role of slavery and African Americans in the Civil War and in particular at the specific Civil War locations being interpreted. This process has engendered much resentment from Civil War scholars and enthusiasts, who decry such movements as diminishing these Civil War places as commemorations of hallowed ground and as places where armies fought, or as attempts to simply be politically correct. In reality, we know in the west that this movement is long overdue; the Civil War is a much more complex, dynamic, and interesting event of our culture than we have been led to believe.

If this were not so, why would we today have such a difficult time agreeing on the cause of this great conflict that removed forever the façade of purity that had until then surrounded our Revolutionary existence?

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