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Civil War Reconstructed

Archaeologist Mines Atlanta Landscape for Remains of the Clash Between Union and Confederate Armies

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By CAMERON MCWHIRTER

(See Corrections and Amplifications item [below](#).)

KENNESAW, Ga.—When Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman arrived here in June 1864, he wrote to his superiors, "The whole country is one vast fort."

Gen. Sherman and his 100,000 men encountered 65,000 Confederates dug in along 12 miles of earthworks at Kennesaw Mountain. After fierce fighting, the rebels retreated to nearby Atlanta. Several more battles ensued before Union forces took the city, dealing a crippling blow to the South.



Enlarge Image
Josh D. Weiss for The Wall Street Journal

Garrett Silliman points toward a rifle pit he found this month while using a GPS system in the woods of Smyrna, Ga.

The detritus of war—bullets, uniforms, cannon shot, swords and, of course, corpses—was strewn across the region in the aftermath. Trenches, both intricate defenses built over weeks by engineers and shallow pits frantically dug by infantry under fire, snaked for miles.

Today, metro Atlanta—a land of expressways, subdivisions and shopping malls—has grown to about 5.7 million people, from about 10,000 in

the 1860s. So it's easy to assume that evidence of the famous clash of armies has been obliterated except for that preserved in museums, parks and monuments.

That assumption is wrong, according to Garrett Silliman, a 36-year-old archaeologist for an environmental and land-use consulting firm. Mr. Silliman's employer, Edwards-Pitman Environmental Inc., has a contract with Cobb County and the Georgia Department of Transportation to identify battle sites to preserve—or at least excavate—before bulldozers plow them under. He is hoping that as the

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150th anniversary of the Civil War arrives this year, governments will take a renewed interest in preservation.

Battlefield archaeology is meticulous work. It takes years of education and mastery of sensitive equipment, including global positioning systems, ground-penetrating radar, advanced metal detectors and extremely precise mapping software.



Enlarge Image

Josh D. Weiss for The Wall Street Journal

Garrett Silliman uploads the site's coordinates for comparison with old Civil War era maps.

But the work's goal is simple: to reconstruct a battle.

"It's just a huge crime scene," said William Lees, president of the Society for Historical Archaeology and a professor at the University of West Florida. "You are just trying to figure out what happened there by what was left behind."

If Mr. Silliman finds a clump of unspent bullets, he knows it was where men fumbled with ammunition shortly before an attack. If he finds shattered bits of bullets and belt buckles, he knows it is where soldiers encountered heavy fire. This forensic detail helps Mr. Silliman and other archaeologists develop a much clearer picture of parts of specific battles and also helps them understand overall military strategy at the time.

"We can really create a good picture of what was happening even with a limited archaeological record," Mr. Silliman said.

On a cold January morning, Mr. Silliman set out in his Land Rover in search of forgotten battlefields hidden amid heavily developed suburbs. His first stop was a municipal water tank atop a low hill in the shadow of Kennesaw Mountain. In 2005, Mr. Silliman was surveying at the bottom of the hill when he fell in a hole. Cutting away kudzu with a machete, he discovered what he thought was an advanced trench line. Looking at maps and accounts of the fighting, he determined the unnamed hill was likely an advanced position of Alabama Confederates, captured by Union Midwesterners on June 15, 1864.

Five years after he fell in the hole, Mr. Silliman has come back—with funding, county permission and equipment—to see what is still here. Mr. Silliman, who with a trim rounded beard and knit cap looks like a cross between a hippie and a Civil War colonel, hoisted on his back a GPS device that looked like a futuristic trumpet and pointed skyward. He carried a notebook to sketch battle lines that he would later scan into his computer.

There were trenches made of piled mud and stone, running along the hill. The water tank destroyed trenches higher up the hill. A nearby utility line and a subdivision destroyed more down the hill. But the side of the hill, which is tough to build on, had been spared. The fortifications still stand a few feet high, despite years of erosion.

"It's amazing how well preserved these things are, given everything that's happened," Mr. Silliman said as he tramped through the forest.

Mr. Silliman stopped every few feet to log data to the satellite and sketch the line. He will probably come back in the spring with a metal detector to try to find bullets. Unlike collectors, who dig up items to trade or sell, Mr. Silliman uses detectors to figure out the battle's progress.

Many first-hand reports from the battles and later recollections were wrong. Officers confused by the fighting or eager to impress superiors wrote accounts of battles that often made themselves look better and the fighting fiercer than they actually

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were. It's like any crime scene. Witnesses can't be trusted, but physical evidence can.

Mr. Silliman's guess is that professionals have surveyed less than 10% of all the battle lines around Atlanta. Like many archaeologists, he considers his work on these forgotten battlefields to be more of a calling than a job. He has ancestors who fought for the Union, and says he wants to preserve what he can for future generations.

"It's our Iliad," he said of the conflict.

Corrections & Amplifications

William Lees teaches at the University of West Florida. An earlier version of this story incorrectly said he taught at the University of Western Florida.

Write to Cameron McWhirter at cameron.mcwhirter@wsj.com

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