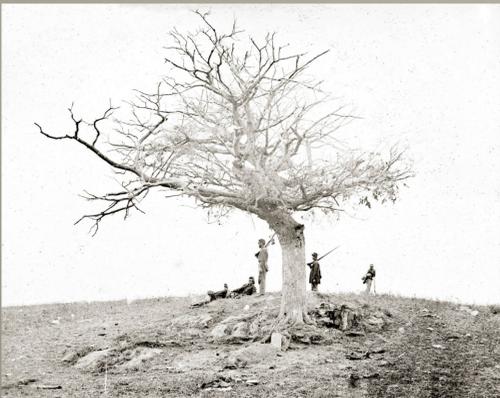




Archeology at Antietam

Archeological Survey of New Lands, 2011-2013



Archeology at Antietam

Beginning in October, 2011, archeologists will be conducting three seasons of fieldwork at Antietam National Battlefield. The archeologists will be looking for archeological sites on lands acquired by the battlefield since 1998. They hope to find evidence of Civil War camps, artillery positions, and field hospitals. They will also be investigating farm sites, looking for evidence of life in this area in the 1700s and 1800s, and searching for Indian camps.

Battlefield Archeology

Archeology can reveal a great deal about how battles were fought. Even for well-documented battles like those of the American Civil War, archeology can show exactly where on the landscape troops marched and where they fired their guns. This knowledge sometimes changes our understanding of the fighting.

Archeologists use metal detectors to find bullets, shell fragments, and other evidence of fighting – war is a messy business. Intact, unfired bullets were dropped where soldiers were standing while they loaded their guns. By mapping out the locations where dropped bullets are found, archeologists can map out firing lines. Fired bullets land where someone was aiming. A position occupied by men during heavy fighting will be marked both by the bullets they dropped and those that were fired at them. Since both armies used a variety of weapons and ammunition, it is sometimes possible to identify the units involved just from the kind of bullets found at the battle site.

For this to work, the archeologists have to know exactly where each artifact was found. When archeologists investigate a battle site, each artifact is bagged separately with its own unique number, and a flag is placed at the find spot bearing the same number. The location of each flag is then recorded using a laser transit or highly accurate GPS device, allowing the archeologists to make a digital map of all their finds. If artifacts are removed from a battlefield without careful mapping, this information is lost.

Using these techniques, archeologists have been able to map out many positions at Civil War battlefields in the National Parks. At Antietam, the advance and retreat of the 7th Maine across the Piper Orchard has been mapped in detail. At Manassas (Bull Run), bullets marking the first firing line of the 19th Indiana of the Black Hat Brigade were found around and east of a farmhouse, showing where the men stood in the yard and adjacent field while they exchanged fire with Confederates 70 yards away. The archeology shows exactly where the men stood, and allows us, 150 years later, to stand in their bootprints.

Antietam's Farms

Besides the site of the famous battle, the Antietam National Battlefield includes a remarkable collection of historic farms. The earliest were founded in the 1740s, on the frontier of European settlement. Some of the buildings still standing in the park may go back to the 1760s. Even though much of the old farm landscape can still be seen above ground, archeology has much to tell us about life on those old farms. Many buildings that once stood in the park have been torn down and forgotten, including small outbuildings. Small tenant houses once dotted the landscape, but few of these remain. Archeology can uncover the foundations of these missing structures and help historians recreate the landscape as it was. Archeology also brings to light the objects people used on these farms and in those tenant houses. Pottery, glass, metal tools, and much else gets buried in the ground around old farms. Behind the David Miller Farm at Antietam archeologists found a large pit that was used for dumping trash in the early 1800s, and it held large pieces of earthenware pots and bone china plates used in the house at that time. Many more such "features," as archeologists call them, may be found during the current project.

Ancient Native Americans at Antietam

Another goal of the project will be to find evidence of the Indians who must once have camped and hunted at Antietam. The banks of Antietam Creek, especially, must have been visited regularly by ancient Native Americans. Find of stone spear points and other tools would show where Indians visited.

Protect Our Sites

The Archaeological Resource Protection Act 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 within the Antietam National Battlefield and on all other federal property.



Dropped, Unfired Bullets (above) and Fired Bullets (below), from a Civil War Battlefield



Archeologists at Work. Above, taking Notes. Below, using a Metal Detector and digging Test Units.

