

BULLETS, AND BONES: THE VALUE OF ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLE

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Following the Civil War, the United States increased its military presence in Montana Territory as a direct result of the development of the Bozeman Trail. Fort C. F. Smith was established on the Bighorn River, and Fort Phil Kearny near Sheridan, Wyoming. Army occupation and trail traffic increased an adversarial relationship with the Lakota tribes that resulted in open warfare that was not settled until 1877 in the region. A variety of treaties that were aimed at halting raiding and open warfare did little to resolve the situation. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 created a reserve for the Sioux that included the Black Hills. The same treaty effectively reduced Crow lands from 38 1/2 million acres to 8 million.

Although a few groups of Sioux, including Sitting Bull's band, refused to be forced onto the reservation, the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 was partially successful as many bands of Sioux agreed to stay on their reservation in present-day South Dakota. However, George A. Custer and the Seventh Cavalry led a survey expedition into the Black Hills in 1874. One result was the report of the presence of gold. The 1868 treaty was ignored and prospectors poured into the area despite army attempts to halt them. The Government changed its mind and ordered the Black Hills opened to mining and homesteading exacerbating an already tense situation between the Lakota and white settlers. The Lakota, both individuals and band units, who had agreed to stay on the reservation left to join the defiant bands in the Bighorn and Powder River country. In December 1875 and January 1876, the U.S. Government issued orders to all Indians to return to the reservations and declared those who refused "hostiles."¹ In the spring of 1876 three columns of U.S. military moved into the region, led by Brigadier General George Crook, Colonel John Gibbon, and Brigadier General Alfred H. Terry, and included over 2000 men. Terry's column included the 700 man Seventh U.S. Cavalry commanded by Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer. That spring, the three units advanced into Montana Territory reaching closer to the Bighorn River. On June 25, 1876, the Seventh U.S. Cavalry engaged the Sioux and their allies on the Little Bighorn River. The cavalry suffered a decisive defeat.

In the spring of 1876, a three-pronged campaign was launched to shepherd the Sioux and Cheyenne back to their agencies on the reservation.² The first column, under Colonel John Gibbon, marched east from Fort Ellis (near present day Bozeman, Montana). The second column, led by General Alfred Terry (and including Custer) headed west from Fort Abraham Lincoln near Bismarck, North Dakota. The third column consisted of General George Crook's men moving north from Fort Fetterman, Wyoming (near modern Douglas) into Montana.

Unknown to Terry and Gibbon, Crook encountered the Indians near Rosebud Creek in southern Montana and was defeated by them about a week before Custer's battle.³ After this, his force withdrew to Wyoming, breaking one side of the triangle. Meanwhile, Terry was moving west up the Yellowstone River to the Bighorn. The Seventh Cavalry, under Custer, was to scout ahead and departed Terry's command on June 22. On the morning of the

25th, the Seventh Cavalry was at the divide between the Rosebud and the Little Bighorn Rivers. From a spot known as the Crow's Nest, army scouts observed a large Indian camp (Figure 1).

Worried the Indians might escape Custer decided to attack and descended into the valley of the Little Bighorn. Captain Frederick Benteen was ordered to scout southwest with three companies to search for Indians and block a possible southern escape route. A few miles from the Little Bighorn Custer again divided his command as Major Marcus Reno was ordered to advance with three companies along the river bottom and attack the Indian village on its southern end. The remaining five companies would follow Custer in support of Reno. Custer took the remaining five companies along the east side of the river to an ephemeral tributary of the Little Bighorn. He must have finally realized the gravity of the situation as the north end of the village came into view. From here, he sent a message back to Benteen: "*Benteen, Come on. Big village, be quick, bring packs. P.S. Bring packs [sic]. W.W. Cooke.*" The messenger, Trumpeter John Martin, was the last soldier to see Custer and his command alive.

Custer and five companies rode to their fate. Custer apparently further divided his command in the lower reaches of Medicine Tail Coulee sending one wing of two companies to the ford at the mouth of the coulee where it debouches into the Little Bighorn River. Custer and the other three companies held higher ground to the east, now known as Nye-Cartwright Ridge. Whether due to increasing warrior pressure on the wing at the mouth of Medicine Tail Coulee or because of pressure on his wing, Custer apparently ordered a withdrawal from the coulee with the five companies rejoining at the southern end of what is now called Custer or Battle Ridge and Calhoun Hill. There Custer evidently deployed Lieutenants James Calhoun and John J. Crittenden with two companies to hold the position while he rode to the north with the remaining three companies. Custer's goal may have been to move further north and cross the river with the intent of attacking the village from the north and relieve the pressure on Reno's command. Custer likely deployed Captain Myles Keogh about 300 yards in the rear of Calhoun and Crittenden's position while he moved on to the north with two companies, E and F. Some of Custer's command seemingly did move to the northwest along a spur of land or an extension of Custer or Battle Ridge, now just outside the park boundary, but at some point was forced back to take positions at Last Stand Hill. The command was under attack by increasing numbers of Cheyenne and Lakota warriors who soon outnumbered, outgunned, and outfought Custer and his men, destroying the command to a man by late that Sunday afternoon.

In the meantime, Indian warriors had forced Reno and his men to retreat across the river and up the bluffs to a defensible position. Reno and the men on the hilltop were joined by Benteen's forces and the pack train, both following along Custer's line of march in order to bring up the ammunition packs. The Indians pinned down all until June 27th, when the village broke up into small groups



Figure 1. Map of the battlefield (Western National Parks Association).

that withdrew as Terry's and Gibbon's combined column arrived. For that day and a half, Reno, Benteen and the men fought to keep their defensive position and wondered when Custer would relieve them. Reno sent two men to meet the advancing column, and they found Terry and Gibbon near the abandoned Indian village. Here, a scout brought the news. Custer and his men lay dead on a ridge above the Little Bighorn.

Students of the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn have long used physical evidence, artifacts, as information to support or refute a point of view. Many have collected relics from the field, beginning as early as 1877, some as curiosities, others as evidence of the event. The first real attempts to systematically collect and study archaeological data came in the 1950s when Don Rickey and Robert Bray conducted some work at the Reno-Benteen defense site.⁴ Around that same time early metal detector hobbyists and collectors like J. W. Vaughn went to the trouble to document their work in written form.⁵

It was not until 1983, when a range fire provided the first real opportunity to conduct systematic archaeological studies of the field of battle. Since then, there have been three major metal detector inventory projects (Figure 2), two major excavations projects, and over a dozen minor projects completed at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and on the lands surrounding the monument covering about 2000 acres. The volume of paper generated to document that work is significant, including one master's thesis, one Ph.D. dissertation, four books, three monographs, and over 20 short National Park Service (NPS) internal reports.

The amount of paper may be interesting, but it does not begin to convey the whole story of what has been found nor how interpretations of the battle have been altered as a result of the discovery of thousands of pieces of physical evidence of the fight between the Lakota and Cheyenne and the U. S. Seventh Cavalry on June 25 and 26, 1876 (Figure 3).



Figure 2. A metal detector team makes a sweep along the Little Bighorn tour road (NPS image). S

It is perhaps best, as they say, to begin at the beginning, or in this case June 22, 1876, when Custer left the Yellowstone River valley and began his fateful march to history. The Custer column camped three times before finding the Indian camps in the Little Bighorn valley. One of those campsites was archaeologically investigated.⁶ Initial archaeological reconnaissance was conducted

at the site of Custer's June 23rd camp on Rosebud Creek. Only a handful of artifacts were recovered, a .45-55 cartridge case, the back of a General Service button, a trouser button, a broken mess spoon, a crushed camp boiler, a badly rusted one gallon can that may have held roasted coffee beans, a Burden horseshoe, and the tips of several horseshoe nails found near a firepit. Taken together these artifacts are the lost bits of the Seventh's camp equipment from a thirteen-hour overnight stay by over 600 men. The fired cartridge case suggests that orders for members of the column not to fire their weapons were not rigorously enforced in some element of the command. The firepit and clipped horseshoe nail tips suggest that some farrier probably reshod at least one horse before he turned in for the evening. The small, but diverse quantity of artifacts was not unexpected given the short-term and ephemeral nature of the camp. The few historical accounts referring to this and the other camps indicate the exhausted men quickly tended to their animals, ate their field rations, and found any bit of ground where they could grab a few hours of much needed rest. The artifacts are the physical evidence of some of those activities, eating and tending horse, but they also suggest that hunting or some other activity not recorded in the historic record involving firearms occurred at or near the campsite.

The next set of archaeological data we have relates to Major Marcus Reno's deployment and attack on the Indian village. A former valley resident metal detected his family's land and some

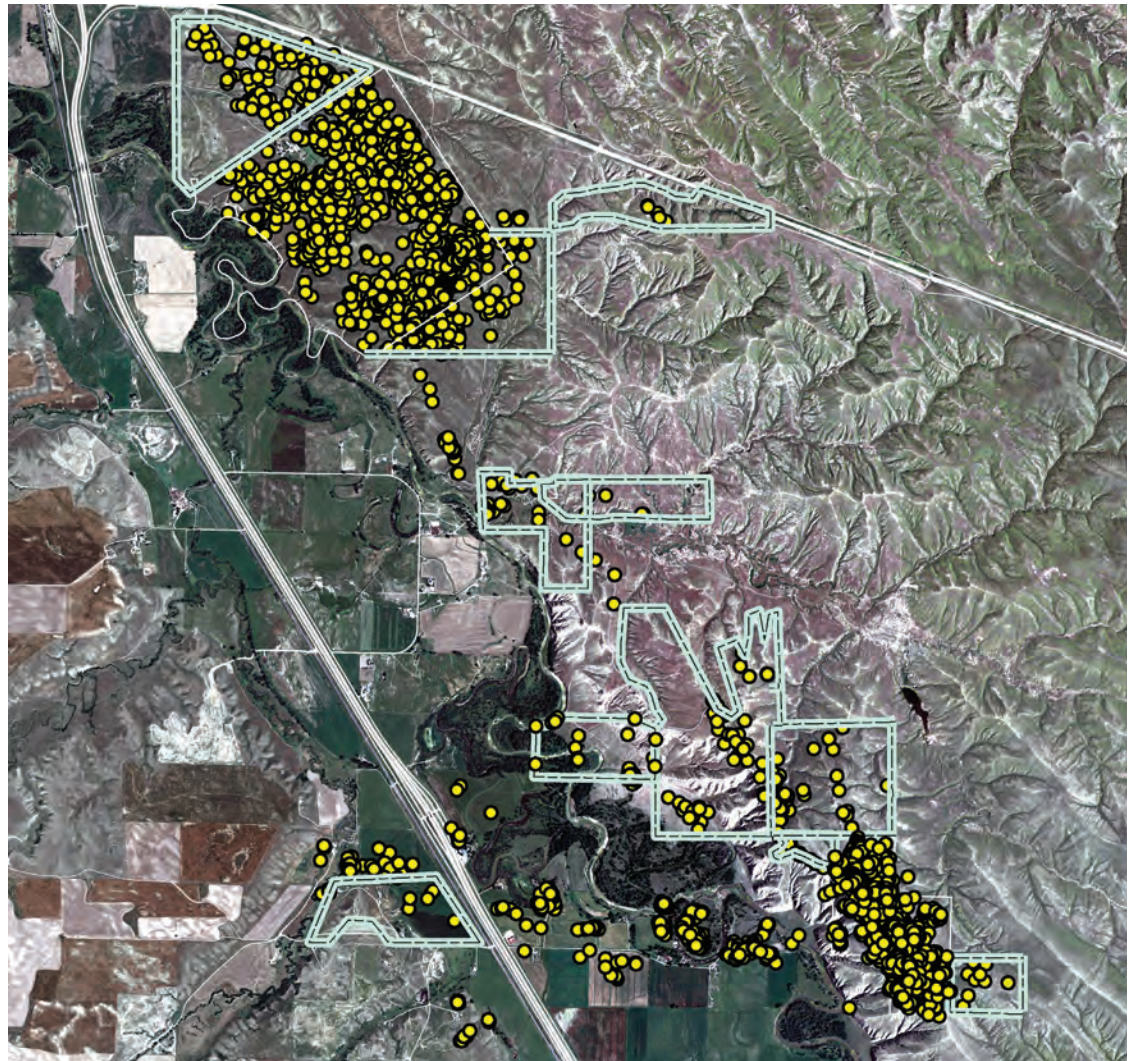


Figure 3. A plot of all archaeological finds in and around the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument (NPS image).

adjacent landowners' property for several years. He plotted his finds on maps and aerial photographs. In 1993 the professional archaeological team mapped his many finds that included evidence of Reno's skirmish line in the valley, elements of the timber fight, and the retreat to the river.⁷ Perhaps more exciting, in some ways, was the opportunity to see and map the finds in Sitting Bull's camp circle, located just north of the Garryowen store, and a recently discovered Indian village on the east side of the river. This new village site yielded extensive evidence of warriors firing at the bluffs and Weir Point. It was shortly after this archaeological discovery that the story of Spotted Tail's disaffected warriors was rediscovered in a long overlooked historical document. Lieutenant Oscar Long reported the story and attached a map of the fight that he gathered from some of the young warriors of Spotted Tail's band to his superiors. The map shows the disaffected warriors' camp to be on the east side of the river in a location consistent with that of the archaeological finds.

Two other finds in the valley are of interest. Both are human skeletal remains.⁸ They proved to be the partial remains of more than one individual. In fact, there were parts of two people. Those few bone fragments matched two partial sets of remains that had been recently removed from the Custer National Cemetery with the hopes of identifying the remains. As it turned out, the physical anthropologist examining the remains was able to determine that one set of remains were the same as those that had been exhumed in 1928 by a National Cemetery superintendent, and the bone found in the valley were elements overlooked in the 1928 exhumation. One partial set did indeed belong to a soldier, as yet unidentified. The other set of remains were those of an elderly Native American woman, probably buried many years after the battle and misinterpreted by the superintendent in 1928 as more soldier remains. The Native American woman's remains were repatriated to the Crow tribe.

Another partial skeleton was found eroding from the Reno Retreat Crossing in 1989. Dr. P. Willey was able to determine an age and height for the individual that compared favorably with four soldiers killed with Reno. With a bit of luck a photograph of Sergeant Edward Botzer, one of the likely candidates, came to light. A photographic superimposition of the skull and photograph shows the remains are most likely to be those of Botzer. His remains are buried in the Custer National Cemetery as are all the human remains of the soldiers found on the battlefield during the archaeological work.

Archaeologists have not formally investigated the Reno Retreat Crossing, although Retreat Ravine above the crossing, at least that portion within the park fence surrounding the Reno-Benteen defense site was inventoried in 1985.⁹ The 1985 investigations took in the entire Reno-Benteen area owned by the National Park Service, including portions of Sharpshooter Hill. In 1994 and two subsequent years much of the land between the Reno Benteen defense site and Medicine Tail Coulee were also inventoried with metal detectors.

Evidence for Reno's chaotic retreat up to the defense site was abundantly clear in the archaeological record.¹⁰ Bullets and cartridge cases from both combatant groups were found along the route as well as some lost equipment and personal items. The historic accounts suggest that no command and control was exercised over the retreating troopers. The archaeological record does not

entirely agree with the historic record. There is strong physical evidence that some soldiers upon reaching the hilltop that has become known as the Reon-Benteen defense site were organized and placed in a skirmish line to support the other members of Reno's command at they came up retreat ravine. They were certainly fired on by the warriors as is evidence by impacted bullets in the area, but they also had support and covering fire from the skirmish line at the head of Retreat Ravine.

The Reno-Benteen defense is well represented archaeologically with hundreds of bullets, cartridge cases, bits of horse tack, other army equipment, and personal items scattered throughout the defense site. It is not possible to separate the early part of the defense and the movement to Weir Point from the later defense episodes as the artifacts are too intermingled in the defense site proper.

Nevertheless, there is evidence of the fight around Weir Point and the retreat back to the defense site. At Weir Point and to the north cartridge cases and bullets show where the fighting occurred and where men were deployed. The historical documents relating to the action at Weir Point suggest that until the retrograde movement began there was only intermittent firing and at long ranges between the opposing forces. The archaeological data supports those statements.

A few cartridge cases and bullets of various calibers were found around Weir Point and on the bluffs overlooking the valley. The cartridge case locations were below the crest of the knoll and protected from sight of Weir Point. While it is possible the cases represent Lt. Edgerly's forward advance from Weir Point, the evidence points to the strong possibility that this is an Indian position used to fire at the troops on Weir Point.

Other archaeological evidence of combat consists of one .45-55 cartridge case and one .45 Springfield bullet found north of Weir Point in the general vicinity of a .44-caliber cartridge case, a .44-caliber bullet, a .44-40 cartridge case, a .50-70 cartridge case, and a .50-caliber bullet. The .44-caliber rimfire case was fired in a Henry or Model 1866 Winchester. A single Spencer case was found on the bluff edge north of Weir Point near a .45-55 cartridge case. Firearms identification procedures confirms the .44-40 case matches to one found in 1984 at Calhoun Hill. Thus, this gun was used in the Weir Point episode and at Calhoun Hill by a warrior involved in the fighting. The .45-55 case matches to four other cases, one found to the north, one near Weir Point, and two found west of the Reno-Benteen defense site and southwest of Sharpshooters' Hill. This group of cases fired from the same gun probably indicates the movement of one soldier. These cases and their find locations are likely associated with the Company D movement north of Weir Point, its movement back to Weir Point, and the subsequent retrograde movement back to Reno-Benteen.

The inventoried area of Cedar Coulee from Weir Point to the Reno-Benteen defense site yielded a watering bridle snap hook, a spur, Colt revolver cartridges, Springfield carbine bullets, a Model 1870 carbine tool, 50-caliber bullets, and .44-caliber bullets. These data indicate movement and activity along and in Cedar Coulee. The artifacts were found strewn along a line on the upper west side of Cedar Coulee not far from the present-day tour road alignment. This line of artifacts shows the retreat from Weir Point was under fire and was made rapidly as the historic documents relate. These archaeological finds are consistent with the historic accounts that Companies M and D covered the retrograde movement until Com-

pany K formed a skirmish line and covered the final elements of that movement. Historical documents suggest the Company K covering fire began near Sharpshooters' Hill and there is ample archaeological data to support the Company K skirmishing efforts.

Back at Cedar Coulee a single Colt cartridge, a carbine tool, and carbine bullet were found in proximity. The meaning of this pattern is not clear, but it leaves an impression of an event occurring at that location. One possible interpretation, but not necessarily the only interpretation, is these artifacts may be associated with the wounding and or death of Swiss immigrant Farrier Vincent Charley. The fate of Charley is no longer in doubt. His remains were reported dug up in 1903 and moved to the Custer National Cemetery. During our work to identify the 1903 and 1928 remains one set of bones was shown to be those of robust male about 28-year-old and about 5' 10" tall. A bullet wound to the right hip was evident in the bone, and it was in such a position that the bullet must have come from the back right. Abdominal wounds were so serious in the 19th century that over 80% of those with this type of wound died. Charley, a farrier, was 27 years old and 5' 10 1/4" tall when he died of a gunshot wound to the hip. In all likelihood the bones found in 1903 that we examined are those of Charley.

The abundant archaeological evidence of the Reno-Benteen defense shows that was was a spirited fight. The Lakota and Cheyenne held positions surrounding the soldiers. Many cartridge cases were found on Sharpshooter Hill and in the swales, and behind the knolls that surround the army positions. Among some .44-caliber Henry cartridge cases at one knoll was a brass bracelet, probably lost by one of the warriors. The tip of a gold painted knife blade that once was part of a war club was found in another location.

Literally hundreds of bullets fired from the Lakota and Cheyenne guns, including many captured from the defeated Custer command were found imbedded in the Reno-Benteen defense position (Figure 4). Among the more poignant reminders of the power of those missiles are the remains of six of the soldiers who died in the Reno-Benteen defense. One showed dramatic evidence of a gunshot injury to the head. His yet unidentified remains show that a tumbling bullet struck him on the right side of the head and passed through his skull, exiting on the left.

What of Custer and his command, what archaeological evidence is there of that fight? There is essentially no archaeological evidence to date of Custer's movements until his command reached at Medicine Tail Coulee. In the lower reaches of Medicine Tail and at Nye-Cartwright Ridge, along Deep Coulee, and on to the north there is abundant evidence of the battle that became known as Custer's Last Stand.

The archaeological evidence for combat at the mouth of Medicine Tail Coulee is meager but is definitely present.¹¹ The archaeological investigations did recover two pieces of a broken Model 1874 army mess knife, a period butcher knife of the type that might have been carried by a soldier or a warrior as a sheath or belt knife, a lead rifle ball, the cylinder pin to a Colt revolver, and a .30-caliber Remington Smoot revolver cartridge case. Don Rickey and J. W. Vaughn earlier reported finding a few .45-caliber army carbine cartridge cases, some equipment and personal items, bullets, and Indian caliber cartridge cases at or near the river ford. The archaeological data are consistent with the historical accounts that a small action with only limited firing occurred at the ford. The finds of soldier equipment indicate that some items were lost at or near the ford and are consistent with the conclusion reached by Rickey and Vaughn that at least one cavalry horse may have been hit, and in plunging around, scattered items attached to the saddle.

The Deep Coulee area which is believed to have been the retreat route for the soldiers from Medicine Tail Coulee to rejoin Custer and the other companies at what is known as Calhoun Hill. Archaeological investigations along Deep Coulee¹² recovered some 88 items, the majority of which are bullets and cartridge cases. Only two cartridge cases are .45-caliber army carbine, but there are four unfired cartridges. In contrast to the number of army cartridge cases, 28 .45-caliber bullets were recovered. There are 8 .44-caliber rimfire cases, 5 .44-caliber bullets, 4 cartridge cases and 2 cartridges in .50-70-caliber, 11 .50-caliber bullets, 1 .40-caliber Sharps bullet, and one lead ball. Two .50-caliber bullets were fired in Sharps Sporting Rifles. Both were fired in different guns. There were also several items of army equipment recovered including two brass spurs (one a regulation spur and the other an earlier model army spur), a picket pin, and a currycomb. A single iron arrowhead was also recovered as was an iron awl. One of the .44-caliber rimfire cases firing pin imprint matches to the case found at the Reno-Benteen defense site. Clearly that Henry or Winchester Model 1866 was used at both battlefields.



Figure 4. These .45-55-caliber cartridge cases split when fired in a larger caliber firearm. They may represent army cartridges salvaged from dead soldiers and repurposed and fired in warrior used Sharps and Springfield .50-70-caliber firearms (NPS image).

The archaeological data from Medicine Tail Coulee supports the notion that only a light action occurred at the ford. The data also support the contention that some element of Custer's command, probably the left wing, moved from this action at the ford northeast up Deep Coulee to reunite with Custer's right wing at or near Calhoun Hill. Battle debris found on this line as well as debris in line with Nye-Cartwright Ridge suggests the reunion movement was under fire and was contested. The archaeological firearms data and distribution patterns indicate the warriors took possession of this terrain after the soldiers deployed on and near Calhoun Hill. The warriors were certainly on the right, left, and front of the soldiers deployed at this southern end of the field. There is also clear evidence of soldiers returning the warriors' fire in the form of army caliber bullets associated with Indian caliber cartridge cases in this area.

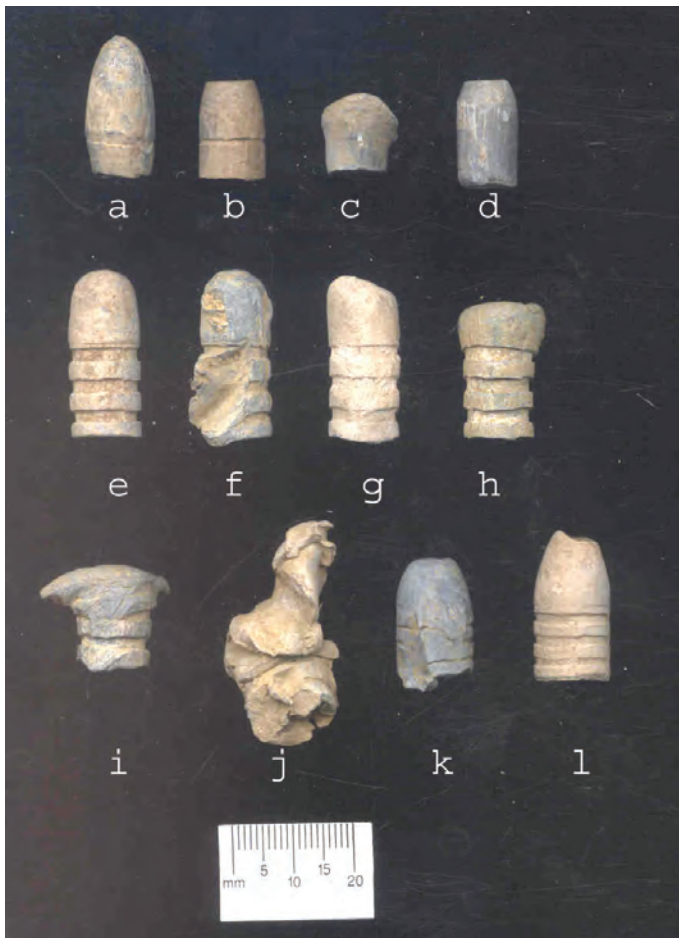


Figure 5. Examples of the bullets recovered from the Custer field, a-d are .44-caliber warrior fired, e-h are .45-405 grain army bullets, and i-l are .50-450 grain bullets fired by the warriors. In total the cartridge cases and bullet indicate the warriors used 47 different types of firearms at the battle (NPS image).

Another sobering bit of testimony to the battle's loss of life is a soldier's skeleton found by Frank Bethune in the Deep Coulee area in 1928. Dr. P. Willey examined that skeleton, buried in the national cemetery. He found the remains to be those of a 35-year-old white male about 5' 8" tall. He had a gunshot wound to the head, evidence of blunt force trauma, and at least 98 cut marks on the bones, indicating the victorious Lakota and Cheyenne mutilated him. Evidence of this ritual mutilation was seen on many of the skeletal remains from the Custer battlefield. No identity has yet

been established for this soldier.

There is no direct evidence for the juncture of the two wings at Calhoun Hill, but there is plenty of evidence for the ensuing fight on the Custer field and the destruction of Custer's immediate command.¹³ The archaeological data indicates that Custer and the left wing may have moved northwesterly along Custer Ridge after deploying Companies C and L under Lieutenants Calhoun and Crittenden on what became Calhoun Hill. The archaeological evidence in the form of cartridge cases and bullets show the Lakota and Cheyenne warriors poured fire in on the soldiers on Calhoun Hill from the east, west and south (Figure 5).

Custer most probably advanced beyond Last Stand Hill to a more northerly position just outside the current park boundary and now called Custer Ridge Extension. That movement may have been halted by the advance of warriors associated with a movement around the north end of the battlefield. Richard Fox contends that Custer moved as far as the river before being forced back.¹⁴ At this juncture we disagree as to what the artifact distribution means, because I do not see that there is any archaeological data to show that Custer moved any further north than the end of Custer Ridge extension.

After Custer was pushed back to the vicinity of Last Stand Hill the warriors took command of the ridge extensions using these as positions to fire at the soldiers on Last Stand Hill and others that may have been in the vicinity of Cemetery Ridge. Archaeological evidence suggests that when Custer made the movement to Last Stand Hill numerous warriors gained the Custer Ridge Extension and began firing at the remaining members of the command. They used some Henry and Winchester rifles as well as many army carbines, revolvers, and ammunition just captured from the fallen men of the right wing. Custer's remaining men returned fire until they were overrun and killed. Much of Custer's fire must have come from Last Stand Hill. The bullet orientation strongly suggests this, even though there were very few corresponding army caliber cartridge cases found on Last Stand Hill during the investigations. It seems likely that one reason cartridge cases were not recovered in corresponding quantity at Last Stand Hill is that they were souvenired from the field in the ensuing decades as this area was heavily visited.



Figure 6. Excavations at Last Stand Hill revealed not only cartridge cases and bullets fired during the fight but human bone from the soldiers who died there (NPS image).

The gross distribution of army-related artifacts provides some idea of the combatant locations during the battle. The positions of cartridge cases, buttons, spurs, equipment, and human bone indicate that soldiers fought and died along the east side of Custer Ridge from Calhoun Hill to the Keogh position, and to Last Stand Hill (Figure 6). There was also fighting at the northernmost extent of the South Skirmish Line or the Deep Ravine Trail. These troop positions are further corroborated by the presence of impacted bullets from Indian associated weapons.

At least seven discrete Indian positions can be discerned on the basis of the variety of cartridge case types (representing the variety of weapons used by the Native Americans) and government bullets impacted around these positions. Two positions are on Greasy Grass Ridge. Another is what we have named Henry Ridge, where numerous .44 Henry cartridge cases were found southwest of Calhoun Hill. Yet another is a knoll 660 feet northeast of Last Stand Hill. In addition to a variety of non-government cartridge cases found at the knoll, we also found split .45-55 government cases, which probably represent captured government ammunition fired from .50 caliber weapons.

Captain Myles Keogh and the men of Company I, deployed below the ridge top on the east side of Custer Ridge. Perhaps they were being held in reserve, perhaps they were on their way to aid Calhoun, or perhaps they were to cover Calhoun in case a withdrawal became necessary. The spatial distribution of army-related artifacts clearly indicates very few battle-related artifacts on either side of the ridge top above Keogh's position.

The firing must have been intense from both sides. The finds of spent cartridge cases and bullets certainly suggest this. Bullets fired from the soldiers' guns were found embedded in the ground, often within or at the front of the areas where quantities of Indian cartridge cases were found. Bullets in the calibers corresponding to the cartridge cases found at Indian positions were discovered embedded in the army positions (Figure 7). A few were even found in direct association with human remains (Figure 8).



Figure 8. One of the most poignant artifacts recovered during the archaeological work was this Native American fired .50-450 grain bullet that has bone embedded in the body. Whether it a man or horse is not known (NPS image).

From their positions under cover, and initially at a distance from the soldiers, the Indian fire began to take its toll. As the return fire from the soldiers began to slacken, the Native Americans moved in closer. The cartridge case data suggest Indian movements along two broad lines. One was from south to north, from Calhoun Hill to Last Stand Hill through the Keogh position; the second was from Calhoun Hill to the South Skirmish Line, joining with the Indian group attacking from the north and west.

Just what happened along the Deep Ravine Trail or South Skirmish Line is open to several interpretations. The archaeological materials show that horses died there, men died there, and there was fighting along the trail where the white marble markers now stand. It was probably a breakout attempt as the Indian accounts suggest. The issue is whether it was organized or a helter-skelter event. I do not believe the archaeological evidence is strong enough to totally refute or support any specific assumption. The human skeletal remains do not appear to from any E company man, although they are not definitively identified at this point. The bullets, cartridge cases, a rather poignant man's wedding ring, and some other personal items, as well as evidence of cut marks and crushing blows on the skeletal remains certainly indicate that the victorious Lakota and Cheyenne had time to utterly destroy those soldiers who ventured toward Deep Ravine.



Figure 7. Five iron arrowheads found on the battlefield. Only 12 were found during the archaeological investigations. The Battle of the Little Bighorn was dominated by firearms on both sides (NPS image).

The final bit of archaeological evidence relates to the aftermath of the battle. Two separate data sets show what happened after the Native Americans left the field. First are the remains of the men buried on Custer battlefield, in the valley, and at the Reno-Benteen defense site by the Reno-Benteen command survivors with the aid of Gen. Alfred Terry command which came upon the remains of Custer's command on June 27, 1876.¹⁵ The archaeological evidences tells the tale of hasty, but not uncaring, burial in the face of uncertainty about when or if the Native Americans would return. They also tell the tale of the men's lives, the manner of their death, and the burials and reburials those remains have endured.

Secondly, there is the Reno-Benteen equipment dump we excavated.¹⁶ It may be one of several equipment disposal areas. It yielded evidence of the deliberate burning and destruction of ammunition and ration crates or boxes, some guns, and a large number of saddles and other horse tack. The army held the field of battle, but they had suffered an ignominious defeat, and they simply destroyed what equipment they could not salvage so as to render it unserviceable to the enemy.

The archaeology of the Battle of the Little Bighorn has yielded thousands of artifacts, reams of notes and other records, and a pile

of reports, monographs, and books. We know that we have not found it all, nor have we learned everything there is to know. But, during 23 years of continuing archaeological investigations we have found many things that show the historical record is correct on many points, that Native American oral tradition likewise can explain some details better than the army accounts, and archaeological detective work has uncovered artifacts and their patterns of distribution that neither oral tradition nor documentary records mention. The Little Bighorn archaeological record is not better than the others, rather it should be viewed as another set of information to be compared, contrasted, and correlated with the other information sources. Archaeological data is physical evidence of the battle, and as such is the very visible reminder of those past events that have come to play such a role in our lives. That record in concert with the Native American oral histories, and historic documents demonstrates that Custer's command was outnumbered, outgunned, and simply outfought by the Lakota and Cheyenne warriors who were defending their way of life. The artifacts do not just set on shelves in a storage facility. They and information they convey are a very real part of the interpretation of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

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