

AFTERWORD

The Discovery and Preservation of the Payne' Farm Battlefield

by Theodore P. Savas

The entire war fascinates me, so I find it baffling that many people only read or study a particular theater, branch of service, or personality. My interests in the Civil War vary widely, but they have a common theme. Put me in a hallway that represents the entire war and I will surely open a side door, drift down another corridor, and end up in a closet studying what most people would consider an answer to a trivia question.

Nearly three decades ago, one of those hallways carried me into Orange County in Northern Virginia to the pristine battlefield of Payne's Farm. The back story of how that remarkable battlefield came to be preserved needs telling.

* * *

I was a practicing attorney back in the late 1980s, a recently married Iowa transplant living in northern California. My undergraduate degree was in American history (as was much of a Masters' degree). For me, the study of the past was a serious avocation, and much more enjoyable than a deposition or preliminary hearing.

In 1989, I read "The Campaign That History Forgot," by Jay Luvaas and Wilbur S. Nye, a full issue on the Mine Run Campaign in *Civil War Times Illustrated* (vol. 8, November 1969). The name "Payne's Farm" was not foreign to me, but this was the first time the most serious fighting of that fascinating campaign gripped my attention. I next devoured *Mine Run: A Campaign of Lost Opportunities, October 21, 1863-May 1, 1864*, by Martin Graham and George F. Skoch (Lynchburg, VA: H.E. Howard, 1987), a thin book with minimal citations. I wanted more. Thankfully, I owned a set of the 128-volume *Official Records*, so it was easy to delve deeply into the campaign's after-action reports. The accidental battle was even more fascinating than I believed...

On November 27, 1863, Maj. Gen. Edward Johnson's Confederate infantry division (about 5,300 men) was marching southeast along the Raccoon Ford Road to join other Second Corps troops at Locust Grove. Union troops filtered out of the woods on Johnson's left and threw part of the column into confusion. Johnson turned his four-brigade division to face the threat, bent back his far left brigade under George Steuart to prevent it from being turned, cobbled together a thoroughly incomprehensible battle plan, and attacked with his entire division. It was about 4:00 p.m.

The Union troops who had disrupted his strung-out column consisted of advance elements of Maj. Gen. William H. French's III Corps, with Maj. Gen. John Sedgwick's VI Corps stacked up behind French (potentially 32,000). Caught unawares, French waged an ad hoc mostly defensive battle. Much of his left flank spent the next few hours fending off vicious attacks and exchanging fire with Leroy Stafford's and John M. Jones' brigades. French's center held firm and exchanged heavy fire against a curiously passive Stonewall Brigade. The troops on French's left under division commander Henry Prince fought a seesaw affair during which company- and regimental-sized elements threaded into, and in some cases through and behind, Johnson's attenuated front. This jumbled, confusing, and bloody affair unfolded in a mix of wooded, brushy, swampy, and open terrain.

The reports were a mess. They were often obviously wrong (one Union officer believed the Raccoon Ford Road was the miles-distant Orange Plank Road), and no two were in general agreement on much of anything. In an effort to grasp the battle's ebb and flow and figure out who was where and when, I set up a large easel with oversize sheets of paper, read the reports, and tried to make sense of it all.

It quickly dawned on me that something was amiss. The earlier *Civil War Times, Illustrated* article contained serious factual flaws, and its map of the fighting, at least to my way of thinking, misplaced the units of both armies. The direction and angles of most of the attacking Confederate brigades were incorrect, and the general positioning of every

Union command was wrong. Their orientation was way off. Commands in relation to known fixed landmarks like roads, farm lanes, houses, and creeks were way off. I checked the map in the Mine Run book and discovered it was essentially a duplicate of this earlier incorrect map. How could that be? I determined to find out.

In April of 1990, I flew to Richmond and met up with Paul Sacra, a good friend and member of the Richmond Civil War Round Table. We spent the evening planning our course of action and set out early the next morning for Orange County armed with extensive primary sources and battle reports, determined to locate and map the Payne's Farm battlefield.

There was not a single historical or road marker for this battle at that time. We made our first stop where the wartime Raccoon Ford Road (modern-day Zoar Road) and Jacob's Ford Road (modern-day Indiantown Road) intersected. We knew with certainty the fighting started and seesawed around this junction, which represented the left flank (essentially Stuart's brigade) of Johnson's Confederate line.

According to a battle report, there was a ravine north and west of the intersection. The 3rd North Carolina troops had dropped their gear there, ordered their ranks, and charged northeast into the jumbled brigade fronts of Cols. William Blaisdell and William Brewster's Excelsior Brigade. We found the ravine within minutes. Metal detectors (used with permission on private property) quickly uncovered bullets, a ramrod, buckle, and other relics. Rifle pits dotted the woods on the other side of the road, confirming diaries and letters in our possession. More relics were found. Other than a few houses, little had changed since 1863.

Reports placed a section of Carpenter's Confederate battery in the intersection, where one gun fired canister toward charging Union troops on their right-front (likely the 11th New Jersey), and the other piece fired west down the Raccoon Ford Road when a Union regiment flanked Stuart's line. A two-hour search found what we were looking for: An iron canister ball a couple hundred yards northeast of the intersection.

We left Steuart's front and walked down the old Raccoon Ford Road into James Walker's sector. When fired upon, the Stonewall Brigade had turned to face the threat, aligned its ranks, and advanced generally straight ahead. According to reports, the regiments passed through the woods until they reached a fence, moved beyond it into a field, and were hammered back into the woods by a heavy Union fire from the left side of Blaisdell's line and Brig. Gen. William Morris' three regiments. Walker tried to get his men to advance, but most refused. The Virginians spent the balance of their battle fighting inside the tree line.

After securing permission from Bill Meadows, the primary landowner, Paul and I trudged into the woods, noting how the undulating terrain matched our primary sources. After some 200 yards, we reached a fence separating the woods from a sprawling open field. This was where the Virginians had fought, shooting into an oblique line of woods to their left-front, and another distant stand of timber in their front. It was as if we had stepped back in time. Another ramrod was found here, together with a host of relics.

We next moved down the road to where Stafford's Louisiana brigade had formed on Walker's right, with Jones' command doing the same beyond Stafford's right. Johnson knew little about the Union enemy and even less about the terrain, but that did not stop him from ordering his left two brigades to march into the woods and make a giant left-wheel to (hopefully) take his enemy in the flank. (Steuart's brigade on the far right was tasked with the same thing, wheeling right.)

The Louisiana troops tramped into the woods and after a tight inside wheel found themselves on the edge of a high hill looking down on a distant farm lane running parallel to their line. Beyond it, the Stonewall Brigade was fighting from the edge of the woods. It was a stunning view. Stafford guided his brigade down the hill through swampy terrain, up a slope, and across the Payne Farm lane. Waiting for them about 500 yards away was Col. Warren Keifer's veteran brigade, which had taken up a powerful position on a ridge. The fire from Keifer's men, supported by Morris' left two regiments, ripped apart the

staggered effort and sent it tumbling back to the lane. Stafford ordered repeated attacks, but many regiments refused to budge or moved only a handful of yards before retreating. The men settled down in the fence-lined lane and exchanged a heavy fire until darkness ended the fighting.

The long lane, location of the old Payne house, and surrounding terrain precisely matched the reports and other primary sources. A sweep of the hill behind the lane found it riddled with Union bullets that had flown over the heads of the embattled Louisianans. Just behind the lane we found scores of items, including half a ramrod, a partial bayonet, dropped bullets, and even most of an old harmonica. The ground in front of the lane also produced dozens of fired minie balls. According to an unpublished diary, a section of Dement's Maryland battery had rushed down the lane and unlimbered at the junction of Walker's and Stafford's line. Just as it emerged from the woods a bullet struck a gunner riding on a limber in the head and killed him instantly. He was buried south of the Raccoon Ford Road, but when his friends returned the next spring to find him, they were unsuccessful. More likely than not, his remains are still there.

Jones' brigade (the far right element of Johnson's division) had lost touch with Stafford's men during the giant left-wheel. By the time it reached the top of the hill, the Louisianans were already fighting in the lane. Jones guided his men down into the slough at the bottom and up the slope on Stafford's right. He, too, found it impossible to mount a coordinated attack and stood firm to deliver a sustained fire against Kiefer's men on the ridge. Two of David Birney's brigades under Col. Thomas W. Egan and Brig. General John Ward pushed their brigades to the front to relieve Union troops running low on ammunition.

Paul and I crossed several hundred yards of undulating and mostly open terrain to the high ground held by Union troops (which I dubbed "Keifer's Ridge.") There was no doubt where the Union line was positioned. The front of the hill had been peppered by hundreds of lead rounds, most of them Confederate Gardner bullets. The crest was littered with dropped bullets, including small piles of unfired breech-loading Sharps

cartridges that marked the part of the line held by the 1st US Sharpshooters (Egan's brigade).

Our discoveries shocked the landowner, who used his acres to graze livestock. He had long thought the battle was fought more than a mile distant, even though on occasion he would find a bullet or two. A trunk full of relics convinced him otherwise.

Paul and I returned several times over the next year or two to map the field and establish the extent of the lines. I drew extensive maps, some of which included the general location of the artifacts. I recall sitting in Paul's house one evening after a long day on the Payne's Farm field and telling him, "This field is pristine and intact. The battle was important, and some of the war's most famous fighting units fought and died there. We have to save it." Paul, of course, readily agreed.

The following year I returned to Virginia and delivered the maps and other information to A. Wilson Greene, the director of The Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites (or APCWS) in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The APCWS was founded in the summer of 1987 and kicked off the push to save Civil War sites. Greene, one of the war's finest scholars, admitted he knew little of the battle and had no idea the field was intact and unspoiled. We poured over my maps. The longer we talked, the more excited Wil became.

Saving the land, however, was a slow and frustrating process. As part of the larger Mine Run operation, Payne's Farm was but a small battle inside a larger understudied campaign that misfired. Wil had a lot on his plate, including the escalating debate over Disneyland's proposal to build a theme park near Manassas, Virginia. In addition, the majority landowner wanted to develop his land. With verbal battles and threatened lawsuits flying in every direction, Paul and I presented Bill with proof that his land contained at least one mass grave (according to a private letter we received from a different relic hunter), and that developing his land would be a travesty. A lengthy tour helped convince him of the importance of the land. He is a generous man, and allowed us

to keep the relics we found. Today, when I give a talk on Payne's Farm, I pass them around so others can enjoy them.

The years passed. I published articles in history magazines and delivered talks across the country in an effort to raise awareness. Wil Greene left the APCWS, which in 1999 merged with the Civil War Trust (formed in 1991) to become the Civil War Preservation Trust. Finally, and thankfully, the Civil War Trust, together with the help of local allies, acquired 685 acres in 2003. The field would be preserved.

I received a few calls, letters, and emails from several people over the ensuing years about preserving the land, helping write historical markers to interpret the field, and so forth, but it never moved beyond that stage and it was hard to figure out what was happening on the ground while living in California.

In 2013 I was able to revisit Mine Run and Payne's Farm by publishing *The Maps of the Bristoe Station and Mine Run Campaigns*, by Bradley Gottfried, one of our Savas Beatie Military Atlas series titles. Brad welcomed my knowledge on the smaller battle and together we worked closely on the maps and notes.

Few students of the war know the name of Payne's Farm. Fewer still appreciate that Johnson's bold (if foolish) attack, coupled French's cautious tactics, prevented two Union corps from striking the left-rear of the Army of Northern Virginia. Such an event would have dramatically altered the campaign, and perhaps elevated it to prominent status. Today, however everyone with a desire to do so can walk much of the field (on Virginia 611 across from the Zoar Baptist Church, two miles north of Locust Grove), which offers a 1.5-mile interpretive trail, complete with historical markers.

For that, I am thankful.

Theodore P. Savas

June 2018