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## Notes from the Field: Sulphur Creek Trestle Preservation Project

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# Notes from the Field: Sulphur Creek Trestle Preservation Project

Dr. Carolyn Barske

In the fall of 2013 the departments of history and geography at the University of North Alabama received a grant from the American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) for the Sulphur Creek Trestle Preservation Project. The goals of the project included expanding the boundaries of a 1973 National Register of Historic Places nomination and mapping important physical characteristics of the battlefield. The 1973 National Register nomination only covered a small fraction of the battlefield landscape. The landscape is essential to understanding how the battle played out on September 25, 1864 and the preservation of as much of the landscape as possible is essential to preserving the stories of the men who fought at the Battle of Sulphur Creek Trestle. The revised nomination expands the boundaries of protected land from 0.787 acres to 317.018 acres. Additionally, the nomination contains a much more detailed history of the battle, which places it firmly in its historic context and allows for a better understanding of the role that United States Colored Infantry troops (U.S.C.T.) played in North Alabama during the Civil War.

The project was conceived in the winter of 2012-2013. Initially, Drs. Sunhui Sim and Carolyn Barske worked with Judy Sizemore, director of the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area, to

conduct research on the history of the battle, to determine the preservation needs, to determine expanded boundaries to be included in an updated National Register nomination, and to secure landowner permission for the project. The team then wrote a grant application for the Sulphur Creek Trestle Preservation Project to the ABPP. The ABPP, which is part of the National Park Service, “promotes the preservation of significant historic battlefield associated with wars on American soil.”<sup>1</sup> They do so through providing advice to those interested in preserving battlefields. Additionally, they administer a grant program to help preserve battlefields, which to-date has helped preserve more than 100 battlefields.

Once the grant was awarded, Dr. Barske traveled to Washington, D.C. to attend a workshop on battlefield preservation with the ABPP in August of 2013. Drs. Sim and Barske then hired student workers Lauren Hinton (geography) and Jonathan Steadman (history) to assist with the project. The team traveled to Limestone County to the site of the battle on multiple occasions. The team photographed key physical elements of the battlefield landscape, pinpointed important locations using GIS technology, and met with local experts on the history of the area and battle. Jonathan then began to compile primary and secondary sources related to the history of the battle and its significance in the western theater of the Civil War. Upon Hinton’s graduation in December 2013, Katelyn Johnson (geography) joined the team. Additionally, Lisa Harris was hired in the spring of 2014 to design a website about the battle of Sulphur Creek Trestle and the preservation project. Dr. Tim Collins of the department of history &

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<sup>1</sup> *American Battlefield Protection Program*, “About us,” <http://www.nps.gov/abpp/aboutus.htm>

political science also assisted with the project, bringing R.O.T.C. students to the site to help complete the military terrain analysis portion of the project.

The original 0.787 acres identified in the 1973 National Register Nomination only included the site of the Sulphur Creek Trestle Fort, which sat atop a hill next to the Nashville & Decatur Railroad line. This small area did include some important historic features, including well-preserved rifle pits and the remains of the fort's powder magazine. However, as the team began to explore the battle in greater detail, they realized that the preservation of this small area did not allow for a comprehensive picture of the battle and an understanding of the important role the landscape played in the outcome of the battle. The battle, fought between Confederate troops under the command of Nathan Bedford Forrest and Union troops, including the 111<sup>th</sup> U.S.C.T. troops, on September 25, 1864 concluded with a Confederate victory largely because of the battlefield landscape. The fort site sat at a lower elevation than the surrounding hills on which Forrest placed his artillery. Forrest's men were thus able to shell the Union forces into submission, resulting in the deaths of 200 Union troops and the capture of the 820 men who survived the battle.

After the capture of the fort, Forrest's men burned the Sulphur Creek Trestle Bridge, which was the largest bridge along the Nashville & Decatur railroad line. This line had played an important role in moving men and supplies to Gen. Sherman's army as he moved towards Atlanta in the summer of 1864. Forrest and other Confederate leaders had been pushing for attacks on rail lines including the Nashville & Decatur line since the spring of 1864. They recognized that breaking up Sherman's lines of supply and communication could

have drastic effects on his campaign across the south. However, President Jefferson Davis initially refused to authorize Forrest and others to attack the lines, worrying that moving Confederate forces around for the attacks would leave important iron and munitions areas in Alabama and Mississippi exposed. When the attacks on the rail lines were finally authorized, they came too late to affect Sherman's attack on Atlanta. However, the Confederate victory did help Sherman make the decision to live off the land as he marched to Savannah as it revealed that his supply lines were vulnerable to Confederate attack.

One of the most important elements of the expanded National Register nomination is the increased attention paid to the role the U.S.C.T. troops played in the defense of the fort and the battle. Active Union recruitment of African-Americans in Alabama began in the late spring of 1863. The men recruited in north Alabama were taken over the state line into Pulaski, Tennessee, where they were formed into the 110<sup>th</sup> and 111<sup>th</sup> U.S.C.T. The 110<sup>th</sup> went on to guard the town of Athens (which Forrest managed to capture the day before he captured the fort at Sulphur Creek Trestle). After their capture, men of the 110<sup>th</sup> and 111<sup>th</sup> U.S.C.T. were sent to Mobile to build fortifications around the city.

After the historical context for the National Register nomination was expanded, the team began to work on mapping the battlefield landscape. The increased boundaries were drawn to include the hilltops Forrest used to position his artillery, the likely site of Forrest's camp the night before the attack, the Union camp outside of the walls of the fort, the Union horse corral, and the former site of the burned trestle bridge. Additionally, Dr. Sim worked with Johnson and Steadman to develop maps showing troop positions during various

phases of the battle. Figure 1 shows the Confederate and Union positions during the first phase of the battle. The map also shows the expanded National Register boundaries. Dr. Sim also worked with Johnson and Steadman to develop story maps, which include a more detailed depiction of the phases of the battle. Harris then used these maps, along with information from the National Register nomination, to build a website. The website contains images of the site today, a detailed description of the battle, images of important figures involved in the battle, the National Register maps and the story maps.

The research team completed the project in the winter of 2014. Final project reports were submitted to the ABPP in November and the updated National Register nomination is scheduled for the April 2015 meeting of the Alabama State National Register Review Board. Upon approval from the Board, the nomination will head off to Washington D.C. for final approval. If you are interested in learning more about the Battle of Sulphur Creek Trestle, please visit our website: <http://www.buildingthepride.com/faculty/ssim/abpp/>. If you are interested in learning more about the ABPP, please visit their website: <http://www.nps.gov/abpp/index.htm>.

**Figure 1:** Phase One of the Battle of Sulphur Creek Trestle. Created by Lauren Hinton, Katelyn Johnson, Jonathan Steadman and Dr. Sunhui Sim.

