



HISTORY

## ‘The dead of Olustee’: Where is the mass grave of 125 Union soldiers killed in Florida’s largest Civil War battle?



**Steve Patterson**

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SANDERSON | Traveling west from Jacksonville with 5,500 invading Union soldiers, Brig. Gen. Truman Seymour and his staff crossed paths with an unwelcoming Southern woman.

"You will come back faster than you go," she told the men who, on that February 20, 1864 midday, paused for lunch a few miles from the hamlet of Olustee.

By nightfall, hundreds of Seymour’s troops were dead or missing and more than 1,000 wounded as survivors of Florida’s largest Civil War battle struggled to stay ahead of Confederates chasing them out of Baker County.

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**Mark Woods:** History from the mouths and pens of those who put up monuments to Women of Confederacy

The Olustee battlefield stayed a bitter, unreachable memory for Union troops for the rest of the war, with soldiers unable to return or recover comrades who died there.

When an officer finally reached the site in 1866, a year after the war ended, he found the bones of Union soldiers “scattered broadcast over the battlefield” by hogs that had rooted through shallow graves, desecrating remains of the fallen warriors.

Searching the area, the officer and his detachment found skulls of 125 men and wagonloads of bones that they buried together in a mass grave they topped with a 12-foot-tall monument.

But that marker vanished by the early 1870s.

And while historic reenactors put up a stone replacement at a private cemetery in the 1990s, no one knows for sure where the original monument stood or where the remains were buried.

To this day, while Florida has a state park memorializing the Confederate victory at Olustee, — thousands of people are expected there this weekend for the 45th annual battle reenactment — the mass grave of Union soldiers killed there remains lost.

Barbara Gannon, a history professor at the University of Central Florida who thinks the grave is close by, is on a quest to see the men who were buried there honored.

After a visit last spring, Gannon said, “I looked out there and I said ‘we’re coming for you’.”

The Civil War researcher has been telling students, historians and strangers about her dream of seeing the soldiers recognized, pointing to federal laws that she says entitle them to honorable burial.

“It’s intolerable that there are American soldiers who lay unknown and un-honored in a state of the United States,” said Gannon, 64, whose academic career followed stretches as an Army sergeant and an analyst for a Congressional watchdog office.

Gannon, who discussed Olustee’s dead last fall at the University of Mississippi, will be talking about them at a conference of historians outside Tampa at the end of this month and to members of the Massachusetts Historical Society in April.

But how to honor the battle's dead, particularly soldiers whose graves were lost, has been a challenge that lingered for generations.

## **What happened at the Battle of Olustee on Feb. 20, 1864?**

Wounded and dying Union soldiers fell alone when federal forces abandoned Seymour's ill-advised push west across rural North Florida. Confident after easy wins over outmanned rebel militia, the general had sent his troops along a road to Lake City without realizing that Confederate leaders had summoned reinforcements and were massing about 5,000 rebels near Olustee.

Hemmed in by swamp, Union troops skirmishing with rebel cavalry moved forward through the dry ground near a railroad line and found Confederate infantry and artillery advancing to fight units that were sometimes disorganized and confused. Troops from one federal unit, the Seventh Regiment New Hampshire Volunteers, were moved the wrong direction by mistaken orders that ruined their value in the fight.

“[B]eing under a terrific fire from the artillery and infantry of the enemy ... the battalion had become so badly mixed that it could not be re-formed,” Sgt. Henry F.W. Little, a Medal of Honor recipient for his valor in a different battle, later recounted. “... [T]he mistake of our commanding officers could not then be remedied; the ground was becoming thickly dotted with the bodies of the fallen.”

Other units suffered heavily too, with hundreds killed or wounded as a brigade comprised of the 47th, 48th and 115th New York Infantry held back the Confederate counterattack. Hundreds more were hurt among the 35th U.S. Colored Troops, a unit comprised mostly of former slaves who hadn't been in combat before but covered the retreat of other troops. The 7th Connecticut Infantry and 8th U.S. Colored Troops also suffered heavy losses in the battle, where wounded were loaded into a train that members of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, immortalized in the movie *Glory*, pulled three miles to safety after the engine broke down.

Some soldiers in units like those were simply lost, with no record of them beyond that day's battle. Gannon keeps spreadsheets marking those soldiers, hoping the lists might help add names to the remains (just bones, not uniforms) still at Olustee.

Lists can't, of course, help find the men's lost grave.

The South was covered with graves when an Army officer, Lt. Frederick E. Grossman from the 7th U.S. Infantry Regiment, was dispatched to Olustee in May 1866 to check where and how Union soldiers had been buried following their army's retreat.

“The bodies of the Union soldiers ... were buried by the Confederates in such a careless manner that the remains were disinterred by the hogs within a few weeks after the battle,” Grossman reported to his superiors, recounting that he organized a detachment of troops to collect remains.

“The men carried an empty bag each, into which they gathered all the human bones found over the ground as they advanced. In many instances where portions of bones protruded, we removed the earth and disinterred all the bones that had not been disturbed by the hogs. In this manner and by carefully searching over an area of about two square miles, I collected two wagon loads and a half of bones.”

Grossman wrote that he counted 125 skulls.

“Of course, it is impossible to identify any of the remains, as they consist only of bones bleached by the sun of two summers,” the lieutenant added.

Grossman wrote that he assumed the remains were Union because the Confederates buried their dead mostly on the opposite side of the railroad line, and “their graves are now even in perfect condition.” Gannon said Confederate dead were eventually moved to Lake City, where a stone honoring “unknown Confederate soldiers” at Oaklawn Cemetery marks the burial place of more than 150 men who died in the battle or at a Confederate hospital.

## **A monument was erected to honor the Union dead. Then it disappeared**

In the shade of tall Baker County pines, the lieutenant told his men to dig a single grave measuring 18 feet by 12 feet, then build a wooden fence and a ditch surrounding it.

Following his commander's directions, Grossman had the men erect a wooden monument, painted white with black lettering cut into the wood, for "the memory of the officers and soldiers of the United States army who fell" on that battlefield.

"May the living profit by the example of the dead," read the monument's north face.

But within seven years, the memorial had apparently vanished.

"All that could be seen of the monument ... were parts of two sides of a weather-stained and broken-down fence," wrote Loomis Langdon, a West Point-schooled artillery officer and Olustee veteran who had been crossing Florida by train in 1873 and had a porter alert him when they approached the site.

"I had lost some of my best men" in the battle, Langdon wrote in a book printed in 1879, and said discovering the disappearance led him to try — unsuccessfully — to get assigned to finding and re-burying "the dead of Olustee."

The reason the monument vanished isn't known. Some researchers speculated that the monument might have been vandalized by embittered Confederate die-hards. But wood also can rot easily and fall apart, said Gary Dickinson, president of a citizens support organization for the state park that preserves the core of the battlefield. Dickinson said he has seen wood decay erase evidence at a cemetery in Mandarin, too.

The Army had tried to move its dead from Olustee soon after Grossman set up the monument.

Congress had ordered the creation of national cemeteries to bury America's soldiers with honor in 1862 and, after the war, the government hired a contractor to move Union dead in Florida to Beaufort, S.C.

Paid by the number of bodies moved, the contractor billed the Army Quartermaster General's Office for recovering remains in Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Lake City and Apalachicola.

But Gannon has found no record of billing to remove bodies from Baker County.

Instead, there's a letter between two Quartermaster offices questioning a contractor's report that "the authorities objected to the removal of these bodies in the spring of 1868 ... on account of the lateness of the season." The letter doesn't mention Olustee by name, but was collected by archaeologists preparing a 1994 study of Olustee's battlefield.

Rather than the federal government, the most effective efforts to commemorate Olustee history were led by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which raised money to preserve the site where rebels defeated an ill-advised Union effort to extend federal control west from Jacksonville.

A 3-acre property preserving the site of the Confederate victory opened as a state park in 1912.

## A new monument is placed near the battle site

Reenactors started commemorating the battle in the 1970s and, in 1991, a reenactor helped build a stone monument patterned after the one Gross and his men created in the 1860s.

The battle “is part of our American heritage, good or bad,” said Jeff Grzelak, 63, a reenactor since age 16 who said he started thinking about the memorial after reading about it in a Civil War magazine.

Gross’s report described the original wooden structure carefully and listed the messages cut on each of the four sides, so Grzelak had the same inscriptions carved into a granite monument that was paid for with money the reenactors raised over several years.

It was installed not on state parkland, but in a cemetery covering a couple of acres bordering the Osceola National Forest off U.S. 90, across a tiny street leading into the park.

The site, close to the railroad and surrounded by some tall pines, fit the description of the original, but Grzelak said he didn’t know for sure (and still doesn't) where any bones buried in 1866 were.

The cemetery has markers for graves of African-Americans as early as the late 19th century, but he said he never learned who controlled the site, so reenactors outlined their plans in community meetings and waited for reactions.

“We didn’t want to offend anybody. ... We said ‘hey, we want to put this monument here.’ Nobody objected,” said Grzelak, a self-described “urban lumberjack” who runs a tree service in Orlando.

Property records identify the owner as the nonprofit Monument Cemetery Association of Olustee, although state records say that group only incorporated in 2017.

The association’s agent referred a reporter’s questions to its president, who didn’t respond to phone and email messages.

The 1994 archaeological report didn’t identify the mass grave, but Gannon said she thinks it’s probably close to where Grzelak set the granite monument.

Even so, she said the soldiers buried at Olustee deserve further acknowledgment: the monument doesn’t say anyone is buried nearby and laws Congress passed required, where possible, identifying the soldier who gave his life.

Gannon has had students (and a volunteer) researching rolls of soldiers reported killed, captured or missing after the battle, removing anyone who’s mentioned in later records to boil down a list of people most likely left behind on the field. That list could be handy if someone agrees to somehow honor the dead still at Olustee.

She said she’d be glad if the cemetery operators wanted to have an additional marker, but she’d also be satisfied if the dead were honored on state land or the sprawling national forest property just over the fence.

“This is federal land, and these were U.S. soldiers,” she said.

Where and how to honor the fallen are details she isn't worried about now. Gannon is talking about the dead hoping to build interest among people who might support commemoration.

If that's hard, that's okay.

"I'd go to hell to get this done," she said.