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Old well may hold Civil War remains

BOONSBORO, Md. (AP) — Archaeologists and Civil War historians are looking for an old well where the bodies of 58 Confederate soldiers were dumped after the Battle of South Mountain 140 years ago.

The remains were removed 12 years later and reburied at a nearby cemetery. Local historian Steven R. Stotelmyer, however, believes some bones may remain along with other relics of the clash that set the stage for the better-known Battle of Antietam three days later.

"It's uncertain whether whole skeletons were removed," Mr. Stotelmyer said. "The men who did the labor were day laborers. They might just have gone for the skulls and long bones."

Mr. Stotelmyer, a civil engineer and amateur historian, is among about 20 volunteers participating in an excavation of the Wise Farmstead at Fox's Gap, about 50 miles west of Baltimore. Located along the Appalachian Trail, it was the site of fierce fighting during the battle on Sept. 14, 1862, in which about 6,000 soldiers were killed, wounded or reported missing.

The \$30,000 project was jointly funded by the National Park Service, the state of Maryland and the private Central Maryland Heritage League as part of the state's management plan for the battlefield, Mr. Stotelmyer said. Joseph A. Baker, an archaeologist at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, is overseeing the work.

The story of Wise's well is familiar to Civil War history buffs, but its exact location is a mystery. According to Mr. Stotelmyer, who has written extensively on the subject, two days after the battle, Union soldiers tossed the bodies into farmer Daniel Wise's covered well after growing tired of digging graves in the shallow soil.

"I've been digging around here now, and I can attest to the fact this is rocky," Mr. Stotelmyer said.

He has located the well in photographs taken before 1919, when Wise's cabin, the main reference point, was torn down. The volunteers are working their way across a grid Mr. Baker designed, based on the old photos.