



Bull Run Civil War Round Table

**P.O. Box 2147
Centreville, Virginia 20120**

Bull Run Civil War Round Table (BRCWRT) Preservation Corner

March 12, 2020

Blake Myers (photos courtesy of Blake Myers)

BRCWRT's Leap Day 2020 Hike/Tour - The Newly Preserved Land on the Bristoe Station Battlefield

On Saturday, February 29, 2020 (Leap Day), eighteen Roundtable members were treated to a hike and tour of the land parcels recently saved by the American Battlefield Trust (ABT) that are part of the Bristoe Station Battlefield. This historic landscape encompasses the position of Ricketts Battery and the ground on which General Heath's 1st Brigade (Webb's division) anchored the right flank of the II Corps defensive line along the Orange & Alexandria Railroad tracks during the Battle of Bristoe Station fought on October 14, 1863.

BRCWRT members will recall the October 2019 announcement of the American Battlefield Trust purchase of the 152 acres of core Bristoe Station Battlefield. This land is now saved and, when donated to Prince William County, will more than double the current size of the Bristoe Station Battlefield Heritage Park, increasing the saved and preserved land on the Bristoe Station Battlefield to nearly 300 acres.

This past fall, the staff at Bristoe Station Battlefield Heritage Park, led by BRCWRT members Rob Orrison (Prince William County Historic Preservation Manager) and Kevin Pawlak (Bristoe Station Battlefield Heritage Park Site Manager), kindly offered to conduct this hike/tour for BRCWRT members in part to express their thanks for BRCWRT's support of the Park and its preservation and conservation initiatives.

On the appointed day our tour group assembled at Bristoe Station Battlefield Heritage Park's parking lot, where Kevin and his team met us. The weather was cold and windy, but sunny - - a wonderful day for a hike & tour for our group of hardy members! Kevin welcomed us and recognized BRCWRT for its support of the Park and its preservation, conservation and interpretation efforts. He also noted that our hike/tour would be the first ever tour of this portion of the Bristoe Station Battlefield. Kevin then provided an overview and history of the land parcels we were going to visit, emphasizing that this is 'raw battlefield' - saved, but not yet preserved or interpreted. The hike would be to the currently accessible portions of this land using trails established by local ATV enthusiasts and hunters - trails that will likely be used by the Park when developing the preservation and interpretation plan for this area of the battlefield. Kevin provided tour participants a handout packet containing applicable maps and an Alfred Waud sketch of Browns and



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Ricketts Batteries, and we then moved to the land parcel access point/trailhead via a Park-provided "shuttle service".



BRCWRT Tour Group & Bristoe Station Tour Guides at Access Point/Trailhead

At the land parcel access point/trailhead, Kevin gathered the group and provided an overview of the strategic situation in October of 1863.

After the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, the Army of Northern Virginia withdrew across the Potomac River to Virginia and concentrated behind the Rapidan River in Orange County. The Army of the Potomac pursued Lee's Army but was unable to decisively engage and defeat it. Both armies halted along the Rapidan and paused to rest and recover on the rolling terrain between Madison Courthouse and Culpeper. Taking advantage of the lull in fighting in Virginia, General Lee dispatched Lieutenant General Longstreet's First Corps to reinforce the Confederate Army of Tennessee under General Bragg. The Federal Army countered by sending the XI and XII Corps from Meade's Army of the Potomac to reinforce General Rosecrans in Tennessee. Lee learned of the departing Union corps, and early in October began an offensive sweep around Cedar Mountain with his remaining two corps, attempting to turn Meade's right flank and impose his army between the Army of the Potomac and its supply base at Centreville. Meade discerned Lee's intentions and, not wishing to give battle in a position that did not offer him the advantage, began a withdrawal along the line of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad to the defenses of Centreville.



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Dictated by the existing roads, terrain and the challenges associated with crossing Broad Run, Meade's forces used multiple routes and multiple Broad Run crossing sites in their withdrawal to Centreville. By October 14th the Federal V Corps had crossed Broad Run using Milford Ford and was resting north of Broad Run along the Centreville Road (vicinity of today's Target Parking lot along U.S. Route 28), awaiting link up with the II Corps that was using the Orange & Alexandria Railroad as its route to cross Broad Run.

At this point our hike began proceeding along the 'the raw trail' until we arrived at Broad Run (see photographs below). Kevin discussed the challenge of the terrain surrounding Broad Run. Broad Run itself was and is a challenging stream to cross - its steep banks and broad flood plain make it fordable only at specific sites that were few and far between. The Orange & Alexandria Railroad provided a 'man-made' crossing site, and it was being used by Warren's II Corps. Warren's units were traveling along the O&A Railroad enroute to crossing Broad Run, linking up with the V Corps, and then continuing on to Centreville, when they became aware of Confederate forces to their northwest, moving toward Broad Run.



Tour Group at Broad Run



Broad Run Flood Plain and Steep Banks

An interesting aspect of the O&A Railroad in the area of Bristoe Station is that it was/is located in a small valley that routinely floods during a heavy rain or rainy season. For this reason and to ensure rail line use year-round, the rail line was laid on an elevated earthen embankment to protect the line from flooding. This embankment provided a ready-made earthwork for the II Corps units and soldiers. Upon becoming aware of the Confederate forces to his left front, Brigadier General Alexander Webb (commander of Warren's lead division) threw his men into line of battle behind the railroad embankment with his right flank, Heath's Brigade, anchored on Broad Run.



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The Confederate forces detected by Webb's men were the soldiers of Brigadier General Henry Heth's Division of Lieutenant General A. P. Hill's Second Corps, who thought they had caught the tail end of Meade's Army. Under Hill's direction, General Heth, who was advancing on these Federal forces detected at Broad Run, wheeled his division (Cooke's NC Brigade, followed by Kirkland's NC Brigade) to their right to meet this new threat posted along the rail line.

Heth's attack produced minimal results - the 26th NC successfully penetrated the federal line twice, first on Heath's right flank held by the 82d NY, and against the center of Heath's line held by the 19 ME and 15 MA. In both cases the penetrations were limited and not exploited. Federal units along the embankment sustained very few casualties in this fight, while the attacking Confederates were not so fortunate. Their attack across open farm fields against a defensive line arrayed behind the railroad embankment, and while under heavy artillery fire, initially from Browns Battery (located in a position near today's VRE Station Parking Lot) and then from Ricketts Battery resulted in considerable casualties in both Heth's and Anderson's Divisions.

Our hike continued as we crossed the small stream feeding Broad Run and proceeded to the top of the ridge where Ricketts Battery was positioned during the battle.



Hiking to the Ridge Crest and Ricketts Battery Position

Once we gathered again on the crest of the ridge, Kevin discussed the value of this terrain and its significance during the battle. From this position Ricketts could see virtually the entire battlefield - to and beyond Bristoe Station, the O&A Railroad line and across the farm fields and to Brentsville Road. From an interpretation perspective, Kevin discussed the potential of eventually removing some of the modern tree growth to enhance the view from this ridge to include the historic location of Bristoe Station, the ground over which



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Cooke's and Kirkland's Brigades attacked and the position of McIntosh's Battery (none of which are currently directly visible from the ridge).



Tour Leader Kevin Pawlak Describes the Visibility and the Action from Ricketts Battery Position

Kevin described the actions of Brown's Battery, located to the right rear of Ricketts Battery position on the ridge crest, and Ricketts Battery in thwarting the Confederate attack, and countering the fire from McIntosh's Battery.

From here, we proceeded back down the ridge, past a modern, spring-fed pond, back across the stream and to the site of a roadbed that was used, in addition to the O&A Railroad, by Warren after the battle to cross Broad Run.



Tour Group at the Diagonal Roadbed



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From this site we hiked back to the access point/trailhead, and the starting point for our hike, to begin the "shuttle service" back to the Bristoe Station Battlefield Heritage Park parking lot. Prior to the shuttle service resuming, we thanked Kevin and his staff for a terrific hike and tour and for the insights they provided on the newly saved land parcel and the battle, including the strategies, the units, and the soldiers who fought here on October 14, 1863.

All in all, it was a superb outing for the BRCWRT members who participated - we all gained a better appreciation for the Battle of Bristoe Station and particularly the action involving Ricketts Battery, Heath's Brigade, and Cooke's and Kirkland's NC Brigades. Thank you to the Roundtable members who participated - Blake Myers, Stephanie Vale, Tom Jones, John DePue, Bill Mindak, Joe & Zach Imler, Denise Rodgers, Joe Young, Todd Creekman, Richard Markowitz, Dan Paterson, Mike Buckley, Jeff Joyce, Bob Hemm, Bill Cratty (& friend Bob from the Shenandoah Valley) and Don Richardson.

A huge BRCWRT Thank You to our tour guide, Kevin Pawlak, and the Bristoe Station Battlefield Heritage Park staff and volunteers, who made this such an informative, interesting and terrific afternoon - Staff members Lance Russell and Nate McDonald, and Volunteers Jeff Joyce, Brandon Moist, Tom McGinlay and Lionel Raymond!