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"Seven Year Locusts": The Deforestation of Spotsylvania County during the American Civil War

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"Why, we cut down a woods in a few days! you have no idea what damage an army can do – it is worse than seven year locusts," wrote Private. John L. Smith of the 118th Pennsylvania Regiment in a letter home.[1] Like the locusts to which he refers, Civil War soldiers descended upon their surrounding environments for sustenance and supplies, with little concern for the devastating consequences to nature that would inevitably follow. Similar to Smith, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Lyman reflected after a post-war visit to the Wilderness battlefield that "to an unpractised eye it was just as if a whirlwind had twisted off each trunk and left the top hanging by the torn fibres. But it was the whirlwind of musket balls."[2] Both soldiers commented on the palpable damage armies had on the forests in which they camped and fought. Scenes of violent deforestation confronted soldiers and civilians alike with the sobering reality of warfare's destructive tendencies. The consistent presence of two massive armies, camping and fighting within the Spotsylvania Wilderness of northern Virginia between 1863 and 1864, devastated the forest environment to such an extent that it would take decades for the region to fully recover. Despite numerous firsthand accounts of the environmental consequences of the Civil War, historians have traditionally paid little attention to such a perspective. However, in order to achieve a more complete understanding of the destruction caused by one of the most violent conflicts in American history, this environmental approach must be considered.

To explore deforestation in the Civil War, this study will focus on Spotsylvania County in Virginia, a region whose involvement in the war, according to one economic study, "was as intense, if not more so, than Germany's involvement in World War II."[3] Particular emphasis will be placed on the areas surrounding the dense Spotsylvania Wilderness. This study examines armies encamped in the region, along with accounts from the particularly destructive battles that were waged in the area: Chancellorsville (April 30-May 6, 1863), the Wilderness (May 5-6, 1864), and Spotsylvania Courthouse (May 8-21). Understanding the extent to which woodland environments both sustained and were altered

by their violent and nonviolent encounters with human warfare in turn provides deeper insight into the "mutual and necessary" codependent relationship between man and nature.[4] Most importantly, an environmental approach to Civil War history highlights the extent to which deforestation influenced and exacerbated the scope of wartime devastation. This devastation includes the severe economic and ecological costs to specific regions-costs that would plague future reconstruction efforts as well as the reconciliation of the nation as a whole.

Contextualizing the Wilderness of Spotsylvania

The Spotsylvania Wilderness in the beginning of the Civil War has been characterized as a "broad stretch of impenetrable thickets and dense second growth that had replaced forests cut down to fuel local iron and gold furnaces."[5] Originally seeing its economic promise, Governor Alexander Spotswood purchased this 3,000-acre stretch of woods in 1719. During the ensuing century, Spotswood and his successors constantly harvested the Wilderness "for its ore as well as its timber for use as charcoal," until advanced technology rendered charcoal obsolete. In fact, as Kathryn Shively Meier surmises, "by the time the armies of the Potomac and Northern Virginia occupied the Wilderness, a past of cultivation and fallowness had permanently altered the landscape, producing a near-jungle of trees glued together by secondary growth."[6] This fascinating landscape, unique to its surrounding area, would become the backdrop to some of the most horrific events during the Civil War.

At the battle of Chancellorsville in the spring of 1863, both Confederate and Union troops first met the disturbing realities of fighting in the confined Spotsylvania forests. It was here that Confederate general Robert E. Lee decided to divide his army in two to defeat the masses of Major-General Joseph Hooker's Union troops with a daring flank march through the woods. The forest provided the Confederates with the cover they needed to successfully carry out Lee's bold plan. Although Chancellorsville had a great impact on the Spotsylvania Wilderness, these events paled in comparison to the what took place a year later, in virtually the same thickets.

The Battle of the Wilderness, which took place over much the same ground as the Battle of Chancellorsville, initiated "the bloodiest campaign in American history."[7] General Ulysses S. Grant, the new commanding officer for the United States, had 122,000 troops prepared to cross the Rapidan River, where General Robert E. Lee and his 66,000-man Army of Northern Virginia waited. Grant although general commander for the United States, made his headquarters with the Army of the Potomac, under the direct command of George Gordon Meade.[8] Having spent the previous winter deadlocked along the freezing river, the spring of 1864 beckoned as a new opportunity for battle to again ensnare the two armies. The only question was where.

Faced with the perpetual threat of starvation due to a marked lack of resources, Lee and his dwindling army had an important decision to make that spring: stay fortified along the Rapidan, or retreat closer to Richmond. Lee ultimately opted to remain on the Rapidan, content with the knowledge that failure to hold the line would not be catastrophic, as his army could maintain the ability to maneuver farther south. Indeed, Lee recognized the viable opportunity that initiating battle in the Spotsylvania Wilderness would hold for the Southern cause. In addition to keeping the fight farther from Richmond, the impenetrable forest would prohibit Grant and Meade from effectively utilizing their advantages in artillery and manpower. In a sense, the terrain would level the playing field for Lee and his army. As Gordon Rhea suggests, "accosting Meade in the Wilderness made eminent sense as a southern objective" because it had "few negotiable roads, clearings were scarce, and visibility rarely exceeded a few hundred feet."[9]

The conditions, then, were right for the Confederates. When Grant and Meade crossed the river on May 5, 1864, they were hastily met by Lee's men in the morass of the Wilderness, littered with the half-buried skeletons and wreckage of Chancellorsville. The following weeks would see continuous fighting throughout the region, ultimately culminating in the brutal engagement at Spotsylvania Courthouse. The Wilderness campaign defined Grant's his persistence, foretelling an end to Southern hopes of independence. While his predecessors had given up and retreated north after battles with Lee, Grant would press on, bringing his numerical superiority, and the economic superiority of the North, to bear on Lee's army. The engagements in the Spotsylvania Wilderness in

1864 offer unique examples of this violent, new type of grinding warfare that would plague Virginia until Lee's surrender. Furthermore, the defining landscape of the Wilderness offers an extraordinary backdrop from which to study the environmental impacts of the conflict.

Secondary Literature

The destructive aspects of the Civil War in relation to the natural environment have not gone unnoticed by historians, though concerns about the causes and repercussions of deforestation have largely been left unaddressed. Most relevant to this study are articles by Kathryn Shively Meier and Jack Temple Kirby-both of whom acknowledge the importance of forests in the conflict. Meier's focuses her work, "Fighting in 'Dante's Inferno': Changing Perceptions of Civil War Combat in the Spotsylvania Wilderness from 1863 to 1864," through a psychological lens, as opposed to the environmental perspective I take, reflecting on the changing impacts the wilderness had on the psyche of the men who fought there in 1863 and 1864. According to her, "the year 1864 introduced key environmental and psychological changes which resulted in soldiers fixating on their environment."[10] As a result, one finds increasing references to the damage done to nature in the diaries and letters of soldiers as the war progressed. Meier's work effectively emphasizes a dynamic, psychological relationship between man and nature in this region-a theme that is integral to understanding man's ultimate reaction towards the unrestrained destruction of nature in and around the Spotsylvania Wilderness.

Jack Temple Kirby's article, "The American Civil War: An Environmental View," recognizes "that humans are connected creatures, obligated partners in a dynamic natural community," and that while nature is certainly capable of change without human interference, "human action-making civilizations, technology, warfare-has enormous consequences." Importantly, Kirby notes that large areas of the South "had been undergoing profound forest degradation for at least a thousand years."[11] This degradation was, he explains, by virtue of the agricultural practice of fire/shifting, a method of farming that involved burning a swath of woodland to create farms for a few years, only to abandon them when they had been exhausted, repeating the process once they had

recovered. Hardwoods, used for housing and fencing, simply had no time to mature, especially in the midst of a destructive civil war. Ultimately, this meant that after the cessation of hostilities, regions already suffering from this sort of environmental degradation, as was the region around the Spotsylvania Wilderness, would undergo greater challenges in their efforts to rebuild with no adequate source of sturdy lumber from which to draw.

Also essential to this study, Kirby expands upon the impacts that armies could have on forests: "Soldiers were forester-engineers nearly everywhere-felling trees, stripping limbs, chaining trunks to horses and mules for snaking to campsites and fortifications, where winter quarters and breastworks were almost always made of log."[12] In other words, soldiers were actively engaged with woodland environments, consistently using their natural resources for fuel or shelter for the duration of the war. Save for a few brief words in regard to the effects of "artillery fire" and "fire" in general, Kirby does not explore the extent to which combat damaged forests-something that Meier's study acknowledges, though solely from a psychological point of view.

Other environmental histories of the Civil War have looked more generally at the environmental impacts of war on the landscape, failing to adequately consider deforestation and its dramatic role in the Southern economy. Lisa Brady's essay, "The Wilderness of War," examines environmental effects on the entire South. Brady writes:

Across the South…massive armies collided, leaving trenches and rifle pits gaping like open sores; pits from the explosions of underground mines pock marked the ground, and where thick woods once stood, little but broken trunks and shattered limbs remained.

Using such descriptive language, Brady illuminates the destructive qualities of war, emphasizing her opinion that, "[in] the most heavily contested areas, the effects of the Civil War were akin to a natural disaster."[13] Examining destruction on the macro level, as Brady does, implies that all regions suffered in the same way. Such a generalization, however, breaks down upon deeper consideration. The Spotsylvania Wilderness, for example, was the setting for three of the bloodiest battles in the conflict, as well as consecutive winter encampments for both

Union and Confederate armies. This constant, debilitating pressure on the region resulted in higher environmental and economic costs.

Similar to Brady's assertion that "landscape was not simply a backdrop to the events of war…but [also] a powerful military resource,"[14] Mark Fiege and Richard Tucker examine the links between strategy and environment. Fiege's essay, "Gettysburg and the Organic Nature of the American Civil War," considers that "as much as [the Civil War] was a political, economic, social, or cultural conflict, the war was an organic struggle in which two societies fought to use and overcome nature in the service of competing national objectives."[15] His work provides substantive information on just how important geographic space was in the conflict, and considers the destruction of that space as a means of harming the enemy.[16] Similarly, Tucker's article, "The Impact of Warfare on the Natural World: A Historical Survey," explores the way in which environmental destruction was used as military strategy in a global context. In regard to the Civil War, he suggests that northern armies destroyed farms and fodder in the South as an "environmental war against the southern landscape [and] provided the decisive blow" that would eventually end the war.[17] While accounts like those of Fiege and Tucker are beneficial for any environmental study of the Civil War, their emphases on purposeful natural destruction for military means do not examine inadvertent natural destruction.

Nature has always played a crucial role in military campaigns. The authors that I have mentioned all recognize this fundamental fact and have greatly contributed to an understanding of nature's significance in the Civil War. Yet, the literature has not discussed the long-term ramifications of the war's destruction to forests. Home to three deadly battles, the forests in Spotsylvania County offer a superb case study for exploring this little-researched aspect of Civil War history. Studying the micro effects of deforestation on this region will promote a greater understanding as to how easily soldiers, whether acting individually or as part of a larger army, could dramatically alter the natural landscape to a point of environmental disaster. In contrast to the strategic uses of the environment described by other historians, these woodlands were not destroyed with any direct intent of causing damage to the enemy. Spotsylvania County, unlike the Shenandoah Valley and the Georgia backcountry, was never the target of a direct ecological war campaign,

but suffered tremendously nonetheless. The causes and ramifications of this devastation will be the focus of this work.

Before the Battles: Army Encampments

"The only physical result of the war in Virginia which remains at all noteworthy is the destruction of the forests. A camp is a great consumer of timber; and the five years in which the region was warred over served to sweep away a large part of the trees," Captain Nathaniel Shaler wrote in a newspaper article five years following the end of hostilities.[18] Typically missing from traditional accounts of the conflict, the environmental implications of army encampments were dire. Often more devastating to the locale than even the most brutal of battles, an army encamped represented a continuous, grinding strain on the local ecosystem, depleting virtually all of its resources. Larger than some cities, armies had predictable consequences on the land in and around the Spotsylvania Wilderness. Private William Paynton of the 21st New Jersey Regiment, for example, wrote in a letter home from Stafford County Court House in 1862:

where we now are, is in the woods…but the woods we have cut down to make fires. it is pretty cold here, and when we make fires we have make larges [*sic*] ones. you can imagine the size of them when I tell you that we use as much woods as you could put on a cart in one fire…our Regt, will burn perhaps fifty loads every day.[19]

Such continuous depletion of the region's woodlands would end in wide-scale environmental holocaust. "At the present time one can imagine himself in some new country – listening to the men cutting down trees and cutting up wood, so continuous is the distant strokes of the axe heard," penned Private James M. Higgins in 1863, a Mississippi soldier encamped around Fredericksburg's surrounding countryside. "Two months ago when we first came here this was covered with a fine growth of young trees – now, not a sign of a tree is to be seen."[20]

Another Mississippian, Private Franklin L. Riley of the 16th Mississippi Regiment, painted a bleak image while encamped nearby: "[F]irewood…is getting difficult to find. There must be 75,000 soldiers on this side of the river – all wanting to keep warm. The ridges near Fredericksburg used to be covered with trees. Now most of the trees have been cut down."[21] The forest environments had many resources to offer – predominately

fuel for campfires, as Riley's account typifies, as well as material for shelter against the elements. "We built a wall of pine logs, about 4 feet high, with a log chimney on one side…Inside we had built 2 bunks of pine sticks and over this we spread spruce pine leaves," remembered Private Alfred Bellard of the 5th New Jersey Regiment.[22]Substantial shelters like Bellard's, while providing soldiers with an insulating sanctuary from the harsh elements of Virginia's winters, also demanded a lot of trees for their construction. With these cabins constituting significant portions of Union and Confederate winter encampments, yet another drain on the forests presented itself. The utilization of trees to meet these sorts of demands directly limited the supply of wood that could be harnessed in the rebuilding process for residents of this region. This translated into an extended period of reconstruction and economic devastation during the war and for many years afterward.

So complete would the destruction and harvest of woodlands around Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania become in the next few years, that soldiers would have to go to extremes to meet their needs for timber. For example, David Thomas, a captain in the 27th Connecticut Regiment, elaborated the following in a newspaper article written on April 15, 1863:

The boys here have been 'stumping' Virginia pretty well…The fact is the woods have all been cut down, and fuel is very scarce. We now are gathering what we call the second crop, that is, we cut off the stumps even with the ground…If the former residents ever return to this portion of Virginia, they won't find a piece of timber large enough to make a respectable souvenir.[23]

As Thomas describes, with fully-grown trees and other sources of wood, such as fences, local barns, or abandoned homes depleted, the soldiers resorted to using tree stumps as fuel. Furthermore, the fact that his account was written in April of 1863, a full two years before the end of hostilities, only underscores the severity of the situation. Union and Confederate armies would alternatively occupy areas in and around this region, engage in armed combat, and further diminish the already exhausted environment for another twenty-four long months.

With forests and other easy sources of timber and fuel rapidly decreasing with each consecutive encampment in northern Virginia, soldiers were

forced to hike increasing distances for wood. "Yesterday in the forenoon William Lewis and I went up and get [*sic*] some wood. We had to go a mile and fetch it on our backs. What do you think of that?" complained Private John Dunbar of the 37th Massachusetts Regiment in a letter to his sister. "Did you ever think when I was in Ware that I should have to carry wood on my back as far as that?"[24] Similarly, accounts expressing the drudgery of this unfortunate fact of army life can be found in the diary entries of weary soldiers. In his diary, Private Thomas C. Bradbury of the 17th Maine Regiment related: "just returned from the woods where I have been for wood to burn. have to lug our wood about a mile and a half."[25] The constantly decreasing supply of usable timber, as a direct result of deforestation from encampments, posed very serious problems to the soldiers who faced the daunting task of locating and retrieving this crucial resource.

Besides making life difficult for soldiers, deforestation from encampment left few resources for the citizens of Spotsylvania County. As Private William Morgan of the 2nd Massachusetts recorded, "[W]herever the army goes every thing goes before it – what was a forest yesterday is tomorrow a clearing with hardely a branch left upon the spot."[26] Having to fuel the insatiable demand of armies for its natural resources, woodlands faced the very real possibility of being reduced to barren wastelands of stumps and dirt. While the dramatic extent of this destruction was not intended, it was nonetheless a formative reality in the post-war South. In a region as heavily focused on agricultural production as the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania area was, this sort of ruination would critically affect the locale's economic viability during and after war.[27] This ruination, in turn, would play a crucial factor in motivating the emigration of residents from the region throughout the remainder of the conflict. The forests provided building materials for structures and fences, and with unimpeded deforestation, this vital aspect of civilization and agriculture was temporarily lost.

The Effects of Battle on the Spotsylvania Wilderness

In addition to the grave effects of army encampments, the woodland environments of the Spotsylvania region suffered from the desperate armed struggles within its boundaries, the most significant of which

occurred in the midst of dense forests. As Lisa Brady has surmised, "[S]ome of the worst damage in the Civil War occurred in heavily wooded areas. Stray bullets, cannon shot, and the occasional saber pounded into the trunks and limbs of trees."[28] Significantly, the battles of Chancellorsville, the Wilderness, and Spotsylvania Courthouse, all took place in virtually the same forests, thereby multiplying the damages sustained in the Spotsylvania Wilderness, and lending weight to Brady's claims. Nature bore the brunt of warfare, and as many soldiers and civilians alike recorded, forests were particularly ravaged.

Due to the inhospitable fighting conditions presented by the Spotsylvania Wilderness, the majority of the fighting during the three battles that occurred in the area was done by the infantry, resulting in a deadly crossfire of bullets that cut away everything in their path. Private Frank Wilkeson, a soldier in the 4th US Artillery, wrote in his diary that during the Battle of the Wilderness, "small limbs of trees were falling in a feeble shower in advance of me. It was as though an army of squirrels were at work cutting off nut and pine cone-laden branches." This seemingly benign parallel of bullets stripping branches from trees to the handiwork of squirrels, pales in comparison to the "shot and shell from [Confederate] guns [that] cut great limbs off of the trees" that Wilkeson described later.[29] During the confusion of battle, coupled with the overwhelming presence of death, Wilkeson's comments on the destruction of the forests suggest that what he observed was just as terrible as anything else he had seen.

Having no means to avoid harming the overgrown forests that characterized this region, it was simply a matter of course that trees and undergrowth were caught in the crossfire. For example, during the battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse, Private Samuel S. Johnson wrote in his diary on May 12, 1864 that "from 8 A.M. until dark, the most severe infantry fight of the war was in progress, the 2nd Div of the 6th Corps, during that time used 570,000 rounds of ammunition: large trees were cut down by musket balls."[30] Johnson was referring to the single division, but that kind of firepower, when discharged by more than one division, would quite literally fill the air (and forest) with burning lead. Furthermore, in a letter written to his sweetheart, Sergeant George Fowle of the 39thMassachusetts Regiment, recorded that "we were ordered into a piece [*sic*] of wood where there was heavy firing…The Rebs had a battery

that raked us the whole afternoon. We laid there…about seven hours, that battery rakeing [*sic*] us the whole time."[31] A constant "rakeing" of artillery rounds through a stand of trees for seven hours, as Fowle describes, would spell disaster for that portion of the forest.

Combined with Johnson's account, these two men provide a chilling glimpse into just how many murderous projectiles coursed through the Spotsylvania Wilderness during battle, smacking into soldiers and trees alike. Perhaps the most vivid example of trees as collateral damage during these battles comes from General Robert E. Lee's own aide, Walter H. Taylor. In his memoir, Taylor described the following at Spotsylvania Courthouse:

Then occurred the most remarkable musketry-fire of the war…from continuous lines of hissing fire, an incessant, terrific hail of deadly missiles. No living man nor thing could stand in the doomed space embraced within those angry lines; even large trees were felled – their trunks cut in twain by the bullets of small arms.[32]

The same fundamental reality of armed engagements occurring within the Spotsylvania Wilderness emerges from these three accounts. As soldiers utilized the landscape for cover, trees naturally attracted bullets and artillery rounds to root out those seeking refuge behind them. As a necessary result, the landscape suffered significantly. "The tremendous roar of the artillery and the rattle of the musketry seemed to make the woods tremble," remembered an awed Confederate Surgeon in a letter to his wife. "I have never before seen woods so completely riddled with bullets. At one place the battle raged among chinquapin bushes. All the bark was knocked off and the bushes are literally torn to pieces."[33]

Additionally, fearful conflagrations plagued these battlefields during the engagements of 1863 and 1864, and contributed to the deforestation of the region. As a concerned Federal captain wrote in his diary, it was far too easy for "bursting shells and invariably dry weather [to] set fire to the dead leaves and branches."[34] Confederate general Porter Alexander observed the following in his memoirs concerning the Battle of the Wilderness: "During the morning the woods had taken fire, & on part of the enemy's line the log breastworks were actually blazing when the attack was made."[35] Similarly, United States Major-General A. A. Humphreys remembered that during a certain point of the battle, "just

before the attack the front line of breastworks … which was entirely of logs, took fire from the forest in front …which had been burning for some hours."[36] Such fires were often uncontrollable, and numerous accounts exist whereby troops bore witness to scenes in which "many wounded soldiers were burned to death."[37] Alexander described "extensive fires in the woods," and such blazes were not uncommon phenomena during these battles, but were frequently a very real consequence of them. Irrepressible fire fed off of the dense undergrowth and scrub oaks of the area, ripping through the woods seemingly at will. [38]

The shredding apart of trees, along with numerous forest fires, were two principal components in the total level of destruction wrought on this tract of woodland west of Fredericksburg during the battles of 1863 and 1864. A Pennsylvania soldier, William Taylor, summarized it best when he wrote in 1864 that:

All nature seems changed. Humanity seems changed. Never will be written in full the history of these days. No pen can do it. Who is able to describe these terrific cannonades, tearing men, animals, the earth and the woods, the fierce charge and shout, the panic and stampede…Surely the rider on the Pale horse has made this his pathway.[39]

The destruction of "earth and the woods" played a particular role in Taylor's memory, and his depiction of environmental destruction is just as terrible as scenes of death and anguish. So much so, in fact, that he likens it to evidence of the Apocalypse. The biblical reference to the 'rider on the Pale horse', found in Revelations 6:7-9:

And when the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the fourth living being say, "Come!" And I looked up and saw a horse whose color was pale green like a corpse. And Death was the name of its rider, who was followed around by the Grave. They were given authority over one-fourth of the earth, to kill with the sword and famine and disease and wild animals.

provided potent imagery that evokes how the desolated woodland battlefield would have appeared. The torn, bleeding corpses of soldiers, lying amidst the smoldering remains of mangled trees, was the ultimate result of the fighting in the Spotsylvania Wilderness in May 1864. Indeed, as Kathryn Shively Meier's work regarding the psychological impacts of the Wilderness suggests, many soldiers "began to sympathize

with nature's wounds," especially by the battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse.[40] Taylor's account clearly indicates the extent to which soldiers were increasingly cognizant of their surrounding environment in 1864, lamenting the hell that their actions created during battle.

These accounts describing the wartime destruction of the natural environment, however, do not tell the whole story of the battlefield deforestation in the area. Interestingly, participants have provided accounts that document incidents of intentional deforestation that occurred during battles-environmental destruction meant to bolster military plans. For example, a Virginian described a case in which a portion of forest was purposely cut down during the Wilderness battle:

A space of perhaps forty yards in width in front of the works was cleared of brush. At my suggestion, trees along the edge of the clearing were blazed, to guide the men in the elevation of their guns, and the men were instructed to aim below the blazed marks.[41]

In much the same way, Samuel Johnson reflected in his diary that at noon on May 7, 1864, "Battery M. 5th U.S. and our battery, were sent to the immediate front, as the woods were cut down to give us a position."[42] The compact, dense, and confusing environment created by the overgrown forest, fostered such actions. In both cases, one from a Confederate perspective, and one from the Union, the lay of the land required these measures to be taken for the benefit of the troops in question. Furthermore, trees were often cut down during lulls in battle to help in the construction of protective earthworks. Indeed, Humphreys remembered that during the Battle of the Wilderness, "division commanders were directed to throw up breastworks (of logs and earth) upon going into position, a work which was accomplished without delay."[43] While the devastation of nature was not the goal of the armies, environmental damage was, nonetheless, a byproduct of battle, and perhaps in some cases, even a necessity.

Consequences of Deforestation

When considering the various elements of destruction and deforestation that the area around Spotsylvania County endured, a number of serious environmental and economic concerns emerge. Significant among them are the far-reaching effects that would haunt both this desolate piece of

land in northern Virginia and its surrounding areas. These effects center around two significant factors: life in the region and the area's economic viability.

The battlegrounds of the Spotsylvania Wilderness remained in a state of shock long after the contending armies had left the region, and indeed, when returning to the sites of battle, soldiers were often awed by what they witnessed. Writing during a post-war visit to the forests around Chancellorsville and the Wilderness battlefields, 2nd Lieutenant B. B. Chapman of the 13th South Carolina Infantry Regiment remembered in an article he wrote for a newspaper, that "[I]n all of this skirt of woods I noticed carefully hundreds of trees, and I did not see a tree of considerable size that had not been torn by a cannon shot or shell. Most of the trees were topped by shells."[44] Lyman also visited the same region following the end of hostilities. In a letter, he comments that he "had heard of 'a little sort of run, with a rise on the other side, where it was perfectly awful', and I recognized the place at once…not one [tree] was standing, for a distance of some hundreds of yards in length."[45] Perhaps most telling is a description written by Private John Harvey Shannon of the 15th Georgia Regiment in a letter to his wife, referring to the Battle of the Wilderness: "[I]n all battlefields I have seen I have never seen such destruction. The timber (and the fighting was mostly done in thick woods) was torn all to pieces. Numbers of saplings as large as my thigh were shot down by minnie balls."[46] Destruction of the kind to which these soldiers bore witness was common throughout the region.

Soldiers, however, were not the only ones who documented scenes of environmental degradation. Even as early as 1862, civilian newspapers took note of the deforestation caused by winter encampments. In the February 22, 1862 edition of *Harper's Weekly*, the following was written about the Army of the Potomac's camp along the Rappahannock River:

The large amount of fuel required by the army has caused the woods to disappear with magical rapidity. This, and the destruction of the fences, the demolition of houses, and construction of new military roads, will render it rather difficult for the absconding secessionists to recognize their ancient boundaries, if they ever return.[47]

This account demonstrates how quickly an army could transform the surrounding countryside. Furthermore, observed in 1862, this passage

suggests how this region would fare for the remainder of the war. Written before any of the great battles discussed in this study were even fought, this article underscores just how dire the situation in Spotsylvania would become, as evidenced by the post-war accounts mentioned above. Indeed, Charles R. Stedman, a civilian whose family moved to the region after the war, remembered that when they began construction on a home, "[T]he timber, which was about half full growth in height had been completely riddled by Minnie balls…Many of the trees were cut at about half their height, so that the tops were lopped down to the ground."[48] Struck by the unusual condition of the surrounding forests in his new home, Stedman felt the need to record his observances for others. His words became important reminders of the impacts of the Civil War on the forest, effects that did not simply disappear with the armies. Civilian photographers were also awed by the landscape, documenting images of deforestation, capturing the otherworldly effects that conflict wrought on nature. The image depicted below, for example, captures a scene on the site of the Wilderness battlefield that clearly shows the havoc that the woodland endured.[49] Trees were torn to shreds, their leaves and branches all but stripped from the remaining trunks, creating a barren wasteland, haunted by the skeleton of the shattered forest. The fact that civilians were inspired enough to capture the images that display this carnage, through writing or photographs, such as the one above, suggests that the degree of damage to the forests was acutely disturbing.

When considering the lasting implications of this damage, a primary concern that arises is the fundamental transformation of life in the region post-war, both for humans and animals. John Harvey Shannon mentioned in an excerpt from the letter to his wife that was cited previously, following the horrible marring he witnessed in May 1864, that he thought it would be "impossible for anyone to live in such a place."[50] When considered in conjunction with the correspondence of others, it becomes apparent that his prediction was correct. For at least the months immediately following the culmination of the battles fought in the Spotsylvania Wilderness, the region was devoid of any significant amount of life.

An examination of the wildlife reveals telling evidence of the region's destruction. The vast expanses of the tangled growth and dense forests

of the region offered sanctuary to many species of animals, just as any other pre-war forest. Indications of such life can be seen in soldiers' accounts. For example, Private. James L. McCown, a Confederate soldier, remembered waking to the "song of the birds" in a camp in the Wilderness on May 5, 1864. Furthermore, he recalled being distracted by the "strange appearance" of a rabbit that jumped in front of him as the men prepared for battle.[51] However, the days immediately following McCown's writings witnessed the grisly devastation that has been described in previously addressed accounts. Evidence of the effect of battlefield devastation on wildlife is unfortunately difficult to find, as individuals of the time did not carefully consider the environmental implications of the destruction of forests on the survival of the animals in the area. Yet, it is possible, by carefully examining firsthand accounts, to construct a general picture of the ways in which wildlife reacted to the life-shattering events of the war around them.

Even after Chancellorsville in 1863, consequences for wildlife were evident. Captain Thomas Fanning Wood, a surgeon in the 3rd North Carolina Regiment recorded the following in his memoirs of the war: "The stench above the old battlefield was awful owing to the dead horses, which had been bared by the rain. It was very remarkable that there were no buzzards seen."[52] It seems quite odd that buzzards, typically common to the region, were missing in the aftermath of perhaps one of the greatest events of extermination up to that point in the Spotsylvania Wilderness. Similarly, an article written in 1881 in the Philadelphia Weekly Times speaks of, "[A] journalist [who] spoke with a local man about the animals of the Wilderness and [was] told that the animals left the area for several months after the battle." The local man, who was an old slave who had lived in the area his entire life, is quoted in the paper as to have said, "Durin' the battle the deah and the wild tukkeys [*sic*], an' even the tukkey-buzza'ds [*sic*] – dug out, and we didn't see a wild beast nor skasely [*sic*] a bird that summer."[53] The implications of his statements are clear, especially taken in tandem with Dr. Wood's. The destruction of the forest in 1864, eerily similar to that of 1863, was so terrific, that even hardy scavengers like turkey buzzards left the region for months on end following the battle, indicative of the lack of remaining animals in the region.

This idea is significantly reinforced by a striking account written by Lieutenant James E. Phillips, a soldier in the 12th Virginia Regiment, whose brother was killed in combat in the Spotsylvania Wilderness in 1864. Unable to properly inter his remains due to the chaos of battle and ensuing movements away from the region, Phillips had to make the trek back to the Wilderness seven months later after receiving a leave of absence during the siege of Petersburg. In his own words, Phillips provides perhaps the strongest evidence for the battle's effects on life in the area at this time:

Now comes the most remarkable incident which ever occurred to anyone. It seems strange that such a thing could even occur… As I said, I left [my brother] there in that woods and he remained for more than seven months lying on the ground with his comrads…[after trekking through the countryside] I came upon my brother & others lying on their backs just as I had left them. Nothing had disturbed them as they showed no signs of anyone putting hands upon them or even any wild animals had molested them…[54]

After seven full months of exposure- seven months that spanned spring, summer, fall, and the beginnings of winter- the bodies were "just as [he] had left them." When one considers that these men were in the midst of a Virginia forest, the fact that their corpses were left unmolested by any scavenging creature for that period of time is astounding. Taken in tandem, these accounts provide compelling evidence suggesting a distinct lack of wildlife in the aftermath of the engagements fought in the area.

The negative impacts of environmental destruction were not limited to wild animals. Phillips remarks in the same account, that during his entire trip from Guinea Station on up into the Wilderness, "I never saw a person at all." The entire region, it would appear, was a wasteland. Destruction of forests, trees, and occasionally even civilian structures, created very trying circumstances for the local populace. Indeed, "Virginia has become a vast grave yard," a distraught James Freeman wrote to his cousin in May 1864. "[W]hole districts of country that were interspersed with houses & finely cultivated farms,-once homes of peace & plenty-are laid waste."[55] Often falling into military hands for various purposes, human habitats deteriorated significantly. "The part of Virginia through which we have marched has been totally devastated," observed a

Confederate Surgeon of the 13th South Carolina Regiment. "It is now nothing but one vast track of desolation, without a fence or a planted field of any kind."[56] People could simply no longer survive in a region as volatile and grim as was Spotsylvania County by the end of the war.

This, coupled with the negative psychological impacts that historian Max Edelson suggests a dearth of trees could create, would be enough to warrant the emigration of many away from the region. According to him, "[T]rees documented the land's historic productivity, stood for social desires, marked off refined from uncultivated spaces…and served as emblems of collective identity."[57] In other words, the presence of trees can be considered a symbol of healthy society. Previously representing prosperous land, once trees were destroyed into apocalyptic shadows of their former selves, the area was shrouded in a kind of gloom. Katherine Couse, a resident of the Spotsylvania Wilderness during the Civil War, put it this way:

Delapidation [*sic*] and decay mark the course of every thing at old Laurel Hill [a key position during the battle at Spotsylvania Courthouse]…an air of suffocating loneliness reigns, as the shadow of [*sic*] come on. The wind has a peculiar howling sound-as if ghosts and witches were around mourning over the sad remains. Do not think me superstitious. Troubles seem to be attracted to this spot.[58]

Surrounded by the horrific scenes of the aftermath of a month's worth of some of the most violent fighting of the entire Civil War, Couse provides the contemporary reader with a telling glimpse into the observances of an everyday civilian. Her account focuses on a supreme sense of "loneliness," implying a lack of vibrant life. Psychologically speaking, the "delapidation and decay" that is so prevalent in her surroundings, appears to have played a substantial role in her perspective. Witnessing the unreserved destruction of one's familiar home and surrounding property, as Couse did, cast upsetting outlooks on life. In part, then, the emptiness and neglected decay of the region, so often recorded by observant soldiers-some of which have been mentioned previously-can seemingly be attributed to disenchanted civilians, fleeing the now unrecognizable lands of their home.

The environmental destruction in the Spotsylvania Wilderness over the course of the war, combined with the area's decline in population,

suggests that the region endured devastating economic times. Ms. Couse lamented this fact in the letter quoted above, explaining that "[I]t is fearful to see with what impunity all kinds of robbery…are carried on." She even goes so far as to say "we are suffering from such lawless times as existed in the dark ages."[59] What people remained in the region by the end of the war had very little in terms of food or money, and as Couse explains, resorted to robbery to meet their needs.

Hence there seems to be validity in Cynthia Musselman's proffered opinion that "the economic loss to the Spotsylvania County… and the City of Fredericksburg area was huge as a result of the Civil War and undoubtedly had a far-reaching and traumatic effect on the area." According to her study, the net worth per head of household in this region decreased by 72.9% between 1860 and 1870. Personal property value in the area also saw a tremendous drop-84.9% between 1860 and 1870. Musselman attributes much of this loss of wealth to the fact that freed slaves left the area, depriving their previous owners of a valuable commodity.[60] As Mark Fiege notes, "the removal of labor had serious environmental consequences," namely that "on poorly tended or fallow land, weeds moved in, making it even harder for the remaining people on farms and plantations to produce food."[61] Furthermore, Musselman states that the Fredericksburg-Spotsylvania region "had a population growth rate of -7.3% from 1860 to 1900," giving "credence to the concept that economic growth in this area was on the decline and the Civil War only pushed it along faster, a lot faster."[62]

The loss of slaves and other sources of labor, while very important factors, cannot be the only cause of such a decline. Deforestation and the general degradation of this area during the war limited the acquisition and use of a very valuable natural resource-timber. Even during the war, accounts of soldiers taking fences, among other sources of civilian wood, for want of any other adequate supply, are frequent. Sallie Todd, a civilian living near the Spotsylvania Wilderness, wrote a letter to her brother in May of 1864 expressing frustration that, "[The Yankees] pulled down all of our fencing to make breastworks. You would not know the place, nothing standing except for the gates."[63] Such actions on the part of the soldiers suggest a true dearth in available lumber.

Importantly, according to Musselman, it would take "over 20 years before the trees grew back to the point where they could be used to

replace destroyed fence rails and a destroyed lumber industry."[64] This fact alone can account for a number of the factors that contributed to the economic devastation of the region. Without wood for fencing, for example, the maintenance of agriculture and livestock presents itself as an obvious obstacle. With no way to keep domesticated animals in or wild animals (and desperate humans) out, both sectors suffered significantly. "Destruction of fences," Fiege noted, "was a serious problem because it left corn and other crops vulnerable."[65] "We raised sweetpotatoes and watermelons-but enjoyed none of the benefits," wrote a frustrated Couse. "They disappeared as soon as fit-for use."[66] Indeed, Musselman elaborates on the "drastic impact on the agricultural production of this area," revealing that it took fifteen years for corn production to return to its pre-war figure. Furthermore, she explains, cattle and sheep production suffered tremendously throughout the war, taking upwards of fifteen to twenty years before returning to pre-war levels.[67] Agriculture and livestock are examples of the way in which the lack of timber in the area would come to negatively affect the region as a whole. In addition, the "destroyed lumber industry" meant lost job opportunities and difficulties in construction projects. With only a limited number of economically viable options tying them to the land, coupled with the emotionally upsetting images of devastation, the region's population dwindled, creating yet another obstacle to reconstruction.

Conclusion

As shown by eyewitness soldier and civilian accounts, deforestation during the Civil War due to encampments and combat was a very real issue, having severe consequences both during and after the conflict. Considering the past from an environmental standpoint offers a new and unique means of understanding the destructive nature of the war. In addition, by focusing on the case study offered by Spotsylvania County, this work has demonstrated the somber reality of the difficulties presented to a particular region as a result of inadvertent deforestation. By understanding how dramatic these effects were just for Spotsylvania County, one can begin to comprehend the scope of devastation that deforestation as a whole had on the entire South. While this region is unique in terms of its landscape and unprecedented amount of activity,

the damages it sustained are similar to other areas throughout the war's reach. Spotsylvania, it must be remembered, is just one county in one state, within an entire region. An understanding of the inadvertent deforestation associated with armies during the war, therefore, is essential to understanding the conflict's complete impact on those who lived through it. Most importantly, this study has sought to illuminate an aspect of Civil War history that is often left ignored-an aspect whose significance for the individuals who lived during America's darkest years simply cannot be understated.

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[2] Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Lyman, U.S. Staff, letter, April 17, 1866, Bound Volume 405, FSNMP.

[3] Cynthia Musselman, "The Economic Impact of the Civil War on the City of Fredericksburg, Spotsylvania County, and Stafford County," (unpublished study, 1987), FSNMP, 25.

[4] Arthur A. Ekirch, *Man and Nature in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 1.

[5] Gordon Rhea, *The Battle of the Wilderness, May 5-6, 1864* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 51.

[6] Kathryn Shively Meier, "Fighting in 'Dante's Inferno': Changing Perceptions of Civil War Combat in the Spotsylvania Wilderness from 1863 to 1864," in Peter Coates, Tim Cole, and C.J. Pearson, ed., *Militarized Landscapes: From Gettysburg to Salisbury Plain* (London: Continuum, 2010), 4.

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[8] E.B. Long, *The Civil War Day by Day: An Almanac* (Garden City and New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), 492.

[9] Rhea, *The Battle of the Wilderness,* 27 (first quotation), 51-52 (second quotation).

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[11] Jack Temple Kirby, "The American Civil War: An Environmental View," *National Humanities Center*, http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nattrans/ntuseland/essays/amcwar.htm.

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[16] *Ibid.,* 93-109.

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[18] Captain Nathaniel S. Shaler, "An Ex-Southerner in South Carolina," *The Atlantic Monthly* 26:7 (1870): 54.

[19] Private. William Paynton, 21st New Jersey Infantry, letter to wife, November 26, 1862, Bound Volume 480, FSNMP.

[20] Private James M. Higgins, 16thMississippi Infantry, diary, March 13, 1863, FSNMP.

[21] Private Franklin L. Riley, 16th Mississippi Infantry, diary, January 14-15, 1863, Bound Volume 424, FSNMP.

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[23] *Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, Conn.), April 15, 1863, FSNMP.

[24] Private John Dunbar, 37th Massachusetts Infantry, letter, February 13, 1863, Bound Volume 369, FSNMP.

[25] Private Thomas C. Bradbury, 17th Maine Infantry, February 16, 1863, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, [hereafter cited as UVA].

[26] Private William F. Morgan, 2nd Massachusetts Infantry, letter to wife, January 4, 1863, Bound Volume 352, FSNMP.

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[41] James Bumgardner, 52nd Virginia Infantry, article in an unnamed paper, Bound Volume 405, FSNMP.

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