

Federal Trenches

This landscape character area encompasses the southern, discontiguous parcel of the park where extant earthwork fortifications remain from the Battle of Pea Ridge. These are the only known features built as part of the military battle. This area includes the parcel within the park boundaries, and two parcels on either side that were identified by the GMP/EIS as potential acquisitions due to their significance to the battle. The Existing Condition Plan, located at the end of this section, illustrates the area of the Federal Trenches and its current condition (Figure 3-117).

The Federal Trenches encompass the area where, in the days just prior to the Battle of Pea Ridge, General Samuel E. Curtis fortified his position on the bluffs above Little Sugar Creek. The Union army hastily built earthen breastworks, cleared trees and underbrush, dug rifle-pits and set up artillery emplacements in anticipation of an advance from the Confederate army from the south. The Confederates considered these preparations to be formidable, resulting in Van Dorn and his generals, McCulloch and McIntosh, to re-orient their advance to avoid the bluffs and the frontal attack. They instead marched ten miles to the north along the Bentonville Detour in an effort to turn Curtis' position and to interrupt his communication line with his supplies from Springfield and Rolla, Missouri.

According to a lieutenant in the 59th Illinois regiment under Colonel White, "Our retreat to (Little) Sugar Creek occurred on the 5th of March 1862. . .we went into a camp a safe distance back from the brow of the hill north of the stream. The first order was to build earthworks on this hillside and get the artillery into position as this slope faced the south and thus commanded the direct approach of the rebels coming from that direction. It was a most tedious and difficult



Figure 3-102. The Federal Trenches is the southern, discontiguous parcel of the park where extant earthwork fortifications remain from the Battle of Pea Ridge (MB-Battle of Pea Ridge March 6, 7th & 8th 1862).



Figure 3-103. The view to the valley of Little Sugar Creek was key to the Union army's strategy. From this point, they could see the advance of the Confederates (MB: DSC_0220.jpg, 2013).



Figure 3-104. The lower area of the landscape character area is a broad open space (MB: DSC_0237.jpg, 2013).

work. Up through a heavy underbrush over the rough uneven surface the men pulled the heavy guns by means of long ropes.” The lieutenant described the urgency of the construction, “all night we worked and finished just at sunrise next morning, when we went to camp for rations and rest.” ³⁻⁸¹

General Curtis arrived at Little Sugar Creek on March 6, 1862, at two a.m. in the morning. He immediately ordered the Union troops to “fell trees and otherwise obstruct approaches to his positions.” According to historian George W. Herr who chronicled the battle in 1890, “The valley of (Little) Sugar Creek is a long, narrow, irregular ravine. . .flanked by high projecting hills. On those hills the Third and Fourth Divisions. . .cut down great numbers of trees with which they obstructed approaches to the left. In fact, before the close of the 6th all approaches were pretty thoroughly blocked.” ³⁻⁸²

Herr’s descriptions of the hillside and the earthworks noted, “on the headlands of (Little) Sugar Creek eight breastworks of considerable extent were erected and a battery near the road crossing was completely shielded by an extensive earthwork erected by Company C...” ³⁻⁸³

Upon learning the Confederates had turned his position by advancing north, Curtis began moving troops from the newly built earthworks. They left their protected, fortified position and marched north to reinforce troops at Elkhorn Tavern and Leetown Battlefield. The constructed earthworks were never used for the purpose for which they were built. However, they were instrumental in causing Van Dorn to alter his attack.

3-81 Bearss, Leetown, Elkhorn Tavern Grounds, Federal Earthworks, and Tanyard, 23-24.

3-82 Bearss, Leetown, Elkhorn Tavern Grounds, Federal Earthworks, and Tanyard, 1956 – from George W. Herr, *Episodes of the Civil War, Nine Campaigns in Nine States*, 64.

3-83 Bearss, Leetown, Elkhorn Tavern Grounds, Federal Earthworks, and Tanyard, 66.

Spatial Organization

Existing Condition

The spatial organization of this landscape character area is derived from its natural features.

The bluffs above Little Sugar Creek form an undulating edge along the north side of the valley that are contrasted by the level valley of Little Sugar Creek far below. The valley is approximately a quarter-mile wide and rises very slightly towards the south where the valley transitions to agricultural fields. The dense woodlands along the hillsides of the bluffs reinforce the separation between the hill and valley.

Analysis

The spatial organization remains similar to that which existed during the period of significance and reflects the historic appearance as witnessed by the Union army.

When the Federal Trenches were built in 1862, the spatial orientation of the bluffs overlooking the valley was key to the Union army’s strategy. From this position, the army built trenches to provide protection from the Confederates as well as a vantage point to witness their movements. Today, the separation of the bluffs and valley remains, and contributes to the historic character of the Federal Trenches.

Federal Trenches

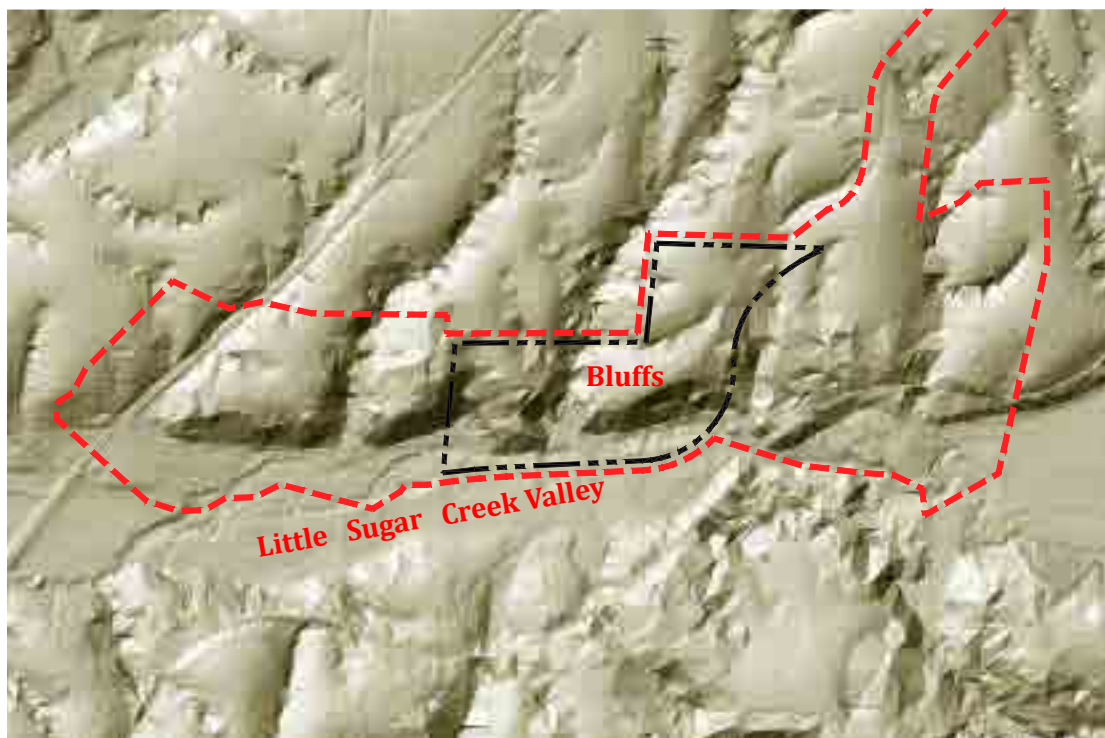
Contributing Spatial Organization

The aspects of spatial organization that contribute to the historic character of the Federal Trenches are:

- Relationship of bluffs above Little Sugar Creek to the valley below.



Figure 3-105. This 1960s aerial photograph is of the bluffs above Little Sugar Creek. Today's Old Wire Road is a relocation of the original Telegraph Road, which was historically located further east (and can be seen as a faint trace in the upper right of the photo). (NPS PERI: PICT0105.jpg, c.1960)



--- STUDY AREA BOUNDARY
--- NPS BOUNDARY

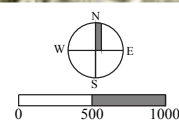


Figure 3-106. The topography and landform of the Federal Trenches remains very similar to that which existed at the time of the battle (HillFigure XX - Federal Trenches.pdf).

Topography and Landform

Existing Condition

The earthen breastworks built by the Union troops as a protected, fortified position are located on the top of the bluffs overlooking Little Sugar Creek. The bluffs are a series of landforms that rise eighty to one hundred-twenty feet above the valley floor; extend in an east/west direction, and are separated by narrow hollows and intermittent streams.

Below and to the south of the bluffs is a flat, narrow valley that includes Little Sugar Creek. On the south side of the creek, the topography rises more gently to form the south side of the valley. The park boundaries extend to the approximate center of Little Sugar Creek. Within the park, on the north side of Old Wire Road, is a broad level area that extends from the parking area towards the north. The open area is one of the hollows in the series of bluffs. The broad level area extends for approximately three hundred feet. At its mid-point, a path ascends the steep hillside to reach the trenches on top of the bluff.

Analysis

In 1862, the Union army chose the bluffs overlooking Little Sugar Creek for the topographic advantage they provided. The sight lines afforded by the high bluffs provided an overlook across the valley. By building trenches on top of the bluffs and by felling trees on the steep slopes, the Union army was able to create a fortified position that offered protection from anticipated rebel fire. The elevation, high above the surrounding valley to the south also provided a vantage point to witness the approach of the Confederate troops.

Today, the topography and landform of the Federal Trenches landscape character area remains very similar to that which existed at the time of the Battle of Pea Ridge.

The narrow valley immediately below the bluffs and the small hollow contribute to the historic character emphasizing for the visitor the topographic change and strategic importance of constructing trenches on top of the bluff.

Federal Trenches

Contributing Topography and Landform

The topography and landform features that contribute to the historic character of the Federal Trenches are:

- High bluffs overlooking Little Sugar Creek and Valley
- Broad, open level area
- Valley of Little Sugar Creek



Figure 3-107. The Federal Trenches parking area provides space for eight cars with no accommodation for RV/bus parking. It is accessed from Little Sugar Creek Road (MB DSC_0239.jpg).



Figure 3-108. An asphalt trail extends to the top of the bluff. It is located north of, and parallel to the trench (MB DSC_0209.jpg).

Circulation

Existing Condition

The existing circulation within the Federal Trenches landscape character area consists of vehicular routes to the area and a parking area, and park pedestrian routes. The roads are Benton County roads.

Old Wire Road (formerly Telegraph Road and Little Sugar Creek Road) is the vehicular route to the Federal Trenches landscape character area. Old Wire Road is outside of the park boundary and extends roughly north/south. It is a gravel/dirt road about twenty-feet in width. The road is in fair to good condition.

Little Sugar Creek Road is the southern vehicular route that extends east/west following Little Sugar Creek. It is a narrow, asphalt-paved two-lane road in good condition.

The parking area and pedestrian trail were built in the 1960s to provide visitor access to the trenches. The parking area includes eight spaces for cars with no accommodation for bus/ RV parking. It is located just off Old Wire Road, and is in good condition.

A pedestrian trail, approximately six-feet in width, extends from the parking area to the north where it ascends a steep hillside and hollow to the top of the bluff. It follows the north edge of the trench, and forms a loop around the top of the hill. Although the trail was originally asphalt surfaced, the paving is cracked and worn in places, and is completely disintegrated in others. The trail is in very poor condition.

Analysis

Circulation within the Federal Trenches differs from that which existed at the time of the battle in two ways: the alignment of Old Wire Road/Telegraph Road and the approach to the bluffs. The construction of the nearby railroad



Figure 3-109. The asphalt path extends from the parking area up to the top of the bluffs. The path is in poor condition (MB DSC_0207.jpg).

likely altered the alignment of Old Wire Road / Telegraph Road.

In 1862, Old Wire Road / Telegraph Road followed the valley of Little Sugar Creek, but extended to the north in an alignment further to the east than today's route. Through Pea Ridge NMP, the road extended from the Federal Trenches to the tanyard. It was used by the Union army as early as March 5th, 1862, when troops were entrenched above Little Sugar Creek and General Curtis was encamped at Pratt's Store, north of the Federal Trenches along the Telegraph Road. It is likely the road was used by the Union for communication and transportation between these two points.



Figure 3-110. The earthen breastwork and trench is the only known structure that remains within the park that was built for use in the battle. Their presence confirms the location of Curtis' stand along Little Sugar Creek and marks the turning point of the battle (MB DSC_222.jpg).



Figure 3-111. The topography of the trench includes the hastily built earthen breastworks of the Union army on the south-facing slope (MB DSC_0226.jpg).

After the battle, Telegraph Road was used by the local community and appears on 1900s maps of the area. At some undetermined date, the route was altered near the Federal Trenches. It is possible that this was altered with the construction of the St. Louis and San Francisco railroad in the 1880s, that cut across the Telegraph Road. Rather than build a trestle to cross it, the road was re-routed. The historic road trace remains, and is located less than a quarter-mile east of its present location.

The eastern section of the Telegraph Road and was not in existence during the period of significance. It is not a contributing feature. The road trace of the original Old Wire Road / Telegraph Road is a contributing feature. The southern section of Old Wire Road follows its original alignment. This segment is a contributing feature. The alignment of Little Sugar Creek Road is a contributing feature.

In building the earthen breastworks and clearing the hillsides for fortification, the Union army would have approached the trenches from the top of the bluffs (from the north) unlike visitors today who approach from the south and hike up the bluff. The trail that leads from the parking area to the top of the bluffs was built by the NPS in the 1960s. It provides access to the Federal Trenches, but is not a contributing feature as it was not present during the period of significance.

Federal Trenches Contributing Circulation

- Little Sugar Creek Road (alignment)
- Road traces of Telegraph Road

Non-Contributing Circulation

- Telegraph Road / Old Wire Road segment

Structures

Existing Condition

The only structures within the Federal Trenches landscape character area are the trenches associated with the earthen breastworks. These features were hastily built by the Union army in February and early March 1862, in the days just before the Battle of Pea Ridge.

One known linear trench occurs within the park boundaries. It is located on top of the bluff just northwest of the parking area. This structure is a shallow trench with earth ramparts that is several hundred feet long but just a few feet deep and wide. Some portions of the trench are fairly deep (up to three-feet deep). Other portions are very shallow including those that disappear into the hillside at the ends of the trench.

The shallow trench with earthen ramparts is not readily discernible to the untrained eye, and the full extent of the earthwork is difficult to see. Overgrown vegetation including undergrowth, trees and shrubbery make the trench even more difficult to see. The form of the trench appears to be in good condition. Some areas have filled with dirt and debris, further obscuring the structure.

Although the trench is the most legible military built feature, it is likely that the entire top of the bluff was manipulated by the Union army as they built their protective fortification.

Analysis

The earthen breastwork and trench is the only known structure within the park that was built for use in the battle. The presence of the trench confirms the location of Curtis' stand along Little Sugar Creek. The Union troops built other trenches on the bluffs east and west of this trench. It is also likely there are other earthworks, including artillery



Figure 3-112. The earthen trench in the 1940s (faint traces of Curtis' Sugar Creek Trenches-1940).



Figure 3-113. The earthen trench in the 1940s (Remains of Curtis' Sugar Creek line almost obliterated-1940).

emplacements, that were dug in late February and early March 1862.

The fortifications built on the bluffs above Little Sugar Creek were never used for their intended purpose. However, their formidable presence greatly influenced the battle in location and in outcome. General Samuel Curtis originally planned to force the Confederate Army to attack his entrenched army at their fortification perched above Little Sugar Creek. When General Van Dorn learned from his scouts of the strength of the fortification and its position, he determined that rather than attack the Union straight on, he would march his troops through the night around the Union army and attack them from the rear. Consequently, the Union troops had to abandon their trenches and the fortifications were never part of the battle.

Since the period of significance, the extant trench has eroded in some locations and has filled with debris and dirt in others, which has obscured its form. When the shallow trenches and earthen breastworks were built they were free of vegetation. Union troops modified hillside vegetation around the breastworks, and trenches were cleared of vegetation. Trees were felled to provide obstacles to attacking Confederate troops and to provide a clear line of fire for the artillery.

The breastwork and trench along the top of the bluffs built by the Union army are contributing features. As the only built features remaining from the Battle of Pea Ridge, these features are key components for understanding how and where the battle was eventually fought.

The full extent of the earthen structures built by the Union army for General Curtis' fortification is not known. Further research and field investigations could reveal more topographic manipulations that were part of



Figure 3-114. The earthen trench in the 1940s (Looking east along Federal earthworks from point A, Jan) (MB DSC_239.jpg).

the construction as well as more areas on the tops of the bluffs where earthen structures were built.

Federal Trenches

Contributing Structures

- Earthen breastwork and trench
- Other earthen breastworks and trench (unknown number/extents, might extend beyond NPS boundary)



Figure 3-115. The trench is relatively clear of woody plants due to periodic mowing. Some tree thinning has occurred near the trenches, and tree stumps have been left by the NPS to indicate to visitors that this area was historically cleared (MB: DSC_0222.)



Figure 3-116. The broad level area between the parking and hillside is mown grass and groundcovers (MB: DSC_0237.jpg).

Vegetation

Existing Condition

The vegetation of the Federal Trenches is primarily very dense trees and undergrowth on the hillsides and tops of the bluffs above Little Sugar Creek. Within the tree cover is deadfall and other downed trees.

The trench is relatively clear of woody plants. Some tree thinning has occurred near the trench, and trees that have the potential to damage the trench have been removed periodically. Tree stumps have been left by the park to indicate that this area was historically cleared. The broad level area between the parking area and hillside is mown grass and groundcovers. Mature trees in this area create a park-like appearance.

Analysis

During the winter of 1862, the Union army modified the vegetation of the bluffs north of Little Sugar Creek. Trees were felled and undergrowth removed for a clear line of sight to the valley below, and for use in building 'obstructive works' using the fallen trees to obstruct all approaches.³⁻⁸⁴

The fallen timber allowed the Union troops to see the approach of the Confederates to the south and their actions in the valley, and provided a clear field of fire for the artillery.

Trees likely remained on the hillsides behind (to the north) of the trenches, while undergrowth would have been removed in order to facilitate the army's operations. The trees on the southern hillsides of the bluffs were cut down in "great numbers. . . with which they obstructed approaches to the left."³⁻⁸⁵

3-84 Bearss, Leetown, Elkhorn Tavern Grounds, Federal Earthworks, and Tanyard, 1956 – from *Warfare Along the Mississippi*, The Letters of Lieutenant-Colonel George E. Currie, Edited by Norman E. Clarke, Sr., Mount Pleasant, 1961. 23-24.
3-85 Ibid.

The earthworks were never used for their intended purpose. Since the original construction, overgrown dense vegetation has obscured the view to the south. The vegetation covers evidence of breastworks or other topographic manipulations that were likely part of the 1862 construction.

The age of the extant trees indicate that the bluffs were probably logged for timber sometime in the early 20th century.

After the NPS acquired the property in the 1950s, the trench and surrounding area were cleared of woody vegetation and maintained as mown grass.

The integrity of the vegetation is diminished as the extant vegetation does not provide an accurate appearance of the fortification and its lines of sight during the period of significance. This can be remedied through vegetation management.

Federal Trenches

Contributing Vegetation

- Vegetation associated with trenches and earthen ramparts
- Hillside vegetation

