

# GEORGIA

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# BATTLEFIELDS

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Published by Georgia Battlefields Association, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to preservation of Georgia's Civil War history and sites. Contact newsletter editor by e-mail: [info@georgiabattlefields.org](mailto:info@georgiabattlefields.org)

## Return to Chickamauga: Georgia Battlefields Association annual tour 27-30 March 2025

Chickamauga is one of two Georgia battles that the 1993 Civil War Sites Advisory Commission report characterized as decisive, its highest rating of significance. Our perception at the end of our 2013 tour focusing on the Chickamauga Campaign was we had covered important though less familiar events during the lead-up to the battle but left perhaps too little time to cover the combat of 19-20 September. Consequently, our 2025 tour will be four days instead of three. Our guide will again be National Park Service historian Jim Ogden. More details of the itinerary are in the [October Georgia Battlefields Association newsletter](#).

**Price:** As with our 2024 tour, this will be a three-and-a-half-day tour: All day Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, plus Sunday morning. On Wednesday evening (26 March), GBA representatives will be in the hotel lobby to hand out materials. Dinner on your own that evening. The **\$580** price includes bus transportation, handouts, three lunches and three dinners (Thursday through Saturday). If you can't join us for whole tour, send an e-mail (be sure to include your phone number) to [info@georgiabattlefields.org](mailto:info@georgiabattlefields.org), and we will correspond with you about a reduced price.

**Registration:** Register online using [this link](#). Alternatively, you can mail a check to Georgia Battlefields Association at 315 S. 5<sup>TH</sup> ST, Griffin GA 30224-4343.

**Hotel:** TownePlace Suites, 6801 Ringgold Rd, East Ridge TN 37412, 423 933 2700. GBA rate for a king room is \$125 (\$147 if you include the unavoidable tax) per night. Queen double is \$135 (\$160) per night. Price includes breakfast. To book online, use [this link](#). Note that online booking will be unavailable after 25 February 2025 (one month before the tour begins).

## Battlefield road trip to Washita and Little Bighorn: Comparing interpretation at two National Battlefield Parks

The first priority of battlefield preservation is to save the site itself. The second priority is to interpret the site by installing and maintaining interpretive markers and visitor services.

One of the prime motivations for preserving and interpreting battlefields is to use them as teaching tools. Georgia Battlefields Association, the American Battlefield Trust, and other preservation organizations believe that you will better understand what happened at a site if you can see the ground, ideally if it looks as much as possible as it did when history was made there. Realization of this ideal is enhanced when interpretation, often times in the form of historical markers, is present to guide a visitor when no knowledgeable human guide is available.

Many of you have been to Gettysburg, which has not only interpretive markers but also monuments (some would say too many) that often indicate what person or unit was where and when. Like Gettysburg, Chickamauga and Kennesaw Mountain battlefields in Georgia are protected by the National Park Service (NPS). Also in Georgia, Fort Pulaski is a national monument that was the object of a bombardment, and it has interpretive markers and visitor services, as does Andersonville, the Civil War's best known POW site.

With the advent of new technologies, NPS and other preservation groups are shifting to different media for interpretation. Markers and monuments, even those made of cast aluminum or stone, eventually succumb to sun, rain, wind, vandalism, and even bird droppings, which are acidic.

A recent trip to two NPS battlefields—[Washita Battlefield National Historic Site](#) and [Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument](#)—provided an opportunity to compare interpretation methods. The two battlefields relate to what former NPS Chief Historian Robert Utley called America's longest war, the fight against the Plains Indians, which he described as lasting from 1845 to 1890. While these are not Civil War sites, they both involved U.S. Army officers (particularly Custer) who first came to prominence during the Civil War.

The Washita battle occurred 27 November 1868, when the U.S. Army began implementing a policy of forcing tribes to live on reservations by attacking camps in winter and destroying tipis and foodstuffs, killing ponies, and taking women and children as hostages. Leading the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, Lt.Col. Custer separated his command into four units to attack from multiple directions,

and he succeeded in his mission. The site is 30 miles northwest of Elk City, Oklahoma, and has a spacious visitors' center that tells the story of the battle with maps, texts, and artifacts. At the battlefield itself, there is a small pavilion with some markers and plaques, as well as access to walking trails, along which are numbered posts with both a phone number, a web address, and QR codes that activate audio narratives.

The Little Bighorn battle occurred 25 June 1876 and is the best known of all the engagements between the U.S. Army and the Plains Indians. Scouting reports indicated a large concentration of Indians was somewhere in southeastern Montana Territory, and the U.S. Army converged on the area with columns from the west (under John Gibbon), south (under George Crook), and east (under Alfred Terry). Custer's 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry separated from Terry's column on 22 June 1876 to more precisely locate the Indian camp. As at Washita, Custer divided his regiment, only to discover that the Indian camp was far larger than reported and may have contained 2,000 or more (mostly Sioux) warriors. The detachment under Major Reno attacked the camp from the east but was repulsed and retreated to a hill, where he was joined by Captain Benteen's detachment. (Both Reno and Benteen had been brevet brigadier generals during the Civil War.) Custer attempted to attack from the north, but he and all 210 of those with him were killed. Adding the 53 dead from Reno's and Benteen's detachments, the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry lost 45% of its troops during the campaign.

Among other things, the Little Bighorn fight illustrates the fine line that sometimes separates being bold (if you succeed) from being reckless (if you fail). The battlefield helps you understand that Reno and Benteen could not have seen what was happening to Custer and his troops, nor could they have dispatched a rider to find out. When Gibbon's column arrived the next day, the Indians were gone, and the scope of the disaster became apparent. The dead men were quickly buried, and memorialization began within a year. Several changes to the site occurred into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Bodies buried hastily in 1876 were disinterred and put in a mass grave under a monument, and the horses' remains were also put in a common grave. Though markers were emplaced to indicate where individuals fell, they are symbolic because many of the bodies were unidentifiable. Full color interpretive markers were emplaced, as were other monuments, including one to the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho.

As you might expect, the Little Bighorn battlefield draws many more visitors than does Washita, and the Little Bighorn visitors' center is being refurbished due to its frequent use. While Little Bighorn will always have monuments, I suspect the trend will be to replace interpretive markers with web site addresses, QR codes, or apps that will provide supplemental information.

Next month: Interpreting the [Big Hole National Battlefield](#) from the 1877 Nez Perce War.



Little Bighorn bodies were reinterred in 1877 at this site. Memorial emplaced in 1881.



Little Bighorn mass grave for horses with headstone (left) and marker.



Washita visitors' center built in 2008.



Washita trail stop with phone app number, web site URL, and QR code.

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