

## How Ecology and Land Use History Shaped the Battle of Chancellorsville

Robert H. Floyd

Colorado State University  
Center for Environmental Management of Military  
Lands (CEMML) at Fort A.P. Hill, Virginia  
Building 0308  
13832 Anderson Camp  
Fort A.P. Hill, Virginia 22427

Paul F. Threadgill

Maryville College  
Division of Natural Sciences  
502 E. Lamar Alexander Parkway  
Maryville, Tennessee 37804

### ABSTRACT

The Battle of Chancellorsville (1-3 May 1863) in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, has often been regarded as one of the pivotal battles of the Civil War. Extensive deforestation to support the local iron industry beginning in the early 1700s resulted in a very dense coppice forest known as “The Wilderness,” which from historical accounts was likely characterized by successional oaks (*Quercus* spp.), pine (*Pinus* spp.), and evergreen “tanglefoot” (probably greenbrier, *Smilax* spp.). The Wilderness played a critical role in the outcome of the battle by influencing Union troop positions, severely limiting visibility, and providing cover for Confederate maneuvers. Uncontrolled wildfires in the Wilderness also claimed the lives of many of the wounded on the battlefield. Even the mortal wounding of Stonewall Jackson by his own men may be linked, in part, to the land use history and ecology of the battlefield because of the confusion caused by the wildfires and dense vegetation. This manuscript aims to explore first how the Wilderness came to be formed prior to battle, and secondly how the forest directly influenced the outcome of Chancellorsville using accounts provided by the men who fought in the battle.

*Keywords:* Chancellorsville, Civil War, vegetation, land use history, wildfire, coppice forest.