

# Historical gem sits in northeast Clark County

Site offers more than history lessons

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It's August 1861 and the country has been torn apart after most of the southern state seceded from the United States to form the Confederate States of America. It was not yet known which direction Missouri was going to go and there were plenty of opinions and loyalties to both sides.

In the city of Athens, Missouri, northwest of Keokuk and across the Des Moines River from Croton, Iowa, it literally was neighbor against neighbor and father against son as a battle broke out there on Aug. 5, 1861.

To get there, head north on Highway 81 out of Kahoka, or south on Highway 81 out of Farmington, and turn onto County Road CC. (Don't be discouraged when coming out of Kahoka and the road sign says 12 miles, when it starts feeling like the longest 12 miles in the world.) Follow CC to the park. There will be directional signs to point the way to the historical sites, campground and office.

Today, the area has a few residents in the area, but by and large, the town that once had

500 people and more than 50 businesses is no more. Instead, the State of Missouri has the Battle of Athens State Historic Site on 400 acres of land where the city once stood.

Melissa Pitford is the superintendent of the site and has been at that post for about 5 years. She is well versed in the Civil War battle portion of the history of the park, but said there are also a lot of other things going on there.

The site has a campground with basic and electric campsites. There's also a lake where anglers can fish and there are several trails in the park, one which gives access to the Des Moines River and features spring waterfalls and carpets of wildflowers.

Pitford said the campsite does not take reservations. However, there is a large shelterhouse at the park that can be reserved. The shelter house, which was built to mimic what the old general store looked like in the 1860s, features an enclosed kitchen for those that need it.

It would be a nice place for a family reunion or other types of gathering.

### CIVIL WAR HISTORY

There are several buildings that were standing during the Aug. 5, 1861, battle that are still on site today. Anyone already



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This house was struck by a cannonball during the Battle of Athens in Clark County on Aug. 5, 1861. The early Civil War battle pitted neighbor against neighbor and father against sons as the fate of Missouri hung in the balance.

familiar with the Athens site, will know about the Thome-Benning cannonball house.

A cannonball shot during the battle struck the house, going through the front of the building, damaging a bookcase and exiting out of the back of the home, eventually landing in the Des Moines River.

The Bennings, who lived in the home at the time of the battle, sought to keep bloodshed from happening in the town and asked the Union forces occupying the town to leave. Pitford said Commander of the forces, David Moore, told them if they want to avoid bloodshed, stay out of the way of their muskets.

The house couldn't really stay out of the way of the pro-confederate cannonball though. No one was hurt when it smashed



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Here is an up close photo of where the cannonball entered the home.

through the home. The Thome-Benning house is furnished with period pieces. There is a replica of the bookshelf that was damaged by the cannonball next to the cannonball hole in the wall. Pitford said the original was lost somewhere along the way, but they were fortunate enough to have a photograph of the cannonball hole from the 1800s that showed the shelf, so a

replica was made.

The rest of the furniture is from the time period and from the house or from the area. The two bedrooms are made up for the period as well, complete with the rope beds of the time.

According to greatriverroad.com, the battle started to take shape after Moore's troops with the help of an Illinois militia and Iowa Home Guard and carried out

some operations in northeast Missouri, settling in and occupying Athens on July 24.

Colonel Martin Green worked his way with his forces up from Edina, Missouri, in Knox County and his 2,000 troops basically surrounded Athens and Moore's 500 men.

Despite being outnumbered 5 to 1, Green's troops were not trained as well and did not have the firepower Moore had. Moore's troops had muskets compared to Green's men with mostly shotguns and squirrel rifles.

The battle lasted about two hours and saw at least 50 injured or killed. It was demoralizing for the pro-confederate troops who retreated.

The bitter feelings between neighbors lasted and as railroad commerce replaced river commerce, the town started to dry up and was mostly gone by 1900.

In 1975, the land

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The Thome-Benning or "cannonball house" is fully furnished with period furniture. Here is one of the bedrooms as it would have looked in the mid-1800s. Tours of the home are available Wednesday to Sunday from April to October.

## ATHENS: History in Mo.

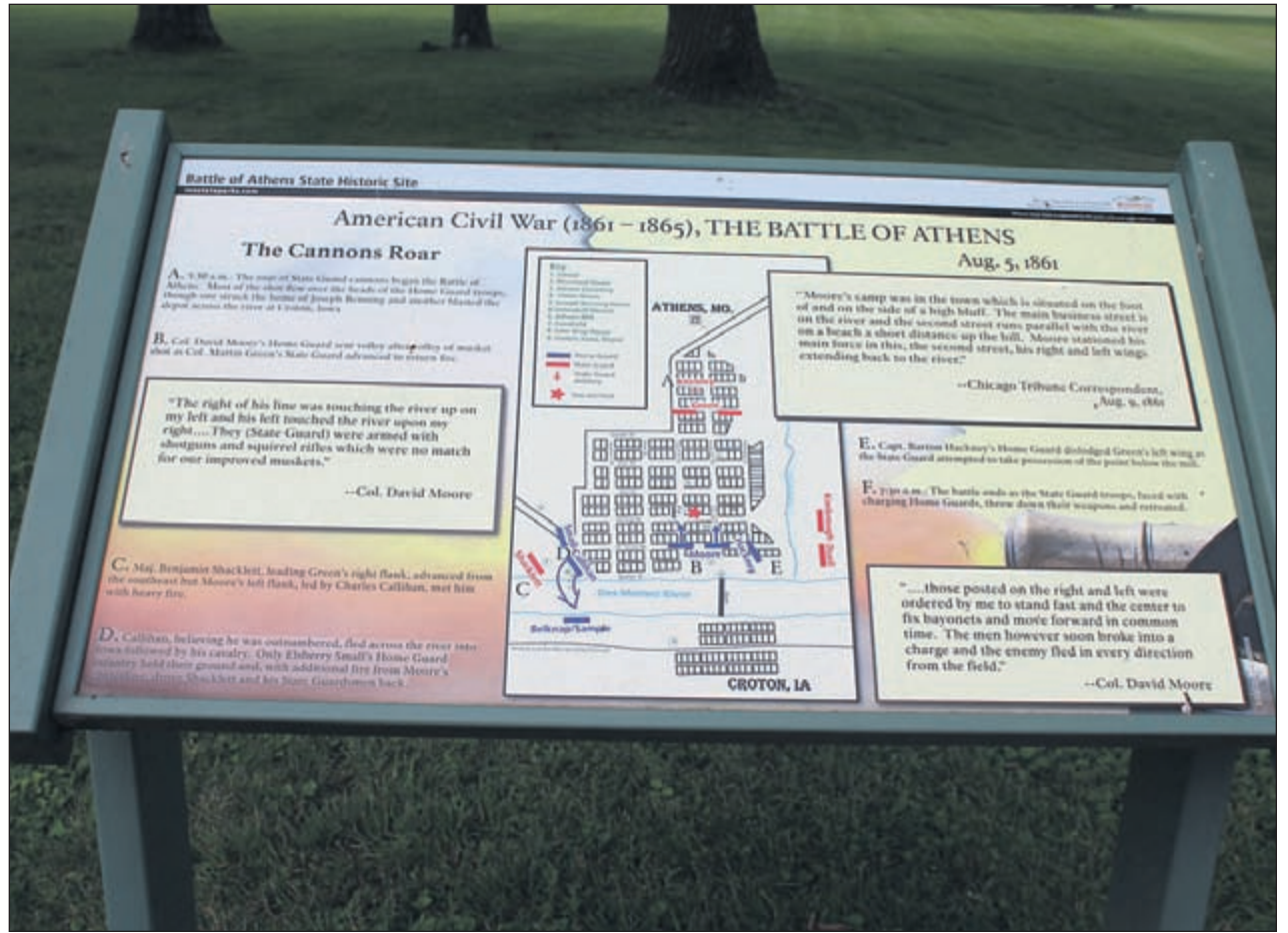
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was donated to the state for the park. Then Civil War reenactments were held there starting in 1981. Today, Pitford said, the reenactment is held every three years on the weekend closest to Aug. 4. The most recent reenactment was in 2022, so in 2025, the next reenactment will be held.

The park mainly operates April through October, though is someone wants to see the historic site in the off season, that can be arranged. Tours of the Thome-Benning House are available 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday, April to October. Pitford said they have someone there to give tours on the weekends, which is the busy time, during the weekdays, people

may want to contact the park office at 660-877-3871, to let them know they would like to see the home.

For those who would like to walk around the historic area or the park in general, it is open all year during daytime hours.



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There are several of these informational signs set around the Battle of Athens historic site in Clark County. For those who would like to do a self-guided tour, they are helpful to tell the story of the battle.

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