

## Shepherdstown Battlefield Special Resource Study

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### SLIDE #1 – TERRAIN FEATURES

In early September 1862 General Robert E. Lee entered Maryland with his Confederate Army of Northern Virginia in what has become known as the Maryland Campaign. He hoped to move the war out of Virginia and gather supplies, bolster his army with new recruits, capitalize on the momentum of recent battlefield victories to further damage Northern morale, and possibly convince European nations to officially recognize the Confederacy.

He would remain in Maryland for two weeks and fight three engagements: South Mountain September 14, Harpers Ferry Sep. 14-15, and Antietam or Sharpsburg on Sep. 17. On the evening of September 18 Lee made the decision to abandon his position at Sharpsburg and cross the Potomac River below Shepherdstown into Virginia (what is now West Virginia).

However this was not a retreat, but a redeployment of troops. His Maryland Campaign was still ongoing. He explained to President Jefferson Davis that his position at Sharpsburg was “a bad one to hold with the river in [our] rear...When I withdrew from Sharpsburg into Virginia, it was my intention to recross the Potomac at Williamsport, and move upon Hagerstown.” After crossing at Shepherdstown Ford, Lee stated that “the army was immediately put in motion toward Williamsport.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> War of the Rebellion, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1891), ser. 1, vol. 19, 142 (hereinafter cited as OR).

## **SLIDE #2 – ARTILLERY, SEPTEMBER 19**

On the morning of September 19 the Union Army awoke to find the Confederate lines around Sharpsburg abandoned. Cavalry patrols were sent forward toward the river and found the last of Lee's army crossing at Shepherdstown Ford. Union artillery unlimbered and opened fire across the Potomac. Confederate cannon replied. This artillery exchange marked the beginning of the two-day Battle of Shepherdstown.

Defending the river crossing for the Confederate army was a rear guard commanded by General William Nelson Pendleton. This force consisted of two brigades of infantry and 44 guns of the artillery reserve. 33 of these guns were positioned along the heights overlooking Shepherdstown Ford.

Throughout the morning and afternoon of September 19 Union troops of the Fifth Corps under General Fitz John Porter took up a position along the Maryland bluffs and in the dry C&O Canal bed. From here they kept up a concentrated artillery and infantry barrage against the Confederate position on the opposite bluffs.

In late afternoon General Porter ordered an assault. Under enemy fire two Union regiments, the 1<sup>st</sup> U.S.S. & the 4<sup>th</sup> Michigan, charged through the river at the ford. Upon reaching the Virginia bank they scaled the bluffs on either side of Trough Rd, scattering Confederate defenders and capturing 4 cannon. After dark these two federal units then returned to the Maryland side of the river and the fighting for the day was over.

This day's actions would have tremendous consequences, ultimately altering Lee's plan for the campaign. That evening the Confederate commander received word that the Union army had crossed the Potomac River and scattered his rear guard. He also received the erroneous report that all 44 guns of his artillery reserve had been captured. The Confederate army's movement toward Williamsport was halted and three divisions were sent back to Shepherdstown.

After the success of the Union Army's Fifth Corps on the evening of September 19 Union General George McClellan ordered a reconnaissance in force to ascertain

the whereabouts of the Confederate army. He ordered his cavalry commander Alfred Pleasonton to cross the river on the morning of September 20 and “push your command forward after the enemy as rapidly as possible, using your artillery upon them wherever an opportunity presents, doing them all the damage in your power without incurring too much risk to your command.” He added, “If great results can be obtained, do not spare your men or horses.” This cavalry was to be followed by two brigades of infantry.<sup>2</sup>

### **SLIDE 3 - BATTLE MAP #1**

By 7 a.m. of September 20th the Union cavalry had yet to arrive at the river and would not do so until mid-morning. Therefore it was Major Charles Lovell’s brigade of Regulars who crossed first. Without the aid of cavalry they were marching into the country blind.

Lovell’s men waded the river at the ford and proceeded up Trough Road. Approximately a mile into the march, as they approached a belt of woods and a cornfield, Lovell’s men spotted movement ahead. This was A.P. Hill’s Division under General Stonewall Jackson who had just arrived on the field. Lovell halted his men and deployed them into line. He then sent back word to his superior officer General George Sykes who was then at the river bank, that the enemy had been contacted. The word came back that Lovell was to suspend the march and return to the river. As of yet not a shot had been fired.

Meanwhile, General Sykes had been supervising the crossing of a second Union brigade under Col. James Barnes. Barnes’ assignment was to march to Shepherdstown and report what he found. However, the news that the enemy had been contacted changed everything. Sykes ordered Barnes to abort his mission to Shepherdstown and instead deploy his men into battle line at the crest of the bluffs above so as to cover the withdrawal of Lovell’s men.

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<sup>2</sup> OR, Series 1, Vol 51, Pt 1, 853.

## **SLIDE 4 – BATTLE MAP #2**

On the plateau above, Lovell's men were marching back to the river. Behind them the first three brigades of A.P. Hill's division stepped out of the woods and cornfield and began to advance. It was at this point the fighting broke out in earnest. Lovell's men opened fire against the advancing Confederate line which then returned fire. Suddenly the Federal artillery from the Maryland bluffs erupted turning the ground on both sides of Trough Road into a killing field. James Perrin, 1<sup>st</sup> SC Rifles, called it "the most trying fire of shell and shot I have ever experienced."<sup>3</sup> Col. Samuel McGowan commanding Gregg's Brigade described, "The batteries of the enemy on the Maryland side poured upon [my men] a terrible fire of grape, round shot, and shell. Their practice was remarkably fine, bursting shells in the ranks at every discharge. The Fourteenth South Carolina Volunteers, from the nature of the ground over which it passed, was particularly exposed. When the artillery made gaps in their ranks, they closed up like veterans, and marched on without confusion or in the least losing distance." Over that deadly space the 14<sup>th</sup> SC lost 55 men. Among them was Captain James H. Dunlap, who was "blown to pieces by a shell."<sup>4</sup>

## **SLIDE 5 – BATTLE MAP #3**

The Confederate advance was greatly affected by the terrain of the battlefield. Trough Road created a break in the advancing line resulting in Pender's brigade becoming isolated to the west of the road from Gregg's and Thomas's to the east. Spotting this danger General A.P. Hill ordered his second line of three brigades to advance to support Pender. These three brigades then stepped off, advancing over the fields of the Osborn Farm. General James Archer, commanding this second line, stated simply "The advance of my command was made under the

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<sup>3</sup> OR, Series. 1, Vol 19, Part 1, 995.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 987 - 990

heaviest artillery fire I have ever witnessed.”<sup>5</sup> These three brigades would lose 136 men in that advance, 17 killed outright and 119 wounded, many mortally.

On the fields above the cement mill Pender was engaged in a firefight with Barnes’ Union brigade who had deployed up two ravines to take position. Pender’s men took fire from the 18<sup>th</sup> MA on the crest of a hill to their right. Then the appearance of the 13<sup>th</sup> & 25<sup>th</sup> NY gave Pender the impression that the Federals were attempting to flank him and he immediately sent word for support on his left.

On the east side of Trough Rd. Lovell’s men took up a position along the top of the bluffs. Here they received reinforcements in the form of a brigade under Gouverneur Warren who took position to Lovell’s left and opened fire on the approaching line. A fourth Union brigade was also ordered across the river as the fighting escalated.

At this point there were approximately 8000 men on what is now the West Virginia side of the river within what is considered the core area of the battlefield, 5000 of whom were engaged in direct combat, and more troops were being ordered into the fray.

#### **SLIDE 6 – BATTLE MAP #4**

Watching from the opposite bluffs Union General Fitz Porter now issued an order for all units to disengage and return to the Maryland side of the river. The brigades of Lovell and Warren responded, crossing under fire at the ford along with brigade of Thomas Stockton whose men were halfway across when word came to withdraw.

#### **SLIDE 7 – BATTLE MAP #5**

To the west side of Trough Rd Col Barnes next received the order and his men complied, many of them using the dam of the cement mill as an avenue of escape. By a miscommunication one Union regiment failed to withdraw with the rest of the brigade. This unit was the 118<sup>th</sup> PA.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1002

## SLIDE 8 – BATTLE MAP #6

This 118<sup>th</sup> PA had been in the army less than three weeks. Once under fire many realized their guns were defective and would not shoot. Left alone atop the bluffs they were crushed by a concentrated attack of four Confederate brigades, which scattered the line and sent the men into a panicked and frenzied retreat. Some members fell to their deaths from the jagged rock cliffs bordering the river. Others took shelter in the lime kilns where a misplaced federal artillery shelled killed a number of them. The dam that spanned the river provided a tenuous escape route but this too was raked by enemy fire and a number were shot down here as well.

In this, their first battle, the 118<sup>th</sup> PA suffered a staggering 36% casualty rate including 77 men were killed or mortally wounded.

On the fields above, Confederates were pinned down by federal artillery fire throughout the day as they did their best to care for the wounded and the dying. That night the firing ceased and the Rebel infantry marched off the field. The Battle of Shepherdstown was over. In all almost seven hundred more names were added to the casualty list of the Maryland Campaign.

The Battle convinced Union General George McClellan that an aggressive pursuit of Lee's army into Virginia was not an immediate option. In his official report he explained that the Battle of Shepherdstown "showed that the enemy was still in force on the Virginia bank of the Potomac, prepared to resist our further advance."<sup>6</sup> By September 27 McClellan had yet to make any substantial forward movement and that day informed his chief Henry Halleck, "My present purpose is to hold the army about as it is now, rendering Harper's Ferry secure and watching the river closely, intending to attack the enemy should he attempt to cross to this side."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> OR 19, Pt.1, 68.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 505.

As for the Confederate army, on September 20 Robert E. Lee wrote President Davis, "As stated to you yesterday, the march of the army toward Williamsport was arrested. General Jackson's corps was turned back toward Shepherdstown, to rectify occurrences in that quarter."<sup>8</sup> The aggressive action by Union troops at Shepherdstown had broken the momentum of Lee's march and forced a retrograde movement that occupied an entire day. Lee now decided to abort his plans to reenter Maryland and move on Hagerstown. The Maryland Campaign was over. With Lee's army driven from Northern soil, Abraham Lincoln used this opportunity to claim a victory. On September 22, 1862, he issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, permanently altering the course of our nation's history.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.