



THE 1862 BATTLE OF SHEPHERDSTOWN

The 1862 Battle of Shepherdstown may have significantly changed the course of the American Civil War as the last battle of the Maryland Campaign; the campaign that is generally acknowledged as the turning point of the Civil War. The Maryland Campaign of the Army of Northern Virginia involved three battles: South Mountain, Antietam, and Shepherdstown. The Campaign was undertaken in early September of 1862 in hopes of both: winning over the citizens of Maryland to the Confederate cause; and, winning a military engagement in the north in order to convince the governments of England and France to recognize the legitimacy of the Confederacy.

Opposing General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was General George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac.

After the bloodiest day in American military history on Sept. 17 at the Battle of Antietam, the armies rested. On the evening of Sept. 18, the Army of Northern Virginia retreated across the Potomac River, using Boteler's Ford, about 1 mile east of Shepherdstown, which was then still part of Virginia. To cover the retreat, General Lee left Major General Pendleton in command of 35 pieces of artillery and infantry troops who were placed on the south shore of the river. The artillery pieces were placed on the bluffs overlooking both the ford and a dam that was located about 1000 yards west of the ford. The bluffs and the guns straddled the Charlestown Road (then spelled Charlestown, not Charles Town and now named Trough Road) which ran south from the river. Five of the guns were removed from the bluff since their range was not enough to reach the Union artillery pieces placed on the Maryland side of the Potomac. The retreat was accomplished by mid-afternoon on Sept. 19 and General Lee sent the cavalry under JEB Stuart to another ford of the Potomac near Williamsport, Maryland. In two dispatches that Lee sent to Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Lee indicated his intentions to continue the Maryland Campaign by re-entering Maryland at Williamsport.

Major General Pendleton, while a graduate of West Point, was, in real life, an Episcopal minister.

He was known for his superb organizational skills and had been placed in charge of the Army of Northern Virginia's artillery units. In the ordinary use of the artillery, Pendleton's major task was attaching artillery units to various infantry brigades for the deployment of the artillery by the commanders of the infantry brigades.

Pendleton had never commanded troops in battle before Sept. 19.

By about 2:30PM on the afternoon of Sept. 19, the Union Army of the Potomac placed 70 artillery

pieces on the north side of the river and an artillery battle commenced. Union sharpshooters were placed in the now-dry C&O Canal and fired on the Confederates on the south shore. The Confederate forces were overwhelmed by the firepower of the Union barrage. The Union infantry began crossing the dam at about 5:30PM and the Confederate forces began to retreat. Pendleton saw his infantry fleeing their positions from along the river and saw his artillery being decimated by the Union barrage. He panicked and fled the scene looking for help. While he was looking for aid, his troops showed much better military behaviour and removed all but four of the artillery pieces from the bluffs and successfully retreated from the river, unbeknownst to Pendleton. Pendleton finally located Lee about midnight and reported that all had been lost at the river and the Army of the Potomac had taken possession of the south shore of the Potomac. Meanwhile, the units of the Army of the Potomac had returned to the Maryland side of the river.

As a consequence of Pendleton's report, Lee decided not to re-enter Maryland and ordered the Army of Northern Virginia to retreat further up the Shenandoah Valley to Winchester. He also ordered "Stonewall" Jackson to send A.P.Hill's Light Division, at dawn, back to Boteler's Ford and stem the tide of the Union advance. Ironically, there were no troops on the Virginia bluffs overlooking the Potomac from about 7:30PM to 6:00AM on Sept.19-20.

On October 12, 1892, one soldier in the United States Army was awarded the Medal of Honor for heroism in the Battle of Shepherdstown on September 19th, 1862. The citation reads:"The President of the United States of America, in the name of Congress, takes pleasure in presenting the Medal of Honor to Private Cassius Peck, United States Army, for extraordinary heroism on 19 September 1862, while serving with Company F, 1st U.S. Sharpshooters, in action at Blackburn's Ford, Virginia. Private Peck took command of such soldiers as he could get and attacked and captured a Confederate battery of four guns. Also, while on a reconnaissance, he overtook and captured a Confederate soldier.

General Orders: Date of Issue: October 12, 1892

Action Date: September 19, 1862

Service: Army

Rank: Private

Company: Company F

Division: 1st U.S. Sharpshooters

On the morning of Sept. 20, Union soldiers retrieved the four Confederate artillery pieces that had been left the previous night while other units moved 1.5 miles south of the river in search of the Confederates. At the same time, the Army of the Potomac occupied the Virginia bluffs straddling the Charlestown Road. After Jackson reconnoitered the area south of the river, Hill deployed his troops. The opposing armies met at about 10:00AM, at about what is now and was then, Engle Molders Road and an infantry battle ensued. The Union Commander saw that his

troops were outnumbered by about 2 to 1 and ordered an immediate retreat. The battle and retreat lasted about four hours and involved approximately 8,000 - 9,000 infantrymen.

Unfortunately, one of the Union commanders did not believe that the order to retreat came through the proper channels and his regiment, the 118th Pennsylvania Volunteers (called the "Corn Exchange" regiment), remained on the bluff. This unit had never been in combat before and had been issued new Enfield rifles. About half the rifles did not work. As a consequence the 118th was decimated, losing about 40% of its 700 men before returning to the Maryland shore. The total number of casualties from both sides was about 677. After the battle ended at about 2:30PM, the Army of the Potomac remained in Maryland and did not pursue the Confederates and the Army of Northern Virginia retreated up the Valley.

The resulting irony of the Battle of Shepherdstown is that General Robert E. Lee changed his plans because he believed that his retreat across the Potomac was being pursued aggressively. And yet, President Lincoln removed General George B. McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac because he did not pursue the Confederates aggressively.

Witness to the Battle of Shepherdstown



"I shall never forget the scene as I worked my way across the dreadful causeway. The bullets struck all around me, men were shot in various places of the body, some falling, others again staggering and struggling to make the other side, and all hurrying wildly on with the consciousness of the desperate chances they were taking. When nearly midway across, one poor fellow just ahead was shot, and in falling rolled over and over. As I came up to where he was lying, he clutched the tail of my overcoat, and in piteous accents called out, "Help me Captain, for God's sake don't leave me here." Without stopping, I unfastened the overcoat from around my neck and left it in his death grip, saying I couldn't help him then, but would send after him as soon as I got across. I pushed on, but the poor fellow's soul had reached the presence of the Great Commander before I got to the other side."

**-Capt. Francis Adams Donaldson
118th Pennsylvania Volunteers, "Corn Exchange" Regiment
September 20, 1862**