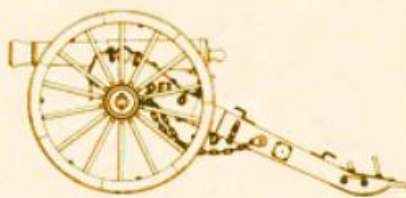


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RICH MOUNTAIN BATTLEFIELD

Northwestern Virginia In 1861: The First Campaign

Upon the outbreak of Civil War in 1861, the Staunton-Parkersburg Pike was a vital link between the heart of Virginia and its western counties, as well as a gateway to the B&O Railroad.



Richmond was anxious to hold onto all of its territory, and sent Col. George Porterfield to hold northwestern Virginia for the south. The Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike, and its connecting pikes to the north and south, gave the South access into the mountain territory to strike at the railroad.

As Virginia moved towards secession from the Union, many in the far western counties were determined to stay in the Union. These counties had long felt neglected by the Richmond government and some disaffected western Virginians seized this opportunity to form a new government independent of Richmond. They were encouraged by the Federal government who needed to maintain control of the vital B&O Railroad.

The Philippi Races

Confederate Col. George A. Porterfield was moved into Grafton, but found little support there for the southern cause. Believing that a movement of Union troops was eminent, he ordered the destruction of some of the railroad bridges. The he removed his collection of green volunteer regiments to the more sympathetic town of Philippi.

Major General George B. McClellan, commanding the Federal Department of the Ohio, was charged with securing the loyal counties of western Virginia and protecting the B&O Railroad. He sent troops across the Ohio River at Parkersburg in answer to the Confederate attacks on railroad bridges. On the morning of June 3, these Federal troops surprised the Confederates in Philippi. Brigadier General Thomas A. Morris had planned a two-pronged attack on the town. Colonel Ebenezer Dumont of the 7th Indiana Volunteers, with about 1,500 troops and two fieldpieces, would attack on the direct route from the northwest. When he reached the town he established his cannons on the hill overlooking the covered bridge, and opened the attack from that point. Col. Benjamin F. Kelley of the 1st (West) Virginia volunteers was to move south from the railroad down to the Beverly-Fairmont Turnpike southeast of Philippi, then surprise the Confederates in their rear with his 1,900 men. The plan was frustrated by driving rain and unfamiliar terrain, and Col. Kelley's forces ended up on the road. They had barely reached the outskirts of the village when they heard the sounds of Dumont's attack and rushed to join in, but they were approaching on the north side of the town, leaving the turnpike clear to the southeast. Surprised and outnumbered, the Confederates fled down the turnpike to Huttonsville, in an encounter often known as "the Philippi races." Although the Confederate flight was seen as a debacle, and Porterfield lost his command, they did retain most of their troops, and the Federal attempt to capture the entire force in one swoop failed.

Rich Mountain

(Read more about: The Battle of Rich Mountain)

Confederate command in the region was then given to Gen. Robert S. Garnett, who quickly fortified two key turnpike passes over the mountains. One was at Laurel Hill, outside of Belington on the Beverly - Fairmont Pike. The other position, at the western base of Rich Mountain on the Staunton and Parkersburg Pike, was named Camp Garnett in his honor. Earthworks were built here overlooking the vital turnpike, and by early July the camp held 1,300 Confederate troops and 4 cannons commanded by Col. John Pegram.

General McClellan, meanwhile, consolidated his hold over the far western part of Virginia and the railroad. By July 4 he was with the largest portion of his army at Buckhannon, on the S and P Pike. On July 6 & 7, elements of his force, advancing up the pike, encountered Confederate skirmishers at Middle Fork bridge.

McClellan himself brought the larger portion of his force, over 5000 men, to Roaring Creek Flats, just two miles west of Camp Garnett. General McClellan, who characteristically overestimated the numbers of the troops facing him, felt it would be disastrous to attack the well-entrenched position head on. Instead he sent General William S. Rosecrans with his brigade of 1,917 men on a roundabout march to the south around Camp Garnett. Guided by David Hart, the young son of a family that lived at the top of Rich Mountain, the men struggled through the pathless forest, hindered by thick undergrowth, steep hillsides, and intermittent rain. They came to the ridge top well to the south of the turnpike, and moved north along the top of the mountain until they overlooked the pass where the pike crossed the mountain at Joseph Hart's farm.

Around 2:30 on the afternoon of July 11, these troops surprised the Confederate outpost at the pass. The 310 men and one cannon on guard here had been fearing a Union flank attack from the north or east. Instead they were surprised by the assault from the south. The Confederates took cover on the opposite side of their hastily constructed log breastworks, and behind rocks, trees, and the homestead buildings. With the help of their one cannon, they held off the Federal assault for more than two hours, until they were overwhelmed by a renewed attack and forced to flee.

Meanwhile in Camp Garnett, Colonel Pegram tried to rally reinforcements to the fighting at the pass, but brought help too little and too late. A second cannon sent up the pike as reinforcement was captured by Federal troops. During the night, realizing that the enemy was in his rear, Pegram ordered the withdrawal of his remaining forces during the night. On the morning of July 12, General Rosecrans victorious troops marched down the turnpike to Camp Garnett, which they found abandoned except for the sick and wounded. Rosecrans sent word to General McClellan that the enemy was beaten. The advance of the withdrawing Confederate column, led by mapmaker Jed Hotchkiss, successfully escaped down the turnpike, but Pegram's main force, cut off and without supplies, surrendered to McClellan in Beverly two days later.

Laurel Hill

Meanwhile, McClellan had sent General Morris to engage Gen Garnett at Laurel Hill. The Confederate camp was established at the western base of Laurel Hill Mountain east of Belington. Entrenchments of stones, felled trees, and abatis were erected running up the hill from the south side of the turnpike commanding the valley leading to the Tygart Valley River. On the north side of the road were additional entrenchments running to the foot of Laurel Mountain, as well as three artillery positions. On the morning of July 7, Morris's Federals moved south from Philippi and engaged the southerners in a series of skirmishes in the hills around Belington. A number of assaults and cannon bombardments over several days kept Garnett's troops busy, without seriously challenging their position. On the afternoon of July 11, they could hear the sounds of battle coming from Rich Mountain 23 miles away.

When Garnett was informed of Pegram's defeat and Federal control of the Pike, he recognized that the Laurel Hill position was also cut off. He ordered his skirmishers to step up their fire to cover the withdrawal preparations. When his troops began withdrawing at dusk, they left their tents up and fires burning, with the rear guard in place until the last moment. Upon reaching the turnpike crossroads at Leadsville, he was mistakenly told that Beverly was in Federal hands, and so turned his column north and east on more primitive roads.

Corrick's Ford

On the morning of the 12th, Morris's troops discovered that Garnett was gone, and soon set off in pursuit. The poor roads and incessant rain slowed travel, and the Federals could easily follow the Confederate march along Pheasant Run road by the quagmire of mud and discarded equipment along the way. The road was very rough, with steep slopes and dense woods on either side. Although slowed by felled trees left behind by the southerners, the Federal force caught up with the southern rear guard by noon on the 13th, at Kalar's Ford of Shaver's Fork. Then commenced a running skirmish, as the two-mile long Confederate column moved up the river ravine, followed by the pursuing Federals. At the final crossing at Corrick's Ford, Confederate troops on a high bluff gave cover for their troops to cross the river. Gen. Garnett, while directing the final skirmishers, was shot and killed. He was the first general officer killed in the Civil War. Gen. Morris stopped there, having captured a number of Confederate troops and most of their baggage train. The remains of Garnett's troops struggled on east through the wilderness, eventually straggling into Monterey, Virginia.

McClellan's victory

From Beverly, General McClellan sent telegrams to Washington claiming "Our Success is Complete and Secession is Killed in this Country." Within two weeks, the Federals met with disastrous defeat at Manassas, and President Lincoln, badly needing a winning general, called McClellan to Washington to command the Army of the Potomac. Many of the characteristics which later marked McClellan's command, such as superior organizing ability, overcautiousness, and tendency to overestimate enemy forces, had been apparent in his command of the Rich Mountain campaign.

Lee's Cheat Mountain Campaign

Following Rich Mountain the Federals built fortifications commanding crucial turnpike passes in the upper Tygarts Valley. A fortification at Elkwater blocked the Huttonsville-Huntersville Turnpike. Cheat Summit Fort (White Top or Camp Milroy) commanded the Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike at an elevation of almost 4,000 feet above sea level. Elements of the 14th Indiana and the 24th and 25th Ohio Regiments under command of Colonel Nathan Kimball were stationed at Cheat. The fort originally consisted of a large enclosed pit and parapet fortification with walls almost 14 feet high. It was believed to be impregnable to both artillery and frontal assault. Another large encampment called Cheat Mountain Pass, at the western base of Cheat Mountain, provided a supply force and reinforcements between these two fortifications.

(continues below)

The Confederates, upon retreating eastward down the turnpike, had fortified positions to stop the Federal advance. Fortifications were built at Camp Bartow, on the hills above Traveller's Repose, and Camp Allegheny at the top of Allegheny Mountain, and a major supply base was established at Huntersville. Determined to recapture the critical roads, General Robert E. Lee came to western Virginia to direct a counter attack. He was not actually in direct command, and was hampered in his efforts by jealousies among the commanding officers. From his camp at Valley Mountain, between Huntersville and Elkwater, Lee planned a complex simultaneous attack on Cheat and Elkwater. He moved some of his troops a little closer onto Mingo flats, and searched out routes through the mountains that could flank the fortified Federal positions. On September 12, an assault force of 1,500 men under Colonel Albert Rust were supposed to lead the attack on the fort, thus giving the signal for the coordinated attack by five separate Confederate columns. Rust and Colonel Anderson were moving from Camp Bartow against Cheat, while three additional columns were to move from Mingo Flats by different paths against Elkwater and Cheat. Instead of attacking the fort directly, Rust encountered Federal supply wagons less than one-half mile from the fort and engaged 200 Federal skirmishers in dense woods. Surprised by what they perceived as an overwhelming force, the Confederates retreated, littering the woods with abandoned equipment. As a result the signal was never given and the coordinated attack never took place. An uncoordinated attack on Elkwater was easily repulsed. A later reconnaissance in front of Elkwater by Lee's aide, John Augustine Washington, and son, Fitzhugh Lee, resulted in Washington being shot and killed. Skirmishing continued in the area for two days, after which Lee withdrew from the area. Defeated by the rough terrain and rainy weather, the campaign earned him the name "Granny Lee" – and his reputation as a general was severely damaged.

Camp Bartow - Battle of Greenbrier River

Confederate General H. R. Jackson remained at Camp Bartow with 2,000 men to guard the Staunton-Parkersburg Pike. 5,000 Federal troops under General Joseph J. Reynolds at Cheat Summit Fort took the initiative on October 3, 1861 by attacking Camp Bartow, 12 miles to their east. This engagement, the Battle of Greenbrier River, consisted of an artillery duel with two flank attacks. Federal artillery in the valley dueled for four hours with Confederate cannons dug in on the hillsides. Reynolds failed to dislodge the Confederates from their position and returned to Cheat Summit, but the Confederates feared that Camp Bartow may not be safe from a renewed attack.

Camp Allegheny

In November, the Confederates abandoned Camp Bartow, and left about 1,200 Georgia and Virginia regiments, with two batteries of artillery, guarding the pike at the stronger position on the top of Allegheny. The pit and parapet fortification was built on the John Yeager farm at the turnpike pass over Allegheny mountain. On December 12, 1,900 Federal troops, newly commanded by General Robert H. Milroy, attacked Camp Allegheny. They attempted a two pronged assault. From a base camp at the now abandoned Camp Bartow, Milroy personally directed the main column up the turnpike, then over the top of the hill to attack from the north. Milroy's force was prematurely engaged by Confederate pickets, and a fierce close fight ensued on the right flank of the Confederate fortifications. Soon after Milroy's troops were repulsed, the hopelessly late second column under Colonel Moody attacked up the hill on the Confederate left. Due to the fortuitous timing, Confederate commander Colonel Edward Johnson was able to concentrate most of his 1,200 troops to meet this new attack, and drove them off as well.

Winter Camps

For the rest of that winter, the two armies huddled in their camps on top of the mountains, close enough to see each other's camp fires on a clear night. These mountain heights were desolate places, with the farm on the top of Cheat Summit described by a soldier as "a splendid twenty acre farm averaging ten rocks to every blade of grass." Mr. White, who owned the farm, refused to cooperate with the Union troops, and was soon put under arrest. The Yeager family, who lived at the top of Allegheny, got along better with their occupying army, and continued to live there throughout that winter that the camp was occupied. The winter was especially severe, and both armies suffered terribly in their exposed positions. Measles, pneumonia and other illnesses took a higher toll than any of the battles. To the lowland bred soldiers, North and South, life in these mountains was an unbearable ordeal.

When spring came, both armies were more than ready to push on down the pike into the Shenandoah Valley, leaving behind the cold, desolate wilderness of that first winter of war. Both Cheat Summit Fort and Camp Allegheny were abandoned in April of 1862.