

The Battle of Antietam

The Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862, climaxed the first of General Robert E. Lee's two attempts to extend the Confederate effort into the North. About 40,000 Southerners were pitted against the 87,000-man Federal Army of the Potomac under General George B. McClellan. When the fighting ended, the Battle of Antietam had the unfortunate distinction of being the single bloodiest day of the Civil War. Also there, the course of the American Civil War had been greatly altered.

After General Lee's great victory at Manassas in August, he marched his Army of Northern Virginia into Maryland, hoping to find vitally needed men and supplies. General McClellan followed – first to Frederick (where through rare good fortune a copy of the Confederate battle plan fell into his hands), then westward 12 miles to the passes of South Mountain. There on September 14 Lee tried to block the Federals. Because he had split his army to send troops under General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson to capture Harpers Ferry, Lee could only hope to delay the Northerners. McClellan forced his way through and by the afternoon of the next day both armies had established new battle lines west and east of Antietam Creek near the town of Sharpsburg. When Jackson's troops reached Sharpsburg on the 16th (Harpers Ferry had surrendered the previous day), Lee consolidated his position along the low ridge that runs north and south of the town.

The battle opened at dawn on the 17th when Union General Joseph Hooker's artillery began a murderous fire on Jackson's men in the Miller cornfield north of town. Hooker reported: "In the time I am writing, every stalk of corn in the northern and greater part of the field was cut as closely as could have been done with a knife and the slain lay in rows precisely as they had stood in their ranks a few moments before." Hooker's troops advanced, driving the Confederates before them. Jackson reported that his men were "exposed for near an hour to a terrific storm of shell, canister, and musketry."

About 7 AM, Jackson was reinforced and succeeded in driving the Federals back. An hour later Union troops under General Joseph Mansfield counterattacked and by 9 AM had regained some of the lost ground. Then, in an effort to extricate some of Mansfield's men from their isolated position near the Dunker Church, General John Sedgwick's division of Edwin V. Sumner's corps advanced into the West Woods. There Confederate troops struck Sedgwick's men on both flanks, inflicting appalling casualties.

Meanwhile, General William H. French's division of Sumner's corps moved up to support Sedgwick but veered south into Confederates under General D. H. Hill posted along an old sunken road separating the Roulette and Piper farms. For nearly four hours bitter fighting raged along this road (afterwards known as Bloody Lane) as French, supported by General Israel B. Richardson's division sought to drive the southerners back. Confusion and sheer exhaustion finally ended the battle here and in the northern part of the field.

Southeast of town, Union General Ambrose E. Burnside's troops had been trying to cross a bridge over Antietam Creek. Some 400 Georgians had driven them back each time. At

1 PM the Federals finally crossed the bridge and, after a two-hour delay to reform their lines, advanced up the slope beyond. By late afternoon they had driven the Georgians back almost to Sharpsburg, threatening to cut off the line of retreat for Lee's decimated Confederates. About 4 PM General A. P. Hill's division, left behind by Jackson at Harpers Ferry to salvage the captured Federal property, arrived on the field and immediately entered the fight. Burnside's troops were driven back to the heights near the bridge they had earlier taken. The Battle of Antietam was over. The next day Lee began withdrawing his army across the Potomac River.

More men were killed or wounded at Antietam than on any other single day of the Civil War. Federal losses numbered 12,410; Confederate losses 10,700. Neither side gained a decisive victory that day. Lee's failure to carry the war effort into the North produced two important results for the Federalists. First, Great Britain postponed the recognition of the Confederate government. Second, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which, on January 1, 1863, declared free all slaves in the rebellious states. The Civil War thus had a dual purpose of preserving the Union and ending slavery.

If you visit Antietam ...

Open year-round, the 3,200-acre national battlefield encompasses an 8½-mile driving tour with more than 350 monuments, tablets, markers, and 41 authentic cannons.

Included are such highlights as:

Dunker Church, the focal point of repeated clashes as both armies sought to occupy and hold the high ground around it.

The Cornfield, where more fighting took place than anywhere else at Antietam. The battle lines swept back and forth across the field for three hours.

Sunken Road, or Bloody Lane, where for nearly four hours, Union and Confederate infantry contested this sunken country road resulting in over 5,000 casualties – thus the name “Bloody Lane.”

Lower Bridge, or Burnside Bridge, where the fighting was a key factor in McClellan's failure at Antietam. Called Burnside Bridge after the Union general whose troops were held off most of the day by a few hundred Georgia riflemen, it is the battlefield's best-known landmark.

Antietam National Cemetery, where the remains of 4,776 Federal soldiers, including 1,836 unknowns, are buried on a hilltop near town. Most of the Confederate dead are buried in Hagerstown and Frederick, Maryland, Shepherdstown, West Virginia, and in local church and family cemeteries.

The whole battle was fought over an area of 12 square miles and consisted of three basic phases – morning, midday, and afternoon. During the morning phase, three piecemeal Union attacks drove back Jackson's line but did not break it. The midday phase saw two Union divisions break D. H. Hill's line in the sunken road, but McClellan's failure to follow it up lost him the advantage that had been gained. In the afternoon phase, Burnside's slow pincer movement beyond the lower bridge was broken by A. P. Hill's timely arrival.

For more information on the Antietam National Battlefield, go to:
<http://www.nps.gov/anti>

Clara Barton

In 1861 Clarissa Barton, known as “Clara,” was living in Washington while working at the U.S. Patent Office. When the 6th Massachusetts Regiment arrived in the city after the Baltimore Riots, she organized a relief program for the soldiers, beginning a lifetime of philanthropy.

When Barton learned that many of the wounded from First Bull Run had suffered, not from want of attention but from need of medical supplies, she advertised for donations and began an independent organization to distribute goods. The relief operation was successful. The following year U.S. Surgeon General William A. Hammond granted her a general pass to travel with army ambulances "for the purpose of distributing comforts for the sick and wounded, and nursing them." For three years she followed army operations throughout the Virginia Theater and in the Charleston, South Carolina area. She was at Antietam tending the wounded during and after the battle. She formed her only formal Civil War connection with an organization when she served as superintendent of nurses in Major General Benjamin F. Butler’s command. She also expanded her concept of soldier aid, traveling to Camp Parole, Maryland, to organize a program for locating men listed as missing in action. Through interviews with Federals returning from Southern prisons, she was often able to determine the status of some of the missing and notify families. By the end of the war, Barton had performed most of the services that would later be associated with the American Red Cross, which she founded in 1881.

“War is a dreadful thing.”

Clara Barton had this to say about the Battle of Antietam: “War is a dreadful thing ... Oh, my God, can’t this civil strife be brought to an end?”

“Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

This was said more recently by American philosopher George Santayana.

Feedback

It’s always good to hear what customers have to say in response to our Bugler newsletters. After the “Dog Days of Summer” was emailed, Bruce Davidge of San Andreas, California sent us the origin of the use of the term Dogs of War. It was used by William Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar*, Act 3, Scene 1. Here it is as said by Antony:

"And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge
With Ate by his side come hot from Hell
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry "Havoc!" and let slip the dogs of war."

He went on to explain that Ate was the Greek goddess of discord and destruction; the cry "Havoc!" was the signal to kill and pillage without mercy.

Bruce also recommended the book The Dogs of War, written by Fredrick Forsythe in 1974. He said it was "a good novel about mercenaries in Africa, although his dogs of war quote is not attributed accurately." There was also a movie by the same name.