



# ANTIETAM

ANTIETAM NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD SITE \* \* \* MARYLAND

THE VIOLENT BATTLE HERE ON SEPTEMBER 17, 1862, ENDED LEE'S FIRST INVASION OF THE NORTH, POSTPONED INDEFINITELY ENGLAND'S THREATENED RECOGNITION OF THE CONFEDERACY, AND GAVE PRESIDENT LINCOLN THE OPPORTUNITY TO ISSUE HIS EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

"The night after the battle . . . was a fearful one. . . . The dead and dying lay as thick over [the field] as harvest sheaves. The pitiable cries for water with appeals for help were much more horrible to listen to than the deadliest sounds of battle. Silent were the dead, and motionless. But here and there were raised stiffened arms; heads made a last effort to lift themselves from the ground; prayers were mingled with oaths, the oaths of delirium, men were wriggling over the earth; and midnight hid all distinction between the blue and the gray. . . ." So wrote an officer on "Stonewall" Jackson's staff. The view from Union headquarters was equally sobering. "The night . . . brought with it grave responsibilities," reported the commander of the Army of the Potomac. "Whether to renew the attack on the 18th or to defer it . . . was the question. . . . After a night of anxious deliberation, and a full and careful survey of the situation and condition of our army . . . I concluded that the success of an attack was not certain. . . . I should have had a narrow view of the condition of the country had I been willing to hazard another battle with less than an absolute assurance of success."

All the next day the two armies eyed each other uneasily across the slopes of Sharpsburg ridge. Pleasant and tranquil today, the fields then were so strewn with dead and unattended wounded that the sight seared in Gen. James Longstreet's memory was "too fearful to contemplate." The Confederates, although "worn and exhausted," prepared for a renewal of combat, but Gen. George B. McClellan lacked the heart to attack. By late afternoon the threat had passed on and Gen. Robert E. Lee began issuing orders for the withdrawal. That night, as the glare of campfire belied their intentions, his men pulled out of their lines, filed to the river ford, and recrossed the Potomac. "Thank God," muttered Lee when at last his proud army stood in comparative safety upon the [West] Virginia bluffs overlooking the river.

THE retreat marked the end of the Maryland campaign which had begun with bright hopes just 2 weeks before. Fresh from earlier successes (in June they had turned back one Union thrust against Richmond, and in a recent series of battles around Bull Run had driven another army into the defenses of Washington), Lee's Army of Northern Virginia splashed across the Potomac in early September 1862 and embarked on the Confederacy's first invasion of the North. By the 7th the Confederates had concentrated about Frederick, while the Union army, which McClellan had just reorganized with remarkable speed and efficiency, slowly moved out toward Rockville where it might cover both Washington and Baltimore.

Lee had broader objectives in crossing the Potomac than just "to procure substance" for his troops. "The people of the South have long wished to aid you in throwing off this foreign yoke, to enable you again to enjoy the inalienable rights of freemen, and restore independence and sovereignty to your State," he declared in a proclamation to the people of Maryland on September 8. "In obedience to this wish, our army has come among you . . ." But Lee found little sympathy in the State. Anticipating that his invasion would cause the Union forces to evacuate the strategic positions of Harpers Ferry and Martinsburg, he then planned to shift his line of communications to the west and threaten to carry the war into Pennsylvania. In this way he could maintain his army at the expense of the enemy while drawing the Army of the Potomac away from the Virginia front and its own base of supplies. If Lee's ultimate purpose was to bring his enemy to battle, he did not reveal it in his dispatches to President Jefferson Davis, though he knew that a military victory on Northern soil would do much to win foreign diplomatic recognition for the South.

On September 9, Lee issued Special Order 191 covering the next phase of the campaign. His army would divide before it crossed the Blue Ridge: Maj. Gen. James Longstreet would remain at Boonsboro with two divisions and the baggage trains, Maj. Gen. D. H. Hill's division would constitute the rear guard, while Maj. Gen. Thomas J. ("Stonewall") Jackson with three columns would pinch off the Union garrison at Harpers Ferry. Once in control of this strategic point, Lee's line of communication through the Shenandoah Valley would be secure and he could then march into Pennsylvania.

The bulk of Lee's army moved out from Frederick on September 10. Maj. Gen. Lafayette McLaws marched with two divisions by way of Burkittsville into Pleasant Valley and then pushed along the crest of Maryland Heights, which his troops won after a sharp skirmish on the 13th. Brig. Gen. J. G. Walker crossed the Potomac

with his division at Point of Rocks during the night of the 10th after a vain attempt to destroy the Monocacy aqueduct of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, spent the next day resting in camp, and on the 14th moved into position with his artillery on Loudoun Heights, which dominated most of the Union works protecting Harpers Ferry. Jackson's three divisions forded the Potomac at Williamsport on the 11th, entered Martinsburg the next morning, and completed the investment of Harpers Ferry when they arrived before Bolivar Heights on the 13th.

Lee's plan was based upon the assumption that the Union army would be too disorganized—and its commander too cautious—to exploit this division of his forces, which violated a fundamental principle of strategy. But on September 13, as Jackson's columns converged upon Harpers Ferry, a Union private picked up a lost copy of Lee's order, presenting McClellan with a glittering opportunity "to cut the enemy in two and beat him in detail." Now it was his turn to take the initiative.

On September 14, McClellan's advance divisions fought their way through the gaps at South Mountain, defended at Turner's Gap by D. H. Hill's division with reinforcements from Longstreet's corps, and at Crampton's Gap by three brigades from McLaws' command and two regiments of dismounted cavalry. This delaying action enabled Lee to concentrate at Sharpsburg and await the arrival of Jackson's force after the capture of Harpers Ferry. He now hoped to reunite his army and fight a successful battle on Maryland soil. The outlook brightened considerably when word arrived on the 15th that Harpers Ferry had surrendered that morning, yielding a prize of more than 11,000 prisoners and significant quantities of guns and military stores. More important, Jackson's divisions would soon be available.

More than Harpers Ferry was lost to the Union when McClellan gave Lee an extra day to prepare for battle. His own army had beaten Jackson in the race to catch up with Lee, so that by nightfall of the 15th he had four corps and part of a fifth within easy striking distance of the Confederates. An advance early on the 16th would have caught the Confederates outnumbered by better than three to one, but it never came.

Instead of a battle there were only sporadic artillery exchanges throughout the 16th. After "a severe night's march," Jackson arrived during the day with two of his divisions and the one commanded by J. G. Walker. Toward evening the Union I Corps, commanded by "Fighting Joe" Hooker, probed for weak spots on the Confederate left—a sure warning where the weight of McClellan's attack would fall the next morning. By waiting a day McClellan gave Lee time to reassemble the bulk of his scattered army and bring to the field about 40,000 men to oppose his own 87,000.



1 Confederate dead along the Hagerstown Pike.  
2 The Dunkard Church and some who defended it.



3 Bloody Lane.  
4 A Federal artillery observer scans the field.  
5 Burnside Bridge and the Confederate-held bluffs beyond.  
6 Lincoln and McClellan confer on the field after the battle.



THUS the campaign that had taken such a dramatic turn 4 days earlier with the chance discovery of a lost order culminated in a battle of many lost opportunities for the Union. Had McClellan attacked on the 16th; had the attack of the I, II, and XII Corps been better coordinated; had French and Richardson but realized how close they were to snapping the Confederate line and had the fresh corps of Franklin (which was only lightly engaged) and Porter been thrown into the battle at this point; had Burnside been aggressive enough in the early hours to prevent Lee from stripping his right to reinforce Jackson and Hood—had any of these opportunities been grasped, the results must have been a great victory. McClellan might have seized the hill behind the West Wood that dominated the Confederate left and thrown the weight of his attack against the exposed flank. He should have made still better use of massed artillery and thrown division upon division against Lee's line until it broke. But McClellan lacked such an instinct to grab for the jugular. Afraid to commit his reserves, he kept his cavalry in the center, where they could serve no useful purpose; and he failed to see that his subordinate commanders carried out his overall design. He could have renewed the assault the next day with the odds still more in his favor. Instead he rested his troops and awaited reinforcements (some of which had arrived by 7 a.m.), while Lee remained in position throughout the 18th, then slipped across the Potomac that night.

If Antietam was fought badly by McClellan, it was a battle that Lee should never have fought at all. His army was depleted from recent battles and strenuous marches, and the numbers he faced were too formidable to offer any real prospect for success. If he had defeated McClellan on the west side of the Antietam, what could he have done next? A frontal assault against the overpowering artillery sited on the hills across the Antietam would have been out of the question, and the terrain did not lend itself to any

large scale maneuver on the flanks. Even "Stonewall" Jackson was forced to abandon plans for a flank attack against the Union right. Admirers of Lee have alleged that there were valid political and psychological reasons why he chose to offer battle in Maryland, that he "had read McClellan's inmost soul and knew he was not to be feared." Perhaps so. The fact remains that Lee needlessly courted military disaster under tactical conditions that made the chances for victory remote. Success, if won, could not have been exploited because of the nature of the terrain and the overwhelming strength of the Union army. The most that Lee could reasonably have hoped for was a standoff. That this ultimately happened was primarily the result of the high degree of coordination and cooperation among the Confederate corps and division commanders, as opposed to the lack of any supreme will or direction on the part of the Union generals. The rosy results, strategic and diplomatic, that might have followed a Confederate victory along the Antietam in no way improved Lee's field position, while the victory that McClellan might well have won could easily have brought the war to a more speedy end.

A tactical draw, this convulsive struggle represented a strategic defeat for the South, for Lee had to postpone his invasion of Pennsylvania. Yet the benefits to the North were essentially political. The battle made possible Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which changed both the objectives and the character of the war and greatly reduced the chances of either foreign intervention or recognition of the Confederacy.

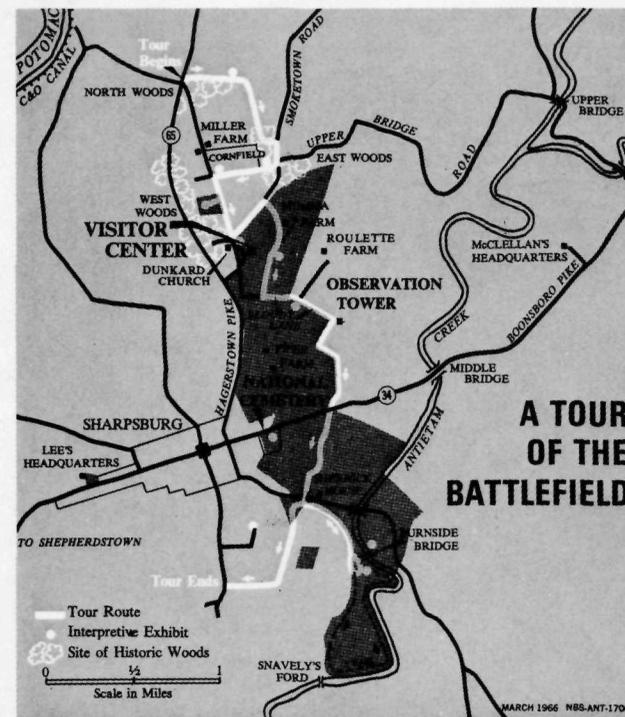
Antietam might have ended the war; instead it only prolonged it. The official reports, the eloquent testimony of survivors, and the men left behind in field hospitals or in shallow graves—12,410 Union and 10,700 Confederate—all bear witness to the fact that more Americans fell here than on any other single day in the Civil War, and probably in any single day of our entire military history.

—Jay Luvaas

Antietam gave Lincoln his long-awaited opportunity to inject the issue of slavery into the war. Five days after the battle he issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which declared that on January 1, 1863, all slaves in areas then in rebellion against the United States "shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free." In this engraving after Francis B. Carpenter, Lincoln reads the proclamation to his Cabinet.



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**ABOUT YOUR VISIT**—Antietam National Battlefield Site lies just east of Sharpsburg, Md., along Md. 34 and 65. Both routes intersect either U.S. 40 or 40A. The visitor center is north of town on Md. 65. A network of park roads provide access to most of the battle landmarks. There are also markers at Turner's, Fox's, and Crampton Gaps on South Mountain, scenes of preliminary fighting, and the Shepherdstown Ford.

Antietam National Cemetery, located at the eastern limits of Sharpsburg, is the burial place of 4,773 Federal dead, largely from the battles of Antietam and South Mountain. Of the Civil War burials, 1,836 are unidentified. The total number of burials is more than 5,000.

**ADMINISTRATION**—Antietam National Battlefield Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

The National Park System, of which this site is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the great historical, natural, and recreational places of the United States for the benefit and enjoyment of all the people.

A superintendent, whose address is Box 158, Sharpsburg, Md. 21782, is in immediate charge of the site.

**THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**—the Nation's principal natural resource agency—has a special obligation to assure that our expendable resources are conserved, that our renewable resources are managed to produce optimum benefits, and that all resources contribute to the progress and prosperity of the United States, now and in the future.

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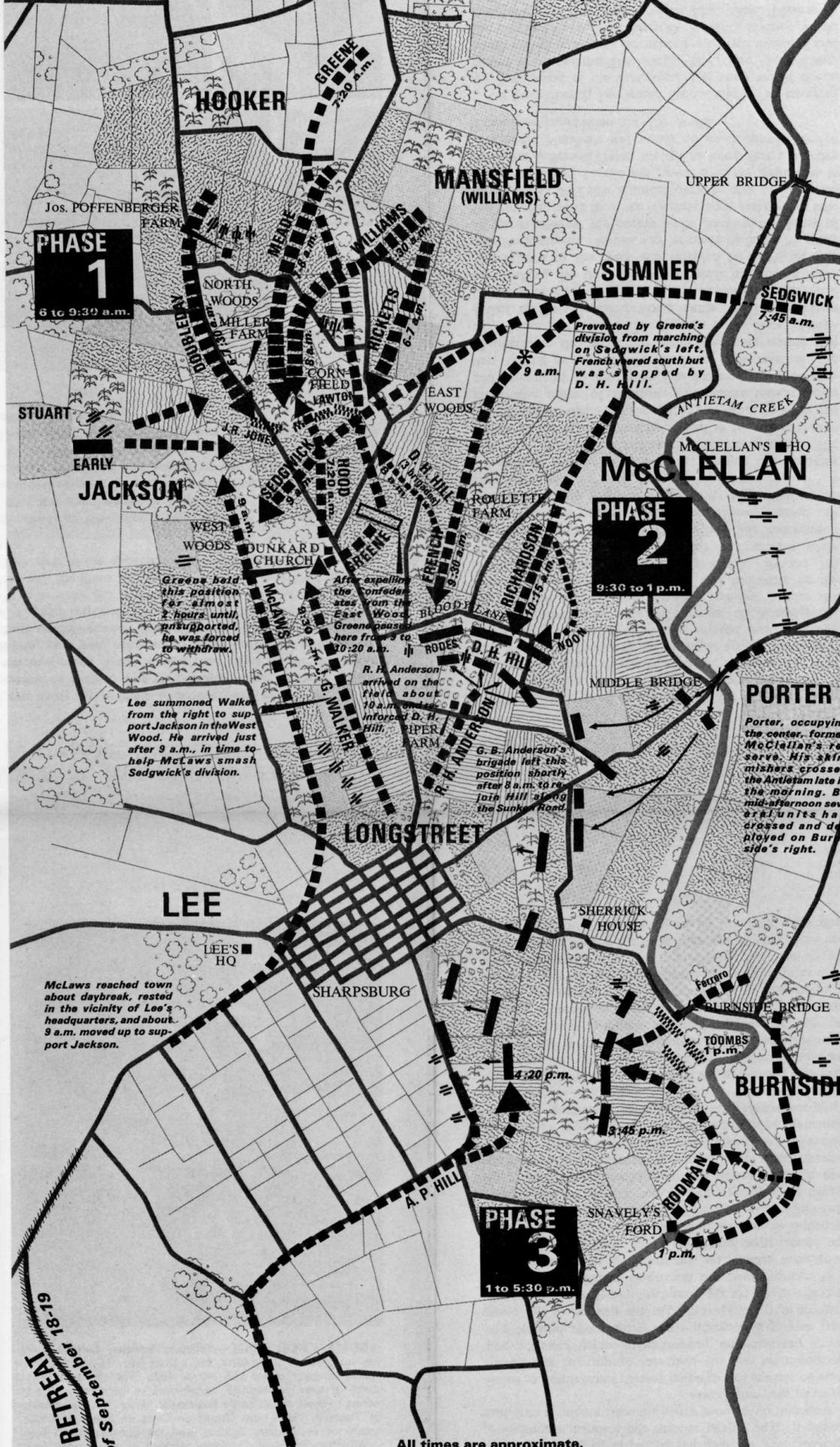
# ANTIETAM

LEE's line stretched across the angle formed by the junction of the Potomac and Antietam Creek. Unable to prevent a Union crossing of the latter to the north, he at least was able to take advantage of the natural defenses of the terrain. The limestone outcroppings and patches of woods offered good cover from the superior weight and numbers of the Union artillery, while the ravines and slight depressions made it possible to rush reinforcements in relative security from one danger spot to another. On a hill 2 miles north of Sharpsburg and west of the Hagerstown turnpike he posted artillery and some of "Jeb" Stuart's cavalry as support for the Confederate left. The West Woods and the field east of the turnpike contained two of Jackson's divisions, facing north, with John B. Hood's exhausted division—pulled out of line after clashing with Hooker the evening before—near the Dunkard Church in support. D. H. Hill's division occupied the center of Lee's line, his 3,000 men stretching for over a mile. Longstreet's command embraced Hill's position in the sunken road, extended to the bluffs overlooking the Lower Bridge, and curled around to the west to guard the right flank against any attempt to ford the Antietam farther down. Robert Toombs' brigade blocked the passage of the bridge; the rest of D. R. Jones' division held the heights in front of Sharpsburg, while J. G. Walker's division was stationed on the extreme right. Although he had nearly 2 days in which to prepare his position, Lee erected no breastworks: it was too early in the war, apparently, to appreciate the need for artificial cover in the field. He was inferior in artillery, and he lacked reserves except for Hood's division, which was committed to come to the early aid of Jackson. There remained, of course, the three additional divisions on their way from Harpers Ferry, but that morning these hardly counted.

McClellan intended to attack both Confederate flanks and then, with his reserves, assault Lee's center—a risky plan, since it required a double envelopment (by forces separated by the Antietam) of an enemy well posted and in a better position to send reinforcements wherever needed. And it all miscarried. "The main attack upon the enemy's left" became hardly more than a series of blows by individual divisions as they reached the field, while Burnside's attack against Lee's right was late in materializing. There was no cohesion, no unified command, no definite objective, and at the climax of battle McClellan was unwilling to commit his reserves in the center. Antietam was in fact a soldiers' battle, waged by separate units with little direction from above. THE battle began at daybreak with Hooker's assault on the Confederate left. Advancing on a front of two divisions, with a third in reserve, the I Corps drove for the high ground near the Dunkard church. The leading brigades in each division deployed from columns 10 ranks in depth into the standard battle formation—skirmishers in front, followed by a continuous line 2 ranks deep, with a second line some distance to the rear. As the battle developed, these reserve brigades were moved forward to build up the firing line and extend the flanks until the entire corps was engaged. Massed batteries of artillery on a ridge behind Hooker's corps and on the eastern bluffs of the Antietam brought Jackson's line under a deadly crossfire. In a cornfield, the cornfield, three of Jackson's brigades tangled with Hooker. Aided by artillery, which raked the field with canister until "every stalk of corn" in the northern part "was cut as closely as could have been done with a knife," the I Corps gradually forced the Confederates to yield. "The slain lay in rows, precisely as they had stood in their ranks a few moments before," Hooker reported, adding "It was never my fortune to witness a more bloody, dismal battlefield." Two of the Confederate brigades lost more than half their number in killed or wounded; the third lost over 30 percent, and only 2 of the 15 regimental commanders who saw action escaped injury. Jackson's other division, in line across the turnpike and west of the cornfield, faced the same terrible fire. Although they stubbornly contested the ground, "sometimes driving the enemy before them and sometimes compelled to fall back before their well-sustained and destructive fire," the men of Jackson's old division were swept back into the West Woods. According to Jackson, "the carnage on both sides was terrific." A Union general later wrote that "the two lines almost tore each other to pieces." As Hooker's troops fought their way across the fields, they were hit in turn by a violent counterattack by Hood's division, coming up from the Dunkard Church. "Hood's men always fight well," commented another Confederate general in his official report. That day they fought like devils. In what Hood himself described as "the most terrible clash of arms, by far, that has occurred during the war," his two "little giant brigades" smashed into the divisions of Meade and Doubleday. Then Jubal Early's brigade, detached to support Stuart's cavalry on the Confederate left, successfully attacked the flank and rear of one of Doubleday's brigades which had formed in line of battle west of the Hagerstown pike. Tired, disorganized, with his reserves engaged, ammunition in short supply, and casualties running high (Ricketts lost one-third of his command and a brigade in another division reported casualties of nearly 44 percent), Hooker's corps withdrew to fight no more as a unit that day. ONCE again the cornfield became the storm center as Hood's troops, soon reinforced on the right by three brigades sent over by D. H. Hill, swept the crumbling Union formations back upon their batteries. In the East Woods, Hill's brigades encountered the fresh troops of Mansfield's XII Corps, moving up to support Hooker. Williams' division (Mansfield was mortally wounded early in the action and Williams assumed command of the corps) deployed on the right; "after a severe struggle of an hour and a half" Williams' brigades drove the Confederates back into the West Woods. Meanwhile Greene's division, on the left of this new Union battleline, engaged the Confederates among the thick trees and rock ledges of the East Woods. "After a short but severe contest" Greene's veteran division, weakened by the detachment of one brigade to bolster the extreme right flank of the Union line, pushed past Hill's

# THE BATTLE OF ANTIETAM

September 17, 1862



**LEE'S RETREAT**  
night of September 18-19

**LEGEND**

- UNION
- CONFEDERATE
- ATTACK
- A FORCE IN MOTION
- ARTILLERY
- WITHDRAWAL
- UNIT OVERRUN OR PUSHED BACK
- PAUSE

By late 1862 both sides had adopted similar systems of organization for their land forces: an ARMY was composed of two or more CORPS; each CORPS was composed of two or more DIVISIONS; each DIVISION was composed of two or more BRIGADES; each BRIGADE was composed of two or more REGIMENTS; each REGIMENT was composed of ten COMPANIES, which on paper usually contained about 100 men, but often were only half that.

brigades on their right and forged ahead to the field beyond the burning Mumma house. Here it paused to regroup and replenish its ammunition. IT was now about 9 o'clock, and more Union troops were massing behind the East Woods for still another assault. This was Sedgwick's division of Edwin V. Sumner's II Corps, which had forded the Antietam that morning and now was advancing toward the West Woods in three brigade lines 60 to 70 paces apart. On they came, nearly 6,000 of them, through the East Woods—by this time littered with the human debris of both armies—across the cornfield, where they came under heavy artillery fire, and into the West Woods. Only Early's brigade and the remnants of one of Jackson's divisions were on hand to hold the line until reinforcements could be rushed from another part of the field. Gliding beneath the crest of the hill in front of Sedgwick, Early worked his men around to the left front corner of the Union column. Here he was soon joined by McClellan's division, which had arrived from Harpers Ferry a short time before, and Walker's division, which had been shifted over from its original position on the Confederate right. This counterthrust by forces at least the equal of Sedgwick and probably larger, and aimed at the most vulnerable part of the column, the flanks, saved the day for Lee. Sedgwick's third line was the first to give way. Then in confusion the second line opened fire and killed many of those in the front ranks, and because their formation was too compact, the Union troops could not deploy in the direction of the Confederate attack. "The fire came upon them from front and flank and presently from the rear." Within minutes the ground was strewn with 2,200 casualties and Sedgwick's entire division was in retreat. AGAIN, the Confederates swarmed northward in pursuit. Williams' division had already retired to the vicinity of the East Woods, and Sedgwick's troops took refuge behind "a long line of strong post and rail fences." Unable to overcome this obstacle and even to stand long under "an incessant storm of shot and shell, grape and canister," McLaws and Walker were forced to fall back and take shelter in the West Woods, where they continued to come under the fire of Union artillery. The Confederate counterattack also beat against Greene's division and provoked it into further action. After repulsing two assaults this small division surged forward to the West Woods near the Dunkard Church, where it staunchly held its ground for nearly 2 hours. About noon the division was withdrawn to the main line, and the battle on Lee's left was virtually over. WHEN Sumner's remaining divisions came up, the battle entered a new—and for McClellan an unexpected—phase. French, forming his division into three brigade lines, did not follow Sedgwick into the West Woods but instead veered south, leaving Greene's division at the Dunkard Church to plug the gap between the two divisions. This line of advance brought him to the Roulette farm, where he encountered elements of D. H. Hill's division. French's division drove forward to a hill north of the sunken road, where Hill's brigades under Rodes and G. B. Anderson were preparing to make a stand. Although commanded by high ground to the north and east, this narrow lane with bordering rail fences served as a natural trench. R. H. Anderson's division, which had arrived from Harpers Ferry that morning, moved into the field to the south in support. As French's division surged forward, it reached a crest overlooking the sunken road. A Confederate brigadier described what happened next: "While the men were busy improving their position by piling rails along their front, the enemy deployed in our front in three beautiful lines, all vastly outstretching ours, and commenced to advance . . . to the crest of the hill . . . and for five minutes bravely stood a telling fire at about 80 yards, which my whole brigade delivered. They then fell back a short distance, rallied, were driven back again and again, and finally lay down just back of the crest, keeping up a steady fire. . . ." One Union colonel reported that he held his position only "at a fearful sacrifice. The men were supplied with 60 rounds of ammunition, and exhausted their supply, and took the cartridges from the dead and wounded, and kept up the fire against the enemy." Hill's men tried on several occasions to outflank French, but the arrival of Israel B. Richardson's division of the II Corps decided the outcome. Swinging into line on the left of French, Richardson's division was able to enfilade the Confederate line and convert the sunken road into a "Bloody Lane." The momentum of this charge carried Union troops all the way into the Piper orchard, near the Hagerstown turnpike, and for a few desperate minutes Longstreet's center was held by remnants of several disorganized brigades, one North Carolina regiment without ammunition, and four fieldpieces served in part by Longstreet's staff. But Richardson received a mortal wound, and his men were unable to sustain their offensive. When they withdrew a short distance to higher ground shortly after noon, the battle in the center died down. IT flared up next on the Confederate right, where McClellan had been prodding Ambrose E. Burnside for several hours (since 10 a.m., he said in his initial report; later he claimed that he sent his first order to Burnside at 8 o'clock) to storm the bridge and the heights beyond. The first attempt, by Crook's brigade, went astray; a second column, charging with fixed bayonets, likewise withered before the galling fire that Toombs' infantry and the flanking batteries concentrated upon the bridge. Finally at 1 p.m. two regiments, the 51st New York and the 51st Pennsylvania, dashed across the bridge and gained a foothold on the western bank, while Rodman's division outflanked the Confederate position by fording the creek farther down. But it took 3 vital hours for Burnside's battleline to advance up the slopes from this bridgehead. By late afternoon the IX Corps had almost pushed into the village of Sharpsburg. Once again Lee's line was stretched to the breaking point when fresh reinforcements, this time the celebrated Light Division under A. P. Hill, arrived to hit Burnside's left flank. Covering the 17 miles from Harpers Ferry in 7 hours, Hill's division forced Burnside to retreat to the heights above the bridge. The battle of Antietam was over. □