

The Cornfield Trail

September Harvest of Death



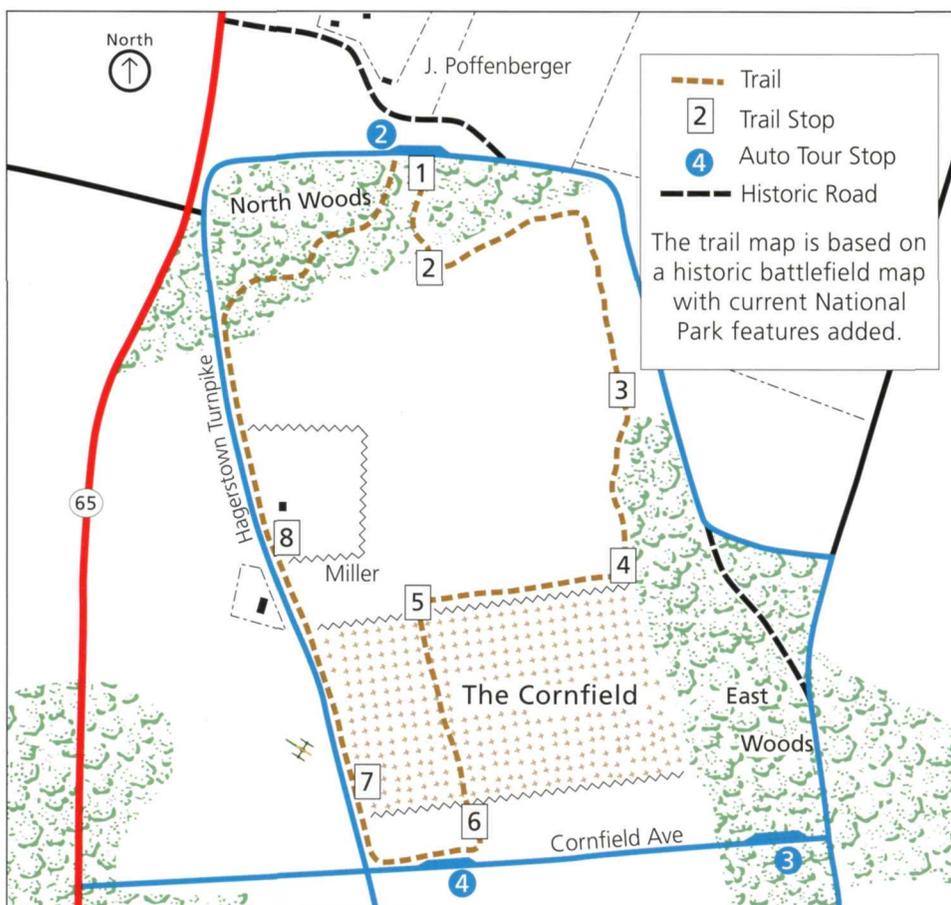
Introduction

The Cornfield Trail starts at Auto Tour Stop 2. The trail is 1.6 miles in length and takes approximately sixty to ninety minutes to complete. The trail is gently rolling, but the surface can be slightly uneven, so good walking shoes are recommended.

Please stay on the trail and remember you are in an agricultural area. There are groundhog holes and poison ivy, please watch your footing. Please note that the actual Cornfield is not always planted in corn. The National Park Service issues permits to local farmers who

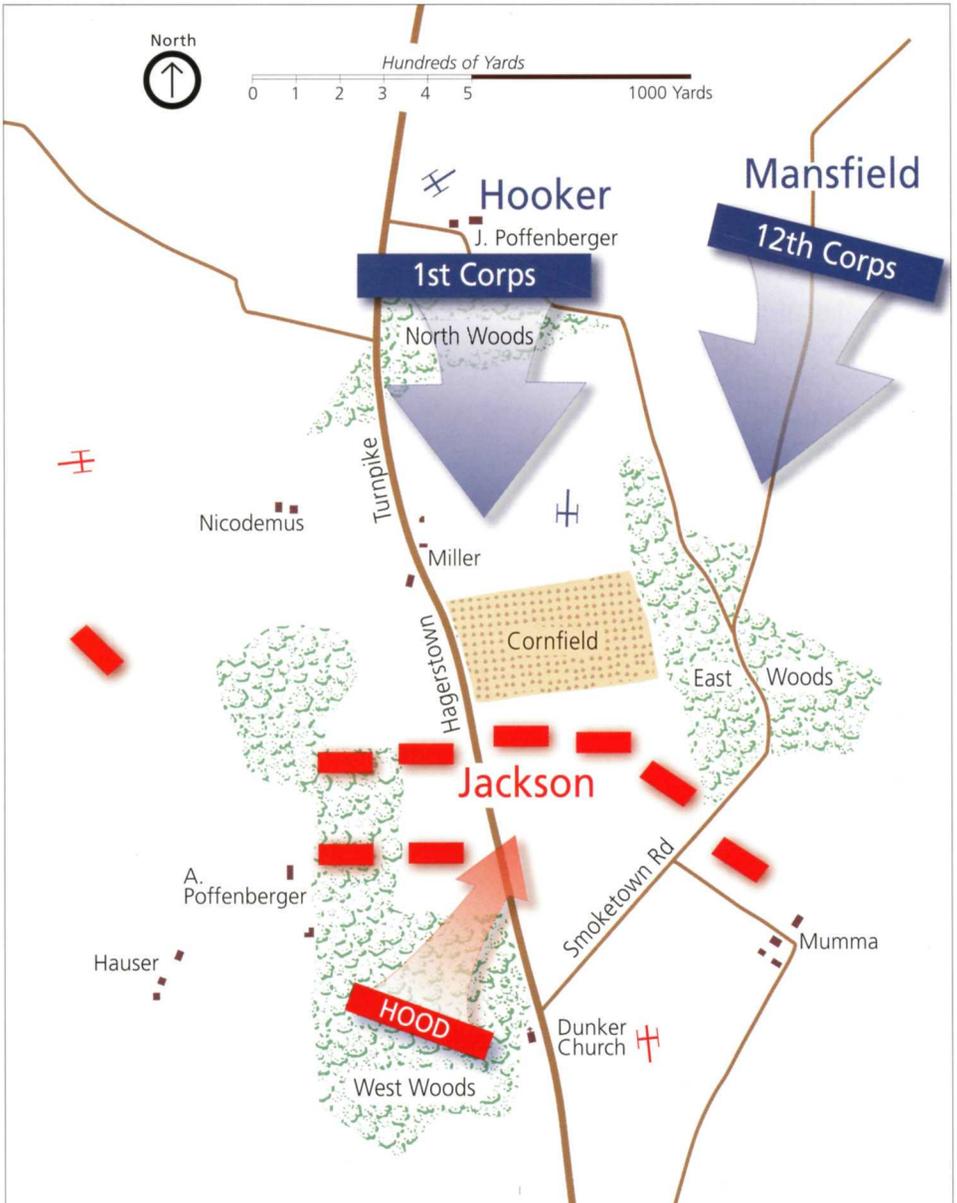
plant crops and pasture animals that help the park maintain the rural appearance of the landscape.

You will be hiking most of the area where the first three hours of battle took place. More than 25,000 men in blue and gray struggled mightily for control of this northern end of the field. As many as 8,000 men were killed or wounded from dawn until 9:00 a.m. during two major Union attacks and a Confederate counterattack.



Battle Map

The map below is based on the historic map of the battlefield. In the back of this trail guide there is a table of organization for the primary units involved in the Cornfield and a timeline of the battle action.



Stop 1 - Parking area at Auto Tour Stop 2

The night before the battle approximately 15,000 soldiers of the Union 1st Corps and the 12th Corps crossed over Antietam Creek and moved into position just north and east of you. General George McClellan was the Union Commander. His plan was to have these troops attack Confederate General Robert E. Lee's northern or left flank early the next morning.

Wednesday morning, September 17th, the Battle of Antietam began as Major General Joseph Hooker's 1st Corps moved south. His objective was high ground about one mile south (where the visitor center is today); halfway there is the infamous "Cornfield."

You will be following in the footsteps of Hooker's men for the majority of this hike. One soldier in his command remembered, *"We were astir at the first streaks of dawn. No reveille call this morning. Too close to the enemy. Nor was one needed to arouse us. A simple call of a sergeant or corporal and every man was instantly awake and alert. All realized that there was ugly business and plenty of it just ahead."*



Commander of the Union
1st Corps Major General
Joseph Hooker

The trail begins across from the parking lot and heads south for about 75 yards.

Stop 2 - Out of the Woods and Into The Fire

You have just moved through what was a small woodlot known as the North Woods. Over the years local farmers used the wood for fences and fire wood. Our mission at this National Battlefield is to restore the landscape to look as closely as possible to how it looked the day of the battle. One way we are accomplishing this is by re-planting the historic woodlots. The Park Staff and thousands of volunteers have planted trees in this and other areas of the park.

Around 5:45 a.m. Hooker's men moved out, their battle lines extending nearly a quarter mile on either side of you. After marching through the North Woods and into the open fields beyond, the Union ranks were met with devastating artillery fire from Confederate guns. Major Rufus Dawes, commander of the 6th Wisconsin wrote that after

marching a few yards a shell burst *"over our heads; then another; then a percussion shell struck and exploded in the very center of the moving mass of men. It killed two men and wounded eleven... Thus opened the first firing of the great battle of Antietam."*

Much of this fire came from a cleared hilltop just over a ½ mile to the west (your right) known as Nicodemus Heights. More than a dozen Southern cannon on this far end of Lee's battle line poured flanking or enfilading fire into Hooker's men as they moved out of the North Woods. Union artillery officer Captain Albert Monroe described Nicodemus Heights as *"an active volcano, belching forth flame and smoke."*



At this point the trail turns left (east) for about a hundred yards, then turn right and continue south on the edge of the East Woods to the Cornfield.

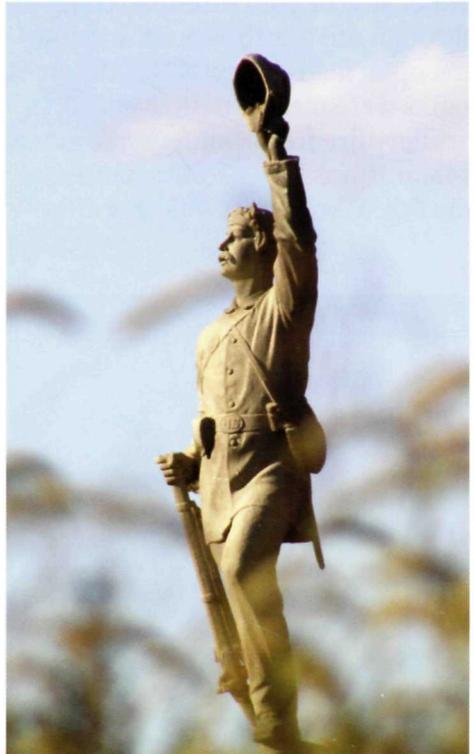
Stop 3 - Tricky Terrain and a Complicated Advance

For the next 100 yards you will be walking along the edge of the East Woods. The woodlot went farther south than it does today. This is another area that will be re-planted. All of the woodlots were important as staging and rallying areas for both sides. Something you should look for on this hike and elsewhere on the battlefield is the subtle but deceptive terrain.

As one soldier remembered, *“One who has participated in battle knows how much and how little can be seen - the smoke, the trees, the varying formations of the ground limit the vision. The deafening noise making orders hard to be understood. The ghastly work of shot and shell, the shrieking of some of the wounded...all tend to limit the knowledge of battle outside of a few yards on either side.”*

At first light, Hooker ordered two artillery batteries to move to the high ground to your right (west) and fire point blank at the Confederates soldiers in the Cornfield. Their explosive shells were set to burst just 1½ seconds after leaving the gun. This deadly fire helped clear the way for Hooker’s infantry attacks that followed.

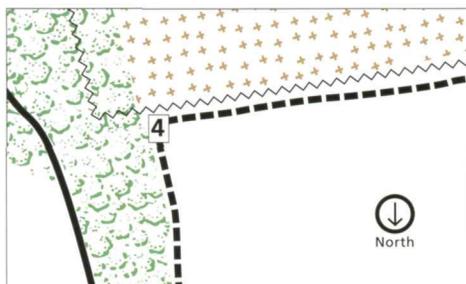
Then three 1st Corps brigades moved through this area. One commander was wounded and another panicked and ran away, delaying two of the brigades. This meant that Gen. Abraham Duryea’s Brigade of about 1,000 men advanced alone into the Cornfield at about 6:00 a.m. The two delayed units finally joined them, but in thirty lonely minutes almost half of Duryea’s men would be killed or wounded.



Continue south along the East Woods to the north-east corner of the Cornfield

Stop 4 - Corner Of Death At Antietam

An interesting facet of this battle is how the most numerous casualties often took place along the edges of the battlefield landscape. Borders like this corner; or the southern edge of the Cornfield; along the Hagerstown Turnpike; or in the Sunken Road were deadly.



You are walking in the footsteps of the 12th Massachusetts. Recruited in the Boston area, these men came from the heart of New England. They advanced south along the East Woods, *“Through the field to the heavy fence that bordered the memorable cornfield where later in the day the dead were literally piled up. Just then a shell struck the fence and exploded right in the midst of us. It seemed for a moment that all was chaos, as dust, splinters, and smoke filled the air; but it staggered us for only an instant, and rubbing our eyes, we saw that most of us were still in fighting trim. Onward to the Cornfield.”*

The 12th Massachusetts continued through the Cornfield to the other side where they collided with Gen.

Harry Hays’ Louisiana Brigade. During the ensuing struggle, the men from Massachusetts lost 224 killed and wounded out of 334 engaged or 67% casualties. This was the highest percentage of loss for any Union regiment that terrible day.

Numerous other units of the 1st Corps advanced past and fought near this spot. Later that morning the Union 12th Corps, commanded by Gen. Joseph Mansfield, moved through the East Woods. General Mansfield, in his first major field command, was mortally wounded in the advance. Col. Eugene Powell of the 12th Corps, whose Ohio regiment fought here, wrote, *“The sight at the fence (north Cornfield fence) where the enemy was standing when we gave our first fire was awful beyond description, dead men were literally piled upon and across each other.”*

The dead men described were Confederates who started the day over a half-mile to the south at the Sunken Road. Lee ordered these men north toward the havoc in the corn. They pushed all the way to this corner where met by the full weight of the 12th Corps and driven back.

Here the trail turns right (west) and follows the northern boundary of the Cornfield

Stop 5 - The Most Sacred Ground - The Cornfield

You are about to enter the Cornfield. Take a moment to reflect on the dreadful carnage that occurred here, where farmers, laborers and shopkeepers gave up their hopes, their dreams and futures for a cause that both sides believed was right.

You will now be walking in the footsteps of the Iron Brigade who pushed through this field at about 6:30 a.m. These were all mid-western boys from Wisconsin and Indiana. Major Rufus Dawes, elevated into command of the 6th Wisconsin Infantry when his commander was wounded, describes their advance into the corn:

“We climbed the fence, moved across the open space and pushed on into the corn-field. I halted the left wing and ordered them to lie down on the ground. The bullets began to clip through the corn, and spin through the soft furrows— thick, almost, as hail. Shells burst around us, the fragments tearing up the ground, and canister whistled through the corn above us.”

Major Dawes continued his description as they moved south: *“At the front edge of the cornfield was a low Virginia rail fence. Before the corn were open fields, beyond which was a strip of woods surrounding a*

little church, the Dunkard church. As we appeared at the edge of the corn, a long line of men in butternut and gray rose up from the ground. Simultaneously, the hostile battle lines opened a tremendous fire upon each other. Men I cannot say fell; they were knocked out of the ranks by the dozens.”

Later that morning, Confederate soldiers under the command of Gen. John Bell Hood counterattacked back through the corn all the way to this northern edge. All morning soldiers attacked around and through this field. By 9:00 a.m. the Cornfield changed hands too many times to count.



Continue south and through the Cornfield. You have traveled .6 of the 1.6 mile trail.

Stop 6 - Georgian Defense and Texas Counterattack

As the men in blue broke out of the corn they faced a solid line of Confederate infantry in the open fields about 100 yards to their front. On the Confederate right (your left), men from Alabama and North Carolina struggled to maintain their position. On their left, Virginians of the “Stonewall” Brigade barely held on. Deadly Confederate volleys initially halted Hooker’s advance, but soon more Union troops were sent in, pushing the Southerners back.

Directly in front of you was Col. Marcellus Douglas’ Brigade of Georgians (that’s the gray Georgia monument to your front left). Col. Douglas was wounded by rifle fire, then killed by an artillery shell that blasted him into the air. Louisiana troops, commanded by Gen. Harry Hays, moved up to support the men from Georgia. In just a short time Hay’s command was wrecked with every regimental commander killed or wounded and a loss of more than 60% casualties. Stonewall Jackson desperately needed more help.

Gen. John Bell Hood’s Division, including the indomitable Texas Brigade, was waiting behind the Dunker Church for their first hot meal in three days. Jackson called them into battle and *“In less than five minutes we were advancing toward the enemy. In less than fifteen we*

were sending and receiving death missiles by the bushel.” Hood’s men drove north, some turning west towards the Hagerstown Turnpike and some turning east towards the East Woods. (The rose colored monument just across Cornfield Avenue is the Texas State Monument).

The 1st Texas Infantry drove through the Cornfield. In this gallant charge through the corn, the 1st Texas lost 82% of their men killed or wounded, the highest percentage for any Confederate unit in any battle of the Civil War. General Hood described the action as, *“The most terrible clash of arms by far that has occurred during the war.”*



Artwork from the Georgia and Texas State Monuments



Stop by the Confederate Monuments, then head west to the Hagerstown Turnpike and turn right (north).

Stop 7 - The Bugler and The General

Just across the road are two cannons representing Battery B, 4th United States Artillery. Battery B moved forward with the initial Union attack in the Cornfield. As soon as the guns had been brought into this position, they came under intense fire from Stonewall Jackson's men. The battery commander, Captain Campbell, was wounded and down. The Battery's fifteen-year-old bugler, Johnny Cook, helped his Captain to safety and returned to the guns. Cannoneers were shot down around him. In one of the most desperate and deadly locations at Antietam, young Cook helped load and fire in the face of an enemy assault just a few yards away.

For his bravery at this battle, the former paper boy from Cincinnati, Ohio, was awarded the Medal of Honor. He is one of the youngest in our history to be accorded this Nation's highest military honor.

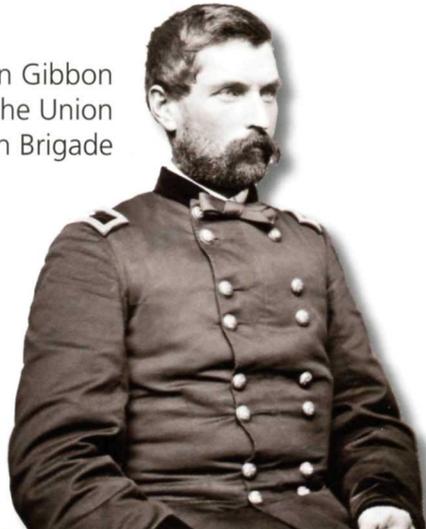
Also helping at Battery B was Gen. John Gibbon who commanded the Iron Brigade. Corporal James Kent wrote how "*Gen. Gibbon put in a double charge of grape and sighted the gun himself. When that charge went into the ranks of the rebels it lifted a whole windrow of them 12 feet into the air. I saw whole bodies, arms, legs and all sorts of fragments above the corn for a moment, but they, the rebs, stopped coming towards us about that time. That discharge carried whole rails from the fence clear into their ranks.*"

Battery B suffered nearly 50% casualties in the fighting, the highest loss for any battery North or South that day. Its' firepower, coupled with the musketry of Hooker's infantry, and the timely arrival of the 12th Corps, helped shatter Hood's counterattack.



15-year-old Johnny Cook, Bugler for Battery B, 4th U.S. Artillery

Gen. John Gibbon
Commander of the Union
Iron Brigade



Continue north on the Hagerstown Turnpike to the D. R. Miller farm. Most of the buildings on the farm today were not there during the battle.

Stop 8 - The Miller Farm

This battle not only destroyed the lives of soldiers on the field, it devastated the community where it was fought. The population of Sharpsburg at the time of the battle was about 1,200. For every person in town, there were almost one hundred soldiers present. Obviously the battle destroyed fences and crops, but even more damage was sustained when the 80,000 man Union army remained for two months as uninvited guests.

The local paper reported that *“the country over which the great battle of Wednesday raged presents a melancholy picture of devastation. A number of houses and barns were destroyed, fences scattered as if a tornado had swept them away, hundreds of acres of corn trampled down and devoured, and wreck, ruin and desolation meet the eye at every turn.”*

David R. Miller owned this farm which included the Cornfield. He, like the majority of local residents, ran to escape the terror of battle, only to return to a farm that would never be the same. Mr. Miller submitted a damage claim of \$1,237 to the federal government for damage to his farm. The U.S. Quartermaster General reimbursed him \$995 in 1872.

Diseases also ravaged many of the local families. David’s brother Daniel died just after the battle. A third Miller brother, Jacob, wrote how, *“diarrhea was a very common complaint,”* and that *“many other citizens and hundreds of soldiers have been taken with the same, and many died, it is an army disease thus adds to the Horrors of war.”*



Owner of the Cornfield
David R. Miller

Finish the hike by continuing north on the Turnpike, then up to the right through the restored North Woods and back to your car.

Conclusion

The landscape that you have just walked was the scene of some of the most horrific fighting in the history of our nation. In his official report of the battle, General Joseph Hooker wrote, *"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. It was never my fortune to witness a more bloody, dismal battlefield."* Later he would write his brother-in-law that the Battle of Antietam *"was fought with great violence on both sides. The carnage has been awful."* Incredibly, the fighting in the Cornfield represents only one third of the day's action at Antietam.

At the end of eleven hours of fighting, more than 23,000 men were killed, wounded or missing. General Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia held their ground on the 18th, then retreated that night across the Potomac River and back into Virginia. This battle ended the first Northern invasion by the Confederacy and provided Abraham Lincoln an opportunity to issue his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

Confederate dead along the Hagerstown Turnpike just south and west of the Cornfield.



Time Line of Cornfield Action

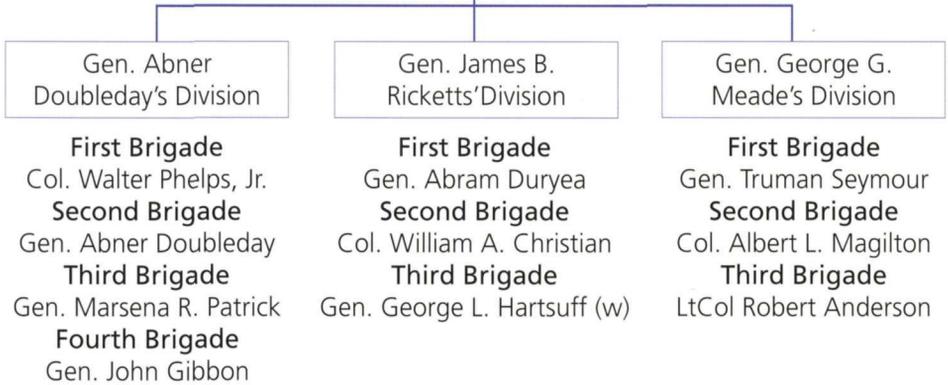
- Daybreak Gen. Hooker's 1st Corps begins their advance. Union Artillery moves up and fires directly into the Cornfield. Confederate artillery on Nicodemus Heights begins to fire at advancing Union soldiers.
- 6:00 a.m. Gen. Abram Duryea's Brigade (Ricketts' Division, 1st Corps) is the first Union Brigade to break out of the Cornfield and engage Stonewall Jackson's Confederates.
- 6:30 a.m. Abner Doubleday's Union Division (led by the Iron Brigade) begins to attack along the Hagerstown Turnpike and in the Cornfield.
- 6:45 a.m. Gen. Harry Hays' Confederate Brigade moves north to support Jackson's initial line. Through the East Woods, Col. Coulter's and Col. Christian's Brigade (Ricketts' Division, 1st Corps) come to the support of Duryea's men who are retreating.
- 7:20 a.m. Gen. John Bell Hood's Confederate Division counterattacks into the Cornfield.
- 7:30 a.m. Lee orders Southern troops from Gen. D. H. Hill's command at the Sunken Road to move north. They drive all the way into the Cornfield.
- 8:00 a.m. Gen. Joseph Mansfield's 12th Corps begins to arrive and drive back Hood's men and the Confederate reinforcements from the Sunken Road.
- 9:00 a.m. Short lull in the action. Confederates have been pushed back to the West Woods. Union General Edwin Sumner's powerful 2nd Corps begins to arrive on the field.

Order of Battle for Principal Units Involved

UNION

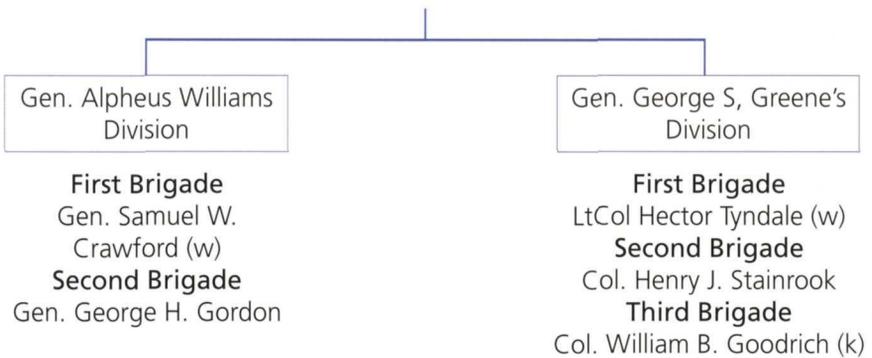
1st Corps

Gen. Joseph Hooker (wounded)
approximately 8,000 men



12th Corps

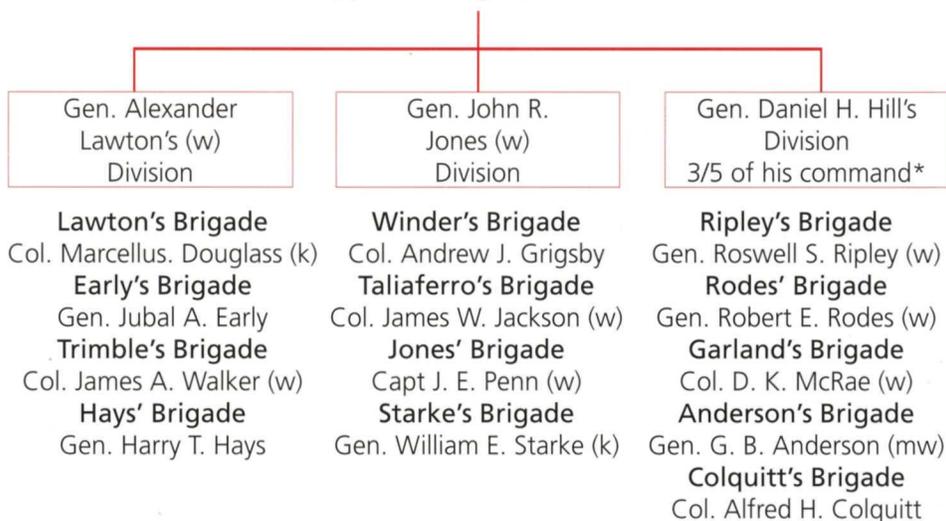
Gen. Joseph K. F. Mansfield (killed)
approximately 7,000 men



CONFEDERATE

Jackson's Wing

Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson
approximately 9,200 men



*Anderson's and Rodes' Brigades did not move north to fight in the Cornfield. They remained in the Sunken Road.

Gen. John B. Hood's Division
part of James Longstreet's Wing,
approximately 2,300 men

Hood's Brigade
Col. William T. Wofford

Law's Brigade
Col. Evander M. Law



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