

Antietam

The Bloodiest Day of the Civil War

The Battle of Antietam (or Sharpsburg) on September 17, 1862, climaxed the first of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's two attempts to carry the war into the North. Some 41,000 southerners were pitted against the 87,000-man Federal Army of the Potomac under Gen. George B. McClellan. And when the fighting ended, the course of the American Civil War had been greatly altered.



"War is a dreadful thing . . . Oh, my God, can't this civil strife be brought to an end."

Clara Barton, who tended the wounded at Antietam during and after the battle.

After his great victory at Manassas in August, Lee had marched his Army of Northern Virginia into Maryland, hoping to find vitally needed men and supplies. McClellan followed, first to Frederick (where through rare good fortune a copy of the Confederate battle plan, Lee's Special Order No. 191, fell into his hands), then westward 12 miles to the passes of South Mountain. There on September 14, at Turner's, Fox's, and Crampton's gaps, Lee tried to block the Federals. But because he had split his army to send troops under Gen. 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 September 15 both armies had established new battlelines west and east of Antietam Creek near the town of Sharpsburg. When Jackson's troops reached Sharpsburg on the 16th, Harpers Ferry having surrendered the day before, 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 Gen. Joseph Hooker's artillery began a murderous fire on Jackson's men in the Miller cornfield north of town. "In the time I am

writing," Hooker reported, "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, and Jackson reported that his men were "exposed for near an hour to a terrific storm of shell, canister, and musketry."

About 7 a.m. Jackson was reinforced and succeeded in driving the Federals back. An hour later Union troops under Gen. Joseph Mansfield counterattacked and by 9 o'clock 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, Gen. John Sedgwick's division of Edwin V. Sumner's corps charged



"I have always had a high opinion of General McClellan, and have no reason to suppose that he failed to accomplish anything that he was able to do."

Robert E. Lee

headlong into the West Woods. There Confederate troops struck Sedgwick's men on both flanks, inflicting appalling casualties.

Meanwhile, Gen. William H. French's division of Sumner's corps moved up to support Sedgwick but veered south into Confederates under Gen. D. H. Hill posted along an old sunken road separating the Roulette and Piper farms. For nearly 4 hours, from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., bitter fighting raged along this road (afterwards known as Bloody Lane) as French, supported by Gen. Israel B. Richardson's division, also of Sumner's corps, sought to drive the southerners back. Confusion and sheer exhaustion finally ended the battle here and in the northern part of the field generally.

About Your Visit

Antietam National Battlefield lies north and east of Sharpsburg, along Md. 34 and 65. Both routes intersect either U.S. 40 or 40A and Int. 70. The visitor center is north of Sharpsburg on Md. 65 and is open daily except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years. Please check with the park staff for information on facilities and daily activities.

There are interpretive markers at Turner's, Fox's, and Crampton's gaps on South Mountain (scenes of preliminary fighting) and at the Shepherdstown (W. Va.) Ford where Lee's army recrossed the Potomac.

Relic hunting within the park is prohibited. Fishing is permitted in Antietam Creek, but a Maryland fishing license is required. The park has a picnic area but fires and camping are not allowed. The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park, 8 kilometers (5 miles) away, has a walk-in tent campground.

Antietam National Battlefield and Cemetery are administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Box 158, Sharpsburg, MD 21782, is in charge.

Southeast of town, Union Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside's troops had been trying to cross a bridge over Antietam Creek since 9:30 a.m. Some 400 Georgians had driven them back



"If I cannot whip Bobbie Lee, I will be willing to go home."

George B. McClellan

each time. At 1 p.m. the Federals finally crossed the bridge (now known as Burnside Bridge) and, after a 2-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. Then about 4 p.m. Gen. A. P. Hill's division, left behind by Jackson at Harpers Ferry to dispose of 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.

It is said that more men were killed or wounded at Antietam on September 17, 1862, than on any other single day of the Civil War. Federal losses were 12,410. Confederate losses 10,700. Although neither side gained a decisive victory, Lee's failure to carry the war effort effectively into the North caused Great Britain to postpone recognition of the Confederate government. The battle also gave President Abraham Lincoln the opportunity to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, which, on January 1, 1863, declared free all slaves in States still in rebellion against the United States. Henceforth the war had a dual purpose: to preserve the Union and to end slavery.



The Battle of Antietam was fought over an area of 31 square kilometers (12 square miles) and consisted of three basic phases: morning, midday, and afternoon. Before starting your tour, stop at the park visitor center where exhibits and a 26-minute film program provide an introduction to the Maryland Campaign. Tour stops 4, 5, 6, and 7 have tape players with additional information about the battle.

Morning Phase (6 a.m. to 9 a.m.)

- 1 **Dunker Church** This church, reconstructed on the original site, was the scene of repeated clashes as both armies sought to occupy and hold the high ground.
- 2 **Joseph Poffenberger Farm** Hooker launched the initial Union attack from this point, behind the North Woods, only to be stopped by Jackson's troops in the Cornfield, 0.8 kilometer (0.5 mile) south.
- 3 **East Woods** Here Union Gen. Joseph Mansfield was fatally wounded as he led the XII Corps into battle.
- 4 **The Cornfield** More fighting took place here in the Miller cornfield than anywhere else at Antietam. The line of battle swept back and forth across the field 15 times.
- 5 **West Woods** Union Gen. John Sedgwick's division lost more than 2,200 men in less than one-half hour in an ill-fated charge into these woods against Jackson's troops.

Midday Phase (9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.)

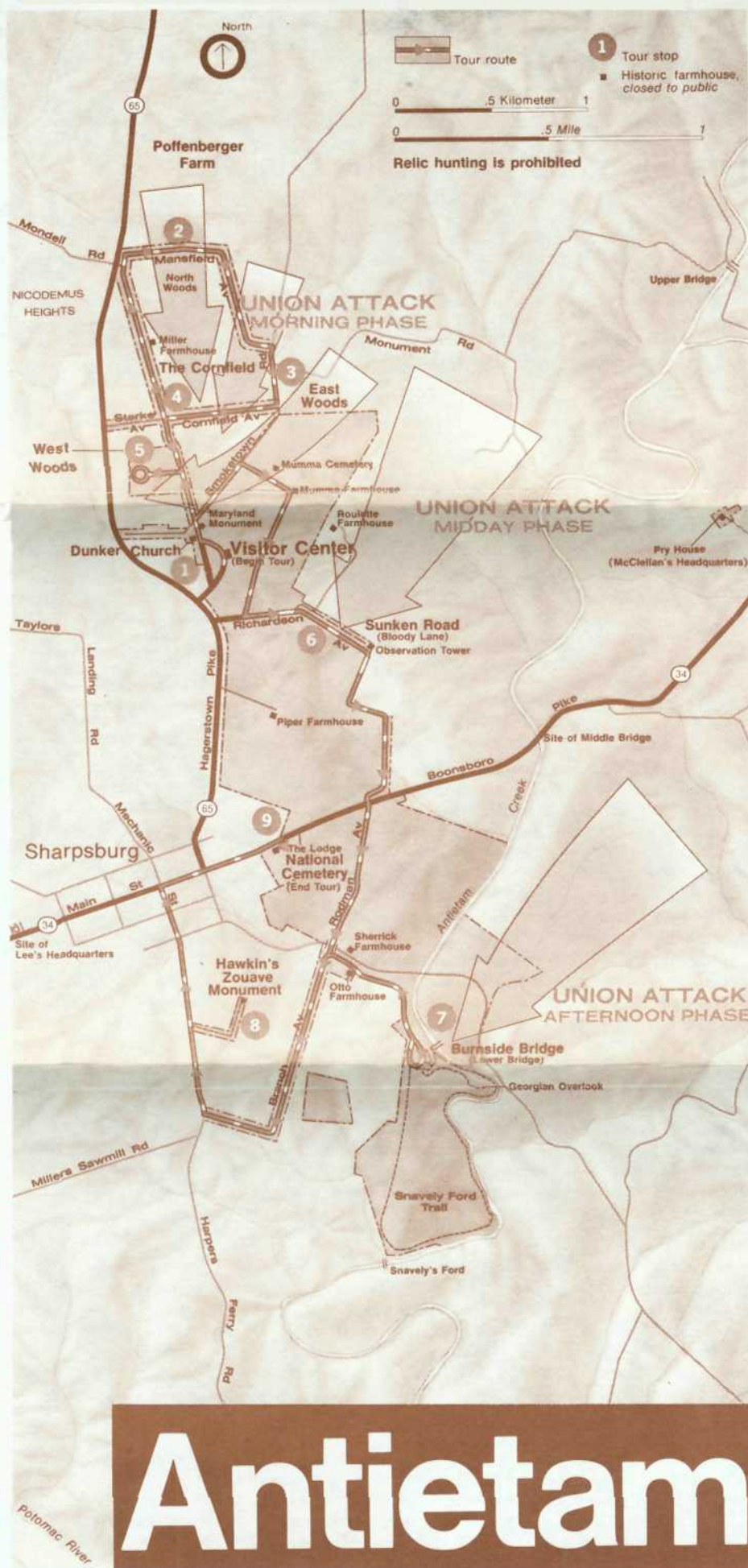
- 6 **Sunken Road (Bloody Lane)** For nearly 4 hours Union and Confederate infantry contested this sunken country road, resulting in some 4,000 casualties. This is why the road is known as Bloody Lane.

Afternoon Phase (1 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.)

- 7 **Burnside Bridge** The fighting at this bridge, named after the Union general whose four divisions were held off most of the day by a few hundred Georgia riflemen, was a key factor in McClellan's lack of success at Antietam. Built in 1836, the bridge is the battlefield's best-known landmark.
- 8 **Hawkins Zouaves Monument** Reached only by foot, this monument marks the place where the battle ended at dusk. A splendid view of the pastoral Antietam Valley awaits visitors who come here now.
- 9 **Antietam National Cemetery** The remains of 4,776 Federal soldiers, including 1,836 unknowns, are buried in this hilltop cemetery near town. Most of the Confederate dead are buried in Hagerstown and Frederick, Md., Shepherdstown, W. Va., and in local church and family cemeteries.

For Safety's Sake Motorists are asked to use caution while driving the tour route. Be aware of one-way roads, pedestrians, and bicyclists. Drivers should stop their vehicles while reading interpretive signs. To insure proper control, bicyclists should exercise caution while descending hills. Please use walkways and trails to avoid contact with stinging nettles, ticks, and snakes. Do not climb on cannons, monuments, markers, fences, or trees. Make your visit safe and enjoyable; don't spoil it with an accident.

Note: Relic hunting is prohibited.



Antietam