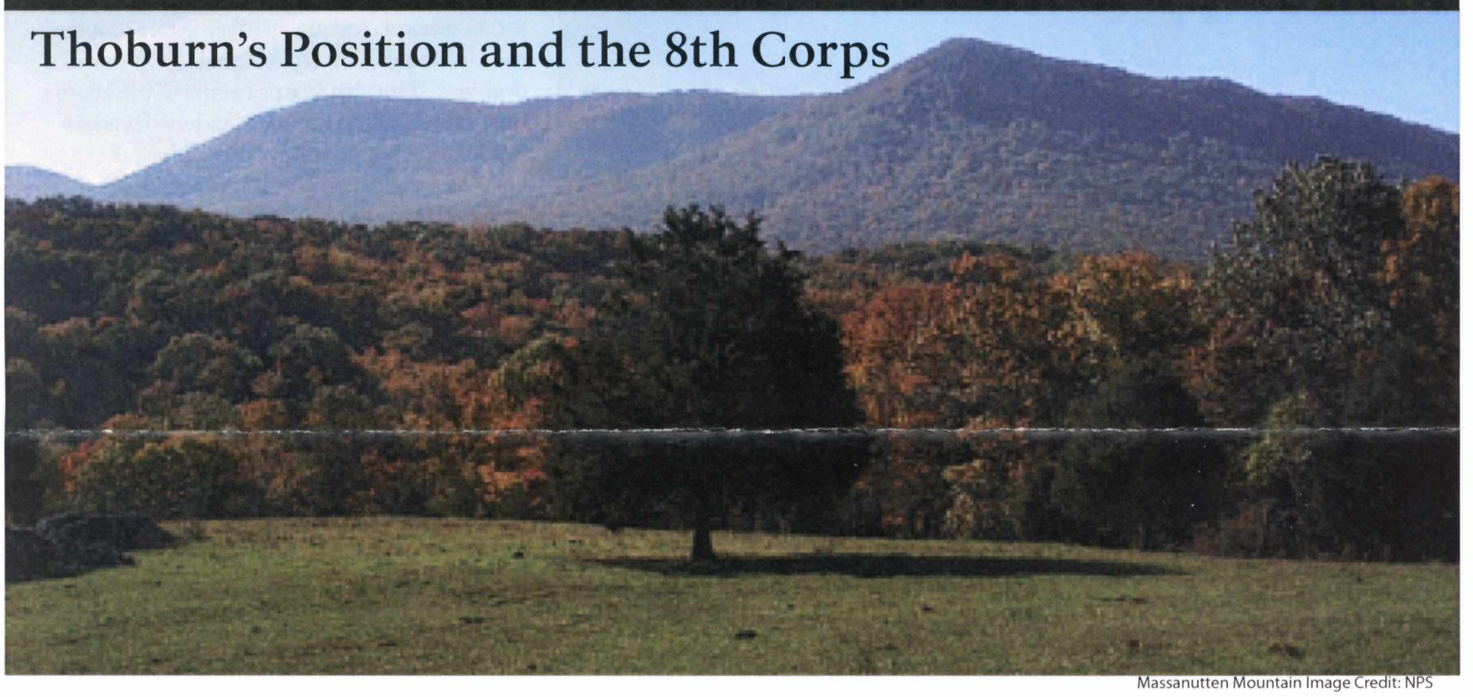
Thoburn's Position and the 8th Corps



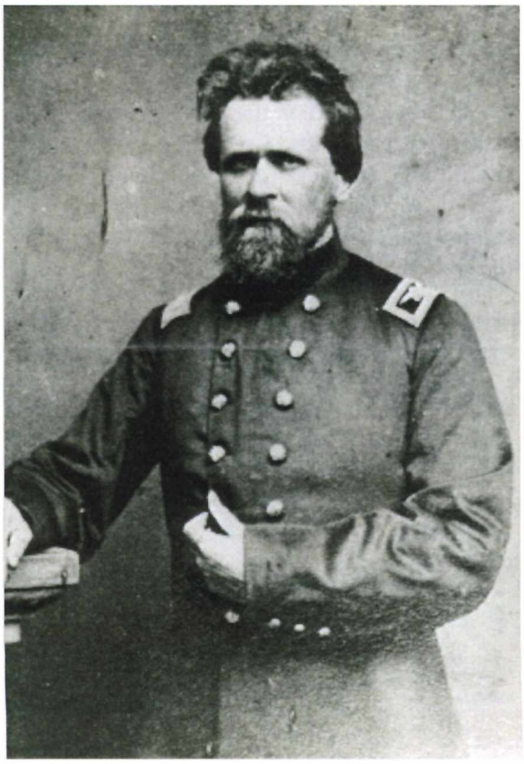
Massanutten Mountain Image Credit: NPS

"The awful conviction came to mind in a moment, that the Eighth Corps, so gallant in all its former engagements, had been entirely and instantly changed into a disorganized mass of stragglers."
Record of the 114th New York State Volunteers

The Union Left

Following "The Burning" of the Shenandoah Valley (late September –early October, 1864), the Union Army of the Shenandoah Valley encamped among the bluffs north of Cedar Creek. Anchoring the army's left flank was the Army of West Virginia (also known at the 8th Corps), commanded by Brig. Gen. George Crook. Numbering approximately 4,200 men, the 8th Corps' two divisions were positioned east of the Valley Pike in a staggered formation. Holding the front line were the 1,700 men of Col. Joseph Thoburn's 1st Division, overlooking Cedar Creek and the North Fork of the Shenandoah River. The 2nd Division, commanded by Col. Rutherford B. Hayes (future President of the United States) was encamped across a broad plateau approximately three-quarters of a mile north (or behind) Thoburn.

Col. Thoburn and his 1st Division



Col. Joseph Thoburn
Library of Congress

Col. Joseph Thoburn, a surgeon before the war, had quickly volunteered in 1861 and had seen extensive action in both West Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley. Nearly all of his men were battle-tested veterans. Upon taking their position along Cedar Creek in early October, Thoburn had his men dig a series of strong entrenchments near modern Bowman's Mill Road. Unfortunately, almost none of these fortifications survive today, although they were described vividly by a Confederate soldier who attacked them during the battle:

The enemy was posted on an almost impregnable position on the bluff overlooking Cedar Creek… The enemy's breastworks were built of strong timbers, with earth thrown against them, with a deep trench on the inside…. In front of this breastwork, and from forty to fifty feet in breadth, was an abattis….*

*abattis—tree branches with their ends stripped and sharpened into points and then intertwined (a precurser to modern barbed wire).

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Confederate Plan



Battle of Cedar Creek Map
Jedidiah Hotchkiss - Library of Congress

The natural strength of the Union position, along with the entrenchments, ruled out a frontal assault, so the Confederates searched for an unexpected alternative. After scouting the Union position from Signal Knob (which dominated the 8th Corps camps to the south) on October 17th Southern leaders devised a bold plan. Confederate commander Jubal Early split his smaller army into three columns in order to place the bulk of his force against the 8th Corps. It was one of the riskiest attack plans created during the war, as it required perfect coordination and absolute surprise to have any chance of success.

Surprise Attack

Following an all-night march along the base of the Massanutten Mountain, including two river crossings, the Confederates rolled out of a dense fog in the pre-dawn hours of October 19th. Early's plan worked perfectly, as it caught the majority of Thoburn's men completely by surprise. Most were still in their tents and the few who managed to form a line were quickly overwhelmed. One Confederate described the scene as they overran Thoburn's position:

Such a sight as met our eyes as we mounted their works was not often seen. For a mile or more...towards the rear was a vast plain.... Tents whitened the field from one end to the other...while the country behind was one living sea of men and horses—all fleeing for and safety. Men, shoeless and hatless, went flying like mad to the rear.... Such confusion, such a panic, was never witnessed before by the troops....

Three of the four Union artillery batteries where quickly captured, as Thoburn's line collapsed. In the confused retreat that followed, Col. Thoburn desperately attempted to rally his men before being struck and mortally wounded. Soon after, Col. Hayes' 2nd Division came under attack. Although it fought gallantly, Hayes' line was also quickly overwhelmed. Despite the long odds, the Confederate attack had worked perfectly, with the 8th Corps routed and fleeing. The Union left had completely collapsed.

"Victory from the Jaws of Defeat"

Following their surprise attack, Early's Army of the Valley succeeded in driving the rest of the Union troops from their camps and north of Middletown. By 10:30 a.m. the Union forces were bloodied, battered and on the verge of a demoralizing defeat. Cedar Creek appeared to be a stunning Confederate victory.

But the afternoon witnessed a remarkable turn of events. Sheridan, who had left the Valley on October 15, returned that morning. Riding from Winchester, and completely unaware of the disaster that had befallen his army, Sheridan rode hard to the field where he quickly rallied his men. He then ordered a counterattack at 4:00 p.m. that swept the Confederates from the field. Sheridan had literally snatched a "victory from the jaws of defeat."

Preservation of the Thoburn's Position



This property, consisting of 134 acres, and part of the historic Bowman-Hite farm, was preserved by the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation in 2003. While the main entrenchments built by the 8th Corps are now gone, the remains of a smaller set of earthworks still exist on the western edge of the property along the bluffs overlooking Cedar Creek. These were probably constructed to protect a picket line that covered crossing points in the creek. Future plans call for the construction of walking trails, interpretive signage and parking, so that future generations can visit and learn from the resources contained on this hallowed ground.

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