

## **Aldie, Middleburg, Upperville in the Gettysburg Campaign**

On behalf of the Civil War Trust, Mosby Heritage Area Association, Aldie Heritage Association, Land Trust of Virginia, Piedmont Environmental Council, and Oatlands Historic House & Gardens, I would like to thank each and every one of you for coming out tonight to discuss the importance of this historically-significant Virginia town. It is truly an honor to speak to you all tonight.

Now that we understand the preservation threat here in Aldie, as well as the history of the Battle of Aldie, thanks to Jennifer, Florian, Malcolm, Wynne, and Kevin, I would like to take a few minutes to put the cavalry battles of Aldie, Middleburg, and Upperville, fought from June 17 through June 21, 1863, in the greater scope of the momentous and decisive Gettysburg Campaign.

In early June 1863, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's powerful Army of Northern Virginia was at the pinnacle of its existence. Encamped at Fredericksburg and Culpeper Court House, Lee's army had just won two decisive battles along the Rappahannock River line: at Fredericksburg in December and Chancellorsville in early May.

Yet, much hung in the balance for the Confederate cause: the Confederate defense along the Mississippi River at Vicksburg – “the Gibraltar of the Confederacy” – was besieged by the Federals under the command of Maj. Gen. Ulysses Grant; intervention by Great Britain or France was on the cusp of being

realized; and the Army of Northern Virginia struggled to feed itself off the war-torn Virginia landscape. If the Confederates could win a decisive battle against the Federals, they could perhaps win the war.

To accomplish the goals of winning a victory on Northern soil, lessening the blow of defeat at Vicksburg, damaging the public opinion of the Lincoln Administration, encouraging the Northern Peace Democrat movement, and preventing the Army of the Potomac from launching a summer offensive campaign in the Eastern Theater, Lee planned to advance north into Maryland and Pennsylvania. At the same time, the Confederates' adversary, Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker's defeated Army of the Potomac, was also encamped just north of Fredericksburg across the Rappahannock, keeping a watchful eye on the enemy.

On June 3, Lee issued orders to his First and Second Corps (under Lt. Gens. James Longstreet and Richard Ewell, respectively) to concentrate at Culpeper for the advance north. Lee's Third Army Corps remained at Fredericksburg as the rear guard until the Army of the Potomac slipped away to pursue.

Maj. Gen. JEB Stuart and his Cavalry Corps were ordered to Brandy Station, just six miles to the northeast from Culpeper, to screen the army and block the fords along the Rappahannock River. In response to the cavalry concentration, Hooker ordered cavalry commander Maj. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton and his troopers

to disperse the Rebels.. Hooker also needed his cavalry to gather the needed intelligence in order to plan his next course of action. On June 9, 1863, Pleasonton's cavalry caught Stuart by surprise near Brandy Station. A back-and-forth fight ensued across Fleetwood Hill, resulting in a tactical draw.

The next day, Ewell's and Longstreet's corps were ordered north and into the Shenandoah Valley. Stuart's Cavalry was ordered to screen the advancing corps by defending the gaps from Union troops.

The 140-mile-long Shenandoah Valley runs north-south between the Blue Ridge to the east and the Ridge-and-Valley Appalachians to the west. The Shenandoah was essentially the "breadbasket of the Confederacy," acting as the main supply line for Lee's army and a strategic backdoor into Northern territory. With limited entry points through the mountains, the Blue Ridge was a natural screen to protect an army moving through this essential artery. Lee understood the vital importance of the Shenandoah Valley: to secure the gaps and entry points was to secure the Valley and prevent the enemy from gathering intelligence.

Believing Lee's army was moving North through the Shenandoah Valley, Hooker ordered his men to find the Army of Northern Virginia, relying heavily on his cavalry to be the eyes of the army. On June 15, JEB Stuart's cavalry corps began its movement north on the east side of the Blue Ridge Mountains, screening

the main body of the Army of Northern Virginia as it advanced through the Shenandoah Valley.

The next day, Hooker ordered Pleasonton's cavalry to move into the Loudoun Valley towards the village of Aldie to discover the whereabouts of Lee's army. Aldie lies in a gap in the Bull Run Mountains, and controls access to both the Ashby's Gap Turnpike and the Snickersville Turnpike. Gaining control of those roads opened access into the Blue Ridge, allowing Pleasonton to pierce Stuart's screen and learn the enemy's location and intentions. Hooker's dispatch to Pleasonton read: "the commanding general relies upon you ... to give him information of where the enemy is, his force, and his movements ... it is better that we should lose men than to be without knowledge of the enemy, as we now seem to be."

On June 17, Pleasonton issued orders to Brig. Gen. David Gregg to ride toward Aldie, while one regiment reconnoitered to Middleburg. Patrols were also ordered to Winchester, Berryville, and Harpers Ferry. At 5:00am, just as the heat and humidity began to rise, Gregg and his cavalry division made their way west towards Aldie from Manassas. At the same time, Colonel Thomas Munford's Virginia troopers advanced from Upperville to Aldie in order to set up pickets, reconnoiter, and forage. When Brig. Gen. Judson Kilpatrick's cavalry brigade arrived at Aldie, they ran into Munford's pickets, pushing the Confederates back

through Aldie. On the other side of Aldie, the Federals ran into more of Munford's Virginia cavalry, who in turn drove the Union troopers back. The Ashby's Gap Turnpike was held by Rebel forces, preventing the Federals from reaching the Shenandoah Valley. No one expected this vicious fight.

Along the Snickersville Turnpike, Kilpatrick brought up two batteries of artillery on a hill northwest of town to fire upon the Confederates, while his cavalry deployed. By the Adam Farm along the Ashby's Gap Turnpike, more Confederates waited for a Federal attack. Kilpatrick ordered a charge of this position and made some headway, but failed to dislodge the Confederates fully from their positions at the Adam farm.

Along a curve on the Snickersville Turnpike near the Furr House, Munford's Virginia cavalry dismounted and hid behind a stone wall. Waiting for unsuspecting Federal cavalry, it was described by Munford: "I doubt if there was a stronger position in fifty miles of Aldie than the one I had." As the 1<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts broke through Confederate pickets, they had no idea the fire that would be inflicted upon them by Munford's men at the bend. The horrendous volume of fire forced the Massachusetts cavalymen to halt and attempt to turn around. Though taking heavy casualties, the Federals did not stop fighting nor assaulting the Rebel positions. More companies of men from the 1<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts attacked, but were "just slaughtered" from heavy fire and hand-to-hand combat.

Federal reinforcements from the 1st Maine and 4<sup>th</sup> New York, saved the Federals from a disastrous defeat. By 8:00pm, the battle of Aldie died down, just as Munford's men departed for Middleburg. The result of the battle of Aldie was inconclusive, but proved to the men of both sides that this oncoming campaign would be a desperate and bloody affair.

Before arriving in Aldie in the morning of June 17, Kilpatrick had ordered the 1<sup>st</sup> Rhode Island Cavalry under the command of Col. Alfred N. Duffie to Middleburg by way of the Thoroughfare Gap in order to reconnoiter Loudoun County and hold the town. After limited action with Confederate pickets, Duffie secured the town and set up defensive positions leading into the town. However, Brig. Gen. Beverley Robertson's North Carolina brigade was able to force back Duffie's Rhode Islanders. The next morning, Brig. Gen. John Chambliss's brigade attacked and captured Duffie's men. Union probes into Middleburg throughout the rest of the day were virtually bloodless. However, Confederate troops occupied Mt. Defiance a high eminence west of Middleburg.

On the morning of June 19, Gregg moved into Middleburg, with Brig. Gen. John Buford's two brigades around the northern end of the Confederates. Col. J. Irvin Gregg's brigade was ordered to take Middleburg and push westward along the Ashby Gap Turnpike. The Federal cavalry was able to drive the Rebels through town until reaching a strong enemy position on Mount Defiance. With artillery and

Kilpatrick's brigade as reinforcements, Gregg's troops advanced upon Mount Defiance. Armed with carbines, the 4<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Cavalry assaulted North Carolina troops to the south of the turnpike. The assault nearly secured Union victory there, but a strong counterattack by the 9<sup>th</sup> Virginia Cavalry drove the Federals off the heights.

Soon, the green North Carolinians began to give way. With the wounding of Confederate Maj. Heros von Borcke and the approaching Federal cavalry under Buford, Stuart ordered a withdrawal off Mt. Defiance. Though certainly not a Confederate victory, Stuart once again accomplished his goal of preventing the Federals from penetrating his screen and discovering the movements of the main bodies of the Army of Northern Virginia.

By June 20, Pleasonton still had no conclusive intelligence about the Army of Northern Virginia, nor had he been able to burst through Stuart's screen of cavalry. Because he believed the Confederates had more than just cavalry, Pleasonton requested infantry support from Maj. Gen. George Meade's V Army Corps in order to route the Rebels at Upperville. The goal was to hold the Confederate's attention, while Buford worked his way around the Confederate lines. On the other hand, Stuart received reinforcements from Brig. Gen. Wade Hampton's brigade, who was deployed with Robertson's brigade on the Ashby's Gap Turnpike.

At 8:00am, Union cannon opened on the Rebels lining the turnpike, forcing Hampton's brigade to fall back across Cromwell's Run. Stuart's men were in the meantime falling back west of Rector's Crossroads to the Goose Creek Bridge. Pleasonton and Brig. Gen. Strong Vincent's brigade reorganized their men to cross the Goose Creek Bridge. The artillery fire around the bridge was so intense that it could be heard all the way in Washington, DC. Stuart's men tried to make a stand by the bridge to give them more time to fall back and reorganize towards Upperville on the high ground at Vineyard Hill. The hill lay only 5 miles from the Blue Ridge and Lee's army.

In the meantime, Federal cavalry under Buford made their way from Middleburg to Upperville in an attempt to strike the Rebel left on Vineyard Hill. On his way, his division ran into Chambliss and Jones' brigades along the Trappe Road, who were trying to reunite with the rest of the Confederate cavalry. Gamble and Devin's Federal cavalry brigades charged against the gray troopers until reinforcements from the 9<sup>th</sup> Virginia Cavalry came in just in time to sweep the Yankees from their victory.

While all this was ensuing along the Trappe Road, at Vineyard Hill, just east of Upperville, Northern cavalrymen charged the Confederate position on this prominent piece of high ground. Wade Hampton's brigade counterattacked the oncoming Federals at least three times. The Rebel stand on Vineyard Hill was

crucial to allowing their troops to safely fall back towards the Blue Ridge and Ashby's Gap. Nonetheless, Federal cavalry continued to pursue the Confederates. At the intersection of the Trappe Road and Ashby's Gap Turnpike, the enemies clashed one last time.

The Battle of Upperville was over – and so were the cavalry clashes in the Loudoun Valley.

Those five bloody days at Aldie, Middleburg, and Upperville resulted in roughly 1,400 casualties. Heroic soldiers like Henry Lee Higginson of the 1<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry, Maj. Heros von Borcke on Stuart's staff, Nehemiah Mann of the 4<sup>th</sup> New York Cavalry, and so many others either bore the scars of war or became one of the fallen. It was a grim foreshadowing of the deadliest battle ever fought on North American soil – the Battle of Gettysburg – which was fought less than one month later as a part of this bloody campaign into Pennsylvania.

Though small compared to many other battles fought during the Gettysburg Campaign, the battles of Aldie, Middleburg, and Upperville were significant in their own right. From Upperville, JEB Stuart would launch his fateful ride around the Army of the Potomac, resulting in one of the greatest controversies surrounding the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg. Additionally, Pleasonton's cavalry were never able to solve the question of "where was Lee's army?" allowing Lee's army

to march deeper into the North unmolested. These three battles became critical to the future of the Gettysburg Campaign. What happened here on these hallowed fields, the same ones we are trying to save today, helped decide the fate of the country we call home. Their importance can never be overstated.

As I close, I would like to leave you all with a quote from a veteran of the battles of Aldie, Middleburg, and Upperville. Captain Charles T. O’Ferrall of the 12<sup>th</sup> Virginia Cavalry wrote in his memoirs:

*“The names of Aldie, Middleburg, and Upperville were raised from obscurity and made historic. These fields, especially the last named, will figure in all time to come as the scenes of as desperate cavalry fighting as the world has ever seen.”*

Thank you.