

The Battle of Aldie, June 17, 1863

On June 17, 1863, thousands of Federal and Confederate cavalymen converged on Aldie. The temperature was stifling, the roads were dusty, and man and beast alike were parched. Though the anticipation of yet another battle fought across Virginia's farmlands and along its roadways seemed on the horizon, no one believed June 17, 1863 would usher in more bloodshed.

Soldiers admired the beauty of the country they rode through—the well-kept farms, the rolling hills, the fences crisscrossing the fields of blooming crops. Despite the fact that many of these Union and Confederate horsemen signed up voluntarily for the war, by the summer of 1863, many dreamed of being elsewhere, back at home with their families and friends, away from the misery, death, and destruction of the battlefield. Above the rattling of their sabers and the trotting of their horses, some of the soldiers daydreamed about a life with no war. "I do not expect to get out of the war alive," said one horse soldier to another as they began to near Aldie, "but if I do I shall go West," before a fury of gunshots cut the dream short.

Federal cavalry approached Aldie from the east while the Confederates entered the town from the west, both using the Little River/Ashby's Gap Turnpike, modern U.S. Route 50. A lack of knowledge about the enemy movements and the

desire to gain information about their whereabouts prompted the Union advance on the town, while orders to keep the Confederate army's northern advance blind to Union eyes sent the Southern cavalry riding towards Aldie. Unexpectedly, east of town, the lead elements of both columns stumbled into each other. A back and forth fight broke out in the streets of Aldie itself, as the town's citizens no doubt huddled for shelter in their homes. The Federals managed to drive the Virginians they faced all the way through Aldie before meeting a more stubborn Confederate resistance on the west end of town, which in turn drove the Union troopers back the way they came.

With a fight on their hands, both of the opposing commanders began bringing more men into the immediate area as the temperature climbed into the mid 90's. For the Federals arriving at Aldie's west end, the Little River, with its picturesque stone arch bridge still spanning it, became an oasis to the hundreds of arriving Northern troopers. Immediately, men and horses alike plunged down the river's steep banks into the refreshing water. "Men, horses, mules all rushed pell-mell into the warm disgusting," "milk and molasses" colored water "and drank the filthy fluid to quench their thirst," remembered one of the water-seeking troopers.

None other than the young captain George Armstrong Custer arrived at the banks of the Little River. Seeing the chaos on the east bank while everyone surged for water, Custer spurred his horse across the stone arch bridge that many of you

probably drove your car across this evening and descended the west bank of the river for his and his mount's refreshment. Rather than returning the way he came, Custer decided to ford the river and ascend its east bank to get back onto level ground. The feat was easier said than done however, and Custer and his horse tumbled back into the Little River, with the captain becoming fully submerged for a time. He soon reappeared and crawled out of the river despite the jeers and laughter of those who witnessed the fall.

The Federal soldiers from Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, and a host of other Northern states that trotted through Aldie were in for a historic treat. Before crossing the Little River, a host of beautiful buildings greeted them, including the Woodburn Tavern. Aware horsemen also could not have failed to notice their passage through the Aldie Gap, a dangerous passageway for many Northerners recently that marked the entrance to the confederacy of John Singleton Mosby and his Rangers. Throughout much of the Civil War, that gap was one of the last geographical features they saw before meeting their demise at the hands of Mosby's command.

The village of Aldie provided mindful soldiers with a great view into their country's past. They pushed their horses along the road slicing between Charles Fenton Mercer's home and the impressive mill complex. Mercer was a prominent member of the national political scene in the antebellum years before the Civil War

who pushed forward legislation for the construction of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and fought the African slave trade. Up next, they passed the home of the Berkeley clan, another prominent family throughout Virginia's history. As the seemingly endless column of Union soldiers continued to ride through Aldie, curious citizens watched the cavalcade through their open windows and doors, while a less venturesome bunch peeked through their blinds. One of the ladies of Aldie watched the happenings from the upper story of her house before the shocking profanity from the mouth of a Union officer drove her back inside. Today, cruising through Aldie gives drivers many of the same views and contemplations that travelers have experienced over the last two centuries.

Once through the village, the fight escalated again along the Ashby's Gap Turnpike. Though successful in forcing some dismounted Confederate cavalry further away from Aldie, the situation along the turnpike stalled as fighting spiraled northwest up the Snickersville Turnpike.

At a bend in the pike about one mile outside of Aldie, Confederate cavalrymen took positions behind a stone wall at a blind curve in the road. As the Federal horsemen passed out of Aldie, they charged into the determined fire of the Virginians. Wave after wave of Federals tried to get around the bend in the Snickersville Turnpike, but each turn revealed an unseen foe at close range. "I was so close to these men as they charged by me, that I could see the dust fly from their

blue jackets as the bullets from our revolvers would strike them. I was not fifteen feet from them,” recalled one Virginian behind the stone wall on June 17. “I saw at least one of their horses shot when running at full speed, throwing its rider over its head,” he continued. During one of these attacks, Luigi Palma di Cesnola, commanding the 4th New York Cavalry, lunged forward to join in the attack with his soldiers despite being placed under arrest earlier in the day. His heroics earned him the Medal of Honor, the only soldier to receive that award in the cavalry fights in the Loudoun Valley during June 1863.

Altogether, five attacks against the Confederate position failed to crack it and left the roadway of the Snickersville Turnpike and the fields around it littered with the casualties of battle, both men and horses alike. For one of the units involved, the 1st Massachusetts Cavalry, two out of three men in the regiment who rode over the Little River earlier that day and down Aldie’s picturesque main street failed to come out of the battle unscathed.

In the wake of the repeated Federal repulses, Confederate horsemen poured back down the turnpike, their eyes set on Aldie itself. At the last minute, a freshly arrived regiment of Maine cavalrymen stopped the enemy advance and, like so many other blue coated cavalrymen before them, began pushing northwest towards the bend in the road after a back and forth melee on Aldie’s outskirts. Finally, the weight of Union numbers began to tell, and the Mainers drove the Virginians from

the stone wall. However, they did so at the cost of losing their commanding officer. “I do not hesitate to say that I have never seen as many Yankees killed in the same space of ground in any fight I have ever seen, or on any battlefield in Virginia that I have been over,” remembered one of the Confederate cavaliers.

When the shouting of men and horses and the cracking of pistols and rifles died away as the sun sank behind the Blue Ridge on Wednesday, June 17, 1863, approximately 400 Union and Confederate soldiers littered the streets and fields of Aldie, either dead or wounded. Doctors and nurses loaded the ambulatory wounded into wagons and transported them east over the Little River through the Aldie Gap to permanent hospitals. Aldie’s homes became temporary hospitals for the more seriously wounded. Union soldiers, left with the gruesome task of burying the dead, impressed a local wheelwright into making coffins for the remains.

For the thousands of people who participated in the battle, whether they carried a saber into the fight or watched with angst from the windows of their homes, it was a day many could never forget.

On the 28th anniversary of the battle, 16 survivors from the 1st Massachusetts Cavalry left Aldie and proceeded north up the Snickersville Turnpike. This time, they did not ascend the road and travel its twist and turns spurred on by the shouts of their comrades and commanders. Instead, they came back to remember their

fallen friends at the bend in the road. After an “entirely informal” ceremony dedicating a monument bearing the names of the fallen from that June day in 1863, the gray bearded men walked over the battlefield around the Furr Farm, lost in their own thoughts and memories. Slowly, beginning quietly, a hushed scattering of voices got louder and louder. “Here we buried comrades,” said one. “Here it was that Sergeant Odell called ‘Rally round the colors, boys,’” said another. “Here is where Sergeant Teague charged the stone wall.” “Here is where we buried fourteen in one grave.” “Here—” began another before the leader of the ceremony, Major Charles Davis, cut the men off and called them to the front yard of the Furr House. There, they took their “last look over the field, with bare heads” when one member of the Massachusetts delegation somberly said, “Well, boys, who next?”

Obviously, like their comrades who perished in 1863, the participants of the monument dedication are long gone. No more can they pace the sacred fields of Aldie and point out exactly the spot where their fondest memories happened. But thanks to the work of dedicated preservationists and landowners, we can. Today, anyone can follow the path both armies took to Aldie, through the town, and beyond without hardly a modern intrusion. I challenge you all here tonight to find another place in Northern Virginia with such an incredible historic landscape as the one we are working to save tonight.

Yes, the witnesses of the fight at Aldie are still “alive” through the letters and the artifacts they left behind that you can find in books, archives, or museums. But what do those stand for—what do they truly mean—if we cannot understand the provenance of the words and deeds of our predecessors? And what if that dangerous, deadly bend in the road was straightened out? How much would that change our view of Aldie’s experience in the Civil War?

The preeminent means to understand the past lies not in an archive or behind a glass case. No, to be on the land where history happened is to experience that history. That is what people get when they visit Aldie. Here, the stories of the past are alive. To see the Woodburn Tavern, walk the Snickersville Turnpike, and traverse the Furr Farm is to live the past. That is something we must never lose.