



The Battle of Cedar Creek



The Battle of Cedar Creek, by Julian Scot, 1872
Courtesy of the Vermont State Curator's Office

“A victory turned from disaster...” Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan

The 1864 Valley Campaign



Custer's Division Retiring from Mount Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley, October 7, 1864 - by: Alfred Waud
Image Courtesy: Library of Congress

Following his victories in September and October, 1864, Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan and his 32,000-man Army of the Shenandoah conducted a systematic destruction of a 75 mile swath of the Shenandoah Valley. “The Burning” laid waste to the “Breadbasket of the Confederacy.” Confident the campaign was over, Sheridan camped his army on the bluffs north of Cedar Creek. Gen. Jubal Early’s poorly equipped and ill-fed Army of the Valley was reduced to approximately 12,000 men and seemed to pose little threat. Thus, Sheridan traveled to Washington, D.C., on October 15th to confer with higher authorities about future movements.

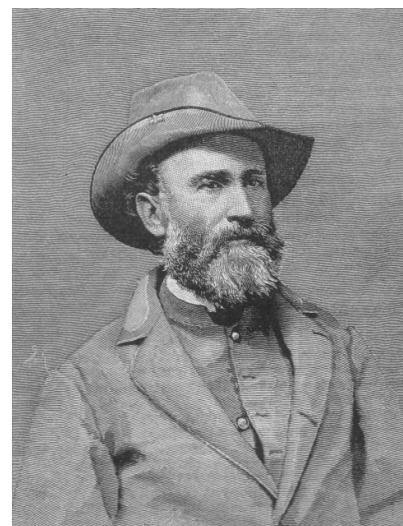
Confederate Plan

Little did Sheridan realize that on October 13th Early had received 3,000 reinforcements from Gen. Lee, along with instructions to launch an offensive to regain the Valley. While the natural strength of the Union position ruled out a frontal assault, Gen. John Gordon devised an unexpected alternative. After toiling up the steep slopes of Massanutten Mountain on October 17th to Signal Knob, where the entire Union army was visible, he returned with a bold plan.

Despite the long odds, Early approved and put the plan into motion on the night of October 18th. It was one of the riskiest and most audacious assaults attempted during the entire Civil War. Early split his smaller army into three columns in order to place the bulk of his force against the Union left, held by the 8th Corps. It would take perfect coordination and absolute surprise to have any chance of success.



Major General Philip Sheridan
Army of the Shenandoah



Lieutenant General Jubal A. Early
Army of the Valley

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. Most Northern soldiers were still in their tents and the few who managed to form a line were quickly overwhelmed. Within minutes the 8th Corps was routed and fleeing.

The Union 19th Corps was struck next and although given more warning, its lines were soon forced back and Belle Grove fell to the Southern advance around 7:00 a.m. That left only the Union 6th Corps, which had set up its line along the banks of Meadow Brook, to face

the Confederate advance.

Fighting stubbornly, the Northern line continued to withdraw. Brig. Gen. George Getty's 6th Corps division made a determined stand on a prominent hill overlooking Middletown where the town cemetery was located. For 90 minutes (8:00 to 9:30 a.m.) Getty repulsed three attacks and withstood a 30 minute artillery bombardment before finally being forced to withdraw. By 10:30 a.m. the Army of the Shenandoah was bloodied, battered and on the verge of a demoralizing defeat. Cedar Creek appeared to be a stunning Confederate victory.

Fatal Halt

Early assumed the Union army would conduct a full retreat and thus ordered his lines to halt just north of Middletown. Believing his own men were too exhausted, and his lines were weakened by the loss of men who were plundering the Union camps, Early felt the best he could do was "hold what had been gained" (including over 1,000 prisoners and 24 cannon). Despite this success, Gordon urged his commander to continue the advance.

Frustrated, he later called this delay the "fatal halt." Early's plan was to secure his captured spoils and hold on until darkness could cover his withdrawal. During this debate Early, Gordon and the rest of the Confederate army heard cheering from the Union lines. Although they did not know it, this celebration marked the arrival of Sheridan, and with him, a turning point in the battle.

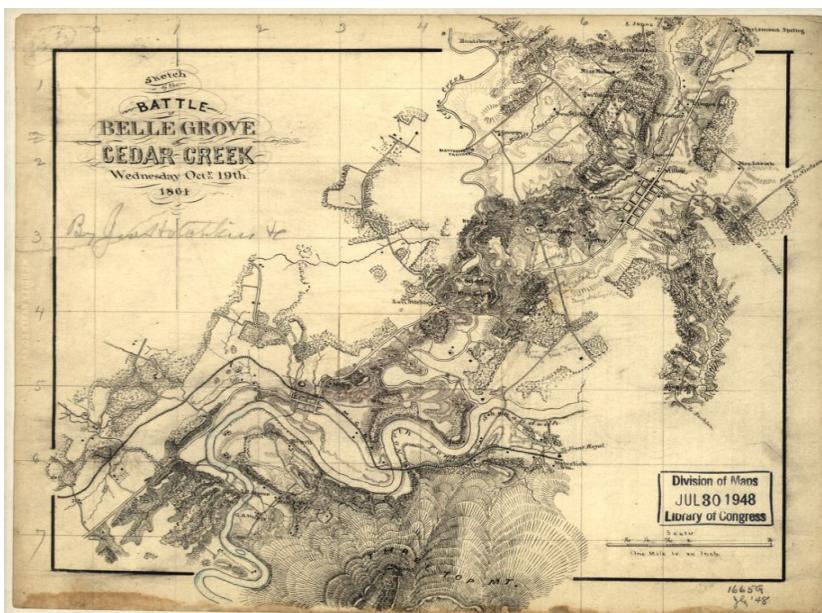
Sheridan's Ride



Returning that morning, Sheridan had no idea of the disaster that had befallen his army. Soon, however, the sounds of battle reached him, followed by fleeing Union soldiers spreading rumors of defeat. Riding hard, he rallied soldiers along the way, and arrived on the field around 10:30 a.m. "Sheridan's Ride," later celebrated in art and poetry, forever cemented his status in American history. Sheridan immediately rejected all suggestions to order a full-scale retreat, and instead began to plan for a counterattack.

Sheridan's Ride by Thure de Thulstrup
Image Credit: Library of Congress

Counterattack!



Sketch of the battle of Belle Grove or Cedar Creek, Wednesday, Oct'r 19th, 1864 / by Jedediah Hotchkiss
Image Credit: Library of Congress

Preparations took several hours, but by 4:00 p.m. Sheridan ordered his attack to begin. The Union advance met determined resistance and the fate of the battle hung in the balance before the Confederate left was turned. At this point, Union cavalry, led by Brig. Gen. George Custer struck hard. The Confederate line unraveled and the retreat quickly turned into a rout.

By 5:00 p.m. the Confederate Army of the Valley ceased to exist. Losses included over 1,200 prisoners and 48 cannon, including all 24 of the Union cannon captured that morning. Total casualties numbered approximately 8,600 (5,700 Union and 2,900 Confederate), making it the second bloodiest battle in the Valley.

Cedar Creek was a momentous Union victory and marked the end of Sheridan's overwhelmingly successful campaign, which crushed further Confederate resistance in the Shenandoah Valley, and occurred on the eve of the presidential election. For the Confederacy, the campaign was a humiliating disaster, and one of a string of setbacks that fall and winter that ultimately lead to final defeat less than six months later.