

# Highland County

## AT WAR

## Battlefield Driving Tour

### Battle of McDowell

May 8, 1862

#### 1862 Timeline

##### Winter 1861-62

Confederate Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson in winter headquarters in Winchester.

##### March 1862

Jackson retires south, up the Valley, as Union forces occupy Winchester.

##### 23 March

Jackson is defeated at the First Battle of Kernstown.

##### April - May

After pausing at modern-day Elkton, Jackson moves his army out of the Valley to deceive Federal forces and then returns via rail through Staunton.

##### 8 May

Jackson defeats Federal forces under Gen. John Frémont at McDowell.

##### 23 May

Jackson defeats a Federal garrison at Front Royal.

##### 25 May

Jackson defeats Union Gen. Nathaniel Banks at the First Battle of Winchester.

##### Early June

Jackson narrowly eludes an attempt by Union Gens. Frémont and James Shields to trap him in the lower Shenandoah Valley.

##### 8 June

Jackson defeats Frémont at Cross Keys.

##### 9 June

Jackson defeats Union forces at Port Republic.

##### Mid-June

Federal forces withdraw from the Valley and Jackson joins Lee in front of Richmond.

## Stonewall Jackson's 1862 Valley Campaign

In the spring of 1862 during the Civil War, with Confederate fortunes fading, Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson was ordered to use the Shenandoah Valley as a diversionary theater to keep additional Union forces from joining the massive Federal campaign to capture Richmond. In a swift feat of marching, deception, counter-marching and sheer boldness, Jackson conducted one of the most audacious and brilliant campaigns in American military history. With only 18,000 men, Jackson tied up elements of three separate Federal armies—over 60,000 men—and was able to prevent them from joining the Federal effort against Richmond.

### Prelude to Battle

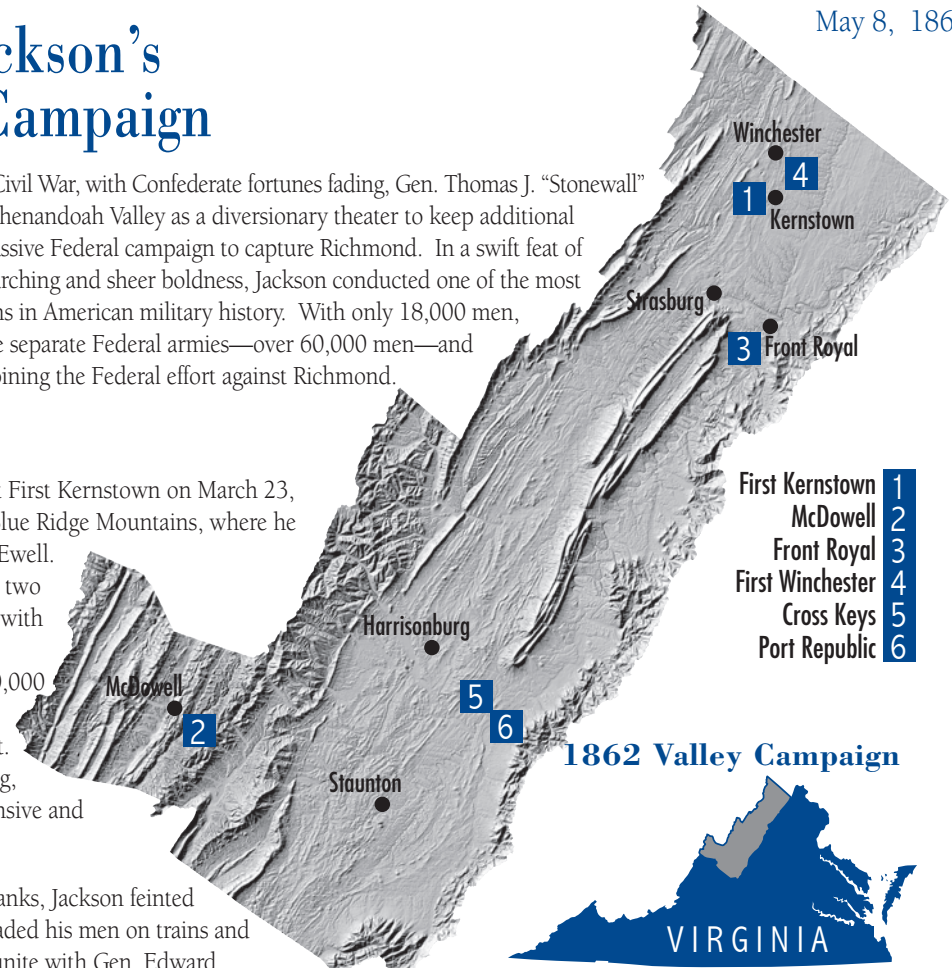
After suffering a tactical defeat at First Kernstown on March 23, Jackson withdrew south to the Blue Ridge Mountains, where he was reinforced by Gen. Richard Ewell. By late April, Jackson was facing two threats: Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks with 15,000 men in the Valley, and Gen. John Fremont, who had 20,000 men scattered throughout the Allegheny Mountains to the west. To keep those forces from uniting, Jackson decided to take the offensive and strike Fremont first.

Leaving Ewell behind to block Banks, Jackson feinted east over the Blue Ridge, then loaded his men on trains and doubled back into the Valley to unite with Gen. Edward "Allegheny" Johnson's command west of Staunton, bringing his total strength to 11,600. From there he targeted Union Gen. Robert Milroy's 3,000 man brigade, the advance elements of Fremont's army, which had advanced eastward to threaten Staunton. As the Confederates approached, Milroy withdrew west to the tiny village of McDowell. Jackson arrived at the outskirts of McDowell around noon on May 8, and quickly occupied Sitlington's Hill, a steep elevation that towered over the village below. Along the north base of the hill ran the Parkersburg-Staunton Turnpike, which snaked through a narrow gorge before crossing the Bull Pasture River and continuing into the village. Jackson began scouting for a way to outflank the Union force – only to find himself surprised when the outnumbered Yankees attacked.

### The Battle of McDowell (May 8, 1862)

Reinforced to 6,500 by the arrival of the brigade of Gen. Robert Schenk, who took overall command, Milroy suggested a "spoiling attack" against the larger Confederate force, followed by a withdrawal after dark. Although greatly outnumbered (about 2,400 Federals took part in the attack), the Union regiments moved steadily up the steep and rugged slopes and inflicted heavy losses along the Confederate line. Silhouetted against the sky, the southerners made easy targets, while their own fire aimed downslope at the attackers tended to go too high. A Federal attempt to flank the Confederates along the Parkersburg-Staunton Turnpike turnpike was turned back. Atop Sitlington's Hill, the struggle continued until after dark, with "sheets of flame shot from the angry mouths of the guns, lighting up the whole mountain side." The Confederate defenders wavered but never broke. Milroy finally instructed his regiments to disengage, and Schenk ordered a withdrawal west. Jackson announced the victory with the message, "God blessed our arms with victory at McDowell."

McDowell had a profound impact far beyond the Valley. At the time, the fortunes of the Confederacy were at a low ebb, and the victory at McDowell brought unexpected hope. And Jackson was far from finished. Free from the threat from the mountains, he was soon back in the Valley and racing north.



1862 Valley Campaign

VIRGINIA

# Battle of McDowell Driving Tour Directions

**Please Note:** This is a lengthy tour over mountain roads, so allow yourself plenty of time and drive carefully – and enjoy the breathtaking scenery of Highland County.

**Directions to Stop #1 (West View):** The West View stop is located alongside Route 254 (Parkersburg Turnpike), next to West View United Methodist Church, west of Staunton. The stop is a Civil War Trails marker approximately 11 miles east of VA-262 (the loop road around Staunton). From downtown Staunton, take W. Beverly Street (VA-254). When approaching from the north on I-81, take exit 225 onto VA-262 South and continue 20.2 miles to the exit onto VA-262 N. When approaching from the south on I-81, take exit 220 onto VA-262 North and continue approximately 4.5 miles to the exit onto VA-262 N.

## Stop 1 ~ West View: Confederate Camps

Confederate Gen. Stonewall Jackson arrived here on May 6, 1862, as he moved west to confront the Federals in the mountains, and joined his command with that of Gen. Edward “Allegheny” Johnson. Johnson had been camped here since mid-April after withdrawing from Camp Allegheny to the west. (See Stop #8). Among those who joined the Confederates here were 200 VMI Cadets, who had been assigned to temporary service with Jackson. The combined Confederate force set out for McDowell the next day, May 7. Jackson’s secretive nature, even with his own staff, led to some troops taking the wrong road and marching 25 miles out of the way before rejoining the army.

**Directions to Stop 2:** Head northwest on VA-254 W for 3.6 miles, then turn right onto VA-42 N. Continue for 5.2 miles, then turn left onto Turn left onto US-250 W. Continue for 14.8 miles and pull into the parking area on your right.

## Stop 2 ~ Mountain House: Jackson’s March

Union and Confederate troops skirmished near this position (also known as Rodgers’ Tollgate and Rodgers’ Toll House) during the Confederate advance to McDowell. At the time, Mountain House was a well-known stopping point providing food and lodging for travelers taking the Staunton-to-Parkersburg Turnpike. Federal troops advanced and took up station at this forward location on April 19, and those troops were the first to encounter the advancing Confederates on May 7, when leading elements of the Rebel force struck Yankee pickets. The Union force hastily withdrew, abandoning their baggage at the tollgate and retreating to the crest of Shenandoah Mountain. Allegheny Johnson and Stonewall Jackson split their force into two columns to envelope the Union holding position on Shenandoah Mountain.

**Directions to Stop 3:** Turn right back onto US-250 W and continue west. In 2.1 miles pull into the parking area at the overlook on the right.

## Stop 3 ~ Fort Johnson (Confederate Breastworks)

You are standing in the middle of what was once Fort Johnson. Soldiers under Gen. Edward “Allegheny” Johnson built the fortifications after moving here from Camp Allegheny (see Stop #8) in April 1862. The breathtaking view from the overlook looks west, along the route of the armies towards McDowell. Take the interpreted walking trail to view the remains of the entrenchments and to learn more about the position and the actions here.

Confederate troops under Johnson took up position here on April 13 after withdrawing from Camp Allegheny. When Union Gen. Robert Milroy’s troops approached on April 19, the Confederate troops retreated, eventually camping at West View (Stop #1). Johnson himself was in Harrisonburg on April 19, conferring with Stonewall Jackson, and was surprised to learn upon his return that his troops had abandoned this position. Milroy manned the fortifications with his own Federal troops, but would in turn abandon the position – and withdraw west to McDowell – when the united force of Johnson and Stonewall Jackson approached on May 7. The Confederates then pursued the Federals towards McDowell.

**Directions to Stop 4:** Return to US-250 W and continue west for 7.3 miles until you see the pull-off for the Sitlington’s Hill trailhead to your left. Park in the pull-off.

## Stop 4 ~ Sitlington’s Hill: Battlefield Walking Trail

You’re at the foot of an interpreted walking trail that leads to the top of Sitlington’s Hill, the main Confederate defensive position during the battle. Please note that this is a fairly strenuous trail, an approximately 1.4-mile long (2.8 mile round trip) route that rises approximately 600 feet. Before taking the trail, please be sure that you are in condition for the hike and that you are dressed appropriately (especially your shoes); taking water is strongly encouraged. If you can take the trail, you’ll find it immensely rewarding, with outstanding interpretation and terrific views from Sitlington’s Hill that look over the battlefield and the village of McDowell. If you decide not to climb the trail, you’ll still find two interpretive markers about the battle here in the parking area.

Arriving at McDowell around noon on May 8, Jackson quickly sent Allegheny Johnson to occupy Sitlington’s Hill, which towered over the village. Expecting a roadblock on the Parkersburg-Staunton Turnpike, Johnson diverged from the road into a steep narrow ravine that led to the top of the hill. After driving away Union skirmishers, he deployed his infantry along the long, sinuous crest of the hill. Meanwhile, Stonewall Jackson began scouting for a way to outflank the Federals, only to find himself surprised when the Yankees launched their spoiling attack up Sitlington’s Hill. Although greatly outnumbered, the Federals made steady progress up the slopes and took a heavy toll on the Rebels, as the Confederate position had unexpected disadvantages. The steepness of the slopes forced the defenders to stand up to fire, which silhouetted them against the sky and made them easier targets, while the Federals proved difficult to see in the trees, smoke, and increasing darkness. As the fighting raged on the hilltop, some Federal troops tried



## Visitor Information

Brochures and information about the battle, including lodging, restaurant

### Highland Civil War

161 Mansion House

www.hcvt.com

### Highland County

P.O. Box 100

Tel. 540-438-1000

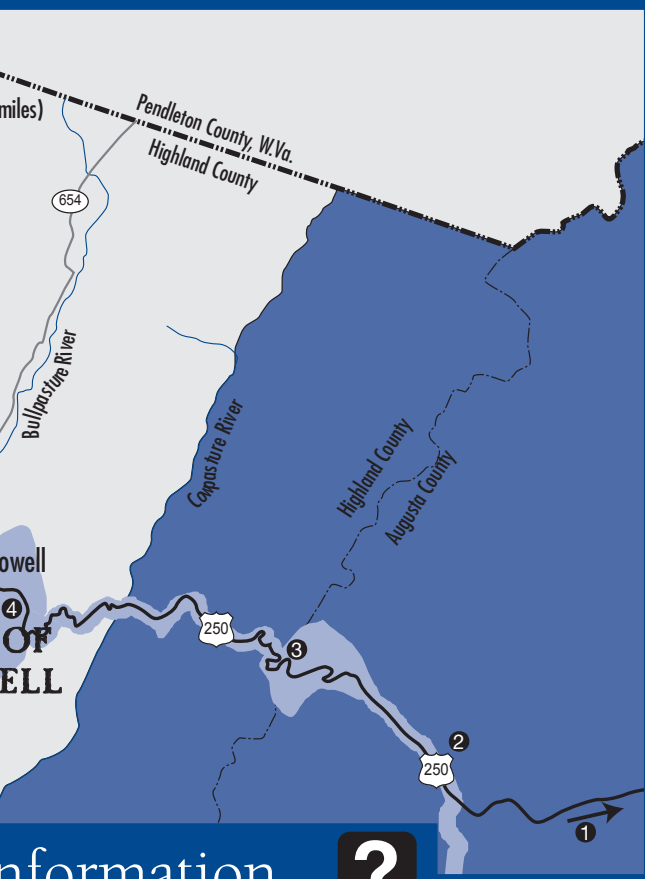
www.hcvt.com

### Downtown Staunton

35 South New Street

Open daily, 9am-6pm

www.hcvt.com



## Information



Information about Civil War sites, other sites, and other information are available at:

### Highland County Museum and War Orientation Center

1000 Main Road, McDowell, VA 24458-2100  
540-396-4478

[www.highlandcountyhistory.com](http://www.highlandcountyhistory.com)

### Highland County Chamber of Commerce

100 N. Main Street, Monterey, VA 24465  
540-668-2550 • Fax 540-468-2551

[www.highlandcounty.org](http://www.highlandcounty.org)

### Staunton Visitor Center

100 N. Main Street, Staunton • 540-332-3971  
Open (Apr.-Oct.), 9:30am-5:30 pm (Nov.-Mar.)  
[www.visitstaunton.com](http://www.visitstaunton.com)

## Stop 8 ~ Camp Allegheny

Two miles west of here, on the former Staunton-to-Parkersburg Turnpike, is Camp Allegheny, the highest Civil War fortification east of the Mississippi. (Read the Civil War Trails marker here to learn more.) The road was an important strategic target for both armies. In December 1861, Confederate forces under then-Col. Edward Johnson occupied the summit of Allegheny Mountain to defend the turnpike. A Union force under Gen. Robert Milroy attacked Johnson on December 13. Fighting continued for much of the morning as each side maneuvered to gain the advantage. Finally, Milroy's troops were repulsed, and he retreated to his camps near Cheat Mountain. At year's end, Edward Johnson remained at Camp Allegheny, where the brutal winter took a heavy toll on his men. On March 18, 1862, in the lead-up to the Battle of McDowell, Johnson (now promoted to General) had about 4,000 men stationed at Camp Allegheny (the main portion of his force), but his effective strength was only 2,784, as nearly 1,200 men were absent for various reasons. Johnson also knew that Camp Allegheny was vulnerable to being flanked, and felt that Shenandoah Mountain to the southeast would be a better defensive position. With the permission of Gen. Robert E. Lee, he left here on April 2 to move his force to Shenandoah Mountain (Stop #3).

*This concludes your tour. For information on other Civil War sites in the area, visit or contact the "Visitor Information" resources listed in the box on this page, or go to [www.ShenandoahAtWar.org](http://www.ShenandoahAtWar.org).*

**Further Reading:** For more about the battle, see *The Battle of McDowell* by Richard L. Armstrong. For more about the campaign, see the SVBF's interpretive booklet, *"If This Valley is Lost, Virginia is Lost!": Stonewall Jackson's Valley Campaign, Shenandoah 1862: Stonewall Jackson's Valley Campaign* by Peter Cozzens, and *Stonewall Jackson's 1862 Valley Campaign: War Comes to the Homefront* by Jonathan A. Noyalas.

to turn the Confederate right by advancing on the turnpike (leading to a clash between pre-war friends from western Virginia who "called each other by name" before opening fire), but were repulsed.

Atop the hill, the fighting continued for hours, but the Confederates held, even as darkness descended. As the Federals began to run low on ammunition, Milroy ordered his regiments to disengage.

*Directions to Stop 5: Return to US-250 W, turning left to continue towards McDowell. In 1.6 miles, turn left onto State Rte 678. In 0.2 miles, turn right (look for the Civil War Trails "bugle" sign at the turn) to take the drive to Cemetery Hill. Park near the top of the drive and walk to the Civil War Trails marker.*

## Stop 5 ~ Cemetery Hill: Union Artillery Position

This was a Union artillery position during the Battle of McDowell on May 8, 1862. It provides an excellent vantage point of the battlefield from the Federal perspective, looking up at Sitlington's Hill, the height manned by the Confederates. From here, the Federal guns (supported by Union infantry) attempted to provide fire to support the Union attack up the slopes, although the height of the Rebel position made it difficult to reach the defenders. The view from here shows just how steep those slopes were, but despite that – and despite the disparity in numbers – the Federals almost carried the position through a combination of surprise, aggressiveness, and the quirks of the terrain, but in the end the Confederates held.

*Directions to Stop 6: Take the drive back down to State Rte. 678 and turn left (east). Continue for approximately 250 yards and pull into the parking lot of the church. Walk to the Civil War Trails marker.*

## Stop 6 ~ Church: Village of McDowell and Cemetery

Union troops camped in this area from mid-April until the Battle of McDowell. After the battle, the Federals withdrew to the village, carrying their wounded. At 2 am the next morning (May 9), the Union commanders ordered a general retreat along the Staunton-to-Parkersburg Turnpike toward Franklin (in modern-day West Virginia). Federal infantry held a skirmish line along the river until near dawn when they withdrew and acted as rear guard for the retreating column. Ten men of the regiment were inadvertently left behind and captured. Shortly after the Federals retired, the Confederates entered McDowell. Jackson started his main force in pursuit of the Federals on May 10, heading towards Monterey on the Staunton-to-Parkersburg Turnpike.

After the battle, the small village was inundated with dead and wounded. Among those who helped bury the dead and care for the wounded were the VMI Cadets who had been dispatched to help Jackson. (The cadets took no part in the fighting.) If you walk to the front of the church and cross US-250, you'll find a cemetery where both Confederate and Union soldiers killed in the battle are buried.

*Directions to Stop 7: Head east on State Rte 678, then turn left onto US-250 W. Continue for 9.9 miles, then turn left onto Spruce Street. Continue for 200 feet and turn left to park behind the Courthouse. Walk to the Civil War Trails marker in front of the Courthouse.*

## Stop 7 ~ Monterey Courthouse

Monterey was used as a headquarters for both Confederate and Union forces during the early part of the war in 1861 and 1862. (Read the Civil War Trails marker here for more details.) In the lead-up to the Battle of McDowell, Federals under Gen. Robert Milroy advanced from Camp Allegheny to occupy Monterey on April 8, 1862, and during the following week there were several small encounters between the two sides. The most notable was a skirmish on April 12, 1862, when Confederate Gen. "Allegheny" Johnson sent part of his force from the east to drive out the Federals – mistakenly believing that only a small Federal force occupied the town. Milroy, hearing his pickets were under attack, believed that Johnson's entire force was returning, and formed a line of battle on either side of town. Confederates approaching the town reported back the size of the Union force, and that Federal artillery was stationed on the conical hill ("Trimble Knob") south of the town and would be able to fire on any Rebel advance. Johnson prudently ordered his forces to withdraw. After the Battle of McDowell on May 8, 1862, the Federal troops retreated along the Staunton-to-Petersburg Turnpike towards Monterey. Some 2.5 miles east of town they turned north on Strait Creek Road (modern Route 629) towards Franklin (in modern-day West Virginia) to rejoin Union Gen. John C. Fremont and the rest of his force. Stonewall Jackson pursued them to the outskirts of Franklin until receiving orders on May 12 to return to the main Shenandoah Valley.

*Directions to Stop 8: Continue west on US-250. In 12.8 miles, look for the Civil War Trails marker on your left.*

# Shenandoah AT WAR



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## Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District

The Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District was created by Congress to protect and interpret the Valley's Civil War story. The Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation, the authorized management entity for the National Historic District, proudly shares this unique history with people around the world.

The National Historic District lies in northwest Virginia, within an easy drive of Richmond, Tidewater, and the DC metropolitan area.

Interstate 81 runs the length of the District, linking with I-66 in the north and I-64 in the south. From the east and west, the District is also served by US Routes 250 (Staunton), 33 (Harrisonburg), 55 (Strasburg), 50 and 7 (both in Winchester).



National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



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[www.VirginiaCivilWar.org](http://www.VirginiaCivilWar.org)