



**SHENANDOAH
VALLEY**
★★
BATTLEFIELDS
NATIONAL HISTORIC DISTRICT

THE COALING

THE BATTLE OF PORT REPUBLIC - JUNE 9, 1862

“IN EVERY GREAT BATTLE OF THE WAR THERE WAS A HELL-SPOT.
AT PORT REPUBLIC IT WAS ON THE MOUNTAIN SIDE.”

- Quotation by Louisiana Confederate soldier from Robert K. Krick's,
Conquering the Valley

THE ROAD TO PORT REPUBLIC

In the spring of 1862, with Union armies threatening the Confederate capital of Richmond, Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson was tasked with utilizing the Shenandoah Valley as a diversionary theater of war to keep and draw Federal troops away from the advance on the capital.

After a tactical setback at First Kernstown (March 23), Jackson defeated Union forces at McDowell (May 8), Front Royal (May 23) and Winchester (May 25). Narrowly escaping a trap near Strasburg, Jackson withdrew south, followed by two Federal armies on either side of Massanutten Mountain. Reaching Massanutten's southern tip, Jackson stopped to face his pursuers. On June 8, Confederate troops under Gen. Richard S. Ewell defeated Union Gen. John C. Frémont at Cross Keys. The next day, Jackson turned towards the other Federal force east of Port Republic.



“THE BALL IS OPEN AGAIN AND WE [ARE] TO HAVE
ANOTHER HOT DAY...I MAY NOT SEE THE RESULT.”

- Confederate Maj. Joe Chenoweth, 31st Virginia, writing in his journal
as the Battle of Port Republic started; he would be killed that day.

(Courtesy Keith Rocco/Tradition Studios)

THE BATTLE

At Port Republic, the Union troops waiting for Jackson consisted of two isolated brigades under the command of Gen. Erastus B. Tyler. The Federals were in a strong defensive position, aligned near Lewiston Lane (modern-day Lynnwood Road), with their right anchored on the south branch of the Shenandoah River, and their left on the open crest of a ridge known as "The Coaling." The Coaling was a 70-foot high prominence, its top cleared for a charcoaling operation. Federal artillery atop the height dominated the battlefield.

Confederate troops were slow to reach the battlefield, as the only route was via a makeshift wagon bridge

over the South River. As the action began on the flat plain of the South Fork of the Shenandoah two miles beyond Port Republic, the Confederates were actually outnumbered.

OPENING ATTACKS

Concerned that delays would allow time for Federal reinforcements (especially Frémont) to arrive, Jackson launched his attacks piecemeal, with the troops he had at hand. Elements of the Stonewall Brigade attacked through the wheat fields in the river plain, but were repulsed with heavy casualties – as Union artillery fire from the Coaling wreaked havoc in the rebel ranks – and then were driven back further by a Federal counterattack.

“THE SHELL FROM THE BATTERY ON THE COALING WAS RIPPING THE GROUND OPEN ALL AROUND US, AND THE AIR WAS FULL OF SCREAMING FRAGMENTS OF EXPLODING SHELL, AND I THOUGHT I WAS A GONER.”

– Confederate Col. George M. Neese, *Battle of Port Republic*

THE ATTACK ON THE COALING

Jackson now turned to Gen. Richard Taylor’s Louisiana Brigade, the “shock troops” of his army. While one regiment joined the fight in the plain, the rest of the brigade, including the famed Louisiana Tigers, moved through the woods to assault the Coaling.

Confederate Col. George M. Neese, who was on the receiving end of the Union artillery fire, described Taylor’s assault. “I heard a mighty shout on the mountain side in close proximity to the coaling,” he recalled, “And...I saw General Dick Taylor’s Louisianians debouching from the undergrowth, and like a wave crested with shining steel rush toward the fatal coaling and deadly battery with fixed bayonets, giving the Rebel yell like mad demons. The crest of the coaling was one sheet of fire as the Federal batteries poured round after round of grape and canister into the faces of the charging Louisianians.”



Confederate
Gen. “Stonewall” Jackson

HELL ON THE MOUNTAIN SIDE

The Confederates swarmed over the Federals, but the defenders refused to buckle. The gunners “fought like tigers when the enemy were close on them. They [loaded the cannon] with armfuls of... canister, stones, chains, and everything they could put in...and at every shot mowed down heaps of the enemy.”

The Confederates captured the hilltop, but were driven off by a Union counterattack, and both sides took and retook possession of the heights in a ferocious series of charges and countercharges.

“Men ceased to be men,” a Louisianian described. “They cheered and screamed like lunatics—they fought like demons—they died like fanatics....In every great battle of the war there was a hell-spot. At Port Republic it was on the mountain side.”

Reinforcements from Ewell’s division allowed the southern troops to sweep the Federals from the high ground for good. With the capture of the Coaling, the tide of the battle changed. The Confederates turned captured Federal cannon against the rest of the Union line, and—with Ewell’s reinforcements also bolstering the Confederate attacks across the plain—the stubborn Federal defenders were finally driven from the field, bringing an end to the hardest-fought battle of Jackson’s Valley Campaign.

The cost had been horrific. “It was a sickening sight;” recalled a Tiger of the Coaling after the battle, “men in gray and blue piled up in front of and around the guns and with the horses dying and the blood of men and beasts flowing almost in a stream.”

“THE ARTILLERYMEN USED THEIR RAMMERS IN A WAY NOT LAID DOWN IN THE MANUAL, AND DIED AT THEIR GUNS... ‘T’WAS CLAW FOR CLAW.’”

– Confederate
Gen. Richard Taylor

THE AFTERMATH

After the Confederate victories at Cross Keys and Port Republic, Union forces withdrew north. Having accomplished his mission—tying up more than 60,000 Federal troops that would have been used against Richmond—Jackson was free to join Robert E. Lee in the defense of the capital. Port Republic was the capstone to Jackson’s brilliant Valley Campaign.