



HELP SAVE 72 ACRES AT CEDAR CREEK

THE MORNING ATTACK: “A PERFECT SHOWER OF LEAD”

“With a wild, fierce yell... the line rushed up the slope and dashed at the intrenchments.”

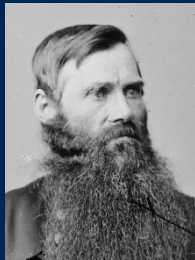
– Confederate Col. Peter A. S. McGlashan



The target property. The Union defensive line was where Bowmans Mill Road is today, on the left. Bryan's Brigade attacked from right to left across the target property.

EARLY “HAD DOUBTLESS RETREATED”

On October 18, 1864, Union Gen. Horatio Wright, in temporary command of the Federal army at Cedar Creek, dispatched reconnaissance patrols to check on Confederate activity to the south. Uncertain of Confederate intentions, for some days the Federals had been sending out such patrols and forming their troops in line of battle by 4am as a precaution against attack. When the patrols returned on October 18, all reported no evidence of enemy activity.



Union Col. Thomas Harris

One of the patrols had consisted of Union Col. Thomas Harris's brigade, part of Col Joseph Thoburn's division in Gen. George Crook's Army of West Virginia. When Harris returned from his scout he reported that “nothing was to be found in [Confederate Gen. Jubal A. Early's] old camp, and that he had doubtless retreated up the Valley.”

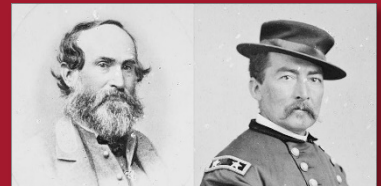
Union troops, tired of the long campaign and 4am turn-outs, were eager to believe the reports. One soldier recalled how Harris's report “gave a fancied sense of security to much of the army.” The troops were also overconfident of the strength of the position, with one writing home that “We do not fear an attack while we remain here.”

But Harris could not have been more wrong. Even as his report was being passed up to Wright, the Confederates were on the move, embarking on a night march that would culminate early the next morning – October 19, 1864 – in one of the most audacious surprise attacks of the war.

Ironically, the first main line of troops to be hit would be Thoburn's division – with Harris's brigade at the center.

THE ROAD TO BATTLE

In August 1864, Union Gen. Philip Sheridan was dispatched to the Shenandoah Valley to contest Confederate Gen. Jubal Early's dominance of the region.



Early and Sheridan

By mid-October, Union victories at Third Winchester, Fisher's Hill, and Tom's Brook had changed the tide in the Valley. The Federals believed the Confederates were “broken, dispirited, and disposed of” – but the southerners were eager to strike back.

“THE DESTRUCTION OF SHERIDAN'S ARMY”

On October 17, 1864, Early instructed Gen. John B. Gordon, Gen. Clement A. Evans, and mapmaker Jedediah Hotchkiss to climb the imposing height of Signal Knob, at the north end of Massanutten Mountain, to observe the Union positions at Cedar Creek.



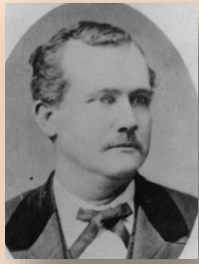
Evans recalled that the climb “was so steep that I had to travel on all fours pulling along by the rocks and bushes.”

From Signal Knob, the Union positions were fully exposed, and the Confederate officers could see “the place [the Federals] could be best attacked... like a large map.” They noted that the Union positions were dangerously isolated and vulnerable to assault in detail, and discussed a plan of attack that Early approved. By 8pm on October 18, the first Confederates were on the march; they would be in position to attack at Cedar Creek by 4am. Gordon believed that “the destruction of Sheridan was inevitable.” (*Unknown to the Confederates, Sheridan was actually in Winchester, on his way back from a meeting in Washington, D.C.*)

“We glided along the road like a procession of specters through the dark.”

– Confederate Col. Peter A. S. McGlashan, describing the night march

“MOST COMPLETELY FORTIFIED POSITION”



*Confederate Col.
James P. Simms*

The Confederates moved to attack in three columns, under Gen. John B. Gordon, Gen. Gabriel Wharton, and – at the center – Gen. Joseph Kershaw. Bryan’s Brigade of Georgians, commanded by Col. James P. Simms, was at the middle of Kershaw’s line. When Kershaw’s division crossed Bowman’s Mill Ford at 4:30am, Bryan’s Brigade was in the lead.

Kershaw’s target was Union Col. Joseph Thoburn’s division, part of Gen. George Crook’s Army of West Virginia. Although they manned a formidable position, on high ground overlooking Cedar Creek and the North Fork of the Shenandoah, Thoburn’s force was dangerously isolated from other Federal units. His line consisted of 6 cannon under Lt. Henry Brewerton (located on Thoburn’s Redoubt, preserved by the SVBF), Col. Thomas M. Harris’s brigade, 6 cannon under Lt. William Munk, and Col. Thomas Wildes’s brigade. Harris’s brigade and Munk’s artillery were located on the northern edge of **the target property**.

Confederate Capt. Augustus Dickert considered Thoburn’s works “the most completely fortified position by nature, as well as by hand, of any line occupied during the war.” But it was also fatefully detached from the other Union defenses.

“FORWARD, DOUBLE-QUICK, CHARGE!”

When some of Thoburn’s men reported sounds of enemy activity, Col. Wildes sent word to Col. Harris, but Harris, who was sleeping in an ambulance, dismissed it and said “That cannot be so.” His brigade remained asleep, leaving the center of the Union line, along **the target property**, unmanned and unprepared.

As Kershaw’s men advanced up the slope towards Thoburn’s line, Confederate Col. Peter A. S. McGlashan recalled that the Federal pickets “could not distinguish us. But we could see their dark blue uniforms readily.” The Georgians were almost on top of the pickets before the first Federal cried out “I see them!” and fired a shot. The pickets fled towards the main line. Hearing shots, Col. Harris now started to rouse his men – but too late and too slowly.

As the Confederates advanced, McGlashan saw that the Union lines “were crowned with a formidable line of intrenchments defined sharply against the campfires behind and strengthened by a thicket hedge of abatis.” They could see partially-dressed Union soldiers trying to hurry into position. Brigade commander Col. Simms shouted, “Now men, fix bayonets! Forward, double-quick, charge!” The men surged forward towards the gap. The Federals tried to shift troops to plug the opening (on the northern edge of **the target property**), but were too late.



*Confederate Col.
Peter A. S. McGlashan*

“FIRING, BAYONETING, AND SLASHING”

The Confederates unleashed a volley that “seemed to wake the stillness from one end of the valley to the other,” then “with a wild, fierce yell that seemed to rend the clouds above, the line rushed up the slope [on **the target property**] and dashed at the intrenchments.” Reaching the abatis, the Georgians used their rifles to flip the snarled, sharpened branches against the earthworks and scaled the entrenchments, pouring through the gap in the Union line, “leaping into the ditch, firing, bayoneting, and slashing on every side.”

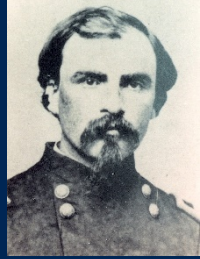
East of the gap, Union Lt. William Munk’s artillery tried to hold its ground, but were overwhelmed by the Georgians. McGlashan described how “the gunners, half-clad, gallantly tried to serve the pieces with our men swarming all around them... [but were] overpowered and bayoneted at their guns.” Col. Wildes’s brigade, next in line, was flanked on both sides and in danger of being surrounded, so Wildes ordered his men to retreat as the Confederates poured into his works with a “hellish Rebel yell.”

The Georgians also turned to the left (west), where they routed West Virginians from Harris’s division that Col. Thoburn had hurried to the front. “They jumped over our works with fixed bayonets bayoneting and shooting down our men by the hundreds,” one Mountaineer recalled. The Georgians then joined in the attack on Lt. Brewerton’s artillery on Thoburn’s Redoubt. Brewerton turned two guns towards the Georgians in a vain attempt to hold them off, then ran his cannon down a ravine to save them. Thoburn’s entire line had been broken.

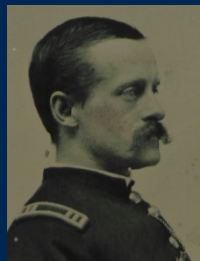
As the battle continued, the rest of the Army of West Virginia and the XIX Corps were also overwhelmed. The Federal army, under the command of Gen. Horatio Wright during Sheridan’s absence, retreated north, then began to stabilize around Middletown. Early’s commanders urged another assault, but he demurred, his force disorganized by the chaos of battle and the lure of the well-stocked Federal camps.

“WILD FLIGHT [GAVE] WAY TO BEDLAM.”

Meanwhile, Sheridan had hurried to the field from Winchester (“Sheridan’s Ride”), and his appearance had reinvigorated his troops. In the afternoon, Sheridan launched a counterattack. The Confederates held at first, but eventually the heavier Union numbers began to tell, and the Confederates began to retreat – some of them moving across **the target property** en route to the fords over the North Fork of the Shenandoah. As the Federal pressure mounted and Union cavalry swooped down on the Confederates, “wild flight [gave] way to bedlam,” and the retreat became a chaotic rout. By nightfall, a day that began as a stunning Confederate triumph ended as a crushing defeat that ended southern hopes in the Valley.



*Union Col.
Thomas Wildes*



*Union Lt.
Henry Brewerton*