

*“They mowed us down like grass”
- Union cavalryman Jacob Lester*

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The Fight on Battery Heights at New Market

The Union Cavalry Charge: “They were ready for us”

With the Confederates staggered, the chance for victory was in Union Gen. Franz Sigel’s grasp. He ordered a counterattack – including an assault by Union Gen. Julius Stahel’s 1,000-strong cavalry east of the Valley Pike.

Unfortunately for the Federal horsemen, the conditions were terrible for a mounted charge. Hard rain had turned the ground into a muddy morass. To their front was a ravine with broken ground, and on their right was the Valley Pike, where stone walls would funnel the horsemen into a compact front, making them easy targets. For the attackers, it was nightmarish ground.

And the Confederates [many of them positioned on the target property] were ready, formed into a large “V”, with infantry on both sides and artillery in the center. The 22nd Virginia Infantry, led by Col. George S. Patton, was on the left, and the 23rd Virginia Infantry, commanded by Col. Clarence Derrick, was on the right. In the center rested the artillery – double shotted [sic] with canister, per Breckinridge’s orders – including two VMI guns commanded by Cadet Capt. Collier Minge. In front of the VMI guns [on the target property] were the remnants of a partially demolished rock fence, providing additional protection.

For the Federal horsemen, it was a recipe for disaster. “We got orders to ‘draw sabre’ and I knew we were to charge,” Union soldier Jacob Lester of the 1st New York Veteran Cavalry said. “Horses got stuck in the mud and fell over each other and in a moment we were mired up like a flock of sheep.” Eventually, the disorder subsided and the Federals launched their attack, with some advancing on the pike, and most crossing the open ground towards the target property.

The Confederates greeted them with a hailstorm of metal. “They were ready for us,” a Union sergeant later recalled. “Our battalion marched directly into their artillery fire. Shells were dropping all around us and musket balls were whistling.”



CONFEDERATE
COMMANDER GEN. JOHN
C. BRECKINRIDGE



UNION COMMANDER
GEN. FRANZ SIGEL



UNION GEN. JULIUS
STAHEL



CONFEDERATE COL.
CLARENCE DERRICK

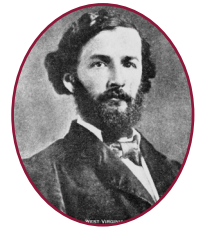
“We got quickly into action with canister against cavalry charging down the road and adjacent fields,” Confederate Cadet Capt. Minge recalled. “When the smoke cleared away the cavalry seemed to have been completely broken up.” A Union sergeant said, simply, that “they mowed us down like grass.”

On the Confederate right, Col. Derrick “Ordered my men to fire low, and waited for them to debouch out of the heavy smoke.” Horses and men fell, snarled in a tangled, terrifying mess.

The artillery fire was devastating. Jacob Lester described how “A shell from the rebel artillery struck a man at my side carrying away half of his head and spattering his brains, hair and whiskers all over the right side of me. The same shell carried away the left shoulder and arm of a man in front of me and struck another man farther on square in the back, passed through and as he toppled from his horse I saw his whole front torn open and a torrent of blood flowing from it.”



VMI CADET CAPT.
COLLIER MINGE



CONFEDERATE COL.
GEORGE S. PATTON

Few Federals reached the Confederate line. Lester and others rallied and advanced again, only to be struck by friendly fire. “Our battery fired a charge of grape and canister over our heads, but it exploded too soon and scattered all around me...” Lester recalled. “It is a wonder I was not killed by our own men.” Overwhelmed by fire from front, sides – and now the rear – the Federals broke for good. “I threw off my overcoat and dropped my carbine and skedaddled and didn’t stop until I got back to Mount Jackson,” recalled one. As one Confederate stated it, “This was the end of the cavalry in that fight.”

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