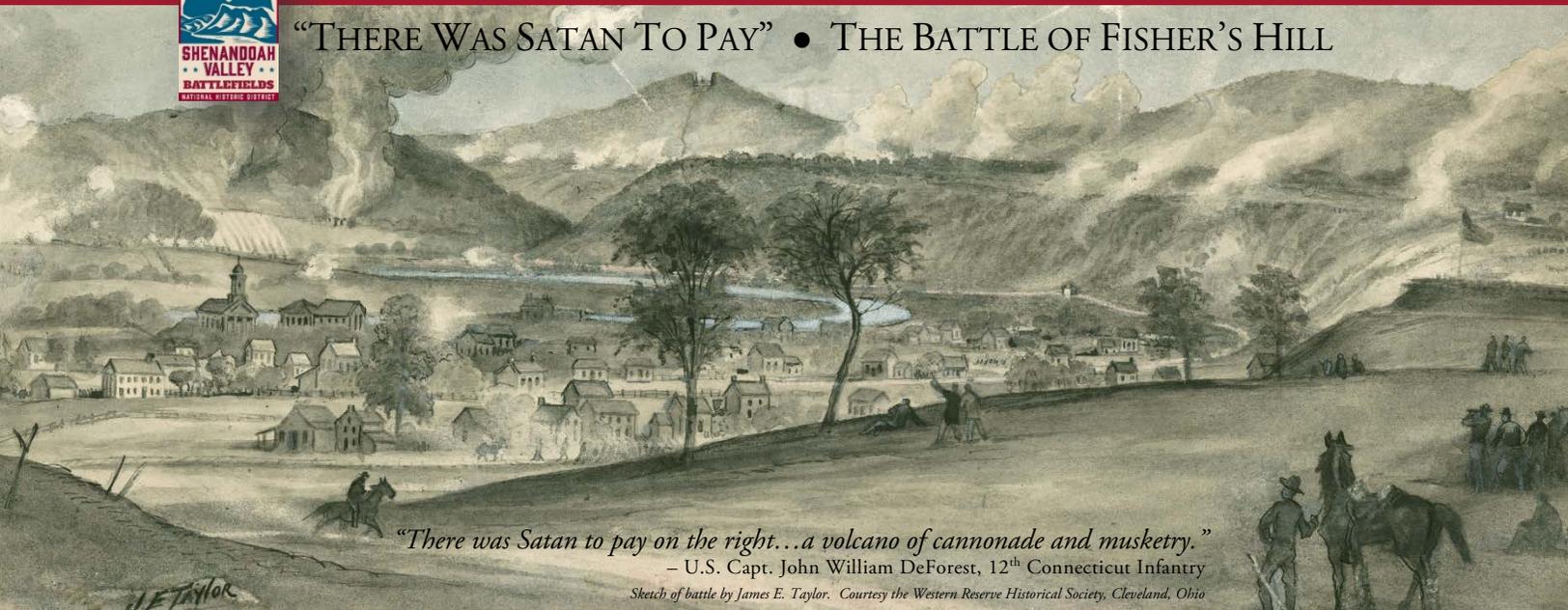




HELP SAVE 120 ACRES AT FISHER'S HILL

“THERE WAS SATAN TO PAY” • THE BATTLE OF FISHER'S HILL



“There was Satan to pay on the right...a volcano of cannonade and musketry.”

– U.S. Capt. John William DeForest, 12th Connecticut Infantry

Sketch of battle by James E. Taylor. Courtesy the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio

“THE ONLY PLACE WHERE A STAND COULD BE MADE”

After a series of victories in the summer of 1864 by Confederates under Gen. Jubal A. Early had thrown the north into an uproar and imperiled Abraham Lincoln’s reelection, Union Gen. Philip H. Sheridan was sent to the Shenandoah Valley to bring an end to Confederate dominance. After Sheridan’s much-larger force delivered a crushing defeat to Early’s army at Third Winchester on September 19, Early withdrew his army south to the imposing defensive position of Fisher’s Hill, which Early believed “was the only place where a stand could be made.” The Federals pursued, and by September 21 the armies faced each other again.

Fisher’s Hill was, in the words of Capt. James F. Fitts of the 114th New York, “a natural fortification, apparently an impregnable one.” It sat at the narrowest part of the Valley, stretching just four miles from Little North Mountain to Massanutten Mountain. Union Capt. John W. DeForest, 12th Connecticut, described the eastern end as “a spot for Rocky Mountain goats to fight in,” and the entire position as “not a nut to be cracked easily.”

But after their heavy losses at Third Winchester, the Confederates no longer had enough troops to fully man the position, and Early was forced to stretch his line. Believing the greatest threat was on his right, he put his strongest forces on that end and in the middle – including Gen. John Pegram’s division on the heights that are today known as “Pegram’s Hill,” part of the target property in this project. Early’s vulnerable left was held by a thin line of dismounted cavalry.

Unfortunately for Early, that weak flank is where the Federals planned their main attack. Daunted by the “Confederate Gibraltar” to his front, Sheridan sent Gen. George Crook and his Army of West Virginia on a long march around the Confederate left flank, using forest cover to remain (mostly) hidden from view.

To keep Confederate eyes and attention away from the west, the rest of the Federals demonstrated against the center and right of Early’s line. Shortly before Crook attacked, Getty’s and Wheaton’s divisions

from the VI Corps, in the center of the Union line, advanced to the ridgeline opposite Pegram’s Hill, prompting a furious response from southern artillery. Capt. Fitts remembered [how] “The rushing and screaming of the ponderous missiles filled the air.”

Crook launched his assault about 4 pm, scattering the Confederate cavalry and hitting the end of the southern line “like a thunderbolt.” Gen. Stephen Dodson Ramseur’s men initially put up a stubborn resistance, but broke under pressure from multiple directions. Sheridan ordered the rest of the Federals forward. In the center, the troops of the VI Corps moved across the target property, past Pifer’s (Stoner-Keller) Mill and up Pegram’s Hill. “Steadily, yet swiftly, [our line] went up, like a wall of gleaming steel...” Capt. Fitts remembered. “...all [along the] crest, angry spits of flame flashed in [our line’s] face, and volleys of lead were hurled down upon it.”

Meanwhile, Pegram attempted to meet the Federals coming from the west by moving troops to his left. But as Confederate Capt. Samuel D. Buck remembered, “the North Carolina brigade on our left concluded Gen. Pegram was trying to get [our brigade] out and leave them to be captured, and, without firing a shot, broke and ran over us, carrying us off the field without any organization.”



Gen. John Pegram

With Federals pouring over the heights, the Confederate line collapsed. Private Isaac G. Bradwell, 31st Georgia, recalled how, “When we left the breastworks the enemy was only a few yards in front of them. In the scuffle and confusion there a comrade, after firing at the enemy, jerked his gun back and struck me above the right eye with the sharp piece of metal on the butt end of his gun. From the wound the blood gushed out and ran down over my eye...Turning around, I saw my comrades running toward the pike.”

Even the most ferocious southern fighter realized the day was lost. “The Confederates saw the hopelessness of their situation, and realized that they had only the option of retreat or capture.” remembered Confederate Gen. John B. Gordon. “They were not long in deciding.”