HELP SAVE THE WEST WOODS
THE THIRD BATTLE OF WINCHESTER

“A terrific thunderstorm was raging in the woods.”
Confederate Private George Q. Peyton

“IF TOMORROW PASSES AWAY AS QUIETLY”
On September 18, 1864, Confederate Maj. Henry Kyd Douglas wrote of the situation around Winchester. “A quiet, beautiful day...I shall be glad if tomorrow passes away as quietly.” Douglas’s hopes would be disappointed. The next day, September 19, 1864, would bring the Third Battle of Winchester, the largest and costliest battle ever fought in the Shenandoah Valley.

Until that point, the 1864 Shenandoah Campaign had seen only smaller clashes. When Union Gen. Philip Sheridan was sent to the Valley in August 1864 to contest Confederate Gen. Jubal A. Early’s dominance of the region, he had been ordered to avoid a politically disastrous defeat, and the fighting during the first 6 weeks of the campaign had been relatively small and indecisive. But when Sheridan learned that Early had divided his forces, and (thanks to African-American Thomas Laws and pro-Union schoolteacher Rebecca Wright) that one of Early’s divisions had left the Valley, he moved to attack with his entire army at Winchester, hoping to cut off and destroy Early’s force. But Sheridan’s traffic-jammed advance through the narrow Berryville Canyon postponed his main attack until 11:40am, a pivotal delay that turned Sheridan’s hoped-for easy triumph into an epic day-long struggle.

“POUR IT INTO ‘EM— GIVE ‘EM HELL!”
During Third Winchester, no ground was more involved in the fighting than the West Woods. The woodlot was at the center of the back-and-forth action for much of the day.

As fighting began, dismounted Confederate cavalry under Gen. Bradley Johnson, posted along the edge of the woods, sparred with Federal skirmishers. By the time of Sheridan’s 11:40am attack, their position had been taken by dismounted Virginia cavalry under Col. William Thompson and a battery of artillery under Col. William Nelson. As Union Gen. James B. Ricketts’s division moved south of the woods to attack Ramseur, Nelson’s artillerymen sent shells crashing into their flank. Jubal Early rode up behind the gunners and shouted, “Pour it into ’em— give ’em hell— God damn their blue-bellied souls – pour it into ’em!” Despite the fire, Ricketts’ men kept advancing, driving Ramseur’s men west.

“OPPOSING LINES CHARGING AT THE SAME TIME”
Just north, Union Col. Jacob Sharpe’s brigade was advancing across the Middle Field towards the West Woods. Early ordered Gen. Zebulon York’s Louisiana Tigers (of Gen. John B. Gordon’s just-arriving division) to “meet them halfway.” York’s men advanced out of the West Woods to confront the Federals; Confederate Capt. William J. Seymour described “two opposing lines charging at the same time.” The combatants met in what another southerner described as “the prettiest stand up fair open field fight.” But Sharpe’s brigade “advanced too fast, leaving its right flank exposed.” Pummeled by flanking fire and Confederate artillery, Sharpe’s brigade eventually broke.

But the Federals and their superior numbers kept coming, and the Confederates were pushed back across the battlefield. York’s Tigers were now the ones “far in advance” of the rest of the line, and York withdrew to avoid being cut off. As the battle swung in the Federals’ favor, Union troops entered the West Woods – but critical Confederate reinforcements were about to arrive.

THE RACE TO WINCHESTER
When the first elements of the Union army emerged from the Berryville Canyon, east of Winchester, early that morning, the only major Confederate force in position to contest their path into the city was Gen. Stephen D. Ramseur’s division. Meanwhile, Early’s other divisions – under Gen. John B. Gordon, Gen. Robert E. Rodes, and Gen. John C. Breckinridge – were hurrying southward, racing to get to Winchester and bolster Early’s defenses before the full weight of Sheridan’s army could be brought to bear. They would largely succeed, and as both sides threw everything they had into the struggle, the battle became a do-or-die affair.
RODERS ARRIVES: “CHARGE THEM, BOYS!”

Just in time for the Confederates, Gen. Robert E. Rodes had arrived, and he sent his division plunging into the West Woods. “Charge them, boys!” he shouted. As he attacked, remembered Confederate Pvt. George Q. Peyton, “It sounded as if every tree in the woods was falling down and that a terrific thunder storm was raging in the woods.” But as he urged his men forward, Rodes was struck by a shell fragment and killed. “He leaned for an instant,” recalled Confederate Pvt. Marcus D. Herring, “then fell headlong from his horse.” Rodes’ troops continued their attack. Gen. William R. Cox’s brigade smashed into the Federals and drove them out of the woods, and Gen. Bryan Grimes’ brigade advanced south through the woodlot and slammed into Ricketts’ flank. “The rebels... came sweeping back like an avalanche,” remembered one Federal. The attacks crushed Ricketts’ division and sent it retreating in disorder. The Confederates pursued; “We went on through blood and fire a mile in advance of the army,” wrote Pvt. Thomas P. Devereux.

RUSSELL’S COUNTERATTACK

But Union artillery fire from units such as the 5th Maine Battery helped slow the Confederate advance. Union Col. Charles Tompkins “sat upon his horse with a loaded revolver close behind the [Maine] battery, and ordered it not to move.” Union Gen. David Russell mounted a counterattack across the battlefield and into the woods, but while ordering Col. Oliver Edwards to charge, Russell was struck in his side by a bullet. When Edwards asked if he was hurt, Russell stuffed his shirt in the wound and said “It makes no difference at such a time as this. Order your brigade to charge!” – only to be killed moments later by a shell fragment.

UPTON’S ATTACKS: “GRAPE AND CANISTER”

Despite Russell’s death, the advance pushed the Confederates back. Edwards continued the attack south of the woods, forcing Grimes to withdraw. Just north, the 37th Massachusetts (armed with repeating rifles) and the 5th Maine Battery devastated Cox’s brigade, driving them into the West Woods. “We ran into a masked battery which opened on us with grape and canister and enfilade fire,” recalled Confederate Sgt. Julius L. Schaub. Meanwhile, Union Gen. Emory Upton, who assumed command of Russell’s division, moved north to confront additional Confederates, forcing them back to the woods. Russell’s attack and the follow-up by his subordinates had turned the tide.

When Union Gen. George Crook launched his pivotal assault to the north a short while later, Upton attacked again, his men driving across the Middle Field towards the West Woods. Although Confederate Gen. William Cox tried to hold the position along the edge off the woods – his men taking cover “behind fences, thickets, and rifle pits” – he was soon taking fire on three sides and forced to retreat. The Federals cleared the last of the Confederates from the woods by 4pm.

Even then, the role of the West Woods wasn’t finished. During Sheridan’s final attacks, Upton launched his men out of the woodlot to hit the angle in the Confederate battle line, helping to unhinge the position and contribute to the ultimate Confederate collapse. When Upton was wounded by an artillery shell, he insisted that he be carried to the top of a hill so he could witness the battle’s final stages, when the broken Confederates were sent “whirling through Winchester” – a defeat that forever changed the course of the war in the Valley.

AFTER THE BATTLE: “VERITABLE SLAUGHTER PEN”

The scenes in and around the West Woods after the battle reflected the ferocity of the combat. Sketch artist James Taylor described the woodlot as “a veritable slaughter pen.” Surveying the fallen, he wrote, “look into the faces of a hundred men killed in battle and you will find the same general expression... a look of surprise and fear.”