

The Battle of Antietam

by Ted Alexander

On the morning of the Battle of Antietam, Union soldiers advanced under fire toward the Dunker Church, scene of some of the heaviest fighting of the battle.

The morning of September 17, 1862, dawned peacefully in the farming community of Sharpsburg, Maryland. But this day would be like no other in the history of the United States. On Sharpsburg Ridge, General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was stretched out for about three miles. Running behind the Confederate lines was

the Hagerstown Pike, which Lee used to transport troops back and forth along the frontlines.

But the Confederates also had their backs to the Potomac River. For the leader of the Union army, General George B. McClellan, the plan was simple. With eighty-six thousand soldiers to Lee's forty thousand, he had only to drive the Confederates into the river.

If Lee was defeated here, his army would be destroyed.

The battle began at dawn. The Union 1st Corps under General Joseph Hooker struck the Confederate left **flank** under General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson in the Miller Cornfield north of town. The fighting raged for more than two hours, with Hooker's men advancing nearly as far as the Dunker Church. The northerners were pushed back by a charge by the Texas Brigade, who were themselves forced out of the Cornfield with heavy losses. The 1st Texas Regiment alone lost more than eighty-two percent of its troops, one of the highest casualty rates on either side during the war. (Included in the casualty figures are soldiers who were killed, missing, or wounded.)

The Union 12th Corps arrived to reinforce Hooker, and the pressure on the Confederate left flank was enough to force Jackson's lines to crumble. As Confederate soldiers streamed out of the East Woods back

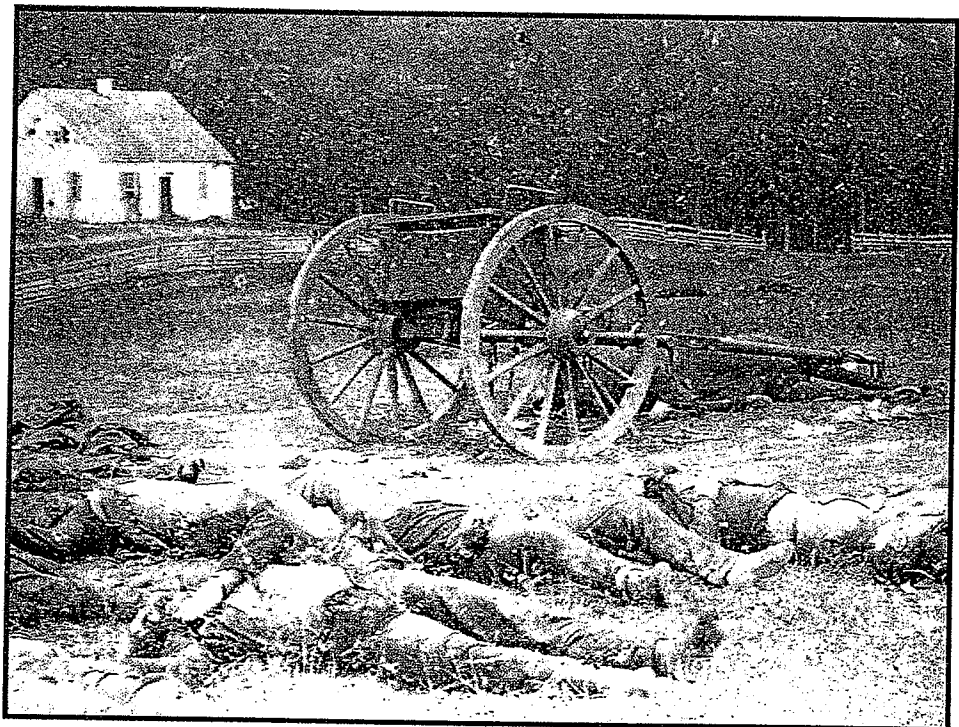
across the Cornfield, more Union reinforcements arrived under General William Sumner. Sumner personally led a charge of fifty-four hundred men across the open fields toward the seemingly weak Confederate lines.

Sumner had no way of knowing that more than five thousand Confederate reinforcements under General Lafayette McLaws and General William Walker were advancing from the south. They hit the Union division from the front and on its left flank. This phase of the battle, aptly named the West Woods Massacre, lasted about twenty minutes. When the smoke cleared, more than two

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A flank is the left or right side of a formation of soldiers. To flank the enemy means to attack them from the side.

After the battle, Alexander Gardner took this photograph — one of the most famous images of the Civil War — of dead Confederate soldiers near the Dunker Church.



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thousand Union soldiers lay dead or wounded.

A strange silence fell over the north end of the battlefield as a Union division under General William French moved south and attacked the Confederate line in a lane known locally as Hog Trough Road. Over the years, erosion had turned the road into a natural trench. Confederate commander General D.H. Hill was a stubborn man, determined to hold the road against the onrushing torrent of Union soldiers. The southerners waited until the Federals were within easy musket range, then let loose with a volley that killed or wounded nearly everyone in the front ranks of French's division.

The slaughter continued as both sides received reinforcements. General Israel Richardson's division joined French's

men, and Confederates under General Richard Anderson moved up to assist Hill's defenders in the road. The Confederate line held until noon, when some of Richardson's men got in the road and an Alabama regiment mistakenly pulled out of position. The Confederate line dissolved, and the remnants of Hill's and Anderson's divisions fled in disarray to an adjacent farm owned by a man named Piper.

The Union breakthrough left a gaping hole in the Confederate center, but Richardson's advance met stiff resistance in a counterattack by just two hundred southerners led by Hill himself. The final blow to the Union attack came when Richardson fell mortally wounded. Without a division commander, the Union tide receded, and the fighting ended. More than five thousand men had become casualties in the battle for the road, which was thereafter known as Bloody Lane.

By 1 P.M., the fighting had shifted to Rohrbach Bridge southeast of town. Union general Ambrose E. Burnside had been trying all morning to get his 9th Corps across Antietam Creek. Although Burnside had more than 12,000 troops at hand, his passage was prevented by 450 Confederate sharpshooters. The Confederates put up a brave defense until they ran low on ammunition and were

A country lane known as Hog Trough Road earned the terrible name Bloody Lane after thousands of lives were lost in a futile battle for it, as shown in this photograph by Alexander Gardner.





forced back by a Union division that had forded the creek downstream.

Instead of advancing, Burnside held his soldiers back for several hours so that they could rest, eat, and replenish their ammunition. The delay proved fatal. By the time the Union advance was renewed, Confederate reinforcements under General Ambrose P. Hill had arrived, and they pushed Burnside's troops back to Antietam Creek.

By 6 P.M., the battle was over. The armies of the North and South held about the same ground as they had when the bat-

tle had begun, but more than thirty-six hundred soldiers had died, and thousands more were wounded or missing, making it the bloodiest one-day battle in American history. Although Antietam has been described as a tactical draw, the Army of Northern Virginia lost twenty-five percent of its men, and Lee was forced to withdraw to Virginia, abandoning his invasion of the North. The Battle of Antietam would prove to be a turning point in the war.

Union troops under General Ambrose E. Burnside paid a high price to cross Rohrbach Bridge, which later became known as Burnside Bridge. After crossing the bridge, Burnside's delay in pressing his advantage cost the North a decisive victory at Antietam.

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Alexander, Ted. "The Battle of Antietam." Cobblestone Oct. 1997: 4-9