ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

"An Omen of the Final Sunset for the Confederacy": Sheridan's 1864 Valley Campaign

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Throughout much of the summer of 1864 Lieutenant General Jubal Anderson Early's Confederate army had the upper hand in the Shenandoah Valley. With the exception of Union victory at the Battle of Rutherford's Farm, located on Winchester's northern outskirts, on July 20, 1864, the region continued to be a place of humiliating defeats for federal forces. "To many a Federal general it had been the valley of humiliation," remembered a Vermont veteran, "on account of the defeats his forces had suffered, [none] had been able to destroy the enemy west of the Blue Ridge, or drive the Confederate armies from that land of abundance, where they gathered strength to prolong the conflict, and from which they raided the other side of the Potomac and menaced Washington." [1]

By late July 1864 Union General-in-Chief Ulysses S. Grant fumed over the inability of Union forces in the Shenandoah Valley to secure the region, prevent its provender from feeding Confederate armies, and preclude its use as a diversionary theater of war. Grant keenly understood that until federal forces could silence Early's Confederates in the Shenandoah Valley, he would not be able to deliver the crushing blow necessary to defeat General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in front of Petersburg and thus open the gates to Richmond. Following Early's victory at the Second Battle of Kernstown on July 24, 1864, and Confederate Brigadier General John McCausland's burning of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, six days later, Grant determined to create a massive force under a competent and aggressive general to crush Early's command.

After consolidating four departments—Department of the Susquehanna, Middle Department, Department of Washington and Department of the West—into the Middle Military Division (popularly referred to as the Army of the Shenandoah), Grant carefully considered who would command this force of approximately 40,000 men. Grant initially suggested Major General William Buel Franklin, a former classmate and friend from West Point, to President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. Lincoln

[1] George N. Carpenter, *History of the Eighth Vermont Volunteers, 1861-1865* (Boston: Press of Deland and Barta, 1886), 164.

vehemently disapproved of Grant's first choice. Beyond the fact that Franklin's reputation had been tarnished by his seeming lack of aggressiveness as commander of the Left Grand Division at the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862, General Franklin was a Democrat, ardent critic of the Lincoln administration, and vociferous supporter of former Union Major General George Brinton McClellan's bid for the presidency. Lincoln understood that the outcome of the campaign in the Shenandoah Valley would undoubtedly contribute to his success or failure at the polls in November, and he dared not put his political fate in the hands of a known detractor. [2]

After Lincoln rejected Franklin, Grant recommended Major General George Gordon Meade, the current commander of the Army of the Potomac. Lincoln also disliked this idea. The president reminded Grant that a number of individuals had pressured him to remove Meade from command of the Army of the Potomac. With the election only months away, Lincoln did not want to appear as if he caved to the wishes of a few individuals. [3]

Major General Philip Henry Sheridan was Grant's third recommendation. While Lincoln seemed comfortable with the choice, Secretary of War Edwin McMasters Stanton disapproved. Although Sheridan was a West Pointer who had performed well with Grant in the west and proved admirable in Grant's eyes as a cavalry commander in the Army of the Potomac, Stanton believed that the thirty-three-year-old Sheridan was too young for such terrific responsibilities. Grant noted of Stanton's reluctance, "Mr. Stanton objected, on the ground that he was too young for so important a command." [4] Grant, however, possessed limitless faith in Sheridan's abilities. He believed that Sheridan had, "no superior as a general, either living or dead, and perhaps not an equal." [5] Once Grant calmed Stanton's fears, Sheridan met with approval and received the command of the Army of the Shenandoah.

Sheridan's appointment formally came on August 6, 1864, and met with mixed reaction among the troops charged with doing what no other Union army had been able to achieve in the Shenandoah Valley—drive Confederate forces from the region and place the valley firmly in Union hands. Three days after Sheridan's appointment, Colonel Charles Russell Lowell wrote his wife from Harpers Ferry—the launching point of Sheridan's 1864 Shenandoah Campaign, "Everything is in chaos here, but under Sheridan

[2] Mark A. Snell, *From First to Last: The Life of Major General William B. Franklin* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 92, 151, 199.
[3] Jeffry D. Wert, *The Sword of Lincoln: The Army of the Potomac* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 387; A. Wilson Greene, "Union Generalship in the 1864 Valley Campaign" in Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *Struggle for the Shenandoah: Essays on the 1864 Valley Campaign* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1991), 41-43.
[4] Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant, 2 vols.* (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1886), 2: 317.
[5] General U.S. Grant to Senator George F. Hoar, quoted in W. E. Woodward, *Meet General Grant* (U.S.: The Literary Guild of America, 1928), 261.

is rapidly assuming shape. It was a lucky of inspiration of Grant's or Lincoln's to make a Middle Military Division and put him in command of it." [6]

While some veterans in the newly created Army of the Shenandoah approved of Sheridan and believed he would lead the Union command to victory, others did not seem so certain. One New York veteran noted, "Gen. Sheridan was a man, but little known at this time, and many were the expressions of surprise that an officer of so little distinction should be placed in charge of such an immense command." [7]

Throughout August and the first half of September, Sheridan organized his command—the VI Corps under Major General Horatio Gouverneur. Wright, the VIII Corps (Army of West Virginia) under Major General George Crook, the XIX Corps under Major General William Hemsley Emory, and his Cavalry Corps Major General Alfred Thomas Archimedes Torbert. Sheridan's first month of command witnessed some skirmishes and a lot of maneuvering between Harpers Ferry and Fisher's Hill, located south of Strasburg, but no major battles. [8] While some became incensed over Sheridan's apparent lack of aggressiveness, Sheridan's cautious behavior was merely obedience to Grant's directive to be pragmatic and not bring on a premature engagement unless completely certain of victory. Grant's concern was not only military, but political; any Union defeat in the Shenandoah Valley would not only hurt Union efforts at Petersburg, but hamper Lincoln's bid for reelection too. "I knew that I was strong, yet, in consequence of the injunctions of General Grant, I deemed it necessary to be very cautious," Sheridan explained, "and the fact that the Presidential election was impending made me doubly so, the authorities at Washington having impressed upon me that the defeat of my army might be followed by the overthrow of the party in power." [9]

After weeks of inactivity President Lincoln demanded decisive action in the Shenandoah Valley. [10] Lincoln wired Grant on September 12, "Sheridan and Early are facing each other at a dead lock. Could we not pick up a regiment here and there, to the number of say ten thousand men, and quietly, but suddenly concentrate them at

[6] Colonel Charles Russell Lowell to wife, August 9, 1864, quoted in Edward Waldo Emerson, ed., *Life and Letters of Charles Russell Lowell: Captain, Sixth United States Cavalry, Colonel Second Massachusetts Cavalry, Brigadier-General United States Volunteers* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 322.

[7] Harris Beecher, *Record of the 114th Regiment, NYSV: Where it Went, What it Saw, and What it Did* (Norwich, NY: J. F. Hubbard, Jr., 1866), 396.

[8] For a detailed examination of this maneuvering during the first month of Sheridan's command see Scott C. Patchan, *The Last Battle of Winchester: Phil Sheridan, Jubal Early, and the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, August 7-September 19, 1864* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2013), 55-202.

[9] Philip H. Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan* (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1888), 1: 499-500.

[10] For discussions of Lincoln's political considerations by the second week of September see Charles Bracelen Flood, *1864: Lincoln at the Gates of History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 292-4; Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), 3: 233-4.

Sheridan's camp and enable him to make a strike?" [11] Grant replied the following day and informed Lincoln that he would visit Sheridan, "and arrange what was necessary to enable him to start Early out of the Valley." [12]

Three days after Lincoln communicated his displeasure to Grant, the general in chief informed Sheridan that he wanted to meet with Sheridan on September 17 in Charles Town. Sheridan knew that if he did not have a specific plan in place to attack Early by the time of the meeting, Grant would either give him one or potentially remove Sheridan from command. Although he undoubtedly felt pressured to strike Early he still believed he could not formulate a plan without possession of information about the Confederate army's precise strength, exact location, and capacity to be reinforced.

Sheridan knew what intelligence he needed, now he had to find a way to get that information from behind Early's lines in Winchester. As Sheridan lamented his difficulties to General Crook, someone who had spent considerable time in the region and knew some of the area's Unionist sympathizers, Crook informed Sheridan about a twenty-four-year-old Quaker school teacher in Winchester who might offer assistance if she could be reached—Rebecca Wright. [13] In order to reach Wright, Sheridan relied on a man recommended highly by Major Henry K. Young's scouts, Tom Laws—an African American from Millwood who had a pass signed by Confederate officials to enter Winchester three times per week to sell produce to Confederate soldiers and civilians in Winchester. [14]

With a courier secured and the prospects of Wright's assistance, Sheridan penned a note on a small piece of tissue paper to Wright, "I learn from Major-General Crook that you are a loyal lady, and still love the old flag. Can you inform me of the position of Early's forces, the number of divisions in his army, and the strength of any or all of them, and his probably or reported intentions?" [15]

Wrapped in tin foil and placed in a capsule, Laws carried the clandestine message to Wright in his mouth. When Laws arrived at Wright's home around noon on September 16 she initially determined to not divulge anything to Laws, a man whom she

[11] President Abraham Lincoln to General Ulysses S. Grant, September 12, 1864, quoted in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 10 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 7: 548.
[12] General Ulysses S. Grant to President Abraham Lincoln, September 13, 1864, quoted in ibid.
[13] General George Crook to Colonel Theodore W. Bean, September 26, 1886, quoted in *The Loyal Girl of Winchester: September 1864* (n.d.), 7; *The New York Times*, July 28, 1912; Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs*, 2: 3.
[14] William B. Feis, *Grant's Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to Appomattox* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 241-2; Ervin L. Jordan, Jr. *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 285; Roy Morris, Jr., *Sheridan: The Life and Wars of General Phil Sheridan* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1992), 191-2.
[15] Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs*, 2: 5-6.

never before met. Laws begged her to take several hours to think about it and not give an answer to Sheridan's plea for help until he returned later that afternoon. [16]

After some thought, and undoubtedly reflecting on the brutal treatment of her father Amos at the hands of Confederates under Lieutenant General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson in March 1862, Wright offered Sheridan the information she possessed. [17] Fortuitously for Sheridan, on September 14, an unidentified Confederate officer visited Wright and divulged information which at the time seemed to make little impression on Wright—due to Sheridan's inactivity in the valley, Major General Joseph Brevard Kershaw's infantry division and an artillery battalion under Major Wilfred Cutshaw departed the region to join Lee's army in the trenches around Petersburg. [18] Wright relayed that information to Sheridan via Laws.

The information Wright provided, coupled with intelligence provided by his scouts that Early's forces were scattered—Lieutenant General John Brown Gordon's and Major General Robert Emmett Rodes' divisions around Martinsburg, Major General John Cabell Breckinridge's command around Bunker Hill, and Major General Stephen Dodson Ramseur left to defend Winchester—Sheridan went to his meeting in Charles Town with the vital intelligence he needed to begin his campaign to clear Early from the Shenandoah Valley. Intent on striking Winchester, Grant noted that Sheridan appeared, "so positive in his views, and so confident of success," that the general in chief kept the plan he developed to himself and simply directed Sheridan to, "Go in!" [19]

As Sheridan put the finishing touches on his plan to crush Early, Wright wondered as to whether or not her information made it to Sheridan, and if it had, did it prove useful? "Many, many times during the next day and the quiet Sabbath I wondered what had become of… my note," Wright penned. [20] When artillery and musket fire erupted east of Winchester on the Berryville Pike on Monday morning, September 19, signaling the opening of the Third Battle of Winchester, Wright wondered whether the information she supplied had anything to do with it.

Throughout the day, Sheridan's army of nearly 40,000 pressured Early's 15,000 Confederates from the east and north. By 5:00 p.m. Early's outnumbered command, which had fought stubbornly throughout the day, clung to Winchester's northern and eastern outskirts in a line that had taken the shape of an inverted L. While Sheridan's infantry corps pressured the portion of Early's line that faced east, Sheridan's cavalry—

[16] Frank A. Burr and Richard J. Hinton, *The Life of Gen. Philip H. Sheridan: Its Romance and Reality* (Providence, RI: J.A. & R.A. Reid Publishers, 1888), 198. For further discussion of Wright see Jonathan A. Noyalas, "That Woman Was Worth a Whole Brigade" *Civil War Times* 51, no. 3 (June 2012): 43-49.
[17] *Olympia Record*, April 3, 1906; Michael G. Mahon, *Winchester Divided: The Civil War Diaries of Julia Chase and Laura Lee* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2002), 21.
[18] *The Times* (Washington, D.C.), October 5, 1902; Rebecca Wright to Charles Carleton Coffin, May 1, 1890, Coffin Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
[19] Charles Carleton Coffin, *Freedom Triumphant: The Fourth Period of the War of the Rebellion* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890), 17; Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 2: 327-8.
[20] *The Times*, October 5, 1902.

approximately 6,000 troopers—aimed to deliver the crushing blow against the portion of the line that faced north anchored in an earthwork fortification constructed in 1861, Fort Collier. All efforts to resist the tidal wave of cavalry proved futile for Early's troops. One soldier remembered of the cavalry assault, "In solid columns, with drawn sabers flashing in the sun… came… troopers like a thunderclap out of clear sky." [21]

Although Sheridan's army suffered more than 5,000 casualties (including nearly 700 killed) a new air of optimism permeated the Army of the Shenandoah's ranks after the battle. [22] Many of Sheridan's men, particularly those who fought previous engagements in the Shenandoah Valley that resulted in defeat, believed Sheridan's grand victory signaled the dawn of a new era. The 29th Maine's Major John Mead Gould, who had been part of Major General Nathaniel Prentice Banks' defeated Union force in the region during Stonewall Jackson's 1862 campaign, captured the significance of the victory at Winchester, "I have been in the Army all the time the war has been in existence… I am happy in knowing that there is an end to all hard times and I begin to feel my days of retreating before a victorious army are ended." [23]

While Sheridan decided to rest his army on the night of September 19 in Winchester, Early's battered command marched south. As these Confederate troops—so accustomed to success in the valley—trod south on the Valley Pike many reflected on what the Confederate defeat meant and ultimately who was responsible. Some Confederate soldiers believed Early was to blame. Confederate cavalryman John Opie wrote, "What was left of our army had now lost all confidence in General Early as a leader, and they were, therefore much demoralized." [24] Confederate veteran John Casler echoed, "General Early was to blame for the defeat… the corps never had any confidence in him afterwards." [25]

Although many Confederates contended they had lost confidence in General Early, it seemed to some outside observers that Early's army, although defeated, was not completely demoralized. Robert T. Barton, discharged from Confederate service in October 1862 due to tuberculosis, observed of the Confederate army as it retreated past his home south of Kernstown, "There was not a little confusion and disorder and many ambulances and wagons of wounded men, but no panic nor any apparent apprehension

[21] Carpenter, *Eighth Vermont*, 183. For detailed treatments of the Third Battle of Winchester see, Patchan, *The Last Battle of Winchester*, or Brandon H. Beck and Roger U. Delauter, Jr., *The Third Battle of Winchester* (Lynchburg, VA: H.E. Howard, 1997).
[22] Casualty figures taken from Brandon H. Beck, "Third Battle of Winchester" in Jonathan A. Noyalas, ed. *"Give the Enemy no Rest!" Sheridan's 1864 Shenandoah Campaign* (New Market, VA: Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation, 2007), 16.
[23] William B. Jordan, ed., *The Civil War Journals of John Mead Gould* (Baltimore, MD: Butternut and Blue, 1997), 403.
[24] John N. Opie, *A Rebel Cavalryman with Lee Stuart and Jackson* (Chicago: W. B. Conkey, 1899), 251.
[25] John O. Casler, *Four Years in the Stonewall Brigade* (Girard, KS: Appeal Publishing, 1906), 234.

that at a more advantageous place Early would turn his veterans round to confront his foes." [26]

The "advantageous place" General Early had in mind was Fisher's Hill. Anchored on the west by Little North Mountain and on the east by Massanutten Mountain, the so-called "Gibraltar of the Valley" was the Shenandoah Valley's narrowest point at 3.9 miles wide. Early correctly understood that if he did not attempt to make a stand at Fisher's Hill the next best reasonable place he could establish a defensive position would be in one of the Blue Ridge Mountains' gaps south of Harrisonburg, thus abandoning a significant portion of the region to Sheridan's army. Early concluded, "This was the only position in the whole Valley where a defensive line could be taken against an enemy moving up the Valley." [27]

Although Early's assessment was correct no army could realize Fisher's Hill's true potential unless it had enough troops to span the distance from Little North Mountain to Massanutten. By the time Early's command arrived at Fisher's Hill on September 20 his command contained approximately 8,000 troops—approximately half of the troops available to him at the beginning of the previous day and nowhere close to the number needed to defend the nearly four mile front. Early's ranks had been thinned not only by the loss of approximately 3,500 men at Winchester, but by the deployment of two cavalry brigades under command of Brigadier General Williams Carter Wickham to prevent Union cavalry from getting into the Luray Valley east of Massanutten. [28] Captain Samuel Buck of the 13th Virginia Infantry noted simply of the Confederate conundrum, "The position was a very strong one, but our army was too small to man it." [29]

Although the size and condition of Early's army placed the Confederates in a precarious situation, Early clung to one hope, Sheridan's memory. During the period of maneuvering between Sheridan and Early in August and early September 1864 Early placed his army at Fisher's Hill and dared Sheridan to attack; Sheridan did not. "I determined therefore to make a shot of a stand here," Early explained, "with the hope that the enemy would be deterred from attacking me in this position, as had been the case in August." [30]

Early's belief proved naïve. When Sheridan met with his corps commanders in Strasburg on September 20 it was determined, based on General Crook's suggestion, that the VIII Corps launch a flank attack against the Confederate left flank while the rest of the army distracted Early's front.

[26] Margaretta Barton Colt, *Defend the Valley: A Shenandoah Family in the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 338.
[27] Jubal A. Early, *A Memoir of the Last Year of the War for Independence in the Confederate States of America* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 98.
[28] Jonathan A. Noyalas, *The Battle of Fisher's Hill: Breaking the Shenandoah Valley's Gibraltar* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013), 21-22.
[29] Samuel D. Buck, "The Battle of Fisher's Hill" *Confederate Veteran* 2, no. 11 (November 1894): 338.
[30] Early, *A Memoir*, 98.

After marching across rugged country on September 21 and 22 Crook's corps, approximately 5,500 men, got into position on Little North Mountain and around 4:00 p.m. rushed off its eastern slope, "like an avalanche of howling demons." [31] Major General Lunsford Lindsay Lomax's heavily outnumbered, ill-equipped, and ill-mounted cavalry—responsible for the protection of Early's left flank—could do little to slow the onslaught. Soon, in less than one hour by most accounts, Early's line pressured from the left, front, and rear collapsed like dominos from west to east. In the aftermath of defeat Early's army withdrew south to Rockfish Gap, near Waynesboro, Virginia, thus leaving a significant portion of the Shenandoah Valley undefended and open to destruction by Union forces. [32]

For Sheridan, the rout his army inflicted at Fisher's Hill cost his command 456 casualties, while Early reported a total loss of 1,234. [33] Demoralized by the defeat Henry Kyd Douglas, a member of Early's staff, penned, "The battle of Fisher's Hill… made the Valley of Virginia, for us, what it had been during Jackson's day for the enemy, a 'Valley of Humiliation.'" [34]

In the battle's immediate aftermath Confederates searched for answers as to what had gone wrong at Fisher's Hill and who was to blame for the army's second defeat in three days. While some blamed Lomax's cavalry for not doing enough in its unenviable position to slow the attack, many soldiers and valley civilians blamed Early. Charges of ineptness and even drunkenness at Fisher's Hill even prompted South Carolina Senator James Lawrence Orr to urge the Confederate Senate to investigate Early's conduct in the Shenandoah Valley. [35] Even some of the Shenandoah's citizens, such as Augusta County resident Sarah McComb, petitioned Confederate President Jefferson Davis to remove Early from command after Fisher's Hill and replace him with a more competent commander before Sheridan destroyed the entire valley. McComb explained to President Davis, "There will never be anything but defeat and disaster until Genl. Early is relieved of command… men & Senior officers have lost all confidence in the leader." [36]

While the Confederacy searched for answers after Fisher's Hill, Sheridan shifted his focus to destroying the "Breadbasket of the Confederacy"—a region which already endured much privation. [37] During that final week of September and the first week of

[31] *Springfield Republican*, November 29, 1886.
[32] For a more detailed tactical study of the fighting at Fisher's Hill see Noyalas, *Fisher's Hill*, 31-99.
[33] U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 43, part 1, p. 59, 556.
[34] Henry Kyd Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 313.
[35] Millard K. Bushong, *Old Jube: A Biography of General Jubal A. Early* (Boyce, VA: Carr Publishing, 1955), 245.
[36] Sarah L. McComb to Jefferson Davis, October 24, 1864, quoted in Lynda Lasswell Crist, ed., *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, 14 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 3: 117.
[37] It is important to note that while Sheridan's devastation during the Burning brought the most widespread destruction to the region in a short period of time the region's landscape and its inhabitants suffered tremendously prior to Sheridan's arrival. For further discussion see Jonathan A. Noyalas, *Civil War Legacy in the Shenandoah: Remembrance, Reunion, and Reconciliation* (Charleston, SC: The History

October in what came to be known as the Burning, Sheridan's command destroyed nearly 1,400 barns, thousands of various other farm structures, three iron furnaces, 435,000 of bushels of wheat, and seized approximately 11,000 head of cattle. [38] Although Confederate sympathizers viewed Sheridan's fiery campaign as brutal some Union troops regarded it as an unfortunate military necessity to bring about the conflict's end. "A large portion of the supplies for the rebel army at Richmond were drawn from this exceedingly rich section of the country," observed a veteran of the 116th New York, "It supplied Early entirely thus making his occupation of it an easy matter. Had this sharply been sooner cut off, it would have been impossible for him to have constantly threatened Maryland and Pennsylvania with invasion. War is terrible, and this was but one of the evils which the chivalry should have expected." [39]

In addition to the Burning, Sheridan's cavalry struck another blow to Confederate morale in the valley with a victory over Confederate cavalry under Major General Thomas Lafayette Rosser at the Battle of Tom's Brook on October 9. Three Union victories and the campaign of destruction made many Union soldiers believe that Early's army had been whipped and would pose no more threat in the valley. From Union camps along the north bank of Cedar Creek, Colonel Rutherford Birchard Hayes wrote his wife following Union victory at Tom's Brook, "Our campaign in the Valley is supposed to be ended. It winds up with a most signal cavalry victory." [40] Sheridan too believed Early no longer posed a major threat, so much so that he left the army on October 15 to attend meetings in Washington, D.C. with President Lincoln and Secretary Stanton. General Horatio Wright assumed temporary command in Sheridan's absence.

The confidence that many in the Army of the Shenandoah possessed about Early no longer posing a significant threat proved premature. Stubborn and cantankerous, General Early refused to surrender the Shenandoah Valley without one final attempt to defeat Sheridan. The question that loomed for Early was how with a numerically inferior force could his command drive the Army of the Shenandoah from its fortified positions along the banks of Cedar Creek? On October 17, several of Early's subordinates led by General John B. Gordon scaled Massanutten Mountain and observed the Union position from Signal Knob—one of the most prominent features in the lower Shenandoah Valley.

Press, 2015), 22-27; Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2012), 135.

[38] Michael G. Mahon, *The Shenandoah Valley 1861-1865: The Destruction of the Granary of the Confederacy* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1999), 135. For the best study of that most destructive period see John L. Heatwole, *The Burning: Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley* (Charlottesville, VA: Rockbridge Publishing, 1998).

[39] Orton S. Clark, *The One Hundred and Sixteenth Regiment of New York State Volunteers: Being a Complete History of Its Organization and of its Nearly Three Years of Active Service in the Great Rebellion* (Buffalo, NY: Printing House of Matthews and Warren, 1868), 238.

[40] Rutherford B. Hayes to wife, October 12, 1864, quoted in Charles Richard Williams, ed., *Diary and Letters of Rutherford Birchard Hayes*, 5 vols. (Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1922), 2: 524.

A survey of the Union line revealed that the Union army's left flank, defended by Crook's corps, appeared to be its weakest point. [41]

At approximately 5:00 a.m. on October 19, following Confederate cavalry probes on both of the Union army's flanks earlier that morning, Early's Confederates slammed into the Union army's left flank. Within the battle's first thirty minutes Crook's two divisions had been driven from their position on the left flank and despite some dogged resistance by the XIX and VI Corps, Early's five infantry divisions cleared the Union troops from their positions and forced them to withdraw north through Middletown. [42]

The Union veterans were demoralized by not only what had transpired, but that it occurred in General Sheridan's absence. The 29th Maine's John Mead Gould lamented, "I thought of the blood that had been spilled for nothing and another sacrifice must be made for the cursed Valley and that the rebellion was not ending. In fact I got blue." [43]

As the battle raged that morning Sheridan, who arrived in Winchester on the night of September 18 following his visit to Washington, awoke at the Logan house on the corner of Piccadilly and Braddock Streets unaware of the disaster his army confronted. After he received some initial reports of artillery fire in the distance from pickets on Winchester's southern outskirts Sheridan had his horse Rienzi saddled and rode south. When Sheridan left the Logan residence that morning he rode not only to the scene of his army's disaster, but into the realm of legend as the event of Sheridan's famed ride would be forever immortalized in art and poetry by individuals such as Thomas Buchanan Read, Alfred Waud, and Charles Andrus. [44]

Near present-day Stephens City, about five miles north of Middletown, Sheridan saw the first signs of his army's disaster as ambulances filled with wounded men moved north. As Sheridan rode toward Middletown he contemplated his options and ultimately determined to reorganize his command, an effort already underway by General Wright, and launch a counterassault.

Around 4:00 p.m. Sheridan launched his attack against Early's Confederates who had taken position on Middletown's northern outskirts. Although contested at first, the weight of Sheridan's afternoon assault proved too much and Early's line collapsed. Sheridan's ability to reverse his army's fortunes that afternoon not only added another victory to the Army of the Shenandoah's laurels, but also proved the end to major military operations in the region and finally and permanently wrested the Shenandoah

[41] Jonathan A. Noyalas, *The Battle of Cedar Creek: Victory from the Jaws of Defeat* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2009), 25-29.
[42] For further discussion of this phase of the battle see Noyalas, *Cedar Creek*, 32-58.
[43] Jordan, ed., *Civil War Journals*, 422.
[44] For further discussion about the event of Sheridan's Ride and how it emerged as Sheridan's iconic moment see Jonathan A. Noyalas, "'Its Thrill Will Never Die': Sheridan's Ride in War and Memory" in Jonathan A. Noyalas and Nancy T. Sorrells, eds., *"We Learned that We are Indivisible": Sesquicentennial Reflections on the Civil War Era in the Shenandoah Valley* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2015), 143-67.

Valley from Confederate control. Colonel Joseph Warren Keifer, commander of a division in the VI Corps, noted simply, "The war closed on that bloody battle-ground of the Shenandoah Valley, so far as important operations were concerned with Cedar Creek." [45]

Throughout that first month of autumn 1864 Sheridan brought an aggressiveness to the Shenandoah Valley that had never before exercised by any Union commander in the region. During that bloody autumn in the Shenandoah nearly 20,000 men became casualties in the most destructive period in the Confederacy's breadbasket. Although costly Sheridan's 1864 Shenandoah Campaign proved a significant tipping point in the conflict as it not only helped ensure Lincoln's bid for reelection, but it also deprived the Army of Northern Virginia of one of its greatest diversionary theaters of war, avenues of invasion, and food resources. Indeed, Sheridan's 1864 Shenandoah Campaign marked, as historian Bruce Catton once observed, "an omen of the final sunset for the Confederacy." [46]

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[45] Joseph Warren Keifer, *Slavery and Four Years of War: A Political History of Slavery in the United States together with a Narrative of the Campaigns and Battles of the Civil War in which the Author Took Part*, 2 vols. (New York: Putnam, 1900), 2: 157.
[46] Bruce Catton, *Banners at Shenandoah: A Story of Sheridan's Fighting Cavalry* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 243.