

## **Lee Loses an Order**

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By the second week of September 1862, elements of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia had crossed the Potomac River into Maryland, while George B. McClellan moved northward from the defenses of Washington in an effort to bring the rebels to battle. The Confederate commander hoped that a major victory on northern soil would lead to Republican defeats in the upcoming 1862 elections, and perhaps bring about British and French recognition of the Confederacy. On September 9, from his headquarters at Frederick, Lee issued his fateful Special Orders No. 191, which outlined the future movements of his divided army, with Stonewall Jackson to move against Harpers Ferry and James Longstreet to advance to Boonsboro, Maryland. Lee sent copies of the order to various subordinate commanders, but one sent to General D.H. Hill was evidently lost by a courier.

On the morning of September 13 in a field near Frederick, a corporal of the Twenty-seventh Indiana Volunteers found an envelope containing a piece of paper wrapped around three cigars. The invaluable piece of intelligence eventually made its way up the chain of command to General McClellan. It provided the Union commander with information that, if he moved quickly, could be used to destroy the different elements of Lee's army before they could unite. The ever-cautious McClellan was concerned that the Lost Order could be a ruse designed to draw his army into a trap, but he soon became convinced of its authenticity and began moving his forces to seize several strategic passes in South Mountain from where he could advance and corner Lee.

On September 14 the first significant fighting of the campaign took place when Union forces under William Franklin captured Crampton's Gap but failed to advance to assist the threatened Union garrison at Harpers Ferry. To the north additional combat took place that same day at Fox's and Turner's Gaps, as Union cavalry battled Confederates under D.H. Hill for control of the vital locations. The southern forces held their positions until Union reinforcements arrived and seized the gaps. About 5,000 men fell in the battles, including Union General Jesse Reno.

While the fighting took place at South Mountain, Stonewall Jackson lay siege to Harpers Ferry, the strategic position at the junction of the Potomac and the Shenandoah Rivers. Though they should have been withdrawn upon the advance of the Confederates, some 12,000 inexperienced Federal troops under Colonel Dixon Miles attempted to mount a defense of the position. Jackson's men easily took control of Maryland and Loudoun Heights overlooking the town, and then commenced a bombardment of the remaining Union position on Bolivar Heights. Miles ordered his garrison to surrender, though a few Yankee cavalry managed to escape the trap. He was then killed by one of the last Confederate artillery rounds fired before the surrender..

By this time, Lee had learned of McClellan's discovery of the Lost Order, and realized the danger facing his smaller force. In response to this threat, Lee began concentrating his army near the small village of Sharpsburg, located just north of the Potomac River in Maryland. Leaving a portion of Jackson's force under A.P. Hill at Harpers Ferry to complete the paroling of the captured Union garrison, he prepared defensive positions at Sharpsburg to await an anticipated attack by McClellan. The bloodiest day of the Civil War was just two days away.