

Episode 110: Burnside Moves Toward Fredericksburg

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Upon hearing that George McClellan had been removed as head of the Army of the Potomac and replaced by Ambrose Burnside, Robert E Lee's reaction was somewhat humorous but ultimately prophetic. Lee remarked that he was sad to see McClellan go, "for we always understood each other so well. I fear they may continue to make these changes until they find someone whom I don't understand." Abraham Lincoln would eventually find such a man in Ulysses S. Grant. As for Burnside, he was reluctant to take the reins of the Army of the Potomac and the events of the next month would show that Lee had little trouble understanding him.

When Burnside took over command, the Union army was at Warrenton while Lee's army was about 30 miles away at Culpeper. The two forces were separated by the Rappahannock River. Since Lincoln had been frustrated by McClellan's lack of aggression, he pressed Burnside to do something and soon. On November 14, 1862, only five days after assuming command, Burnside presented his plan to Lincoln. His plan called for the Union army to move 40 miles east to Fredericksburg and cross the Rappahannock there. Having sidestepped the mass of the Confederates, Burnside's troops would then move south and capture the Confederate capitol at Richmond.

Lincoln liked the plan and approved it. When McClellan had moved on Richmond earlier in the year, he had moved most of his men south by boat to Fortress Monroe. This had left Washington, D.C. feeling vulnerable to Confederate attack and Stonewall Jackson's Valley campaign had diverted lots of Union resources due to those fears. Burnside's plan kept his army in contact with Washington and thus left Lincoln feeling less exposed. One other important

reason for Burnside selecting this particular path was that it prevented Jackson from attacking his army on the flank. Heading directly south from Warrenton would have given Stonewall's men in the valley plenty of opportunities to pester the Union army from the side.

While Lincoln and overall Union army commander Henry Halleck approved Burnside's plan, there was one aspect of it that was not so pleasing to them. They both believed Burnside's goal should be less focused on Richmond and more focused on defeating Lee's army. Still, he had a plan to do something so it was better than what McClellan had been not doing for the last two months.

On November 16, Burnside put into effect his order to get the army moving. The Rappahannock between Culpeper and Fredericksburg is easily crossed at many fords and the Confederate cavalry had little trouble keeping tabs on such a large mobilization. In some cases they were able to do more than observe. At U.S. ford, about fifteen miles from Fredericksburg, a company of the 10th New York, numbering 29 men, was surprised by rebel cavalry. 24 of the men and their horses were captured.

As usual, Lee seemed to understand his opponent completely and grabbing prisoners such as those at U.S. ford probably helped him to do so. He quickly ordered two divisions under Lieutenant General James Longstreet to move on a parallel path south of the Rappahannock and meet the Union army before they could cross at Fredericksburg. The vanguard of the Union army arrived at Falmouth across from Fredericksburg on November 17 and was opposed by only 500 Confederates. But already Burnside's plans were going awry. The pontoon bridges that were supposed to be in place to cross the river had not yet arrived and the moment was lost. This was the first of a series of mishaps that would plague Burnside over the next few weeks, culminating in the horrific Battle of Fredericksburg.