

Episode 111: The Stage is Set at Fredericksburg

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By the evening of November 19th 1862, Confederate troops under General James Longstreet were positioned on the heights above Fredericksburg, Virginia. On the other side of the Rappahannock River, 120,000 Union troops of the Army of the Potomac under General Ambrose Burnside arrived and a headquarters was established near Falmouth.

Burnside had been advised by President Lincoln to move quickly through Fredericksburg. He did not heed Lincoln's advice. Bold action did not come naturally to Burnside. He was, for all his impressive looks and dignified air, an indecisive and anxious man, unpersuaded of his own competence, who had twice turned down overall command. "Few men..." a Massachusetts colonel wrote, "have risen so high upon so slight a foundation." The Union troops were to cross the Rappahannock using pontoon bridges, but due to breakdowns in communication, the arrival of the materials to build these bridges was delayed until the 25th. Upon arrival of the materials, which had been left over 50 miles away in Washington, D.C., Burnside had to determine the proper place to construct them, and the engineers had to actually put this temporary floating bridge together. This meant that both sides would lay in wait for nearly a month before the battle would occur, and that the Confederates had plenty of time to bring in reinforcements.

Lee arrived at Fredericksburg on the 20th, and buildup of Longstreet's remaining troops in the area continued. Within a few days, the number of Confederate troops in and around the City of Fredericksburg went from 1,000 to over 75,000 stretching along a 7 mile line on the crests of hills surrounding the city. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's troops began moving South

from Winchester on the 21st over rough, mountainous terrain, arriving in Fredericksburg on December 3rd.

The Confederates urged the people of Fredericksburg to abandon their town before the Federals attacked it. “I never saw a more pitiful procession than they made trudging through the deep snow...” wrote a Virginia artilleryman, “little children trudging along with their doll babies...women so old and feeble that they could carry nothing and could barely hobble themselves... Some had a Bible and a toothbrush in one hand, a picked chicken and a bag of flour in the other. Where they were going we could not tell, and I doubt if they could.”

While the armies waited, they traded with each other, sending back and forth across the narrow river little fleets of makeshift boats loaded with Union sugar and coffee and newspapers to be swapped for southern papers and tobacco.

The battle of Fredericksburg would be a major failure for Burnside, leading to so much bloodshed that some accounts state that Burnside visibly wept with grief. His retreat and the resulting “mud march” would lead to Burnside’s decision to resign and eventual replacement with Joseph Hooker.

On the western front, Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston took command. Johnston had been the highest ranking officer in the United States Regular Army to resign his commission and join the Confederate cause. Throughout the war, Johnston held a personal grudge against President Jefferson Davis, because, despite Johnson’s rank of full general, he was still outranked in the Confederate Army by three other men whom he had outranked in the US Army, including Robert E Lee. Johnston had been wounded earlier in the year at the Battle of Seven Pines, and Lee had taken command of the army of Northern Virginia. By November, Johnston had

recovered from his wounds and was placed in charge of troops between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River.

Johnson survived the war for 26 years. In the winter of 1891 his old civil war enemy, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman, died in New York City. Among the honorary pallbearers who stood bare-headed in the cold wind outside the church was eighty-two-year-old Joe Johnston, who had fought Sherman in Georgia and the Carolinas. When a friend warned him he might fall ill, Johnston told him, "If I were in [Sherman's] place and he were standing in mine, he would not put on his hat." Johnston died ten days later, of pneumonia.