

## **Brandy Station and Second Winchester**

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The movement of General Robert E. Lee's army northward in early June 1863 and the subsequent maneuverings of the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia soon led to the largest cavalry engagement of the war, the battle of Brandy Station. As Lee concentrated his forces near Culpepper in preparation for the invasion, he ordered his cavalry under General J.E.B. Stuart to screen his army from the prying eyes of General Joseph Hooker's cavalry. Stuart staged two ostentatious reviews of his troopers, the second of which was observed by Union scouts. Concerned about this concentration of enemy forces, Union cavalry commander Alfred Pleasonton brought 11,000 troops across the Rappahannock River to attack the Confederates. John Buford's cavalry brigade pushed the Confederates back from the river, before the rebels received reinforcements and stopped the Union advance.

Another Federal brigade under David Gregg soon joined the fighting and again drove the southerners past Brandy Station and towards Fleetwood Hill. There a single Confederate cannon delayed the Union advance until additional southern troops arrived. The two sides fought back and forth for control of the hill, but by the end of the day the Confederates retained possession of the summit. That evening Pleasonton's force withdrew from the field after 10 hours of fighting. The battle of Brandy Station was tactically a Confederate victory, but it served as a psychological boost for the northern mounted forces, as for the first time they had performed well in an engagement against Stuart's vaunted command. The aura of invincibility surrounding the Confederate cavalry had ended.

As the month of June, 1863 continued, a portion of Lee's Army moved northward through the Shenandoah Valley towards the town of Winchester. General Hooker advised

President Lincoln that the time was right to make an assault on Richmond. Lincoln responded with his firm belief that the priority was striking Lee's army, not Richmond, and for Hooker to fight the Confederate general's force when the opportunity presented itself. The Second Battle of Winchester began after a delayed Union retreat left just under 7,000 Federal troops in the path of Lee's advancing Confederates. General Robert H. Milroy had initially resisted efforts to have his command withdrawn from the town, until he realized that it was the target of a large portion of the Confederate army. On June 14, elements of Richard Ewell's corps attacked Milroy's fortifications west of the town. Realizing his position was hopeless, Milroy abandoned his fortifications that night in an effort to escape northward. Edward Johnson's division blocked the way, and a confused battle broke out early the next morning at Stephenson's Depot. Milroy and about 2,700 Yankees escaped, but the Confederates captured 4,000 prisoners, along with numerous pieces of artillery, and vast quantities of supplies. The southern advance had begun auspiciously.

While the intentions of Lee to take his army across the Potomac River became clearer by the day, details of the whereabouts and strength of his entire command was unknown to both Hooker and the Lincoln administration. To protect the capital, Hooker positioned the bulk of his army west of Washington, D.C. and east of the Confederates. He sought to move his troops farther north, but General Henry Halleck urged Hooker to follow behind Lee's army in an attempt to protect both Washington and the threatened garrison at Harpers Ferry. Population centers throughout Pennsylvania and Maryland were in what a reporter described as a "perfect panic" as the Confederate invasion became a reality. In Harrisburg, the capitol building was evacuated. Fear had gripped the North and the stage was being set for one of the most momentous battles of the American Civil War.

