

Sheridan's Ride, a Raid in the North, and the Battle of Westport

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The battle of Cedar Creek, Virginia, part of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, was the major event that occurred during third week of October 1864. Beginning in the previous Spring a campaign had been underway in the Shenandoah Valley to determine control of the vital region. During the summer Jubal Early, who had been detached from Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at Petersburg to assist in the defense of the Valley, helped defend Lynchburg from a Union force, before moving northward and threatening Washington, D.C. Ulysses Grant ordered troops from the Army of the Potomac to protect the capital and ultimately drive Early from the Valley. Union cavalry commander Philip Sheridan was tasked with this mission.

Sheridan's command defeated Early's outnumbered force at Winchester and Fisher's Hill in September. The Federals then embarked on a campaign of destruction that was designed to eliminate the Shenandoah as a source of supplies for the Confederacy. By mid-October, Sheridan's army was encamped at Cedar Creek, while the general himself traveled to Washington to meet with administration officials. Early's Confederates, meanwhile, had scouted the Union position and discovered a route of advance by which they could surprise the Yankees. Early on the morning of October 19 the southerners struck, driving back in disorder two Federal infantry corps under Generals George Crook and William Emory. The Union VI Corps, however, resisted stoutly and slowed the Rebel advance. They were aided by the fact that the ill-supplied southerners spent valuable time plundering their enemy's abandoned camps instead of pressing the assault.

Upon returning from his meeting in Washington, Sheridan heard the sound of artillery fire in the distance, and soon discovered soldiers fleeing the battlefield, claiming that the army had been destroyed. He rode quickly forward, rallying the fugitives as he approached Cedar Creek. By late afternoon the Federal launched a devastating counterattack that drove Early's command from the field. The victory solidified Union control over much of the Valley, won Sheridan his greatest fame of the war, and contributed to Lincoln's reelection two weeks later.

On the same day that Sheridan dealt the Confederacy a punishing blow at Cedar Creek, hundreds of miles to the north a small group of southerners embarked on one of the war's strangest operations, raiding the town of St. Albans, Vermont from Canada. Lieutenant Bennett Young had previously escaped from a Union prisoner-of-war camp and fled to Canada. He received permission from the Confederate government to launch a raid against the border town, in hopes of obtaining money to aid the south. On October 19, Young and about twenty followers robbed four St. Albans' banks, obtaining more than \$200,000.00 before fleeing back across the border. Canadian authorities arrested most of the men, but they were eventually released. The Canadian government ultimately submitted reimbursement to St. Albans for a portion of the funds that had been looted.

The final major event of the week took place far to the west, with a Confederate effort to regain the initiative in Missouri. With regular Confederate forces having been driven from the state earlier in the war, much of the region had fallen victim to vicious guerrilla fighting. In the Fall of 1864, Confederate General Sterling Price mounted a major raid into the state, hoping to gather supplies and divert Federal forces from other

theaters. Price's Confederates clashed with Union troops at the Little Blue River and the Big Blue River on October 21 and 22, but the campaign's major engagement took place at Westport on October 23. There Federals under James Blunt and Alfred Pleasonton battled elements of Price's command until the Confederates were forced to retreat. Casualties totaled about 3,000 in the bitter fight, which resulted in Price's withdrawal into Arkansas and the consolidation of Union control in Missouri.