Little Battle at Big Bethel
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As state after state in the South took the path of secession and as the new Confederate government boldly placed their capital in Richmond, just over 100 miles from Washington, D.C., one key Southern fortification remained in Union hands. Fortress Monroe, located at Old Point Comfort in Hampton, Virginia, provided strategic power over the entrances to the Chesapeake Bay and the James River.

In late May 1862, Major General Ben Butler was sent to take command of the fort. Before the war, Butler had been a politician and lawyer in Massachusetts. He had little military experience and his rank was mainly a tribute to his political power. Despite his mainly civilian background, Butler was anxious to make some military progress from his new base. The Northern public also expected action, and Butler was only too happy to oblige.

Early in June, Butler learned that the Confederates had built a battery only eight miles from Fortress Monroe and about thirteen miles south of Yorktown. The Confederate forces, under command of Colonel John Magruder, were posted near two local churches called Little Bethel Church and Big Bethel Church. Magruder began to send men to the vicinity of Fortress Monroe to harass the Union troops. Butler determined to make his mark by capturing the Confederate post and thereby opening the way for a march to Richmond. Reconnaissance indicated that the Confederate forces numbered in the vicinity of 1,400 troops. Butler ordered a force of 3,500 men and artillery to make a surprise attack and take the fortifications near Big Bethel.

The expedition was a disaster from start to finish. Butler's untested volunteers were going up against men commanded by experienced military commanders in Magruder, Daniel Harvey Hill and George Randolph. The Union soldiers got lost on their overnight march to Big Bethel, a local resident alerted the Confederates to the movement and finally one New York regiment mistakenly fired on another Union regiment. One man was killed and twenty-two wounded before the battle with the enemy had been engaged.

General Ebenezer Pierce, in command of the expedition, determined that with the enemy aware of the Union presence a frontal attack was out of the question. He attempted to attack the Confederate flanks but his exhausted men were not up to the task. One regiment hid in the woods while another charged across a swamp. Major Theodore Winthrop raised his sword and shouted "Come on, boys – one more charge and the day is ours!" and was immediately cut down by Confederate fire. The Southerners hid in the underbrush and picked off the green Northern troops as if they were out hunting. After several failures to drive the defenders back, Pierce determined that it was best to head back to Fortress Monroe. They left 76 men dead and wounded behind. Confederate casualties numbered only eight.

The fiasco at Big Bethel was a serious setback for Butler's aspirations. Northern newspapers called for his removal or court martial and discussed the folly of appointing politicians into military rank. Butler persevered, however, and as the war progressed would become quite notorious among Southerners for some of his latter actions.

This first real battle on Virginia soil would come to look like a mere skirmish in comparison to the sanguine nature of latter conflicts in the Old Dominion. With the forces on the

peninsula at a stalemate, the stage was set for the first serious battle of the war the next month

farther to the north at Bull Run.