

## **Rich Mountain and Corrick's Ford** **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

Though they would soon become overshadowed by a much larger battle to the east near Manassas, the smaller engagements at Rich Mountain and Corrick's Ford in July 1861 played a major role in ensuring that western Virginia would remain in Union hands throughout the conflict.

In June, Federal forces had won a victory at Phillipi, which led the Confederates to send additional troops to western Virginia, along with a new commander, Brigadier General Robert S. Garnett. The southern leader positioned the majority of his force near Laurel Hill, with a smaller contingent under Colonel John Pegram at Rich Mountain, which controlled the turnpike from Staunton to Parkersburg. In early July the Confederates would face a threat from 20,000 Union troops led by General George B. McClellan, who hoped to secure the remainder of western Virginia for the north.

While part of McClellan's force demonstrated against the Laurel Hill position, the Union commander himself led the bulk of his men against Rich Mountain. On July 11, with a local Unionist citizen as a guide, William Rosecrans led his brigade along a mountain path to turn the Confederate left flank. Rosecrans' men reached the mountain's summit and then advanced to cut the turnpike. Near the Hart Farm, they encountered a small southern force under Captain Julius de Lagnel that stubbornly contested the Yankee advance before being forced to withdraw. While the Federal battle plan had been for McClellan to then launch an attack against the main Confederate line, Rosecrans' achievement forced Colonel Pegram to abandon his position, with more than half of the southerners, including the colonel, being captured during the hasty

withdrawal. In total, about 150 men had been killed or wounded in the fighting around the Hart Farm, and around 550 Confederates were captured during the subsequent retreat.

The taking of the Confederate position at Rich Mountain forced Garnett to evacuate his other garrison at Laurel Hill. Torrential rain and Confederate delaying tactics hampered the pursuit, but Garnett's attempt to save his supplies and ammunition slowed his retreat and allowed McClellan's force to catch up with the rebel rear guard at Corrick's Ford on the Cheat River on July 13. Most of the Confederates were able to escape but Garnett himself, while directing the rear guard, was shot and killed. His body fell into Union hands, and McClellan directed that it be sent to Washington, and ultimately to Baltimore, where relatives interred it. Garnett had become the first general officer, north or south, to be killed in the Civil War.

Rich Mountain and Corrick's Ford had resulted in a relatively small number of casualties but, in the words of historians David and Jeanne Heidler, it "had been a significant strategic setback and a profound psychological blow for the new Confederacy." McClellan, even now displaying the symptoms of an over-developed ego, reported "Our success is complete and secessionism is killed in this country." The Union victories had in fact secured the resources and transportation network of western Virginia for the north, and Unionists would begin the process that ultimately led to the formation of the new state of West Virginia in 1863. The operations in western Virginia had also raised the profile of George B. McClellan, who in the aftermath of the Union defeat at Bull Run, would be asked to take command of the forces around Washington, D.C., soon to become known as the Army of the Potomac.