

## **The Battle of Bull Run**

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On Wednesday July 17 Washington, D.C. was buzzing with the news in the morning papers. Union forces under Irvin McDowell were moving out of Washington toward the Confederate encampments at Manassas. The advance was no secret to Confederate General Beauregard, who had access to the papers and had also heard the news from a spy in Washington.

As the federals moved westward, they pushed back Confederate outposts at Fairfax Court House and Vienna and then stopped for the night at Fairfax Court House. Beauregard wired Jefferson Davis in Richmond that his outposts were being driven in and asked for reinforcements if possible. Davis in turn ordered General Joseph Johnston to move his forces from the Shenandoah Valley to Manassas to aid Beauregard.

On the next day, July 18, McDowell continued to move slowly westward, reaching Centerville, about 20 miles west of Washington and 7 miles from Manassas Junction. Meanwhile, Johnston's men were hurriedly making their way toward Manassas by foot, horseback and railroad.

Bull Run lies about half way between Centerville and Manassas Junction and was not easily crossed except due to steep banks and dense forests. There were a number of fords that had been long used by the locals, but all of these along Beauregard's 8-mile-long line were closely guarded by the Confederates. While waiting for his supply trains to catch up to his men at Centerville, McDowell sent a small force under Brigadier General Daniel Tyler toward

Blackburn's Ford on a reconnaissance mission. Reaching the crest of the ridge overlooking Bull Run, Tyler brought up several pieces of artillery and began shelling the Confederates on the other side. The Southerners, under the command of James Longstreet, counterattacked and repulsed the Union force. Fifteen Confederates and nineteen Union troops lost their lives at the skirmish at Blackburn's Ford.

On the afternoon of Friday July 19, as McDowell continued to wait on supplies and get his troops organized, the first of Johnston's troops began to arrive from the valley. As Friday turned into Saturday, more Confederates poured in from the west. As the time for battle got close, both sides began to form their plans of action. Strangely enough, each plan ended up calling for an attack on the other's left flank. Had this worked out, it would have resulted in both armies turning like a counterclockwise wheel around each other.

As it turned out, McDowell got his men moving first on the morning of July 20 and at sunrise began attacking the Confederates near the Stone Bridge. This caused the Confederates to forego their own planned turning action and go instead onto the defensive. A small force of a little over 1,000 Confederates under Nathan Evans were able to hold off the 20,000 Union attackers for crucial moments until reinforcements arrived. Even with reinforcements, however, the Confederates were pushed back by noon to a local prominence called the Henry House Hill.

On the Henry House Hill, as Confederates began to retreat in disarray, a Virginia brigade under former VMI professor Thomas Jackson, held fast and other Confederates rallied around them. It was from this famous stand that Jackson received the affectionate nickname of Stonewall. For most of the rest of the afternoon, charges and countercharges continued until at about 4 pm the Confederates broke through and began to drive the Union forces back in a rout.

Panicked Yankees fled furiously back toward Washington, getting caught up in crowds of horrified civilians who had brought picnics out to watch what they assumed would be the only battle of the war. The exhausted Confederates were unable to continue their pursuit and the battle ended as nightfall came. The first great battle of the war saw almost 3,000 Union casualties and almost 2,000 on the Southern side. As news of the battle's outcome spread, Southerners rejoiced and Northerners wept in shame and frustration.