

The First Battle of Kernstown

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As the spring of 1862 began, the Union and Confederate armies in Virginia began to reposition themselves for upcoming action. Confederate General Joseph Johnston, deciding that the position his forces had occupied at Manassas since the previous summer was untenable, decided to withdraw to Richmond. President Abraham Lincoln continued to pressure Major General George McClellan to act against the Confederates. Now that the *Monitor* had neutralized the CSS *Virginia* in Hampton Roads, McClellan decided to send his forces by boat to Fortress Monroe and attack Richmond by way of the Virginia Peninsula.

As Johnston began his withdrawal to Richmond, he feared being attacked from the west by forces under Major General Nathaniel Banks. To protect his flank, Johnston ordered forces under Major General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson to protect the gaps in the Blue Ridge Mountains from Union penetration. Johnston also ordered Jackson to prevent Banks from leaving the Shenandoah Valley altogether and joining forces with McClellan to attack Richmond.

On March 21, Jackson got word that Banks was sending a large part of his force to join up with McClellan. To prevent this, Jackson sent his men in motion on a demanding march to meet the Union forces in battle. Heading north toward the Union forces near Winchester, Jackson’s men covered 25 miles on March 22 and another 15 miles on the morning of March 21. The Union army was in position just south of Winchester at Kernstown. Jackson, receiving mistaken intelligence from Confederate spies in the town, thought he was facing a fairly small

force. Instead, his 3,000 Confederates were about to engage a Union force two or three times bigger.

By 11 am on March 23, Jackson had his exhausted men ready to attack. In this early battle, Jackson did not do the sort of personal reconnaissance that would later cost him his life but relied on the word of his cavalry leader Colonel Turner Ashby. Ashby informed Jackson that only a small Union force was in position directly ahead. Knowing that his tired men couldn't succeed in a frontal assault, Jackson wheeled most of his men around for an attack to the left of the Union position.

The Union commanders seemed quite surprised that the much smaller Confederate force was attacking them. They did not realize that Jackson actually thought he had superior numbers. The Union leaders continued to move more and more soldiers toward Jackson's attacking men. The Confederates took cover behind a stone wall and were able to hold off several Union attempts to take the positions. When one of his officers observed to Jackson that they were heavily outnumbered, Stonewall replied "Say no more of it. We are in for it."

Still, Jackson's men were able to hold off the larger force until about 6 pm when men started to run out of ammunition and Union cavalry was attacking their exposed flanks. At this point, Jackson was in the rear directing a reserve regiment to come forward. In command at the stone wall was Brigadier General Richard Garnett, who after surveying the situation sounded the retreat. Jackson, moving forward, was shocked to see the retreat but was unable to stem the tide. Fortunately for his troops the Union men were too beaten down from the fight to offer much of a pursuit.

This battle was the only time during the war when Stonewall Jackson was soundly defeated. Jackson blamed the defeat on Garnett and had him arrested for "neglect of duty".

Despite the loss on the battlefield, the battle had a lasting positive impact on Confederate fortunes. Abraham Lincoln was so rattled by yet another fight this close to Washington that he held back tens out thousands of men for defense of that city. The lack of these men would prove telling in McClellan's upcoming Peninsula Campaign.