

More Bloodshed in the Shenandoah

<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>

In late May 1862 fighting continued in the Shenandoah Valley with the engagements at Front Royal and Winchester, earning Confederate General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson even greater fame. Following his victory at McDowell earlier that month, Jackson moved his small army eastward and then northward down the Valley towards a position held by Union General Nathaniel Banks at Strasburg. By May 23 he had approached within a short distance of Front Royal, then garrisoned by about 1,000 Federal troops.

After Confederate cavalry isolated the Union force by cutting its communication lines with Strasburg. Jackson then ordered an infantry attack against the northern position. In a circumstance that typified the fraternal aspect of the Civil War, the vanguard for the rebels included the First Maryland Confederate Infantry, while facing them in the Union ranks was the First Maryland Union Infantry. The southern attack broke the enemy lines, and the Federals retreated from the town and crossed a bridge over the Shenandoah River. Confederate cavalry continued the pursuit and virtually annihilated the Yankee command, which suffered approximately 900 casualties. It was one of the most lopsided engagements of the war, and led to General Banks withdrawing his force north towards Winchester, with Jackson in hot pursuit.

The Confederate commander hoped to cut off Banks’ 10,000-man force south of Winchester, which led to skirmishing with the Federal rear guard on May 24 near Newtown. Banks’ main force then took positions along a series of hills south of Winchester. Despite the fact that May 25 was a Sunday, the devout Jackson launched an attack on the Federals, which they initially repulsed. A brigade from Louisiana commanded by General Richard Taylor then struck the Union right flank, forcing the Yankees to retreat. Other Confederates under Richard Ewell simultaneously attacked the Union left, causing that portion of the line to collapse as well. A Union soldier referred to the fighting as “hell—or at least about as good an imitation as is

often produced in the 'upper world.'" Banks' defeated troops withdrew hastily through the town, with some of its pro-Confederate citizens joining in and firing on the bluecoats as they fled. They left behind large stores of supplies and equipment, which the Confederates gratefully appropriated. The retreating troops did not halt until they had crossed the Potomac into Maryland some thirty miles to the north.

During the battle the Federals had lost approximately 300 killed and wounded, and more than 1,700 captured. The Confederates suffered about 400 casualties in the fighting. Jackson's victory had been complete, but he was unable to exploit it because of Union reinforcements that were quickly sent to the Valley. He advanced northward towards Harpers Ferry, but soon had to fend off Federal armies under James Shields and John C. Fremont. The culminating engagements of the 1862 Shenandoah Valley Campaign would take place the following month at Cross Keys and Port Republic, resulting in the clearing of Federal soldiers from much of the region.