

Engagement at Baton Rouge and the Battle of Cedar Mountain

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When New Orleans fell to Federal forces on April 25, 1862, Louisiana government officials had moved their headquarters from Baton Rouge north to Shreveport. In May, Union forces under Brigadier General Thomas Williams entered and began to occupy Baton Rouge, meeting little to no Confederate resistance.

Major General Earl Van Dorn had been appointed earlier in the year by Jefferson Davis to lead the Confederate Trans-Mississippi department. Van Dorn believed that Baton Rouge should be retaken and used as a staging area from which to retake New Orleans. Van Dorn ordered 5,000 men under Major General John Breckenridge to capture Baton Rouge and in late July this force began to move from eastern Louisiana toward the city. The plan was for these Confederates to attack Baton Rouge from the east while the ironclad ram *Arkansas* would pummel Union forces from the Mississippi River to the west.

Breckenridge attacked at dawn on August 5, 1862 and made good progress into the town. During the bitter fighting, Thomas Williams was killed. The *Arkansas* was stalled by engine failure four miles above the city and was of no use to Breckenridge and his men soon began to be pounded by artillery fire from Union gunboats. Unable to make any more progress and worried about his ability to hold what he had captured, Breckenridge withdrew from the city. The Confederates would not make another attempt during the war to recapture Baton Rouge.

This week also saw serious fighting in Virginia. After the Seven Days battles ended in early July, Robert E. Lee had stationed 24,000 men under Stonewall Jackson near Gordonsville, an important railroad junction point. These men would shield the Confederates in Richmond from the Union forces in Northern Virginia, under Major General John Pope.

On August 6, 1862, Pope moved his men south into Culpeper County, with the intention of attacking Jackson's force and capturing Gordonsville. Jackson, always aggressive, decided to attack Pope first and began to move his men to the north. The Union and Confederate forces met on the morning of August 9 just outside of Culpeper on the ground around Cedar Mountain. The day consisted mostly of an artillery duel until late afternoon when Union infantry began an attack. This was just at the time that Confederate division commander Brigadier General Charles Winder was mortally wounded by a shell fragment. In the subsequent confusion, parts of the Confederate line were about to break under the assault when they were rallied by the sudden presence of Brigadier General Jubal Early.

The situation was still tenuous when Stonewall Jackson himself appeared at the front and exhorted the men to attack, waving his sword and a battle flag above his head. Emboldened, the Confederates went on the attack and by early evening the Union troops were in full retreat from the field. Jackson held the field against expected counterattacks for two days and then fell back to his position at Gordonsville. The Union suffered about 2,300 casualties during the battle while Confederate losses were at about 1,300. The Battle of Cedar Mountain began to focus attention from the Richmond area to Northern Virginia, culminating in several weeks in the bloody Second Battle of Bull Run.