

The Fairfield Campaign

June-August 1863

In late June, Robert E Lee's army was marching north behind the safety of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The objective for Lee's second invasion of the north was to carry the war into Pennsylvania and spend as much of the summer campaign season as possible in the north, gathering supplies and defeating the Army of the Potomac if the opportunity should arise. While the Blue Ridge mountains masked Lee's movements, the mountains also left him blind to the activities of Meade's forces, who were much closer at hand than the Confederates imagined.

Meade and the Army of the Potomac may have been a step behind the enemy, but the Federal army was well concentrated around the road nexus of Frederick, Maryland. Meade's opening move was to direct the main body of his force north to Emmitsburg, rapidly marching along parallel roads for maximum efficiency. Meanwhile, he advised Sickles' III Corps to cross the mountains at Middletown and harass the rebel rear.

Lee had anticipated this move and already sent Longstreet's I Corps to act as the army rearguard and defend the Potomac crossings at Shepherdstown and Williamsport. Heavily outnumbered, Sickles now found himself in grave danger of being trapped and cut off from the rest of the Federal army on the wrong side of the mountains.

Farther north, Lee directed AP Hill's corps to hold the Cashtown pass while Ewell's II Corps concentrated on Harrisburg. It did not take Ewell long to capture the state capital. A bold attack by Rodes' Division managed to defeat "Baldy" Smith's militia in a hotly-contested fight for the bridges across the Susquehanna. The Union militiamen were unable to destroy the crossing in time, allowing rebel troops to pour into the city and sack the capital. Politically, this was a major coup for Lee's army. Militarily, it also yielded a bounty of supplies to ship south through the Cumberland Valley.

By the end of June, Ewell was finishing his operations in Harrisburg and making preparations to join Hill in the vicinity of Gettysburg. Hill sent Heth's division to probe the road network at this modest crossroads when Reynolds I Corps and Buford's cavalry division made contact. Heth attempted to escape back to the mountains but found himself cut off and surrounded by growing numbers of Federal divisions streaming north—now including the XI and II Corps. Lee urgently ordered Ewell to hasten south while the remainder of Hill's corps crossed through Cashtown to rescue Heth.

But what of Longstreet? Between Boonsboro and Sharpsburg, Longstreet and Sickles found themselves engaged in a series of skirmishes, with the rebels unable to pin down the Federal troops. General Sykes and V Corps maintained a watch at Middletown, holding open the mountain pass for Sickles to make good his escape. While this may have been a prudent move by Sykes, it was not communicated to Meade. After the campaign, Meade and Sykes would accuse

the other of failing to send proper messages, but in truth, multiple couriers between the two had been lost over the course of several days. This meant that while Sickles would be saved from Longstreet's trap, Meade would be without two of his corps for the coming engagement at Gettysburg. Worse still, due to the miscommunication, Meade continued to believe Sykes was marching north with all haste, when in truth, he was over 50 miles away.

In early July, elements of both armies met at Gettysburg in a major pitched battle. In a hard fight, Lee managed to hold on for a narrow victory with Hill and Ewell facing down Reynolds, Hancock, Howard, Slocum, and Pleasonton.

Some 50 miles to the south, a fateful and pivotal moment occurred at Sharpsburg. General Sickles made good his escape back to Middletown, where General Sykes acted on his own initiative to counter-march both the III and V Corps toward Harper's Ferry. This would prove to be a truly momentous—and controversial—decision. According to his own records, Sykes rationalized the decision on two grounds: (1) Slipping to the southwest would allow two Federal corps to get behind Longstreet; and (2) Passing through Harper's Ferry could cut Lee's line of retreat across the Potomac.

These were both sound military reasons for his action, but Sykes was guilty of both miscalculation and bad timing. In the first case, the counter-march through Harper's Ferry was a long, hard road that would take over a week to complete. Sykes was also in possession of a note from Meade—finally delivered after long delay—confirming the commander's orders to march to Fairfield with all due haste. Sykes chose to disregard this order on his accord. But Sykes was also the victim of poor timing, for at the very same moment he chose to slip around the rebel position at Sharpsburg, Longstreet had already decided to abandon the position and rush north to join with Lee. Had Sykes remained Middletown just one more day, the road to the Potomac, and Lee's rear, would have been wide open. But alas, it was not to be.

The result of Longstreet's march north would ultimately be the seminal action of the campaign—the Battle of Fairfield. In a grueling 3-day engagement, Meade found himself hammered from two directions as Longstreet's I Corps crashed through the Mechanicstown gap and hit the Federal flank. The arrival of Sedgwick's corps helped Meade weather the storm and Lee's victory was not the decisive blow he'd aimed to achieve.

In fact, by this time in mid-July, General Lee and his corps commanders were beginning to fall victim to their own success. Buoyed by the capture of Harrisburg, the sudden arrival of JEB Stuart, and a series of minor battlefield triumphs, the rebel high command sought to press the issue and seek their elusive, decisive blow. This may have caused Lee to lose focus and ignore the alarming reports from his cavalry pickets along the Potomac that two entire Federal corps remained missing and could not be located. Lee chose not to take an active role in reconnaissance with these pickets, leaving him blind to the whereabouts of Sickles and Sykes.

Much to Meade's dismay, he too lacked critical information about the whereabouts of Sickles and Sykes. His rogue corps commanders had done a spotty job of maintaining communication and while they were making slow, steady progress through Harper's Ferry, they were sorely needed in Maryland. Meade finally ordered a retreat back to the Pipe Creek Line after suffering yet another setback against Lee. This time, Lee obliged and began pulling back through the Blue Ridge to safety. But would Lee's move be too late?

While the Army of the Potomac licked its wounds along the stout Pipe Creek line to screen Baltimore and Washington, Pleasonton's cavalry rode north through Gettysburg and passed through Cashtown to liberate Chambersburg. Here, the Federal cavalry found a major rebel supply depot and mile-long trains of wagons rumbling south, filled with loot from Harrisburg. Far to the south at Harper's Ferry, French's garrison had just been released for operations in the Shenandoah Valley, and Sykes was finally making good on his promise to cut the Potomac crossings. By this time in late July, the tide of the campaign seemed to be shifting in Meade's favor. How should the Army of the Potomac capitalize?

At a war council in Taneytown, a dispute simmered between Meade and his corps commanders—namely Hancock “the Superb.” There were reports from Pleasonton and locals that Lee's army was threatening to move north through the Cumberland Valley and resume the offensive. Meade and several of his subordinates gave credence to this information and argued the best course would be to press Lee's rear and maintain contact, in case a rebel force would slip around the Federal army to endanger Baltimore. Hancock disagreed, arguing the reports must be false and Lee must be marching back to Virginia instead of turning north.

Backed by Reynolds, Meade's argument won the day and the Army of the Potomac attacked Lee's rearguard along the Blue Ridge. It became a fiasco of sorts, as the entire Federal army funneled down the Emmitsburg Pike and could not bring their strength to bear against Hill's corps, which easily beat back the attack.

Where was Lee going? The reports from Pleasonton and local civilians turned out to be nothing more than the long wagon trains captured on the way south and a sharp skirmish with JEB Stuart. In truth, Hancock had been correct and the Confederate high command never considered resuming the offensive. The Army of Northern Virginia was on the way home, back toward Hagerstown.

But not all was well for Lee. At Hagerstown, he was met with reliable reports of Federal infantry—in great numbers—massing along the Potomac crossings to block the route home. Worse still, the nearest crossing at Williamsport had just been washed out due to flash floods in the region. The news grew more grim when cavalry pickets confirmed that the Confederate depots at Chambersburg, Martinsburg, and Winchester had all fallen into Yankee hands. With no supplies and the road to Virginia blocked, logistics became Lee's worst enemy. The pace of march now slowed to a crawl and the rebels found themselves surrounded—Pleasonton to the north, Sykes and Sickles to the south, and Meade's lumbering army closing in from the east.

In the first week of August, the campaign drew to an end. Reynolds and Sedgwick broke through the Blue Ridge at Waynesboro, linking up with Kilpatrick's cavalry division. A valiant defense by Pender's division kept the Confederate rearguard from being completely overrun, but the ring was closing in around Lee's position at Hagerstown. Longstreet's vanguard came within miles of Shepherdstown, only to find Sickles and Sykes dug in along the opposite bank of the Potomac. A crossing would need to be forced here, or the ferry repaired at Williamsport.

Lee would no doubt make good his escape, but at the cost of thousands of stragglers and most of his hard-won wagon trains of captured supplies. It was a dangerous end to what began as a glorious invasion of Pennsylvania.