The Blood-Tinted Waters of the Shenandoah

The 1864 Valley Campaign's Battle of Cool Spring, July 17-18, 1864

by Jonathan A. Noyalas

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by Jonathan A. Noyalas

EMERGING CIVIL WAR SERIES

Savas Beatie
California

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Dedicated to the memory of Mike Smith,
a wonderful friend and supporter of Shenandoah University's
McCormick Civil War Institute's efforts at Cool Spring.
May he rest in peace.

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The peaceful waters of the Shenandoah River today present a stark contrast to the carnage experienced along its banks during the battle of Cool Spring. (jn)

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Foreword

BY BRIAN MATTHEW JORDAN

View of the Shenandoah River looking south from atop the bluffs where Union batteries were posted on July 18, 1864. (jn)

Even the most diligent students of the Civil War's military history might be hard pressed to identify the battle of Cool Spring, a sprite, sanguinary clash that unfolded along the banks of the Shenandoah River in Clarke County, Virginia, on July 18, 1864. On that day, elements of two federal army corps met up with rebel general Jubal A. Early's Army of the Valley as it slinked back up the Shenandoah, nursing the regrets of a failed foray to Washington, D.C. Fought during a brutal summer whose surreal scenes—the fires of the Wilderness, the fury of the Mule Shoe, the frontal assaults at Cold Harbor—overwhelmed even those well acquainted with the war's devastations, the engagement at Cool Spring was quickly eclipsed in national memory. As federal troops trundled into the works around Petersburg and battled their way ever closer to Atlanta, the press and the lay public had reason to shift their sights far from Island Ford.

This book, then, is an act of historical recovery—skillfully narrating the details of a battle that many histories have misplaced. But it is substantially more,

because historian Jonathan A. Noyalas, the dean of the Civil War in the Shenandoah Valley, has rendered exquisitely legible the gap that yawns between messy human experiences and tidy historical narratives. Soldiers (and, by extension, their families and communities back home, who also fight) assign weight and meaning to battles in ways that do not always align with the subsequent assessments of starched historians. Indeed, events that barely register on our rubrics of significance loomed large in the lives of ordinary soldiers. The grief of widowhood was felt no less acutely because a husband was felled in a skirmish. Slugs of lead proved no less deadly in brief actions. Physical and psychological injuries were not the exclusive province of headline-seizing battles; the quiet agonies of veteranhood visited the survivors of engagements large and small.

Each summer Shenandoah University's McCormick Civil War Institute conducts a camp for children at Cool Spring. Among the topics explored are camp life and the everyday experiences of soldiers. (jn)

Historians routinely consider the significance of a battle by evaluating its operational results, strategic consequences, or political implications. Noyalas's metric is much simpler and, I submit, more humane. He argues that Cool Spring was a significant battle not because it changed the course or outcome of a military campaign, but because it changed the lives of those who fought there. Noyalas's approach urges us to reconsider not just our Civil War past, but what we deem significant about it. The war was comprised of many similar actions that have scarcely merited the attention of historians. Even so, these engagements consumed the lives of their contemporaries—men and women, of course, who could never be certain how the war would turn out. The war was punctuated with contingencies and close-run things; it brimmed with lost alternatives and moments of futility. Those experiences, no less than Shiloh and Gettysburg, are part of the Civil War fabric.

Noyalas's relentlessly human account of Cool Spring takes inventory of combat's lived costs. In

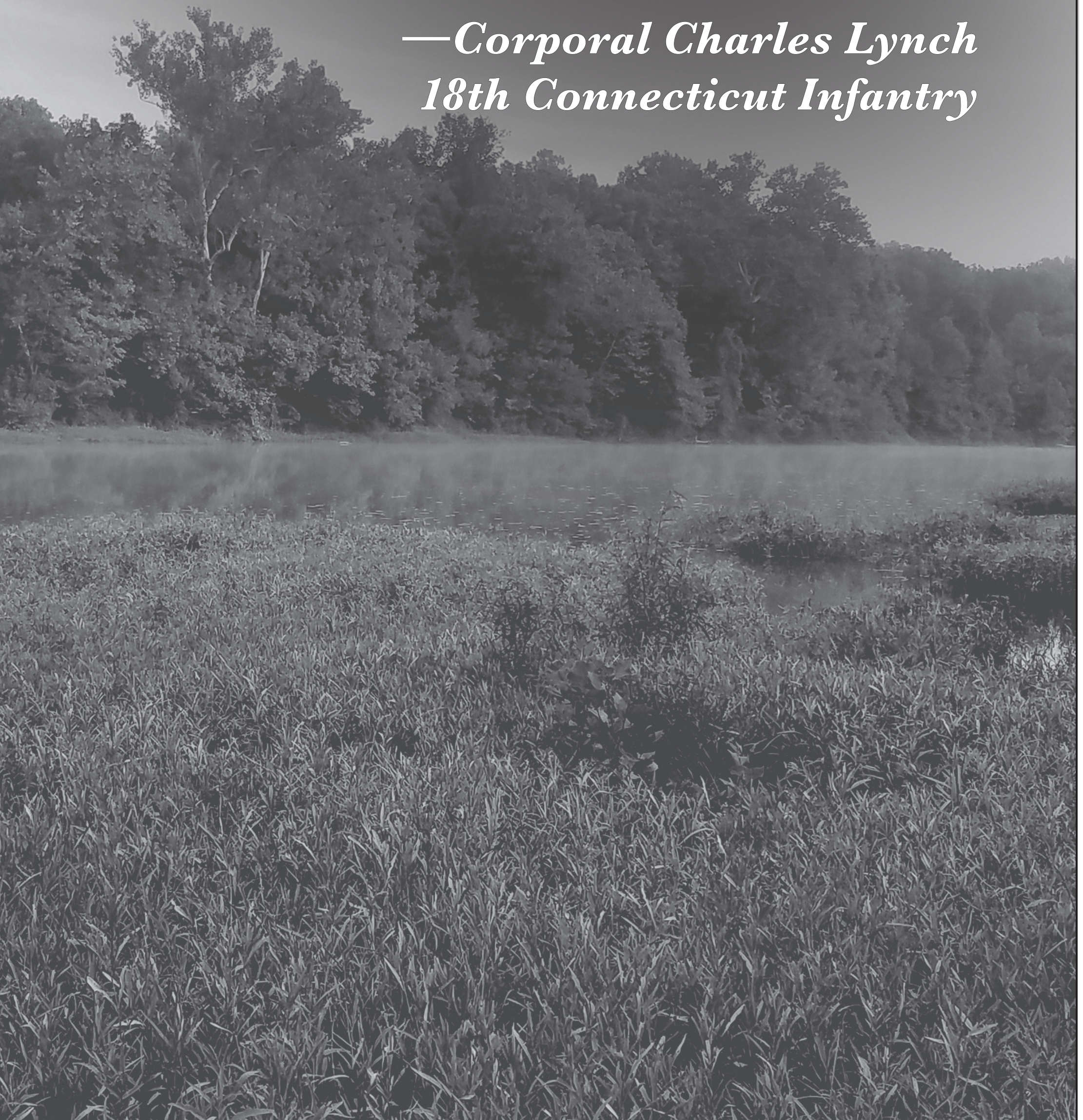
these pages, for instance, we meet the soldier from Killingly, Connecticut, who returned to the battlefield to comb for his dead brother's remains—consumed by a survivor's guilt as profound as his personal grief. Noyalas demonstrates that no tactical map can adequately record the totality of what happened on a Civil War battlefield, for the consequences of combat rippled out in both time and space, annexing lives, families, and communities—sometimes for generations. Noyalas captures that complex dynamic by punctuating his battle narrative with telling vignettes—many drawn from pension files, service records, and civilian newspapers—tracing what I have called elsewhere the "human longitude" of war. A stubborn hour defending a nameless ridge could truly endure for fifty or more years. In Noyalas's account, the human consequences of battle are not siloed into a final chapter; rather, they are seamlessly integrated into the narrative of the battle itself. With this short volume, Noyalas supplies both a template for future writers and a keen reminder that Civil War battles are rich laboratories in which to observe the human experience in all its complexity.

Happily, readers interested in Cool Spring are not limited to this handsome volume. Together with his troop of talented undergraduate students at the McCormick Civil War Institute, Jonathan Noyalas has brought this battlefield—a significant portion of which is now owned by Shenandoah University—to new interpretive life. Exploiting the latest technologies, Noyalas and his students have developed not only a walking tour and exhibits, but also an augmented reality experience that harmonizes with the arguments you will soon encounter. I have had the privilege to walk the battlefield with Jonathan, and I can only hope that many others, inspired by the words that follow, will choose to visit this moving site. Study what happened on July 18, 1864, but, more importantly, reflect on what Civil War stories we choose to tell—and whose Civil War histories we choose to write.

BRIAN MATTHEW JORDAN ***is associate professor of history and chair of the history department at Sam Houston State University and author of*** **Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War,** ***a Pulitzer Prize finalist.***

“As seen by the men in the ranks, it was strange that a small force was ordered over that river to cope with Early’s force, and the 6th Corps near by. . . . Some things are hard to understand in the life of a soldier.”

—Corporal Charles Lynch
18th Connecticut Infantry



Prologue

Sycamore tree along the Shenandoah River's eastern shore believed, according to oral histories, to be a hideout for freedom seekers. (jn)

Scores of Union soldiers wounded during the battle of Cool Spring on July 18, 1864, aided by comrades who helped them navigate their way from the battlefield on the Shenandoah River's western shore to the immediate safety of the Shenandoah's eastern side, inspired poet Edith Thomas. A native of Ohio who enjoyed a successful career as a poet and editor for Century Dictionary and Harper's magazine, with no discernable connections to the battle, Thomas authored "A Christopher of the Shenandoah, Island Ford, Snickers Gap, July 18, 1864," approximately two decades after what proved to be the bloodiest battle fought in Clarke County, Virginia, during the Civil War. What motivated Thomas to author the ten-stanza poem from the perspective of a solitary Union soldier, "the Orderly," is unclear.

Throughout the poem—which appears in this volume's appendix—"the Orderly," at great personal risk, attempted all humanly possible to rescue his comrades utilizing "a battered and oarless barge."

Efforts to carry wounded Union soldiers across the Shenandoah River from the battlefield's western shore to its eastern side indeed occurred; however, no such incident as Thomas's poem depicted transpired. Nonetheless, "A Christopher of the Shenandoah" exemplified the American soldier's commitment to never leave a comrade behind on the battlefield. For decades, well into the twentieth century, "A Christopher of the Shenandoah" proved a staple at Memorial Day ceremonies from coast to coast.

Unfortunately, Thomas's poem, much like the fighting that took place along the banks of the

View of the Shenandoah River from its eastern side. On the night of July 18, 1864, many Union soldiers, not just one as poet Edith Thomas imagined in her poem, helped evacuate wounded Union soldiers from the Shenandoah River's western bank to its eastern shore. (jn)

Shenandoah River on July 18, 1864, fell into obscurity. While the battle of Cool Spring, the result of the Union pursuit of Confederate general Jubal A. Early's Army of the Valley following Early's push to the gates of Washington in mid-July 1864, pales in comparison to engagements such as Shiloh, Antietam, Chickamauga, or Gettysburg, it offers a critical reminder that the litmus test for a battle's meaning should never be confined to the number of troops engaged, amount of casualties, strategic consequences, or political gains. For the wife transformed into a widow, to the child made an orphan, to a soldier wounded in combat, or veteran traumatized

Confederate veteran John Alexander Stikeleather was forever haunted by what happened at Cool Spring. **(wcnc)**

by what occurred on the battlefield, an engagement's significance was defined by how that battle forever altered their earthly existence.

Nearly 15,000 troops fought along the Shenandoah River's banks on July 17-18, 1864. Approximately 1,000 soldiers became casualties. While neither Union or Confederate soldiers possessed delusions about the battle being among the conflict's most significant engagements, to soldiers such as the 4th North Carolina's John Alexander Stikeleather, who watched his friend Martin Snow die "in ten seconds" after being shot in the neck and was haunted by that moment for the remainder of his life, or the 18th Connecticut's Pvt. Samuel Smith, who saw a Confederate bullet strike his brother James and watched helplessly as the Shenandoah River's current swept James away to his grave, the battle of Cool Spring proved the war's most significant battle.

For Nancy DeArmond, wife of the 30th North Carolina's Sgt. Aaron Leonidas DeArmond, who died from wounds received during the battle, the battle of Cool Spring thrust her into widowhood with the immense responsibility of now caring for four fatherless children.

Four-year-old Mary Ellen Farley never really had an opportunity to get to know her father, Pvt. Joshua Farley. Farley is buried in the Winchester National Cemetery, grave 709. **(jn)**

When a Confederate bullet killed the 116th Ohio's Pvt. Joshua Farley his four-year-old daughter Mary Ellen, whose mother died in 1862, became an orphan.

Lieutenant Ransom Griffin, one of Farley's comrades, assumed guardianship of Mary Ellen.

During the final thirty-four years of his life Col. James Washburn, shot through the left eye while leading the 116th Ohio Infantry to bolster Col. Joseph Thoburn's northern flank, received frequent reminders of Cool Spring's consequences each time he looked into the mirror and viewed the disfigured face staring back.

To the aforementioned soldiers and civilians, the "sharp and bloody engagement . . . on the Shenandoah" proved a life-altering moment.

2.9 in Rifle

"We've Scared Abe Lincoln Like Hell"

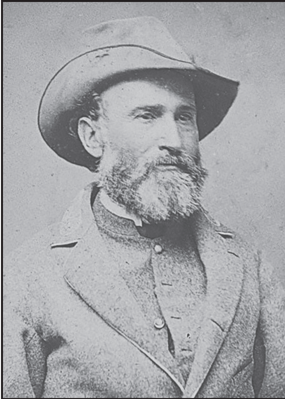
Chapter One

July 9–12, 1864

Union artillery at Cool Spring during the battle's 155th anniversary commemoration in 2018. (jn)

The residents of Washington, D.C., tried to maintain a sense of routine during the second week of July 1864. Stone masons worked on the north face of the United States Patent Office, shopkeepers went about their daily tasks of stocking shelves and selling wares, construction crews repaired pavements throughout the city, and children played in the streets. To the casual observer, all appeared, as Lois Bryan Adams, an employee at the United States Department of Agriculture, recorded in her diary, that "business seems progressing about the same as before . . . happily oblivious."

All, however, was not normal. Following the victory of Lt. Gen. Jubal Early's Confederate force at the battle of Monocacy on July 9, 1864, streams of refugees poured into the nation's capital and the city's inhabitants prepared for a possible attack. Rumors circulated wildly about the strength of Early's command and his next target. Horatio Nelson Taft, an examiner at the United States Patent Office, wrote



As Lt. Gen. Jubal Early's Confederates neared Washington, D.C., during the second week of July 1864, apprehensions among the capital city's inhabitants grew significantly. (loc)

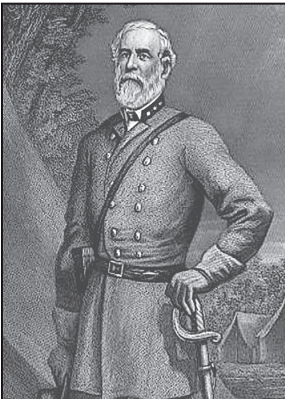
in his diary on July 9: "The rebel force is estimated at all numbers from five thousand to twenty thousand. . . . It is supposed that they will make an attempt upon this city or Baltimore next."

While speculation about the strength or intentions of Early's army ran rampant, most seemed to comprehend the purpose of his mission—to create a strategic diversion and therefore hinder Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's campaign to take Richmond. One Washingtonian concluded correctly on July 9 that "this rebel 'raid' is supposed to be intended to draw Grant away from Richmond to defend Washington."

All doubts as to Early's intended target ceased in the early afternoon of July 11, 1864, as his command stood north of Washington in front of Fort Stevens. News of approximately 10,000 Confederates situated on the capital's outskirts, coupled with artillery fire, shook some of the capital's inhabitants to the core as the war had now come to their doorstep. Lois Bryan Adams, unnerved by the "considerable cannonading," wrote of this sobering reality: "We know that 'the front' now is no mythical or distant place far down the Rapidan, the Rappahannock, or the James; but, for the present at least, a reality terribly near."

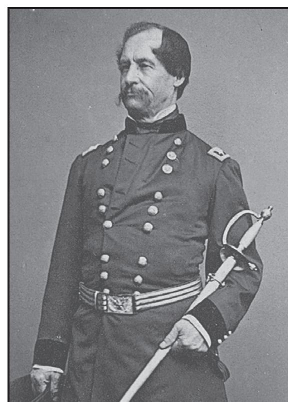
The fear that Adams and other Washingtonians felt that second week of July stemmed from a scheme Confederate war planners had developed one month earlier to alleviate mounting pressure on the Confederate capital by sending Early's Second Corps, Army of Northern Virginia, to the Shenandoah Valley to create a strategic diversion and, if possible, threaten Washington. Two years earlier, in the spring of 1862, when Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac approached the gates of Richmond, Confederate general Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's army carried out a campaign of diversion in the Shenandoah Valley. Jackson's victories contributed significantly to Richmond's security and buoyed the Confederacy's spirit mightily. If Early could replicate Jackson's success, the threats to Richmond could once again dissipate.

General Robert E. Lee hoped that sending Early to the Shenandoah Valley in 1864 would yield the same results as Stonewall Jackson's successes there two years earlier. (loc)



While the departure of Early's corps from the Army of Northern Virginia came with risks, most notably diminishing the army's strength as Union forces concentrated south of Petersburg, the Army of

Northern Virginia's commander, Gen. Robert E. Lee, recognized the benefits of utilizing the Shenandoah Valley as a diversionary theater of war. "I acknowledge the advantage of expelling the enemy from the Valley. The only difficulty is the means. It would [take] one corps of this army" and might "hazard the defense of Richmond," Lee explained to President Jefferson Davis on June 11. While indeed precarious, with all weighed in the balance, Lee believed sending Early to the Shenandoah Valley "the best" decision "that can be made."



An 1822 graduate of West Point, Maj. Gen. David Hunter's inability to defend Lynchburg, Virginia, created an opportunity for Early's Confederates to march to the outskirts of the nation's capital. (loc)

When Lee met with Early on June 12, 1864, Lee explained all he hoped Early's campaign would achieve. First, Lee wanted Early to defeat Union general David Hunter and drive him from Lynchburg, Virginia, a vital transportation and logistical hub. Throughout the spring of 1864, Hunter menaced the Confederacy's efforts in the Shenandoah. Hunter defeated Brig. Gen. William "Grumble" Jones's Confederates at Piedmont on June 5, cleared the Shenandoah Valley of Confederates, occupied the strategically significant city of Staunton in the Valley's southern end, and destroyed property Hunter deemed important to the Confederacy's cause, including homes believed to be utilized as safe havens for Confederate irregulars, the Virginia Military Institute, and railroads.

Shortly after 3:00 a.m. on June 13, Early's Second Corps departed from the vicinity of Gaines's Mill and headed west. Early's command arrived in Lynchburg on the afternoon of June 17. By the following day, Early's command forced Hunter from Lynchburg. With Hunter defeated and moving deep into West Virginia, Early focused on that part of Lee's instructions that instructed the Second Corps "to move down the Valley, cross the Potomac near Leesburg in Loudoun County, or at or above Harper's Ferry . . . and threaten Washington City."

Although tactically defeated at Monocacy, Maj. Gen. Lew Wallace's efforts there bought valuable time to better prepare for Washington's defense. Sixteen years after the battle, Wallace published *Ben-Hur*. (loc)

Early's army moved rapidly through the Shenandoah Valley. By July 4 Early's army reached Harpers Ferry. Five days later, Early's command engaged and defeated Maj. Gen. Lew Wallace's force at the battle of Monocacy. On July 11, Early's command reached present-day Silver Spring, Maryland, located north of Washington. As some in Early's ranks peered at Washington, they "could see the church steeples and

Private George Nichols, 61st Georgia Infantry, was among the soldiers in Early's army who hoped they would occupy Washington and capture President Abraham Lincoln. (gwn)

dome of the capitol building, and could hear the city clocks strike" and wanted to attack. Private George Nichols, 61st Georgia Infantry, wrote enthusiastically that "we privates wanted to charge and take the city, and we wanted to capture 'Uncle Abe.'"

As Early surveyed the area around Fort Stevens—a fortification located north of the capital which protected the Seventh Street Road, an avenue described by one chronicler as "the vital artery . . . leading directly into Washington from Silver Spring"—shortly after noon on July 11, he "discovered that the works were but feebly manned." Sensing opportunity, Early summoned Maj. Gen. Robert Rodes to "immediately" maneuver his division "into line as rapidly as possible, throw out skirmishers, and move into the works if he could."

Although it seemed simple enough, Rodes's command, along with all of Early's men, were exhausted. Over the course of the past month, Early's regiments had marched nearly 500 miles, fought multiple engagements, and contended with extreme heat. Confederate soldier John Worsham captured the toll all of this had taken on Early's command: "We had marched during that time four hundred and sixty-nine miles, fought several combats, and one battle . . . many of them were physically unable to keep up." Early admitted on July 14 in his report to Lee that "the men were almost completely exhausted and not in a condition to make an attack." Simply put, "the spirit

Scene of the fight in front of Fort Stevens. Although Early did not attempt to capture the nation's capital, the presence of Confederate troops heightened anxieties among Washington's defenders and its inhabitants. (loc)

Interior view of Fort Stevens. Originally named Fort Massachusetts, the fort's name was changed to honor Brig. Gen. Isaac Stevens who was killed on September 1, 1862, at the battle of Chantilly. (loc)

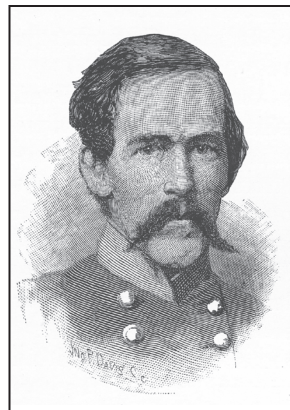
was willing," as historian Benjamin Franklin Cooling concluded, "but the bodies were not."

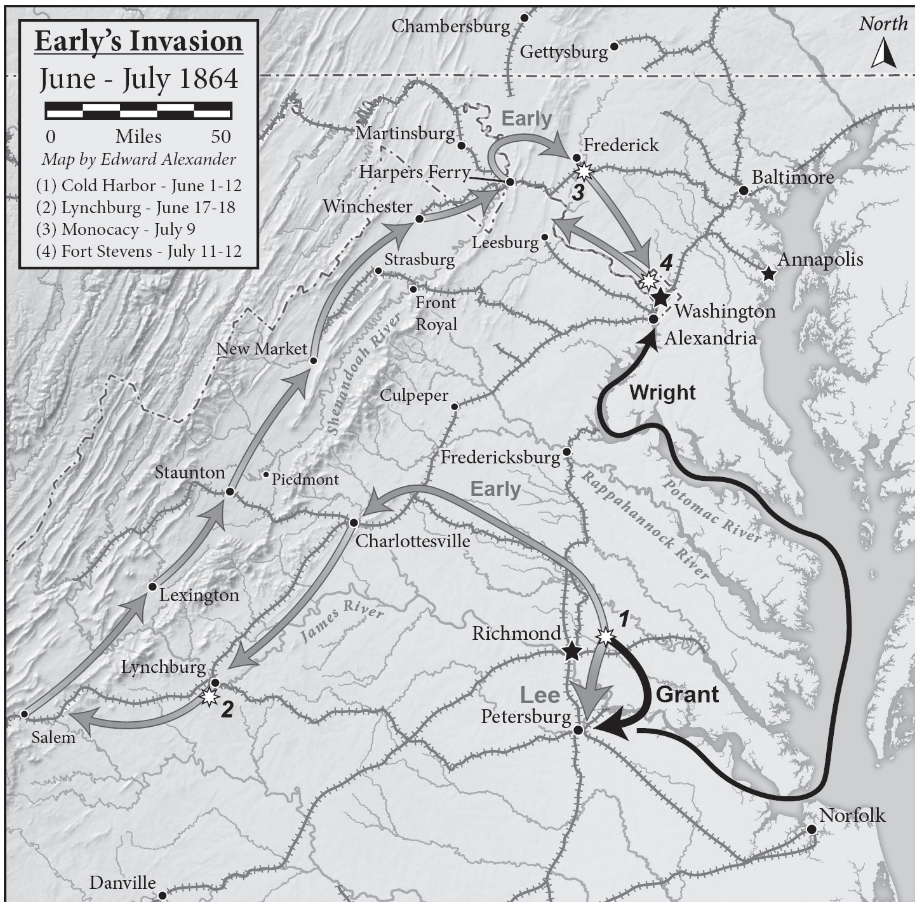
As Rodes attempted to bring his men into position, Early spied "a cloud of dust in the rear of the works towards Washington." Early reckoned this to be the arrival of Union reinforcements. That perception, coupled with Union batteries opening fire on Early's army, dashed any expectations for a Confederate attack. "This defeated our hopes of getting possession of the works by surprise," Early explained. While Early's command exchanged shots with the defenders of Fort Stevens, Early abandoned all ideas of an assault.

In retrospect, some Confederates believed this a prudent decision. As a Virginia soldier in Early's command surveyed Fort Stevens and the surrounding area on July 11, it appeared "the most formidable" fortification he "ever saw." Confederate John Worsham noted that "trees had been cut down" in front of Fort Stevens "so that the limbs pointed towards us and they were sharpened . . . The enemy had a full sweep of the ground for at least a mile in their front." Worsham candidly stated that Early's "force would not be able to take them."

Once Early decided he would not strike, he next determined how long he should stay. Early reasoned that the longer his corps remained, the greater chance his command confronted of being cut off and destroyed. Aware that the "loss" of his "force would have . . . such a depressing effect upon the country"

Major General Robert Rodes was regarded as one of the best division commanders in the Army of Northern Virginia. Following his death at the Third Battle of Winchester, September 19, 1864, the *Richmond Dispatch* characterized Rodes "as one of the most brave and gallant spirits." (bl)

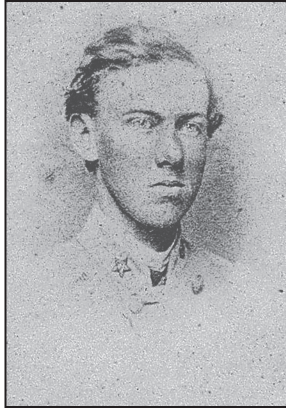
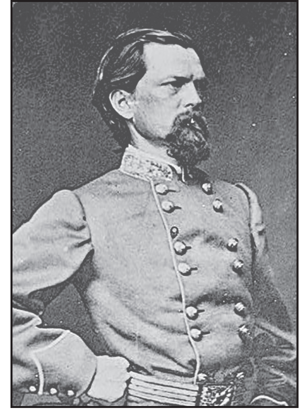




Early's Invasion, June-July 1864—As Early's army moved north through the Shenandoah Valley en route to Washington in the summer of 1864, newspapers in the North pondered what Early hoped to achieve. A correspondent for the *Chicago Times* wrote on July 7: "It is impossible . . . to arrive at any definite conclusion in regard to the objects of the movement of the Confederate forces into Maryland."

and prove a "fatal disaster" to the Confederate war effort, Early decided to withdraw during the night of July 12.

As Early's columns departed, those in the ranks assessed the significance of their movement to Washington's gates. Although the Confederates had not attacked, Early's presence forced Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant to send troops from the VI and XIX Corps to Washington. Those troops began to arrive in the nation's capital around 2:00 p.m. on July 11. Father James Sheeran, a chaplain in the 14th Louisiana Infantry, viewed the campaign as a success. "The object of his [Early's] mission was accomplished; to

draw their [Union] forces from Richmond," Sheeran wrote in his diary. The 5th Alabama's Henry Beck agreed with Sheeran's assessment. Although Beck admitted he and his comrades "were disappointed" they did not attack, he concluded that "our object in this expedition no doubt was accomplished, by withdrawing" Union forces "from Richmond." Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Swift "Sandie" Pendleton, a member of Early's staff, thought the army's push to Fort Stevens not only strategically significant, but a remarkably well-managed effort that prevented significant losses, save those who fell victim to the heat. Pendleton explained that while some might brand Early's inability to take Washington a "failure," it was "necessary to call to mind the fearful heat" and that Early "was undoubtedly prudent to withdraw. I think it showed good management to come off so well." Not all viewed the movement to Washington's gates so positively. Private Caleb Linker, 57th North Carolina Infantry, believed Early's army accomplished nothing. Decades after the conflict, one of Early's division commanders, Maj. Gen. John B. Gordon, recognized that while the Second Corps "succeeded in" getting "General Grant to detach a portion of his army from Lee's front at Petersburg," Early missed an opportunity. Gordon thought Early "undoubtedly could have marched on Washington."

Confederate soldiers wounded during the fighting in the Shenandoah Valley in the autumn of 1864 and recuperating at a hospital in Americus, Georgia, also thought Early should have attacked. Nurse Kate Cummings overheard some "wounded men,

Although Early's army did not attack the nation's capital, the presence of it compelled Ulysses S. Grant (left) to send reinforcements to Washington—troops that Grant could have used to further pressure the Army of Northern Virginia at Petersburg. (loc)

Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Swift "Sandie" Pendleton (center) was among those in Early's army who believed the Confederate advance to Washington's outskirts strategically benefitted the Confederate war effort in Virginia. (loc)

Major General John B. Gordon (right) criticized Early's generalship in 1864 and believed Early could have attacked Washington. (loc)

Confederates outside of Early's army, including Brig. Gen. Edward Porter Alexander, chief of artillery for the Army of Northern Virginia's First Corps, believed Early's advance to Washington provided the Confederacy with some strategic benefits. (loc)

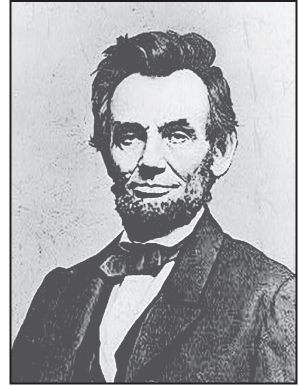
who were with General Early in his late disastrous campaign . . . blame General Early for not marching right up to Washington, as they think he could have taken it." North Carolinian John Alexander Stikeleather had little doubt that Early's army could attack and capture Washington. However, he did not believe Early's army strong enough to maintain control. Stikeleather surmised that "had we taken Washington, the advantages to us perhaps, would have been temporary."

As news of Early's advance to Washington and subsequent withdrawal spread throughout the Confederacy, soldiers and civilians alike offered their perspectives about what, if anything, Early's campaign achieved. Brigadier General Edward Porter Alexander, the chief of artillery for the Army of Northern Virginia's First Corps, thought it "absurd" that Early could have captured Washington. Although Alexander recognized that Early's movement deprived Grant of "those two corps [VI and XIX]," he thought that the prospect of Early achieving anything beyond a strategic diversion "purely bluff." Believing that "Grant . . . was not easily bluffed," Alexander thought Early's corps could have served the Confederate war effort better had it been sent to reinforce Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's command near Atlanta, Georgia.

Confederate civilians, such as Mary Greenhow Lee, did not debate the strategic implications of Early's movements, but rather focused on how it buoyed morale. Lee, one of the staunchest Confederate women in Winchester, Virginia, believed Early's campaign marked "a glorious era in our national history." Lucy Buck, a Confederate resident of Front Royal, did not hold such a joyous perspective. When Buck learned that Early had withdrawn from Washington's gates and pulled back across the Potomac into Virginia, she pondered in her diary on July 16 "what it all means." While Buck expressed faith in Early, the decision to withdraw without launching an assault made little sense to her. "General Early has an object in it, no doubt, and fully understands all he intends to do. Wish I did too," Buck wrote.

In his report to Lee, written two days after the withdrawal, Early appeared apologetic that he could not capture Washington. "I am sorry I did not

succeed in capturing Washington," Early explained to his superior. Nonetheless, Early had carried out Lee's directive to "threaten Washington city" and pull troops away from Grant. On the night of July 12, in a conversation with one of his staff officers, Maj. Henry Kyd Douglas, Early shared his perspective about what he believed the advance to Washington achieved. "In his falsetto drawl," Early crowed to Douglas that "we haven't taken Washington, but we've scared Abe Lincoln like h[ell]!"



As much as President Abraham Lincoln might have wanted to order an immediate pursuit of Early's command, he refused to do so as he believed Grant would develop a suitable plan. (loc)

While true that he did not capture Washington, Early's boast about how the Confederate advance to the capital's northern periphery impacted President Lincoln proved erroneous.