

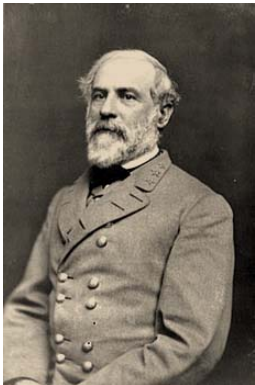
# The Road to Gettysburg



At the Battle of **Brandy Station** on June 9, 1863 Hooker was still in command of the Army of the Potomac. He sent his cavalry under the command of General Alfred Pleasonton to break up a concentration of Confederate cavalry around **Culpeper**. He feared Jeb Stuart was either going to mount a massive raid into Maryland and Pennsylvania or move around the Federal flank as he had done nine months earlier during the Second Manassas Campaign.

The full day of cavalry fighting at Brandy Station resulted in a draw, with neither side winning a clear victory. It was, however, the largest cavalry battle ever fought on the American continent and the first time the Union cavalry had stood up to Stuart's cavaliers in an open fight without being driven from the field. Even as the battle was being fought, however, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was quietly moving toward the Shenandoah Valley, their roadway into Maryland and Pennsylvania. Hooker knew only that Lee had left his trenches along the Rappahannock, but he did not know where the Confederate army was or where it was going. To get that information, he needed his cavalry.

One of the cavalry's main functions during the war was to scout around and find the enemy while also keeping the enemy cavalry ignorant as to the location of one's own army. No one was better at the first task than Jeb Stuart. During the Loudoun Valley Campaign, he would prove his skill at the second as well.



Hooker let Pleasonton plead exhaustion on the part of his men and horses for a full week after Brandy Station before losing patience with him and giving him a direct order to go out and find Lee's army. "It is better that we should lose men," he said, "than be without knowledge of the enemy." Pleasonton's dual objectives were **Ashby's Gap** and **Snicker's Gap**, 12 miles to the north, the most important Northern Virginia pathways into the Shenandoah Valley. He had to get through the gaps to see behind the mountain wall that was screening Lee's movements from Federal eyes. Jeb Stuart's mission was simply to keep him from doing that until Lee and his men were safely across the Potomac River and on Northern soil.

The first clash came on June 17 at **Aldie**, a small town at the junction of two highways leading to both Ashby's Gap and Snicker's Gap. The fighting between Col. Tom Munford's Confederate brigade and two Federal brigades commanded by Judson Kilpatrick and David McM. Gregg was some of the bloodiest cavalry fighting of the war. Munford later said he never saw "so many dead Yankees in one place in the entire war." That night, Munford, on Stuart's orders, withdrew northward toward Snickersville while Beverly Robertson's Carolinians and Fithugh Lee's Virginians (under the temporary command of John Chambliss) trapped and virtually annihilated the First Rhode Island Cavalry at **Middleburg**.

As Pleasonton brought his entire cavalry corps into play, Stuart gathered his scattered brigades as well. The next three days saw clashes in Middleburg, **Rector's Crossroads**, **Pothouse**, **Union** and **Upperville** until Stuart was finally forced



back to the Blue Ridge gaps by superior Union numbers. Pleasonton gave up his attempt to get to the Shenandoah on the evening of June 21 and retreated to Aldie, closely followed by Stuart and his men. Two days later, Hooker started moving his army toward the Potomac River, and the day after that, Stuart set off on his controversial ride that would finally get him to Gettysburg the day after the battle started.

For nearly a week, Union and Confederate cavalymen clashed almost daily in the Loudoun Valley. Giving up ground to the enemy was not Stuart's favorite way to fight, but it did buy time for Lee to move into Pennsylvania without interference from Hooker.

Our guide is **Steve Meserve** who has been studying the American Civil War longer than he cares to admit (nearly half a century at this point). He has ancestors on both sides in that conflict, with his father's family at the time being from New Hampshire and his mother's from Alabama. He was executive secretary of the North-South Skirmish Association for 10 years, and is a former associate editor of "Civil War" Magazine. He worked with Bill Miller, Brian Pohanka and Rob Hodge to put together Time-Life's most recent Civil War publication, "The Civil War: Images of an American Tragedy." He was also a contributing editor on the "Library of Congress Civil War Desk Reference" published this past September by Charles Scribner & Sons. He has contributed several articles to the "Washington Times" Saturday Civil War page, and has been leading tours of Northern Virginia Civil War sites for the past five years, both for the Loudoun County Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Services and for charter groups. He is a native of Texas who grew up in the US Air Force, but whose family has been living in Loudoun County since 1989.

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