

SIGN 1: The Attack and Death of Gen. Stevens

Female narrator:

In May of 1862, Confederate Major General Thomas Stonewall Jackson's army forced Union troops that had moved into Virginia to retreat to Washington. The North's capital city was well protected by a ring of forts.

Late that summer, Jackson wanted to draw Major General John Pope's Union troops out of Washington and into battle. On August 28, Jackson attacked a Federal column on the Warrenton Turnpike. That triggered the Second Battle of Bull Run, which raged for the next two days about ten miles southwest of here and left 22,180 casualties in its wake. That brings us to Ox Hill.

Male narrator:

The Union troops tried to retreat from Bull Run to Washington along the Warrenton Pike, which is now Route 29.

The commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, General Robert E. Lee, wanted to block that Union retreat. He sent Stonewall Jackson on a wide march along Little River Turnpike, what is now Route 50, around the retreating Union troops, trying to gain advantage on Pope's flank. Pope learned about this through skirmishes with cavalry, and he sent troops ahead of Jackson on the Little River Turnpike to block the Confederates on a ridge where Jermantown Road lies today. Pope then sent about 4,000 troops toward Jackson's right flank.

The two Union divisions Pope sent were under the command of General Isaac Stevens and Major General Philip Kearny. It was September 1, 1862, and Stevens' division engaged Confederate troops right where you are now, at Ox Hill.

Ed Wenzel of the Chantilly Battlefield Association:

Ed Wenzel:

"The battle of Ox Hill was kind of like a meeting engagement. It was an unexpected clash. As far as

the Confederates were concerned, they were surprised. Jackson was surprised. They knew that they had Federal forces in front of them at Jermantown. They had scouted out that position and they realized that on the other side of Difficult Run there was a substantial Federal force. And they also understood that the Federals were retreating from Centreville to Jermantown on Route 29, the Warrenton Pike. But they didn't expect to be hit in the flank, which is what happened when Reno's 9th Corps came up and Stevens launched his assault."

Male narrator:

Historian Mike Henry:

Mike Henry:

"They'd been at it now for three days. It's late August to the first of September. They're in wool uniforms. They've been marching and counter-marching, fighting. They're exhausted. They've had enough. And all of a sudden they're surprised."

Female narrator:

Some 4,000 to 6,000 Union troops were in the area. About 15,000 to 17,000 Confederate troops were nearby. Also playing a key role in the battle that day was a severe thunderstorm.

The first skirmishes between the armies took place in the afternoon near the Reid family house, a little southwest of the current park boundaries.

That land is behind you if you are facing the first sign. General Stevens saw those Confederate troops in the Reid farm fields.

Ed Wenzel:

When most of the muskets were fouled and couldn't be fired, and it was getting dark and you couldn't see, a lot of the fighting in the cornfield with Birney's troops and General Branch and Pender's troops just degenerated into a disorganized brawl.

Female narrator:

Stevens decided to attack even though he was outnumbered. At about 4:30 in the afternoon, he sent his troops from the field where the condos now sit up the hill that you are standing on. If you face the interpretive sign, you'll have a view similar to what a Union soldier saw that day. Stevens' troops were coming uphill from behind you, not realizing what they were heading into.

Ed Wenzel:

"They knew the Confederates were there because they had driven their skirmishers back into the woods, but there was a time frame there where the Confederates were not firing at them as Stevens was organizing his division to attack. And there was conversation back and forth among some of the men in the ranks as to whether the Confederates were there at all. Some of the soldiers thought that they had fled. They didn't understand, they didn't realize that there was an entire Confederate corps on the Little River Pike. The Confederates were waiting for them as they approached. That surprised them."

Male Narrator:

Imagine yourself in a blue uniform, moving up this hill, and seeing the gathered storm clouds above you. At that time, off to your left, beyond the wooden fence, was a cornfield. Beyond that were woods. And if you were a Union soldier, you looked at that corn and those woods and wondered what was in them.

Female narrator:

Stevens extended his lines and sent some soldiers into the cornfield. *The 50th Pennsylvania moved left, supported by the 8th Massachusetts and the 100th Pennsylvania.* Confederate brigades were hastily brought up from Little River Turnpike. Stevens' forces continued to fall, but he rallied his troops and continued the assault. By 5:00, about an hour after the fighting had begun, Stevens' 79th Highlanders had lost five color bearers.

Sound: Bagpipes

Male narrator:

Stevens would be the sixth. He picked up the colors himself, cried "Highlanders, my Highlanders, follow your general!" and charged ahead. During the charge, Stevens was killed by a bullet to his head.

Female narrator:

Face the sign, and look straight ahead. You'll see a rail fence. Just shy of that fence is where Stevens fell, draped by the flag he carried.

Male narrator:

As Stevens fell amid the thunder, lightning and rain that drenched the battlefield, the 79th New York regiment and the right line of the 28th Massachusetts crashed into the woods in front of you. They drove Hays' Louisiana Brigade back through the woods that grew beyond the fence in front of you and onto land that is now the shopping center across the street.

Ed Wenzel:

“That’s why you’ve got Hays’ brigade being commanded now by a colonel who had never commanded a brigade before, and he gets his guys disoriented in the woods. He tries to change some regimental formations and he gets them out of position, and they can’t present a front to the enemy – just when the attack hits them, and that’s why they’re driven back into the woods.”

Female narrator:

A second event occurred just as Stevens died. The storm struck with violent force as he fell.

Ed Wenzel

“Well, it was a terrifying storm. Most accounts talk about it. Bolts of lightning all over the place illuminating the woods, torrential rains coming down, gale force winds blowing sheets of rain into the faces of the Confederates because the storm was coming from the south. So the storm’s at the backs of the attacking Federals, but it was directly into the faces of the Confederates.”