

INTERPRETIVE SIGN 3:

Attack of General Birney's Brigade

Female narrator:

When General Stevens first saw the Confederates, he sent a courier with word of the impending encounter to Federal commands along the Warrenton Pike. General Kearny, who was on the Warrenton Turnpike, ordered a brigade led by General David Birney to go forward. Two other brigades followed. By this time, the rain was falling hard, and woolen uniforms were soaked and heavy.

Male narrator:

Face the sign titled Attack of General Birney's Brigade. Birney's troops were about 450 yards in front of you, near an orchard. His lead regiments entered the cornfield on your right and met the Confederates. By now, the Confederate troops had regrouped and fought off the Stevens attack. But many were left with mostly rain-soaked cartridge boxes and cartridges. As the fighting

and rain continued and darkness fell, small arms became useless.

Ed Wenzel:

“It’s difficult when you’ve got muzzle loaders trying to keep the water from wetting the paper cartridges, and that happened all over the place. Most relic hunters will tell you that most of the dropped cartridges that they found searching at Ox Hill were unfired bullets. And they’re unfired because the powder was wet, and the soldiers would throw ‘em on the ground. 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. The only weapons they had were to swing their muskets at each other or stick each other with a bayonet.”

Mike Henry:

“When rain hits the muzzle-loading weapon, it turns it from being a rifle into a club. A wet musket is absolutely functionless. If you’re going to use your musket as a club or the other end as a bayonet, you’ve got to be in close proximity to your foe. If you let your foe get that close, you’ve already screwed up. By the time the battle degenerates into the hand-to-hand combat, both sides are so tired of it. Both sides realize that it’s better to pull back and fight another day. There is no advantage to be pressed when you’re looking at hand-to-hand combat.”