



# McDowell messenger

Spring 1994 A special project newsletter sponsored by Valley Conservation Council Volume 1, Number 1

## Battlefield Corridor Project Offers Unique Opportunity

The Valley Conservation Council, an organization dedicated to promoting land use that will sustain the natural and cultural heritage of the Valley region, has received a one-year grant from the National Park Service in order to study the McDowell Battlefield Corridor.

The portions of Highland and Augusta Counties, where the battle, troop movements, skirmishes, and encampments took place, are still largely rural. The landscape retains much of the character it had when the two forces met destiny here during the Civil War. Because of this, the area offers a unique opportunity to interpret the movements of troops over the broad landscape of the Valley.

The land where the most intense fighting occurred is already owned by two battlefield protection organizations, the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites and the Lee-Jackson Foundation. The challenge is to protect the corridors leading to and from the battlefield. The McDowell Battlefield region is the only Valley site where a full interpretation of the war is still possible, virtually uninterrupted by modern structures.

More than 130 years ago, portions of two armies destined to create the bloodiest war in American history slogged their way toward

each other over this land. They traveled through quagmires of mud and over rugged mountain terrain in western Virginia. The 12,500 men were far from the big cities and politicians orchestrating the conflict that came to be known as the American Civil War.

Suddenly, for one afternoon and evening, the sleepy crossroads hamlet of McDowell in rural Highland County became witness to a fierce struggle between the Union and Confederate forces. In little more than four hours, 180 men lay dead and many of the more than 600 wounded were being tended in makeshift hospitals quickly established in the village.

According to Civil War historians, this short-lived, pitched battle of May 8, 1862, took on greater significance than it appeared to at the time. Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson used the costly victory to restore the reputation of his army. It also opened the door for a Shenandoah Valley Campaign that would turn his name and those of his "foot cavalry" into legend.

The routes which will be studied with the voluntary cooperation of the community include the following state and forest roads in Augusta County: 250, 254, 629, 688 and 716. In Highland, the study will look at routes 220, 250, 629, 640 and 678.

The VCC will identify and bring

together many partners and funding sources with an interest in protecting and interpreting the battlefield region and its related historic sites and structures. Plans will include meeting with interested groups and individual landowners to entertain ideas and suggestions, design educational materials, and explore protection strategies. The end result will be an interpretation and protection plan for the McDowell corridor.



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## From the South...

Gen. "Stonewall" Jackson



Before the war, Gen. Thomas Jonathan Jackson was simply an eccentric professor at the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington. But, at the First Battle of Manassas in July 1861, he earned the nickname "Stonewall" because of the courage shown by his troops in that conflict.

Things had not gone well for the general since then. A battle in the middle of a bitter West Virginia winter, a letter of resignation that he was persuaded to withdraw, and a defeat in March 1862 at Kernstown had left a lot for the young officer to prove.

Under Jackson was Brig. Gen. Edward "Alleghany Ed" Johnson. His men had endured much of the preceding winter in an encampment atop Alleghany Mountain. On the day of the McDowell Battle, Johnson could be seen among his troops waving a hickory stick and shouting encouragement.

Late in the day's battle, Johnson became a casualty after being struck in the ankle by a bullet. Out of action for months, he was, nevertheless, promoted to major general for "his gallant and meritorious conduct" at McDowell. After being shot, he was replaced in the field by Brig. Gen. William B. Taliaferro who performed admirably during the heat of the battle.

## McDowell Victory Opened Valley Door

The late winter and early spring of 1862 opened with Union and Confederate forces jockeying for position throughout the western part of Virginia and West Virginia. The struggles of these two forces across land so far from either the northern or southern capitals held an importance recognized by both sides.

Months earlier Gen. "Stonewall" Jackson had confided to a friend: "If this Valley is lost, Virginia is lost." And he was right. The Shenandoah Valley, often called the "Breadbasket of the Confederacy," held provisions for the southern army within its wheat fields. The Valley also had Staunton, a major supply center and transportation network where two major roads and one railroad crossed.

The Federal forces also recognized the strategic importance of the Valley. In March, Gen. Robert Milroy had proposed a campaign which would allow his troops in West Virginia to "thence march rapidly to Staunton." In April, Milroy cautiously moved his 6,000 men toward the Valley, arriving in McDowell on April 17. The Southern forces under Gen. "Alleghany Ed" Johnson had been in the region since late 1861. But with just 2,800 men under his command, the Confederate commander could do little more than withdraw east and wait for reinforcements.

On April 30, under orders from Gen. Robert E. Lee to join with Johnson, Jackson began moving his troops from their encampment near Harrisonburg. The move, Lee felt, would keep the enemy occupied in the western part of the state and relieve pressure on Fredericksburg and Richmond.

Slowly, Jackson's and Johnson's armies marched westward with intentions of engaging Milroy. By the evening of May 7, the two Confederate forces, numbering nearly 9,000, were

camped just east of McDowell. Milroy, learning of the enemies' presence, wired for reinforcements from Gen. Robert Schenck, 34 miles away in Franklin. In McDowell, nervous Federal troops slept with guns at their sides.

*"The trees, bushes and twigs are all cut to pieces...the wonder is how any body got off alive."*

*...Col. Michael G. Harman, C.S.A.*

Before the frost had burned off the ground on Sunday, May 8, the Confederates had topped the last mountain towering above McDowell. Just past the mountain and rising sharply from the Valley floor is steep, bare-sided, boulder-strewn Sittlington's Hill. Five of Johnson's regiments positioned themselves at the crest of the 500-foot hill overlooking the Federals below.

By late morning, Schenck had arrived in McDowell, and, after studying the enemy positions, he and Milroy decided to wait for nightfall and withdraw from their indefensible position in McDowell.

The two armies remained at a standoff most of the day, but the situation changed drastically at 3 p.m. with a mistaken report that the Rebels were rolling cannon into place on the hill. Fearing a bombardment of their lines, Milroy and Schenck quickly conferred and agreed to attack.

Nine hundred men from Ohio regiments led the attack up the hill.

*(See Battle, page 4)*

## The Final Toll

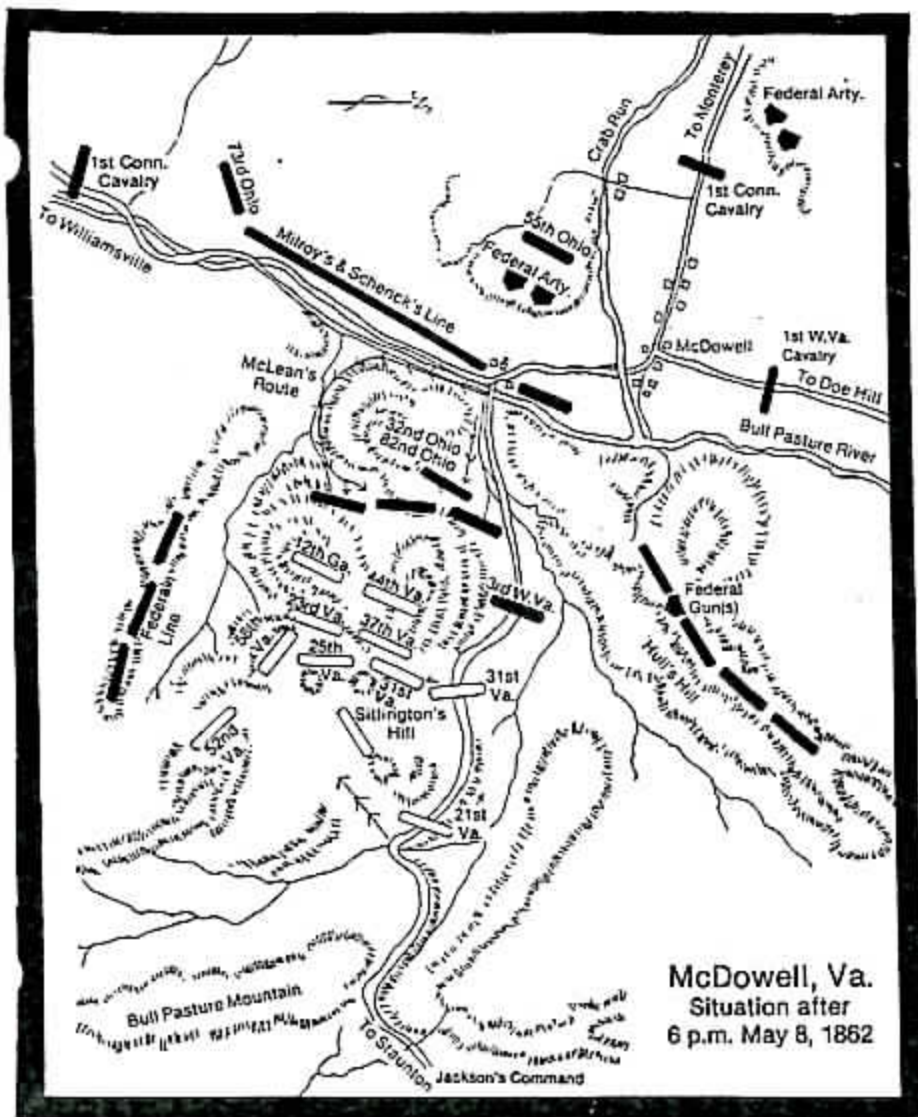
### Federal Casualties

Killed.....34  
Wounded.....220  
Captured.....5  
TOTAL.....259

### Confederate Casualties

Killed.....146  
Wounded.....382  
Captured.....4  
TOTAL.....532





Map courtesy of Richard L. Armstrong, whose book, *The Battle of McDowell: March 11-May 18, 1862*, is available in area bookstores.

## They Came through Mud and Snow

It was no easy task for the men of the North and South to arrive at McDowell for their May 8 showdown. Muddy quagmires, freezing temperatures and snow impeded the progress of both sides.

Union Gen. Robert Milroy was already in Highland County by April when he wired of a "terrible snow-storm here to-day." His army's march into

*"That terrible march..." (the road) was the worst I ever saw in the Valley of Virginia..."*  
*...Jedediah Hotchkiss, C.S.A.*

Monterey on April 6 was complicated by heavy snow that melted and turned the road into a mudbath. The journey that day was described by one soldier as "one of the roughest and most disagreeable marches we had yet experienced."

In the meantime, Confederate Gen. Edward Johnson was near Buffalo Gap. His troops, too, suffered from the weather. Captain S.G. Pryor of the 12th Georgia recalled his men marching in mud up to their knees under a constant downpour.

Gen. Stonewall Jackson and his men befell the same fate in their march from the Harrisonburg area. Jedediah Hotchkiss, Jackson's mapmaker, remembered a 16-mile march to Port Republic as "that terrible march." The

(See *Mud*, page 4)

## From the North...

*Gen. Robert H. Milroy*



Wild-eyed Brigadier Gen. Robert Milroy had been in the area of western Virginia for some time before the Battle of McDowell. In charge of the Cheat Mountain District, he had proposed a plan that would take his 6,000 soldiers rapidly into Staunton and the Valley.

The general soon discovered the troubles that often accompany military movement in rugged mountain country. Plagued by snow, freezing temperatures and supply problems, he allowed his men to forage in the countryside.

Ordered to retreat in the face of Confederate advances, Milroy turned stubborn as the two armies converged in Highland. Vowing to "yield not a foot to treason, and so we must fight," he wired Brig. Gen. Robert C. Schenck to join him.

Schenck was 34 miles away in Franklin when he received Milroy's May 7 message, but he marched his men the entire distance in 23 hours to arrive the next morning. Schenck, who rode in ahead of his troops, was greeted with a relieved "Just in time," from Milroy.

Although Schenck was the senior officer, he apparently deferred to Milroy. But later in his battle report, he claimed credit for the attack while criticizing Milroy's "undaunted and impetuous, though rather uncalculating, bravery."



# •Battle

(Continued from page 2)

Johnson's Georgians and Virginians met them in a fierce clash.

As the fight continued, Schenck, a native Ohioan, ordered more troops from his home state into battle with the cry: "Men, remember that you are from Ohio!" The two Ohio regiments were able to scale the hill and surprise the Confederates, scattering the Virginians with a fixed bayonet charge. Both sides struggled in hand-to-hand combat as the momentum shifted back and forth.

The intense fighting continued even as daylight waned. Along the Federal lines, the 60 rounds of ammunition each soldier had received was gone, replaced by deep fatigue. During the night, the Union troops hastily withdrew west, leaving the field of victory to the South. The next morning a weary Jackson wired

Richmond a terse message: "God blessed our arms with victory at McDowell yesterday."

The strategic victory came at a high cost in human terms. Although the battle lasted little more than four hours, the fighting was intense. Col. Michael G. Harman, Jackson's former quartermaster, noted: "It was a desperate fight, and I wish you could see the battle ground. The trees, bushes and twigs are cut all to pieces...the wonder is how any body got off alive."

The 12th Georgia took the brunt of the of the day's casualties. Fighting from an exposed position high on the hillside, the Georgians counted 52 dead and 123 wounded, outnumbering the total Yankee dead.

The costly victory in McDowell opened the door for Jackson's famous Valley campaign in the summer of 1862. By driving a portion of the Union army westward out of the Valley, he isolated Milroy and Schenck from the rest of the Union commands. This not only relieved the pressure on Richmond, but gave Jackson free rein to deal with the smaller Yankee forces left in the Valley.

## McDowell Newsletter Courtesy of VCC

The Valley Conservation Council is a private, non-profit organization based in Staunton that serves eleven Valley counties. It fosters protection of the region's valuable open spaces.

As a result of a grant from the National Park Service, the VCC will be studying the McDowell Battlefield Corridor in Highland and Augusta Counties. Landowners along the corridor have been selected to receive this special newsletter so that they can be involved in the voluntary study project. If you would like to know more about the VCC or the McDowell project, call (703) 886-3541.

This VCC-sponsored newsletter was designed by Nancy Sorrells.

# •Mud

(Continued from page 3)

rain had turned the road into a muddy mire, "the worst I ever saw in the Valley of Virginia," he added.

Once the sun came out, Jackson pulled a fast one on everyone, including his own men. Cutting eastward through a gap in the Blue Ridge Mountains, he ordered his men aboard a train. With bets

## VMI Cadets Provided Support at McDowell

When their former professor called for help, the teenage corps at the Virginia Military Institute answered, throwing themselves into the middle of Jackson's McDowell campaign.

Prior to moving his troops westward through the Valley, Jackson had wired the VMI superintendent requesting that the corps be brought to Staunton to help guard the trains there. Leaving just 11 cadets in Lexington to guard the school, four companies marched north to aid their former professor.

Although the VMI board protested the possible involvement of the cadets in battle, Virginia's governor sent a message explaining that the "mischief" was done; adding "I think it best to let them go on."

The corps accompanied the Confederates into McDowell. Although the 200 cadets saw no action in the battle, they came face to face with the realities of war when they helped bury the Union dead.

Eleven days after joining Jackson, the cadets were ordered back to Lexington. They carried with them Jackson's praises for a job well done.

flying that the Valley boys were headed for Richmond, Jackson ordered the trains WEST. When the trains unloaded their "cargo" in Staunton, it surprised the town and the army!

The route west was easier, following the Parkersburg Turnpike, a "super-highway" to West Virginia. The stage was set for a McDowell showdown.



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