

Retreat from Gettysburg (Including the Retreat of the Wounded Train)

Timeline

Thursday, July 2, 1863 (Day Two of the Battle) – Meade allows John Buford to take his troopers out of line because they desperately need rest and the horses need to be re-shoed. Buford takes his troopers to the Federal supply depot at Westminster, MD, 25 miles to the rear.

Friday, July 3 (Day Three of the Battle) – A single cavalry regiment, the 6th U. S. Cav, under Capt. Ira Claflin, rides unsupported to Fairfield after a small column of wagons is reported to be in the area. The Yankees blunder into William E. (“Grumble”) Jones’ Confederate cavalry brigade on picket duty, and after a brief but brutal fight, flee in a wild rout. Since this is along the route where the Confederates will be retreating, the Union has unknowingly squandered a great opportunity.

East of Gettysburg Union cavalry repulses Rebel cavalry trying to get behind Union lines. Later that day after Pickett’s charge has been repulsed, one of the Federal cavalry commanders, Judson (“Kil-Cavalry”) Kilpatrick, orders a senseless, futile charge by Farnsworth’s brigade against Confederate infantry dug in below Big Round Top. Farnsworth is killed.

Late in the night Richard S. (“Dick”) Ewell instructs his quartermaster, Maj John A. Harmon, who has served so admirably in the same capacity for Stonewall Jackson, “to get [Ewell’s] train safely across the Potomac or he wanted to see his face no more.”

At 11:00 pm BGen John D. Imboden (CSA) is summoned to report to Lee’s headquarters. Two hours later after Lee has returned from A. P. Hill’s headquarters where orders have been issued for the rest of the army, Lee instructs Imboden to take a second column, the so-called Train of Wounded, to Williamsport.

Saturday, July 4 – By 3:00 am Ewell’s reserve train, under Harmon’s command, has formed along the Fairfield Road, and begins to leave the Gettysburg area, headed for the Fairfield Gap.

Early in the day BGen Rufus Ingalls, chief quartermaster for the Union army, is finally able to get wagons of badly needed supplies rolling from Westminster over the Baltimore Pike to Gettysburg.

BGen Francis Barlow, who had been behind enemy lines recovering from a wound ever since Day One, being left for dead, sends Meade a message that Lee's apparent evacuation from the northern part is a feint designed to entrap Meade. Whatever, Meade writes his wife that he has no intention of giving the Rebels the chance to "play their old game of shooting us from behind their breastworks."

Detached Union cavalry from Harper's Ferry, under the command of Maj Shadrack Foley, capture and destroy the Rebel pontoon bridge across the Potomac at Falling Waters. At Harper's Ferry, some elements of Maryland (USA) burn the bridge across the Potomac.

Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, now reduced to 47,000 effectives, after consolidating its lines along Seminary Ridge, slowly heads back toward Virginia, aided by torrential rains making it difficult for Meade's army to follow in pursuit. Lee has Hill's corps, in the center of the line along Seminary Ridge, withdraw first. As Hill leaves he ignites fires along his fortifications in order to screen his movements. Before departing, Confederate soldiers are instructed to deny that they were retreating but instead were merely going back to get more ammunition. Lee leaves 6,802 Confederate wounded in houses, barns, churches, schools and other public buildings.

Lee's supply wagon train – more than 40 miles long and largely consisting of booty captured by Ewell prior to Gettysburg, but also including 4,000 Union prisoners captured by the Rebels – has already departed, followed that night by Hill's Corps to protect the trains, followed by Longstreet and then Ewell bringing up the rear serving as a screening force. Also included are 50,000 head of cattle, 50,000 sheep, plus a huge number of hogs and other animals. Lee's intended route is via Fairfield Gap in the Jack Mountain, then Monterey Pass through the South Mountain range, Waynesboro, Leisterburg, and Hagerstown. By 9:00 pm – 8 hours after leaving -- the head of Ewell's wagon train has reached Hagerstown.

The Midnight Fight in Monterey Pass -- At 3:00 pm Kilpatrick's 3rd Cavalry Division departs for Hagerstown via Emmitsburg where it then heads west to

Fairfield, arriving late in the day. At the summit of the Monterey Pass they encounter Rebel artillery and dismounted cavalry protecting the trains passing to the west. The small band of Rebels uses the same tactics that Buford had used on the 1st day of July by fighting, retiring, fighting, and then redeploying. But after five hours BGen George Armstrong Custer leads his dismounted troopers in hand-to-hand combat to break through to capture 250 wagons and 1,300 prisoners. Slaves and the payroll of Junius Daniel's quartermaster were also seized.

Meade orders William H. French, commanding the Federal Garrison at Harper's Ferry, which had moved to Frederick to return part of his command to Harper's Ferry and to block the passes through South Mountain with the rest of his command. Later in the day Meade changes his mind and countermands his order.

Late in the evening Meade holds another council of war that is reluctant to leave Gettysburg. He announces his intention to send out a strong reconnaissance force at dawn under Warren's direction.

Sunday, July 5– At 4 am Imboden's train reaches Greencastle. Shortly after dawn, the Confederates leave Greencastle but are attacked by an angry crowd of ax-wielding locals who chop at the spokes of the wagon wheels.

As John Gordon's rear guard (CSA) finally leaves Gettysburg, Harmon's main wagon train begins to arrive in the wee hours at Williamsport. By the end of the day there are 5,000 wagons plus the thousands of heads of captured cattle and sheep in Williamsport. Williamsport also begins to develop as a major Confederate hospital complex.

Grumble Jones arrives in Williamsport in the morning to find only chaos in control, Imboden having not yet arrived with the Wounded Train. Grumble immediately begins to impose some order onto the mess, Harmon apparently finally being over his head. When Imboden arrives in the afternoon he immediately begins to deploy pickets to guard the roads while placing 23 pieces of artillery on the high ground to cover the road network. Upon finding the pontoon and bridge gone, Imboden finds a flat ferryboat that can carry approximately 30 men each. The 54th North Carolina arrives from the south with a resupply train. Finding that their pontoon bridge has been destroyed, the Confederates begin lifting canal boats from the canal to use as additional ferries across the Potomac

Meanwhile back at Gettysburg many of Meade's men spend the day burying the dead, tending to the wounded and gathering up tons of weapons and ammunition left on the battlefield. The Army of the Potomac is now reduced to about 67,000 effectives.

Meade has to reorganize his command structure and is preoccupied dealing with MGen Abner Doubleday's grievance about being bypassed to take command of the late John Reynolds' 1st Corps.

Meade does order John ("Uncle John") Sedgwick, commanding the 6th Corps, to push his corps hard toward Lee's last known positions at Gettysburg; there is confusion whether Sedgwick is supposed to merely uncover Lee's intentions and not to engage Lee in battle. Sedgwick takes his entire corps and is finally able to get under way in the early afternoon. Despite Meade's urging to move aggressively, Sedgwick moves very cautiously, employing a formation with a line of heavy skirmishers not conducive to a rapid advance.

Meade divides his army into three wings under Sedgwick, Slocum, and Howard, his intention being to turn in either direction but this plan is spoiled by the uncontrollable Daniel Butterfield, Hooker's hold over chief of staff, who issues provisional orders sending everyone toward Middletown, Maryland. After Butterfield is relieved his staff duties are divided between Alfred Pleasanton, commander of the cavalry corps, and Gouverneur K. Warren, chief engineer. Meade intends to move his headquarters to Creagerstown, ten miles north of Hagerstown (Frederick??). But before he can leave he is visited by Herman Haupt, who is badly misinformed about the situation, and who becomes annoyed when Meade says his men need a rest. Haupt then makes a misleading and unfavorable report to Washington.

Late in the afternoon a detached cavalry element of 200 Union troopers ambushes Imboden's train a few miles into Maryland at Cunningham's Crossroads (present day Cearfoss). The Yanks make off with 134 wagons, more than 600 horses and mules, 645 prisoners, and two artillery pieces. Other than Greencastle earlier in the day, this will be the only significant attack upon Imboden's train before it arrives at Williamsport.

John Buford's 1st Cavalry Division (USA), after mounting up in Westminster, Meade's major supply depot, southeast of Taneytown, heads through more rain and mud for Frederick, Maryland, about 25 miles away. Buford's column gets to within five miles of Frederick before stopping to make a soggy camp in the rain. While there they catch a spy who had been posing as a peddler. Without looking up, Buford tells the man "You have three minutes to pray."

Stuart's troopers pass through Emmitsburg, and after pausing to question some captured Union signalmen, heads south toward Hagerstown.

The cavalries skirmish in towns in Pennsylvania; in Smithburg, MD, Stuart attacks Kilpatrick, who despite holding favorable terrain and positions, disengages and decamps for Boonsboro, 20 miles to the south, ostensibly intending to try to cut off Lee's line of retreat, but more probably wanting to hand off his captured his captured wagons, materials and prisoners to French. In so disengaging, Kilpatrick probably costs the Army of the Potomac the initiative it can never fully regain.

That night Lee has Ewell's and Longstreet's troops construct breastworks and build fires along the edge of the South Mountain range as though they were preparing to stay and to fight. Sedgwick, whose line is a mile and half away, is fooled and sends a message to Meade that Lee is going to stay causing Meade to cancel previous orders to move. This will cause Meade to spin his wheels for the next 30 hours, fearing among other things of precipitously exposing his supply base at Westminster.

Late this night, French reports to Meade "500 wagons (Rebel) guarded by about 150 infantry, 150 cavalry, three pieces of inferior-looking artillery, and from 3,000 to 5,000 head of cattle passed through Hagerstown last night after 11 o'clock to about 4 o'clock. ... [The Confederates] could not cross the ford at Williamsport, the river being too high."

Monday, July 6 – Around midday, Gregg's cavalry makes a half-hearted attack upon Imboden's column, letting go when the Rebels' train is out of reach.

Minor skirmishes continue along Lee's route of withdrawal, but the Blue horse soldiers cannot organize their pursuit. Lee keeps trying to draw Sedgwick in at the Fairfield Gap and then smash them but Sedgwick will not take the bait.

After almost 30 hours lost investigating which route to take, Meade reissues his original orders. By the late afternoon almost the entire Army of the Potomac, other than Sedgwick, is plodding through mud and muck on routes leading to Middletown. Sedgwick's 6th Corps cautiously advances to and eventually gets through the Fairfield Gap.

The Battle of Hagerstown -- Stuart, realizing the importance of Hagerstown, starts sending brigades in that direction. Kilpatrick and Buford meet to decide upon a two-prong attack. Buford is to attack Williamsport while Kilpatrick will go after Hagerstown. Kilpatrick, intending to add to his tally of booty, enters Hagerstown, Dalgram leading, up South Potomac Street largely unopposed before encountering barricades and rifle fire from church steeples. A horse artillery duel ensues with charges and countercharges in the streets before the Rebels stiffen at Church Street while BGen Alfred Iverson's Rebel infantry arrives to flank Kilpatrick's right forcing him to withdraw.

During the morning, as the fighting at Hagerstown began, the head of Lee's army emerges from Monterey Pass and heads for Waynesboro, PA, 12 miles north of Hagerstown. At Waynesboro, PA, Lee establishes temporary headquarters. His army turns south, and reaches Leitersburg, Maryland, at about midnight. After a short rest the march continues toward Hagerstown.

The Battle for Williamsport – Early in the morning Imboden learns that 7,000 Union cavalry are heading his way. At Williamsport a trainload of supplies, including ammo, is ferried across the Potomac to the Rebel troops. Imboden arrays about 700 newly armed wounded on the high ground around the town. Additionally about two hundred teamsters and wagoners are deployed into two companies under the command of wounded officers. Eventually Imboden is able to muster together about 3,000 men to help in the defense; Imboden also has 23 pieces of artillery at his disposal.

As Buford's cavalry pushes forward along Boonsboro Road, believing Williamsport to be lightly defended. The Union attack starts with an artillery barrage at 1:30 pm. The Rebels return fire almost running out of ammo until more is ferried across. Fitz Lee, bringing up the rear of Imboden's train, sends word to Imboden to hold on until Fitz can arrive with his brigade of 3,000 men; in the

meanwhile Kilpatrick begins to start toward Williamsport to reinforce Buford who has sent a distress call to Kilpatrick. Lee arrives before Kilpatrick does and is able to help Imboden stem the attack, causing Buford to withdraw in a rout late in the day.

Kilpatrick and Buford, after retreating from their respective battles, meet up again at the Jones Crossroads, the intersection of Boonsboro Road and Hagerstown-Sharpstown Road.

Tuesday, July 7: In Full Pursuit – Meade launches a full pursuit.

Lincoln, worried that Lee will escape, urges Meade to attack without delay.

After being ordered to turn around at Fairfield, some of Sedgwick's foot soldiers finally reach Emmitsburg early in the morning. Meade continues to plan to have his army rendezvous at Middletown thereby keeping his army between Lee and Washington, DC, but making the blocking of Lee's escape unlikely.

After a brief rest in Leisterburg, Lee's army reaches the outskirts of Hagerstown. Had Kilpatrick captured and held the place on the 6th, Lee's retreat might have been blocked.

Alfred Pleasanton, the Federal Cavalry commander has scattered his divisions rather than concentrating them between Cavetown and Hagerstown, which would have blocked Lee's most direct route to Williamstown. Furthermore by this time the Union horses are tired and jaded.

By the end of the day, Meade's army has made marches of between 15 and 34 miles. Meade and his staff arrive at Frederick, the largest town on the National Road between Wheeling and Baltimore. Torrential rains continue to fall. Meade will need one more day to get over the South Mountain into the Cumberland Valley.

Skirmish at the College of St James – At daybreak, Col Devin, (USA) orders a squadron of the New York cavalry to make a demonstration in the Rebel's front northwest of the college (located about six miles from Hagerstown). After a series of withdrawals down the Boonsboro Road, Devin establishes a position on a hill overlooking the Antietam bridge causing the Confederates to withdraw back to the

college. Afterwards, most of Buford's division bivouac on the old Antietam battlefield.

Near Hagerstown John B. McIntosh's brigade dismounts to push Ewell's left flank across the Antietam Creek, preventing Ewell from gaining a dangerous foothold on the east side of the creek.

The First Battle of Funkstown —What remains of the 6th U.S. Cavalry charge to meet the 7th Virginia, the two having previously fought on July 3 at Fairfield. The Virginians rout the outnumbered Blue horsemen with a saber charge, chasing remnants up to four miles.

Tuesday, July 8: Heavy Fighting at Beaver Creek and Boonsboro – Meade circulates a general order directing that his corps move west toward Lee's positions along the Potomac. Whenever possible they were to use the National Road via Turner's Pass to expedite travel. (The South Mountain Tavern, a stone structure, is located at Turner's pass.) Meade's army also uses Fox's and Crampton's Passes.

After hard marching, Meade's army reaches Middletown; between Gettysburg and Middletown, Meade loses 15,000 troops to starvation and other breakdowns. Furthermore, Meade loses 15,000 horses due to exhaustion and lack of forage. From Middletown Meade advances through the same three passes used to advance against Sharpsburg the previous September.

Lee remains at Hagerstown while cavalry skirmishes occur at Boonsboro and Williamsport.

Boonsboro, located astride the National Road south of Funkstown, commands the approaches to the South Mountain. After concentrating his command at Funkstown, Stuart leads his troops southward toward Boonsboro.

Meade reorganizes his army, appointing Andrew A. Humphreys as his chief-of-staff and French as the replacement commander of the 3rd Corps.

Wednesday, July 9 – A small skirmish occurs at Beaver Creek but otherwise Lee continues to have no substantial opposition.

After spending all of the 8th and until noon on the 9th pulling artillery pieces out of the mud to get over South Mountain, the horses are spent forcing the infantry in the 1st and 6th Corps to advance without artillery support.

Lee and his staff identify and establish a nine-mile defensive line -- mostly with open fields in front and with excellent artillery positions -- that starts at Downsville on the right and extends northward to Hagerstown. This line is constructed along a ridge in front of a road network, including the Downsville Road, that will allow easy transfer of units from position to position. The swollen Marsh Run (or Creek) also runs in front of Lee's line creating another obstacle for any attacking forces. Furthermore the canal path provides a connector between Williamsport and Falling Waters for additional mobility.

Thursday, July 10 – Meade's army starts to move with more determination along multiple roads, including the National Road, toward Lee's forces, now gathering in Williamsport. Several skirmishes erupt in nearby towns, including a serious encounter at Falling Waters, downstream from Williamsport.

Second Battle of Funkstown: To give Lee additional time to complete his fortifications Stuart continues to battle with Buford, Sedgwick's lead unit, on the National Road east of Funkstown. To assist Stuart, Longstreet sends some infantry forward; the Rebels are pushed back to the Antietam before beginning to stand their ground. Heavy fighting ensued with both sides bringing in additional cavalry, infantry and artillery, the action occurring in some of the richest farmland in Maryland. Eventually the weight of Federal forces prevailed and Stuart withdraws; however by the end of the day both sides are still in the same approximate positions they had occupied that morning. That night Stuart's troopers unsaddle their horses for the first time in ten days.

Lee's engineers complete the Downstown line fortifications. Lee's engineers immediately begin construction of a new 26-pontoon 800-foot bridge at Falling Waters. In order to have materials for the pontoons, Lee's engineers strip every warehouse in Williamstown of siding. They also remove roofs in order to melt tar to use as sealant.

Wednesday, July 11 – While Lee's forces wait for the Potomac to lower, Meade's army begins preparing for an attack against Lee.

In New York the first names of draftees are drawn.

Thursday, July 12 – The pontoon bridge at Falling Waters is completed. Also the flooded Potomac has fallen to a five-foot depth at Williamsport.

After catching up to Lee, Meade begins light and ineffective reconnaissance. Lee begins to move across the somewhat subsided Potomac on boats and the newly constructed pontoon bridge at Falling Waters. Meade contemplates a reconnaissance in force that could be converted to an attack for the next day but his Council of War dissuades him.

Friday, July 13 – During the night Ewell's corps and Stuart's brigades complete their evacuation by fording across the Potomac at and above Williamsport; meanwhile Longstreet crosses and Hill begins to cross the newly completed pontoon bridge at Falling Waters. Poor visibility from fog and smoke prevent Meade's signalmen from spotting the evacuation.

Draft riots break out in New York.

Saturday, July 14– At last pressing forward at last to attack, the Federals discover the Rebel positions have been abandoned.

Before dawn Union cavalry detects Lee's retreat across the Potomac. Kilpatrick pursues from Hagerstown to Falling Waters while Buford is coming from Downsville. En route Buford informs Kilpatrick to hold the Rebels' rear guard's attention at long distance while Buford drives to the bridge, cutting off much of the Confederate rear guard, including several pieces of cannon. Instead Kilpatrick attacks, pushing the rear guard to the bridge before Buford arrives. Just as Buford starts to arrive upon the scene, the Confederates cut the pontoon bridge loose from its moorings, thus foiling any further pursuit. Once the pontoon bridge is on the WV side, the Confederate engineers and pioneers disassemble the bridge to take the components with them for the remainder of the retreat.

Henry Heth's division, the first to enter Gettysburg thirteen days earlier, is the last to cross the Potomac but some rear guard units are captured by Union cavalry that could have been even more successful had their attacks been better coordinated.

Upon inspecting the abandoned fortifications, some of Meade's more capable officers conclude that they had averted a disaster by putting off the attack. Col Wainwright later declares these fortifications were the strongest he had ever seen "built ... to stand a month's siege."

Sunday, July 15 – Lee's army moves southward along the Shenandoah Valley to good defensive positions although still short of shoes and some supplies. More importantly, Lee's army has captured and retained a tremendous amount of booty of animals, (approximately 30,000 head of cattle and an equal number of sheep survive the entire retreat), equipment and other badly needed supplies.

July 18 – Continuing to "pursue" Lee, Meade moves his army across the Potomac at Harper's Ferry and at Berlin, MD. For several months, Lee will remain west of the Blue Ridges while Meade stays east of the same range, staying between Lee and Washington while both armies refit and replenish.

July 21-- Lee's army was observed making a further retreat up the Shenandoah Valley.

July 23 -- Meade orders French, still commanding the Union's 3rd Corps, (French's "veterans despised him almost to a man calling him 'the old gin barrel,' 'a perfect ignoramus and bloat,' and 'an imbecile.'") to cut passage through Manassas Gap to cut Lee's column into two parts at Front Royal, perhaps the Union's best chance to defeat the Confederates in detail. However at the little known Battle of Manassas Gap, a.k.a. Wapping Heights, French proceeded at such a leisurely pace that he could not inflict any significant damage even after successfully forcing passage of the gap.

July 24 -- The Federals occupy Front Royal but the Confederates have withdrawn up the Luray Valley.