



Colonel Dixon Miles USA

General Robert E. Lee CSA

# Harpers Ferry Civil War Battlefield Tour

## The Maryland Campaign of 1862

On September 4, 1862, Confederate General Robert E. Lee initiated the Maryland Campaign. Lee ordered the Army of Northern Virginia to cross the Potomac River and invade Maryland. Lee wanted to force President Abraham Lincoln to negotiate with the Confederacy by taking the fighting into the loyal states. To do that, Lee first needed to establish a new route for supplies and communications while in enemy territory. The Shenandoah Valley appeared to be the ideal route, but United States troops in Harpers Ferry and Martinsburg, Virginia, stood in his way. While his army rested at Frederick, MD, Lee made plans to deal with the United States troops.

### Special Orders 191

On September 9, Lee finalized Special Orders No. 191. The orders divided his 70,000-man Confederate army into four columns. Lee sent about half the army north in one column toward Hagerstown, MD. He ordered the three remaining columns to attack Harpers Ferry from the north, south and west.

- From the north:  
**12,033 soldiers under Gen. Lafayette McLaws.**
- From the south:  
**4,555 soldiers under Gen. John Walker.**
- From the west:  
**14,842 soldiers under Gen. Thomas Jackson.**

Lee allotted three days, September 10 – 12, for this complex operation. The army would then reunite near Hagerstown.

### The Battle of Harpers Ferry

As the columns set off on the morning of September 10, Lee expected that the US forces at Harpers Ferry and Martinsburg would not put up much of a fight. He had based the size of each attacking force and the timetable of the operation on this assumption. As Confederates under Gen. Jackson approached Martinsburg, the 2,500 US soldiers there retreated to Harpers Ferry. They joined the 11,500 men in the Harpers Ferry garrison commanded by Col. Dixon Miles. Miles was under orders from Washington, DC, to hold Harpers Ferry “to the last extremity.” This meant that there would be a fight, and Special Orders No. 191 would take much longer than Lee had planned.

The soldiers under Col. Miles’ command, as he put it, “did not exist with the intention of fighting an army.” They were there to guard the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad against sabotage. Half had never fired their weapons. Miles saw them as undisciplined, raw recruits. He ordered some of these brand-new soldiers to defend the vital position of Maryland Heights, which overlooks the town from the north. Confederate veterans under Gen. McLaws would soon test these new soldiers.

The Battle of Harpers Ferry began late on September 12—the day Lee had planned to end the operation. Crossing rivers and mountains slowed the Confederate forces. McLaws could not launch his main assault until early on September 13—one day after Lee’s timetable had already expired. After several hours of fighting, his men forced the US defenders to abandon Maryland Heights. Gen. Walker took position on Loudoun Heights that evening while Gen. Jackson’s men occupied School House Ridge. The next day, September 14, the Confederates bombarded the United States troops on

## Auto Tour

This 6.8-mile tour consists of 5 stops. Once you depart the Visitor Center, the roads used are public (state or county). Use caution when traveling (especially on Rt. 340). Obey all posted speed limits and traffic regulations.

### Stop 1 Bolivar Heights

The primary US defensive line stretched across this ridge facing School House Ridge to the west. To the east looms Maryland Heights, site of fighting on the first and second days of the battle. Loudoun Heights sits south of Maryland Heights, across the water gap, and was occupied by Confederate Gen. Walker on the second day. The Chambers Farm is to the south across Rt. 340. Cannons from both heights, School House Ridge, and eventually the Chambers Farm bombarded the US troops here, forcing the garrison's surrender and mortally wounding Col. Miles. This site features easy to moderate hiking trails ranging from 0.3 of a mile to 3.2 miles roundtrip, panoramic views of the Blue Ridge mountains and surrounding areas, interpretive markers and signs, reproduction cannons, and Civil War earthworks.

### Stop 2 Lower Bolivar Heights

US pickets, soldiers posted in front of the line to warn of an enemy attack, exchanged occasional gunfire here with their Confederate counterparts. After nightfall, this sporadic firing, or even just twigs snapping, sometimes prompted a full volley from the jumpy, raw recruits in the US garrison. Confederate Gen. Jackson also advanced soldiers to this area in a feint attack to cover for Gen. A. P. Hill's flanking maneuver on the night of September 14. This area includes a moderately difficult hiking trail of approximately 0.9 of a mile roundtrip, views of the surrounding ridgelines, and interpretive markers and signs.

### Stop 3 School House Ridge North

At this point you are about mid-way between the center and left flank of Jackson's position. Confederate Gen. J. R. Jones' division was located on the left flank at the north end of the ridge, while General Alexander Lawton's division sat astride the Charlestown Pike (modern Rt. 340) in the center. This site includes a moderately difficult hiking trail of approximately 1.75 miles roundtrip, views of the surrounding ridgelines, interpretive signs and markers, reproduction cannons, and restroom facilities.

### Stop 4 School House Ridge South

This was the right flank of Jackson's position. Confederate Gen. A. P. Hill's 5,824-man division marched off the line here to execute their flanking maneuver on the night of September 14. This area features easy to moderately difficult hiking trails ranging from 1.2 to 3.7 miles roundtrip, views of the surrounding ridgelines, interpretive markers and signs, reproduction cannons, and restroom facilities.

### Stop 5 Murphy/Chambers Farm

This farmstead was on the far-left flank of the US defensive line and only lightly guarded. A. P. Hill's division easily scattered the few US troops posted here before dawn on September 15. Then, as Hill said, "The fate of Harpers Ferry was sealed." As the sun burned off the morning fog, the Confederates renewed the bombardment and Hill's infantry prepared to assault Bolivar Heights. The US garrison surrendered soon after the bombardment began. This site includes easy to moderately difficult hiking trails of up to 1.2 miles roundtrip, views of the surrounding ridgelines and the Shenandoah River, interpretive markers and signs, reproduction cannons, and Civil War earthworks.

## In Their Own Words, the Cause of the Civil War

"That reason was [the United States of America's] fixed purpose to ... abolish slavery." - Georgia Declaration of Secession 1861

"[Slavery] was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution." - Vice President of the Confederate States of America, Alexander Stephens - 1861

"Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery." - Mississippi Declaration of Secession 1861

Loop  
0.9mi  
1.5km

SCHOOLHOUSE RIDGE



SCHOOLHOUSE RIDGE NORTH

BOLIVAR HEIGHTS

MURPHY-CHAMBERS FARM

SOUTH

374ft  
114m

Overlook  
623ft  
190m

505ft  
154m

Overlook

Overlook  
502ft  
153m

Loop  
0.3mi  
0.5km

Lower loop  
1.1mi  
1.7km

Upper loop  
1.3mi  
2.1km

0.6mi  
1.0km

1.6mi  
2.6km

0.8mi  
1.4km

Combined loops  
1.1mi  
1.8km

Earthworks

John Brown Fort foundation

Private campground

Murphy House

John Brown Fort foundation

Entrance Rapids

Bull Falls

Bakerston Road

Millville Road

Whitman Avenue

Washington Street

Shoreline Dr

Murphy Rd

Winchester & Potomac Railroad

340

27



00 .25 0.5 Kilometer  
00 .25 0.5 Mile

- Hiking trail
- Distance indicator
- Harpers Ferry National Historical Park
- Park shuttle bus stop
- Parking
- Restrooms
- Information
- Picnic area
- Auto tour stop

Bolivar Heights with around 60 cannons, hoping to force a quick surrender. The bombardment lasted for several hours and terrified the inexperienced US soldiers who felt trapped “like rats in a cage.” A civilian said that amid the bombardment “heaven and earth seemed collapsing.” But, at the end of the day, the stars and stripes still flew over Bolivar Heights.

The operation was now two days behind schedule and Lee ordered Jackson to disengage. Instead, Jackson executed a flanking maneuver late on the night of September 14. Confederate Gen. A. P. Hill, with 5,824 soldiers and twenty cannons, marched off School House Ridge and then downstream along the Shenandoah River. Hill’s troops climbed up ravines to occupy the Chambers Farm on the left flank of the US defensive line. Jackson also sent Col. Stapleton Crutchfield to move ten cannons to a better position on Loudoun Heights. While the Confederates were moving, 1,500 US cavalrymen marched with their horses down through Harpers Ferry. They crossed the Potomac River, cut through Confederate lines, and escaped the closing trap. Their comrades left in Harpers Ferry were not so fortunate.

Jackson renewed the bombardment the next morning. Within an hour, Col. Miles called a meeting with his senior officers. They faced dwindling ammunition and the prospect of an enemy infantry assault, so they decided to surrender. Before they could communicate this to the Confederates, an artillery shell exploded near Col. Miles and wounded him in the left leg. Miles died the next day, but most of the garrison survived.

In total, 12,520 US soldiers laid down their arms. It was the largest surrender of US soldiers until World War II.

The fall of Harpers Ferry threw the lives of nearly 2,000 people into chaos. Enslaved people who had liberated themselves and made it to the US lines in Harpers Ferry were in danger of recapture. Harpers Ferry had been a dream and a refuge for these freedom seekers. However, Col. Miles had not let them cross into Maryland before the battle began. After the surrender, Harpers Ferry became a nightmare as Confederate soldiers and slave catchers rounded up these freedom seekers and returned them to slavery. Abba Goddard, matron of Clayton General Hospital (today’s Lockwood House) described the scene: “Every nook, corner, cranny, barn, and sty has been searched, and men, women, and little children in droves have been carried off.”

## Lee’s Plan Unravels

Responding to Lee’s invasion, the US Army of the Potomac, led by Gen. George McClellan advanced from Washington, DC. They liberated Frederick, MD on September 12. Then they headed southwest and engaged the other half of Lee’s army at the Battle of South Mountain on September 14. The US troops pushed the Confederates back through the mountain gaps towards Boonsboro, MD. From there the US could force their way into a position which would keep the Confederate Army divided. Then a US relief force could recapture Maryland Heights and save the Harpers Ferry garrison. This threat prompted Lee to order Jackson’s withdrawal. But the US army did not push decisively enough, saving Lee’s plan from disaster. The relief force did not reach Maryland Heights in time. Most Confederates had already moved on toward Sharpsburg, MD. Reacting to the changing circumstances, Lee decided to concentrate his army there.

The Confederate Army suffered only 3,405 casualties between Harpers Ferry and South Mountain. The strain of near constant marching and fighting also sapped thousands of soldiers, leaving Lee with just 38,095 troops on September 17. That morning, the 70,000-strong Army of the Potomac engaged Lee’s forces east of Sharpsburg near the Antietam Creek. In an all-day battle of unprecedented fury, they drove Lee’s army to the breaking point. McClellan did not attack again the next day though, giving Lee time to prepare for a retreat. The campaign concluded with a brief, sharp fight at the Shepherdstown Ford as Lee crossed the Potomac River back into Virginia on September 19. Both sides reeled from the massive casualties of the Battle of Antietam Creek. The fighting claimed 23,500: killed, wounded, or missing. Antietam remains the single bloodiest day in American history.

The Maryland Campaign profoundly impacted the course of the Civil War. Instead of forcing Lincoln to the negotiating table, Lee’s retreat emboldened Lincoln. He issued the Emancipation Proclamation. It declared that enslaved people held in the rebelling states would be free after Jan. 1, 1863. The Proclamation also directed the US Army to recruit and train African American men, who had been barred from serving to that point. Some 200,000 African American men enlisted in the US Army. They fought not to restore the Union, but to make a new, more perfect Union in which slavery no longer had a place.