



In Our Backyard

The Forgotten Battle of Unison

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To make the eight-mile drive south from the village of Philomont in western Loudoun County through Unison to the small town of Upperville you travel on unpaved roads lined with stonewalls, ford streams and pass beautiful rolling fields and old antebellum houses. There are periodic glimpses through the trees of the Blue Ridge just to the west.

The drive takes only a few minutes today, but 146 years ago it took Federal cavalry and infantry forces a critical three days to cover this same short distance on these same roads.

In late 1862, more than 150,000 soldiers from Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and George McClellan's Army of the Potomac occupied the area between Leesburg and Winchester. President Lincoln had noticed that Lee's army, just west of the Blue Ridge, was actually farther from Richmond, the Confederate capital, than McClellan's army camped near Antietam Creek in Maryland. He ordered McClellan to cross the Potomac and move most of his 100,000-man army along the east side of the Blue Ridge to bottle up Lee and cut him off from Richmond. Loudoun County, with a population of just over 20,000, mostly merchants and farmers, was overwhelmed by this invasion. Observers on the Blue Ridge saw campfires covering all the northern Loudoun Valley and dust rose from roads clogged with wagons, horses and men.

Lee, sensing the trap set for him, started moving his own army southward and sent JEB Stuart and a small band of cavalry and horse artillery to delay McClellan long enough to escape the president's trap.

The leading units of McClellan's army and Stuart's force met on Nov. 1 on the dirt roads and fields just north of the village of Unison, near Philomont. Using every stream and hilltop to their advantage, Stuart's 900 men battled the advance forces of the huge Federal army around Unison and on the roads and fields leading to Upperville. By the third of November Stuart's resistance was finally broken by a combination of almost 4,000 Federal cavalry, infantry and artillerymen. His small force escaped along today's Rt. 50, through Upperville and through Ashby's Gap to safer ground. But, he had done his job. On that same day the first units of Lee's army rushing south reached Culpeper and took up positions to block the Federal advance. Lincoln learned of the failure of his plan and drafted the order firing the popular McClellan on Nov. 5. Ambrose Burnside took command of the Army of the Potomac in Rectortown on Nov. 7. The war went on for two more terrible years.

The area where this battle took place has been protected and preserved by the generations of families who have lived here over the years and much of it is now protected by conservation easements.

Today, it still looks as it did in 1862 and, as a new National Park Service report states, a soldier returning to the battlefield today would immediately recognize where he was. Historians visiting the battlefield have called it "pristine," their highest compliment. However, since it was dwarfed by the battle of Antietam, which preceded it, and by the Battle of Fredericksburg, which followed, historians had paid it little attention. But, recent research has revealed the significance of this small battle, planned by Lincoln himself to incapacitate Lee's army and resulting in the dismissal of General George McClellan when it failed.

Members of the Unison Preservation Society (UPS), working with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and the U.S. National Park Service, are now documenting what happened here. Combining local funds with a grant from the U.S. Department of Interior's American Battlefield Protection Program, the UPS convened Civil War historians to discuss the events of 1862 and commissioned a detailed report and set of maps on the battle from the US National Park Service. The report should be available shortly.

Based on the newly understood significance of the battle, the pristine nature of the eight-mile long battlefield and the many historic structures within its boundaries, the commonwealth of Virginia has declared the battlefield to be eligible for the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places. The UPS has received a second federal grant to cover the costs of the historians and archaeologists who will prepare the official nomination documents.

The Unison Preservation Society, a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization, is dedicated to protecting the historic rural countryside in and around Unison for its residents, for scholars and students of history, and for visitors and tourists. For more information on the village of Unison, on UPS and on this battle, please visit our Web site at Unisonva.org. ■