

Did a Civil War battle fought in Little Rocky Run affect history?

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During the First Battle of Manassas (Bull Run), the overall Union commander General Irvin McDowell deployed the majority of his forces to his “right flank” to strike the Confederate Army at what today is the intersection of Routes 234 and 29. Centreville served as the rear area of the Union Army. In order to protect his supplies and hospitals in Centreville, McDowell needed a strong “left flank” for his army. If the Confederate Army got around McDowell’s left flank, there would be no significant Union military forces between his main army at Manassas and the Federal capital in Washington.

McDowell decided to protect Centreville by deploying forces down Route 28 (Centreville Road) as far south as today’s Compton Road. He spread various troops from New York, Michigan, and Massachusetts out in a line that intersected Route 28. The Union line ran along a line of hills that spanned today’s subdivisions of Clifton Townes, Crofton Commons, Green Trails, Compton Village, and North Hart Run.

McDowell knew that Little Rocky Run ran parallel to Route 28 through a valley that his own troops found impassable. Union Mills Road also ran parallel to Route 28 and Little Rocky Run. It was then a narrow road and bordered by heavy woods, a feature that Civil War commanders feared because the enemy could hide artillery in the woods and inflict heavy casualties on troops traveling on such a road.

The Confederates made what one Northern participant termed a “feeble attempt” to turn the Union left flank late in the afternoon of July 21st, 1861. They launched a three-pronged attack from the Prince William County line. The plan was for General Longstreet to push his brigade up Route 28 and General Ewell to move up Union Mills Road. They would be supported in the center by General D.R. Jones’ brigade.

Longstreet hit first but was turned away by the Union artillery after making no progress. Before Ewell got his 2300 troops into the fight, he was ordered to turn his entire command back after a series of confusing orders. Meanwhile, Jones followed his vague orders to support Longstreet in the Little Rocky Run valley by marching his 2000 troops to the intersection of Compton Road and Union Mills Road. Jones’ troops gathered at a farm known as Croscons located near present day Noble Rock Court.

Throughout the day, Confederate scouts were reporting that Union troops were felling trees across roads and placing infantry and artillery behind them. Perhaps that is why Jones decided not to turn left down Compton Road but instead chose to shelter his troops in the woods and move them down a ravine that paralleled Compton Road. Without adequately scouting his planned route of march, Jones started down into the ravine between present day Laurel Rock Drive and Bunkers Court. When his troops crossed what is present day Rock Brook (between Whetstone Manor and Rock Still), they were observed by Union artillery and infantry posted along what was then an old farm road

near present day Bay Valley Lane. From here, the Union position spanned across Compton Road and included artillery firing from the general vicinity of today's Paradise Mill Road.

On the right of his line Jones arrayed the 5th South Carolina Infantry. To the left was the 18th Mississippi Infantry. Immediately behind the 18th, but unable to maneuver, was the 17th Mississippi Infantry. Incapable of supporting the infantry because of the poor terrain were two Confederate cannon of the Washington (New Orleans, Louisiana) Artillery placed at present day Luton Hill. The situation could not have been worse for the Jones brigade. Not only was his ability to maneuver restricted by the terrain, but he was also attacking a well-concealed superior force.

Opposing Jones were Colonel Thomas Davies and his four New York Infantry regiments. Davies cleverly instructed his infantry to lie on the ground. Southern riflemen, unable to see their position, shot over their heads. Davies also had six cannon that fired larger cannon balls (some as large as soccer balls) and could shoot about twice as far as the Southern guns. The cannon were commanded by Major Henry J. Hunt, who later became Chief of Artillery for General Grant, who later became President of the United States.

Hunt brought all six of his guns to bear on the bottled up Confederates. The action began when one of his cannons fired and struck down a Confederate officer and his mount. Despite losses, the Confederates kept pushing against the Union artillery. The South Carolinians, dressed in blue uniforms that made them look like Union infantry, closed within 250 yards of the Union artillery, only to be showered by canister shot (iron balls the size of golf balls) shot from the cannon like a big shotgun. While falling back, the South Carolinians also suffered "friendly fire" from Mississippians in their rear, who simply were crowded too closely to fire safely.

After 45 minutes, Jones pulled his brigade out of the fight and retired to the intersection of Compton Road and Union Mills Road, where he counted 14 killed and 62 wounded. Despite lying upon the ground, the Union troops suffered 6 killed and 18 wounded. Southern sharpshooters (snipers) produced most of these casualties.

The fighting in Little Rocky Run valley is memorable more for what "might have been" rather than the number of casualties. Had Jones' 2000 men headed straight up Union Mills Road in the first place (as Ewell's 2300 men could have), they would have been opposed by fewer than 400 infantrymen who had no close artillery support. These troops from the 29th New York Infantry were posted behind a barricade across Union Mills Road near present day South Springs Drive. Although there were some units behind this small force, it is possible that the Confederates could have pushed all the way down Union Mills Road to Route 29 in Centreville, thereby enabling them to get behind McDowell's Army which was already retreating in panic from Manassas.

Ironically, the Confederate cavalry that would have led this charge down Union Mills Road were from Appomattox, Virginia – the town where both of these armies came to a peace agreement four years later.