

Battle of Fredericksburg
December 13, 1862

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After the Battle of Antietam in September 1862, President Abraham Lincoln with hopes of ending the war anxiously waited for the Army of the Potomac to capitalize on its success by engaging the Confederate Army as soon as practical. The President even made a trip to Antietam to assess the morale and readiness of the troops and to personally urge Major General George McClellan to move the Army in pursuit. But McClellan kept his troops around Sharpsburg, Maryland, judging them not to be fit enough to mount an immediate pursuit of General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. McClellan sent Lincoln excuse after excuse, to which the President wired back in sarcasm and exasperation his famous response, "*Will you pardon me for asking what the horses have done since the Battle of Antietam that would fatigue anything?*"¹

The President, whose patience was legendary, finally had enough. He relieved his General "*with the slows*" of his command on November 1st and appointed Major General Ambrose E. Burnside. Twice before he declined the offer, more out of knowing his own limitations than out of a sense of false modesty, but Burnside had a reputation as a fighter and more than anything, Lincoln and the North needed victories. Quickly reorganizing the Army into three grand divisions totaling 116,683 men at his command, Burnside on November 15th moved the Army towards Richmond, planning to cross the Rappahannock River at three locations directly into Fredericksburg in order to flank Lee's Army. His plan might have worked, but for the lack of the pontoons needed to build the bridges when the town was still not occupied by Confederates. The pontoons finally arrived on November 27th, but Burnside waited until the early morning of December 11th to build the bridges, giving Lee more than enough time to concentrate his forces at Fredericksburg with 78,000 troops and supporting artillery along the "high ground," a five mile crescent across rising ground. How well concentrated were his forces? At Marye's Heights at the left center of the line, Lieutenant Colonel Porter Alexander, Lieutenant General George Longstreet's artillery chief, assured the General that, "*A chicken could not love on that field when we open on it.*"

As federal "pontooniers" from the Engineering Corps began laying the bridges over the river, they took heavy casualties under heavy fire from William Barksdale's Mississippi Brigade, firing from the brick houses and fire pits along the banks of the river. Efforts by Union batteries to dislodge the Mississippians to protect the engineers proved ineffective. It was now 12:30 p.m.

¹ Roy P. Basler, Marion D. Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlop, Editors, *The Collected Works of Lincoln* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), Vol. V, pg. 474

Burnside fuming at the delay ordered all 147 guns positioned on Stafford Heights to bombard the town. Union soldiers were ordered to pile into pontoon boats and under heavy fire established a beachhead in town. After fierce street fighting often door to door, with more and more Union infantry entering the fight, Barksdale was ordered to fall back to the main Union lines. Burnside spent the rest of the day and the 12th getting his troops across the now completed bridges, preparing for the battle.

December 13th began in mist that shrouded the river but as it lifted around 10:00 a.m., the Confederates were greeted with the sight of 50,000 Union troops. The Battle of Fredericksburg opened on the Confederate right with Burnside still hoping to turn Lee's flank and rolling up his entranced army. Stonewall Jackson's troops waited until the first Federal line neared, crippling it and successive ones with thunderous volleys. The Union assaults were repelled with heavy losses, and the engagement on this front ended without any ground gained. Lee from his vantage point on Telegraph Hill at the center of the line sensed that any attack on his left center would fall on Marye's Heights. At 11:00 a.m. Union troops from Brigadier General William French's division deployed in three brigade lines, 200 yards apart, to be supported by Brigadier General Winfield Scott Hancock's division. Their objective was to storm Marye's Heights, but Burnside could not have found a worse place to launch an attack. Between the town and the heights was a hollow plain about a half mile wide. As the troops advanced from the town to the heights, a wide ditch laid in front of them that could only be bridged at two points.

French's first brigade line marched out in columns of four for the attack, vulnerable to Confederate fire. Reaching the open they marched straight ahead for two hundred yards within easy reach of artillery that hit them in front and on both flanks besides being within range of sharpshooters. They now crossed the ditch at the two bottlenecked bridges. Once across the columns had to deploy to the right and to the left into long lines of battle. Two ranks deep for the actual attack. Fortunately, the ground rose just beyond the bridge, offering the advancing troops some cover from the deadly fire. However, once formed they had to climb the rise of this slope back into the open and then march forward four hundred yards to reach Marye's Heights. At the foot of the heights was a sunken road protected by a four foot high stone wall forming a defensive position for Longstreet's infantry. On the slopes above them were positioned more infantry and higher still the artillery pieces, extending far to the right and left that laid down a horrific crossfire of shot and shell, as Porter had assured Longstreet. Losing heavily as it crossed the open plain, the brigade reached a small rise just 100 yards from the sunken road. This rise offered some measure of protection but the final 100 yards offered no hiding place as a man could just as easily be shot lying down as he could standing up. The men who made it to the rise got no further, getting off a volley or two before it fell completely apart under a continuous sheet of flame. Up marched the second brigade advancing no further

than their comrades when it too broke and then the third brigade came to take its place only to suffer the same fate. As the smoke drifted away there lay before the Confederates a plain turned to sea of blue with the dead and wounded. The 14th Connecticut had charged the stone wall three times losing 122 men including lieutenant Colonel Perkins who led the third charge.²

Hancock in support of French's division moved his men out of town as soon as the last of French's divisions crossed the ditch. Hancock formed his lines also in three successive brigade lines. The second wave of Union troops now followed. His first brigade of veteran troops crouched low as they marched forward to the cheers of the wounded towards the heights. But Confederate gunners continued its deadly work. The second Brigade now advanced, General Thomas Meagher's Irish Brigade with each man wearing a sprig of evergreen in his forage cap. But they too met a similar fate, ironically, at the hands of fellow Irishmen, brother against brother, firing behind the stone wall in front of them. By evening Meagher could only assemble 250 out of 1,400 men that went into action.

Throughout the bloody afternoon no less than 14 full-assaults were made on the Confederates at the sunken road. Only one Union officer made it within 30 yards of the wall before he was shot down with the majority falling behind him 100 yards out. The gathering darkness ended the slaughter, a testimony to the futile bravery of the Union assaults. The Army of the Potomac retired across the Rappahannock River suffering another humiliating defeat under the hands of General Lee. Burnside's Army of the Potomac lost killed, wounded and missing more than 12,600 men, the greater part in front of the stone wall. Burnside would lose his command of the army to Joseph Hooker before the Battle of Chancellorsville in May of 1863.

Sources for the Battle of Fredericksburg

Great Battles of the Civil War, John Macdonald, Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., New York, 1988, pages 68-79

The Army of the Potomac: Glory Road, Bruce Catton, Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York, 1952, pages 16- 62

² Blaike Hines, *Civil War Volunteer Sons of Connecticut* (Thomaston, ME: American Patriot Press, 2002), pg. 166