When Hell Came to Sharpsburg

The Battle of Antietam and Its Impact on the Civilians Who Called It Home

Steven Cowie

SB

Savas Beatie
California

Contents

Foreword

Antietam is personal to me.

My mother, you see, was born a Poffenberger. You will visit with Poffenbergers in these pages. Every chapter, in fact, reveals Poffenberger stories. You will experience their war with war. These are my uncles, my aunts, my cousins. Distant family, indeed; and distanced in time. But I am a Poffenberger.

Antietam is in my genes.

Aficionados who share study of the Civil War often gather at Civil War Round Table meetings and inquire: Did you have an ancestor in the war? The query resonates as if a current event, though nearly 160 years has passed since civil war erupted.

My response perplexes people. "Kind of," I'll say. "What does that mean?" retorts the inquisitor. "My ancestors didn't fight the war. Instead, *they hosted it.*"

This is a book about those who hosted the Civil War. The guests were not invited. Rather, they were invaders. All Union and Confederate soldiers at Antietam were unwelcome intruders. In fairness, the two most powerful armies in North America did not target the residents of the Antietam Valley. Happenstance forced their tectonic collision. The ensuing earthquake killed and wounded more American soldiers than any single day in American history. The quake's aftershocks, however, reverberated across generations.

Often we forget that a battlefield, first and foremost, is someone's home. Every battle is juxtaposition over a livelihood. Armies arrive, fight, and depart. Battle days are finite. But a battlefield forges itself into the permanent heart of the land and sears into the souls of its caretakers. Too often, we extract the civilians. Our focus on military matters fails to appreciate that not all casualties wear uniforms. We memorialize our battlefields, but we subdue the memories of the hosts.

Steven Cowie resurrects the memory of Antietam's resident guardians.

Steve's recitation of Antietam's citizens will make you shudder. You will feel their burden; you will sense their tragedy. You will experience their devastation; you will share their losses. You will curse in frustration; you will scream in anger. You will shake in their disarray; you will quake in their disharmony.

Cowie captivates your conscience. His untold tales and graphic descriptions are powerfully presented—so much so that you transcend into a Sharpsburg resident. You meld into one with them. The war will violate you. Shatter your peace; break you into pieces. It steals your fortune; robs your dreams. War kidnaps your property and your life; and your government will hold you as ransom.

"We have been invaded—our fences burned—our wheat crops obliterated from the face of the earth—our stock driven off—our farms and houses pillaged," proclaimed the area's leading newspaper. "Many of us are ruined. We are naked in property as we were in the flesh when we were born into the world. Cannot the Government make some provision for us?"

The government's response—or lack thereof—forms the basis for much of Cowie's investigation. The United States Army, and eventually the U.S. Congress, recognized that private property had been appropriated or destroyed on behalf of the Union war effort. Provisions for payment were ordered or legislated—but only if supported with mandated paperwork. Fortunately for historians, the government excels at manufacturing paperwork. Skid loads of Civil War-era documents are housed at the National Archives (NARA) in Washington, D.C., including civilian claims for war damages and their requested compensation.

Antietam Valley residents impart a trove within this massive war claims collection. Existence of their claims has been known for decades, but historians have largely ignored it due to difficult accessibility, no digitized or microfilmed copies, and endless transcription of nineteenth-century scribbles. Mr. Cowie cast these obstacles aside. Motivated by the untapped potential within this reservoir of war claims, the author embarked on a multi-year exploration in the secluded vaults of NARA, sacrificing daylight for enlightenment scouring nearly 200 war claims.

The result is a study unmatched. *When Hell Came to Sharpsburg* is the most comprehensive compendium and scholarly dissertation on the Civil War's effect upon Antietam's citizenry.

This does not diminish the fine Antietam civilian studies of Kathleen Ernst's *Too Afraid to Cry* (2007) or Ted Alexander's essay "Destruction, Disease and Death" from the special Antietam issue of the journal *Civil War Regiments* (1998). Both are significant contributions to Civil War social history, and both established new understandings of epic struggles of survival in Antietam's aftermath. Cowie builds

upon their foundational work, masterfully weaving details of everyday life into a holistic quilt that rips and shreds into everyday misery.

It is this formulation that differentiates Cowie's scholarship. His study examines the effects of war as an *ecosystem of expansive horrors*. In other words, everything bad makes everything worse. His approach is Newtonian, i.e., every action generates a reaction. It is hard to examine everything, and historians often resort to cherry-picking evidence. Cowie rejects this temptation. His ecosystem is holistic. His narrative interweaves interdependence between life and land. He integrates relationships between natural resources and health and disease. The author intersects social and political intercourse with the dynamics of government action and inaction. He explains economics as agricultural practices (so familiar to these characters and so foreign to us) that define life and death financial decisions. Cowie combines all into a comprehensive web that personalizes the civilian drama and trauma of Antietam.

Fence rails—yes, simple fence rails—present a sample of Cowie's ecosystem approach. What's important, you ask, about fence rails? First, nothing is or was more ubiquitous upon Antietam's landscape than fencing. Fences defined property boundaries and kept livestock within, and livestock without. Fences protected yards, gardens, fields, and orchards. Fences bordered turnpikes, roads, lanes, and walkways. Thousands of rails, nay tens of thousands, crisscrossed Antietam's hills and dales.

No rail existed independent of the ecosystem that created it. Consider the production process. First the forest, followed by the farmer as logger, transport to the sawmill, rail-splitting, return transport to the farm, and finally construction. During a time when the average American earned $1.00 a day in wages, one fence panel cost $1.50. This is understandable considering the labor, time, and brute mechanics required to generate one rail.

What happens, as a farmer, if your fences disappear? It is life-altering. Livestock is not constrained. Crop fields and orchards are not secured. Fields cannot be planted, and yards and gardens are left unenclosed. Roadways are less distinguishable. Your existence changes dramatically. "[F]arms which one month ago were in a high state of culture, are now to be seen without a sign of cultivation," recorded one Antietam witness. "[E]verywhere with rails and fences almost entirely burned for wood."

Accounts of narrative nature are familiar, but Cowie's ecosystem model goes beyond quotations. Cowie quantifies the loss. The author methodically examined 75 war claims, searching diligently for fence rails and fence posts devoured as firewood by the voracious U.S. army occupation. Cowie added the results: *615,885*

rails and posts destroyed. Having problems relating? Try this: stretched rail tip to rail tip, that is enough fencing to drive from Washington, D.C. to Wichita, Kansas!

Surely the government would compensate the loyal farmers of Sharpsburg for such incomprehensible loss. Western Maryland was, after all, strong Union country. Allegiance to the boys in blue permeated almost every household. Losses of such magnitude—caused by the 41-day post-battle Sharpsburg-area occupation by three corps of the Army of the Potomac—certainly demanded recompense. Certainly.

* * *

Antietam boasts uniqueness amongst battlefields on Northern soil. The U.S. army remained stationed there after the battle ended. Not so at Gettysburg (1863) and Monocacy (1864), where the contesting armies abandoned those battlefields (except for medical personnel and wounded) soon after the fighting ended. For six weeks in the fall of 1862, however, Sharpsburg swelled into the second largest city in Maryland—temporary public housing for nearly 45,000 Union soldiers. The region imploded.

Water proved problematic for this occupation city. Its existence determined existence. Every spring, every well, every cistern on every farm, and every lot in town became a target for thirsty soldiers. Alarmed civilians, aware that a severe summer drought constrained their supply and endangered subterranean reservoirs, locked or removed pump handles to prevent bleeding wells dry. Worse than water scarcity was water pollution.

Cowie's ecosystem model is especially effective here. He begins with geology. Strange to encounter a geology lesson in a Civil War book, but this is the brilliance of Cowie's analysis. Citing scientific studies in interesting fashion (Cowie excels at melding science with history), the author explains the phenomenon of Karst—soluble limestone with its myriad of ground surface openings, unstable uprisings, and underground cavities. Upon this, he superimposes rainfall that drains human feces, human urine, and decomposing human bodies (near 6,000) *into the drinking water*. This will make you ill.

If not, Cowie further explains the effect of the equine population on the liquid of life. Nearly 33,000 horses and mules occupy the Antietam Valley with the Army of the Potomac. Cowie details how each creature produces an average of 31 pounds of feces and 2.4 gallons of urine *daily*. Much of this ends up leaching into the drinking water. The result is rampant disease. Diarrhea and dysentery sicken hundreds of soldiers and civilians. Worst of all, typhoid fever runs rampant. The Antietam Valley becomes "a gigantic petri dish."

A pest we have all gone to war against—the common housefly—helps spread the disease. Cowie observes that the housefly's "habit of walking, feeding, and breeding on manure, human excrement, garbage, and carrion makes it an ideal disease vector." Consider this the next time a fly lands on your outdoor barbecue.

Overriding this putrid environment, literally, was the air. Since the germ had not yet been discovered by medical science, common belief held that foul air was a principal contributor to pervasive sickness. The stench of so many half-buried dead men and rotting horse carcasses, even a month after they fell, permeated every pore of the living. "We couldn't eat a good meal," recalled resident Alex Davis, "and we had to shut the house up just as tight as we could at night to keep out that odor." Davis recoiled: "We couldn't stand it, and the first thing in the morning when I rolled out of bed I'd have to take a drink of whiskey. If I didn't I'd throw up before I got my clothes all on."

Throwing up, unfortunately, debilitated and dehydrated hundreds of soldiers and civilians. Who was treating these infirm? We have heard of the heroics of Clara Barton at Antietam, but what of Dr. Augustin A. Biggs?

Mr. Cowie discovered a treasure of Dr. Biggs's ledgers and daybooks preserved within the remarkable history collection of the Western Maryland Room of the Washington County Free Library. Obtained by my father, John C. Frye, curator there for 52 years, the Biggs artifacts documented the local doctor's day-by-day appointments and cases as he tended to Sharpsburg's civilian trauma.

Cowie is indefatigable in tracking Biggs and his patients, so much so that you feel like you are walking and observing astride Biggs during his urgent house calls. Particularly impressive is the author's statistical analysis comparing Biggs's patients before and after Antietam. Cowie proves a direct connection between diseases caused by the Antietam battle and the subsequent weeks-long occupation. Through careful examination of Biggs's meticulous notations, Cowie discovers not only the types of resident ailments, but also Dr. Biggs's treatments. Most fascinating is that the doctor's patient load doubles after Antietam—from 7.20 patients a day before the battle to 15.94 patients a day by the last week of October. Precision analysis by Cowie of this genre permeates the pages of *When Hell Came to Sharpsburg*.

I do not like statistics. How can you have .94 of a patient? I assiduously avoided a 400-level statistics class so that I could graduate. Historians and statistics is proverbial right-brain left-brain warfare. I do, however, admire Mr. Cowie for his deliberation of and patience with statistics. His indomitable calculations of thousands upon thousands of numbers within the Sharpsburg-area war claims form the foundation for his ecosystem model.

Cowie employs stats to humanize the aftermath of Antietam. This seems counterintuitive. Numbers are cold, harsh, and rational. Frightened humans solicit our warmth, compassion, and charity. But Cowie's additions and multiplications reveal the enormity of the Antietam disaster by converting numbers into emotional connections. When Dunker farmer and pacifist Samuel Mumma drags 55 dead horses from near his burned house and barn into the East Woods to torch the carcasses, you feel the man's strain and drain. When Henry Rohrback, near Burnside Bridge, spies U.S. soldiers swiping 400 bushels of his apples "from as fine as orchard loaded with fruit as I ever saw," you see his tears. When Joseph Poffenberger helplessly watches his seven cattle, 15 sheep, and 20 swine "all taken by the troops," you share his pain. "He was so distressed he could not eat."

These represent individual losses. Most powerful, though, are the collective losses. Through brilliant detective-like evidence gathering, Cowie compares war claim damages against the 1860 Agricultural Schedule for the Sharpsburg District. This yields impressive data. For example, during the U.S. occupation the army slaughtered 954 swine (war claims total), which is 45% of the total 2,117 pigs enumerated in the 1860 schedule. The author uses similar comparatives for wheat, corn, hay, straw, sheep, chickens, cattle, horses, potatoes, butter, fruit, and cured meats. If the army could eat it or use it, it disappeared.

Army officers knew their quartermasters were confiscating from Antietam Valley residents. When Joseph Poffenberger "made complaint about the taking" to Gen. George Meade (who had launched attacks from Poffenberger's farm and then occupied it), Meade instructed the distraught landowner "to make out a bill of all the property taken and that the Government would compensate him for it." Meade was right and the government did pay—*in 1899*!

Antietam-area war claims are both blessing and curse. For historians like Cowie and for aficionados like us, they are a blessing that provide exhaustive details into everyday life in the Antietam Valley. They are a curse, however, that tortured nineteenth-century Sharpsburg residents, some for more than 50 years. Their claims, in essence, became chains.

Cowie excels at explaining the complex and convoluted war claims process, making sense of a system that reeked of nonsense. No damage caused by battle, for example, could be included in a claim. Samuel Mumma's house and barn were burned on the day of the main battle and were thus excluded from compensation. Congress eliminated settlements "for the occupation of or injury to real estate . . . [and] the consumption, appropriation, or destruction of or damage to personal property." Does anything remain for the petitioner? What about pillaging?

Congress discovered this loophole, and barred claims "for damages or for losses sustained by thefts or depredations committed by troops."

Should an aggrieved civilian find some category not exempt from petition, the law required him or her to: 1) Obtain a certificate from a U.S. officer vouching for your loss; and 2) Prove your loyalty to the United States. The first requirement proved a difficult hurdle. Many officers were killed in battle or hard to track down during the postwar period. Proof of loyalty was less strenuous, but still onerous. At least two witnesses needed to affirm an applicant's allegiance with an affidavit before the local justice of the peace. Even with this, a single personal enemy could sabotage your loyalty, or the U.S. officers investigating the claim could suspect, and thus deny, your loyalty—if you were a Democrat.

Your blood will boil as Cowie leads you through claims and outcomes. You will feel the emotions of the claimants—frustration, anger, desperation, despondency. The government you supported will abandon you, or at best, minimize you. For many Antietam Valley residents, perpetual debt became life's lifeline. For too many others, bankruptcy ruined them.

"The county will not recover from the effects of this heart-rending disaster for years to come," lamented a local newspaper. "[P]robably not in our day and generation." Steve Cowie's work proves the editor correct.

War is a human tornado.

Dennis E. Frye
Burnside's Headquarters
Raleigh Showman's "Antietam Farm"

I dedicate this Foreword to my mother,
Janice Marie Poffenberger Frye.

OR: *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, DC, 1880–1901).

PPT: Samuel H. Williamson, "Purchasing Power Today of a U.S. Dollar Transaction in the Past," MeasuringWorth.com

RG: Record Group

SHS: Sharpsburg Historical Society

TATC: Kathleen A. Ernst, *Too Afraid to Cry: Maryland Civilians in the Antietam Campaign* (Mechanicsburg, PA, 2007)

UMLA: Upper Midwest Literary Archives, Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN

USAMHI: United States Army Military History Institute

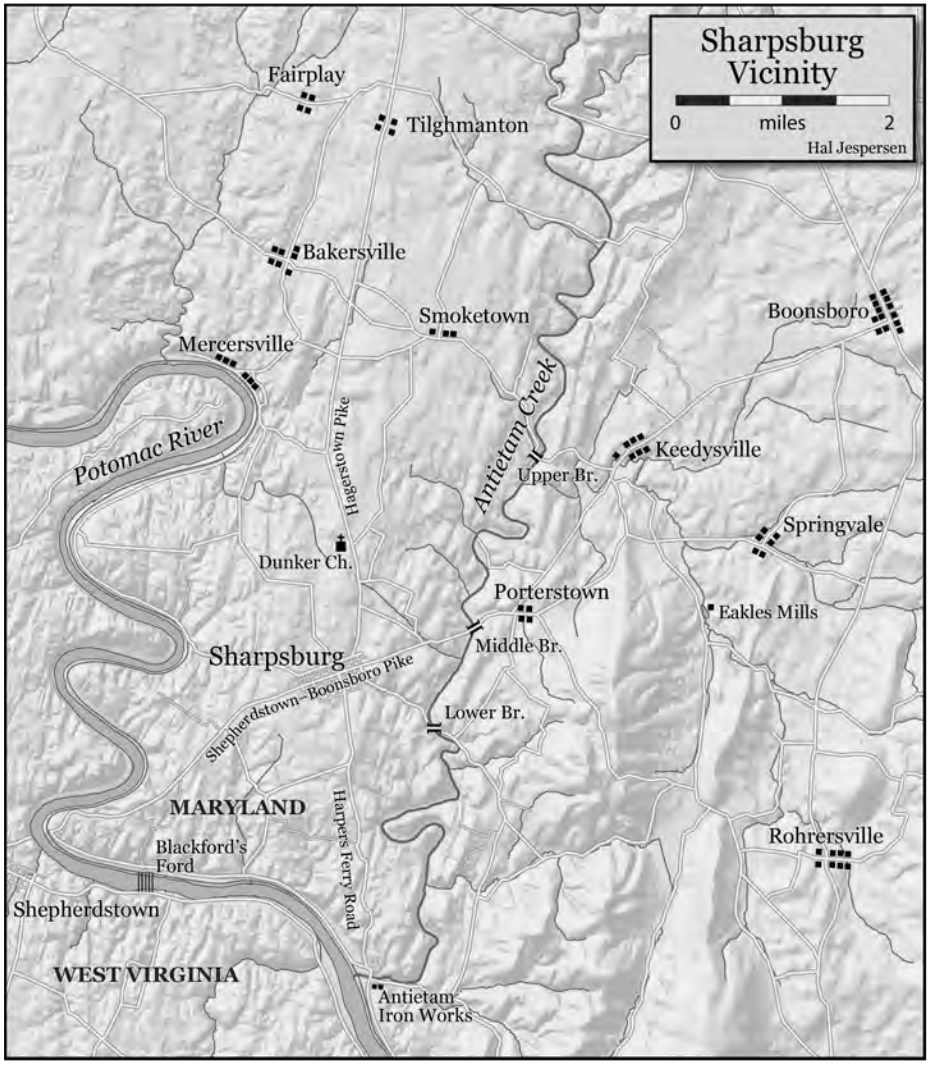
WCC: Samuel Webster Piper, *Washington County Cemeteries—Samuel Piper and the DAR*

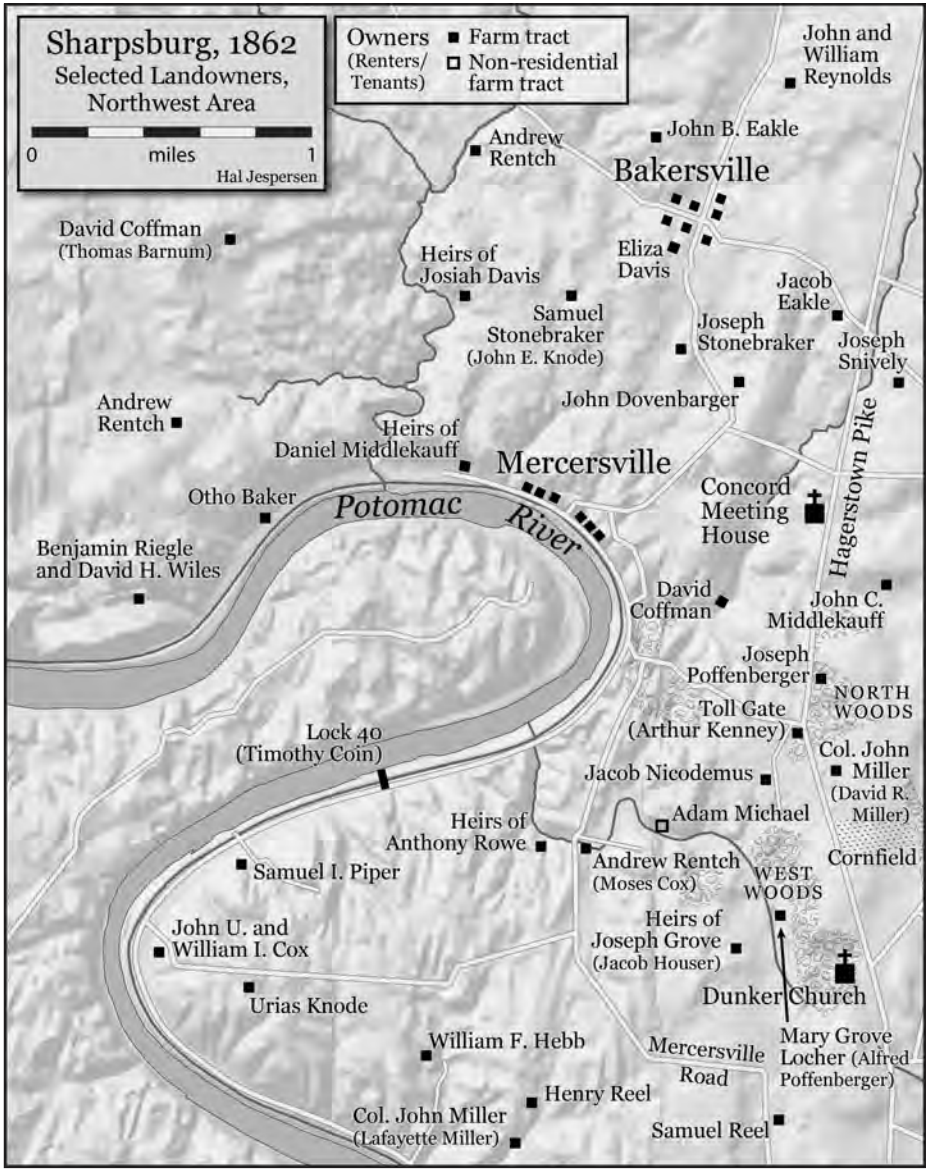
WHILBR: Western Maryland Historic Library

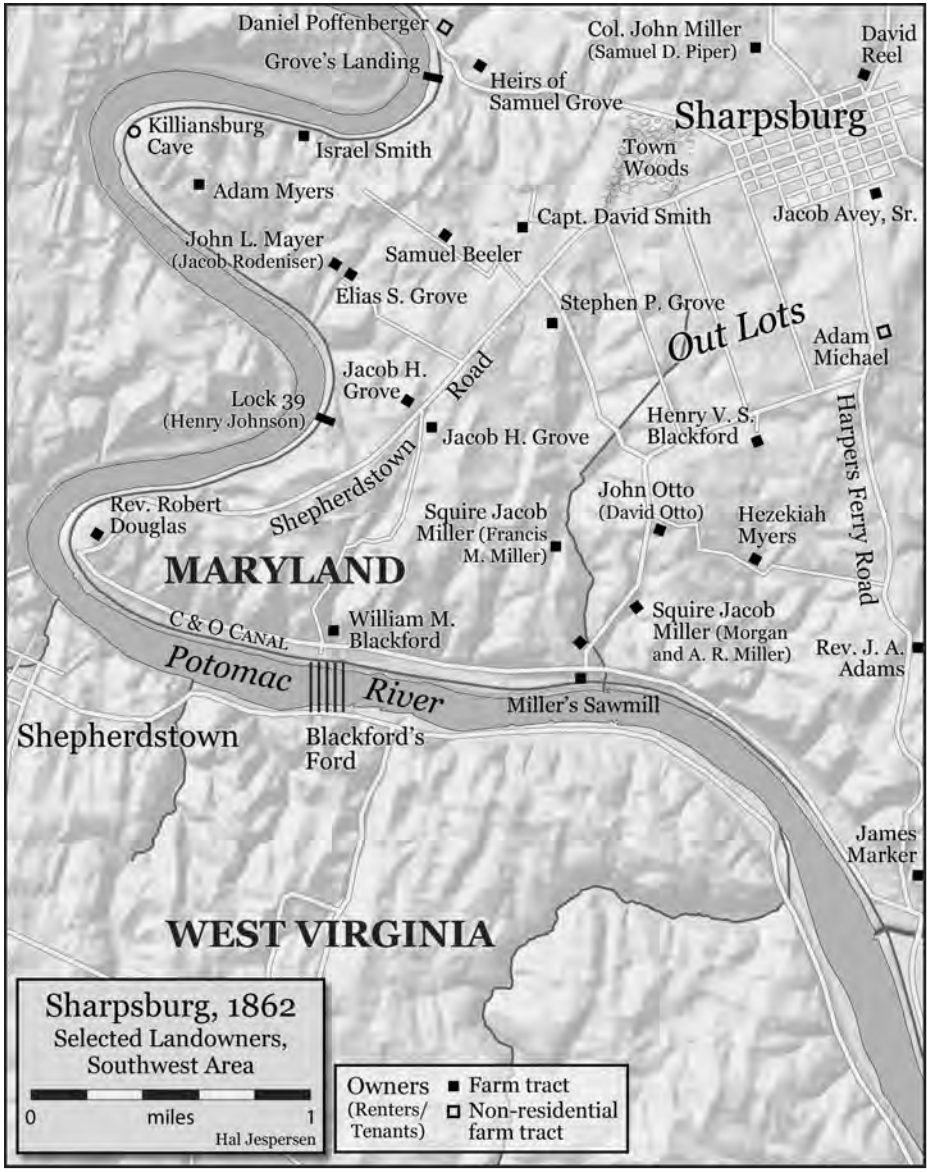
WMR: John Clinton Frye Western Maryland Room

List of Maps

PARTIAL MAP EXCERPT




Sharpsburg, 1862
Selected Landowners, Northwest Area
0 miles 1
Hal Jespersen
Owners (Renters/ Tenants)
Farm tract
Non-residential farm tract
John and William Reynolds
John B. Eakle
Andrew Rentch
Bakersville
David Coffman (Thomas Barnum)
Heirs of Josiah Davis
Eliza Davis
Jacob Eakle
Samuel Stonebraker (John E. Knode)
Joseph Stonebraker
Joseph Snively
John Dovenbarger
Andrew Rentch
Heirs of Daniel Middlekauff
Mercersville
Hagerstown Pike
Otho Baker
Potomac River
Concord Meeting House
Benjamin Riegle and David H. Wiles
David Coffman
John C. Middlekauff
Joseph Poffenberger
NORTH WOODS
Toll Gate (Arthur Kenney)
Lock 40 (Timothy Coin)
Col. John Miller (David R. Miller)
Jacob Nicodemus
Adam Michael
Heirs of Anthony Rowe
Cornfield
Samuel I. Piper
Andrew Rentch (Moses Cox)
WEST WOODS
John U. and William I. Cox
Heirs of Joseph Grove (Jacob Houser)
Dunker Church
Urias Knode
William F. Hebb
Mercersville Road
Mary Grove Locher (Alfred Poffenberger)
Henry Reel
Col. John Miller (Lafayette Miller)
Samuel Reel


Daniel Poffenberger
Grove's Landing
Col. John Miller
(Samuel D. Piper)
David
Reel
Heirs of
Samuel Grove
Sharpsburg
Killiansburg
Cave
Israel Smith
Town
Woods
Adam Myers
Capt. David Smith
Jacob Avey, Sr.
John L. Mayer
(Jacob Rodeniser)
Samuel Beeler
Elias S. Grove
Stephen P. Grove
Out Lots
Adam
Michael
Jacob H.
Grove
Road
Lock 39
(Henry Johnson)
Jacob H. Grove
Henry V. S.
Blackford
Harpers Ferry Road
Shepherdstown
John Otto
(David Otto)
Rev. Robert
Douglas
Squire Jacob
Miller (Francis
M. Miller)
Hezekiah
Myers
MARYLAND
C & O Canal
William M.
Blackford
Squire Jacob
Miller (Morgan
and A. R. Miller)
Rev. J. A.
Adams
Potomac
River
Miller's Sawmill
Shepherdstown
Blackford's
Ford
James
Marker
WEST VIRGINIA
Sharpsburg, 1862
Selected Landowners,
Southwest Area
0
miles
1
Hal Jespersen
Owners
(Renters/
Tenants)
Farm tract
Non-residential
farm tract

PARTIAL EXCERPT

Chapter 1

Something of the Terrible: The Gathering of the Armies

Cannon fire shook the earth as villagers fled their homes. Buildings burned. Dogs howled. Birds darted through the smoky sky, shifting direction with each explosion. "In the street there was the greatest confusion," remembered one witness. "Dead and wounded men and horses lay about in every direction . . . waggons and ambulances overturned in the hurry and anxiety of everybody to get out of the village, where cannon-balls whizzed incessantly through the air, and pieces of bursting shells, splinters of wood, and scattered fragments of brick were whirled about in the dense cloud of powdersmoke that enveloped all things."[1]

"We hadn't gone only a couple of houses," recalled a villager, "when a shell busted right over our heads. So we took back to the cellar in a hurry. The way they was shootin' and goin' on we might have been killed befo' we was out of town."[2]

Elizabeth Miller Blackford, 50 and widowed, studied the terrifying scene from her village home while wrestling with a gut-wrenching decision. Stay to protect her property or flee the missiles plunging into town?

1 Heros von Borcke, *Memoirs of the Confederate War for Independence*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1867), 1:227-228; Several sources describe artillery shells exploding in Sharpsburg village on Sep. 16, 1862. These include Joseph L. Harsh, *Taken at the Flood: Robert E. Lee and the Confederate Strategy in the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent, Ohio, 1999), 336. See also D. Scott Hartwig, *To Antietam Creek: The Maryland Campaign of September 1862* (Baltimore, 2012), 600, and William Miller Owen, *In Camp and Battle with the Washington Artillery* (Boston, 1885), 141. Further details of the Sep. 16 bombardment appear later in Chapter One.

2 Clifton Johnson, *Battleground Adventures: The Stories of Dwellers on the Scenes of Conflict in Some of the Most Notable Battles of the Civil War* (New York, 1915), 109-11. Hereafter cited as *BA.*

"I was standing in the window," Elizabeth remembered, "when a shell exploded in Mr[s] Russel's house between the roof and the ceiling [it] sent the shingles flying every direction . . . it was that, that unnerved me at the moment. I gave way and we left."

Elizabeth, her children, and a slave named Nan fled their village home, rushing west up Main Street. All was chaos. Ambulances rumbled past burning buildings, hauling mangled Confederates, their blood dripping onto the dusty street. A dead horse lay in the road "with his whole backbone split wide open." Elizabeth and her family ran for their lives, "going out the back way to Gerry Groves Town woods, with the shells flying over our heads and around us, we were in more danger than if we had staid home."[3]

It was September 16, 1862. For all the violence, the actual battle had yet to begin. The rural village of Sharpsburg, Maryland was just hours away from the bloodiest day in American military history, during which 100,000 soldiers would clash near a creek called Antietam.

* * *

Up to 1862, Sharpsburg had avoided the ravages of war. Historian Stephen W. Sears described it as "a quiet place, an entirely ordinary little rural community where the roads came together." Founded in 1763, Sharpsburg rested near the

3 Elizabeth Miller Blackford to Amelia Houser, February 8, 1863, "The Letters of the Jacob Miller Family of Sharpsburg, Washington County, Maryland," unpublished correspondence, 1851–1864, John Clinton Frye Western Maryland Room, Washington County Free Library, Hagerstown Maryland. Hereafter referred to as WMR. The Miller letter collection spans beyond 1864 but said correspondence does not relate to this study. "Nan" may have been a slave owned by Elizabeth's father, Squire Jacob Miller. After evacuating Sharpsburg village on Sep. 16, Elizabeth sheltered at her brother's farmhouse south of town. She noted there were "not many soldiers" on this farm on the 16th, "but the next day, Wednesday it was cro[w]ded with them going and coming;" Active Land Record Indices, 1776–1977, Washington County Circuit Court Land Records, Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, Maryland, liber IN 19 / folios 422-23. Land records are hereafter cited by liber and folio and encompass real estate purchases, mortgages, bills of sale, and deeds of manumission. Deed IN 19 / 422-23 associates Elizabeth R. Blackford with Lot 44E (131 West Main Street). Blackford may have rented this property in 1862. Records II / 623, II / 175, and WMCKK 3 / 170 show the Russell family's ownership of Lot 39 (128 West Main Street), located directly across West Main Street from Lot 44E. The 1860 Federal census for Sharpsburg lists Elizabeth Blackford in Dwelling #1571 next to Solomon Renner (who owned Lot 43E in 1862). The 1860 census places Elizabeth Russell and her daughter Lucinda in Dwelling #1698 near Colonel John Miller, who owned and occupied Lot 37E. Regarding "Gerry Groves Town woods," Jeremiah P. Grove and his siblings owned the Town Woods in 1862, which adjoined Sharpsburg village on the west.

Sharpsburg, Md., Principal Street. This 1862 view of Sharpsburg village, taken from the eastern edge of town, looks northwest down Main Street. Photograph by Alexander Gardner.
Library of Congress

Potomac River, which bisected Federal Maryland and Confederate Virginia. Because Maryland was a Union state, U.S. forces picketed the river to watch for potential passage by the Rebel army. Maryland was also a slaveholding border state. Its eastern and southern sections had many Confederate sympathizers, while citizens in Western Maryland—which included Sharpsburg—predominantly favored the Union. As a result, Sharpsburg's initial military experiences were reasonably pleasant. When the 9th Regiment, New York State Militia, marched through town in July 1861, pro-Union villagers cheered the troops and showered them with American flags. One New Yorker recalled, "It is doubtful whether any regiment in the service ever marched under so many banners as did the Ninth on its departure from Sharpsburg."

Two months later, citizens embraced the 13th Massachusetts Infantry during its two-week encampment near town. "Relations with the people of Sharpsburg were very pleasant," wrote the regiment's historian, "and they did their best to prevent our departure."[4]

4 Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red* (Boston, 2003), 167; Kathleen A. Ernst, *Too Afraid To Cry: Maryland Civilians in the Antietam Campaign* (Mechanicsburg, PA, 2007), 5-6. Hereafter

When the 12th Indiana Infantry occupied Sharpsburg during the winter of 1861–62, townsfolk welcomed the Hoosiers. Jacob H. Grove boarded the regiment's officers while Robert Leakins, an eleven-year-old African-American who lived in town, visited the camp "to hear the band play." When temperatures dropped, the Indianans leaned on the community for support, requesting timber from private woodlots for constructing military cabins. The troops "had our tinner here to make them sheet iron stoves which they used in the huts," remembered one townsman.[5]

As winter progressed, some soldiers sheltered along the Potomac River in Jacob C. Grove's warehouse and Squire Jacob Miller's sawmill complex. Others, exposed to the elements, asked citizens for firewood or felled trees at will—and without asking. Much of the wood was valuable oak reserved for market sale and building barns. Squire Jacob Miller, a prominent landowner, complained that the soldiers were "comitting great depradations" to the timber supply and "thining it out most retchidly." Destruction ceased when the 12th Indiana departed in March 1862. Yet, by this time, some residents no longer saw them as soldiers crusading to save the Union but as an unwelcome army of occupation.[6]

---

referred to as *TATC*; *Herald and Torch Light* [Hagerstown, MD], September 23, 1886. This newspaper is hereafter cited as *HTL*. It is not to be confused with its predecessor, the *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light*, which changed to the shorter title in 1863; George A. Hussey, *History of the Ninth Regiment N.Y.S.M.—N.G.S.N.Y. (Eighty-Third N.Y. Volunteers) 1845-1888* (New York, 1889), 55-56. The 9th New York State Militia was also known as the 83rd New York Infantry, and is not to be confused with the 9th New York Infantry; Charles E. Davis, Jr., *Three Years in the Army: The Story of the Thirteenth Massachusetts Volunteers* (Boston, 1894), 8; Because of Maryland's bitterly divided allegiances, the Federal government took severe measures to ensure that it remained in the Union. For further reading on this subject, see J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Western Maryland: Being a History of Frederick, Montgomery, Carroll, Washington, Allegany, and Garrett Counties From the Earliest Period to the Present Day; Including Biographical Sketches of Their Representative Men*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1882), 1:194-211 (hereafter, *HWM*). See also Michael Powell, "Civil Liberties in Crisis," online article, Crossroads of War, http://www.crossroadsofwar.org/discover-the-story/civil-liberties-in-crisis/civil-liberties-in-crisis-full-story/.

5 Timothy R. Snyder, *Trembling in the Balance: The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal During the Civil War* (Boston, 2011), 45; Congressional case of the heirs of Samuel Grove, Record Group 123, Records of the U.S. Court of Claims, Congressional Jurisdiction Case Files, 1884-1943, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, Entry 22, Box 985, Case No. 9313. All congressional cases cited in this study, unless noted, are archived at the National Archives in Washington, DC. References to the National Archives and record groups appear hereafter, respectively, as *NA* and *RG*. All congressional cases archived in Record Group 123 are hereafter cited as claims, followed by case numbers. Testimony in the Groves' case stated that the 12th Indiana established headquarters "in the woods at the suburbs of town."

6 Quartermaster claim of Jacob C. Grove, Record Group 92, Office of the Claims of the Quartermaster General, Claims Branch 1861-1889, Quartermaster Stores (Act of July 4, 1864),

Despite suffering property damages from U.S. troops in 1861 and early 1862, Sharpsburg had avoided the scourge of war. Nevertheless, fears swirled that the Confederate army might cross the Potomac River one day. As one skittish Unionist put it, "Invasion by the Southern army was considered equivalent to destruction." Not only could a battle erupt near the town; Rebels might plunder personal property, force Maryland men into the Confederate ranks, or banish them to a Southern prison, none of which were "attractive prospects for quiet, Union-loving citizens."[7]

Not all Sharpsburg residents feared the Rebels. Many Southern sympathizers lived in the area, and more than a dozen stole across the Potomac to enlist in the Confederate army. Still, Sharpsburg was predominantly pro-Union, described by one historian as a "Unionist and Republican bastion." More than 130 Sharpsburg men fought for the United States. The district raised two companies of the 1st Maryland Infantry, Potomac Home Brigade, and sent other men into the 1st Maryland Cavalry, known initially as Cole's Cavalry.

Notwithstanding, the political divide strained relations in the Sharpsburg environs. Pro-Lincoln Republicans deemed Democrats as disloyal because they opposed the war. "In our community politics ran pretty high during the war," explained farmer David R. Miller, "and some persons called every man who voted the democratic ticket a rebel, but there were many democrats who were loyal and

---

National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, Book G, Box 95, Claim G-1649. All quartermaster claims cited in this study, unless noted, were pulled at the National Archives in Washington, DC. Hereafter, quartermaster claims archived in Record Group 92 are cited as claims, followed by claim numbers; Jacob Miller to Amelia and Christian Houser, February 17, 1862, "The Letters of the Jacob Miller Family of Sharpsburg," WMR. Catherine Amelia Houser was Miller's daughter. She and her husband, Christian Houser, appear in the 1860 Federal census for Muscatine County, Bloomington, Iowa, Dwelling #547. Squire Jacob Miller, who resided on Lot 7 in Sharpsburg village, should not be confused with his nephew, Jacob F. Miller, who lived on a farm southeast of town in 1862. Early historians of the battle, John P. Smith and Oliver T. Reilly, identified Jacob Miller as "Squire Miller" or "Esquire Miller," and Miller's obituaries refer to him as "Jacob Miller, Esq.," and "Squire Miller." See *Herald and Torch Light*, December 15, 1875, and *Hagerstown Mail* [Hagerstown, MD], December 10, 1875; *Herald of Freedom and Torch Light* [Hagerstown, MD], November 27, 1861 (hereafter cited as *HFTL*); M. D. Gage, *From Vicksburg to Raleigh; Or a Complete History of the Twelfth Regiment Indiana Volunteer Infantry and the Campaigns of Grant and Sherman, with an Outline of the Great Rebellion* (Chicago, 1865), 20-21.

7 Lewis H. Steiner, *Report of Lewis H. Steiner, M.D., Inspector of the Sanitary Commission: Containing a Diary Kept During the Rebel Occupation of Frederick, Md. and An Account of the Operations of the U.S. Sanitary Commission During the Campaign in Maryland, September, 1862* (New York, 1862), 6. It is important to recognize that Steiner's fears of the Confederate army in September 1862 likely stemmed from Northern propaganda.

patriotic citizens." James Marker, an outspoken Democrat, "was not allowed to vote from 1862 until after the war on account of his disloyal sentiments." Adam Michael's family "were strong Democrats, and on some occasions the father and sons were stoned at the polls by some of the Republican elements of the town and not allowed to vote."[8]

Political tensions escalated as the war progressed. Secessionists hacked down the U.S. flag on Sharpsburg's public square, while Unionists torched the barns of Reverend Robert Douglas and John E. Knode. Douglas had two sons in the Southern army. Knode, a pro-Northern Whig, married into the Rebel Stonebraker family. After Knode's barn burned, his nephew, a Confederate soldier, quipped, "It cost something in those days to be joined to a Southern woman in wedlock."

Tragedy struck when unknown parties murdered Dewitt Clinton Rentch, a local Democrat. Debate swirled as to whether Rentch was shot "by Union soldiers as a rebel spy" or killed by pro-Northern roughs "in a drunken row." Sheriff E. M. Mobley "went with the states attorney to make an investigation, but nothing was done about it." Rentch's family seethed at the injustice. "Oh my I did not know I had so much gall in my nature until this war question was brought up," wrote Rentch's cousin. "I shudder now at my feelings . . . I hated my most intimate friends because they were in favor of the Union right or wrong."[9]

* * *

8 Dean Herrin, *Antietam Rising: The Civil War and Its Legacy in Sharpsburg, Maryland, 1860-1900* (Sharpsburg, MD, 2002), Antietam National Battlefield Library (hereafter, ANBL), 6-7; Ted Alexander, "Destruction, Disease, and Death: The Battle of Antietam and the Sharpsburg Civilians," ed. Mark A. Snell, in *Civil War Regiments, A Journal of the American Civil War* (Mason City, IA, 1998), vol. 6, no. 2, 150; Ernst, *TATC*, 19; Claim of Daniel Poffenberger (*RG* 123, Entry 22, No 1505). David R. Miller testified in Poffenberger's case; Claim of James Marker (*RG* 123, Entry 22, Box 232, No. 1292); Thomas J. C. Williams, *A History of Washington County, Maryland: From the Earliest Settlements to the Present Time, Including a History of Hagerstown*, 2 vols. (Hagerstown, MD, 1906), vol. 2, pt. 1, 734 (hereafter referred to as *HWC*).

9 Joseph R. Stonebraker, *A Rebel of '61* (New York, 1899), 41; *HFTL*, November 27, 1861, 2C; Robert Douglas to Fitz John Porter, October 24, 1862, M-345, Union Provost Marshals' File of Papers Relating to Individual Civilians, Microfilm Roll 0076, *RG* 109, *NA*; Undated "Letter from Millie" to Amelia Houser, "The Letters of the Jacob Miller Family of Sharpsburg, Washington County, Maryland," WMR. Savilla Miller, one of Squire Jacob Miller's daughters, may have written the letter; Ernst, *TATC*, 21-22; Claim of Andrew Rentch (*RG* 123, Entry 22, Box 537, Case No. 4235). Rentch's case contains details describing the shooting death of his son, Dewitt Clinton Rentch. The 1860 Federal census for Sharpsburg shows Andrew Rentch owning $100,000 in real estate. Rentch's claims case describes him as "the wealthiest farmer in Washington Co. Md."

When September 1862 arrived, farmers of both political parties focused on the fall harvest. They busily threshed grains and stuffed mountains of hay into barns while eyeing their nearly-ripe corn, potatoes, fruits, and vegetables. Pastures bloomed with second crops of clover. Freshly plowed fields awaited seeding with winter wheat. The community depended on all of these resources for subsistence, livestock feed, and annual income. In many respects, this was the worst possible time for disruption of farming.

Then came the shocking news that the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia had marched into Maryland.

General Robert E. Lee had good reasons for advancing north. The Confederacy recently seized the initiative in the war by repulsing the Union army from the Richmond peninsula and then crushing it at the Battle of Second Manassas (Bull Run). By entering Maryland, Lee could build on the momentum and bring the war out of Virginia. He also entertained the hope of "liberating" the slaveholding "Old Line State," which, as he and other Secessionists believed, the United States withheld from the Confederacy against the will of a majority of its people. Most important, Lee sought a decisive battle against the battered Yankees on ground of his choosing. Despite the advantages of fighting a defensive war on home territory, Lee knew the Confederacy could not win a long-term war of attrition against the industrial North. He needed a quick victory, now, while the Union was on the ropes.

The United States was indeed reeling. Routed at Second Manassas, Federal forces had retreated to the fortifications of Washington. Fall mid-term elections were looming, and if morale continued to decline, Northern voters might demand an end to the bloody war by granting independence to the Confederacy. Moreover, the American crisis was injuring the economies of England and France. If Rebel armies continued their military successes, these foreign powers might intervene on behalf of the South.[10]

In early September, Lee's Army of Northern Virginia (ANV) crossed the Potomac River into Maryland at White's Ford and other points, more than forty

10 Gary W. Gallagher, "Season of Opportunity," ed. Gary W. Gallagher, in *Antietam: Essays on the 1862 Maryland Campaign* (Kent, OH, 1989), 1-9; James M. McPherson, *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam* (New York, 2002), 56-61, 91-95; Harsh, *Taken at the Flood*, 25-26, 46-50, 57-58; Alexander B. Rossino, *Their Maryland: The Army of Northern Virginia from the Potomac Crossing to Sharpsburg in September 1862* (El Dorado Hills, CA, 2011), 3-10; Many historians refer to Robert E. Lee's offensive as the 1862 Maryland Campaign. Although primary sources support the possibility of British-French intervention, evidence does not show that foreign affairs factored into Lee's strategy in September 1862.

miles southeast of Sharpsburg. Unfortunately for Lee, many Marylanders in the vicinity did not welcome the ANV as he had hoped, despite the large number of southern sympathizers living in Montgomery and Frederick counties. On the contrary, numerous civilians hurriedly packed valuables, withdrew savings from banks, and fled north. In Sharpsburg, however, there was no great panic. Most residents remained to thresh their grain crops and watch over their property. Lee's army seemed to pose no immediate threat.

When he entered Maryland, Lee expected U.S. military garrisons near Harpers Ferry to evacuate, but, to his surprise, they stayed put, threatening his supply and communication lines to the Shenandoah Valley. To address this threat, Lee sent Major General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson and two thirds of the army to confront the enemy at Harpers Ferry. Lee then continued toward Hagerstown with the rest of the ANV, but ordered a division to guard the gaps of South Mountain and thereby prevent the enemy from attacking his divided army.

When news of Lee's incursion reached Washington, President Abraham Lincoln found himself forced to act fast. He reached out to Major General George B. McClellan, whom he had relieved as commander of the Army of the Potomac (AOP) a few weeks earlier. Lincoln restored McClellan to the AOP and gave the commander simple orders. Drive the Rebels out of Maryland.

Robert E. Lee assumed that his demoralized enemy would "take some time to prepare for the field," but he was wrong. McClellan was a brilliant organizer, who quickly restored the vigor of the Union's flagship force, rebuilt its crippled morale, and led his men into Maryland to locate the invaders. By mid-September, the Army of the Potomac caught up to the Army of Northern Virginia.[11]

* * *

Sunday, September 14, started peacefully at Sharpsburg. Rumors of the approaching armies, North and South, put the community on alert. Nonetheless, in

11 Hartwig, *To Antietam Creek*, 92-106; The forty-mile distance from Sharpsburg to White's Ford is based on historic roads; Scharf, HWM, 1:231-232; Ernst, *TATC*, 40-41; War claims, letters, and other sources reviewed for this study revealed no accounts of Sharpsburg civilian evacuations before Sep. 15, 1862. Most of Sharpsburg's evacuations took place on Sep. 15 and 16, and some people fled their homes on Sep. 17; Dennis E. Frye, *The Battle of Harpers Ferry: History and Battlefield Guide* (Harpers Ferry, WV, 2011); Hartwig, *To Antietam Creek*, 32-34, 43-47; Ethan S. Rafuse, *McClellan's War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union* (Indianapolis, 2005), 236-240, 267-269, 278-295; George McClellan commanded Washington's defenses at the time of his reinstatement to field command.

the absence of immediate threat, parishioners flocked to houses of worship, sang hymns, and sat through sermons—until the distant sound of cannon fire reached their ears.

The ominous harbingers of approaching battle wafted through open church windows as fighting erupted at South Mountain, seven miles east. Alarmed worshipers left their pews to study the distant heights, straining their eyes toward Fox's Gap, where advance units of the Union army attacked the Confederates. Then, suddenly, horsemen from the Southern army rumbled through Sharpsburg village.

"We were all up in the Lutheran Church at Sunday-school," recalled Maria "Teresa" Kretzer, "when the Rebel cavalry came dashing through the town. The whole assembly flocked out . . . we just imagined something was going to happen, and the children ran home from church in terror. There was no dinner eaten that day. The people were too frightened."[12]

At South Mountain, a civilian named John J. Keedy assisted Union forces. The fifty-nine-year-old farmer lived in Keedysville, a town he helped found, located three miles from Sharpsburg. Described as "intensely loyal" to the U.S., Keedy observed Confederate movements before the mountain battle and hatched a plan. He rode to the Rebel picket line at Turner's Gap and attempted "to pass through the Confederate lines on the plea that his wife was sick." The ruse reportedly worked. After riding through the gap, Keedy "penetrated into the Federal lines where he gave all the information possible to the Commanding General." Afterward, the farmer remained with the Federal army, serving as a guide during the Battle of South Mountain.[13]

It is unclear what information Keedy gave Gen. McClellan, but in the late afternoon of September 14, Federal forces attacked Turner's Gap and Crampton's Gap. Sharpsburg residents anxiously watched and listened past sunset, when the Union army captured both gaps.

As the evening passed, citizens waited in suspense to see what would happen next. As mentioned earlier, Stephen W. Sears described Sharpsburg as a place "where the roads came together." These arteries connected Sharpsburg to Boonsboro, Hagerstown, Shepherdstown, and Harpers Ferry. Along with roads,

12 Johnson, *BA*, 118; Ernst, *TATC*, 113.

13 Chapman Publishing Company, *Portrait and Biographical Record of the Sixth Congressional District, Maryland* (New York, 1898), 550; Claim of John J. Keedy (*RG* 123, Entry 22, Box 348, No. 2157). Three witnesses gave sworn testimony describing Keedy's actions on South Mountain.

though, Sharpsburg rested near a major crossing point of the Potomac River—Blackford's Ford—a shallow stretch that allowed persons, horses, and wagons to wade between Union Maryland and Confederate Virginia. From a military perspective, after Southern troops burned the Sharpsburg-Shepherdstown bridge in June 1861, it left Blackford's Ford as the only convenient crossing between the regional towns of Harpers Ferry and Williamsport.

When the fighting on South Mountain concluded on September 14, General Lee decided to retreat to Virginia via Blackford's Ford. Additionally, he chose to reunite his army and abort the Harpers Ferry operation. "The day has gone against us," Lee wrote to Major General Lafayette McLaws, "and this army will go by Sharpsburg and cross the river." After sending those orders to McLaws, Lee descended with his men toward Antietam Creek.[14]

* * *

The night was tense for Sharpsburg's townsfolk. Fourteen-hundred Union cavalrymen rode through the village that evening after escaping from Harpers Ferry. With mounted soldiers from both armies rushing through town the same day, residents feared an imminent clash. Teresa Kretzer recalled, "We couldn't help being fearful that we were in danger. We expected trouble that night, but all was quiet until the next day."[15]

14 Sears, *Landscape Turned Red*, 167; "WA-II-034 Blackford's Ford (Boteler's Ford, Packhorse Ford)," architectural survey file, Maryland Historic Trust, sec. 8, pp. 1-2, https://mht.maryland.gov/secure/medusa/PDF/Washington/WA-II-034.pdf. Maryland Historic Trust is hereafter cited as MHT; Harsh, *Taken at the Flood*, 287-289; Joseph L. Harsh, *Sounding the Shallows: A Confederate Companion for the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent, Ohio, 2000), 181; before the settlement of Sharpsburg, Native Americans accessed the nearby ford to traverse the Potomac River. The crossing point went by the name Packhorse Ford in the early 1800s, and during the Civil War, locals and soldiers referred to it as Blackford's Ford, Boteler's Ford, and Shepherdstown Ford. The name Blackford's Ford stems from Colonel John Blackford (1771-1839), who owned a large amount of acreage southwest of Sharpsburg adjoining the Potomac River. In 1862, two of Col. Blackford's children—William M. Blackford and Helen Blackford Douglas (wife of Rev. Robert Douglas)—owned and resided upon this land. Another son, Henry V. S. Blackford, owned a farm north of Blackford's Ford near Sharpsburg village.

15 Dennis E. Frye, *Harpers Ferry Under Fire: A Border Town in the American Civil War* (Harpers Ferry, WV, 2012), 91-92; Donald C. Caughley, "The Cavalry Escape From Harpers Ferry, Part III," blog, *Crossed Sabers*, September 15, 2007, http://crossedsabers.blogspot.com/2007/09/; Oliver T. Reilly, *The Battlefield of Antietam* (Hagerstown, MD, 1906). Reilly's book is hereafter referred to as *BOA*. Reilly did not paginate his book, but readers can search the text at the

At sunrise on September 15, waking villagers beheld two brigades of Confederate infantry march through town. These were advance forces Lee had sent to secure Blackford's Ford for the army's retreat to Virginia. Brigadier General Robert Rodes halted his brigade southwest of town while Colonel Alfred Colquitt led his command to the ford. Citizens who feared Rebels early in the war now had hundreds in their backyard, but movements toward the river crossing suggested the soldiers would pass to Virginia.[16]

While Confederates secured the ford, General Lee halted east of Sharpsburg at a meadow overlooking Antietam Creek. He could see that the U.S. army was not far behind, but two deliveries arrived around this time to lift his spirits: a hot pot of coffee and a game-changing message from Stonewall Jackson predicting the imminent capture of Harpers Ferry. Lee had already ordered Jackson to abort the operation there, but capturing the garrison would net 12,500 prisoners and much-needed supplies for the ill-equipped Rebel army while adding to Union demoralization. Moreover, if the Confederates at Harpers Ferry could march to Sharpsburg after the capture, Lee might continue the Maryland Campaign, with his army reunited.

The view from Lee's meadow offered a commanding panorama. Sharpsburg lay to the west, fronted by a ridge running north to south. The rolling farmland provided hilltops for Lee's artillery and low ground to hide his outnumbered infantry. Making a stand on such topography might keep the enemy at bay until Jackson finished his mission. Even so, halting here carried the risk of trapping Lee against the Potomac River. There was no bridge to afford swift crossing, and Blackford's Ford provided a cumbersome passage to Virginia. If Lee suffered

---

HathiTrust Digital Library, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/102359684; Johnson, *BA*, 119.

16 Hartwig, *To Antietam Creek*, 481, 747; Claim of Hezekiah Myers (*RG* 123, Entry 22, Box 234, Case No. 1301). Myers testified that Confederates encamped on the neighboring farm owned by Reverend John A. Adams. Benjamin F. Rohrback, a witness in Myers's case, testified that Myers's farm "was in possession of the rebel forces commanded by D. H. Hill Sept. 15, 16, 17, 18 until the morning of Friday the 19th Sept. 1862." Various battlefield maps depict "H. Myers" between the Miller's Sawmill and Harpers Ferry roads; Official report of Brigadier General Robert Rodes, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, DC, 1880–1901), Series 1, Volume 19, Part 1, 1036. Hereafter cited as *OR*. All references are to Series 1 unless otherwise noted. Rodes reported, "On the 15th, after resting on the heights south of Sharpsburg long enough to get a scanty meal and to gather stragglers, we moved back through that place to the advanced position in the center of the line of battle before the town."

defeat on this ground, his army faced potential destruction. Ever the risk-taker, the Confederate commander chose to remain briefly at Sharpsburg.[17]

* * *

Residents of the Sharpsburg community stirred into early wakefulness on the morning of September 15. Collective anxiety disrupted regular business, and nervous citizens went door-to-door to learn the latest news. Farmhand Alexander W. "Alex" Davis remembered, "We expected there was goin' to be another battle, but we didn't know where or when it would be fought. Nobody was a-workin' . . . they was ridin' around to find out what was goin' to happen."

In the early morning, the head of the Confederate column manifested at Sharpsburg, crossing Antietam Creek over the Middle Bridge. Watching from a nearby hilltop was twenty-one-year-old Mary Ellen Piper, who lived with her parents on a nearby farm. "The principal part of them was then crossing into a field about half a mile from where I stood," she wrote shortly after the Confederate army's arrival. "In a short time, I perceived them throwing down our fence, and the whole column was entering. In a few minutes, the fences were all level with the ground and as far as the eye could see was one living mass of human beings."

Confederates besieged the Pipers' house, begging for breakfast. Mary Ellen's father, Henry Piper, "was opposed to the rebellion" and "anxious to see it suppressed." Yet, he also needed to protect his property and thus set aside his political leanings to accommodate the hungry Rebels. "They would come in six, eight, and ten at a time for breakfast," Mary Ellen recounted. "They would eat anything they could lay hands on. I believe we fed 200 in half a day."[18]

17 Hartwig, *To Antietam Creek*, 482, 518-519; Harsh, *Taken at the Flood*, 301-303, 426, 446; Sears, *Landscape Turned Red*, 168; Guided crossing of Blackford's Ford on September 20, 2008, with Dr. Thomas G. Clemens and Save Historic Antietam Foundation (SHAF). The author found the narrow, thigh-deep passage challenging to wade on account of slick rocks lining the bottom of the Potomac River. However, similar conditions may not have existed in 1862. According to historian Dennis E. Frye via email communications in Feb. 2022, "The Boteler mill dam upstream 400 yards impounded water, reduced flow, and made the ford much more manageable [in Sep. 1862]. In addition, the area was suffering from an extreme drought—the worst in recorded history according to local papers."

18 Johnson, *BA*, 96; E. P. to Sally Farran, October 4, 1862, cited in Daniel A. Masters, "Elizabeth Piper and the Battle of Antietam," blog, *Dan Masters' Civil War Chronicles*, September 29, 2017, https://dan-masters-civil-war.blogspot.com/2017/09/elizabeth-piper-and-battle-of-antietam.html. The October 4, 1862 letter originally ran in the Wilmington [OH] *Watchman*, October 23, 1862. Blogger Daniel A. Masters located and transcribed the letter. Masters