

OUR CAMP JOURNAL



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"We are but few in number but formidable." -Pvt. James Shelton, 7th Md. Co. B

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How a battle early in the Civil War helped spur the formation of West Virginia

By Douglass Harlow / WCHS
NICHOLAS COUNTY, W.Va.

A lesser-known battle early in the American Civil War may have played a key role in the formation of West Virginia.

In the late summer of 1861, thousands of Union and Confederate soldiers were amassed in Nicholas County for the Battle of Carnifex Ferry. The result may have ultimately led to the formation of the 35th state to join the union.

"This was all Virginia, and I think economically, west of the mountains was influenced more from Ohio and the Ohio Valley," Sean Pettrey, superintendent of Carnifex Ferry Battlefield State Park, said. "So there was a natural divide between the eastern part of Virginia and the western part of Virginia."

By the summer, Union forces had gained control of much of the Kanawha Valley. Confederate Brig. Gen. John Floyd sought to retake that territory and, in the process, prevent a referendum relating to the division of the state of Virginia that was scheduled for later in the fall.

"Part of their campaign was to drive out the Union soldiers. It was an important supply route, the Ohio and the river and the railroads and the roads, to get supplies from north to south," Pettrey said. "Gen. Floyd with about – I think it was close to



The lesser-known Battle of Carnifex Ferry early in the American Civil War may have played a key role in the formation of West Virginia. (WCHS)

2,000 men – crossed the Gauley River just below here. There were some flat bottom wooden boats that a man named Carnifex at the time operated, and Floyd crossed the river."

On Aug. 24, Floyd and his troopers successfully crossed the river and camped nearby. The plan was to try to drive out the Union soldiers that were also camped close by.

"At the time, Col. Tyler was camped at Keslers Cross Lanes, which is just a few miles down the road," Pettrey said. "On the morning of Aug. 26, Floyd attacked Col. Tyler with the Union, and they routed them because they surprised them first thing in the morning at breakfast.

"Henry Wise jokingly called it the 'Battle of Knives and Forks,' and that term kind of stuck."

After Floyd attacked Tyler at Keslers Cross Lanes, Tyler fell back to high ground and started to dig in. With Floyd threatening to take Gauley Bridge, Union Brig. Gen. William Rosecrans left Clarksburg with sizable force.

"Rosecrans was gathering troops from the northeast part of Virginia," Pettrey said. "He started to march on this position to reinforce the Union presence. He had close to 7,000 men, almost 7,000, whereas Floyd only had about 2,000.

"They got up early and marched all day long, and from what I've read,

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Upcoming Campaigns

MAY

May 25: Memorial Day Gettysburg Parade, in Gettysburg, PA. 1:00 PM form up Lefever St at School. [\(Individual event\)](#)

JULY

July 3-5: 163rd Gettysburg, Daniel Lady farm, Gettysburg, PA Visit:

www.GBPA.org to register online.

FVB Commanded Event
[\(Individual Event\)](#)

July 17-19: Funkstown, MD
<http://www.funkstown.com/special-events/day-in-the-park/>

***(FVB Event) (7th MD COMPANY Event)**

AUGUST

August 29-30: Carroll County Farm Museum- Col. Monzi; Commanding
[\(Individual Event\)](#)



Carnifex Ferry...

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the wagon train of all the supplies was five miles long," Pettrey continued. "People around this area had never seen anything like that."

On Sept. 10, 1861, Union troops appeared and the Battle of Carnifex Ferry was on.

The town of Summersville could hear the thunder and the cannon fire from 20 miles away," Pettrey said. "It was a big battle at that time. It went back and forth. The Union couldn't break the line – they tried different places. The 23rd Ohio Regiment tried to get around the right flank of the Confederate line and two future presidents were with that regiment – the 23rd Ohio – there was Maj. Rutherford Hayes and Pvt. William McKinley."

The battle lasted about four hours before Rosecrans regrouped and withdrew his troops. That night, Floyd decided he was outnumbered and retreated across the river.

"Some people argue about who won the battle," Pettrey said. "I think it was the Union because the Confederates, even though the Union had more casualties, the Confederates left the ground and then the Union camped here for another two weeks."



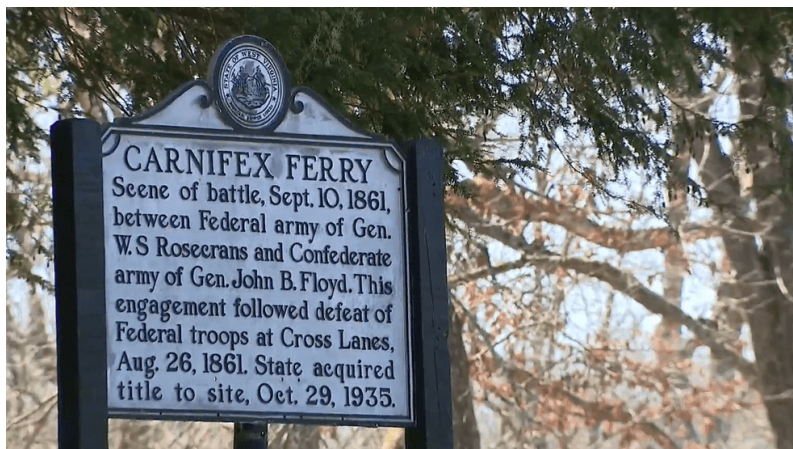
The scene of a September 10, 1861 battle at Carnifex Ferry

With the Union firmly in control of the Kanawha Valley, the referendum took place on Oct. 24, 1861, and resulted in overwhelming favor for West Virginia statehood.

Two years later, the nation's 35th

state was official.

"This was pretty early on, but it was a major battle at the time," Pettrey said. "It made a lot of newspapers, a lot of headlines, but of course the war dragged on for years and there



were bigger battles that took more of the headlines."

May 15, 1864

Engagement at New Market, Va.

**Report of
Maj. Henry Peale,
Eighteenth
Connecticut Infantry
MAY 15, 1864.
Engagement at
New Market, Va.**

HDQRS. EIGHTEENTH
CONNECTICUT VOL. INFTRY.,
*Camp near Strasburg, Va.,
May 21, 1864.*

Brig. Gen. HORACE J. MORSE,
Adjutant-General of Connecticut.

SIR: I have the honor to represent that at 3 o'clock in the morning of May 15 the Eighteenth Connecticut Volunteers, then on picket one mile south of Edenburg, Va., and six miles in advance of the main army, under Sigel, received orders to proceed without delay to New Market, Va., at which place a cavalry fight had occurred the previous day, and which was then held by our cavalry and a small body of infantry, who were seriously threatened by the enemy. The regiment consisted of seven companies (Companies F, I, and H having been detailed under Capt. J. H. Morrison, Company I at signal station), marched without breakfast and in a drenching storm, reaching our advance force about 11 a.m. The distance thus traveled was fifteen miles. At the moment of our arrival the artillery designed to discover the position and designs of the enemy commenced operations. The regiment was ordered to assist in the support of Kleiser's battery. The position of our forces was on a hill northwest of New Market, and distant from the town half a mile. The enemy soon replied to our batteries from a wooded eminence three-fourths of a mile south and slightly commanding our position. After an hour's cannonading, the regiment was ordered to advance and, with the One hundred and twenty-third

Ohio Volunteers and First Virginia Regiment in support of Snow's mounted battery, formed line immediately upon the brow of the hill, the Eighteenth constituting the right. We here awaited the approach of the enemy, whose skirmishers, in double line, could be seen issuing from the woods covering his position. The artillery duel still continued with considerable vigor, and the enemy shelled our line with great accuracy, although without the infliction of any con-



siderable damage. Companies A and B were immediately deployed and descended the hill. Severe skirmishing shortly ensued, our companies retiring very slowly. At this time Capt. William L. Spalding, Company B, was mortally wounded in abdomen and carried to rear. The enemy in three strong lines now issued from the woods and charged down the hill at double-quick, his skirmishers also increasing their speed, and driving ours more rapidly. It was at this time decided that a small knoll some 200 yards to the rear would afford a better position, thereby inflicting greater damage

upon the enemy, who would be forced to pass over an eighth of a mile of nearly level ground before reaching our lines. The line accordingly marched in retreat. The new position of the regiment was most unfortunate for its efficiency, being in a lane backed by barns and two rows of fences. A continuous rain of five days had rendered traveling on other than the roads extremely difficult, and the men stood knee-deep in mud. As the lane was entered by the flank, so nothing but a flank movement could extricate the regiment in order. Companies A and B were now strengthened by Company D, leaving only four companies in line, in all somewhat less than 200 men.

The skirmishers of the enemy now appeared on the brow of the hill and rapid firing ensued, in which Captain Mathewson, Company D, was wounded, as also several of his company. As our skirmishers retired around our flank the line fired several volleys, when, it being apparent that the line of the enemy greatly outnumbered our own, and that farther stay in that position was worse than useless, the commander of regiment on left of the brigade gave the order to retreat, which movement was followed by the Eighteenth. The regiment marched by the flank at double-quick. On emerging from the lane found itself some distance in rear of the retreating line, and was thereby thrown into some confusion, but with some exceptions the men were rallied, and were reformed with the rest of the first line in rear of the second line, which now awaited the shock. The cannonading was at this time extremely rapid, the rebels shelling our position with great accuracy, while the batteries of our first and second lines poured grape

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*Civil War Re-enactors;
America's Living Historians.*

ADIEU, O soldier!

You of the rude campaign-
ing, (which we shared,)

The rapid march, the life of
the camp,
The hot contention of op-
posing fronts— the long
manoeuvre,

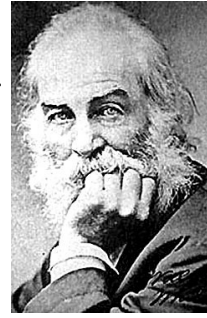
Red battles with their
slaughter,— the stimulus—
the strong, terrific game,

Spell of all brave and manly
hearts— the trains of Time
through you, and like of you, all
fill'd,

With war, and war's expression.

Adieu, dear comrade!

Your mission is fulfill'd—
but I, more warlike,



Walt Whitman
(1819 - 1892)

Myself, and this conten-
tious soul of mine,

Still on our own cam-
paigning bound,

Through untried roads,
with ambushes, opponents
lined,

Through many a sharp
defeat and many a crisis—
often baffled,

Here marching, ever marching on, a
war fight out— aye here,

To fiercer, weightier battles give
expression.

(Continued from page 3)

and canister into their infantry,
which came on in splendid line. As
they drew near our second line fired

and charged, partially checking
their advance, but having suffered
severely was forced to retire. For the
same reason the enemy contented
himself with sending forward
strong lines of skirmishers to harass
our now retreating force, himself



Cadets from Virginia Military Institute, led by 20-year-old Captain Benjamin A. Colonna, race past Bushong's Farm to fill a gap in the Confederate line at New Market. Painting by Keith Rocco.

advancing very slowly. Desultory
fighting was continued for three
hours by our first and second lines
alternately, when, two fresh regi-
ment's arriving, the broken forces
were assembled in rear of them and
marched on the pike to the north
bank of the Shenandoah, from
whence it continued its march until
within two miles of Woodstock,
where it halted at 5 a.m., having
marched nearly thirty miles in
twenty-six hours, in addition to that
incidental to its participation in the
action.

The whole number engaged in the
action was somewhat less than 350.
I am happy to bear testimony to the
good conduct of the few officers of
the regiment present with it, and to
the efficient aid rendered by them
throughout the action.

The death of Captain Spalding is
sincerely mourned by us all. He was
a good officer, and died while in the
brave performance of duty.

I have the honor to be, very respect-
fully, your obedient servant,

HENRY PEALE,
*Major, Comdg. Eighteenth Connecticut
Volunteers*