



**THE BLOODIEST SINGLE DAY  
IN AMERICAN HISTORY  
SEPTEMBER 17, 1862**



General Robert E. Lee,  
Army of Northern Virginia



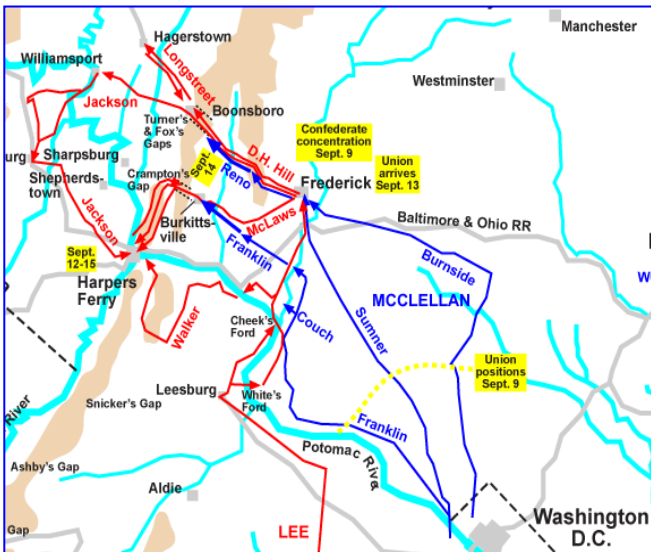
Maj. Gen. George McClellan,  
Army of the Potomac

**Confederate Army**  
Strength: 45,000  
Casualties: 10,300

**Union Army**  
Strength: 87,000 army  
Casualties: 12,400

**THE BUILD-UP**

- **Gen. Lee** invaded Maryland after his victory at the Second Battle of Bull Run, which left the Union Army in chaos.
- As a bonus, his men could get food and clothing from the North while protecting the Southern harvest.
- He also knew that there was a chance he could entice the European nations to recognize and support the South, compelling President Lincoln to sue for peace.
- Lee was opposed by 36-year-old **Gen. McClellan**, whose organizational skills and earlier victories earned him the Union command.



**Sept 17 5:30 a.m.: The Right Wing Attacks**

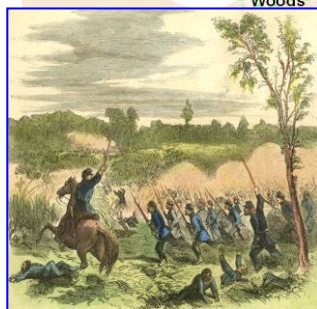
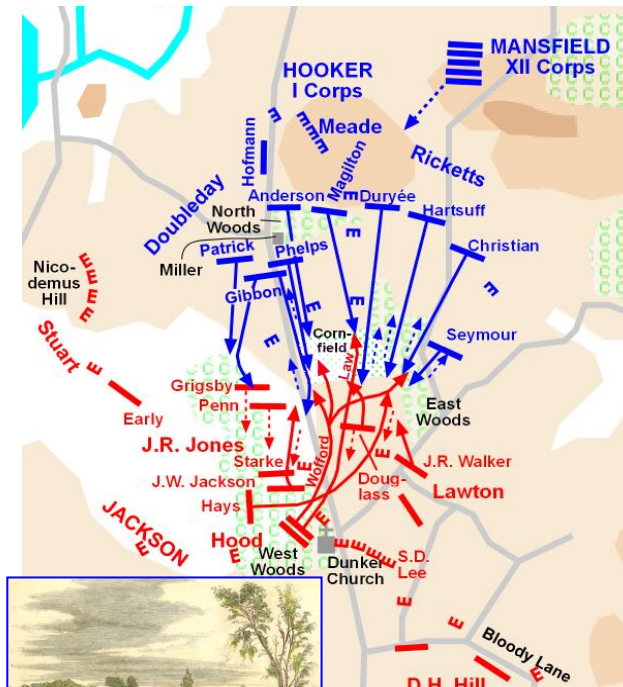
- Lee's 40,000 men marched towards Harrisburg, a major Union supply depot in Pennsylvania. On the way he faced unexpected resistance and a 3-day delay from defenders of Harper's Ferry.
- McClellan reorganized the Union Army in days, rather than the weeks that Lee had expected, and a map of Lee's plans fell into Lee's hands on September 15<sup>th</sup>.
- After deliberate preparations that gave Lee time to get ready, McClellan attacked at 5:30 a.m. on the 17<sup>th</sup>.
- The Union right wing hit Jackson's corps in vicious fighting around the cornfield and Dunker Church.



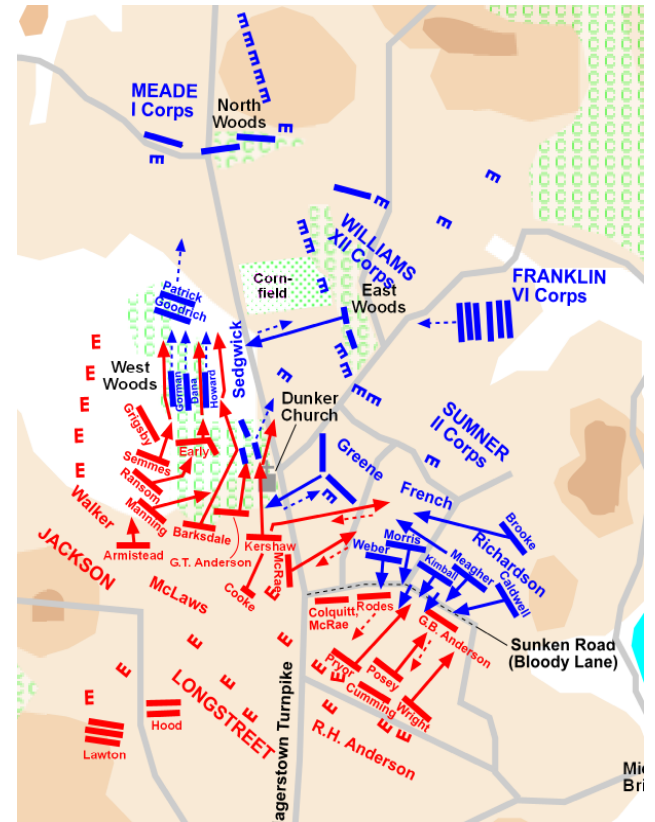
Confederate artillery fire on the Union attack in the cornfield led to a cannon duel with Union batteries, described as "artillery hell"



- To keep the Confederates from reinforcing their left, the Union attacked the center. Lee threw in his last reserves.
- The Confederates held a sunken road that acted as a trench, though it became a death-trap when Federal soldiers fired at it from the flank.
- The Federals were stopped by massed cannon fire. Reserves were on hand, however, and Lee had no means of stopping a renewed attack. McClellan did not order the attack.



The cornfield changed hands 15 times during the morning. When asked where his division was, a Confederate general answered: "dead on the field."

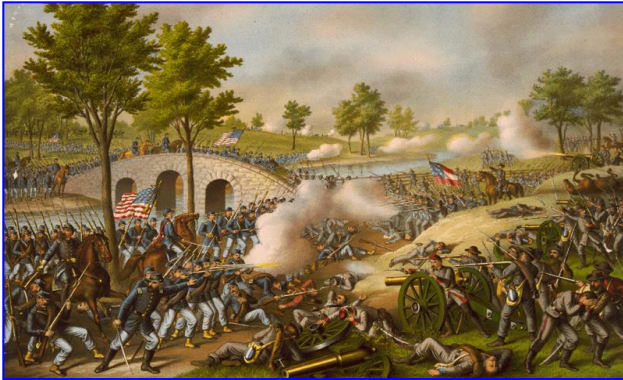


Women and children in Sharpsburg cower as a shell bursts in the window of their cellar

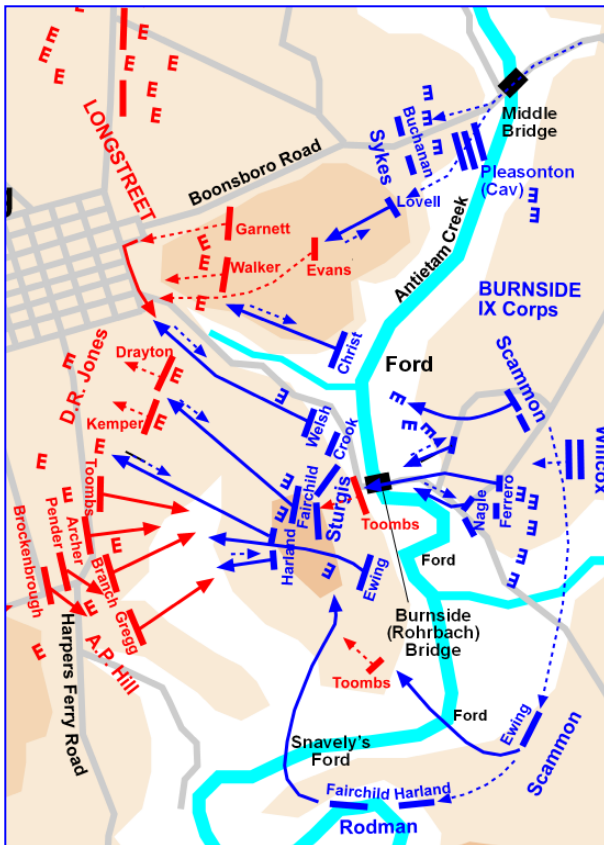




## Sept 17 10:00 a.m. : Attack on the Left

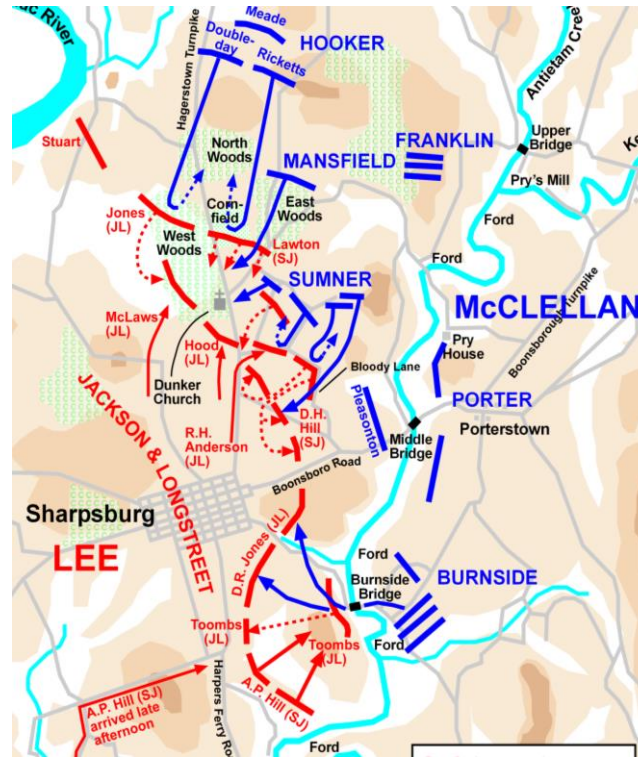


- Union Maj. Gen. Burnside's 15,000 men faced a Southern flank that had been stripped of all but 3,000 Confederates.
- Though the river was only 50 feet wide and in many places was waist-deep, Burnside committed his men to an assault on a bridge.
- After a three-hour fight, Burnside's troops finally fought their way over the bridge, which then became a bottleneck for two hours.
- The Confederates began to panic as the Union advance started to edge around their right flank, but they had given time for Lee to bring up reinforcements, which successfully counter-attacked.



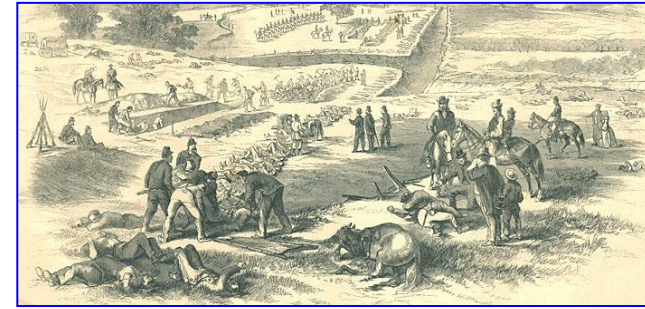
## Sept 17/18: Opportunity Lost

- McClellan committed his men in a series of uncoordinated punches, attacking first in the north, then in the center and finally in the south.
- The staggered attack gave Lee time to shift his own troops along interior lines to meet the most threatened position.
- Lee was thus able to overcome 2:1 odds; at best, McClellan had only three-quarters of his men on the field at once.
- On September 18<sup>th</sup>, Lee held his position while his wounded were evacuated.
- McClellan's pursuit of Lee on the 19 and 20 was halted when a small number of Federals tried to follow across the Potomac and were thrown back. It was the final straw for President Lincoln, who replaced McClellan soon after the battle.

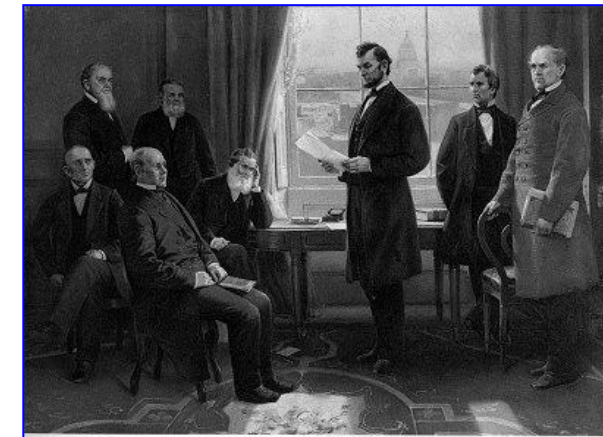


Union troopers crossing the Potomac at Shepherdstown in pursuit of Lee. They found a Confederate division advancing in force and returned to Maryland

## CONSEQUENCES



- Antietam sealed the fate of the South.
- It changed the entire course of the war, not only stopping Lee's invasion of the North but providing President Lincoln with the victory he needed in order to issue his proclamation freeing the slaves.
- With that proclamation, Lincoln ensured that no European country would recognize and support the Southern cause, because no country could back the cause of human bondage.
- Antietam also broke the aura of victory that haloed General Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, showing that they were not invincible.
- Following the final proclamation, the North began recruiting Black soldiers.



Lincoln reads the Emancipation Proclamation to his Cabinet.



An Illumination Ceremony is held annually at Antietam.

About the author: Barry Gander is a top economic and politics writer on Medium: <https://medium.com/@barry-gander>