

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Mechanicsville

By **Brian K. Burton**

It was mid-afternoon on June 26, 1862. General Robert E. Lee, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia's new commander, stood on Chickahominy Bluff northeast of Richmond, the Confederate capital. Lee looked over the Chickahominy River and its floodplain, but he wasn't admiring the view. He had expected to see Confederates moving down the Chickahominy's opposite (north) bank, sweeping away Union outposts and clearing the bridge crossings so most of his army could cross and flank the Army of the Potomac out of its positions around Richmond. But no Southerners could be seen, and as the time passed Lee's position became more precarious. Finally, about 3:00 p.m., he decided he could wait no longer, and he ordered his men across.

Thus began the action at the Battle of Mechanicsville, or Beaver Dam Creek. The first battle Lee initiated as the Army of Northern Virginia's leader, it was nonetheless a battle he did not want to fight at that time or at that place. It also was the first major engagement of what became known as the Seven Days Battles, in which Lee first pushed the Union army away from Richmond and then tried to annihilate it. And it was the first, but not the last, battle of the Seven Days in which Lee's army was less than the exceptionally well-functioning machine of legend.

The road to Beaver Dam Creek began months before June 26, when Major General George Brinton McClellan formed his strategy to bring the Army of the Potomac to the Peninsula between the York and James rivers, an arm of land leading straight to Richmond. By flanking the Confederate army, then commanded by General Joseph Eggleston Johnston, he could either reach the Southern capital before Johnston or force Johnston into battle on McClellan's terms. However, a combination of events led to McClellan's advance being stalled for a month near Yorktown; he then took more time getting to Richmond, where Johnston awaited him behind earthworks. McClellan, convinced he was facing a larger army, began siege operations, working to gain positions from which his heavy artillery could shell the Confederates out of their positions.

By the end of May Johnston had detected a weak point in McClellan's dispositions; the Army of the Potomac was split into two by the Chickahominy, which was swollen to near impassability from recent downpours. Johnston's attack, at Fair Oaks and Seven Pines east of Richmond on May 31 and June 1, was poorly conceived and poorly executed. It accomplished nothing. During the first day's fighting Johnston was severely wounded, and Confederate President Jefferson Davis appointed Lee to command the army in his stead.

Lee had been looked upon as one of Virginia's greatest soldiers, after a stellar prewar record in the U.S. Army. However, his first two commands had been failures, and the public had turned against him. The appointment was not popular. However, some in the army knew better. "His name might be Audacity," one said.¹ As he put his men to work digging stronger fortifications, he began planning to use the troops freed by a strengthened defense for the purpose of getting rid of the Yankees besieging his capital.

That plan eventually included the use of most of his army, plus men from the Shenandoah Valley army commanded by Major General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson, in an attack north of the Chickahominy, where lay both most of McClellan's supply line and one of his five army corps—the V Corps commanded by Brigadier General Fitz John Porter. Lee would use Jackson's men to flank Porter's position at Beaver Dam Creek, attack and defeat Porter while he was retreating, and then cut McClellan's supply line. This would force the Army of the Potomac to retreat back down the Peninsula, where Lee might have a chance to attack and further damage the Union force.

As the last week of June dawned, Lee was assembling his forces. Jackson's army, reinforced by a small division sent from Richmond as a blind, was on its way to Richmond. Three other divisions, commanded by Major Generals James Longstreet, Ambrose Powell Hill, and Daniel Harvey Hill, were ready to march from their positions south of the Chickahominy to river crossings near and northwest of Mechanicsville. By June 26 Jackson's advance would uncover one crossing, at Half Sink Farm, and a brigade of A. P. Hill's division would cross and sweep down the north bank, freeing other Confederates to cross closer to Mechanicsville. Jackson would be in a flanking position north and east of Porter's Beaver Dam Creek line, Porter would be forced to pull back to avoid being trapped, and the pursuit would be on.

Lee experienced one moment of doubt and fear on June 25, when McClellan attacked at Oak Grove to clear Southerners of a position he wanted for his heavy guns. But the Confederate commander soon concluded the Northern attack was limited and that McClellan did not know of his plans. That was not entirely true, as a report of Jackson's approach had reached Union lines through a deserter or a plant (the truth is unclear). But McClellan did not react to the report by attacking Lee's relatively weak forces on the south bank of the Chickahominy; instead he readied his plans for the possibility that Lee would succeed on the north bank.

That readiness was not due to any lack of confidence in Fitz John Porter. A close friend of McClellan's, Porter had his commander's full confidence, and he was well set up for defense. Behind Beaver Dam Creek, a strong defensive position extending from the Chickahominy across the main road north of the river, he placed the newly arrived Pennsylvania Reserve division commanded by Brigadier General George McCall. Two brigades were on the front line, with a third in reserve. Two other divisions, including the army's two brigades of Regulars, were further east but within easy supporting distance. Infantry and artillery created a defense in depth at Beaver Dam Creek, with open fields of

¹ E. P. Alexander, *Military Memoirs of a Confederate* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 110-11.

fire across the creek, marsh, and flood plain. The position was strong enough that Lee, who had traveled in the area, knew he did not want to attack it head on. That's why Jackson's flanking march was crucial to Lee's plans.

However, Jackson (who had made his reputation partially through fast marches on the good roads in the Shenandoah Valley) could not maintain the pace he had set for his men on the march to Richmond. By the evening of June 25 he was five miles short of his planned jumping-off point, the Virginia Central Railroad just east of Ashland. From this delay sprang the entire course of the battle the next day.

Jackson, by the morning of June 26, was six hours behind schedule. Nonetheless, he was moving, and as he did so Brigadier General Lawrence O'Bryan Branch's brigade of North Carolinians crossed the Chickahominy at Half Sink Farms. Branch, in a series of small skirmishes, pushed the Unionists guarding various river crossings out of the way, while Jackson continued his march toward Pole Green Church, northeast of Beaver Dam Creek. As he did so, the Yankees on the river's south bank remained quiet, as McClellan seemed resigned to the Confederate advance. Lee, who early in the morning was again concerned that McClellan might ruin his plans, shook off that fear as the quiet continued and moved to Chickahominy Bluff to watch his plans unfold. Waiting with him were A. P. Hill's division, at Meadow Bridges west of Mechanicsville, and Longstreet and D. H. Hill with their men at the Mechanicsville Bridge on the direct road from Richmond.

The wait became longer and longer for Lee, until it was almost unbearable. Delay meant more opportunity for McClellan to discover how weak the Confederates were south of the Chickahominy, where two divisions faced four Union corps. One o'clock, then two o'clock, came and went with no report from Jackson or Branch. Finally, at 3:00 p.m., Lee had had enough. He knew he had to get across the river or risk everything, so he ordered A. P. Hill to cross his men. Hill, apparently at the same time, had decided on the same move and started his division forward. The Confederates crossed the river and brushed aside token resistance from companies of the 13th Pennsylvania Reserves as they moved southeast toward the Mechanicsville Bridge. Hill's approach forced the Yankees back to their main lines, uncovering that bridge, so D. H. Hill and then Longstreet could cross their divisions.

As A. P. Hill's men moved toward Beaver Dam Creek, the artillery attached to each brigade unlimbered and open fire. The Northern gunners responded, and facing massed fire, the Confederates got the worst of it, although they continued the duel as long as they could. The Union guns also directed fire at the Southern infantry; it was hot enough that the lead brigades under Brigadier Generals Charles William Field and James Jay Archer decided to move closer to the Union lines in the hope that the artillery would not keep aiming at them for fear of hitting friendly troops. Field and Archer moved all the way to the edge of Beaver Dam Creek, taking shelter in some trees lining the creek.

Meanwhile, Brigadier General Joseph Reid Anderson moved to his left in an attempt to flank the Union forces lined up against Field and Archer. However, despite being on their home ground, the Confederates were woefully ignorant of the terrain: one brigadier write later, “The Confederate commanders knew no more about the topography of the country than they did about Central Africa.”² Anderson wound up facing not an exposed flank but Yankees in line waiting for them. The 35th Georgia crossed the creek and drove the 1st Pennsylvania Reserves from its positions, but it, the 14th Georgia, and the 3rd Louisiana Battalion were pushed back by a counterattack from the 2nd and 3rd Pennsylvania Reserves, the 22nd Massachusetts, and the 13th New York.

With Anderson’s failure to turn the Northern flank, Field and Archer didn’t try to charge across Beaver Dam Creek, instead fighting the 1st, 5th, 10th, and 13th Pennsylvania Reserves from its west side. The Reserves were joined by the 4th Michigan and 14th New York, but it’s not clear that the reinforcements were needed, as neither Field nor Archer showed any inclination to get closer.

South of Field and Archer, Brigadier General William Dorsey Pender’s brigade moved along and south of the road from Mechanicsville to Old Cold Harbor. That road crossed Beaver Dam Creek near Ellerson’s Mill, where a dam had been built and the creek became a mill pond. Pender saw some Union artillery and ordered the 34th and 38th North Carolina to flank it. The Tar Heels instead ran into the 7th and 12th Pennsylvania Reserves and were forced back. But the idea formed in several Confederates’ minds that a stronger attack might be able to succeed south of the mill, where the ground was more level and the creek not quite as difficult to cross. Lee ordered Brigadier General Roswell Ripley’s brigade of D. H. Hill’s division to make that attack. A. P. Hill also talked with Ripley about the attack; Confederate President Jefferson Davis, at Mechanicsville observing the action, suggested the same move to D. H. Hill. Meanwhile, Pender talked with D. H. Hill and said that with support and a flanking force he could take the Northern position, so Hill ordered Ripley to follow Pender’s suggestion.

When Lee gave the order for Ripley to move, he most certainly did not mean that Ripley or any other Confederate should make a direct attack. A Southerner reflected on it by saying, “A more hopeless charge was never entered upon.”³ What happened to the 1st North Carolina and 44th Georgia of Ripley’s brigade justified Lee’s reluctance for a general assault. They too headed toward the 7th and 12th Pennsylvania Reserves, who with artillery support practically eliminated the 44th Georgia as a fighting force: it lost 335 killed and wounded, including 14 officers, out of 514 effectives before the battle. The 1st North Carolina lost 9 officers and 133 men killed and wounded. The 7th and 12th Reserves combined lost 40 men killed, wounded, or missing. Total casualties were about 1,400 for the Confederates and just over 350 for the Federals.

The Army of Northern Virginia’s first battle under Lee was fought like a first battle. Maps were wrong, no good command structure existed from Lee on down, and the men in

² Richard Taylor, *Destruction and Reconstruction* (New York: D. Appleton, 1877), 99.

³ Alexander, *Military Memoirs*, 121.

the ranks suffered. Part of that suffering was caused by a steady Federal hand in the battle; the Northerners fought from behind a well-prepared position with plenty of artillery support as well as reinforcements close at hand.

The most important reason for the South's heavy reverse at Mechanicsville, however, was the lack of coordination and communication between Lee and Jackson. Stonewall's force moved by parallel roads, with Major General Richard Stoddert Ewell's division coming within two miles of Mechanicsville before turning northeast to reunite with Jackson. Soldiers in both columns heard firing to their south, but Jackson, arriving at Hundley's Corner northeast of Mechanicsville at about 5:00 p.m., decided in the absence of solid information to stay where Lee had wanted him. It likely was the right decision, but neither Jackson nor Lee (who, it must be said, did not know where Jackson was) tried to lift the fog in front of the other's vision. It can only be guessed what Lee would have done on finding how late Jackson was, but it is certain he would have done something besides what transpired on the banks of Beaver Dam Creek.

Despite Jackson's tardiness, he was in the right place; Hundley's Corner flanked the Beaver Dam Creek line, and Jackson was as close to McClellan's supply base at White House Landing as McClellan himself. Another general, sizing up the situation, might have decided to have Porter's corps retreat to another line while he attacked south of the river, leaving the supply line to itself. McClellan, however, was not that general. He did order Porter back to another position, behind another small watercourse called Boatswain's Swamp, and ask his friend to hold off the Confederates another day; instead of attacking, however, McClellan would ready the Army of the Potomac for a change of base from the York to the James River—a move that would force a retreat from Richmond.
