

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

---

## The Battle of Savage's Station

By **Brian K. Burton**

The morning of June 29, 1862 several groups of Confederates emerged carefully from their lines south of the Chickahominy River and a few miles east of Richmond, their capital. They were from units commanded by Major General John Bankhead Magruder, and they were looking for their enemies from the Union's Army of the Potomac. The Northerners had been there the night before, the fourth night in a row that Magruder and Major General Benjamin Huger, with a total of about 22,000 men, faced the majority of the Army of the Potomac—at least 50,000 men.

As Magruder's troops moved toward the Union lines, they found no one there. Major General George Brinton McClellan had pulled his men back, and the threat was no more. Magruder hastened to tell his commander, General Robert E. Lee, the news. When Lee heard it, he told the courier, "My compliments to General Magruder, and ask him not to hurt my young friends, Major [R. K.] Meade and Lieutenant [Samuel R.] Johnston, who are occupying that fort."<sup>1</sup> Meade and Johnston, two of Major General James Longstreet's engineers, had gone looking themselves and found the works abandoned.

So June 29 started out well for Lee, Magruder, and the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia. The situation Lee had worked to create was in fact happening. McClellan was out of his trenches and vulnerable to an attack while he was retreating. Lee was certain McClellan was headed to the James River to re-establish his base, which he had lost through Lee's bold move of taking most of his army north of the Chickahominy and ultimately defeating McClellan's forces there in the Battle of Gaines's Mill on June 27. On June 28, Lee rested and waited for information, sending a division of infantry under Major General Richard Stoddert Ewell and his cavalry under Major General James Ewell Brown Stuart along the river to firmly break the Union supply line; Stuart then went further, to the Union base at White House Landing, which was in flames after the Northerners put as many supplies as they could to the torch.

McClellan tried on June 28 to get as much of a head start toward the James as he could. He sent Brigadier General Erasmus Darwin Keyes' IV Corps south of a stream

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph L. Brent, *Memoirs of the War Between the States* (N.p.: Privately printed, 1940), 192.

called White Oak Swamp, which although small, was difficult to cross. Keyes covered the main crossings and also sent men to guard the Glendale crossroads south of the swamp. Glendale, where several roads important to either Lee's pursuit or McClellan's retreat came together, was one of two major pieces of real estate McClellan had to hold to get his army to the James (the other being Malvern Hill south of Glendale). Brigadier General Fitz John Porter's V Corps, after fighting into the evening at Gaines's Mill, started moving south on the afternoon of June 28. The Union artillery and trains went with Porter; many infantrymen, artillerymen, and teamsters were moving through the spooky woods around White Oak Swamp all night.

Just as did McClellan, Lee knew Glendale's importance. He needed to reach the intersection and/or Malvern Hill in enough force to take and hold the ground, so the Confederates could catch McClellan between two forces and defeat him before he could reach the James. To make the roundabout march needed to get to Glendale via the Long Bridge Road, Lee chose the divisions of Major Generals Ambrose Powell Hill and James Longstreet. Both had fought hard at Gaines's Mill but had rested June 28 and were ready to go.

Lee also needed to slow McClellan's men down, since they had that head start. To do so, he ordered Magruder and Huger to advance and engage the enemy force. Magruder, commanding three two-brigade divisions, would move down the Williamsburg Road running basically east from Richmond. Huger would use the Charles City road running southeast from Richmond to Glendale.

Finally, Lee needed to account for the contingency that despite appearances, McClellan would move the Army of the Potomac straight down the Peninsula. This would require the Northerners to cross the Chickahominy downstream from the area of the fighting on June 26 and 27. Bridges were the only real possibilities for crossing. Lee therefore ordered Major General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson's command, which also included Ewell's division and that of Major General Daniel Harvey Hill, to be ready to march down the river's east bank and hold the bridges that McClellan might try to use. In the most likely scenario, however, Jackson would repair the bridges near the Gaines's Mill battlefield, cross the river, and keep to the east of any Union force with an aim to flank it.

While the Confederates moved to carry out this plan, the Union rear guard got into position around the army's former main forward base and field hospital at Savage's Station. Brigadier General William Farrar "Baldy" Smith's VI Corps division moved north of the station; Brigadier General Samuel Peter Heintzelman's III Corps covered the Williamsburg Road; and Brigadier General Edwin Vose Sumner's II Corps settled in north of Heintzelman. However, there was a gap of about three-fourths of a mile between Sumner and Smith.

The other Federals continued to move south to the James and safety. The IV Corps left Glendale and reached the river near Turkey Island Creek south of Malvern Hill; a

bridge there used by the River Road was the last important spot in McClellan's plan. The V Corps reached Glendale by noon to protect that vital crossroads. Brigadier General Henry Warner Slocum's VI Corps division also went to Glendale, reaching it in the evening. The important supply trains all crossed White Oak Swamp by late afternoon.

Then the Union command structure (or lack of it, as no one had been placed in overall command of the rear guard) started to take its toll. Smith, with his left flank exposed, asked for Sumner's assistance. Sumner accordingly pulled back the II Corps to near Savage's Station, although there still was a gap between his right and Smith's left. That gap became larger when Smith withdrew from north of Savage's Station and, after stopping for a couple of hours at the station itself, headed toward White Oak Swamp, leaving the northern approach to the station uncovered. Heintzelman, taking a look at the area around the station, decided there were too many men there and got the III Corps moving, also away from the station and toward White Oak Swamp.

Meanwhile, at the station, the supplies accumulated over the previous month were being put to the torch. One innovation in destruction was the running of a loaded train down the railroad into the Chickahominy (the bridge across the river had been destroyed). Also, the field hospital was being abandoned. When the wounded were told of the retreat, many tried to go with the army despite their injuries. About 3,000 remained, however, to be captured. Reverend James J. Marks, in charge at the hospital, stayed with those men.

The Confederates also suffered from command problems on June 29. Longstreet and A. P. Hill did their part, marching 20 miles in the heat and humidity to within seven miles of Glendale. But the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia struggled to fulfill Lee's plan. Things started to go awry when Magruder began to pursue the Federals with his own division and Brigadier General Joseph Brevard Kershaw's brigade of Major General Lafayette McLaws' division. Kershaw ran into some II Corps regiments acting as the rear guard of the rear guard near Allen's farm, and some Georgians of Colonel George Thomas Anderson's brigade of Brigadier General David Rumph Jones's division joined in. From this action and his subordinates' reports Magruder deduced, correctly, that he faced a large Union force (two full corps plus one division at this time). However, he also had misunderstood Lee's orders regarding Huger and, thinking that officer was supposed to use the Williamsburg Road as well, requested Huger's support.

Lee didn't believe Magruder. He asked Magruder's aide, "But what do you think? Is the enemy in large force?"<sup>2</sup> But Lee ordered two of Huger's brigades to Magruder's support, with the understanding that if those brigades were not engaged after a time they were to move back to the Charles City Road. This was unfortunate, because if Lee's plan had a chance of succeeding, Huger needed to push down the Charles City Road as far as possible. When Huger set up where Magruder wanted him he found some of Magruder's troops between him and the Yankees, assumed his own men would not be needed, and got them going along the road they should have been on the whole time.

---

<sup>2</sup> Brent, *Memoirs*, 183.

Magruder received more bad news from Stonewall Jackson, on whom he was counting to join him in an attack on Savage's Station. Jackson, however, responded to Magruder that he could not, as Stonewall had "other important duty to perform."<sup>3</sup> The best reasoning regarding this other duty is that Jackson interpreted Lee's morning order, and an afternoon order to Stuart, as meaning Lee wanted him to stay on the river's north bank. Even if Jackson would have thought his orders were to get south of the river, however, his men did not get the second and more important of the two bridges repaired until nightfall, keeping them where they were for the day.

Once Magruder knew neither Huger nor Jackson would be able to support him, he seemed to throw caution to the wind. Perhaps, thinking about Lee's entire plan, he knew he needed to act to fix as many Federals as possible in place, and the only way to do that was to advance all his men. In any event, he ordered all six brigades of his command to advance and engage the enemy wherever found. In the event, only McLaws' division did any real fighting. Kershaw pushed forward north of the Williamsburg Road and south of the railroad. He found two regiments of Brigadier General William Wallace Burns' II brigade and the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota just west of Savage's Station. The South Carolinians pushed the Yankees back. But since the Southerners had been spotted on the march, Union reinforcements were close at hand. Sumner sent various regiments into the fight; Baldy Smith brought his division back to the field as well.

One of Smith's brigades, Vermonters commanded by Brigadier General William Brooks, moved south of the Williamsburg Road. Toward them came Confederates of Brigadier General Paul Jones Semmes's brigade of McLaws' division. One of Semmes's men called out, "Who are you?" "Friends" was the response. Semmes, near the front, yelled, "What regiment?" When "Third Vermont" came back, Semmes ordered his men to fire.<sup>4</sup> The two brigades then had a vicious firefight in the woods. Each side was supported by two regiments, and neither gave ground.

Meanwhile, Kershaw had all sorts of trouble with regiments and parts of regiments moving all over the place, including to the rear. Combined with the counterattack by Burns' men and the reinforcements, it was enough to push Kershaw back. When night fell the fighting stopped. Nearly 1,000 men had been killed and wounded at Savage's Station out of just more than 10,000 engaged on both sides; the Federals had the worst of it, losing about 600 men, but they had more men engaged and in the fiercest fight, between Semmes and Brooks, the Southerners had the advantage of using "buck and ball" rounds, a combination of a bullet and buckshot, that at short range (and the lines were less than 50 yards apart) was devastating.

---

<sup>3</sup> United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 11, part 2, p. 675.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 721.

Both sides were lucky and unlucky that day. The Southerners were unlucky that Magruder's confusion translated into Lee's order and Huger's useless movements, and that Jackson both misunderstood the intent of Lee's orders and took longer than anticipated to repair the bridges. Also, even in Magruder's command less than one-third of the men were engaged. In particular, D. R. Jones had an opportunity to split the defenders in two. If either Jackson or Jones could have played a larger part in the day, given the Union moves, the remaining Northerners at Savage's Station could have been dealt a severe blow. However, the Northerners themselves were unlucky; if Heintzelman had stayed where he was, Magruder might have been dealt the blow instead, and like the Confederates, the Federals only got about one-third of their force at Savage's Station into the fight.

McClellan, who had not been on the field that day, ordered his men to retreat from Savage's Station that night. Sumner was indignant: "Why! If I had twenty thousand more men, I would crush this rebellion,"<sup>5</sup> he said. But he followed his orders, and they crossed White Oak Swamp. The rest of the Union army was moving as well; IV Corps to Haxall's Landing on the James River, V Corps to positions in the Glendale-Malvern Hill area, and III Corps to the Charles City Road. On the Confederate side, Huger's men were strung out on and near the Charles City Road northwest of III Corps; Jackson's men began to cross the Chickahominy, and Longstreet and A. P. Hill were on the Long Bridge Road where Lee wanted them for the next day's action. June 29 had been a relatively quiet day. June 30 promised not to be.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>5</sup> William B. Franklin, "Rear-Guard Fighting During the Change of Base," in Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds. *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*. 4 vols. (New York: The Century Company, 1887), 2:375.