



Brandy Station and the March to Gettysburg: The History of the Confederate Invasion of Pennsylvania Before the Biggest Battle of the Civil War

Charles River Editors

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Buoyed by his recent successes at the Battle of Chancellorsville, Confederate cavalry commander JEB Stuart held a field review on June 5, but when Robert E. Lee couldn't attend that one, he held another one in Lee's presence on June 8. During that one, the Confederates paraded nearly 9,000 mounted troops and four batteries of horse artillery for review, which included mock battles near Brandy Station. Some of the cavalymen and newspaper reporters at the scene complained that all Stuart was doing was "feeding his ego and exhausting the horses," and he was referred to as a "headline-hunting show-off." More importantly, Union Army of the Potomac commander Joseph Hooker interpreted Stuart's presence around Culpeper as a precursor to a raid on his army's supply lines. In response, he ordered his cavalry commander, Maj. General Alfred Pleasonton, to take a combined force of 8,000 cavalry and 3,000 infantry on a raid to "disperse and destroy" the 9,500 Confederates. Crossing the Rappahannock River in two columns on June 9, 1863 at Beverly's Ford and Kelly's Ford, the first infantry unit caught Stuart completely off guard, and the second surprised him yet again. In addition to being the largest cavalry battle of the war, the chaos and confusion that ensued across the battlefield also made Brandy Station unique in that most of the fighting was done while mounted and using sabers. As Lee's army moved into Pennsylvania, Stuart's cavalry screened his movements, thereby engaging in the more traditional cavalry roles, but it's widely believed that he was still smarting over the results of June 9. As a result, many historians think it likely that he had already planned to remove the negative effect of Brandy Station by duplicating one of his now famous rides around the enemy army, much as he did to McClellan's Army of the Potomac during the Peninsula Campaign in 1862. This time, however, as Lee began his march north through the Shenandoah Valley in western Virginia, it is highly unlikely that is what he wanted or expected. To complicate matters even more, as Stuart set out on June 25 on what was probably a glory-seeking mission, he was unaware that his intended path was blocked by columns of Union infantry that would invariably force him to veer farther east than he or Lee had anticipated. Ultimately, his decision would prevent him from linking up with Ewell as ordered and deprive Lee of his primary cavalry force as he advanced deeper and deeper into unfamiliar enemy territory. According to Halsey Wigfall (son of Confederate States Senator Louis Wigfall) who was in Stuart's infantry, "Stuart and his cavalry left [Lee's] army on June 24 and did not contact [his] army again until the afternoon of July 2, the second day of the [Gettysburg] battle." As it would turn out, Lee's army inadvertently stumbled into Union cavalry and then the Union army at Gettysburg on the morning of July 1, 1863, unaware of the force in their front. From July 1-3, Lee's army tried everything in its power to decisively defeat George Meade's Union Army of the Potomac, unleashing ferocious assaults that inflicted nearly 50,000 casualties in all. Day 1 of the battle would have been one of the 25 biggest battles of the Civil War itself, and it ended with a tactical Confederate victory. But over the next two days, Lee would try and fail to dislodge the Union army with attacks on both of its flanks during the second day and Pickett's Charge on the third and final day. After the South had lost the war, the importance of Gettysburg as one of the "high tide" marks of the Confederacy became apparent to everyone, making the battle all the more important in the years after it had been fought.

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