

2018

# The Valley Campaign of 1864 and Ramifications for the War

Trey Meyer  
*Parkland College*

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## Recommended Citation

Meyer, Trey, "The Valley Campaign of 1864 and Ramifications for the War" (2018). *A with Honors Projects*. 250.  
<https://spark.parkland.edu/ah/250>

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Trey Meyer

HIS 104 Honors Paper

### The Valley Campaign of 1864 and Ramifications for the War

In 1861 the Civil War began and brought with it four years of devastation and destruction along with hundreds of thousands of casualties. The United States hung in the balance for these four crucial years and the battles and campaigns would decide the future of the nation. The Valley Campaign in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in 1864 was a crucial campaign that helped decide the fate of the war and the nation.

In the summer of 1864, the United States was still locked in the bloodiest engagement in its history. In the countryside of Virginia, Union General Ulysses S. Grant and Confederate General Robert E. Lee were slamming into each other's armies trying to pressure the other side into defeat, leaving scores of dead in their wake (David and Greenwalt Chapter 1).

Confederate General Jubal Early, under the command of General Lee, had cleared the Shenandoah Valley of Yankee soldiers. Now, in July of 1864, General Early had the dome of the U.S. Capital in sight. General Early retreated but not before claiming to have spooked President Abraham Lincoln and all of Washington D.C. (David and Greenwalt Chapter 1). General Grant knew that Early's continued presence in the Valley threatened the North and Grant resolved to end this Confederate menace (Pond 111). Grant would put the means to that end in the hands of Philip H. Sheridan and bring the war to the Shenandoah Valley in a way that is best described as "devastation".

The Shenandoah Valley is a fertile tract of land running south to north located between the Alleghany Mountains and the Blue Ridge Mountains, enclosed west and east respectively

(Davis et. al. Chapter 1). The land is bountiful and described by George E. Pond as “the granary of Virginia, with its well-filled barns, its cattle, its busy mills” and produced “abundant crops” (2). The Valley had multiple transportation methods with the Valley Turnpike road, railroads, and the Valley’s namesake, the Shenandoah River (Davis et. al. Chapter 1).

During the Civil War the residents of this fertile valley joined their eastern brethren in the state of Virginia and, with individual exceptions, pledged loyalty to the Confederate States of America (Pond 2). With the loyalty of the Valley laying with the South, the Valley transformed into the “Breadbasket of the Confederacy” (Davis et. al. Chapter 1). The Valley provided much needed provisions to the Confederate armies in Virginia as Confederate wagons would be filled and horses would be replenished (Pond 2).

Agriculture, however, was not the only valuable military aspect of the Shenandoah Valley. The Valley’s path running south to north and through mountains made it an ideal route for any Confederate incursions north. The angle of the Valley ran from the southwest to the northeast, which meant that any Confederate advance that emerged on the other end would be near Washington D.C. (Pond 2). The Confederacy had used the Valley since 1861 for both raids and campaigns and a staging ground for campaigns (Pond 3). General Robert E. Lee had used the Valley to advance his Army of Northern Virginia into Pennsylvania and Maryland, a campaign that culminated in the Battle of Gettysburg in July of 1863 (Davis et. al. Chapter 1). Ultimately it would be this ability to move troops into an offensive position against Washington and the North that would spark the Valley Campaign in the summer and fall of 1864.

In June of 1864 General Grant and General Lee’s forces set up fortifications outside of the railroad junction of Petersburg, Virginia (Wert 6). The Siege of Petersburg had begun with both generals committed to winning. General Grant sent General David Hunter to take command

of all Union forces in the Shenandoah and to take the vital railroad city of Lynchburg in the south (Davis et. al. Chapter 1). In response General Lee met with General Jubal Early and tasked him with saving the city and clearing the Union out of the Valley (Wert 7). General Early was successful and sent General Hunter's Yankees back north. This victory opened up the Valley for Early's use (Davis et. al. Chapter 1).

With General Hunter's defeat, General Early took his rebel force and began raiding the southern Pennsylvania and western Maryland. After defeating the Union in Maryland at the Battle of Monocacy, Early's forces were unopposed to march on to Washington D.C. (Wert 8). Indeed Early's 16,000-man Army of the Valley District had no further engagements as the army stood outside of the capital on July 11 (Patchan 8). Despite having an opportunity to assault the capital and potentially ending the war, Early lacked the strength to dare such an attack and so by the morning of July 13 he had abandoned his position (Pond 72). A contingent of Federal forces pursued the retreating rebels but it was disorganized and only succeeded in getting beat at the Second Battle of Kernstown on July 24 (Wert 8). The Shenandoah Valley was now clear of US forces at the start of August 1864 (Wert 8).

The Second Battle of Kernstown was not the only immediate cause for the upcoming Valley Campaign. Early, riding on the success of having secured the Shenandoah for the Confederacy, ordered Brigadier General John McCausland to strike north. McCausland did as he attacked the Pennsylvania town of Chambersburg and left the town burned and looted (Patchan 282). With the burning of Chambersburg, Early's raid to Washington and defense of the Valley were over and, in its place, would come the devastating Valley Campaign that autumn (Wert 8).

By this time both President Lincoln and General Grant knew that something must be done; the Valley must be taken. Generals William B. Franklin, George G. Meade, and George B.

McClellan were suggested for the job but Lincoln and his Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, turned down all three for varying reasons (Davis et. al. Chapter 1). A name that was decided on, with some misgivings by Lincoln and Stanton, was that of Philip H. Sheridan (Wert 12).

Sheridan had been in command of the Army of the Potomac's Cavalry Corps before being ordered to step down and sent to Washington (Sheridan 2,3). After Washington, Sheridan left for Monocacy Junction, Maryland to personally meet with General Grant (Wert 13). On August 7 Sheridan took command of the Army of the Shenandoah (Pond 120).

On August 10 Sheridan took the Union forces south and into the Shenandoah Valley and thus began "the campaign in earnest" (Davis et. al. Chapter 3). Sheridan's orders, with Lincoln's blessings, were to "follow [the enemy] to death" (Patchan 313). Sheridan then received further, more explicit, orders from Grant calling for Sheridan to "take all provisions, forage, and stock" and that provisions that could not "be consumed, [be] destroyed" (Wert 29). The opening of the campaign saw very little action since August and most of September was spent maneuvering soldiers (Davis et. al. Chapter 3). Men from both sides crossed the same tracts of land so often that one Alabama officer wrote that "we know not only every house, fence, spring, and shade-tree, but very many of the citizens, their wives, and children" (Pond 137). On September 17, General Grant made the journey from outside Petersburg to Charlestown in the Shenandoah Valley to meet with Sheridan (Davis et. al. Chapter 3). There Grant and Sheridan met alone as Grant had received word from Washington that people were growing concerned over rebel forces in the Valley. When asked by Grant about how soon Sheridan could move out, he replied within three days. Grant issued the simple order of "Go in" (Wert 43).

With Grant's orders Sheridan took the fight to General Early. Sheridan knew that speed was of the essence and moved his forces very quickly (Davis et. al. Chapter 4). On September 19

the Union Army of the Shenandoah approached the town of Winchester (Wert 47). There the Union forces found Confederate artillery a mile outside of Winchester and so began the Third Battle of Winchester, sometimes called the Battle of Opequon and (Pond 158) Sheridan, determined to see his goal of sweeping the rebels out of the Valley went for an all-out assault (Davis et. al. Chapter 4). After 90 minutes of intense combat the Confederates began a steady retreat despite having stopped or stalled Federal troops from advancing. Sheridan ordered his exhausted forces forward (Wert 70). The Union troops continued to press the Confederates into Winchester and the Valley until night finally fell. Through the night the rebels continued south through the Valley while the Union forces rested after a hard fought victory (Davis et. al. Chapter 5). Before resting for the night Sheridan kept true to his orders and informed his soldiers that the next morning would start with a 5 a.m. march to pursue General Early further (Wert 99).

With around 30% of his army lost, Jubal Early retreated to Fisher's Hill, a highly defensible position. Despite this fact, Early's gray-clad forces were defeated and were forced to retreat within three days (Davis et. al. Chapter 6). After his second defeat in less than a week, Early and his men were dispirited. Writing to General Lee Early said, "My troops are very much shattered, the men very much exhausted, and many of them without shoes" (Pond 184). A Confederate soldier recounts retreating from Fisher's Hill and seeing a fellow rebel cooking supper on the side of the road singing, "And Old Jube Early's about played out" (Wert 127).

With two smashing victories in almost as many days General Sheridan continued his pursuit of Early but no major engagements would occur as Early kept his army moving south and away from Federal forces (Davis et. al. Chapter 7). General Lee sent additional infantry and artillery to Early as he continued his retreat (Wert 139). After marching roughly 70 miles Sheridan called a halt in the town of Harrisonburg. Here Sheridan would launch the next phase

of the campaign and, under the orders of General Grant, bring what General William T. Sherman did in Georgia to Virginia (Davis et. al. Chapter 7).

On the 26<sup>th</sup> Sheridan sent a brigade to destroy a railroad bridge in what was the act of first total war in the Valley (Pond 190). Sheridan started burning crops, believing that this would bring a swift end to the campaign (Wert 143). Until early October the primary concern of the Union forces in the Valley was the destruction of rail lines, crops, livestock, and buildings (Davis et. al. Chapter 7). The movement of the Union army was punctuated by “clouds of smoke” as one Michigan officer wrote as fire consumed everything in the Valley between the mountains (Wert 158). A local wrote, “The Union army came up the Valley sweeping everything before them like a hurricane; there was nothing for man or beast from the horse down to the chicken; all was taken. So we felt as though we could not subsist; and besides, they were burning down barns and mills in every direction around us” (Davis et.al. Chapter 7). Sheridan reported that his men destroyed 630 barns, 51 mills, 3 iron furnaces, 2 tanneries, 1 railroad depot, 1 locomotive, 3 boxcars, 4,000 tons of hay, a half million bushels of wheat and oats, 515 acres of corn, 560 barrels of flour, and 3,300 head of livestock, for a total of 3.3 million dollars in damages (Wert 159). This destruction was so catastrophic to the locals and Confederates that it became known as “The Burning” (Davis et. al. Chapter 12). These losses were irreparable and delivered a major blow to Lee’s forces outside of Richmond. If “The Burning” did have one negative downside for the Union, it was that it ignited the passions of the Confederates (Davis et. al. Chapter 7).

In a weak attempt to stop the Union devastation of the Valley, Early’s forces engaged the Federals at Tom’s Brook on October 9 (Davis et. al. Chapter 8). The fight was a rout and a disaster, as the Confederates surrendered crucial guns and supplies from Richmond (Pond 203, 204). The Union cavalry continued to pursue the rebels for 20 miles until the rebels successfully

retreated behind infantry lines (Davis et. al. Chapter 8). The victory was a huge moral boost to a Union force who continued to dominate the Valley (Pond 203). It is at this point that General Early decided that he must gamble and make one final push to save both the Valley and Lee (Davis et. al. Chapter 8).

The night of October 18/19 found the Union forces camped beside Cedar Creek (Davis et. al. Chapter 10). At some point during the night Union officers spotted movement amongst the trees and ordered the men to fire on anything moving. Soldiers latter recalled that the woods seemed alive with rebels (Wert 177). Artillery, cavalry, and infantry clashed on the morning of October 19. The Confederates had gained the advantage and were pushing the Union forces out of their encampment (Davis et. al. Chapter 10). The rebels captured supplies along with a significant number of Union prisoners (Sheridan 102).

It is here that General Sheridan proved his worth as a military commander. When the Confederate attack opened on the morning of October 19 Sheridan was not with his forces as he had been recalled to Washington for a meeting a few days prior. The morning of October 19 instead found him nearby in Winchester meeting with a small detachment of the Army of the Shenandoah (Pond 235). Sheridan subsequently learned that his army was breaking at Cedar Creek and had been overrun. Sheridan resolved to ride to the battle and fix his men's resolve and rank or, at the very least, share their fate (Wert 222).

As Sheridan made his way towards the battlefield, Early halted his forces. The morning mist had now combined with the smoke of battle to obscure the fleeing Federals. With the thick fog Early had no idea the troop movements of either side (Davis et. al. Chapter 11). Early's halt gave the undersupplied and starving rebels time to pillage the overrun Union camp (Patchan 318). Pillaging became rampant and took hundreds of men away from fighting with little

discipline to bring the men back into line (Wert 218). When the Confederate attack resumed that afternoon, Sheridan had reached the field (Wert 219). Sheridan's arrival on the field was punctuated by his rallying words of encouragement, "Never mind boys, we'll whip them yet! We shall sleep in our old quarters tonight!" (Pond 236). Sheridan's words of encouragement found their mark as the Union forces pressed a counterattack and forced the Confederates into a retreat before the rebels broke (Wert 236). George Pond wrote, "The army that had swept over the field in triumph at dawn was a mass of fugitives at night." Pond went on further to describe the battle as the biggest rout since the First Battle of Bull Run (238). After the battle Sheridan wrote to Grant that the Union had won, "a great victory, a victory won from disaster" (100).

After the Battle of Cedar Creek, most of the surviving Confederate forces departed to return to the trench lines around Richmond and Petersburg (Davis et. al. Chapter 12). Sheridan knew that the battle had not only secured the Valley but ended any legitimate threat the Confederacy could employ against the Union (Wert 239). Fighting in the Valley would continue another week, but the rebels were now forced to remain on the defensive (Pond 244). Confederate forces would remain in the Valley until March of 1865 when the last battle in the Shenandoah Valley occurred (Davis et. al. Chapter 12). This final Battle of Waynesboro broke Confederate power in the Valley for good (Pond 254). The battle between Sheridan and Early was over.

With the campaign over and Confederates no longer a factor in the Shenandoah, both Grant and Lee began recalling units to join the trenches around Richmond (Wert 250). Before joining his compatriots in Petersburg, Sheridan and his remaining forces finished their orders and, in March of 1865, destroyed the remaining railroads, bridges, and canals in the Valley, leaving it a devastated wasteland (Pond 253). Sheridan additionally captured Lynchburg, a rebel-

friendly rail line city that had been one of the causes for the campaign (Wert 250). Jubal Early's actions in the Shenandoah were the last offensive actions of a Confederate campaign. Early was Lee's final gamble to take control of the war over Grant (Patchan 319). The Confederacy would remain on the defensive for the rest of the war in Virginia until Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865 (Davis et. al. Chapter 12)

The Valley Campaign is an oft forgotten one, being overshadowed by the campaigns of General Lee and General Grant and Sherman's March to the Sea and Atlanta Campaign. Despite not receiving much publicity, the Valley Campaign had very real effects on the war and was a very important factor in the defeat of the Confederacy. From both political and military aspects this campaign left important marks on the Civil War.

Firstly, Sheridan's victory in the Shenandoah Valley strengthened Lincoln's bid for reelection. When General Early showed up on Washington's doorstep both civilian morale and Federal officials were shocked and worried (Patchan 9). Even with Atlanta falling in early September, a Union defeat in the Shenandoah might have diminished Sherman's successes and brought Lincoln another step closer to defeat come November (Davis et. al. Chapter 1). As Jeffrey D. Wert writes, "The politics of 1864, therefore, were governed to a significant degree by outcomes on the battlefield" (4). Victory in the Shenandoah would be vital for a reelection bid. When the campaign was over the soldiers were aware of the effect that their efforts had on the election (Davis et. al. Chapter 12).

The most obvious and immediate impact that the Valley Campaign had was in the military realm. Robert E. Lee had envisioned a Confederate strike to the North and the Shenandoah Valley was the perfect staging grounds for this maneuver (Patchan 7). The Confederacy already had successes in the Valley since the start of the war with no major defeats

occurring making it only logical as a place to apply pressure with a new campaign (Davis et. al. Chapter 1). The purpose of this upcoming invasion or campaign would, he hoped, draw Union troops and resources from the stalemate that existed around Richmond in 1864 (Patchan 7). Lee understood that the stalemate, and the coming Siege of Petersburg, would mean a slow defeat as he would not be able to outlast the numerically and better supplied Federal forces (Wert 6). In 1862 Stonewall Jackson said, “If the Valley is lost, so is Virginia” (Davis et. al. Chapter 1). Both Lee and General Braxton Bragg agreed that securing the Valley for Confederate usage was vital (Wert 7).

General Grant and his Union compatriots had other reasons for wanting the Valley campaign to go their way. The Shenandoah Valley was one of the multiple theatres that Grant planned to coordinate in a massive assault to divide and ultimately conquer the Confederacy (Patchan 5). The largest coordinated assault in Union history would occur with targets of Richmond, Atlanta, and the Shenandoah Valley (Wert 5). If the North was to win the war, they needed to ensure that both northern lands were secure--by ensuring that no invasion force could threaten--and that Lee could no longer be resupplied. Grant had sought to avoid a siege but when it became clear that a siege was inevitable, he knew that cutting Lee’s supplies would potentially quicken the end of the war (Wert 6). Grant may have recognized that cutting Lee’s supplies was important, but he was still reluctant to initiate a large campaign in the Valley. When Grant finally relented and sent Sheridan to command the Army of the Shenandoah, he reallocated substantial numbers of men and supplies (Patchan 1). Supplies and men that Grant knew could potentially help end the war sooner, but the political and military pressures were too great and immediate to ignore Jubal Early and the rebels in the Shenandoah Valley (Patchan 316).

The Valley Campaign is undoubtedly not the sole reason why the Civil War was lost for the Confederacy, but the defeat did end any hopes of the war in Virginia being anything but a slow defeat. Its lasting impacts on the war should not be forgotten for it is an important campaign that helped to end the bloodiest war in American history and ensure that America would endure as a united nation.

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