

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"133rd Anniversary of Antietam"

Carroll County Times article for 17 September 1995

by Jay A. Graybeal

Today is the 133rd anniversary of the Battle of Antietam, or Sharpsburg as it was known to Confederates. The casualties of the one-day battle were nearly 23,500 men killed, wounded or missing making it the costliest single day in American military history. The September 26, 1862 issue of Westminster's Republican newspaper, the American Sentinel, carried a lengthy account of the battle and claimed a Federal victory.

The despatch from the correspondent of the Associated Press, at General McClellan's headquarters, presents a brief but comprehensive statement of the movements and results of Tuesday and Wednesday. General McClellan learned on Tuesday that the Rebel force on the other side of the Potomac, including Jackson's division, were recrossing the river, and that the enemy was concentrating his whole force before Sharpsburg with the view of giving us a general engagement. General McClellan immediately sent for Franklin's corps and Couch's division which were in the rear.

As our line of battle was formed on Tuesday evening with Generals Sumner's and Bank's corps in the centre, General Hooker and Franklin on the right, and General Burnside on the left, the intention being to attempt to turn the enemy's right. General Hooker's corps in the afternoon crossed the Antietam creek, and in a fight of two hours drove the enemy about half a mile, inflicting upon them and suffering himself considerable loss. - On Wednesday, at daylight, the great battle was renewed on the centre and right by our army. Generals Hooker and Sumner in two hours drove the enemy's left back about a mile. The rebels rallied and with terrible loss regained the ground. At this time General Hooker was wounded and General Sumner took command of his corps. General Richardson also was wounded at this time.

General Sumner rallied our troops, they came up to the work with good will, and drove the Rebels before them with great slaughter, driving the enemy a quarter of a mile further back than they had previously been forced in the first attack. In the meantime, Generals Burnside and Porter, on our left had forced the enemy from the line of the Antietam creek, on the main road to Sharpsburg, rebuilt the bridge destroyed by the Rebels and occupied the opposite bank. Here, also, the loss was considerable. The effort was then made to get possession of a ridge of hills on the left hand side of the road, from which the Rebel artillery was thundering. This duty was assigned to Gen. Burnside. He carried the position at a charge, but the enemy were reinforced and regained the ridge, for which they fought desperately. By this time night had come and both armies, as if by mutual consent, ceased hostilities. The battle had lasted for twelve hours, from five in the morning until seven at night, without a moment's cessation. The conduct of our troops was all that could be desired, even the raw regiments behaving admirably.

Later reports would reveal that the victory was not as complete as Gen. McClellan had claimed. Although he had successfully stopped the Confederate invasion, he had squandered an opportunity to crush Lee's army and end the war. An exasperated President Lincoln would shortly replace McClellan for failing to pursue and attack the retreating Confederates.

Although the battle took place on Maryland soil, few local men on either side took part in the battle. For this reason a firsthand account of the battlefield by Dennis Cookson of Uniontown is unique. Written a

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year after the battle, while Cookson was in upstate New York "at a water cure for the benefit of [his] health," the account provides a description of the horrific conditions he witnessed on September 20th.

Just one year ago today I was upon the Bloody Battle field of Antietam. How hot and sultry the air was then. There the dead were lying in heaps, where the parched earth had drunk their blood and the groans and moans of the wounded, mangled & dying rent the air in all directions. There the conflict raged. The forms of the dead & dying and amongst those who yet laid, such suffering as the heart could not conceive without the eye having witnessed it. Forms mangled, crushed to live and suffer for a few days, and then to die in the most horrible agony. Oh God when will it cease. When will the hand of the father fall listless as he attempts to cleave his son to the earth, and brothers cease to regard each other as foes. Shall we ever again be united. Alas will we ever love each other again or give room in our hearts for other than revengeful and bitter feelings. I fear never.

Photo Caption 1: Gen. George B. McClellan commander of the Union forces at the Battle of Antietam fought on September 17, 1862. Historical Society of Carroll County Collection.

Photo Caption 2: Gen. Robert E. Lee led the Confederates at the Sharpsburg. Historical Society of Carroll County Collection.