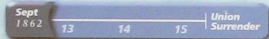


Battle of Harpers Ferry

Invasion rocked the United States during the second year of the American Civil War. In September 1862 Confederate General Robert E. Lee launched his army into Maryland—the North. Lee’s first target became Harpers Ferry. He ordered “Stonewall” Jackson to make the attack.

Here Jackson overcame great obstacles, defeating the Union during a three-day battle and forcing the largest surrender of U.S. troops during the Civil War. His victory at Harpers Ferry enabled Lee to make his stand at nearby Antietam.

When it happened



At first their missiles of death fell far short of our camp; but each succeeding shell came nearer and nearer, until the earth was plowed up at our feet, and our tents torn to tatters.

🇺🇸 Lieutenant James H. Clark, 115th New York Infantry

Confederate Major General “Stonewall” Jackson faced three enemies—the Union garrison at Harpers Ferry, its formidable position on Bolivar Heights, and time. On the second day of the battle, although pummeled by a Confederate bombardment, the Federals still stood firm. Jackson knew he had to force the issue. He devised a

three-point plan. First, to “turn” the Union flank, he ordered Major General A. P. Hill to march 3,500 men and 20 cannon, under cover of night, to a position behind the Federal lines. Meanwhile, one mile to the north, Jackson staged a fake attack against Bolivar Heights to distract the

Federals from Hill’s maneuver. Finally, Jackson ordered that 10 cannon be moved from Schoolhouse Ridge across the Shenandoah River to a plateau on Loudoun Heights. By Monday morning, September 15, all was accomplished. The trap was set.




Setting the Trap


Sept 1862 13 14 15 Union Surrender

Flag Talk

Accurate communication was crucial to winning the Battle of Harpers Ferry. Rivers, mountains, and miles of distance separated Confederate General “Stonewall” Jackson from his mountaintop commanders. With telegraph messaging impossible and courier service difficult, signal flags became the principal form of communication. Confederate signal men occupied positions on the heights, waving flags in patterns to transmit coded messages. This laborious system took time and Jackson

complained that “the day was much advanced” before his orders were transmitted. Nonetheless, Jackson received important intelligence from his commanders, like “not much could be expected from their artillery so long as the enemy retained his advanced position on Bolivar Heights.” Such intelligence enabled Jackson to envision the enemy, thus helping him to devise his plan of attack.

 **Maryland Heights**
Confederate signal station
McLaws

 **Loudoun Heights**
Confederate signal station
Walker

Bolivar Heights
Union position



“Stonewall” Jackson’s scope

I do not desire . . . to open [fire] until all are ready on both sides of the river.

Message flagged from Jackson to Walker and McLaws.

Flagging

Although fog or mist could interfere, the flag system was widely used and an effective form of communication during the Civil War. Only one flag or torch was used at a time. Three simple motions could be combined to signal a message.

