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“Broken Ground of Which I Was Entirely Ignorant:” John C. Frémont Outclassed at Cross Keys

Abstract

During the spring and early summer of 1862, Maj. General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson and his Army of the Valley engaged several larger Union forces during a series of battles and skirmishes in the Shenandoah Valley. On June 8, 1862 at the Battle of Cross Keys, Major General John C. Frémont attacked Confederate infantry, commanded by Jackson’s subordinate Maj. General Richard S. Ewell, in an attempt to capture a strategically valuable bridge at the small town of Port Republic. Frémont was forced to retreat when the inexperienced 8th New York Volunteer Infantry was flanked, leading to a collapse of the entire Federal line of battle. Ultimately, Frémont was defeated at Cross Keys by lack of information after he did not gather intelligence or learn how Ewell’s force was positioned prior to ordering his command to advance against Ewell’s strongly placed defensive battle line.

Keywords

Civil War, Valley Campaign, Cross Keys, Ewell, Stonewall Jackson, 8th New York, Port Republic

Cover Page Footnote

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Zook: Frémont at Cross Keys

During the spring and early summer of 1862, Maj. General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson and his Army of the Valley engaged larger Union forces in a series of battles and skirmishes in the Shenandoah Valley. On June 8, 1862 at the Battle of Cross Keys, Major General John C. Frémont, U.S. Army, attacked Confederate infantry commanded by Jackson’s subordinate Maj. General Richard S. Ewell in an attempt to capture a strategically valuable bridge at the small town of Port Republic. Ewell deployed his troops in a strong defensive position, and Frémont ultimately retreated after being flanked. Frémont advanced against Ewell without gathering intelligence about Ewell’s deployment; the Federal line collapsed when hidden Confederate regiments attacked the flank of the 8th New York Volunteers, which ultimately cost Frémont the Battle of Cross Keys.

In 1862, Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia faced George B. McClellan’s Army of the Potomac along the James River. Lee realized he would be unable to resist McClellan if he was reinforced by the Union armies in western Virginia. Therefore, he ordered Maj. General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson to the Shenandoah Valley to occupy McClellan’s potential reinforcements. Throughout May 1862, Jackson and his 17,000 troops fought a series of engagements between Staunton and Winchester; according to historian Robert S. Rush, “within a one-month period, [Jackson’s] Confederate Valley Army, never exceeding 17,000 men, marched more than 200 miles, fought three battles, and neutralized more than 70,000 Union soldiers in a campaign that caused the Federal focus to shift, at least momentarily, from the peninsula formed by the York and James Rivers to the Shenandoah Valley.”¹ Noted Civil War historian James McPherson agrees, writing that “Jackson’s victories in the Valley created an aura of invincibility

¹ Robert S. Rush, “Actions and Reactions: The Spring 1862 Shenandoah Valley Campaign Revisited,” *Army History* 47 (Spring-Summer 1999): 1.

around him and his foot cavalry,” and adding “they furthered the southern tradition of victory in the Virginia theater that had begun at Manassas.”²

At the beginning of June two Federal armies stalked Jackson’s army, one in the main Shenandoah Valley commanded by Maj. General John C. Frémont, the other in the smaller Page Valley commanded by Brig. General James Shields. James Johnson Kirkpatrick of the 16th Mississippi Infantry confided to his diary that the Federals “[Seem] to be pressing on with unusual courage...General Shields has been marching up the other valley with a detachment from Fredericksburg, and we are almost between two armies larger than our own.”³ Despite the precariousness of his situation, Kirkpatrick added that “All have the most unwavering faith in our leaders.”⁴ Jackson knew he would be outnumbered if Frémont and Shields joined forces and determined to use the flooded Shenandoah River to keep them separated. During “five days of masterly retreat”⁵ up the Valley towards Harrisonburg, Jackson burned the bridges across the Shenandoah at New Market, which “Left Shields with an impassable river between them, entirely unable to harass his flank or impede his march.”⁶ He also took steps to prevent Shields and Frémont from joining by destroying the bridge at Conrad’s Store, “which afforded the last chance of a union of his adversaries north of Port Republic.”⁷

Frémont followed stubbornly, but inefficiently. William Miller argues that “Federal plans in the Valley region became ill defined or ill-considered or both.”⁸ Critically, he was

² McPherson, James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 460.

³ James Johnson Kirkpatrick, “James Johnson Kirkpatrick Diary, June 6, 1862, Friday,” In *The Sixteenth Mississippi Infantry*, R. G. Evans, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002): 78.

⁴ Kirkpatrick 1862, 78.

⁵ Col. William Allan, *Jackson’s Valley Campaign* (Richmond: G. W. Gary and Co., Printers, 1878): 22.

⁶ Allan 1878, 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ William J. Miller, “Such Men as Shields, Banks, and Fremont: Federal Command in Western Virginia, March-June 1862,” in *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1862*, Gary W. Gallagher, ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003): 951.

unable to coordinate his movements with Shields. Miller believes Frémont was out of his depth, writing “A combination of Fremont’s service in the engineers and his ideology earned him rank in the Union army beyond his abilities.”⁹

Elements of Frémont’s command fought the Confederate rearguard on June 6, which allowed Jackson time to establish his headquarters in Port Republic and hold the remaining bridge across the Shenandoah. Allen wrote that the bridge “Gave [Jackson] the means of crossing from one side to the other—of which by the destruction of the other bridges he had deprived his enemies,” and also allowed him to “[Place] an impassable barrier between his two pursuers,” while simultaneously “[Occupying] the point where their two routes converged.”¹⁰ Frémont, with the Confederate army retreating in front of him, sent out a reconnaissance party on June 7; after finding that “Jackson, abandoning the turnpike, had struck by a difficulty and troublesome road toward Port Republic,” Frémont wrote “a movement in the new direction taken by him was determined for the 8th.”¹¹ August Horstmann, a German soldier in the 1st Brigade of Frémont’s 1st division wrote his parents several days later, telling them “On Pentecost Sunday on June 8 we set out early to take up the chase...about midday we ran into the enemy about 8 miles from Harrisonburg. They were posted in the woods on steep hills.”¹²

Jackson tasked Maj. General Richard S. Ewell with stopping Frémont. Ewell chose a strategically brilliant defensive position; Col. Allen wrote that his line was “A wooded ridge near

⁹ Miller 2003,47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), vol. 12, pt. 1, p. 18.

¹² August Horstmann, “Fragment of a Letter Written Shortly Before June 16, 1862,” In *Germans in the Civil War: The Letters They Wrote Home*, Kamphoefner, Walter D. and Wolfgang Heibich, eds. (Raleigh: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 121.

Cross Keys, with an open meadow and a rivulet in front.”¹³ Historian Darrell Collins describes Ewell’s battle line as

Generally facing northwest, the line stretched along the ridge for more than a mile, its center crossing the road from Harrisonburg at a nearly perpendicular angle and a little south of where it split into two roads... The ridge declined rapidly to a small branch of Mill Creek that ran parallel to it.¹⁴

On his far right, Ewell placed Big. General Isaac Trimble’s brigade, consisting of the 16th Mississippi, 21st Georgia, 21st North Carolina, and the untested 15th Alabama. However, Trimble saw “That his assigned position on the right had serious deficiencies. He thought it too heavily wooded in front to allow his men effective fire, and he believed the flank was vulnerable to a turning movement.”¹⁵ Therefore, Trimble reported “I rode forward in front and to the right about half a mile and examined a wooded hill running nearly parallel to our line of battle.”¹⁶ Trimble liked what he found, and “Finding this position advantageous, with its left in view and protected by my artillery and its right by a ravine and densely wooded hill, I at once occupied this position.”¹⁷ His revised position would prove critical.

Col. Albert Tracy, a member of Frémont’s staff, also recognized the strength of Ewell’s position. He recorded in his journal that “The ground, as occupied by the enemy...was in the nature, mainly, of an elevation upon the opposite side of a hollow considerably broken, and, in parts, wooded, lying between ourselves and them.” Looking north, Tracy wrote, “To the left,

¹³ Allen 1878, 25.

¹⁴ Darrell L. Collins, *Jackson’s Valley Campaign: The Battles of Cross Keys and Port Republic, June 8-9, 1862* (Lynchburg: H. E. Howard, Inc., 1993): 51.

¹⁵ Collins 1993, 53.

¹⁶ Isaac R. Trimble, “Report Number 94: Report of Brigadier General Isaac R. Trimble,” In *The Sixteenth Mississippi Infantry*, R. G. Evans, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002): 80.

¹⁷ Trimble 1862, 80.

with, at intervals, lesser batteries, and marked by inequalities of the ground, or by brush, or fence, or fringe of the taller forest, extended in chief their line of battle.”¹⁸

Despite his enemy’s strong position, Frémont did not conduct a thorough reconnaissance; historian Peter Cozzens describes his time at the front as “perfunctory.”¹⁹ He “judged that the enemy’s right was his strategic flank,”²⁰ and deployed his regiments in line of battle, intending to flank Ewell’s right. Frémont admitted he attacked with limited information in his report, and claimed that “to have attacked him irregularly and at random on either of his flanks would have carried us off the roads into wooded and broken ground of which I was entirely ignorant,” and stated he “was without reliable maps or guides.”²¹ Justifying his decision to attack, he stated “to give this effort any chance of success it would have been necessary to lose valuable time in reconnoitering the ground, during which [Ewell] could have withdrawn his troops.”²²

Frémont erred further by placing the 8th New York Volunteer Infantry on his far left, the side that would attempt the critical flanking maneuver. The 8th was an inexperienced unit described as “a horde of befuddled German emigrants who spoke little English and understood less of the reasons for the war”²³ commanded by Louis Blenker, a German soldier who had fought in the 1848 German revolutions.²⁴ The officers and men of the 8th New York advanced toward Ewell without sending skirmishers forward first; Robert Krick notes that “tactical

¹⁸ Albert Tracy, “Fremont’s Pursuit of Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley: The Journal of Colonel Albert Tracy, March-July 1862,” Francis F. Wayland, ed., *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 70, no. 3 (July 1962): 333.

¹⁹ Peter Cozzens, *Shenandoah 1862: Stonewall Jackson’s Valley Campaign* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993): 461.

²⁰ OR vol. 12, pt. 1, p. 20.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Robert G. Tanner, *Stonewall in the Valley* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976): 294.

²⁴ John H. Matsui, *The First Republican Army: The Army of Virginia and the Radicalization of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016): 12.

doctrine called for identifying a defensive position by advancing skirmishers against it,”²⁵ and points out that “Fremont’s inexperienced force included men and units who did know the vital importance of skirmishers, but the 8th New York and its leaders were not among that number.”²⁶ As the Germans of the 8th NY moved forward without skirmishers, they had no way of knowing that Trimble’s Brigade was waiting for them ahead of the rest of Ewell’s line.

The assault started well. August Horstmann recorded that “They beat back the enemy pickets, and then they started singing ‘*Hinaus in die Ferne*’ [a German hiking song] etc. and went straight into a bayonet attack, and it was uphill and over three fences.”²⁷ However, Trimble had concealed his brigade so well that the advancing Federals had no idea they were there. Trimble reported, “I ordered the three regiments to rest quietly in the edge of an open wood until the enemy, who were advancing in regular order across the field and hollow, should come within fifty steps of our line.”²⁸ Krick notes that “Since the tactical edge belonged to the defensive force during the Civil War—even without such tremendous advantages of surprise and strong ground as Trimble enjoyed—attacking forces needed a preponderance in numbers to succeed. At Cross Keys the 8th New York attacked against more than twice its own strength.”²⁹

Trimble allowed the advancing Federals to close to within fifty paces before ordering his regiments to their feet. Then, “As the enemy appeared above the crest of a hill, a deadly fire was delivered along our whole line, beginning on the right, dropping the deluded victims of Northern fanaticism and misrule by scores.”³⁰ The history of the 16th Mississippi records that “The Eighth New York regiment...approached within thirty steps of the fence by which the

²⁵ Robert K. Krick, *Conquering the Valley: Stonewall Jackson at Port Republic* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996): 155.

²⁶ Krick 1996, 170.

²⁷ Horstmann 1862, 121.

²⁸ Trimble 1862, 80.

²⁹ Krick 1996, 168.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Sixteenth Mississippi was concealed, when they received a deliberate volley into their ranks.”³¹

William Oates, 15th Alabama, recalled that “A column of the enemy...walked right up to the twenty-first Georgia, which just mowed them down in piles at a single volley.”³²

The 8th was stunned by the explosion of musketry and retreated, pursued by Trimble’s regiments. As Blenker’s Germans fell back, they left other Federal regiments vulnerable to being flanked in turn, causing a general withdrawal. Col. Tracy recorded “The rebels were too many for us...Stahl [one of Blenker’s brigade commanders] was met by a fire so murderous as well-nigh to cut to pieces two of his regiments.”³³

Horstmann, caught in the storm of lead, told his parents

What must those 7 enemy regiments have through when they saw a single regiment storming at them with their bayonets at charge and singing at the same time...The outcome could easily be predicted, the 8th Regt. Met its doom and a terrible hail of bullets fell on them from a distance of only 50 paces, so that in no time at all, more than 300 were lying dead and wounded in the field in the midst of the enemy position.³⁴

On the evening of June 8, Ewell held the battlefield, and Frémont’s troops camped along the road to Harrisonburg. During the night, Jackson withdrew Ewell and his men to Port Republic, burning the bridge behind them and isolating Frémont on the west bank of the Shenandoah.³⁵ On June 9, as Frémont “[Gazed] helplessly across the South Fork of the Shenandoah,”³⁶ Jackson destroyed Brig. General Shield’s army at the Battle of Port Republic, bringing an end to the 1862 Valley Campaign.

³¹ Anonymous, *A Historical Sketch of the Quitman Guards, Company E, Sixteenth Mississippi Regiment, Harris’ Brigade: From its Organization in Holmesville, 21st April, 1861, to the Surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia, 9th April, 1865* (New Orleans: Isaac T. Hinton, Printer, 1866): 22.

³² William C. Oates, *The War Between the Union and the Confederacy and its Lost Opportunities with a History of the 15th Alabama Regiment and the Forty-Eight Battles in Which it Was Engaged* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1905): 103.

³³ Tracy 1862, 335.

³⁴ Hartmann 1862, 121.

³⁵ Collins 1993, 85.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

Cross Keys and the Valley Campaign produced different legacies for Jackson and Frémont. On the one hand, McPherson notes that “Jackson’s Valley campaign won renown and is still studied in military schools as an example of how speed and use of terrain can compensate for inferiority of numbers.”³⁷ On the other, in his assessment of Frémont, William Miller notes that “Fremont did not manage the battle of Cross Keys well...aggressive southern infantry commanders delivered a few well-timed blows that kept the Federals off balance.”³⁸ Former Confederate General E. P. Alexander stated that “Fremont brought into play about all of his artillery, but he advanced only one brigade of infantry from his left flank. This was repulsed and followed, and the whole of Fremont’s left wing driven back to the shelter of his line of guns.”³⁹

Ultimately, however, Frémont was defeated at Cross Keys due to lack of information. Rather than take time gathering intelligence and learning the how Ewell’s force was positioned, Frémont ordered his command to advance blindly against Ewell’s strongly placed defensive battle line. A more effective reconnaissance of Ewell’s position or adequate skirmishers would have alerted the 8th New York Volunteer Infantry of Trimble’s Brigade in their hidden position. This information may have prevented the one-sided engagement which threw back Blenker’s regiment, and ultimately caused Frémont’s battle line to collapse.

³⁷ McPherson 1988, 460.

³⁸ Miller 2003, 71.

³⁹ E. P. Alexander, *Military Memoirs of a Confederate: A Critical Narrative* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1907): 104.

Zook: Frémont at Cross Keys

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