

# Battle of Philippi (West Virginia)

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(Redirected from Battle of Philippi Races)

Coordinates: 39.15316, -80.04278

The **Battle of Philippi**, also called **The Philippi Races**, was fought on June 3, 1861, in and around Philippi, Virginia (now West Virginia) as part of the Western Virginia Campaign of the American Civil War. It was the first organized land action in the Eastern Theater of the war, but is often treated dismissively as a skirmish rather than a significant battle.<sup>[2]</sup>

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## Background

After the commencement of hostilities at Fort Sumter in April 1861, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan returned to the Army and, on May 13, assumed command of the Department of the Ohio, headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio.<sup>[3]</sup> McClellan planned an offensive into what is now the State of West Virginia (at that time the northwestern part of the Commonwealth of Virginia) that he optimistically hoped would eventuate in a campaign against the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia. His immediate objectives, however, were to occupy the territory to protect the predominantly pro-Union populace of the area, and to keep open the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad line, which was a critical supply line for the Union.

On May 26, McClellan, in response to the burning of bridges on the Baltimore & Ohio near the town of Farmington, ordered Colonel Benjamin Franklin Kelley of the (Union) 1st Virginia Infantry, with his regiment and Company A of the 2nd Virginia Infantry, to advance from Wheeling to the area of the sabotage and secure the important bridge over the Monongahela River at Fairmont, a distance of about 70 miles (110 km) southwest

### Battle of Philippi

Part of the American Civil War



Daring ride on horseback of Col. Fredrick West Lander, June 3, 1861.<sup>[1]</sup>

<b>Date</b>	June 3, 1861
<b>Location</b>	Barbour County, Virginia (now West Virginia)
<b>Result</b>	Union victory

#### Belligerents

<span><span></span></span> United States (Union)	<span><span></span></span> CSA (Confederacy)
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#### Commanders

Thomas A. Morris	George A. Porterfield
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#### Strength

3,000	800
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#### Casualties and losses

4	26
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of Wheeling. In this Kelley's men were supported by the 16th Ohio Infantry under Col. James Irvine. After securing Fairmont, the 1st Virginia advanced again and seized the important railroad junction of Grafton, about 15 miles (24 km) southwest of Fairmont, on May 30.

Meanwhile, the 14th Ohio Infantry Regiment, under Col. James B. Steedman, was ordered to occupy Parkersburg and then also proceed to Grafton, about 90 miles (140 km) to the east. By May 28, McClellan had ordered a total of about 3,000 troops into Western Virginia and placed them under the overall command of Brig. Gen. Thomas A. Morris, commander of Indiana Volunteers.

Confederate Col. George A. Porterfield had been assigned to command of state forces in northwestern Virginia on May 4 and ordered Grafton to take charge of enlistments in that area. As the Union columns advanced, Porterfield's poorly armed 800 recruits retreated to Philippi, about 17 miles (27 km) south of Grafton. At Philippi, a covered bridge spanned the Tygart Valley River and was an important segment of the vital Beverly-Fairmont Turnpike.

## Battle

Col. Kelley devised a two-prong attack against the Confederate forces in Philippi, approved by Gen. Morris on his arrival in Grafton on June 1. The principal advance would be 1,600 men led by Kelley himself, and would include six companies of his own regiment, nine of the 9th Indiana Infantry Regiment under Col. Robert H. Milroy, and six of the 16th Ohio Infantry. In order to deceive the enemy into believing their objective was Harpers Ferry, they departed by train to the east. They de-trained at the small village of Thornton and marched south on a back road (on the same side of the river as Philippi) intending to arrive at the rear of the town.

Meanwhile, the 7th Indiana under Col. Ebenezer Dumont were sent to Webster, about 3.5 miles (5.6 km) southwest of Grafton. There they would combine with the 6th Indiana under Col. Thomas T. Crittenden and the 14th Ohio under Col. Steedman. The column, with a total of 1,400 men under the command of Col. Dumont (with the assistance of Col. Frederick W. Lander, volunteer aide-de-camp to Gen. McClellan), would march directly south from Webster on the Turnpike. In this way, the Union force would execute a double envelopment of the Confederates.

On June 2, the two Union columns set off to converge on Philippi. After an overnight march in rainy weather, both columns arrived at Philippi before dawn on June 3. Morris had planned a predawn assault that would be signaled by a pistol shot. The untrained Confederate troops had failed to establish picket lines to provide perimeter security, choosing instead to escape the cold rain that fell at morning and stay inside their tents. A Confederate sympathizer, Mrs. Thomas Humphreys, saw the approaching Union troops and sent her young son on horseback to warn the Confederates. While Mrs. Humphreys watched, Union pickets captured the boy and she fired her pistol at the Union soldiers. Although she missed, her shots started the attack prematurely.

The Union forces began firing their artillery, which awakened the sleeping Confederates. After firing a few shots at the advancing Union troops, the Southerners broke lines and began running frantically to the south, some still in their bed clothes, which caused journalists to refer to the battle as the "Races at Philippi". Dumont's troops entered the town from the bridge (Col. Lander's ride down the steep hillside through heavy underbrush was considered such a feat of horsemanship that *Leslie's Weekly* gave an illustrated account of it shortly afterward<sup>[4]</sup>), but Kelley's column had arrived from the north on the wrong road and were unable to block the Confederate escape. Col. Kelley himself was shot while chasing some of the retreating Confederates, but Col. Lander personally chased down and captured the soldier who shot Kelley. The remaining Confederate troops retreated to Huttonsville, about 45 miles (72 km) to the south.

## Aftermath

The Union victory in a relatively bloodless battle propelled the young General McClellan into the national spotlight, and he was soon given command of all Union armies. The battle also inspired more vocal protests in the Western part of Virginia against secession. A few days later in Wheeling, the Wheeling Convention nullified the Virginia ordinance of secession and named Francis H. Pierpont governor.

There were two significant Confederate casualties. Both were treated with battlefield amputations, believed to be the first such operations of the war. One of the soldiers was a Virginia Military Institute cadet, Fauntleroy Daingerfield. The other young Confederate was James E. Hanger, an 18-year old college student. After recovering, Hanger returned to his hometown in Virginia. He made an artificial leg for himself from barrel staves with a hinge at the knee. His design worked so well, the Virginia State Legislature commissioned him to manufacture the "Hanger Limb" for other wounded Civil War veterans. Mr. Hanger patented his prosthetic device and founded what is now the Hanger Orthopedic Group, Inc.<sup>[5]</sup> As of 2007, Hanger Orthopedic Group is the United States market leader in the manufacture of artificial limbs.<sup>[6]</sup>

After the battle, Col. Porterfield was replaced in command of Confederate forces in western Virginia by Brig. Gen. Robert S. Garnett. The companies of Confederate recruits present at Philippi became part of various regiments, including the 9th Virginia Infantry Battalion, 25th Virginia Infantry, 31st Virginia Infantry, 11th Virginia Cavalry, and the 14th Virginia Cavalry. The Barbour Lighthouse Cavalry, commanded by Capt. William Jenkins, disbanded after the retreat from Philippi.<sup>[7]</sup>

The celebrated short-story writer and satirist Ambrose Bierce was a raw recruit present at the Battle of Philippi. Twenty years later, he wrote, in an autobiographical fragment he called *On a Mountain*:

We gave ourselves, this aristocracy of service, no end of military airs; some of us even going to the extreme of keeping our jackets buttoned and our hair combed. We had been in action, too; had shot off a Confederate leg at Philippi, "the first battle of the war," and had lost as many as a dozen men at Laurel Hill and Carrick's Ford, whither the enemy had fled in trying, Heaven knows why, to get away from us.

The quotation marks indicate the wryness with which Bierce and his fellow veterans, who were to undergo far more harrowing experiences, must have regarded the designation of "first battle".

## See also

- Philippi Covered Bridge, used by both sides during the battle.

## References

- National Park Service battle description (<http://www.cr.nps.gov/hps/abpp/battles/wv001.htm>)
- Dayton, Ruth Woods, "The Beginning -- Philippi, 1861" ([http://www.wvculture.org/HISTORY/journal\\_wvh/wvh13-1.html](http://www.wvculture.org/HISTORY/journal_wvh/wvh13-1.html)) , West Virginia History Journal, Volume 13, Number 4 (July 1952), pp. 254-266.
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## Notes

1. ^ Frank Leslie's illustrated newspaper, vol. 12, no. 293 (1861 June 29), p. 106.
2. ^ Eicher, *Longest Night*, p. 75, wrote "Although this minor skirmish was glorified in the press ... it had little significance." The National Park Service battle description (<http://www.cr.nps.gov/hps/abpp/battles/wv001.htm>) concludes, "Although a small affair, this was considered the first major land action in the Eastern Theater." The other contender for first battle in the East is Big Bethel, on June 10.
3. ^ Official Records, Chap. IX, p. 2.
4. ^ Dayton, Ruth Woods. "The Beginning - Philippi, 1861".
5. ^ "Corporate History (<http://www.hanger.com/AboutUs/Pages/history.aspx>) ". Hanger Orthopedic Group, Inc. company website. Retrieved on 2008-09-14.
6. ^ "2007 Annual Report (<http://www.hanger.com/AboutUs/Documents/pdf/2007%20Annual%20Report.pdf>) ". Hanger Orthopedic Group, Inc. Retrieved on 2008-09-14.
7. ^ Confederate Forces in the 1861 Rich Mountain Campaign (<http://www.richmountain.org/trpscsc.htm>) , from Fritz Haselberger, *Yanks From The South*. Retrieved on 2008-09-15.

## Further reading

- Carnes, Eva Margaret, *The Tygarts Valley Line, June-July 1861*, "Published by the First Land Battle of the Civil War Centennial Commemoration, Inc. Philippi, West Virginia", 1961. (Reprinted 1988, 2003; McClain Printing Company, Parsons, West Virginia) ISBN 0-87012-703-9.

## External links

- Official Records of the Battle of Philippi (<http://www.wvculture.org/HISTORY/civilwar/philippi02.html>)
- Battle of Philippi Bridge (<http://www.fortunecity.com/victorian/museum/63/battles/west/philippi.html>)
- Battle of Philippi (West Virginia) is at coordinates 39.15316, -80.04278

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