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## Hanover Courthouse: The Union's Tactical Victory and Strategic Failure

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HANOVER COURTHOUSE: THE UNION'S TACTICAL  
VICTORY AND STRATEGIC FAILURE

by

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B.A. May 1997, Old Dominion University

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## ABSTRACT

### HANOVER COURTHOUSE: THE UNION'S TACTICAL VICTORY AND STRATEGIC FAILURE

Jerry Joseph Coggeshall  
Old Dominion University, 1999  
Director: Dr. Harold S. Wilson

The Battle of Hanover Courthouse was the high water mark of the Union's Peninsular Campaign: the battle was a decisive Federal victory, but disjointed leadership by the Union high command squandered the ensuing strategic opportunities. This research project will evaluate the complex strategic situation which developed in the area of Hanover Courthouse as the Union high command attempted to reinforce the Army of the Potomac in its drive on Richmond in May of 1862. This topic has been neglected by historians more concerned with larger battles that took place closer to Richmond, or with Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's campaign in the Shenandoah Valley. Yet, it was the Federal victory at Hanover Courthouse that presented the Union high command with the greatest opportunity to influence the overall strategic situation in the Virginia theater in mid-1862.

The goal of this study will be to expose the strategic opportunities which were lost to the Union at Hanover Courthouse as a result of disjointed leadership. To accomplish this goal this study will provide an in-depth analysis of the strategic issues which faced the Union and Confederate leadership as they each sought to control the area between Richmond and Fredericksburg in May of 1862. A

description of the engagement at Hanover Courthouse, which was the climax of the strategic duel north of Richmond, will be particularly important to this thesis. The fulfillment of this goal will provide a much needed assessment of a critical phase of the war in Virginia.

In analyzing the Battle of Hanover Courthouse this research project will rely upon a wide variety of sources. Primary documents will be used as much as possible; with diaries, reports, and maps making up the bulk of such sources. Secondary sources will be employed mostly as an overall guide in becoming more familiar with the general details of this topic.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All of the figures used in this thesis were created by Alpha Graphics of Virginia Beach, Virginia.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The Battle of Hanover Courthouse was the high water mark of the Union's Peninsular Campaign of 1862. This battle, which occurred between Richmond and Fredericksburg, was a substantial tactical victory for the Union. However, disjointed leadership by the Union high command squandered the ensuing opportunity to bring about important strategic results, and perhaps end the war.

Previous scholarship on the engagement at Hanover Courthouse has been sparse. There have been several regimental histories that have discussed the battle, but these works provide a perspective of the engagement that is limited to the experiences of individual regiments. Studies of the Peninsular Campaign, the Union offensive in which Hanover Courthouse occurred, have consistently relegated the battle to footnote status in order to discuss more thoroughly the dramatic events southeast of Richmond. More general evaluations of the 1862 Virginia campaigns have likewise overlooked Hanover Courthouse in that they often focus exclusively on either the fight for Richmond, or the Shenandoah Valley Campaign.

This thesis will represent the first comprehensive study directed at understanding the significance of the

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The format for this thesis follows the style requirements of Kate L. Turabian's A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations (Sixth Edition).

Battle of Hanover Courthouse. As the climax of a major Union expedition into the Hanover area, this battle did not occur in a strategic vacuum. Rather, it was the only pitched battle of a strategic duel in which the Union and Confederate high commands sought to control the region between Richmond and Fredericksburg. Union failure in that duel can be linked to the inability of the Federal high command to capitalize on the victory at Hanover Courthouse. Unfortunately for the Union, subsequent events proved that the victory at Hanover Courthouse was the pinnacle of Union success on the Peninsula.<sup>1</sup>

Except for Robert E. Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania, no Civil War campaign has been as widely debated by historians as the Peninsular Campaign. The driving force behind this historical controversy has been the numerous attempts to blame either George B. McClellan or Abraham Lincoln for Union failure on the Peninsula. T. Harry Williams, James

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<sup>1</sup>Studies which have dealt with the Peninsular Campaign include: Rowena Reed, Combined Operations in the Civil War (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1978); James McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom (New York: Oxford University, 1988); Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942-44); Joseph P. Cullen, The Peninsula Campaign 1862 (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole, 1973); Studies of the Peninsular Campaign that have also mentioned Hanover Courthouse include William K. McDaid, "'Four Years of Arduous Service', The History of the Branch-Lane Brigade in the Civil War" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1987); James H. Mundy, Second to None, The Story of the 2d Maine Volunteers (Scarborough, ME: Hary, 1992); Stephen Sears, To the Gates of Richmond, The Peninsula Campaign (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992); Alexander S. Webb, The Peninsula, McClellan's Campaign of 1862 (New York: Jack Brussel, 1881).

McPherson, and Stephen Sears have typically been at the forefront of the school of thought which has criticized General McClellan. According to these historians McClellan was an incompetent, unstable commander whose constant delays severely undermined Lincoln's push for a short war. Conversely, Rowena Reed and Ethan S. Rafuse have argued that George B. McClellan was in fact the North's only link to military brilliance in the spring and summer of 1862. These historians maintain that Lincoln's constant interference in military affairs served only to disrupt a skillfully planned and conducted campaign.

Because historians representing the two schools of thought on the Peninsular Campaign have consistently failed to consider the importance of the Battle of Hanover Courthouse, and its critical aftermath, their conclusions concerning key aspects of the campaign are flawed. In their zeal to defend or criticize Lincoln and McClellan historians have neglected to give sufficient attention to what transpired between Richmond and Fredericksburg in April and May of 1862. Consequently, several misconceptions concerning the performance of the Union leadership during that period have been established in Civil War historiography. This paper will dispel those misconceptions by providing a much needed evaluation of the Union high command as it directed Federal activity before and after Hanover Courthouse.

Although the Federal high command consisted of generals

from every theater of the war, this study will focus on that portion of the command structure that was responsible for developing and executing strategy in Virginia. Thus, in addition to President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, the Union high command as defined in this paper includes corps commanders and General McClellan.

George Brinton McClellan was only thirty-five years of age when he led the Army of the Potomac against Richmond in 1862. A West Point graduate, McClellan's military background prior to the Civil War included distinguished service in the Mexican War, and experience as a military observer in Europe. In the early days of the Civil War McClellan's campaign in western Virginia had given the Northern people virtually their only taste of military success. Consequently, when Lincoln needed a general to command the Federal armies against the upstart Confederacy, McClellan was the obvious choice.<sup>2</sup>

McClellan's personal style of leadership remains as much, if not more, a source of debate among historians as the Peninsular Campaign itself. Anything but aggressive, McClellan emphasized low casualties, progress, and security in conducting his campaigns. Like many generals of his

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<sup>2</sup>McClellan's time as Commander-in-Chief was short lived. On March 11, Lincoln demoted him to command of the Department of the Potomac. Lincoln apparently questioned McClellan's ability to direct the western theater while simultaneously commanding the Army of the Potomac. T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and His Generals (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 24-26, 70-71; Mark M. Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary (New York: Random House, 1988), 524.

time, McClellan believed in the Napoleonic concept of seeking out a climatic, decisive battle in attaining victory.<sup>3</sup> Yet, unlike Napoleon, McClellan was a strict proponent of defensive warfare. He therefore hoped to fight the war-winning engagement from a defensive posture.<sup>4</sup> For those in the North intent upon a quick war, McClellan's deliberation in attempting to bring about that grand battle was simply exasperating.

McClellan's arrogant and argumentative nature, along with a propensity for criticizing others, was his greatest weakness. As if those qualities were not harmful enough, McClellan often convinced himself that the Lincoln administration intentionally plotted against him and his army. Such qualities were instrumental in undermining any form of effective cooperation with his superiors.

In addition to his shortcomings, McClellan demonstrated certain strengths which revealed in him a genuine understanding of military matters. His ability to train and organize an army has generally been recognized as unequalled in the war. The personal effort he put into the affairs of

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<sup>3</sup>The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, ed. Stephen W. Sears (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 169, 215.

<sup>4</sup>Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, "Lincoln as Military Strategist," Civil War History, 26, no. 4 (1980): 293; Ethan S. Rafuse, "McClellan, von Clausewitz, and the Politics of War," Columbiad: A Quarterly Review of the War Between the States 1, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 26-27.

his army was nothing short of impressive.<sup>5</sup> Although critics have habitually cited his tactical and strategic caution as evidence of poor generalship, the degree of control that McClellan exercised over his army as a result of that caution made him a difficult general to defeat in battle. The Confederates, as well as his adoring men, therefore viewed McClellan as a capable commander.

The strategic situation in Virginia in the spring of 1862 was considerably more intricate than what it had been in the summer of 1861. Although the capture, or defense, of the Confederate capital at Richmond was still maintained as a primary war goal by the respective belligerents, there were new factors which shaped the formation of Union and Confederate grand strategy. For instance, the increase in the overall size of the opposing armies (over twice their 1861 strength) escalated the scope of military campaigns. Far from the simple march to Richmond that dominated Federal strategy the previous summer, the spring campaign of 1862 involved the entire state of Virginia save the extreme southwest and northwest. Consequently, the Union and Confederate command structures were, for the first time, forced to coordinate the activity of numerous forces throughout the state toward a focused strategy.

By late March of 1862 the Union Army of the Potomac was separated into three general groups and deployed

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<sup>5</sup>Williams, 29.

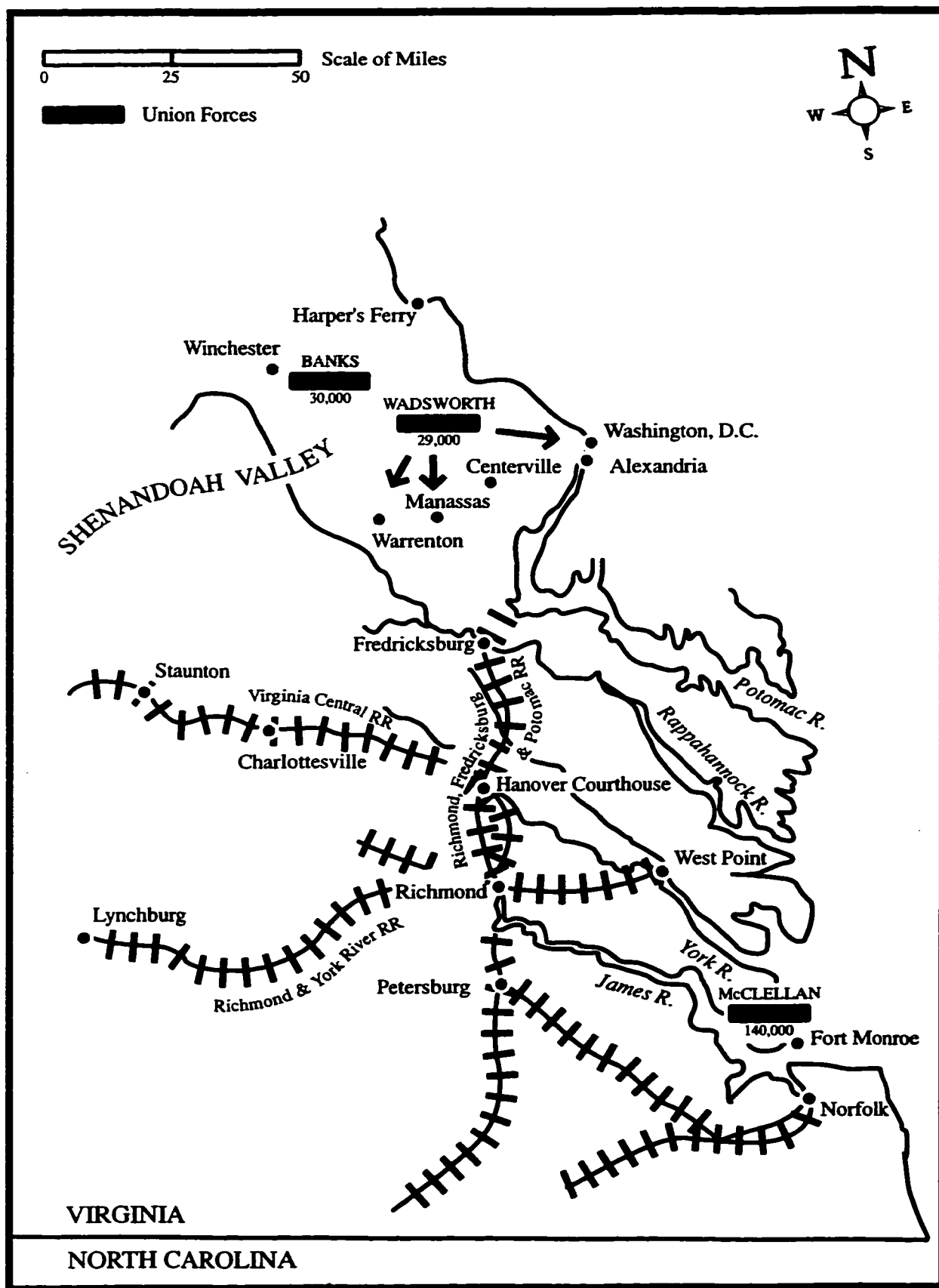


Fig. 1 Union Forces in Early April, 1862.

throughout Virginia and Washington D.C. (see Fig. 1). Positioned in the towns of Warrenton, Manassas, and Washington was one force of roughly twenty-nine thousand Union troops commanded by Brigadier General James S. Wadsworth. The objective of this command was to protect the Union capital. In the lower Shenandoah Valley was another thirty thousand Federals, under Major General Nathaniel P. Banks. Banks' mission was to contain, if not eliminate, Confederate activity in the Valley.<sup>6</sup>

The final, and largest Union force of roughly one hundred and forty thousand men was positioned around Fortress Monroe on the Virginia Peninsula (thirty-five thousand of this one hundred and forty thousand had yet to reach the Peninsula in early April). Carried by water to the Peninsula, this army was the primary component of McClellan's long awaited spring campaign. Under General McClellan's direct command, the objective of this army was the capture of the Confederate capital in Richmond.<sup>7</sup>

The Confederate forces throughout Virginia were

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<sup>6</sup>United States War Department, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, comp. Robert H. Scott (130 Volumes, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, Volume 11, Part 3, Page 53, 60-62 (Henceforth cited as OR).

<sup>7</sup>These figures were calculated by taking McClellan's reported total strength on March 31 and subtracting Banks', McDowell's, and Sumner's strengths. However, two of Sumner's divisions were later returned to the Peninsula, thereby increasing McClellan's strength by at least eighteen thousand men. OR, I, 11, pt. 3: 53



deployed in a defensive posture in which Southern troops were generally positioned opposite their Union counterparts. Thus, except for small garrisons deployed to protect various cities, the two major concentrations of Confederates were in the Valley and around Richmond. The former force, about ten thousand strong, was commanded by Major General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson; General Joseph E. Johnston commanded the latter force of approximately sixty thousand men.<sup>8</sup>

On April 4, 1862, the Union Army of the Potomac left its encampment around Fortress Monroe and began marching up the Virginia Peninsula toward Richmond. McClellan believed that an advance from the southeast via Fortress Monroe provided his army with a more secure avenue of attack than what could be had from northern Virginia. With Fortress Monroe behind him, the York River on his right, and the James River on his left, McClellan's flanks and rear were indeed protected from assault. In addition to the security it provided, McClellan maintained that the Peninsular route would encounter fewer obstacles, be they natural or man made. Although few if any in the Lincoln administration were convinced by McClellan's logic, most kept their objections to themselves in hopes that the campaign would somehow end the war.<sup>9</sup>

As the final elements of the Army of the Potomac

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<sup>8</sup>Boatner, 633.

<sup>9</sup>The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 166-68, 215-16.

prepared to load naval transports for the movement from Washington to Fortress Monroe, Lincoln and his military advisors became concerned over the safety of the Federal capital.<sup>10</sup> Such concern was justified considering the poor quality of the regiments McClellan had designated as the capital's garrison. In addition to its lack of discipline, the garrison's overall strength after detachments was several thousand men less than what McClellan had originally agreed to provide for the city's defense.<sup>11</sup> In response to this oversight, Lincoln ordered on April 3 that one Union corps be withheld from McClellan's army in order to strengthen the defense of the capital.<sup>12</sup> McClellan's subsequent protests against Lincoln's intervention were but the beginning of a protracted and dedicated effort by the general to regain control of the detached forces.

The issue of reinforcements was a constant source of friction between Lincoln and McClellan during the Peninsular Campaign. Throughout the month of April, communication between the two men took on a predictable pattern as it became increasingly centered around the subject. McClellan's letters and dispatches typically began with an

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<sup>10</sup>Congress, Senate, Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, 37th Cong., 3rd sess., 1863, Rep. Com. No. 108 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), pt. 1: 261.

<sup>11</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 3: 56, 60-62.

<sup>12</sup>The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 5 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 179.

overall summary of his army's progress, but ended with pleas for more troops.<sup>13</sup> Lincoln's correspondence, the nature of which became less polite and more formal as the campaign progressed, usually reminded McClellan of the vast forces already under the general's command and asked that caution be replaced with celerity.<sup>14</sup> Predictably, such communication was ineffective in bringing about a satisfactory agreement concerning McClellan's troop strength, or his rate of advance.

The beginning of May offered little promise of renewed cooperation between the President and his general. The reinforcement controversy had taken on a momentum of its own, and become a primary factor in the deterioration of Lincoln's relations with McClellan. On May 1, in response to McClellan's request for more artillery, Lincoln fired off a telegram to the general which accused him of "indefinite procrastination." "Is anything to be done?" Lincoln asked in obvious frustration.<sup>15</sup> McClellan, however, was unaffected by Lincoln's sense of urgency. The size of the forces arrayed against him, combined with Lincoln's reduction of his own force by forty-five thousand men, was to McClellan adequate justification for a cautious

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<sup>13</sup>The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 231, 233, 241, 249.

<sup>14</sup>The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, vol. 5, 182, 184-85, 203.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., vol. 5, 203.

advance.<sup>16</sup>

Lincoln's reluctance to reinforce McClellan was based on his belief that the troops necessary for the procedure could only be obtained by reducing the forces protecting Washington. Furthermore, the body of troops that McClellan fervently requested was the large infantry corps of Major General Irvin McDowell.<sup>17</sup> Forty thousand strong, it had been McDowell's corps that Lincoln had earlier withheld from McClellan on April 3. To Lincoln however, watching that corps float down the Potomac to the Peninsula was as objectionable in May as it had been in April.<sup>18</sup>

Irvin McDowell was not among the most popular of Union generals in 1862. A robust individual, with a knack for speaking his mind, he was highly sensitive to how others perceived him. Throughout the United States McDowell was best known as the Union commander who lost the Battle of Bull Run - the first major engagement of the war. Because of that defeat, he had been replaced by McClellan as commander of the North's eastern army, and demoted to command of a corps. In spite of his misfortune, McDowell was an intelligent and capable officer.<sup>19</sup>

By mid-May, McDowell, who was taking his orders

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<sup>16</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 3: 53.

<sup>17</sup>The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 232, 234.

<sup>18</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 3: 173.

<sup>19</sup>Boatner, 531.

directly from Lincoln, had moved south from Washington and positioned his corps in and around the town of Fredericksburg.<sup>20</sup> Lincoln placed McDowell's troops in the Fredericksburg area because he believed that their presence there shielded Washington from any Confederate thrust from the south. In addition, Lincoln maintained that such a placement kept McDowell's corps in position to move into the Shenandoah Valley should Federal forces there need assistance in controlling "Stonewall" Jackson.<sup>21</sup> Lincoln came to realize, however, that McDowell's corps could reinforce McClellan without jeopardizing its obligations to other areas.

On May 16, after having received a telegram in which McClellan openly begged for more men, Lincoln finally decided to reinforce the Army of the Potomac.<sup>22</sup> In so doing, Lincoln initiated within the Peninsular Campaign a sub-campaign in which the Confederates desperately sought to prevent the Union from reinforcing McClellan's army near

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<sup>20</sup>Congress, Senate, Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, pt 1: 262-63; George B. McClellan, Report on the Organization and Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1864; repr., New York: Libraries Press, 1970), 160.

<sup>21</sup>The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, vol. 5, 184; OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 31-32.

<sup>22</sup>When Lincoln actually decided to reinforce McClellan is unclear. On May 15, he sent McClellan a vaguely worded message in which he would not commit to reinforcing the general. Stanton, however, issued the reinforcement orders on May 17. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that Lincoln made up his mind sometime on May 16. OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 26-27, 28; pt. 3: 173.

Richmond. The critical, but forgotten, strategic duel that ensued ranged over the fifty miles between Richmond and Fredericksburg, and became the centerpiece around which both sides directed their campaigns in Virginia.

## CHAPTER II

### STRATEGIC PREPARATIONS AND MANEUVERING

After laying siege to Confederate defenses at Yorktown in April, and fighting a sharp battle at Williamsburg on May 5, the Army of the Potomac was slowly but steadily closing in upon Richmond. As it did, the Confederate high command became increasingly concerned over the possibility that McDowell's corps might advance south from Fredericksburg. According to Confederate General Robert E. Lee, such a movement "would not only open an attack upon Richmond, but might jeopardize the safety of the [Confederate army on] the Peninsula by threatening its rear."<sup>1</sup> At the very least, it would significantly strengthen the Union forces assaulting Richmond. The nature of Confederate strategy in Virginia therefore began to revolve around Richmond's vulnerability to attack from the north. That the Confederates were in any way prepared to offer an organized defense of the critical area between Richmond and Fredericksburg was largely attributable to the efforts of General Lee.

General Lee's role during the Peninsular Campaign was that of military advisor to Confederate President Jefferson Davis. From this ambiguous but influential position Lee exercised considerable control over Confederate military

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<sup>1</sup>OR, I, 12, pt. 3: 875.

affairs.<sup>2</sup> His exceptional ability to read a strategic situation, and then formulate an effective plan of action was vital to the Confederate defense of Richmond. Unlike President Davis and General Johnston, who focused their attention almost exclusively on McClellan's advance from the southeast, General Lee's strategic perspective included the entire Virginia theater.

Since early April, when McDowell had first appeared near Fredericksburg, Lee had recognized the likelihood of a Federal advance on Richmond from the north. Lee also understood that a Federal thrust into the area between Richmond and Fredericksburg would "interrupt the railroad communication with Generals Jackson and Ewell" in and around the Shenandoah Valley.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Lee had funneled every available regiment he could obtain into the critical area.<sup>4</sup>

Lee's effort to establish Confederate strength north of Richmond produced mixed results. In a little over one week Lee managed to gather approximately sixteen thousand Confederates between Richmond and Fredericksburg (the majority of these troops were acquired from Confederate commands in North Carolina). This force, though, was not

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<sup>2</sup>Freeman, 1: 144-46.

<sup>3</sup>In mid-May, the six thousand men of Major General Richard S. Ewell's division were added to Jackson's command. Jackson's force therefore swelled from ten thousand to sixteen thousand. QR, I, 11, pt. 3: 510-11.

<sup>4</sup>QR, I, 9: 462, 465-68.



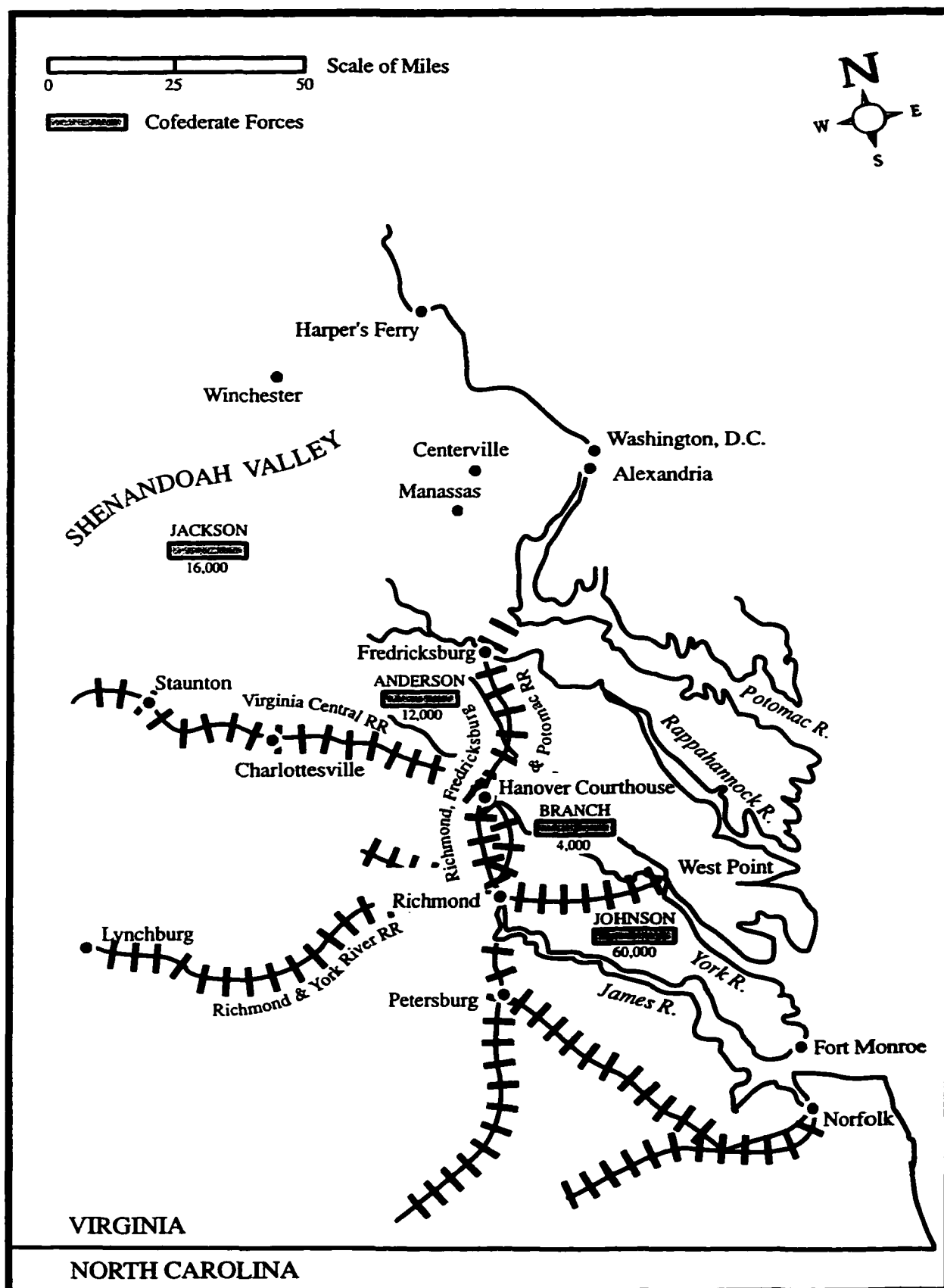


Fig. 2 Confederate Forces in Mid May, 1862.

concentrated into one group.

Roughly twelve thousand of Lee's makeshift force were positioned just south of Fredericksburg under the command of Brigadier General Joseph R. Anderson (see Fig. 2). The primary purpose of this division was to contain McDowell's Federals at Fredericksburg.<sup>5</sup> The remaining four thousand, under Brigadier General Lawrence O'Bryan Branch, were needed in the vicinity of Hanover Courthouse to guard key Confederate rail lines. As a result, neither command was strong enough to seriously hinder a Union thrust from Fredericksburg. A successful Confederate defense of the area was therefore dependent upon the ability of the two forces to unite in time to oppose McDowell's anticipated advance.

On May 20, 1862, McClellan and his Army of the Potomac advanced to within twelve miles of the Confederate capital of Richmond.<sup>6</sup> Two days earlier, on May 18, McClellan had received official word from Stanton that McDowell had been ordered to march south to join him. Stanton's message directed McClellan to extend his "right wing to the north of Richmond[,]" with the objective of uniting with McDowell.

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<sup>5</sup>Anderson's exact strength is not known. Confederate correspondence refers to three brigades, as well as artillery and about 450 cavalrymen, as being under Anderson's command. Anderson's own brigade contained 4,000 men. Since the other brigades under him were comprised of an equal number of regiments it is safe to estimate his overall strength at twelve thousand. OR, I, 9: 459, 462; I, 12, pt. 3: 873-74; I, 11, pt. 3: 649.

<sup>6</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 25.

Stanton further stated that McClellan was not permitted to shift McDowell's corps in any way that would leave Washington uncovered. Although the reacquisition of McDowell's corps had at times seemed as important to McClellan as the capture of Richmond, he was anything but happy over the news of McDowell's movement.<sup>7</sup>

The primary cause of McClellan's displeasure was Lincoln's insistence that the reinforcements march overland to join the Army of the Potomac. "I fear there is little hope that [McDowell] can join me overland in time for the coming battle[,] " stated McClellan on May 21 in response to Lincoln's directions.<sup>8</sup> The general continued by reminding Lincoln that any delays would be dangerous, a statement the President must have found strange coming from McClellan. McClellan assured Lincoln that sending McDowell by water would be a faster alternative than marching from Fredericksburg. Behind McClellan's apparent sense of urgency, however, was a desire to have complete control over any reinforcements sent to his army. Ignoring Lincoln's expressed orders that Washington was not to be uncovered, McClellan convinced himself that if McDowell's corps came by water he would somehow have more control over its involvement in the great battle for Richmond. He therefore used the supposed quickness of the water route to entice

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>8</sup>McClellan, Report on the Organization and Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac, 197.

Lincoln to change his mind on the issue.<sup>9</sup>

McClellan's efforts to have McDowell's corps sent by water had no effect on Lincoln. The President's commitment to the overland route stemmed from his realization that it allowed him to reinforce McClellan without removing McDowell from supporting distance of the Federals in the Valley.<sup>10</sup> Another benefit of the march, contrary to McClellan's claims, was that it would allow McDowell to reach the Army of the Potomac in less time. "By land [McDowell] can reach you in five days," Lincoln assured McClellan in a telegram on May 21, "whereas by water he would not reach you in two weeks, judging by past experience."<sup>11</sup> Of course, Lincoln's favorite aspect of the overland route was that it effectively screened Washington from a Confederate thrust from Richmond. On May 21, in obedience to Lincoln's instruction, McClellan began shifting his army to the north of Richmond (see Fig. 3).

In an effort to ensure McDowell's understanding of his role and objective in the reinforcement process, Lincoln and Stanton went to Fredericksburg to visit the general on May 23. They found that McDowell's troops were generally ready for the march south (Brigadier General James Shield's

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<sup>9</sup>The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 265.

<sup>10</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 27, 32.

<sup>11</sup>The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, vol. 5, 226.

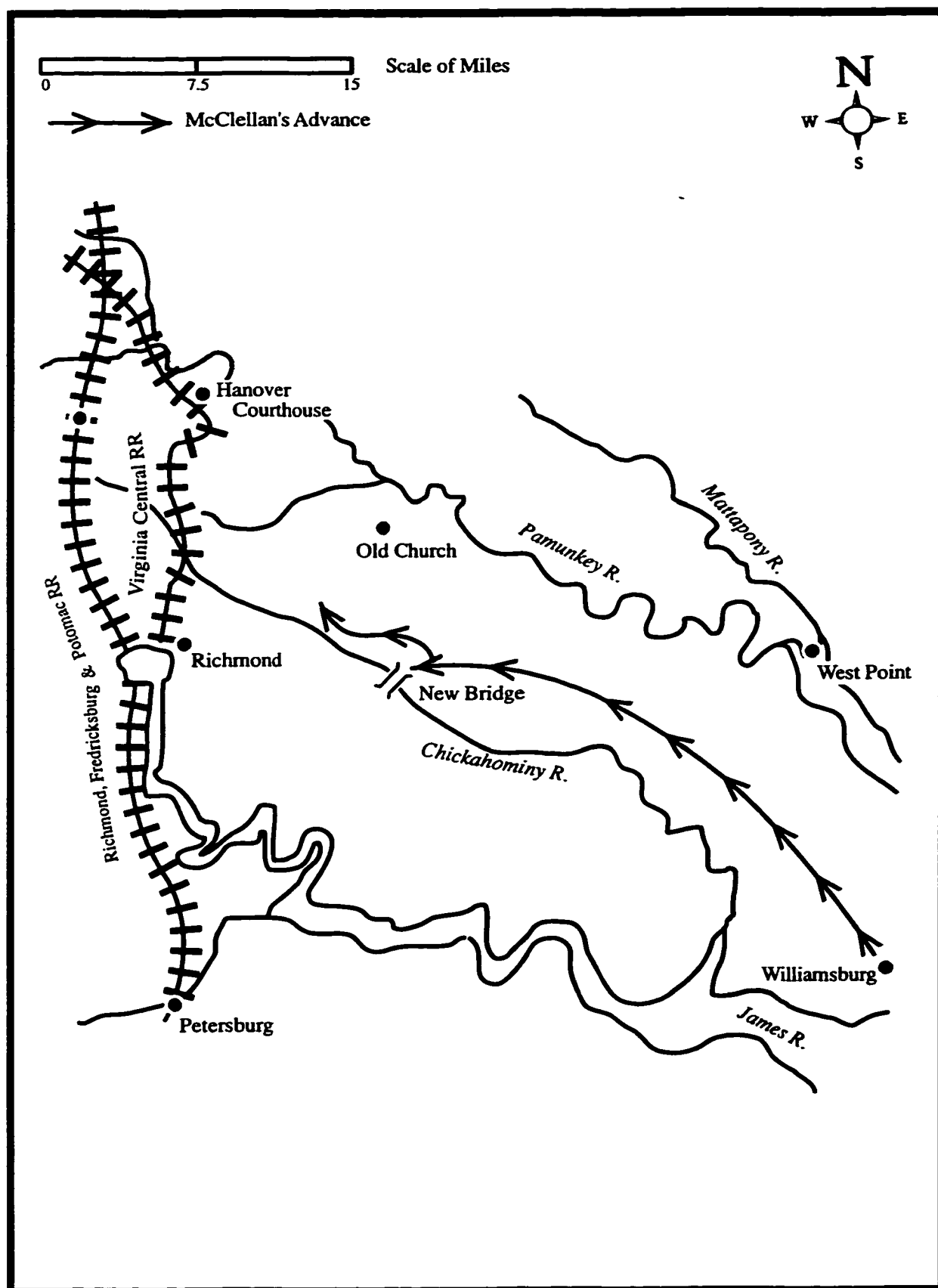


Fig. 3 McClellan Approaches Richmond and Shifts to the North.

division was not completely ready as it had only recently arrived from detached service in the Valley).<sup>12</sup> More importantly, the President and Secretary of War were apparently satisfied with McDowell's comprehension of his instructions, which simply directed him to link up with McClellan without in any way uncovering the capital.<sup>13</sup>

For General McDowell, the task of uniting his corps with the Army of the Potomac involved several key challenges. For example, General Anderson, with twelve thousand Confederates, was intent on disrupting any Federal attempt to advance south from Fredericksburg. If Anderson could not defeat McDowell he could at least destroy key bridges spanning the numerous rivers between Richmond and Fredericksburg. McDowell would then be forced to either search out suitable fords, or rebuild the bridges; either option required time. Yet, before McDowell could even set out he had to prepare forty thousand men for a march through enemy territory to an unspecified destination. This was a challenge in itself.

In spite of such obstacles, McDowell demonstrated considerable skill and foresight in planning his march to McClellan (see Fig. 4). Confident of his ability to maneuver Anderson out of his position south of Fredericksburg, McDowell gave little consideration to the

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<sup>12</sup>Congress, Senate, Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, pt. 1: 263.

<sup>13</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 28.

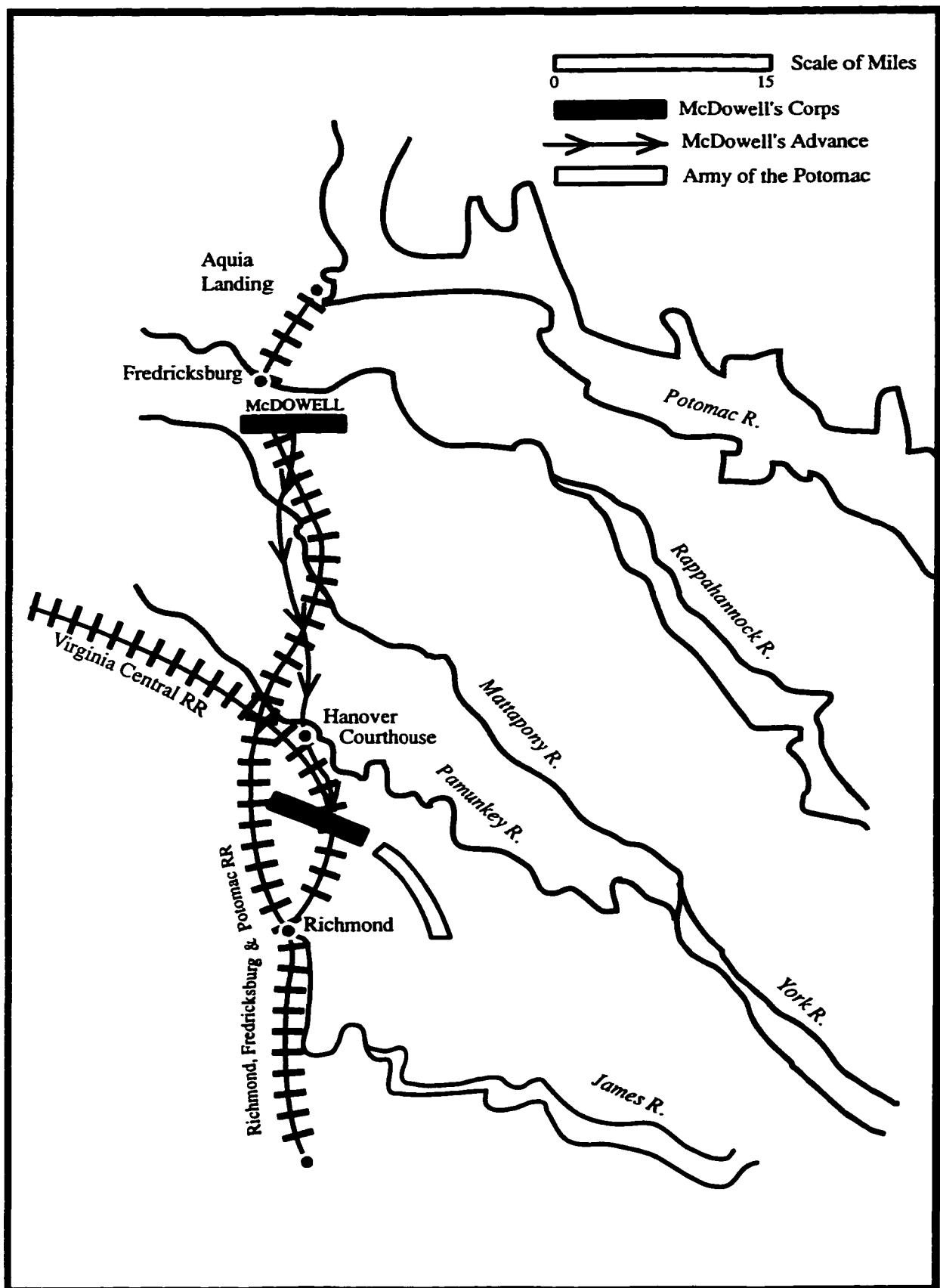


Fig. 4 McDowell's Proposed Route of Advance.

possibility of a serious Confederate delaying action.<sup>14</sup> McDowell's preparation of a pontoon bridge to be carried along with his command virtually eliminated the potential for lengthy delays in crossing rivers. After accurately deducing that the linkup with McClellan was likely to occur in the area of Hanover Courthouse, McDowell decided that he would draw his supplies via the York River as opposed to an overland supply line from Fredericksburg. He therefore decided to conduct his march without the burden of a supply line. Since this meant that his force would live off of what it carried until it gained access to the York, McDowell ordered that plenty of provisions be carried along.<sup>15</sup> Finally, McDowell sent a telegram to McClellan which attempted to initiate communication between the two generals. Although McClellan had earlier complained over the absence of such communication, he did not respond.<sup>16</sup>

As a result of his excellent preparations, McDowell was able to inform the president, during the May 23 visit, that his entire command could begin its movement on Sunday, May 25. A pleasantly surprised Lincoln told McDowell that it was not necessary for the corps to move out on the Sabbath. Lincoln instead suggested they use that Sunday to make

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<sup>14</sup>Congress, Senate, Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, pt. 1: 268.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 268.

<sup>16</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 3: 186, pt. 1: 27; The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 270-71.



absolutely sure that the march got underway on Monday, the 26th.<sup>17</sup>

Lincoln and Stanton returned to Washington the night of May 23. Early on the 24th Lincoln telegraphed McClellan to inform him of McDowell's impending movement. Lincoln also suggested, probably at the request of McDowell, that McClellan send a force to "cut off [Anderson's] supplies from Richmond," preserve key railroad bridges, "and intercept the enemy's retreat[.]"<sup>18</sup> The suggestion made good sense. McClellan, pleased with the prospect of finally regaining McDowell's services, was quite willing to comply. On May 24, McClellan directed a division of infantry to move in the direction of Hanover Courthouse, a point from which such measures could be carried out.<sup>19</sup>

Generals Lee and Anderson had, for two weeks, feared that McClellan might launch just such an expedition. In a telegram dated May 10, Lee advised Anderson to use "extreme watchfulness and caution . . . to guard against any attempt to cut off your command [from Richmond] . . . while engaging

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<sup>17</sup>Earlier in the war McDowell had begun a march on a Sunday and "had been very much condemned for it all over the country." He was undoubtedly relieved when Lincoln told him to postpone his departure until Monday. Congress, Senate, Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, pt. 1, 263.

<sup>18</sup>Lincoln to McClellan, 24 May, 1862, telegram no. 6, from the George B. McClellan Papers, Reel 23, Shelf no. DM 16,004, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>19</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 30; Porter to McClellan, 3:50 a.m., 24 May, 1862, George B. McClellan Papers, Reel 23, Shelf No. DM 16,004, Library of Congress.

you in front[.]”<sup>20</sup> Anderson’s ominous reports on the size and activity of the Federal force in Fredericksburg only added to Lee’s concern for Anderson’s perilous position.<sup>21</sup>

On May 16, in an effort to counter the Union threat to Anderson and the Hanover area, Lee ordered General Jackson to attack the Federals in the Shenandoah Valley. Lee hoped that Jackson’s attack would deny McDowell any additional reinforcements, and perhaps even draw Federals away from Fredericksburg. Lee did not specify a date for Jackson’s attack, he simply indicated that he wanted it done “speedily.”<sup>22</sup>

By pure chance Jackson’s offensive erupted on May 23, the very day that Lincoln visited McDowell at Fredericksburg.<sup>23</sup> The first reports of Jackson’s assault reached Lincoln on May 24 via telegraph, but the news had little effect on the President. In the same May 24 telegram that informed McClellan of McDowell’s impending movement, Lincoln calmly mentioned that the Confederates had defeated a small Union force at Front Royal. However, when it became apparent that Jackson intended to carry his offensive in the

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<sup>20</sup>OR, I, 12, pt. 3: 885-86.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 873, 885-86.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 892-93.

<sup>23</sup>Jackson began his campaign by defeating a force of one thousand Federals at Front Royal, Virginia. He then advanced rapidly on Winchester, nearly trapping Banks’ Federal army in the process. On May 25 Jackson defeated Banks at Winchester, and continued his advance northward.

direction of Harpers Ferry, Lincoln reacted swiftly.<sup>24</sup> Only hours after the President's initial May 24 telegram to McClellan, Lincoln sent another that announced the suspension of McDowell's movement. In the telegram an anxious Lincoln explained that he wanted "to throw Gen. Fremont's force and part of Gen. McDowell's in [Jackson's] rear."<sup>25</sup>

McClellan's reaction to the postponement of McDowell's movement was odd considering his usual penchant for protests. McClellan's response read: "Telegram of [4:00] PM received. I will make my calculations accordingly."<sup>26</sup> Why the general accepted the news so placidly is uncertain. Perhaps McClellan hoped that the diversion of half of the Fredericksburg troops into the Valley would finally convince Lincoln to send him the remainder by water, a contingency that McClellan continued to anticipate. A more likely explanation is that McClellan did not consider the postponement of McDowell's march as a major change in plans. Realizing that the operation "was simply suspended, not

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<sup>24</sup>OR, I, 12, pt. 3: 219; Lincoln to McClellan, 24 May, 1862, telegraph no. 6 and 7, from the George B. McClellan Papers, Reel 23, Shelf no. DM 16,004, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>25</sup>General John C. Fremont's fifteen thousand Union troops were brought into the Shenandoah Valley from duty in extreme western Virginia. Lincoln's plan was to bring Fremont, Banks, and McDowell against Jackson. Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>After receiving Lincoln's telegram postponing the reinforcement operation, McClellan cancelled his orders of that morning directing a division toward Hanover Courthouse. OR, I, 11, pt. 3: 190.

revoked," McClellan understood that he "was not at liberty to abandon the northern approach [on Richmond] ." <sup>27</sup>

McClellan could only wait for the rescheduling of the postponed reinforcement operation. McDowell, however, inherited an entirely new, and unexpected challenge. McDowell's new orders directed him to lay "aside for the present the movement on Richmond [in order] to put twenty thousand men in motion at once for the Shenandoah[.] " <sup>28</sup> The goal of McDowell's new mission, as described by Lincoln, was the capture of Jackson's command. To ensure that McDowell executed his orders promptly, and to report on any unnecessary delays, Lincoln sent Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase to Fredericksburg on May 25. <sup>29</sup>

Unlike McClellan, McDowell was very outspoken in his objections to Lincoln's decision to postpone the march to Richmond. "This is a crushing blow to us[,]" McDowell said in a telegram to Stanton. <sup>30</sup> McDowell was also displeased that he was expected to play a major role in Lincoln's plan to trap Jackson. "Everything now depends upon the celerity and vigor of your movement[,]" said Lincoln in a telegram to McDowell. An agitated McDowell quickly replied that he was "entirely beyond helping distance of General Banks; no

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<sup>27</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 31.

<sup>28</sup>The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, vol. 5, 232-33.

<sup>29</sup>OR, I, 12, pt. 3: 220.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 220.

celerity or vigor will avail so far as [Banks] is concerned." Intent upon making his point, McDowell continued by warning the President that moving his corps from Fredericksburg to the Valley would "gain nothing for you there, and shall lose much for you here."<sup>31</sup>

McClellan and McDowell each understood that the purpose of Jackson's Valley offensive was to prevent a linkup between the Army of the Potomac and the Federals at Fredericksburg.<sup>32</sup> Whether or not Lincoln could see this, or was simply obsessed with eliminating Jackson's constant threat to Washington, is a source of much debate among historians. What has been overshadowed by this debate is that Lincoln's counter-order sent only half of McDowell's corps into the Valley. The divisions of Brigadier Generals George McCall and Rufus King, together totaling twenty thousand Union troops, remained at Fredericksburg.

While in the process of sending half of his corps north to suppress Jackson, McDowell began to act rather curiously. On May 25, he accurately reported that Anderson's Confederates had fallen back from their position south of Fredericksburg toward Hanover Junction. On the same day, McDowell informed Stanton that he was sending the divisions of McCall and King to make a "strong demonstration" to the south of Fredericksburg. The object of this demonstration,

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 220.

<sup>32</sup>The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 276; OR, I, 12, pt. 3: 220-1.

explained McDowell, was "to mislead the enemy as to our movements and intentions" to trap Jackson.<sup>33</sup>

Why McDowell felt compelled to make this demonstration is a mystery. No one in the Union high command had suggested such a thing. Since McDowell had only that day reported that the Confederates had retreated to the Hanover area, it is unclear what enemy he intended to "mislead." That he used twenty thousand men in his demonstration is also peculiar in that half, or even a quarter, of that number would have sufficed. McDowell, though, was trying to discourage Lincoln and Stanton from sending any more of his troops from Fredericksburg to the Valley. If McCall and King were busy demonstrating south of Fredericksburg it would be unwise, and inconvenient, to send them into the Valley after Jackson.

Even after Lincoln cancelled the march to join McClellan, McDowell still hoped that he would be allowed to take his remaining twenty thousand men and go on to Richmond. McDowell tried to convince Lincoln and Stanton that his presence was very much needed at Fredericksburg, and that a subordinate would be just as capable of catching Jackson as himself.<sup>34</sup> Lincoln was not convinced. On May 26, after two days of indecision, Lincoln expressed his belief that McDowell could better direct the movements of

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 232.

<sup>34</sup>Congress, Senate, Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, pt. 1: 263-64.

his divisions from somewhere closer to the Valley. McDowell consented, but strongly recommended that McCall and King be allowed to remain below Fredericksburg.<sup>35</sup>

To accommodate Lincoln's wishes, McDowell transferred his headquarters to Manassas (roughly thirty three miles north of Fredericksburg). In his absence, direct command of the two divisions below Fredericksburg fell to George McCall. Sixty years of age in 1862, McCall was a West Point graduate and veteran of the Seminole and Mexican wars. Having received no orders to continue the demonstration, McCall established camp roughly eight miles south of the town. From there he sent out the cavalry brigade of Brigadier General George Bayard to reconnoiter the area between Hanover and Fredericksburg. Bayard's main objective was to collect any information concerning the strength and destination of Anderson's retreating Confederates.<sup>36</sup>

Anderson's withdrawal from before Fredericksburg began late on the night of May 24, and continued without Federal interference until evening of May 25. Anderson halted his march south near the intersection of the Virginia Central and Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac railroads. That intersection, known as Hanover Junction, is located roughly eight miles northeast of Hanover Courthouse. Once there, Anderson notified General Branch, whose brigade was in the

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 263-64; QR, I, 12, pt. 3: 221, 229-30, 243.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 253, 284-85.

proximity of the courthouse, that he wanted to unify the two commands. The following day, however, Anderson sent word that he was moving his command further south via the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad, and that the two forces should unite closer to Richmond.<sup>37</sup> For whatever reason, Branch failed to receive this communication.

Although Anderson's retreat came as a surprise to the Federals, it had been anticipated by Confederate commanders for several days. The actual reason for the withdrawal had little to do with the Federal buildup at Fredericksburg. Rather, it was McClellan's shift to the north of Richmond, which threatened to cut Anderson off from the Confederate capital, that caused General Johnston to give the recall order.<sup>38</sup>

As Johnston's fear of a linkup between McDowell and McClellan increased, he began to display more interest in the affairs of the Confederate forces north of Richmond. After ordering Anderson away from Fredericksburg, Johnston indicated to Branch and Anderson that he expected their commands to unite at some point.<sup>39</sup> In expressing that expectation, Johnston gave his subordinates conflicting ideas of exactly where that unification of force was to occur. As a result, Anderson and his men rode the rails

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<sup>37</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 3: 544, 550-51.

<sup>38</sup>Joseph E. Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1874), 130.

<sup>39</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 3: 537, 543, 544; Johnston, 130.



toward Richmond, while Branch waited for Anderson to appear somewhere near Hanover Courthouse. The closer Anderson's division got to Richmond the more exposed became Branch's position at Hanover Courthouse.

On May 26, while preparing for his grand assault upon Richmond, General McClellan's attention was also drawn to the area between Richmond and Fredericksburg. One factor that aroused McClellan's concern for the area was a telegram from McDowell to Stanton. The telegram, which Stanton forwarded to McClellan, stated that the Confederates "had fallen back from Fredericksburg toward Richmond, and that General McDowell's advance was 8 miles south of the Rappahannock."<sup>40</sup> In reality, McDowell was not advancing at all. The troops south of Fredericksburg were merely carrying out McDowell's unnecessary demonstrations, but to McClellan it appeared that his reinforcements were finally on their way to join him. Then, on the same day, he received reports of a sizeable force of Confederates near Hanover Courthouse.<sup>41</sup>

McClellan's intelligence regarding the Confederates at Hanover Courthouse was obtained from Union reconnaissance patrols conducted from May 24-26. The general's scouts accurately estimated the number of Confederates in the

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<sup>40</sup>George B. McClellan, McClellan's Own Story (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1887), 369.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 368-69.

Hanover area at between three to five thousand men.<sup>42</sup>

McClellan viewed this enemy force as a serious obstacle to the anticipated juncture with McDowell. In addition, he saw the Confederates at Hanover Courthouse as a threat to the communications of the Army of the Potomac.<sup>43</sup> Unwilling to assault Richmond with a large enemy force beyond his flank, McClellan contemplated sending an expedition to eliminate the Confederate force.

Word of McDowell's advance, and the news of the Confederate presence at Hanover Courthouse may have been enough to convince McClellan to initiate operations in the Hanover area. If not, a telegram from Lincoln received during the late evening of May 26 was the deciding factor. Lincoln's message requested that the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad be cut in order to stop the flow of supplies from Richmond to Anderson and Jackson. McClellan realized that the most logical place to disrupt that rail line was at Hanover Junction. McClellan, therefore, interpreted the President's request as yet another reason to dispatch an expedition to the Hanover

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<sup>42</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 33, 666-68, 673-76.

<sup>43</sup>McClellan was worried that a Confederate force at Hanover Courthouse could advance down the opposite side of the Pamunkey River, and then use the river crossings as an avenue into the Union rear. McClellan did not actually specify this fear, but his efforts to destroy those river crossings revealed his concern. McClellan, McClellan's Own Story, 368.

area.<sup>44</sup>

Shortly after receiving Lincoln's May 26 telegram, McClellan ordered a division of roughly twelve thousand Union soldiers under the command of Brigadier General Fitz-John Porter to Hanover Courthouse.<sup>45</sup> Porter's main objective, as described by McClellan, was to clear the area beyond the army's right flank as far as the courthouse, and beyond if possible. Along the way he was to destroy any bridges, railroad or otherwise, which could assist the enemy in gaining McClellan's flank and rear. Once at Hanover Courthouse, Porter was expected to cut Confederate lines of communication and supply which connected Richmond with Confederate forces in northern Virginia. Finally, Porter's expedition was to serve as a means by which McDowell's twenty thousand troops, advancing from Fredericksburg, could be united with the Army of the Potomac.<sup>46</sup>

McClellan's selection of Fitz-John Porter as the commander of the Hanover expedition was sound. A professional soldier before the Civil War, Porter had fought

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 368-69.

<sup>45</sup>Morell's division contained 530 officers and 11,192 enlisted men for a total of 11,722. 5th Corps returns for May 1862, Fitz-John Porter Papers, Container 3, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>46</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 680-81; Fitz-John Porter, "Hanover Court House and Gaines's Mill," in Battles and Leaders, ed. Robert Johnson and Clarence Buel (New York: Century, 1887-88) 2: 319.

with distinction in the conflict with Mexico. After serving as an instructor of cavalry and artillery tactics at West Point, Porter had participated in frontier assignments, and the Utah Expedition. Prior to May, 1862, Porter's experience in the Civil War had been fairly undramatic. When ordered by McClellan to undertake the Hanover expedition, Porter, a brigadier general, was in command of an entire Union corps. The Hanover Courthouse expedition was, therefore, Porter's first real opportunity to demonstrate his skill as a battlefield commander.<sup>47</sup>

The force under Porter's command for the expedition consisted of one infantry division, led by Brigadier General George W. Morell, and an unattached infantry brigade under Colonel Gouverneur K. Warren. Morell's division was made up of three separate brigades. The First and Second Brigades were commanded by Brigadier General John H. Martindale and Colonel James McQuade respectively. The Third Brigade was led by Brigadier General Daniel Butterfield. Warren's brigade was provisional in nature, and included a battery of artillery and a regiment of cavalry in addition to its three infantry units. Finally, Porter's command included a small brigade of cavalry, with a battery of light artillery attached, and Colonel Hiram Berdan's regiment of green-clad sharpshooters.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Boatner, 661.

<sup>48</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 33-34, 681-82, 698-700.

Porter's plan for carrying out McClellan's instructions was rather simple, and reflected Porter's willingness, if not desire, to engage in battle. Under Porter's plan, Morell's division was to march at first light on May 27 from New Bridge to Hanover Courthouse (see Fig. 5). New Bridge, which spanned the Chickahominy River six miles northeast of Richmond, was located approximately thirteen miles south-southeast of Hanover Courthouse. Fortunately for Porter's troops the roads from New Bridge to the courthouse were fairly direct, limiting the distance of the actual march to about fifteen miles.<sup>49</sup>

Prior to May 27, Colonel Warren's brigade was busy wrecking bridges and railroads spanning the lower Pamunkey. These structures were viewed by the Union high command as potential avenues for Confederate raids into the Union rear. Warren's role in Porter's expedition was to be two fold. First, he was given the task of destroying the bridges along the upper Pamunkey. While executing that assignment, Warren was also expected to operate in concert with Morell's movement by marching his command parallel to the Pamunkey toward Hanover Courthouse. This line of march would bring Warren to Hanover Courthouse from the east, and thereby place his brigade on the flank of any Confederates

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 681-82; Calvin D. Cowles, comp., The Official Military Atlas of the Civil War (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891-1895; reprint, New York: Gramercy, 1983), Map XVI, Map C no. 1 and 2 (Map references are to reprint addition).

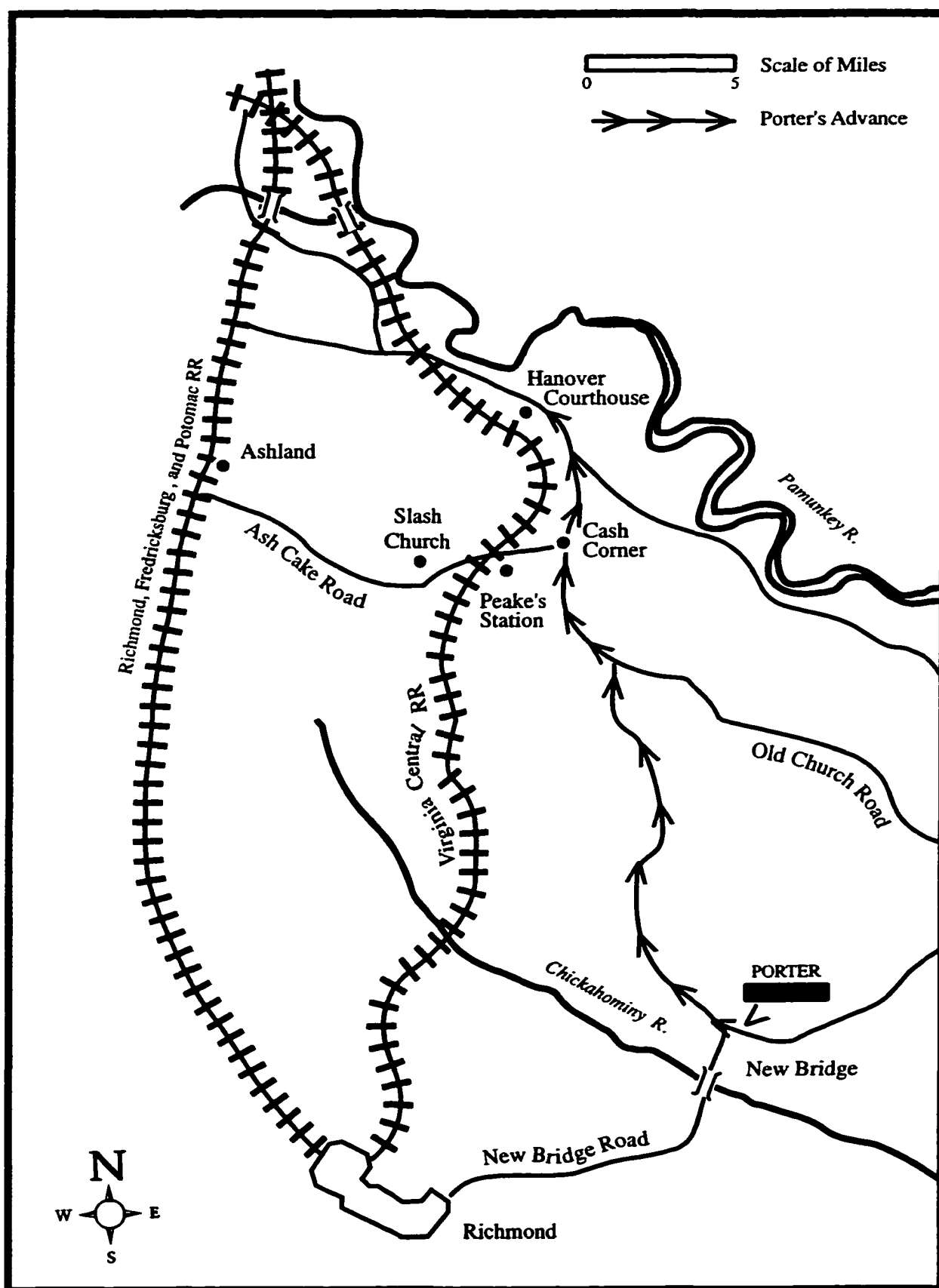


Fig. 5 Porter's March to Hanover Courthouse, May 27.

opposing Morell's advance from the south.<sup>50</sup>

The Confederate force which was the target in all of Porter's planning was Branch's brigade of North Carolina infantry. On May 26, Branch's command was bivouacked two and a half miles to the south of Hanover Courthouse, at Slash Church. Branch's orders from General Joseph E. Johnston directed him to serve as a link between Johnston's army at Richmond and Anderson's force just south of Fredericksburg. In addition, Branch was responsible for the protection of both the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad and the Virginia Central Railroad between Richmond and Fredericksburg.<sup>51</sup>

To accomplish the difficult task before him, Branch had the 7th, 18th, 28th, 33d, and 37th North Carolina (NC) infantry regiments of his own brigade, the 12th North Carolina (unattached), and the 45th Georgia (unattached). For artillery Branch had the battery of A.C. Latham. Altogether Branch's brigade contained approximately 4,500 men. Although Branch had no cavalry under his direct command, General Anderson did send a regiment of Virginia cavalry to the Hanover area with orders to cooperate with Branch. In addition, Brigadier General J. E. B. Stuart sent his 4th Virginia Cavalry to operate to the immediate west of

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<sup>50</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 680-82; The Official Military Atlas of the Civil War, Map XVII no. 1, C no. 1 and 2.

<sup>51</sup>James H. Lane, "History of Lane's North Carolina Brigade," Southern Historical Society Papers, 7 (1879): 103; OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 741.

the courthouse.<sup>52</sup>

Although Branch's brigade eventually proved itself to be one of the toughest in the South's eastern army, in late May of 1862 the men were a fairly disgruntled collection of soldiers. Their misfortune had begun in March, when the brigade suffered a stinging defeat at New Bern, North Carolina. Then, in April, came the passage of the First Conscription Act by the Confederate Congress. This piece of legislation bound all white males between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five to three years of service in the Confederate military. For those individuals who had already served a year in the army, which was most of Branch's brigade, another two years of service was required. Not surprisingly this did little to endear the Confederate government to this group of North Carolinians.<sup>53</sup>

Yet another blow to the brigade's morale occurred in early May when Branch was ordered to transfer his command to Virginia to participate in operations in that state. Many of Branch's troops believed that their obligation as soldiers was limited to the defense of North Carolina. The prospect of serving, and perhaps dying, for Virginia was

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<sup>52</sup>OR, I, 9: 460, 11, pt. 1: 741, pt. 3: 537, 540-41; Lane, "History of Lane's North Carolina Brigade," 103; Robert Krick, 9th Virginia Cavalry (Lynchburg, VA: H. E. Howard, 1982), 6; Kenneth L. Styles, 4th Virginia Cavalry (Lynchburg, VA: H. E. Howard, 1985), 11-12.

<sup>53</sup>Boatner, 172.



therefore objectionable to them.<sup>54</sup>

Morale was not the only problem which faced General Branch on the eve of Porter's advance. The practice of allowing units to elect their officers had left many of the brigade's regiments and companies with leaders of questionable ability. Another problem which was hardly unique to Branch's troops was the poor quality of weapons in the brigade. While one company of the 37th NC was equipped with high quality Enfield rifles, the soldiers of the 28th NC, one of Branch's largest regiments, carried old smooth-bore muskets which were "badly altered from flint to percussion." Not only were these muskets short-range weapons, and thus greatly inferior to the newer rifled muskets, but they could also be difficult to supply with ammunition.<sup>55</sup>

An additional concern for Branch was the condition of his artillery. When Latham's battery reported for duty with the brigade, on or about May 16, it was described as having only half the men necessary to operate the guns effectively.

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<sup>54</sup>McDaid, "'Four Years of Arduous Service': The History of the Branch-Lane Brigade in the Civil War," 49-50, 56-57.

<sup>55</sup>William Grover Morris to his wife, May 30 1862, Folder 1, in the William Groves Morris Papers #3626-Z, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; James H. Lane, "Twenty-Eighth North Carolina Infantry," Southern Historical Society Papers, 24, (1896), 327.

Worse yet, the battery's horses were completely untrained.<sup>56</sup>

Unlike Fitz John Porter, Lawrence O'Bryan Branch had no military experience prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War. Branch's background was in politics, and, like many political generals of the Civil War, he had learned from experience that political prestige did not guarantee military success. Branch's defeat at New Bern was not entirely his fault, but he had made tactical errors which contributed to the eventual collapse of his line. Shortly after the battle, some members of the North Carolina press began to call into question Branch's ability as a commander. Branch was highly sensitive to these criticisms, and it is doubtful that one month, and a transfer to Virginia, had removed them from his memory.<sup>57</sup>

Prior to May 26, the strategic duel north of Richmond between the Union and Confederate high commands was a Union failure. Lincoln and his generals did manage to organize a feasible reinforcement operation which promised to bring extreme pressure on the Confederates at Richmond. Superior Confederate strategy, however, was successful in causing a last-minute miscarriage of that plan. Taken completely by surprise by Thomas Jackson's offensive in the Shenandoah Valley, the Union high command disagreed on the proper response. They had transferred troops from the Valley to

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<sup>56</sup>Lawrence O'Bryan Branch Letter Book, in Branch Family Papers, Duke University, Durham.

<sup>57</sup>Boatner, 80; McDaid, 41-43.

Fredericksburg, and altered the direction of McClellan's attack on the Confederate capital, all to reinforce McClellan north of Richmond. In spite of such heavy commitments, Lincoln postponed McDowell's march to McClellan, and thereby validated Confederate strategy.

While Confederate strategy during early and middle May was successful in preventing a juncture between McClellan and McDowell, it did not negate the possibility that the two generals would unite at a later date. Understanding this, General Johnston took a more active role in Confederate affairs between Richmond and Fredericksburg. Lee's influence on events in the area was thereby reduced since his advisory role obliged him to defer to Johnston's decisions.<sup>58</sup> Johnston's directives, however, caused only confusion among Confederate commanders in the region, and left Branch's brigade in a dangerously exposed position. More importantly, by recalling Anderson from Fredericksburg Johnston unwittingly offered the twenty thousand Federals at Fredericksburg a clear line of march to Hanover Courthouse.

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<sup>58</sup>Freeman, 1: 204-5.

CHAPTER III  
THE BATTLE OF HANOVER COURTHOUSE

At around 4 A.M., May 27, Porter's Federals began their march to Hanover Courthouse during a driving thunderstorm. Porter's main column was arranged with Martindale's brigade in the lead. McQuade's brigade followed behind Martindale's troops, and Butterfield's brigade brought up the rear. The entire column was preceded by an advance guard of cavalry and light artillery led by Brigadier General William H. Emory.<sup>1</sup>

The first half of the day was truly an ordeal for the average soldier in Porter's command. Between the rain, and a 3:30 A.M. reveille, Porter's men had scarcely a chance to close their eyes before being called into ranks. Private Oliver Wilcox Norton, a bugler in the 83d Pennsylvania infantry, wrote in a letter home that they were rushed into line so quickly that there was "no time to make coffee," or a decent breakfast. Norton and his comrades therefore made due with crackers and canteen water.<sup>2</sup>

The rain, which the soldiers emphasized as particularly heavy, reduced the roads to cauldrons of mud. "The roads were horrible," Norton wrote "and the artillery was

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<sup>1</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 682, 698.

<sup>2</sup>Oliver Wilcox Norton, Army Letters 1861-1865 (Chicago: Privately printed, 1903), 82.

constantly getting stuck and causing delay."<sup>3</sup> As if the men were not wet enough, the destruction of local bridges made it necessary for the troops to wade several rain-swollen streams. Porter, perhaps guilty of understatement, later described the march to Hanover Courthouse as "laborious."<sup>4</sup>

Although the rain finally ended between 10:00 A.M. and noon, the soldiers' sufferings continued. According to Eugene Nash, the adjutant of the 44th New York, the "rain ceased and the sun came out blistering hot." The intense heat, said Nash, caused many individuals to leave the ranks. Private Norton described the heat as so bad that "officers and men gave out and lay by the roadside together, utterly unable to go any farther without rest." The misery of the heat was made all the worse by the heaviness of the men's wet wool uniforms. Most of those uniforms were undoubtedly still quite damp at the end of the day.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of the adversity, Porter's command managed to struggle its way to Cash Corner by noon. Cash Corner was an intersection of Old Church Road, which led to Hanover Courthouse, and Ash Cake Road, which ran in from Slash

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<sup>3</sup>Norton later played an interesting role in the creation of the famous evening tataroo referred to as Taps. General Butterfield, Norton's brigade commander, actually composed the legendary tune in July of 1862. In doing so, Butterfield relied upon Norton to transfer the General's whistling into a bugle call. Ibid., 82, 327-28.

<sup>4</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 684.

<sup>5</sup>Eugene A. Nash, History of the Forty-Fourth New York Volunteer Infantry (Dayton: Morningside, 1988), 74; Norton, 82.

Church (see Fig. 6). This intersection was two miles south of the courthouse and three miles east of Slash Church. Half way between Slash Church and Cash Corner the Virginia Central Railroad crossed Ash Cake Road. This was the area, two miles from its actual namesake, where the Battle of Hanover Courthouse was fought.<sup>6</sup>

Branch's decision to place his brigade at Slash Church was not based on the natural strength of the position, but rather on the maneuverability he would be afforded by the Ash Cake Road. Not only did this location provide Branch with a prime site for protecting the Virginia Central and Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac railroads, it also allowed him an avenue of retreat if attacked by a larger force.<sup>7</sup>

On the morning of May 27, Branch detached two of his regiments on special assignments. The 45th Georgia was sent six miles to the west to repair the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad, which Federal cavalry raiders had damaged on May 26. Meanwhile, the 28th NC regiment, under James H. Lane, was sent five miles east to Taliaferro's Mill to deal with a small party of Union cavalry along the Pamunkey. However, almost as soon as the 28th reached its destination, Lane received a report that a Federal column was advancing on Hanover Courthouse from the

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<sup>6</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 693, 701, 707; Cowles, comp., Map LXXXI no. 3.

<sup>7</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 741.

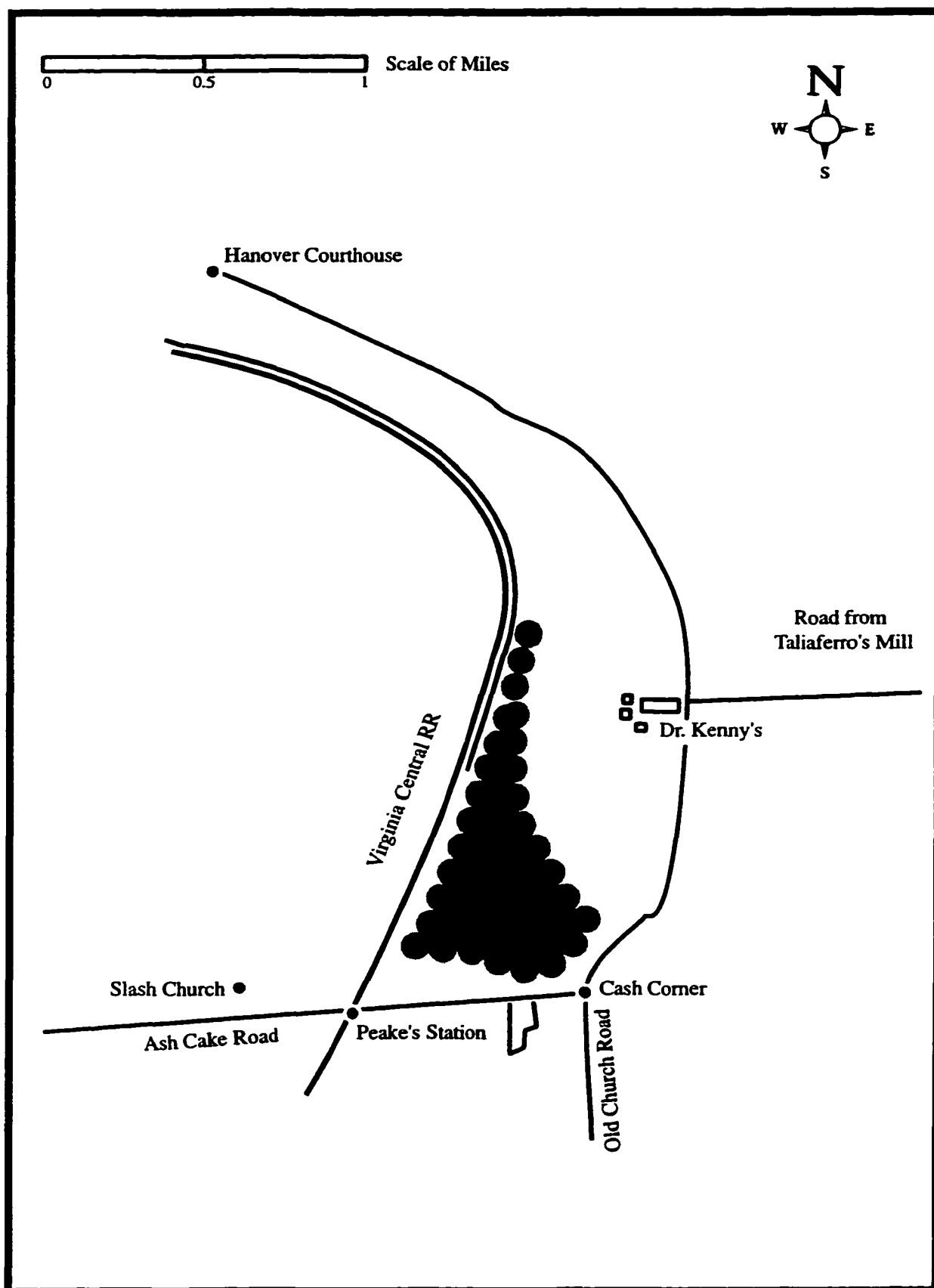


Fig. 6 Cash Corner and the Hanover Area.

south. Lane quickly ordered his troops to counter-march back toward Slash Church.<sup>8</sup>

When Porter's advanced guard reached Cash Corner, it cut off the 28th NC from the rest of Branch's brigade. Lane's only option was to attempt to retake Cash Corner and thereby regain access to Ash Cake Road. Although Lane had almost nine hundred men in his regiment, he was no match for Porter's three brigades.

The initial fighting of the day occurred around 12:30 P.M. when the 28th NC, advancing down the road from Hanover Courthouse, ran into the 25th New York (NY), which was moving up the same road toward the courthouse. The 25th NY was positioned with one half of the regiment in some woods on the right side of the road, and the other half in the yard of a local resident named Dr. Kinney (Kinney's house was about a mile north of Cash Corner).<sup>9</sup>

After some brief skirmishing, Lane's North Carolinians made a direct attack on the left wing of the 25th NY. When Lane ordered his men to drive the New Yorkers from Dr. Kinney's yard, and an adjacent wheatfield, the Confederates responded with enthusiasm. With much shouting, some of the Southerners "leaped the ditch and high fence enclosing the field of wheat, while the rest rushed into the yard and

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 741, 743; Lane, "Twenty-Eighth North Carolina Infantry," 328.

<sup>9</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 714-15; Cowles, comp., Map XXI no. 11.



around the house." The Federals fell back from the house to the outbuildings and barn, using each structure as a rallying point.<sup>10</sup>

Casualties in the 25th NY mounted rapidly. In only a few minutes the regiment lost three lieutenants, a captain, and numerous enlisted men. The lieutenant colonel commanding the left wing was also hit. Overwhelmed by Lane's assault, Colonel Charles H. Johnson ordered his New Yorkers to retreat. Upon hearing the order, both wings of the regiment bolted for the rear. In the confusion that followed seventy of Johnson's men were captured by the Confederates.<sup>11</sup>

Lane handed over the Union prisoners to some troopers from the 4th Virginia Cavalry and set out to supervise the pursuit of the retiring Federals. At this point in the battle it was around one o'clock in the afternoon. After chasing the 25th NY through yet another field of wheat, Lane and his regiment found themselves confronted by Butterfield's Federal brigade and two sections of artillery (see Fig. 7).<sup>12</sup>

The Union artillery was the first to open fire on the advancing Confederates. Although the opening salvo passed harmlessly over the heads of the Southerners, the confusion

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<sup>10</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 743-44.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 714-16, 743-44.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 722-23, 743.

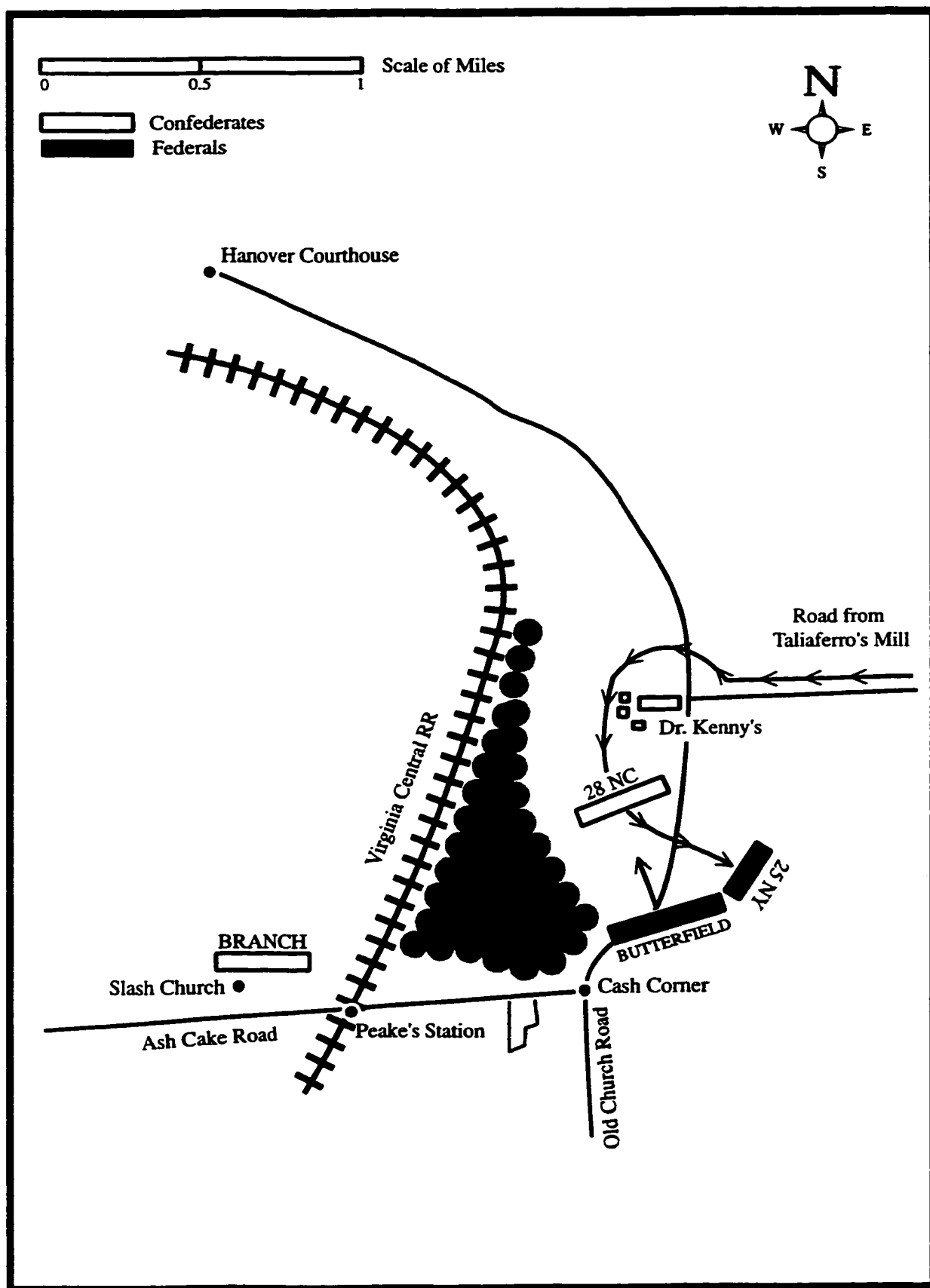


Fig. 7 Lane's Attack, 12:30 P.M.

it caused in the Confederate ranks was enough to bring Lane's attack to a halt. Lane promptly brought up his single section of artillery and a noisy duel ensued between the opposing cannoneers.<sup>13</sup>

The artillery exchange near Cash Corner could be heard by General Branch at Slash Church. The number of pieces being discharged was an indicator to Branch that Lane was opposed by more than a small raiding party. Then, while listening to the distant battle, Branch and his men suddenly found themselves the target of Union guns.<sup>14</sup>

The Federals who were firing on Branch belonged to a strong reconnaissance force under General Martindale. As soon as it had arrived at Cash Corner, Porter had sent this force, which included a section of artillery and two infantry regiments, to support a cavalry screen at Peake's Station. Once at the station, Martindale received word from his skirmishers that a large body of Confederates were camped beyond the railroad. The general promptly ordered his two 3-inch rifled guns, with a maximum range of over two miles, to open fire on Branch's troops a mile and a half away. While the artillery crews worked hard, Martindale's infantry set about tearing up the Virginia Central Railroad,

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<sup>13</sup>Allen Paul Speer, ed., Voices from Cemetery Hill, The Civil War Diary, Reports, and Letters of Colonel William Henry Asbury Speer (1861-1864) (Johnson City, TN: Overmountain Press, 1997), 52; QR, I, 11, pt. 1: 744.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 741.

and nearby telegraph wire.<sup>15</sup>

Branch, having been taken by surprise, responded by bringing up two guns of his own. In addition, he gave orders to the 18th NC and 37th NC to reinforce Lane. As the 18th and 37th advanced up the Ash Cake Road toward Cash Corner, Martindale began pulling his units back to the intersection. By 2:30 P.M. Martindale's force was back at Cash Corner.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout Martindale's reconnaissance to Peake's Station the fighting at Cash Corner had intensified. Having discovered Butterfield's brigade around 1:00 P.M., Lane deployed his regiment and settled into a fire fight with the much larger Union force. Lane, however, was taking on too much in challenging Butterfield, and his regiment began to suffer heavy casualties. Captain William H. A. Speer of the 28th NC could only look on as his comrades began to fall in ever increasing numbers. After watching the regiment's color bearer go down, Speer saw a shell fracture both thighs of a nearby soldier. Shortly thereafter, Speer witnessed two more men "killed with shells, taking off the top of one of their heads & cutting the other [in two]."<sup>17</sup>

As the fight raged on, Butterfield's Federals began to overlap both flanks of Lane's regiment. Lane pulled several

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 682, 702-3, 694; Boatner, 621.

<sup>16</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 703, 741.

<sup>17</sup>Speer, 53.

companies from his front to meet this threat, but in so doing he overstretched his line. With the Federals gaining his rear, and probing his front, Lane was forced to order a retreat. As Lane's regiment began to retire it lost its cohesion, and became a conglomeration of individual companies leaving the battlefield at the doublequick.

By 2:00 P.M. Lane's men were in headlong retreat. In the confusion one company of the 28th NC failed to receive the order to withdraw and was eventually captured.<sup>18</sup> Lane also lost one of his artillery pieces, which had to be abandoned because the horses necessary to withdraw the gun were either killed or injured. Finally, in addition to losing comrades, a gun, and the fight, Lane's soldiers lost their knapsacks. Heavy from the rain, these packs, full of clothing and personal items, were pulled off during the engagement and left on the field during the retreat.<sup>19</sup>

When General Martindale's troops returned to Cash Corner, Porter's main body was nowhere in sight. The bulk of Porter's command was, at that time, pushing Lane up the Old Church Road toward Hanover Courthouse. Although uneasy about leaving Branch's force in his rear, Martindale ordered his subordinates to follow the division up the road.

Martindale and his men had barely gotten underway when

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<sup>18</sup>George Burgwin Johnston, diary, Box 46.1, in the George Burgwin Johnston Papers, N.C. Department of Archives and History, Raleigh.

<sup>19</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 744-45.

orders came from Porter directing them to advance up the Virginia Central railroad. Martindale now found himself in a quandary. In order to carry out these orders he would have to march his men back in the direction of the aggressive Confederates at Peake's Station. Furthermore, Martindale was beginning to have second thoughts about leaving Cash Corner at all as there was a Union hospital and artillery battery still in the area. At this time General Morell, the division commander, rode up and ordered one of Martindale's regiments back to Peake's Station for the move up the railroad. A surprised and somewhat frustrated Martindale acquiesced, but commanded the regiment to march cross-country to avoid Branch's Confederates. Then ensued a mild dispute between Morell and Martindale over the wisdom of leaving an enemy force in the rear of the division. Martindale then "asked to be permitted to assume responsibility of remaining with the Second Maine Regiment to cover the battery and the column in rear." Morell consented and rode off to rejoin Porter.<sup>20</sup>

Shortly after Morell's departure, Martindale received word that the Confederates were at the Harris farm. This farm was located on the Ash Cake Road, seven hundred yards west of Cash Corner. The farm could easily be seen from the intersection, as they were on opposite ends of the same

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 699, 703-4.

field.<sup>21</sup>

With the Confederates in close proximity, Martindale had precious little time to construct a defensive line. His first move was to put the 2d Maine astride the Ash Cake Road. While that regiment was getting into position, Martindale spotted the 44th NY infantry marching up Old Church Road. This regiment, which had been on picket duty south of Cash Corner, was moving to catch up with Porter's advance. Martindale hailed the New Yorkers and the section of artillery accompanying them, and ordered them into his line. Then peering back across Old Church Road, Martindale observed the remnants of the 25th NY resting from its earlier beating. Although only 150 men remained in the regiment, it also was ordered to move into the developing Union line.<sup>22</sup>

Even before the arrival of the 25th NY, Martindale had constructed a line of approximately 1,500 men. Martindale's placement of his regiments was simple, but sound, considering the haste in which the task was performed. On the right was the 2d Maine. In the center was Captain Augustus P. Martin's two pieces of artillery. The left was held by the 44th NY. When it arrived, the 25th NY was designated as artillery support.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 697, 704; Official Military Atlas of the Civil War, Map XXI no. 2.

<sup>22</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 704, 727-28.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 704-5, 707; Nash, 351.

Branch's plan of attack called for the 37th NC to attack the Federal right while the 18th NC assaulted the center. The 7th NC and 45th GA were held in reserve. Branch's remaining units, the 33d NC and the 12th NC, were ordered to attack the Union left. While moving toward their destination, these last two regiments intercepted a squadron of the 5th United States Cavalry that was guarding the Union left flank. The cavalry, which was deployed in a wood, began skirmishing with the two Confederate regiments. As a result of the delay caused by the Union troopers, the 33d and 12th NC regiments were not a major factor in Branch's attack.<sup>24</sup>

At roughly three o'clock in the afternoon, the 18th NC moved forward to engage the Federals (see Fig. 8). After passing through the Harris farm, the 18th, under Colonel Robert H. Cowan, deployed in the field which separated the farm from Cash Corner. Then, with the regiment's Confederate National flag snapping in the breeze, Cowan ordered his regiment to advance.

Confederates and Federals would later agree that the advance of the 18th NC was an impressive sight. Colonel Charles W. Roberts, commanding the 2d Maine, described the charge of the Carolinians as bold, and said that it was conducted "in perfect order." After advancing four hundred yards, with bayonets leveled, the 18th halted and unleashed

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<sup>24</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 686, 688, 692, 741.



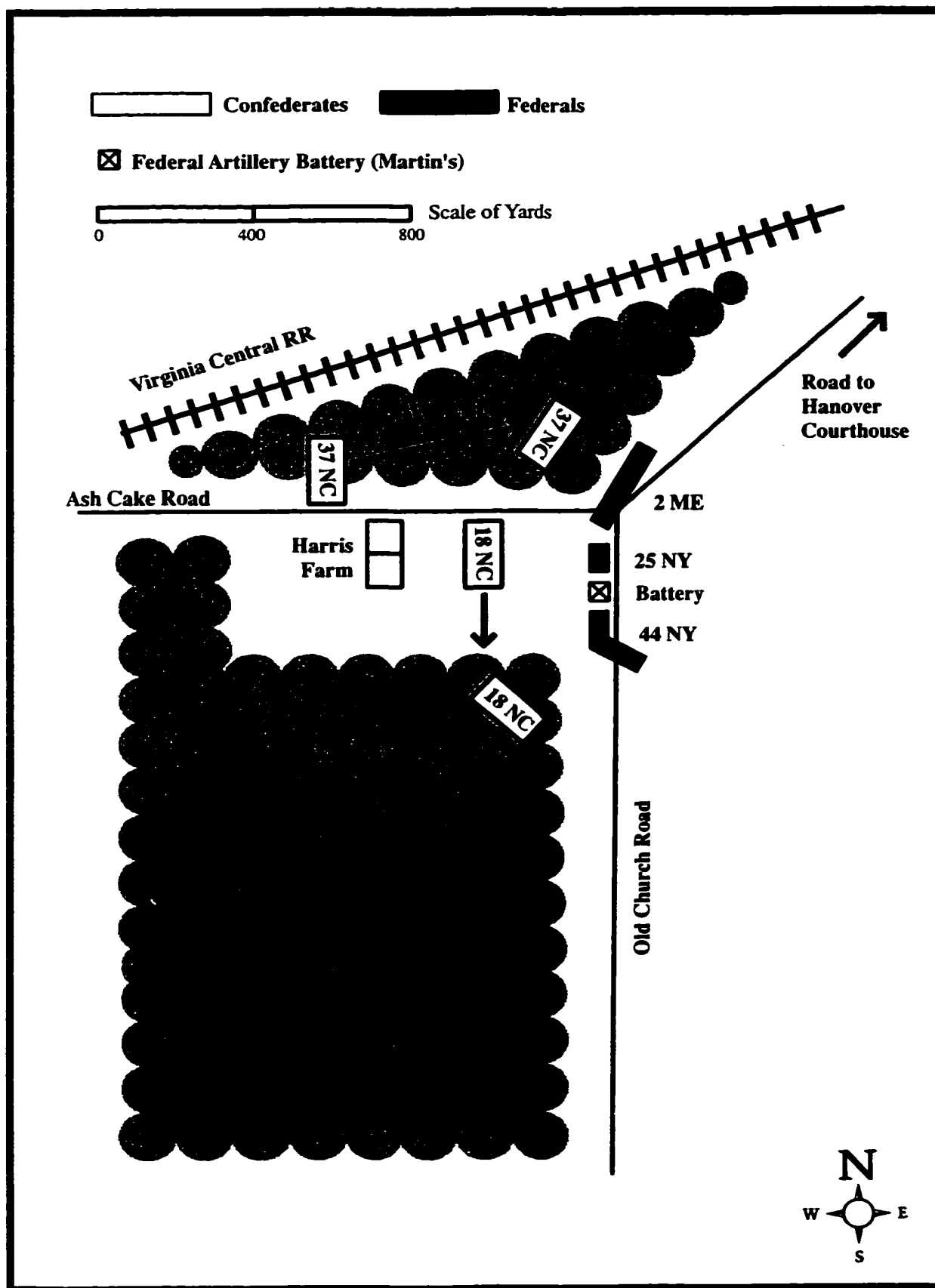


Fig. 8 Branch's Attack, 3:00 P.M.

a volley. The 2d Maine, which was on the receiving end of the 18th's discharge, fixed bayonets and responded with a volley of their own. The two guns of Martin's section also opened on Cowan's men. According to Adjutant William McLaurin of the 18th NC, the Federal fusillade "did great damage, and the eighteenth was compelled to move by the right flank to a wood some two hundred yards to the right, to get some protection." After moving to the right, the 18th found itself confronted by the 44th NY.<sup>25</sup>

During the assault of the 18th NC, General Martindale could see a force of Confederates moving through the woods on the north side of the Ash Cake Road. He correctly concluded that this body of Confederates, which was in fact the 37th NC, intended to attack his right flank (see Fig. 8). Martindale was now faced with a real problem. With the 25th NY not yet in position, the only regiment available to meet this enemy threat was the 2d Maine. However, moving that regiment to the right would leave Martin's artillery unsupported and open to capture. Pursuing what he felt to be his only option, Martindale sent a subordinate "to hasten the march of the Twenty-fifth." The general also sent his aide-de-camp to round up stragglers and ambulance guards to help bolster the threatened flank. Martindale then spent the next several minutes anxiously awaiting the arrival of

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 709; Walter Clark, ed., Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861-65 (Raleigh: State of North Carolina, 1901) 2: 22.

the 25th NY.<sup>26</sup>

When the New Yorkers finally filed into line they did so under fire from the 37th NC. Fortunately for the Federals, dense undergrowth had slowed the 37th's drive through the woods. Consequently, as soon as the 25th NY had assumed its position to the right of Martin's guns, there was just enough time to rapidly shift the 2d Maine in front of the Confederates. The soldiers from Maine promptly faced to the right, and moved at the doublequick approximately one hundred yards up the Old Church Road. Once in position, the Federals had only to face to the front to once again present a line of battle to the enemy.<sup>27</sup>

The redeployment of the 2d Maine put the regiment at a slight angle with the rest of the Union line. The Maine regiment was now located behind a hedge fence. Twenty paces beyond this fence was the 37th NC. The opposing regiments immediately opened fire at extremely close range. Colonel Roberts of the 2nd Maine described the fighting as muzzle to muzzle.<sup>28</sup>

The soldiers from Maine suddenly found themselves in a position where withdrawing would prove as deadly as fighting. A captain in the 2d was certain that had the regiment "fallen back [the Confederates] would have

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<sup>26</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 704-5.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 705, 716, 741; William Groves Morris Papers, Folder 1, p. 47, Southern Historical Collection, UNC.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., Folder 1, p. 47; OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 709.

slaughtered every one of us."<sup>29</sup> Holding the fence, however, was also proving costly. As soon as the 2d Maine had reached the fence, the regimental color-sergeant fell to the ground with a wound. A sergeant major of the regiment was moving along the line giving encouragement to the troops, when he was struck in the face by a bullet that shattered his jaw. Another man had an ear shot off. Sergeant Benjamin Smart was firing and loading as rapidly as possible when a bullet slammed into his chest. Smart died moments later.<sup>30</sup>

The movement of the 2d Maine succeeded in blocking the 37th NC, but it also exposed the Union center to a severe crossfire from the right companies of the 37th and the left companies of the 18th NC. The 25th NY was hit particularly hard by this fire. A major in the 25th later wrote that "[m]any of the men fell dead and wounded" as a result of the crossfire. After several minutes of this punishment Colonel Charles Johnson gave the order to retreat. The order had scarcely left Johnson's mouth when his horse was struck by four bullets. A fifth bullet pierced Johnson's leg, and both horse and rider went down in a heap.<sup>31</sup>

As the 25th NY streamed to the rear, Martin's artillery became the object of Confederate musketry. The Confederates

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<sup>29</sup>Bangor Daily Whig & Courier, 10 June 1862.

<sup>30</sup>Bangor Daily Whig & Courier, 5, June 1862; QR, I, 11, pt. 1: 709.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 697-98.

apparently adopted the common tactic of shooting down artillery horses in order to prevent the guns from being withdrawn. The Union artillerists watched as three horses fell dead, and two more received wounds. Uninterested in making a heroic stand, Martin's men abandoned their two guns and "retired with the infantry[.]"<sup>32</sup>

The 44th NY was the next Federal unit to experience the deadly enfilade created by the Confederate fire. While exchanging volleys with the 18th NC in its front, the soldiers of the 44th NY became subjected to blasts of musketry from the 37th NC on their extreme right and rear. Under this pressure, the right flank companies of the 44th gave way and retreated in disorder.

General Martindale had been watching the fighting from a spot some sixty five paces to the rear of the 25th NY. Without any reserve, there was little he could do to bolster his line. Thus, when his center collapsed, Martindale rushed to halt the retreat.

For a while confusion reigned as Martindale made a personal attempt to stem the "disorderly movement to the rear." Positioning himself in front of the fleeing soldiers, Martindale called out to his men to rally behind a nearby fence. "For a time my orders were not heeded," Martindale later reported, "but presently the men began to obey my commands, and quite a number came forward" to create

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 697-98.

a line.<sup>33</sup>

Martindale's makeshift line was never tested. When the right flank companies of the 44th NY disintegrated under the heavy Confederate fire, the bulk of the regiment conducted an orderly retreat to the Old Church Road. The regiment then took cover behind a depression at the side of the road. From this position the New Yorkers made a tenacious, and costly stand which prevented the 18th NC from exploiting the rout of the Union center.<sup>34</sup>

The duel between the 44th NY and the 18th NC produced the most intense fighting of the battle. Although partially protected by the roadside embankment, the 44th suffered heavy casualties. Lieutenant Colonel James Rice later stated that the Confederate "fire swept through our ranks like a storm of hail." Rice spoke from experience; during the "storm" his horse was shot from under him and his sword was blown from his side. Corporal Samuel Chandler of the 44th was shot five times during the fight (he would die five days later from his wounds). Private Lewis Leland received two head wounds, and had his finger shot off, but continued to load and fire. Adjutant Edward Knox was "waving his sword and cheering on the men . . . when a musket-ball from the enemy shattered his arm, breaking both bones." After using his handkerchief to bandage the wound, Knox returned

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 705, 728.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 730.

to "encouraging the men to victory till he fainted from exhaustion."<sup>35</sup>

As was common during the Civil War, the regimental color guard was a prime target for enemy marksman. When the 44th's color bearer was shot through the head, Corporal James Young snatched up the fallen banner. Moments later Young fell wounded. Struggling to his feet, Young once again picked up the colors, but was immediately killed by a musket ball. When yet another soldier raised the flag, he too was instantly shot down. After the battle the men of the 44th would count forty bullet holes in their beloved flag.<sup>36</sup>

With the road becoming increasingly "filled with the dead and dying," the soldiers of the 44th resorted to desperate measures to hold their position. Officers exchanged their swords for muskets, loading and firing as quickly as possible. Others went about collecting much needed ammunition from the cartridge boxes of the dead and wounded. "[M]any wounded soldiers loaded muskets . . . for others to fire."<sup>37</sup> When the muskets overheated from constant firing, precious canteen water was used to cool them off.

The savage fighting was apparently too much for Colonel

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<sup>35</sup>Nash, 369; OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 731-32.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 731-32; Nash, 75-76, 471.

<sup>37</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 731

Stryker, the commander of the 44th NY. After volunteering to go for help, Stryker was reportedly seen sitting quietly by a tree some distance to the rear (one month later Stryker would be relieved of duty for misconduct on the field of battle). Fortunately for the 44th NY, Lieutenant Colonel Rice, who had assumed command of the regiment upon Stryker's departure, led the troops with bravery and skill.<sup>38</sup>

The situation was no less difficult for the 18th NC. In this, the unit's first battle, many of the regiment's companies suffered fifty percent casualties. On several occasions during the struggle the Carolinians attempted to rush forward in hopes of driving off the 44th NY, but such surges were promptly thrown back by the Federals.<sup>39</sup> Like Rice across the way, Colonel Cowan of the 18th was highly involved in his regiment's struggle. Numerous times during the battle Cowan was seen emptying his revolver into the enemy line. "We trusted in him as a God[,] " confided Private William Bellamy of his colonel.<sup>40</sup> In spite of their heavy sacrifice in killed and wounded, the men of the 18th NC could not drive the 44th NY from the road bed. Wrote one Carolinian after the war: "Our first experience in war was a bloody baptism. 'The Bloody Eighteenth' was a well earned

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 731-32; Nash, 75, 86.

<sup>39</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 731.

<sup>40</sup>From the William James H. Bellamy Diary, 15 May to 2 June 1862, Folder 3, #1559-Z, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.



title."<sup>41</sup>

Martindale's units were down to their last rounds when reinforcements arrived on the battlefield. Upon learning of Branch's attack, Porter had ordered his entire column back to Cash Corner. By four o'clock, McQuade's Federal brigade was in position on Martindale's right. The 14th NY relieved the 2d Maine while the rest of McQuade's regiments formed opposite the left flank of the 37th NC (see Fig. 9).<sup>42</sup>

When McQuade's brigade rolled forward the 37th NC was in no condition to offer a stubborn defense. Falling back in confusion, the 37th managed to make a couple of brief stands, but such resistance proved futile against an entire brigade. At some point during the retreat, the flag of the 37th was captured by the 9th Massachusetts. As the victorious Federals swept the 37th back across the Harris farm, they captured Branch's field hospital set up inside the farmhouse.<sup>43</sup>

When the Federals were reported to be approaching the hospital, three of the four Confederate surgeons abandoned their wounded and raced for safety. "Feeling that this was useless panic," Surgeon John Shaffner remained and conducted an evacuation of the wounded. For his efforts Shaffner was

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<sup>41</sup>Clark, 2: 22.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 682, 700, 720.

<sup>43</sup>Christian G. Samito, ed., Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth, The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney, Ninth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 106-7.

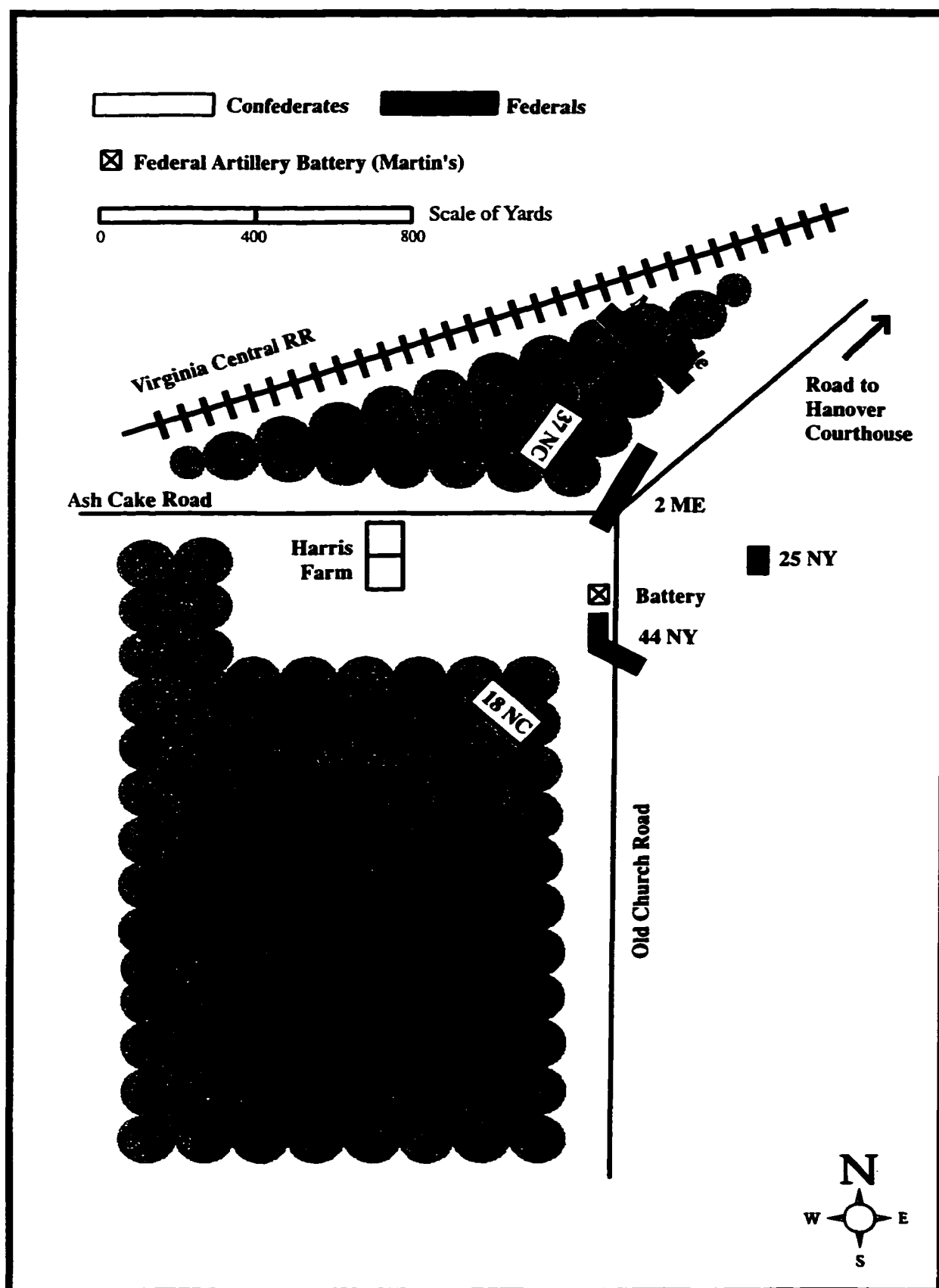


Fig. 9 The Union Counterattack, 4:00 P.M.

captured. That night he witnessed "scenes of anguish and pain" as he "alone engaged in performing operations [and] dressing wounds until 1 o'clock in the morning."<sup>44</sup>

The 18th NC, having received orders to withdraw from its battle with the 44th NY, managed to disengage and retire in a fairly orderly manner. Branch's claim that his troops retreated "without haste or confusion" is difficult to accept. The Federal reports are unanimous in stating that the Confederates left the area in a great hurry. However, at no time does Branch's brigade appear to have lost its cohesion, or been affected by panic.

The rear guard action of the 7th NC undoubtedly prevented Branch from sustaining additional losses during his retreat. Positioned astride the Ash Cake Road, the 7th served as a barrier against the Union pursuit. When the Federals came within range, the 7th unleashed a crisp volley which killed or wounded ten men of the 9th Massachusetts. After this the Federals opted to chase the Southerners from a safer distance.<sup>45</sup>

As McQuade's regiments and Union cavalry pursued the Confederates westward, Porter sent off a dispatch to McClellan announcing the Union victory. McClellan immediately wired Stanton the news. Porter's "expedition promises perfect success in all its objects," proclaimed a

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<sup>44</sup>Louis Shaffner, "A Civil War Surgeon's Diary," North Carolina Medical Journal 27 (September 1966): 410.

<sup>45</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 742.

jubilant McClellan in his telegram.<sup>46</sup>

McQuade's troops followed Branch until sundown, and then returned to Cash Corner. There, under a bright moon, they camped for the night with the rest of Porter's force. Before going to sleep, one Union artilleryman made a quick entry in his diary. He wrote: "Saw the enemy's dead for the first time today. Encamped in a wheat field with the dead and dying all around us."<sup>47</sup>

Branch's brigade bivouacked near Ashland the night of the battle. Three days passed before Lane's 28th NC, which had retreated to the north of Hanover Courthouse, could make its way back to the brigade. When the 28th finally rejoined the brigade "it was wildly and joyfully received" by its fellow regiments. From Ashland, Branch's troops marched south to join the Army of Northern Virginia around Richmond.<sup>48</sup>

In the Battle of Hanover Courthouse, Branch had 80 men killed, 198 wounded, and 456 captured. Among the killed of the 37th NC were three of the regiment's four Robinett brothers. Most of those captured had either collapsed from exhaustion during the retreat, or were somehow cut off from

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 679.

<sup>47</sup>Nathan Appleton et al., comps., History of the Fifth Massachusetts Battery (Boston: Luther E. Cowles, 1902), 275; Speer, 57.

<sup>48</sup>Lane, "Twenty-Eighth North Carolina Infantry," 328-29.

the brigade.<sup>49</sup>

Coming on the heels of their defeat at New Bern, Hanover Courthouse must have been especially frustrating for Branch and his men. Some members of the 18th and 37th NC regiments resented Branch for allowing the two regiments to carry the fight for the entire brigade. In a letter to his wife, John Conrad Thomas of the 37th expressed his desire to "get out from under Branch's command[.]" Branch, wrote Thomas, "is not by any means a competent man and by no means fit for the place he occupies."<sup>50</sup> Joseph H. Saunders, of the 33rd NC, agreed with Thomas. In a letter home Saunders stated that Branch's management of the battle did "not indicate any great care" for the soldiers of his command.<sup>51</sup>

The criticism of Branch was justified. Although he had been heavily outnumbered in the battle, Branch had, nevertheless, handled his troops with timidity. Allowing four regiments to remain virtually idle, while two other units engaged in desperate battle, was inexcusable. Luckily

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<sup>49</sup>Casualty reports of the 18th and 28th NC, May 1862, in the Governor's Papers, Box 158, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh; Casualty report of the 37th NC, Folder 8, in the Adjutant General's Papers, Box 78, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh; Clark, 1: 609; 2: 654-55.

<sup>50</sup>From John Conrad Thomas to wife, 4 June 1862, in the John Conrad Thomas Papers #1462, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh.

<sup>51</sup>Joseph H. Saunders to his mother, June 6 1862, File No. 6, in the Joseph H. Saunders Papers, #650, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

for Branch, Hanover Courthouse was to be his last independent command; the day of the battle he was placed under the direct command of General A. P. Hill.<sup>52</sup>

The day after the engagement, Porter's troops began the work associated with winning a field of battle. Those who were not busy digging graves collected abandoned equipment. One Confederate prisoner described the battlefield as being covered with "dead men, horses, broken wagons, ambulances, gun carriages - the timber tore all to pieces & ground busted up - everywhere destruction was visible in every direction."<sup>53</sup>

Porter wasted little time in taking advantage of his victory. On May 28, he ordered General Emory to take his cavalry and destroy the railroad bridge which carried the Virginia Central Railroad across the South Anna River. To carry out the assignment Emory detailed four squadrons of the 6th United States (U.S.) Cavalry, along with small detachments of infantry and artillery. By the end of the day, the cavalrymen had successfully destroyed the railroad crossing, and three other bridges along the South Anna.<sup>54</sup>

While in the process of destroying the bridges, members of the 6th U.S. Cavalry made contact with some of McDowell's advanced scouts. McDowell's men indicated that they

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<sup>52</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 3: 554.

<sup>53</sup>Speer, 58.

<sup>54</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 686-87, 692-93.

expected to be joined by the rest of their corps at any time.<sup>55</sup> This valuable information was promptly sent back to Porter, who in turn telegraphed McClellan. "I send you good news[,] " read Porter's telegram, "[r]eport says McDowell is advancing[.]"<sup>56</sup>

Porter's telegram was not necessary. McClellan arrived at Cash Corner in the early afternoon of May 28 to personally survey the battlefield. Elated by Porter's victory, McClellan telegraphed additional details of the Union success to Stanton. In his message, McClellan reminded the Secretary of War that it was "the policy and duty of the Govt [sic] to send . . . by water all the well drilled troops available." "[I]f any regiments of good troops remain unemployed [against Richmond]," warned McClellan in the last line of the telegram, "it will be an irreparable fault committed."<sup>57</sup> Then, as suddenly as he had arrived, and without leaving Porter any additional instructions regarding a linkup with McDowell, McClellan returned to his army before Richmond.

Before McClellan's telegram could reach Lincoln and Stanton, the President sent a message of his own asking for more information on events in the Hanover area. "What of

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<sup>55</sup>Porter, "Hanover Court House and Gaines's Mill," in Battles and Leaders, 2: 322.

<sup>56</sup>Porter to McClellan, May 28 1862, from the George B. McClellan Papers, Reel 23, Shelf no. DM 16,004, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>57</sup>The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 279.

F.J. Porter's expedition? Please answer." read Lincoln's telegram.<sup>58</sup> Whereas McClellan seemed content that a battle had been won, Lincoln wanted to extract further results from Porter's expedition. Seeing that the way was open to unite the troops at Fredericksburg with McClellan, Lincoln wired McDowell and asked if the general's divisions "in front of Fredericksburg should not push through and join [Porter]."<sup>59</sup> Inexplicably, McDowell refused, replying that he did not think it advisable "to leave Fredericksburg otherwise than strongly held[.]"<sup>60</sup>

That a vital opportunity was about to be squandered was more than evident to one European observer attached to Porter's command. The Prince de Joinville, a pro-Union Frenchman, was well aware that McDowell's Federals were not far away. If the two forces could be united, he felt, the capture of Richmond would be ensured. Yet, as the days passed, and none of McDowell's troops appeared, the Prince realized that the juncture was not to be. Grimly, he predicted that many of the "gallant young men who surrounded [him] . . . would pay with their lives for the fatal error which was on the point of being committed."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, vol. 5, 244.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 245.

<sup>60</sup>OR, I, 12, pt. 3: 267-68.

<sup>61</sup>Prince de Joinville, The Army of the Potomac: Its Organization, Its Commander, and Its Campaign, trans. William Henry Hurlbert (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1862), 68.



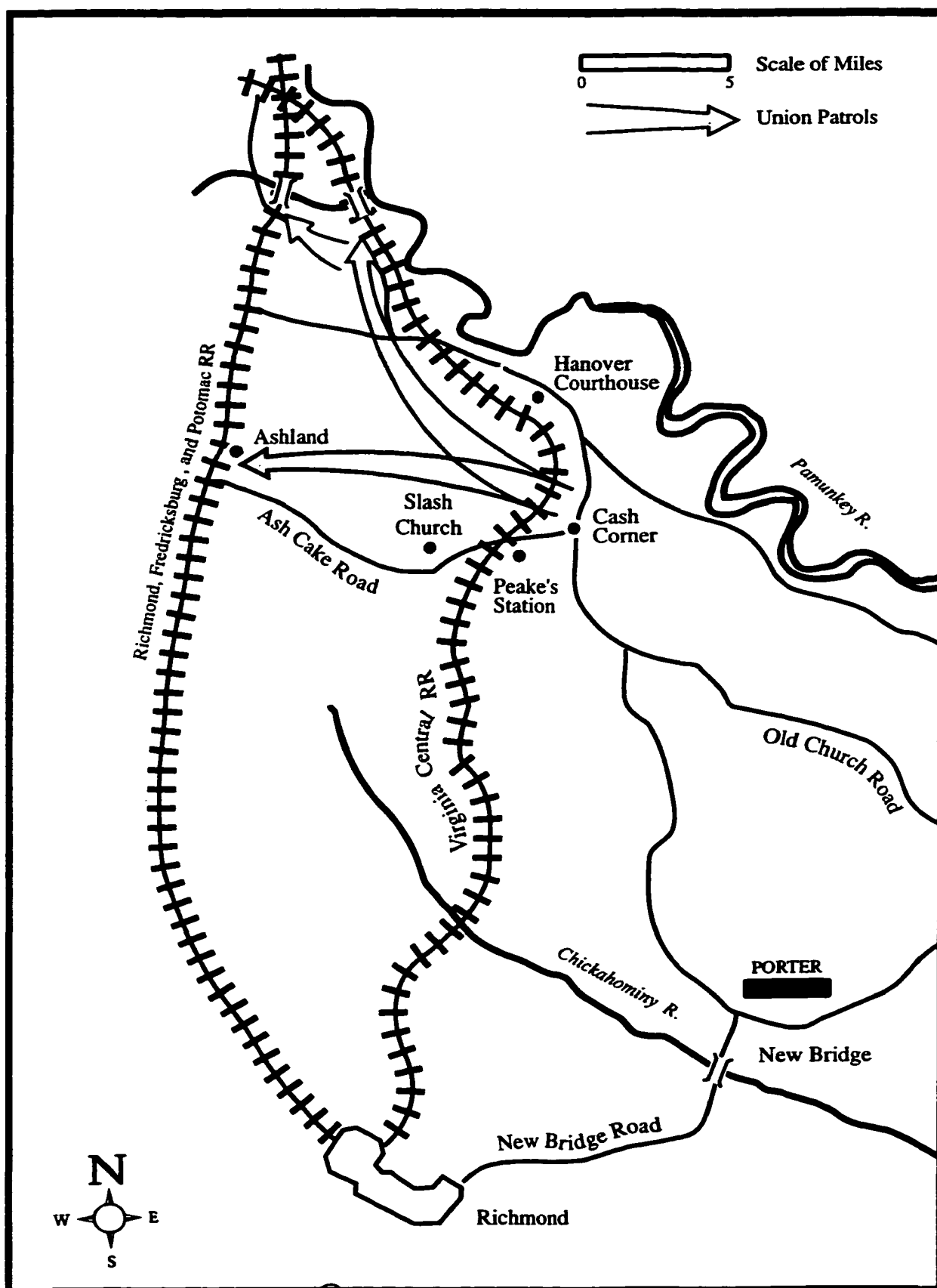


Fig. 10 Porter Destroys Railroad Bridges and Telegraph Lines, May 28, 29.

On May 29, the 6th U.S. Cavalry continued its operations along the South Anna (see Fig. 10). Moving westward along the river, the regiment destroyed the railroad bridge over which ran the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac line. Meanwhile, Porter sent the bulk of Emory's cavalry and Warren's brigade to Ashland. Ashland was a small village on the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac railroad located roughly six miles west of Cash Corner. Union patrols sent there on the 28th had seen Charles Field's Confederate brigade, of Anderson's division, passing through the town on their way to Richmond. Porter's main objective in sending a force to Ashland on the 29th was "to hold in check any [Confederate] force which might be detached" from the town to harass the 6th U.S. Cavalry. Emory and Warren found only some Confederate stragglers in Ashland. They therefore commenced ripping up railroad track and tearing down telegraph wire.<sup>62</sup>

Porter's detachments returned to Cash Corner around mid-day of May 29. That afternoon, Porter's force marched back to McClellan's army. Union losses at Hanover Courthouse were 64 killed, 221 wounded, and 72 missing for a total of 357.<sup>63</sup>

Porter's management of the expedition to Hanover Courthouse was nearly perfect. Although taken by surprise

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 683-84, 686, 736-37.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 685, 1076.

by Branch's main assault on May 27, Porter did not panic. Rather, he handled his troops with skill and confidence. Unlike many Civil War generals, he exploited his victory to the fullest by pursuing his defeated foe. That pursuit netted several hundred Confederate prisoners too exhausted to outrun the Union cavalry. Porter then preyed upon enemy lines of supply and communication. Years later, while looking back on what was Porter's first test as a battlefield commander, one Confederate veteran of Branch's brigade described Porter as "a consummate tactician and sturdy fighter. . . trained from his youth in the profession of arms."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Clark, 1: 609.

CHAPTER IV  
HANOVER COURTHOUSE AND THE WAR IN VIRGINIA

On May 12, General Robert E. Lee had assured Joseph E. Johnston that the loss of Hanover Junction would "interrupt the railroad communication with Generals Jackson and Ewell" in and around the Shenandoah Valley. Porter's victory at Hanover Courthouse, and subsequent attack on the nearby rail lines, validated Lee's earlier prediction. Following the Battle of Hanover Courthouse, all communication between Richmond and Jackson's army in the valley abruptly ended. For over a week after the battle Lee was reduced to communicating with Jackson through letters. A slow and inefficient process, Lee's first letter from Jackson was actually addressed to Johnston, who had been seriously wounded and replaced by Lee five days earlier.<sup>1</sup>

Porter's disruption of the railroad also had an effect upon Confederate supply. Prior to May 27, Jackson had been supplied by rail from Richmond. After Hanover Courthouse Jackson was obliged to rely on whatever supplies could be obtained from the limited stockpile in Staunton. Fortunately for the Confederacy, Jackson habitually captured enough Union supplies to sustain his men.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Johnston was wounded on June 1 at the Battle of Seven Pines. Command of the Confederate army outside Richmond was eventually given to Lee. OR, I, 11, pt. 3: 510-11; 12, pt. 3: 902-8; Johnston, 138-39.

<sup>2</sup>OR, I, 12, pt. 3: 905.

The Battle of Hanover Courthouse allowed Porter to accomplish the goals of his expedition. After the battle there were no more Confederate forces between Richmond and Fredericksburg capable of threatening McClellan's flank or rear. Follow-up activities against key railroads and telegraph lines in the Hanover area cut Confederate lines of supply and communication between Richmond and the Shenandoah Valley. Finally, and most importantly, Porter's victory ensured that the forces of McDowell and McClellan could be united without Confederate interference.

The proximity of Porter's and McDowell's troops on May 27, 28, and 29 presented the Union high command with a prime opportunity to extract critical strategic results from Porter's expedition. While in the Hanover area, Porter's force was roughly twenty-eight miles from McDowell's two divisions below Fredericksburg. One day of hard marching was all that was necessary to bring McDowell's men south to link up with Porter. Had the troops below Fredericksburg been directed to join Porter, the Army of the Potomac would have been reinforced by twenty thousand men. From the Hanover area, those reinforcements would have been perfectly positioned to flank Richmond's defenses from the north. That the Confederate high command feared a Union advance on Richmond from the north betrayed their vulnerability to such an assault.

Unleashing McDowell's twenty thousand soldiers on Richmond from the north was the most promising, but

certainly not the only, advantage of a Union linkup. Simply allowing two divisions to remain idle in the Hanover area was also in the interest of the Union high command. The mere presence of such a force astride the Virginia Central Railroad would have created permanent supply problems for Confederate armies in the Valley. That McClellan would have agreed to implement this strategic measure was ensured by the President's strict order not to uncover the road to Washington. Thus, any possibility of McClellan shifting these divisions elsewhere for his own purposes was negated.<sup>3</sup>

The failure to exploit the strategic opportunities produced by the Hanover expedition was attributable to the disjointed leadership of the Union high command. Poor communication was a major factor in the ineffectiveness of the Union strategists. Insufficient, and often confusing correspondence between Union military leaders during May was a serious detriment to Union strategy. McDowell and McClellan, two generals expected to coordinate their movements north of Richmond, at no time exchanged meaningful information regarding their respective roles in the operation. When Stanton forwarded McDowell's May 25 telegram which spoke of an advance (actually a demonstration) beyond Fredericksburg, McClellan erroneously assumed the reinforcement operation had been resumed. When

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<sup>3</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 1: 28-29.

McDowell failed to appear, McClellan once again felt wronged by the Lincoln administration.

Historians have generally listed Lincoln's decision to send McDowell to the Shenandoah Valley, instead of Fredericksburg, as the primary factor in the failure to unite McDowell and McClellan. This, however, is a misconception which assumes that Lincoln's counter directive of May 24 ended any possibility of moving troops south from Fredericksburg. Lincoln never abandoned the plan to reinforce McClellan. Even after postponing the reinforcement operation, Lincoln "constantly intimated" that McDowell might be directed to "resume [his] advance upon Richmond."<sup>4</sup> Allowing twenty thousand Federals to remain at Fredericksburg, when they could have been used in the Valley, is clear evidence of his commitment to the troop transfer.

Far from withholding the Fredericksburg garrison from Porter, Lincoln suggested on May 28 that they should "push through and join him." The failure to initiate such a move lay with McDowell, who rejected Lincoln's suggestion. Lincoln's main fault was in allowing McDowell to do nothing. Often criticized for interfering too much in military affairs, Lincoln would have been better served in this

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<sup>4</sup>Congress, Senate, Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, pt. 1: 264.

situation had he imposed his will on McDowell.<sup>5</sup>

Why McDowell balked when asked to send troops to Hanover is unclear. His own explanation claimed that Fredericksburg would have been left unguarded had he sent south the divisions of King and McCall. This excuse, however, made little sense in that there was no feasible Confederate threat to the city. Lincoln, who was always wary of Confederate threats, was correct in his belief that it was safe to send King and McCall south to Richmond. Those divisions served no purpose by remaining at Fredericksburg. In fact, their presence below the city was so useless that the Confederates derisively referred to them as the "fifth wheel of the coach."<sup>6</sup> McDowell, though, was less concerned about Fredericksburg than he was about missing out on an operation which promised to redeem his tarnished reputation. He therefore sought to delay the troop transfer until he could once again take an active role in the operation.

McClellan did not hesitate to blame Lincoln and McDowell for the failure to unite the two forces at Hanover Courthouse. He later claimed that his entire plan to take Richmond rested upon a linkup with McDowell north of Richmond. If that were the case, McClellan should have pushed Lincoln and Stanton to order McDowell's troops south

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<sup>5</sup>OR, I, 12, pt. 3: 265-68; The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, vol. 5, 245.

<sup>6</sup>Prince de Joinville, 68.



while Porter was in the Hanover area. He instead demanded, while standing on the Hanover battlefield, that reinforcements be sent to him by water!<sup>7</sup>

The strategic price that the Union paid for its victory at Hanover Courthouse had a significant effect on the outcome of the Peninsular Campaign. Because McClellan had not wanted to assault Richmond with Confederate forces beyond his flank, he had delayed the long awaited assault on Richmond while Porter was at Hanover. Had the victory at Hanover resulted in a more potent Union threat to the Confederate capital, this delay would have been worthwhile. As it was, the drive on Richmond had been brought to a halt for nothing. Before McClellan could resuscitate his campaign the Confederates seized the initiative.

The Confederate high command understood the potential consequences of a linkup between McDowell and McClellan. Throughout the month of May, General Lee used every means at his disposal to prevent McDowell from joining the assault on Richmond. As the Army of the Potomac closed in on the city from the east, Joseph Johnston also grew apprehensive of such a juncture. When on May 27 Confederate cavalry patrols reported that McDowell's troops were advancing south from Fredericksburg, Johnston assumed that McDowell was on his way to join Porter. Johnston therefore decided "to attack [the Army of the Potomac] before it could receive so great

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<sup>7</sup>McClellan, McClellan's Own Story, 375-76.

an accession."<sup>8</sup>

News of McDowell's march southward caused Johnston to abandon his plan to take the offensive by attacking two Union corps south of the Chickahominy River. Those two corps were a prime target because they were separated from the bulk of the Union army by the Chickahominy. However, in order to prevent a linkup between McClellan and McDowell, Johnston was forced to consider an attack against the main Federal army which was slowly moving to the north of Richmond.<sup>9</sup> Such an assault was a much more dangerous undertaking since it would be conducted against a numerically superior foe. That McDowell was likely to reinforce the Army of the Potomac before or during the ensuing battle created an additional risk for Johnston. Fortunately for the Confederates, General J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry discovered that McDowell was not advancing from Fredericksburg as originally reported. Johnston therefore revived his plan to fall upon the exposed Union corps south of the Chickahominy.<sup>10</sup> That assault occurred on May 31, and was the prelude to a larger Confederate offensive that drove McClellan back to the James River.

A major outcome of the Union failure to capitalize on the Battle of Hanover Courthouse was the Confederates'

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<sup>8</sup>Johnston, 130-31.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 129-30.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 132.

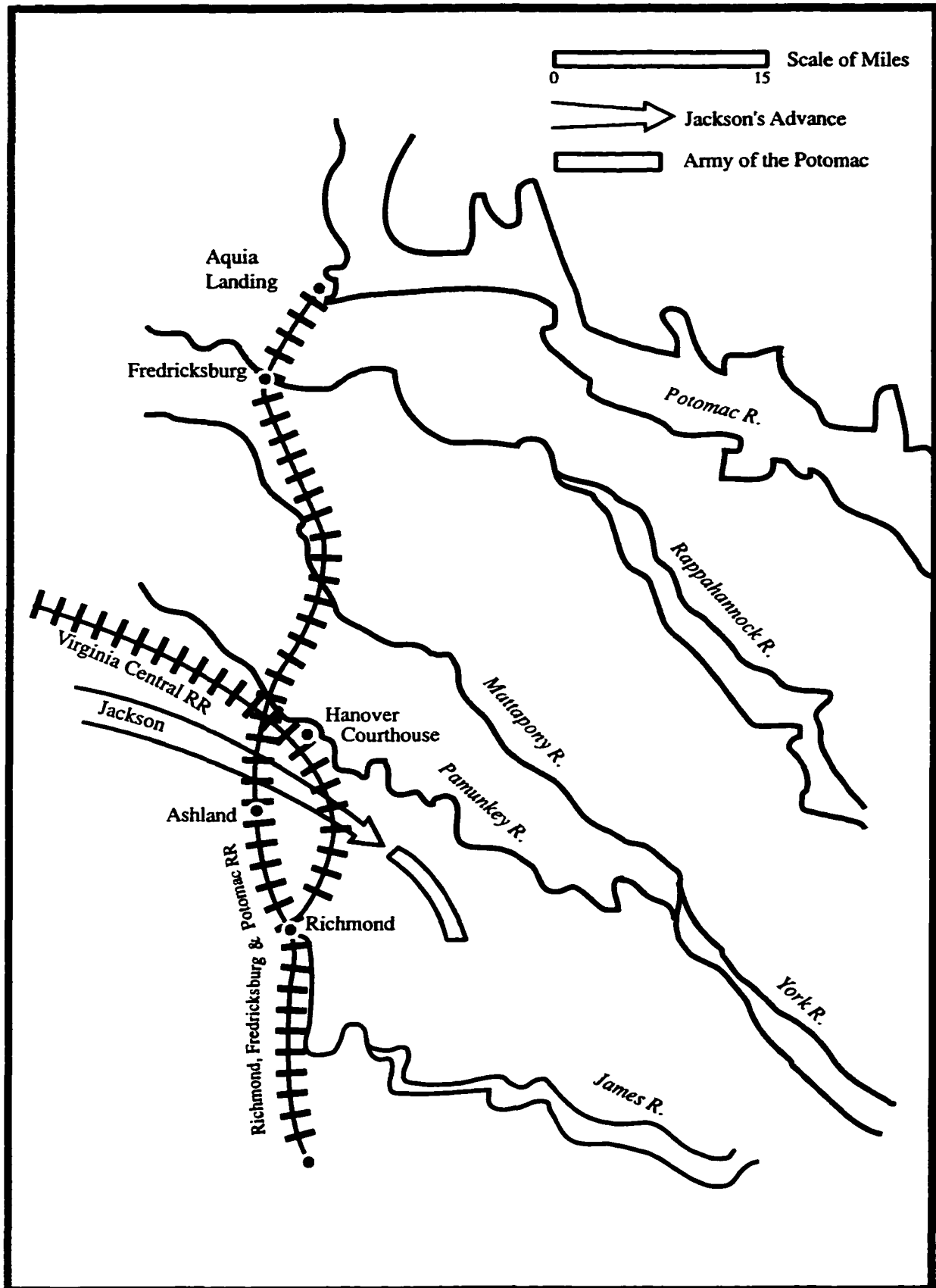


Fig. 11 Jackson's Avenue of Attack, June 26.

ability to exploit that failure. During the offensive that drove McClellan away from Richmond, Jackson's army was brought from the Valley to attack McClellan. The Virginia Central Railroad provided Jackson easy access to McClellan's right flank. Departing from the railroad at Ashland, Jackson's command marched directly across the Hanover Courthouse battlefield on their way to attack the Army of the Potomac (see Fig. 11). The presence of twenty thousand Union troops in the Hanover area could quite possibly have negated the subsequent attack of Jackson's sixteen thousand, but most of those Union troops were still at Fredericksburg.

The consequences of the failure to exploit the victory at Hanover Courthouse were in every way negative for the North. In squandering the opportunity presented to them, the Union high command committed a variety of blunders. Poor communication and strong-willed generals were mostly to blame. Shrewd Confederate strategy only added to the confusion which dominated Union affairs in Virginia in May of 1862.

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<sup>11</sup>OR, I, 11, pt. 2: 552.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

For two years after the Peninsular Campaign the Union high command struggled to get the Army of the Potomac back to where it had been in May, 1862. In June of 1864, that army did approach Richmond once again. However, in 1864 many of the leading officers who had helped direct the Peninsular Campaign were no longer with the army. This was particularly the case with those officers which had been involved in the strategic failure north of Richmond.

For Irvin McDowell the chance to redeem his reputation never came. Nevertheless, McDowell made every effort to clear himself of any criticism concerning the botched effort to reinforce McClellan from Fredericksburg. On June 27, 1862, the same day Jackson's forces broke McClellan's lines southeast of Hanover Courthouse, McDowell defended his actions during May before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. Several times during the questioning McDowell accused the newspapers and McClellan's friends of unfairly castigating him for not moving south from Fredericksburg.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, he did not mention that he refused Lincoln's suggestion to send King and McCall to meet Porter at Hanover.

McDowell was involved in most of the battles which

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<sup>1</sup>Congress, Senate, Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, pt. 1: 267-68.

raged over northern Virginia in the summer of 1862. After receiving much criticism for his performance in those campaigns, McDowell was relieved of command. Although he demanded a court of inquiry to clear him of any misconduct, his career as a battlefield commander was over. McDowell held several minor administrative positions, and finished out the war on the West Coast.

After Hanover Courthouse, Fitz-John Porter commanded his corps through the Confederate offensive that drove the Army of the Potomac from before Richmond. As the main object of General Lee's attacks, Porter's corps was engaged in a disproportionate amount of the fighting. Throughout the ordeal, Porter commanded his troops with the same skill and boldness that he had demonstrated at Hanover Courthouse. Yet, what appeared to be the rise of an outstanding general was actually the twilight of Porter's short military career. In January, 1863, he was cashiered for failure to obey the orders of General John Pope during the 2nd Bull Run Campaign. Fifteen years later a president-appointed board of officers reviewed Porter's court-martial, and recommended that the guilty verdict be reversed. Eight years after the review, a Congressional act officially exonerated Porter of all charges. On August 5, 1886, he was reappointed to rank of colonel. Two days later Porter retired from the army.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Kevin Donovan, "The Court-Martial of Fitz-John Porter," Columbiad; A Quarterly Review of the War Between the States, 2, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 74; Boatner, 662.

George B. McClellan's military career fared little better than that of McDowell or Porter following the Battle of Hanover Courthouse. In August of 1862, after being driven from Richmond by General Lee's Confederates, McClellan's army sat inactive along the James River. Lincoln, thoroughly exasperated with McClellan's style of leadership, turned to General John Pope to defeat the Confederacy's eastern army, but without success. In late summer, Lincoln called on McClellan one last time to repel a Confederate advance into Maryland. On September 17, McClellan fought Lee to a bloody stalemate at the Battle of Antietam. Almost two months later McClellan was relieved of command for his deliberation in attacking the Confederates.

In December of 1862, McClellan was called as a witness in the investigation of McDowell's conduct during the year. When the subject of Hanover Courthouse and the reinforcement operation was raised, McClellan spoke without inhibition. "It is . . . my opinion," he declared, "that had the command of Gen. McDowell joined the Army of the Potomac in the month of May, by way of Hanover Court House from Fredericksburg, we would have had Richmond in a week after the junction."<sup>3</sup> After leading Union forces in some of the largest and bloodiest campaigns of the Civil War, McClellan still harbored frustration over what could have been after the

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<sup>3</sup>W. J. Tenney, The Military and Naval History of the Rebellion in the United States (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1865), 228.

little battle at Hanover Courthouse.

In sharp contrast to his Union counterparts, Lawrence O'Bryan Branch experienced a dramatic improvement in his military career following Hanover Courthouse. As part of Ambrose P. Hill's famous Light Division, Branch and his hard luck brigade were involved in one Confederate victory after another during the summer of 1862. At Antietam, Branch's brigade participated in a dramatic assault that drove McClellan's troops from a breach in Lee's line, and ended the battle. While observing the Federal retreat, Branch was struck and killed by one of the last bullets to be fired on the bloodiest day in American military history.

Civil War historians have consistently failed to recognize the importance of the Hanover expedition on the war in the Virginia theater in 1862. In his 468 page study of the Peninsular Campaign, Stephen Sears devoted only two and a half pages to a general discussion of the Battle of Hanover Courthouse.<sup>4</sup> Rowena Reed, T. Harry Williams, and James McPherson each neglected to even mention Hanover Courthouse in their written evaluations of strategy in the Virginia theater. Significantly, the latter three historians have contributed to the misconceptions which have arisen concerning the failure of the Union effort to unite McDowell and McClellan north of Richmond.

In Lincoln and His Generals T. Harry Williams

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<sup>4</sup>Sears, 114-17.



maintained that McClellan's unwillingness to act decisively would most likely have negated any advantages obtained by uniting McDowell with the Army of the Potomac. This argument, however, ignored the benefits of keeping twenty thousand Union troops at Hanover to sit astride the rail lines between Richmond and Fredericksburg. Williams also failed to recognize the likelihood that the attack Johnston planned to carry out against McClellan and McDowell, after Hanover Courthouse, would have hurt the Confederates more than the Federals.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Union's ability to extract strategic benefits from a juncture of McDowell and McClellan was not reliant upon the latter's willingness to attack Richmond.

Reed's work entitled Combined Operations of the Civil War lends support to the common misconception that Lincoln was to blame for the failure to send McDowell to Richmond. Portraying Lincoln as obsessed with trapping Jackson, Reed inaccurately claims that the President required the Army of the Potomac to wait until Jackson was captured before he would allow McDowell to reinforce McClellan. Yet, Lincoln's suggestion to McDowell on May 28 that the two divisions at Fredericksburg be sent to meet Porter stands as stark evidence against Reed's assertion.<sup>6</sup>

McPherson, in his Battle Cry of Freedom, presented

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<sup>5</sup>Williams, 103.

<sup>6</sup>Reed, 172-73.

conclusions in line with the contentions of both Williams and Reed. McPherson criticized Lincoln's decision to send McDowell to the Valley instead of Richmond, and suggested that the President's "strategic error [was] perhaps even the colossal blunder that McClellan considered it." McPherson, though, does not offer further analysis of the potential strategic drawbacks of Lincoln's supposed mistake because McClellan's "previous record offered little reason to believe that he would have moved to . . . capture Richmond."<sup>7</sup>

The arguments of these historians miss the point because they attempt to evaluate Union strategic failure in terms of mistakes made by Lincoln, or McClellan's cautious approach to warfare. A true understanding of why the North failed to seize the great opportunity to unite the forces of McClellan and McDowell can only be obtained by analyzing the ineffectiveness of the Union high command in directing Federal strategy between Richmond and Fredericksburg. Time and again, historians studying the Virginia theater in 1862 have restricted their focus to operations south of Richmond, where events of true significance were in fact rare prior to May 31. When such studies reached the point where McClellan's Peninsular Campaign came to a halt before Richmond, historians have invariably shifted their attention to Jackson's Valley Campaign. That the former campaign

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<sup>7</sup>McPherson, 460.

fizzled, and the latter was initiated because of the strategic struggle between Richmond and Fredericksburg has been overlooked. As a result, the Battle of Hanover Courthouse, which was the climactic episode in that struggle, has been treated as an irrelevant sideshow of McClellan's campaign against Richmond.

The Battle of Hanover Courthouse was the high water mark of the Union's Peninsular Campaign. It was also a key turning point in the war in Virginia. Before Hanover Courthouse the North controlled events around Richmond; after the battle, and for the remainder of 1862, it constantly reacted to Confederate actions. Porter's expedition produced a decisive tactical victory, which in itself produced significant strategic opportunities. Yet, because of the ineffectiveness of the Union high command, those strategic opportunities went unexploited. As feared by the Prince de Joinville, thousands of lives, and a great deal of time, would be required to regain the ground which Fitz-John Porter had won at the Battle of Hanover Courthouse.

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