

July 1, 1863 Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Neither Lee nor Meade intended a battle take place at Gettysburg and neither were there when the battle started. On June 30, 1863, Confederate General Henry Heth had a division at Cashtown, Pennsylvania, Lee's gathering place before moving on to Harrisburg. Heth sent his division to nearby Gettysburg to look for, as he later wrote in his report, "army supplies (shoes especially), and return the same day." This started the myth that the Battle of Gettysburg started over shoes.

Heth did this without scouting ahead to see what was at Gettysburg. The job of scouting belonged to the Confederate cavalry under J.E.B. Stuart. But they had been gone for over a week. Blind to what was ahead of them, his soldiers ran directly into a Union cavalry division commanded by General John Buford. This started the fighting even though Heth and other commanders were under orders from Lee not to start a battle. But as each side brought in more troops, it became a full-scale battle. Lee started moving much of his army there. One of his goals was to fight the Union army and destroy it. Now, he would have to do it at Gettysburg.

About 5.30 a.m. on the morning of July 1, the battle started. Heth probed ahead cautiously to a point about two miles west of Gettysburg. Buford's cavalry was deliberately slowing his progress. At about 10 a.m. the Union I Corps arrived commanded by General John F. Reynolds.

They set themselves up along McPherson's Ridge to oppose Heth's Confederates. During the fighting Reynolds were killed but the Confederates were driven back.

Meanwhile both sides brought up reinforcements. The Union set up defenses of the town with I Corps defending the western approaches with XI Corps to the north.

The flanks were covered by Buford's cavalry.

One Union division was held in reserve on Cemetery Ridge. In the afternoon, when Lee arrived, the Confederates still did not know the strength of the Union forces they were facing. They also had not scouted the terrain. One division of Ewell's Corps had attacked the Union I Corps just after noon.

At about 2 p.m. Heth's division joined Ewell's troops in the attack on I Corps.

At about 3 p.m., another of Ewell's Confederate divisions, commanded by General Jubal Early, attacked the flank of the Union XI Corps.

By 4 p.m., both of the Union corps retreated through Gettysburg and took up positions on Cemetery Ridge. So far, the Union had lost about 9,000 men including about 3,000 who had been captured. The Confederates had lost about 6,500 men by this point. So the first day of battle was technically a Confederate victory numbers-wise. But Federal troops held the high ground as more reinforcements were still arriving. Based on the first day's fighting, Lee was convinced he could defeat Meade at Gettysburg.

Late in the day, Lee sent the famous order to Confederate General Richard S. Ewell to take cemetery ridge "if practicable." While he had been awaiting orders from Lee, Ewell had ridden out to take a closer look at Cemetery Ridge. Based on what he saw and the confusing order, he decided it was not practicable to take the hill and set up camp.

Instead, he decided to leave the assault for the next day. This was the first major mistake of the battle for South. The Army of the Potomac would end the day with around 21,900 men strongly positioned on Culp's Hill and Cemetery Ridge. The Army of Northern Virginia would have around 27,000 men from Benner's Hill to Seminary Ridge.