

HENRY HILL CELL PHONE TOUR

Greeting

Welcome to Manassas National Battlefield Park! The National Park Service is proud to present the Henry Hill Cell Phone Tour. This one mile loop trail will take you around Henry Hill, the scene of the climax of the First Battle of Manassas, fought on July 21st, 1861. At stops along the route of this hike, we will examine the battle through short audio presentations. Just follow the blue dots and select the program that corresponds to your stop. Thanks for visiting. We hope you enjoy the tour!

Return Greeting

Welcome back to the Henry Hill tour. Remember, all you need to do is input the number that corresponds to your stop. If at any time, you'd like to give us your opinion on this program, just press *0 to leave some feedback. Now, back to the tour!

Stop List

Stop One – Introduction to the Battle

Stop Two – The fight for Ricketts' Guns

Stop Three – The Henry House

Stop Four – Retreat from Matthews Hill

Stop Five – Robinson Lane

Stop Six – Confederate Rally

Stop Seven – Jackson's Lines

Stop Eight – The Assault on Griffin's Guns

Stop Nine – The Union Retreat

Stop 1)

Beginning here, you can see the terrain of Henry Hill, and to the north beyond the Henry House, Matthews Hill. Between the hills is the intersection of two roads, which were known at the time as the Warrenton Turnpike and the Manassas-Sudley Road. Twenty-six miles to the east is Washington, DC, where the 35,000 man Union army began its march on July 16th, 1861.

Union Commanding General Irvin McDowell, forced into this campaign by political pressure, reluctantly led his army west. Their objective: twenty-two thousand Confederates, commanded by General P.G. T. Beauregard, defending the strategic rail junction of Manassas, Virginia. The march was slow through Fairfax County, the Union army plagued by Confederate obstacles real and imagined. The raw recruits were undisciplined and often stopped marching to pick berries or rest in the shade. Eventually, McDowell's army occupied the towns of Vienna, Fairfax Court House, and Centreville. Small Confederate units skirmished with the Federals, eventually joining the defensive line on the western bank of Bull Run. On July 18th, there was a prolonged skirmish at Blackburn's Ford on the Confederate right flank. For two days after that, both sides consolidated their armies and planned for a conclusive battle.

The Confederate lines, now reinforced by 12,000 men of General Joseph E. Johnston's army, stretched along Bull Run for approximately eight miles between Union Mills Ford to the southeast and the Stone Bridge to the north. Anticipating an attack against their right, Beauregard and Johnston massed their troops on their southern line and prepared to strike. McDowell, realizing the Confederate strength, sought to maneuver around the Confederate left flank and strike Beauregard from the north.

Well before dawn on the morning of July 21st, 2 Union divisions, about 13,000 men, marched down the Warrenton Turnpike to ford Bull Run north of the Stone Bridge. An additional 7,000 men approached the bridge itself. By 9 am, the Union forces were bearing down on the small, 1,100 man command of South Carolinian Colonel Nathan "Shanks" Evans, the last unit on the Confederate left flank. Brilliantly shifting his men to meet the slow Union assault, Evans managed to hold back the tide while reinforcements arrived. However, after two hours of fighting, Union numbers were able to drive the Confederates off Matthews Hill. The battle then moved here, to Henry Hill, where the heaviest fighting of the day occurred.

Stop 2)

The First Battle of Manassas is often called, “an end of innocence,” because the violence and loss of life here forever destroyed the prevailing idea of both sides that the war would be short and relatively bloodless. Young men, eager and idealistic volunteers from more than twenty states, north and south, saw the horrible sights of war all along the battle lines and left this place scarred mentally and physically. Some of the most vicious fighting of the battle happened here, where Union Captain James Ricketts deployed his guns.

As the Confederates fell back from Matthews Hill around noon, McDowell was hesitated to press his advantage. After a two hour pause to bring fresh units forward, McDowell ordered Union troops across the Warrenton Turnpike and up Henry Hill. To weaken Confederate positions, he ordered two artillery units forward. Captains Charles Griffin and James Ricketts moved their batteries up to the crest of the hill, dangerously ahead of supporting infantry.

Even though the battle was going well for the Federals, the artillerymen were concerned about moving too far, too fast. No one knew how many Confederates were on this hill. Never the less, horses and men pulled eleven guns up within 300 yards of the reforming Confederate lines. On this location, around 2 in the afternoon, Captain Ricketts’s unlimbered his six artillery pieces of Battery I.

Once in this line, the Union cannons began a duel with thirteen Confederate guns and nearly 2,500 infantry positioned along the tree line to the east. The rallying Confederates held their lines and fired back. Ricketts’s battery, exposed and unsupported, took severe casualties immediately. Close enough to fire with accuracy, Confederate infantry killed and wounded Union men and horses. Finally, Federal infantry began to come up in support.

As the Federal infantry advanced, a rebel watching them later wrote, “What a beautiful sight they were, with well preserved lines they moved across the undulating field! I knew they were Yankees, and my heart sank as I saw them.” The Confederates waited for the Union troops to get closer, and then, with ferocious fire, mowed them down. J.E.B. Stuart’s Confederate cavalry joined the attack and the Federals were pushed back. Confederate troops surged forward and cheered as they took the Union guns. Moments later, a counterattack by the Federals took them back. According to reports, during the fierce fighting of that afternoon, Ricketts’s guns changed hands five times.

After more than two hours of fighting here, the ground around the Union battery was littered with the dead and dying. Among them was Captain Ricketts, who survived his serious wound, but spent several months in a Confederate prison.

Stop 3)

The small farmstead around you was the home of Judith Henry, an 85 year old widow in 1861. Known to the Henry family as Spring Hill, this place would become known to history as Henry Hill.

On the morning of July 21st, 1861, the bedridden Mrs. Henry nervously chatted with her daughter Ellen and her African-American slave, Lucy Griffith, as the sounds of battle began not too far away. Before long, her son John Henry came rushing to the farm and urged his mother to leave. The fighting on Matthews Hill to the north grew more intense and began to spread to the Henry farm. Union shells landed around the house as Confederate troops ran through the yard and climbed over the fences.

The family panicked and decided to flee the house and try to evacuate Mrs. Henry to the Compton Farm, a mile away. They carried her out of the house on her mattress, but as soon as they were outside, the gunfire grew too intense and they became trapped at the farm. First, her children moved Mrs. Henry to the low-lying springhouse, but the old woman begged and pleaded to be taken back to her bed. Relenting, they moved her back into the wooden house.

As she was returned to her bed, the battle got even louder around the house. Confederate soldiers used the house for cover as they fired into the advancing Federals. Union Captain Ricketts, rolling up the hill with his cannons, approached the house. "I saw some of my horses fall and some of my men wounded by the sharpshooters," Ricketts recalled. Thinking it was an enemy position and unaware of the civilians inside, his next order came quickly. "I turned my guns upon the house and literally riddled it."

Inside the house, shrapnel and splinters flew through the air. Ellen Henry crawled into the fireplace for protection. Lucy Griffith ducked under the bed. They were injured, but the wounds were not serious. The widow Henry was not so lucky. The poor woman received terrible cuts to her neck and side and one of her feet was almost blown off. She died the next day in the arms of her daughter. A soldier passing through the yard later would find John Henry laying face down in the grass crying, "They've killed my mother." Mrs. Henry was the only civilian killed in the battle. She was buried in her rose garden.

The ruins of the original house were used as firewood by Confederate soldiers in the following winter. The current structure was built in the 1870s. In the back yard of the house stands a monument to the fallen Union soldiers, erected in 1865, one of the earliest memorials of the war.

Stop 4)

From this vantage point, you have an excellent view down into the valley between Henry Hill and Matthews Hill. Below you is Youngs Branch, a tributary of Bull Run, the Warrenton Turnpike (modern day U.S. 29), and the Stone House. These landmarks are important to understand the events of the battle.

Following McDowell's plan of attack, the Union divisions of David Hunter and Samuel Heintzelman crossed Bull Run to the north at Sudley Ford and then swung south towards Matthews Hill. A third Union division under Daniel Tyler threatened the Confederate left flank at the Stone Bridge.

The Confederate position was commanded by the hard-fighting and hard-drinking Colonel Nathan "Shanks" Evans. After easily holding back a superior Union force at the Stone Bridge, Evans began to think that the assault there was only a feint. That suspicion was confirmed when Confederate signalman Captain E. Porter Alexander, spotting the massive Union force marching around his position, sent Evans the message, "Look out for your left. You are turned." Evans quickly sent for reinforcements, left 200 men to hold the Stone Bridge, and led approximately 900 soldiers towards Matthews Hill.

Arriving at the hill shortly before the Federals, Evans saw that he was greatly outnumbered, but was determined to fight. He positioned his men, units from South Carolina and Louisiana, in a tree line facing an open field. When the 2nd Rhode Island, the lead unit in the Union column came into range, Evans's men fired into them. For the next 2 and a half hours, the battle raged on the slopes of Matthews Hill.

Evans received reinforcements from the regiments of Barnard Bee and Francis Bartow and the outnumbered Confederates fought bravely. They were aided by the fact that the Union leaders were tentative and were only sending in one regiment at a time. Eventually, though, the numbers of the Federals tipped the scales and the Confederates were forced to withdraw across the Turnpike and Youngs Branch.

While the fighting spread from Matthews Hill, four Confederate artillery pieces commanded by Captain John Imboden deployed here and engaged the Union guns before they, too, were forced to retreat. Two hours after the Confederate withdrawal, the Union guns of Ricketts and Griffin would rumble past this position and into the history books.

Stop 5)

As the Confederate troops of Evans, Bee, and Bartow retreated from Matthews Hill and gathered in this area, the Hampton Legion arrived in support. The Hampton Legion was the personally-funded unit of Colonel Wade Hampton of South Carolina. Before the war, he had been one of the state's largest landowners, a rich planter, and a politician. When the Palmetto State seceded, Hampton used part of his fortune to raise and equip his own small army. He treated his men well and they loved him for it. In return, he was determined to earn them glory on the battlefield.

Just before noon, Hampton moved his approximately 600 men here to the northern slope of Henry Hill and arranged them into a line of battle, allowing the retreating rebels to pass through their lines. Pursuing the Confederates, the 2nd Maine and 3rd Connecticut of Erasmus Keyes' brigade hesitantly approached this spot. Other Union units advanced from the Stone House, all of them bearing down on the Hampton Legion.

One of Hampton's men would later recall the scene, "In front of us could be seen in large columns the enemy advancing. Dropping to our knees in a gully we awaited their attack. Soon we were met by a tremendous volley of musketry whose effect was terrible. Immediately to my left was poor Phelps, a ball passed clean through him, striking me in the leg. In every direction could be heard the groans of the wounded. We in turn poured a volley into the enemy. At this time I made up my mind for the worse. I saw we had a terrible struggle before us."

The Legion fought well, but took heavy losses. Finally, as the only organized Confederate unit still facing the Union advance, the pressure became too much and the South Carolinians were forced to retreat. Following the earlier withdrawal of Evans, Bee, and Bartow, they ran south down this lane, passing the Robinson House.

At this point, it appeared that the battle would be a Union victory. The Confederates were outnumbered here and falling back quickly. If McDowell kept the pressure on, the entire rebel line was at risk. However, as the Confederates gave up the ground around the Robinson House, reinforcements were arriving behind them on the crest of Henry Hill. The momentum of battle was about to swing.

Only the foundation of the Robinson House can be seen today, but at the time of the battle, this was the home of a free African-American man and his family. The Robinson family members survived the two battles of Manassas, but much of their property was damaged or seized by soldiers during the war. In 1873, James Robinson was awarded \$1,249 in compensation by the Federal government. He fixed and expanded the home, but it was later burned, a victim of arson in 1993.

Stop 6)

On this ground, between the Robinson House and the crest of Henry Hill, General Barnard Bee stopped and tried to rally his retreating men. Only slightly out of danger, Evans and Bartow joined Bee in attempting to calm the men and reform the lines. Bee, looking up the ridge, was waiting on reinforcements to arrive. Just then, at that desperate moment, General Thomas Jackson appeared on the hill with his brigade.

To coordinate the Confederate defense, Bee rode up the hill to meet Jackson. Bee, fresh from the fight had his sword in his hand and fire in his belly. Jackson, calm and quiet, looked to the north with his cold blue eyes. Bee called out to Jackson, "General, they are beating us back." To that, Jackson replied, "Then we will give them the bayonet." With that, the silent Jackson waited for the Union forces to approach.

Bee hurried back down the hill to his troops. To rally the men, he pointed up to the stoic Virginian and, according to legend, shouted, "There stands Jackson like a stone wall! Let us determine to die here and we will conquer. Rally behind the Virginians!"

The men still able to fight cheered and moved to join the new lines. And more inspiration was on the way. Confederate commanding generals Johnston and Beauregard arrived on Henry Hill, after spending the morning behind the lines shifting units across the battlefield. They joined the fight here shortly after noon.

General Johnston rode up to a battered and disorganized regiment. It was the 4th Alabama, who had lost every officer in the unit. Johnston went to the color-bearer and ordered, "Sergeant, hand me your flag." The soldier politely responded, "General, I cannot give you my flag, but I will put it wherever you command." Satisfied, Johnston rode forward to join the lines. The colors followed him and the 4th Alabama followed their colors.

Beauregard rode back and forth behind the lines, directing arriving reinforcements to gaps in the line. By the time the Union attack resumed, almost 5,000 Confederates were in a strong position on Henry Hill.

The events that happened here played an important role in the battle. It is quite extraordinary that beaten and retreating soldiers could be calmed and reformed to fight again. The rallied men returned to the battle and held their part of the line. Sadly, some of the officers that helped turn the fortunes of war here, Bee and Bartow, would suffer mortal wounds in the afternoon fighting and die here on the fields of Manassas.

Stop 7)

Standing here and facing the Henry House, you are located in the middle of the Confederate lines on Henry Hill as they were positioned in the early afternoon on July 21st, 1861. Shifted northward from the southern positions along Bull Run, Confederate regiments emerged on to Henry Hill from the trees behind you. In front of the infantry, General Thomas Jonathan Jackson deployed 13 cannons and opened fire on the Federals as they came up the hill. The large equestrian statue of Jackson, dedicated in 1940, is visible on the highest spot of land between the battle lines. Jackson had just been given the name Stonewall, now he would have to earn it.

Union General Irvin McDowell, despite having superior numbers, sent his regiments forward slowly and piecemeal. The batteries of Ricketts and Griffin rumbled up the hillside and unlimbered their guns north and south of the Henry House. Then regiments of infantry came marching up, hundreds of men in each line.

Thirteen Confederate artillery pieces dueled with the eleven Union pieces. The short range of only 300 yards negated the benefits of the more accurate Union rifled pieces over the mostly smoothbore Confederate guns. The field between these two armies became the scene of much death and destruction.

As the Union line grew stronger, Stonewall Jackson grew more determined to defeat them. He ordered his men to prepare to move forward. He called out, "Let the whole line rise, move forward with a shout, and trust to the bayonet. I am tired of this long range work... and when you charge, yell like furies"

A Confederate charge, accompanied by the first known use of the terrifying Rebel Yell, pushed the Federals back and Jackson's men captured the Union artillery. A quick Union counter-attack sent the rebels back to this tree line. More Union troops marched up the hill. More Confederate reinforcements joined the fight.

Charges and counter-charges swept across the plateau throughout the afternoon. Three times the Union guns were captured and lost. Wounded and exhausted men crawled away from the battle. The dead lay still on the field. Smoke filled the air and men went deaf from the thunderous noise. The sun beat down on everything.

Mississippians fought Minnesotans, Virginians drew Vermont blood, and men from upstate New York battled men from Upstate South Carolina. The War Between the States begun in earnest and no one would soon forget what happened here, on the bloody plains of Manassas.

Stop 8)

The 33rd Virginia held this position on the left of Jackson's brigade. As the fighting on Henry Hill began, they rested in the near tree line and watched the artillery duel to their right. Colonel Arthur Cummings kept his nervous men ready and waited for a target to appear before him.

Not much later, in an attempt to fire down the Confederate left flank, two 12-pounder field howitzers of Griffin's battery redeployed on the Union right flank. Sweeping out close to the tree line, the Federal gunners were without proper infantry support. Never the less, they unlimbered their guns approximately one hundred yards in front of the 33rd Virginia and readied to fire.

When the Union artillerymen appeared to their front, Cummings ordered his men forward to take the guns. Leaving the tree line, the 33rd moved obliquely into view of the howitzers, but the artillery remained silent.

Captain Griffin saw the Virginians moving across the field toward him. He loaded his guns with canister shot and turned them to face the threat. However, at that moment, his commanding officer Major William Barry rode up and told him not to fire. Making a tragic mistake, Barry believed that the Confederates were actually Federal troops. He was confused because at this time, so early in the war, standard uniforms had not been adopted and units were unfamiliar with each other.

Barry, seeing the blue-clad 33rd Virginia, assumed they were a New York regiment coming over in support. Griffin was not so sure. "They are Confederates," pleaded Griffin, "as certain as the world, they are Confederates!" Still, Barry ordered him not to fire. "I know they are your battery support."

The indecision of the Union officers allowed Cummings to march his men within fifty yards of Griffin's guns. There, they leveled their muskets and fired a devastating volley into the Union battery. "That was the last of us," Griffin would later report. "We were all cut down."

Most of Griffin's men and horses were hit. As the 33rd followed their barrage with a charge, Griffin had no choice but to surrender his guns and escape. Jubilant rebels rushed the artillery and cheered. Their joy would not last long, though. Union countercharges pushed them back towards this tree line. Because of their strategic location and symbolic value, both sides desperately wanted to control the guns. On this ground, many men on both sides would die to take or hold them.

Stop 9)

Walking from the last stop to this spot, you retraced the charge of the 33rd Virginia as they took Griffin's battery. That was not the end of the bloodshed here, though. Confederate and Union soldiers would continue to fight desperately to take and hold this position for hours.

Griffin's guns were reclaimed at first by the men of the 1st Minnesota and 14th Brooklyn, but Confederate troops recaptured the guns with a second charge. The fighting then shifted to Ricketts' battery, which was seized by Jackson's brigade. Union counterattacks by the 11th Massachusetts, the 2nd Wisconsin, and the 69th and 79th New York briefly retook the Federal artillery. The guns changed hands yet again as Confederate troops from Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina and South Carolina overran the Union positions.

While the battle raged all across Henry Hill, the Union brigade of Oliver Howard occupied Chinn Ridge, the hill west of the Sudley Road. Howard organized his men and prepared to charge the Confederate left flank on Henry Hill. However, at the same time, the Confederate brigades of Jubal Early and Arnold Elzey flanked the would-be flankers.

The Confederate reinforcements launched an assault that surprised the Union line on Chinn Ridge. By 5 o'clock, the Confederate infantry was joined by cavalry and artillery and the attack rolled up the Federal right. The Union troops on Chinn Ridge and Henry Hill were swept away and McDowell's army retreated to the north in confusion.

McDowell's official report described the Union troops as they fled towards Bull Run. "The plain was covered with the retreating groups, and they seemed to infect those with whom they came in contact. The retreat soon became a rout, and this soon degenerated still further into a panic."

As the Federals gave up the field, some Confederates slowly pursued them. Others, exhausted from the fight, collapsed on to the grass. Depending on their side, this field was either the site of a glorious victory or a tragic defeat. To many on both sides, it was the last place they ever saw.

Union casualties numbered almost 3,000, with 460 killed, 1,124 wounded, and over 1,300 captured or missing. Confederate casualties were lower with 387 killed, 1,582 wounded and 13 captured or missing, the total coming to just under 2,000.

As the dead were buried and the wounded carried away, the grim reality of war set in. Even though it would pale in comparison to the carnage to come, the first battle of Manassas forever destroyed the illusion of a short and bloodless war. It was indeed, the end of innocence.