

The Legacy of ANTIETAM

160 Years Later

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September 17, 2022, is the 160th anniversary of the Battle of Antietam, when Union and Confederate troops engaged in the deadliest one-day battle in American history. By nightfall of September 17, 1862, more than 23,000 soldiers were killed, wounded or pronounced missing after 12 hours of combat.

General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia had attempted to invade the North as part of Lee's Maryland Campaign, but his plan was thwarted by Union General George McClellan's Army of the Potomac. Lee and his forces retreated to Virginia on September 18.

The Maryland State Monument at Antietam is about 80 yards northeast of the Dunker Church. It was dedicated on May 30, 1900, with the keynote speaker being President William McKinley, a veteran of the battle. This is the only monument at Antietam dedicated to units from both sides.

The monument is an octagonal granite pavilion roofed with a bronze dome and topped with a bronze statue of a robed female standing on a globe and holding a sword and a wreath. Four granite blocks stand in the arches of the pavilion with bronze tablets showing scenes from the battle on the outside and on the inside, information about the eight Maryland units from both Union and Confederate forces that took part in the battle. The names of those Maryland units are also carved just below the pediment on the outside of the pavilion.

PHOTO BY DALE THOMAS

This Union victory was a key turning point in the American Civil War. It ended Lee's Maryland Campaign, intended as the first Confederate invasion of the North and one of the greatest threats to Washington, D.C. It demonstrated that United States forces could prevail against the Confederates. It prevented France and England from joining forces with the Confederacy, despite both countries' urgent need for Southern cotton – neither country wished to support a pro-slavery government. It boosted the tattered morale of Union soldiers.

Most important, the Battle of Antietam provided President Abraham Lincoln with a military success that allowed him to issue his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, thereby formally alerting the Confederacy of his intention to free all persons held as slaves within the rebellious states. One hundred days later, with the Confederacy still in full rebellion, President Abraham Lincoln issued the final Emancipation Proclamation.

By linking the Union cause with an attack on slavery, the Proclamation changed the course of the war and the future of the nation. By setting the stage to free millions of slaves, the South would lose valuable slave labor that had supported its war effort and its economy. Although the Emancipation Proclamation did not free enslaved persons in Maryland or other border states, it did open up one pathway to freedom by enabling African American men to enlist or be drafted into the Union army. And it allowed almost 180,000 former slaves and free blacks to fight the Confederates as United States Colored Troops.

"I never in my life felt more certain that I was doing right than I do in signing this paper...if my name ever



The Sunken Road, as it was known to area residents prior to the Battle of Antietam, was a dirt farm lane which was used primarily by farmers to bypass Sharpsburg. On September 17, 1862, Confederate Maj. Gen. Daniel Harvey Hill placed his division of approximately 2,600 men along the road, piled fence rails on the embankment to further strengthen the position and waited for the advance of the Union army.

Union Maj. Gen. William H. French and his 5,500 men veered south, towards Hill's position along the Sunken Road. As French's men approached the Sunken Road, the Confederate troops staggered them with a powerful volley delivered at a range of less than one hundred yards.

Union and Confederate troops dug in. For nearly four hours, bitter fighting raged along this road as French sought to drive the Southerners back. Outnumbered but with a well-defended position, the Confederates in the road stood their ground. Finally, the Federals were able to overwhelm Hill's men, successfully driving them from this strong position and piercing the center of the Confederacy's line. However, the Federals did not follow up this success with additional attacks and neither side gained a decisive advantage. The Sunken Road was now Bloody Lane.

PHOTO BY DALE THOMAS

goes into history it will be for this act, and my whole soul is in it," Lincoln said. By signing the Emancipation Proclamation, he completed what he would later call "the great event of the nineteenth century." The Proclamation freed the slaves in all states still in a state of rebellion as of January 1, 1863, and thus united the Union cause with an assault on the institution of slavery.

The war's outcome provided Lincoln with a political boost that may have helped him and his fellow Republicans to prevail in 1862's critical midterm elections by maintaining a House majority and gaining seats in the Senate.

Today the Antietam National Battlefield, located at 5831 Dunker Church Road in Sharpsburg, Maryland, is operated by the National Park Service. Visitors can explore the park by taking an 8.5 mile driving or biking tour and/or hiking 12 miles of designated trails.

"The renovation of the Museum and Historic Visitors Center is underway," says Keith Snyder, Park Ranger and Chief of Resource Education and Visitor Services at Antietam. This \$6.8 million project to preserve the 60-year-old facility and provide improved visitor services will be completed in time for fall's 160th anniversary.

Programming will feature a new emphasis on the "why" of Antietam, highlighting the political and social aspects of the battle. "It was the beginning of the end of slavery, a first step," says Dan Spedden, President of Visit Hagerstown & Washington County.

"It's an entirely new presentation," Snyder says. "We will offer programming associated with the battle."

Park events commemorating the 160th anniversary of the battle are planned for two consecutive weekends in September, beginning with the actual anniversary date of September 17 and continuing on September 18. Activities will focus on the battle itself, with hikes,



This 1862 photo by Alexander Gardner (1821-1882) is entitled "Bodies of Confederate artillerymen near Dunker Church." As the first battlefield photographed before the dead were buried, Antietam became the first battle to visually convey the carnage of the American Civil War.

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walks, tours and living history demonstrations. An evening hike is planned on September 16 in recognition of action occurring the evening before combat began. Living history volunteers will present artillery and musket firing programs on September 17 and 18 at 11 a.m., 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. near the New York State Monument next to the Visitors Center.

The following weekend's events, to be held September 24 and 25, will highlight the battle's aftermath, focusing on the care of wounded and deceased soldiers as seen in photos taken using the new technology of "wet plate" photography. Photography and photojournalism came of age during this period and conveyed the grim details of battle to a public anxious for information. Some were the first ever taken of dead soldiers on the battlefield before burial. As the first battlefield photographed before the dead were buried, Antietam became the first battle to visually convey the carnage of the American Civil War.



As in previous years, on the first Saturday of December, a Memorial Illumination will feature 23,000 luminaries representing the men killed, wounded or missing at Antietam. People can drive through the park to view the luminaries.

Frederick Douglass, the noted abolitionist, editor and orator, offered the following thoughts regarding the legacy of Antietam: “At last the outspread wings of the American Eagle afford shelter and protection to men of all colors, all countries, amid all climes [climates] and the long oppressed black man may honorably fall or gloriously flourish under the star-spangled banner.”

Some of the luminaries near the State of New York Monument at Antietam. Each year on the first Saturday in December 23,000 luminaries representing the men killed, wounded or missing at Antietam can be viewed by visitors to the park. PHOTO BY MJ CLINGAN

