

## **Wheeler's Raid and Movements in the Shenandoah**

<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>

The week of August 10, 1864 saw more fighting in both the eastern and western theaters of the war. Federals and Confederates raided their opponents' supply lines and fighting broke out in several locations, including Georgia and the Shenandoah Valley.

In an effort to disrupt the transportation lines supplying William T. Sherman's forces that were then besieging Atlanta, and perhaps force the Union armies to withdraw, Confederate General John Bell Hood ordered his cavalry under General Joseph Wheeler to begin a raid on the Federal rail lines in north Georgia and east Tennessee on August 10. He directed Wheeler to cut the Western & Atlantic Railroad in north Georgia, and then strike against the Nashville & Chattanooga line in Tennessee. Wheeler took with him 4,500 troopers to complete the mission. Over the next five days his men struck the Western & Atlantic at several locations, destroying track, capturing some Federal prisoners as well as cattle to feed hungry southern troops. He then spent several weeks in Tennessee, damaging both the Nashville & Chattanooga and the Nashville & Decatur lines before retiring into Alabama in mid-September. Though Wheeler's raid created some minor supply problems for Sherman, the damages were quickly repaired and proved insufficient to force a Union withdrawal. In fact, with Wheeler having taken half of Hood's cavalry, Union horsemen were able to cut Confederate rail lines south of Atlanta, and by early September Hood had been forced to evacuate the city.

While Wheeler's cavalry raided Tennessee and Georgia, in Virginia the opening movements of the 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign were underway. In mid-June, Robert E. Lee detached General Jubal Early and about 15,000 men from the Army of Northern Virginia to assist in the defense of Lynchburg. Early had then moved northward down the Shenandoah,

crossing the Potomac into Maryland in early July. The Confederate force won a victory at Monocacy on July 9, and threatened Washington D.C. itself before withdrawing into Virginia. To face this threat to the capital, Ulysses Grant detached troops from the Army of the Potomac, and in early August, he created the Middle Military Division under the command of General Philip Sheridan, with orders for Sheridan to destroy Early's force, as well as anything in the Shenandoah Valley that might benefit the Confederate war effort.

On August 9, Sheridan began moving his army southward from the vicinity of Harpers Ferry. Upon learning of the Union advance, Early withdrew up the Shenandoah towards Fisher's Hill. As the two armies maneuvered, skirmishing broke out at several locations. On the twelfth and thirteenth, fighting took place at Cedar Creek, Berryville, and Strasburg, with the Federals facing stiffening resistance. Around this time Sheridan received a report from Grant that Early had received significant reinforcements from Lee. Though the report proved exaggerated, Sheridan was concerned about his ability to hold his current position, and also about his supply situation. Consequently, on August 15-16, the Union general determined to withdraw his troops toward Winchester in order to better protect his flank, and by the 22<sup>nd</sup> he was again near Harpers Ferry. During the withdrawal Sheridan ordered his troops to destroy or capture grain and livestock. In the words of historian Richard Halseth, these actions "initiat[ed] the scorched-earth policy that was to characterize [Sheridan's] Valley campaign." Little action occurred in the Valley over the next month, but in September Sheridan would learn that some of Early's army had been sent back to Lee, leading the Federals to commence an offensive that would eventually lead to the destruction of Early's force and the devastation of much of the Shenandoah. For the Confederates in the Valley in 1864, there would be no repeat of Stonewall Jackson's heroics of two years earlier.