

THE BATTLE OF TURNER'S GAP

SEPTEMBER 14, 1862

MARYLAND PARK SERVICE DRIVING TOUR



Welcome to South Mountain State Battlefield! You have an opportunity to explore several sites upon which approximately thirty thousand men fought a series of battles and in which five to six thousand American fighting men were killed or wounded.

Before we begin, we would like to remind you that much of the battlefield area is private property and there is no "tour road" as is the case with many battlefields; the roads you will be driving are public thoroughfares. Also please note that the tour winds its way over narrow mountain roads, most of which existed at the time of the battle, and some of which are unpaved, unimproved, or not much wider than a single vehicle. Please drive carefully and, above all, ***do not try to read this narrative while driving your vehicle!*** Please read the text only while your vehicle is not in motion.

The Turner's Gap portion of the South Mountain Battlefield tour should take approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete.

The tour begins at the park museum in Washington Monument State Park, which is open 9 AM to 5 PM, weekends in April and October, and seven days a week from May through September. If you desire a deeper understanding of the South Mountain battles, two video presentations (each lasting approximately fifteen minutes) are available for viewing in the museum. One of the videos describes the start of the 1862 Maryland Campaign while the other provides an overview of the fighting at Turner's and Fox's Gaps; the latter is *strongly* recommended for visitors who wish to take the auto tours. The museum also contains a fine assortment of authentic period firearms and other artifacts.

STOP #1 - WASHINGTON MONUMENT

The monument sits atop Monument Knoll, one thousand feet above the valley floor, and is a five minute uphill walk from the museum. Built in 1827 by the people of Boonsboro, Maryland, it is the first completed monument in honor of George Washington. By the time of the Civil War, the monument had fallen into disrepair and was only about twelve to fifteen feet in height. Near the start of the day on September 14th, Confederate troops spotted figures atop the structure; fearing the presence of Union observers, the Confederates investigated only to find that they were local residents trying to gain a better view of the fighting.

The monument was used as a signal station by the Union army during the 1862 Maryland Campaign and at other times during the war. During the Battle of Antietam on September 17th, Union

signalmen atop the monument directed long-range artillery fire by the use of signal flags very much like the ones on display in the museum.

The monument is thirty-four feet high and visitors may climb the stone stairs to the top for a better view of the Cumberland Valley below. If you can tear yourself away from the view for a moment and look behind you, a long low ridge with a modern-day radio tower will be visible to you; most of the Turner's Gap action was fought on the far (eastern) side of that ridge.

Driving directions: To exit the park, follow the tour road back to the four-way stop (the park entrance). Proceed straight ahead on Washington Monument Rd. Just before you reach the end of the road where it joins Alternate U.S. Rt. 40, turn left into the small parking area.

STOP #2 - TURNER'S GAP

A series of black metal tablets on the roadside tell the story of the battle here. These markers were placed by the War Department in the late 1800's and were written by Gen. Ezra Carman, the first serious scholar of the 1862 Maryland Campaign; he was also a participant in the battles here. Note that the topography of the area has changed radically since 1862; the land around the gap is much more thickly wooded today than it was on the day of battle, thus the men who fought here enjoyed much greater visibility than you do in the present day. This is true for most of the areas which you will visit on this tour. The small church just to the east was not present at the time of the battle. The restaurant across the road to the south *was* here, however, and was known at the time as the Mountain House. Built in the mid-1700's, the building served as Confederate General D.H. Hill's headquarters on the day of battle.

The main road was also here on that day; it was then called the National Pike and was the primary thoroughfare from Baltimore, MD. to Illinois; it was thus the main passage over South Mountain. D.H. Hill obviously realized its importance and knew the Union Army would try to force its way up the road from the east and through the gap. Early on the morning of September 14th, Hill positioned Alfred Colquitt's brigade partway down the eastern side of the mountain and sent Samuel Garland's brigade down the Wood Road (the present-day Appalachian Trail) to defend Fox's Gap about a mile to the south.

Although one of the trio of battles fought on this day is referred to as "Turner's Gap", no infantry fighting occurred directly in the actual gap proper where you now stand. However, the field just to the east of the parking area was the site of a Confederate artillery position.

Driving directions: Exit the parking area and turn left. Turn left again onto Alternate U.S. Rt. 40, drive just over 0.1 mile, and turn left onto Dahlgren Road. Drive for 0.4 mile then pull over beside a large field to your right.

STOP #3 - HATCH'S ASSAULT

To your right (south) you can see a mountain topped by communications equipment; this is Lamb's Knoll, and the Fox's Gap portion of the battle lies about 1.5 miles away between the knoll and your present position. The field to your right was a Confederate artillery position; from here the cannon could cover the National Road and the mountainside to the east (ahead of you). This artillery was supported by the rightmost regiment of Brigadier General Robert Rodes' brigade which was positioned ahead of you and facing east down the mountainside. The remaining regiments of his brigade stretched

over the high ground to your left.

Around 4 PM, most of the Union I Corps began its advance from the base of the mountain (ahead of your present location, and which you will see in Stop #5 of this tour). Badly outnumbered, Rodes requested reinforcements and he was forced to reposition his brigade (as you will also see later). The reinforcing brigades of James Kemper and Richard Garnett arrived from Turner's Gap (using the very road you've been driving), and took position ahead of you and to your right, just in time to repel a Union attack. This assault was led by Brig. Gen. John Hatch, who had formed his division into three lines (one brigade per line) before attacking up the mountainside. The Confederate brigades were pushed back but managed to just barely hold and prevent a Union breakthrough.

Driving directions: Drive 0.1 mile, pausing for a moment after the left bend in the road. Look downhill to your right; this is the area defended by Garnett and Kemper's small Confederate brigades. The road becomes unpaved a short distance ahead, and we encourage **extreme caution** while driving this section of the tour -- the road surface is poor and curves quite sharply in places. After about another 0.5 mile the road widens a bit and you'll be able to pull off to the right directly across from a private driveway. Step out of your vehicle and face the house at the bottom of the hill across the road.

STOP #4 - RODES REPOSITIONS HIS BRIGADE

The home at the foot of the hill is a period farmhouse (privately owned) which belonged to J. O'Neil. You may be able to spot another house on the high ground farther on; this home, too, was here at the time of the battle and was owned by N. Haupt.

After some maneuvering, the Confederate brigade commanded by Robert Rodes took up a defensive position in the gorge (Stop #6) between these period houses. Union Brig. Gen. George G. Meade's division comprised the right wing of the I Corps assault. Meade originally attacked straight up the mountain (from down the road to your right), but then began to work his men around farther to his right (on the distant ridge ahead of you) in an effort to flank the Confederate position.

Meade's Pennsylvanians eventually attacked toward you from the high ground beyond the Haupt house and pushed Rodes' Alabamians out of the gorge and diagonally back up the hill to your left. The Confederate brigade's morale ultimately broke and they fled back down toward the National Road. It looked as though Meade's men would have a clear approach to Turner's Gap, but a fresh Confederate brigade under Nathan Evans arrived from the gap in time to execute a "spoiling" counterattack. Although repulsed, Evans bought precious time for the Confederates: sunset ended Meade's chance to crash into Turner's Gap from the north and attack the remaining Confederate defenders from the rear.

Driving directions: Return to your vehicle and continue driving. The road becomes paved again a short distance ahead. Stay straight until the road T's into Mt. Tabor Road. Turn right, drive 0.1 mile, then make a left onto Station Road. After a short distance, use the white concrete driveway pad on the left to carefully turn your vehicle around, then drive back the way you came. Near the intersection, and at the cemetery on the right, carefully pull off onto the grass.

STOP #5 - THE UNION I CORPS FORMS FOR ATTACK

A period church (gone now) called Mt. Tabor stood beside the cemetery to your right, which is the basis for the name of the road running left to right ahead of you. This is a good location from which

to view the area in which the Union I Corps went into battleline before their 4 PM assault.

The I Corps, commanded by Major General Joseph "Fighting Joe" Hooker, was composed of three divisions. The First Division, under Brig. Gen. John Hatch, formed up in three lines in the field across the road directly in front of you. This division attacked at an angle up the mountainside slightly to the south (your left). The Third Division, commanded by Brig. Gen. George Meade, formed for battle just over a tenth of a mile to your right, on the far side of the road you drove to descend the mountain. Hooker's Second Division, under Brig. Gen. James Ricketts, was held in reserve on the east side of Mt. Tabor Road on the ground upon which you now stand.

As you gaze at South Mountain directly ahead of you, it's not difficult to imagine the thoughts of the Union troops who were tasked with attacking these imposing heights. The next tour stop will vividly illustrate the difficulty of this mountain terrain.

Driving directions: Drive a short distance ahead and turn right onto Mt. Tabor Road. After 0.1 mile turn left onto Frostown Road. This road was here at the time of the battle and was the "dividing line" between Hatch's and Meade's divisions. Proceed 0.5 mile and make a right to continue on Frostown Road. Immediately after turning you may pause (traffic permitting) and look to your left for a quick view of the ground over which Meade's men began their advance. Drive approximately another 0.9 mile and pull over on the right side of the road in front of a metal farm gate. Be sure to watch for traffic as you exit your vehicle and walk to the guard rail on the left side of the road.

STOP #6 - THE GORGE

As you look down over the guard rail, you can see below you the gorge in which Rodes' Confederates took up their defensive positions (as described in the narrative for Stop #4). The area directly below you was the far left of the Confederate position; Rodes' remaining men were positioned in a broken line running down the length of the gorge to your left. Meade's men attacked from your left and from behind you, pushing down into the gorge and driving out Rodes' men.

Take note of the rugged terrain on both the near and far slopes of the gorge. Meade's Pennsylvanians attacked down the near slope, into the gorge, and pursued the retreating Confederates up the other side moving diagonally to your right front. Rodes' men retreated to higher ground in that direction but this was their final stand in this battle; after defending there for a time, the Confederate regiments finally broke and ran from the field.

When you return to your vehicle, look for the stone ruins to the left of the farm gate. These stones are all that are left of the Widow Main's house. Just prior to the commencement of hostilities, Colonel John Gordon (commander of the 6th Alabama Regiment of Rodes' Brigade) attempted to warn the widow and her children to leave the area for their safety. Gordon was met with a barrage of verbal abuse by Mrs. Main, who called Gordon and the other Confederates "thieving rebels". Her outburst was met with good-natured laughter and cheers from the men. (As a side note, many of the weapons on display in our museum were retrieved from the battlefield by a local resident named George Main. Although the records are sketchy, we are relatively certain that he was one of the Widow Main's several children mentioned in the first-hand account of the incident quoted in our museum display).

Driving directions: Continue for about 0.7 mile, then turn left onto Michael Road which will "T" into Monument Road after 0.1 mile. At the stop sign look to the top of the hill to your left front; the Washington Monument will be plainly visible atop Monument Knob. Turn left onto Monument Road;

after a short distance you will again reach the four-way stop at the entrance to Washington Monument State Park..

Turn left at this four-way stop and drive approximately one mile to the intersection with U.S. Alt. Rt. 40 (which you will recognize from Stop #2). Turn left onto Alt. 40 and drive for approximately one mile (**CAUTION:** this section of highway contains some *very* sharp curves). Turn right onto Fox's Gap Road and pull over to the right side of the road at any convenient spot.

STOP #7 - THE IRON BRIGADE

When the Union I Corps began its attack up the mountainside (Stops 3 through 6), the brigade of Gen. John Gibbon was held in reserve around Bolivar, a small village about a mile east of this spot (to your left). Around 5 PM, about an hour after the main attack began, Gibbon's brigade was ordered forward. They advanced on both sides of the National Road (present day Alt. US 40). Upon reaching the road you're presently on, the brigade's two lead regiments formed into battleline. The half of the brigade on this side of the National Road advanced across the fields to your left, crossed the road where you now are, and then pressed forward up the mountain to your right.

Approximately halfway up the mountain, Gibbon's men encountered a Confederate brigade commanded by Col. Alfred Colquitt who had been holding their defensive position since early morning. The Confederates took advantage of the rugged terrain, ravines, and woodlines to put up a spirited defense. The battle raged until hours after dark (an uncommon example of Civil War night fighting), finally ceasing due to lack of ammunition and sheer exhaustion. Although Gibbon's brigade was unable to carry the Confederate position, they were widely recognized for their tenacity in the attempt. As a result, the unit thereafter became known as the "Iron Brigade" to the soldiers of both armies.

This ends the Turner's Gap portion of the South Mountain Battlefield tour. If you wish, you may now start the second part of the "linked" tour (Fox's Gap), which commences from this point. Otherwise you may turn around at any convenient point and return to U.S. Alternate Route 40 (the main road directly behind you).



Ranger/interpreter guided tours of the battlefield are available to visitors by pre-arrangement. Please contact the South Mountain State Battlefield office during weekday business hours by calling 301-432-8065.

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