

The First Battle of Bull Run

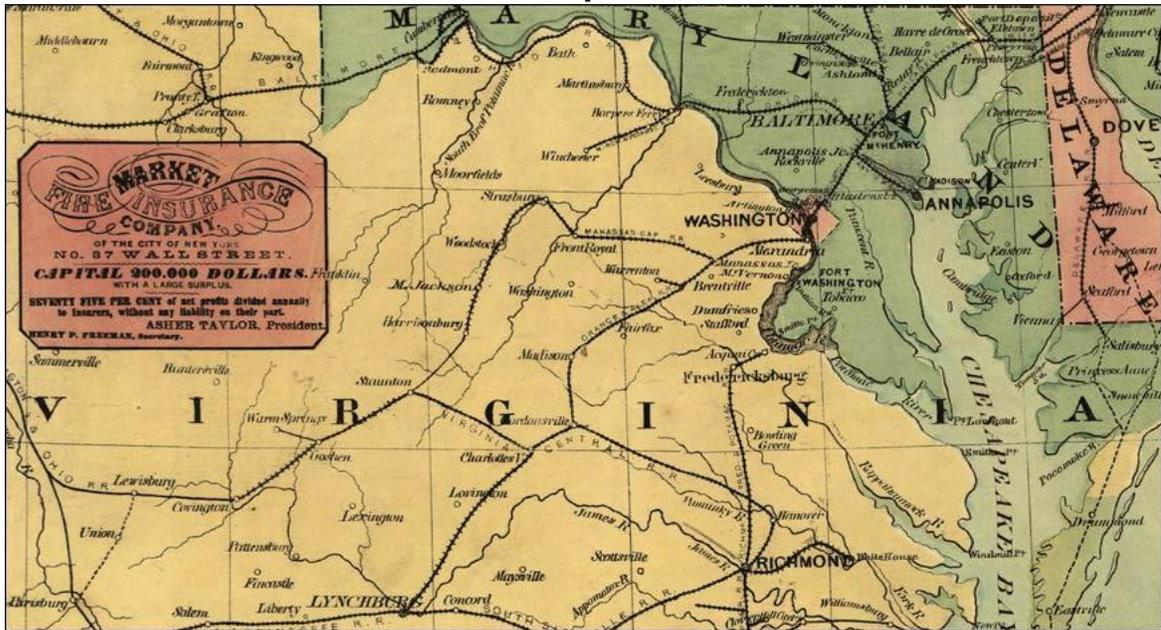
Setting the Stage

The Confederate States of America was formed between December 1860 and May 1861, when 11 Southern states seceded from the United States. The division came about as a result of decades of sectional tension between the North and the South. After the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in November 1860 and the attack on Fort Sumter in April 1861, the nation seemed inevitably headed for war. Most Northerners and Southerners believed the coming conflict would consist of one climactic, winner-take-all battle. Federal troops were enlisted for only 90 days, more than enough time, Northern leaders believed, to rout the Southern army and end the "callow" rebellion.

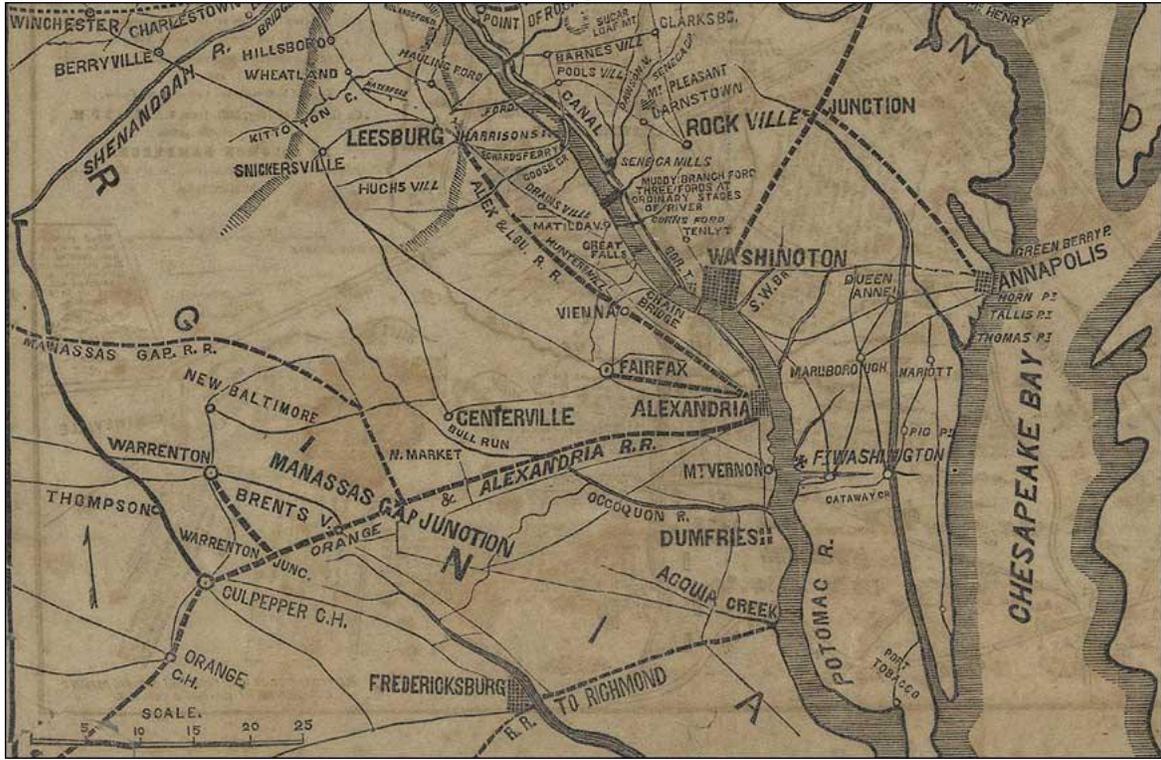
The Union's first goal was Richmond, Virginia, the newly designated capital of the Confederacy and only 100 miles from Washington, D.C. To reach Richmond, the army first had to capture Manassas Junction, an important railway junction 30 miles southwest of Washington. Troops set out for Manassas on July 16, 1861. So naive was the nation about the coming horrors that 200 or so private citizens from Washington, D.C., accompanied federal troops on the march. They hoped to witness and be entertained by this once-in-a-lifetime event.

The two armies met in battle on the morning of July 21, 1861, along the banks of a small stream known as Bull Run. In a ten-hour contest, the green, inexperienced troops of both sides bravely fought and held their ground. By late afternoon, however, the federal troops, driven from the battlefield along with many of the sightseers, were in retreat. Hope of a quick and easy victory was a casualty of the day, along with almost 5,000 members from both armies and bystanders. Daylight faded from the once peaceful fields, bringing to an end not only the first major confrontation of the Civil War, but also the romantic way in which the majority of Americans had viewed the coming conflict.

Map 1



Map 2



Reading 1: The Last Letter of Major Sullivan Ballou

Major Sullivan Ballou was a 32-year-old lawyer from Providence, Rhode Island, who volunteered with the 2nd Rhode Island Infantry. This prophetic letter was written to his wife, Sarah, a week before he was mortally wounded in the first battle of Manassas. This letter is quoted from Henry S. Burrage's 1868 volume, Brown University in the Civil War: A Memorial (pp. 105-7), courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

Head-Quarters, Camp Clark
Washington, D.C., July 14, 1861

My Very Dear Wife:

Indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days, perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write you again, I feel impelled to write a few lines, that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more.

Our movement may be one of a few days duration and full of pleasure and it may be one of severe conflict and death to me. Not my will, but thine, O God be done. If it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield for my country, I am ready. I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how...great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution, and I am willing, perfectly willing to lay down all my joys in this life to help maintain this government, and to pay that debt....

I cannot describe to you my feelings on this calm summer night, when two thousand men are sleeping around me, many of them enjoying the last, perhaps, before that of death, and I, suspicious that Death is creeping behind me with his fatal dart, am communing with God, my country and thee....

Sarah, my love for you is deathless. It seems to bind me with mighty cables, that nothing but Omnipotence [an all powerful god] can break; and yet, my love of country comes over me like a strong wind, and bears me irresistibly on with all those chains, to the battlefield. The memories of all the blissful moments I have spent with you come crowding over me, and I feel most deeply grateful to God and you, that I have enjoyed them so long....

...something whispers to me, perhaps it is the wafted prayer of my little Edgar, that I shall return to my loved ones unharmed. If I do not, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, nor that, when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name.

Forgive my many faults, and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless, how foolish I have oftentimes been! How gladly would I wash out with my tears, every little spot upon your happiness, and struggle with all the misfortune of this world, to shield you and my children from harm....

But, O Sarah, if the dead can come back to this earth, and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you--in the garish day, and the darkest night amidst your happiest scenes and gloomiest hours--always, always, and, if the soft breeze fans your cheek, it shall be my breath; or the cool air cools your throbbing temples, it shall be my spirit passing by.

Sarah, do not mourn me dear; think I am gone, and wait for me, for we shall meet again.... "Sullivan."

Reading 2: The Letters of J.W. Reid

Private J.W. Reid of the 4th South Carolina Infantry wrote several letters to his family between July 23 and July 30, 1861, from the vicinity of the first Manassas battlefield. The following is a compilation of four letters excerpted from Reid's book, History of the Fourth Regiment, South Carolina Volunteers (pp. 23-28), first published in 1891 and reprinted in 1975 by the Morningside Bookshop, Dayton, Ohio.

I scarcely know how to begin, so much has transpired since I wrote you last; but thank God I have come through it all safe, and am now here to try and tell you something about the things that have just happened. As you have already been informed, we were expecting a big fight. It came; it is over; the enemy is gone. I cannot give you an idea of the terrors of this battle. I believe that it was as hard a contested battle as was ever fought on the American continent, or perhaps anywhere else. For ten long hours it almost seemed that heaven and earth was coming together; for ten long hours it literally rained balls, shells, and other missiles of destruction. The firing did not cease for a moment. Try to picture yourself at least one hundred thousand men, all loading and firing as fast as they could. It was truly terrific. The cannons, although they make a great noise, were nothing more than pop guns compared with the tremendous thundering noise of the thousands of muskets. The sight of the dead, the cries of the wounded, the thundering noise of the battle, can never be put to paper. It must be seen and heard to be comprehended. The dead, the dying and the wounded; friend and foe, all mixed up together; friend and foe embraced in death; some crying for water; some praying their last prayers; some trying to whisper to a friend their last farewell message to their loved ones at home. It is heartrending. I cannot go any further. Mine eyes are damp with tears. Although the fight is over the field is yet quite red with blood from the wounded and the dead. I went over what I could of the battlefield the evening after the battle ended. The sight was appalling in the extreme. There were men shot in every part of the body. Heads, legs, arms, and other parts of human bodies were lying scattered all over the battlefield.

I gave you the particulars of our fight as best I could under existing circumstances. I still have a strong presentiment that I will be home again, some time. It may be a good while, and there is no telling at present what I may have to go through before I come, if I do come, only that I will have to encounter war and its consequences.

Yours as ever,
J.W. Reid

Drawing 1

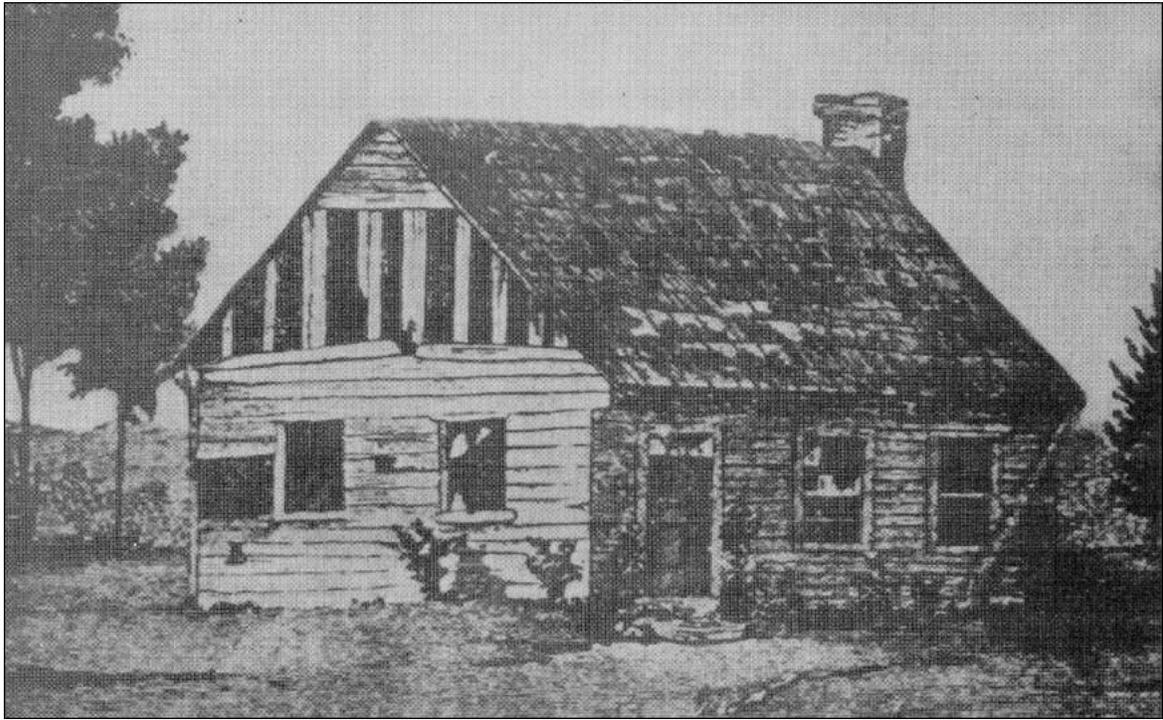


Photo 1

