

Forlorn hope: Land fought over by R.I. soldiers threatened by quarry

Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

by SAM SIMONS
Special to The Sun

Belle Grove Mansion became the center of action on Oct. 19, 1864, when the Confederate Army of the Valley, under General Jubal Early, surprised General Philip Sheridan's Federal Army of the Shenandoah on Cedar Creek, about 15 miles south of Winchester, Va. Revolutionary War hero Isaac Hite Jr. built the house in the 1790s using limestone quarried on the property.

Today, the limestone that built Belle Grove threatens the land that was defended by the artillerymen of Batteries C and G of the 1st Rhode Island artillery. "It turns out that the battlefield sits on the richest vein of limestone east of the Rockies," said Park Ranger Eric Campbell, who also interprets the battlefield for visitors.

A Belgian mining company, Carmeuse Lime and Stone, which has been quarrying the limestone that lies under the west side of the battlefield, has recently received permission to mine an additional 400 acres of core battlefield land.

One area of the battlefield that has already been destroyed is just west of Belle Grove, where the men of Rhode Island were camped on the morning of Oct. 19. Loaded gravel trucks rumble through the position where the Rhode Island artillery was decimated in an effort that saved the Union army.

"(Carmeuse) is not admitting to the public that they're tearing up land where significant fighting took place," Ranger Campbell said. "The area of the Sixth Corps camps has already been turned into a gorge."

The Southern attack started several miles to the east, where the rebels struck the Eighth Corps in a surprise morning attack. Many men of the Eighth died in their tents as the attack hit, and the rest ran west, into the camps of the Nineteenth Corps.

The regiments of the Nineteenth were able to make a few short-lived stands that slowed the Confederate advance toward Belle Grove and allowed the Union supply wagons to escape north. The Sixth Corps had barely formed their line to the north of the mansion when the Rebels hit them.

"Batteries C and G were hit head-on," Campbell explained. "The Confederates got right into them and Battery C lost three guns in hand-to-hand fighting."

Battery G and the two remaining guns of Battery C pulled back to a hilltop cemetery to the west of Middletown and set up in support of a brigade of Vermont infantry, some four miles from where the Southern attack had started. There, the Vermont brigade and the Rhode Island artillery held off four Confederate divisions for an hour and a half, breaking the momentum of the Confederate attack and giving the rest of the battered Federals a chance to regroup to the north. The New Englanders endured a brutal artillery bombardment before retiring to the reformed Union line as General Early brought up 30 pieces of artillery, believing that he faced the entire Sixth Corps.

Batteries C and G had to be combined into a single battery because of the casualties suffered in the battle, but the sacrifice had given the Federal army time to regroup. A counterattack by the Union army late in the day would take them all the way back to Cedar Creek and beyond, turning a devastating rout into a resounding victory.

The presence of the mining operation is unmistakable from the position where most of the Rhode Island casualties occurred, and the expansion is slated for the land to the north where the Union army began its counterattack.

"It may take 20 years for them to reach the most significant (threatened) portion," Ranger Campbell said. "There's still hope that the expansion can be stopped."

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