

# The Cornfield Trail

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Antietam National Battlefield  
Sharpsburg, Maryland

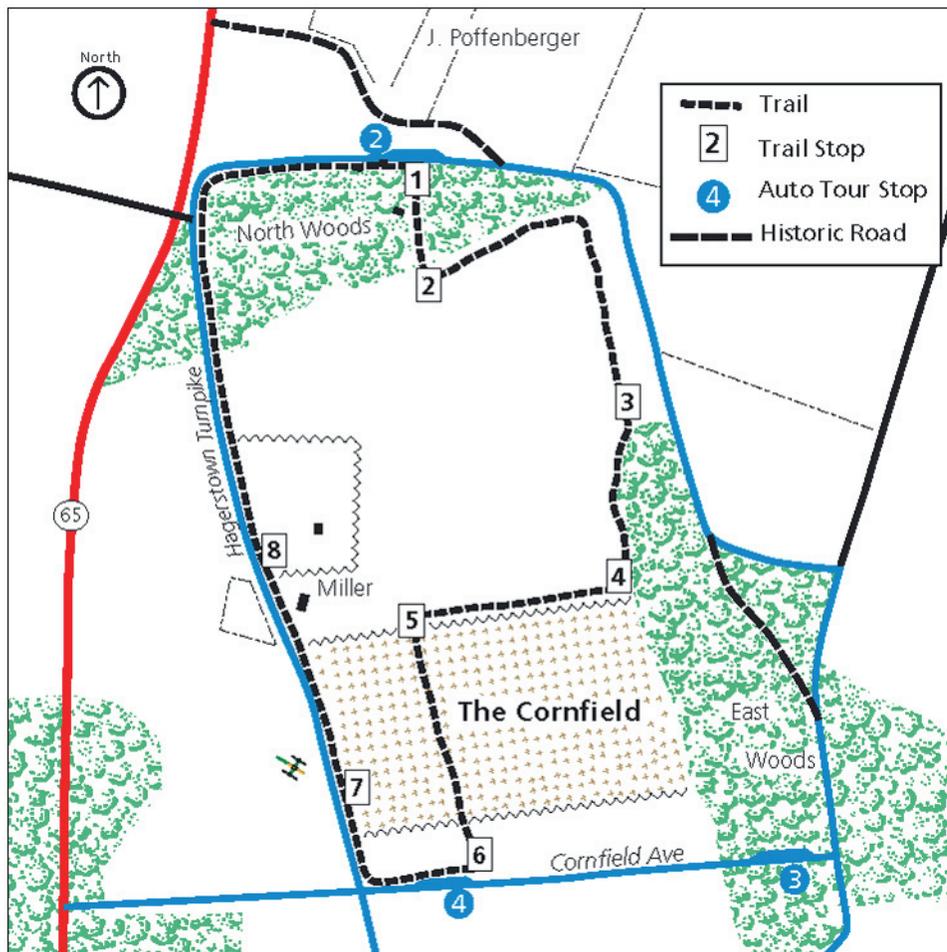


The Cornfield Trail starts at Auto Tour Stop 2. The trail is 1.6 miles in length and should take approximately sixty to ninety minutes to complete. The trail is gently rolling, but the surface can be slightly uneven, so good walking shoes are recommended.

Please stay on the trail and be sure to look out for hazardous groundhog holes and poison ivy just off the trail. Please note that the actual Cornfield is not always planted in corn. The battlefield leases some park land to local farmers who plant crops that help us to maintain the rural appearance of the landscape.

You will be covering most of the area where the Morning Phase of battle took place. Over 25,000 men in blue and gray struggled mightily for control of this northern end of the field. As many as 8,000 men were killed or wounded from dawn until 9:00 a.m. during two major Union attacks and a Confederate counterattack.

## Trail Map



The trail map is a historic battlefield map with current National Park features added.

### STOP 1 - Parking area at Driving Tour Stop 2

The night before the battle approximately 15,000 soldiers of the Union 1st Corps and the 12th Corps crossed over Antietam Creek and moved into position just north and east of you. General George McClellan was the Union Commander. His plan was to have these troops attack General Robert E. Lee's northern or left flank early the next morning.

Wednesday morning, September 17th, the Battle of Antietam began as Major General (MGen) Joseph Hooker's 1st Corps moved south. His objective was the high ground where the visitor center is today, which is about a mile away.

Half way there is the infamous "Cornfield."

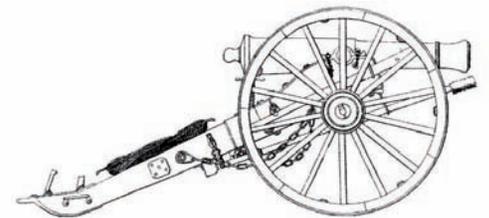
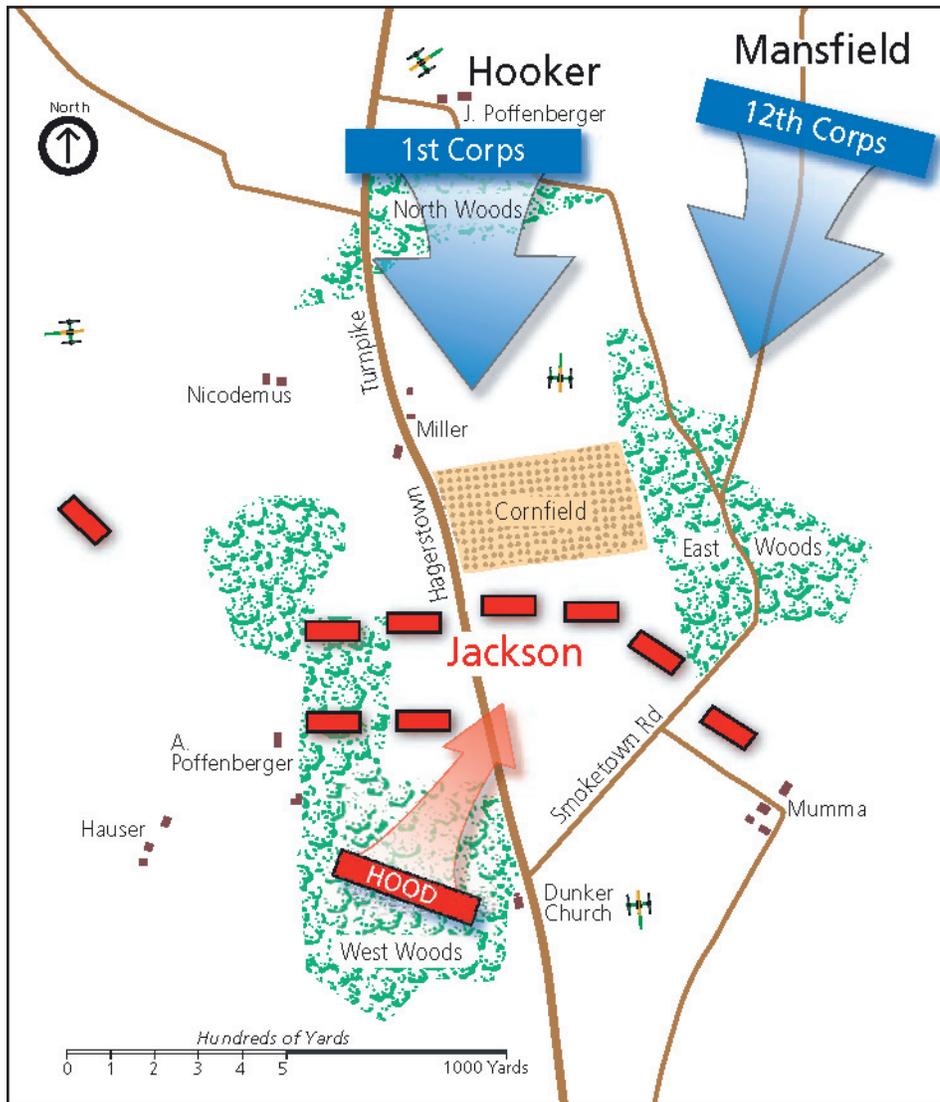
You will be following in the footsteps of Hooker's men for the majority of this hike. One soldier in his command remembered, *"We were astir at the first streaks of dawn. No reveille call this morning. Too close to the enemy. Nor was one needed to arouse us. A simple call of a sergeant or corporal and every man was instantly awake and alert. All realized that there was ugly business and plenty of it just ahead."*

Commander of the Union First Corps MGen Joseph Hooker



The trail begins across from the parking lot and heads south for about 100 yards.

## Battle Map



### Stop 2 - Out of the Woods and Into The Fire

You have just moved through what was a small woodlot known as the North Woods. Over the years local farmers used the wood for fence by re-planting the historic woodlots. Thousands of volunteers have planted trees in this and other areas of the park.

General Hooker's men marched south starting at 5:45 a.m., their battle lines extended almost a quarter mile on either side of you. The soldiers marched through the North Woods and continued across the open fields when Confederate

artillery shells started to crash into the ranks. Major Rufus Dawes, who commanded the 6th Wisconsin described how they, *"had marched ten rods (a rod = 5.5 yards), when whiz-z-z! bang! Burst a shell over our heads; then another; then a percussion shell struck and exploded in the very center of the moving mass of men. It killed two men and wounded eleven.... Thus opened the first firing of the great battle of Antietam."*

Most of the fire came from a cleared hilltop known as Nicodemus

Heights which is about a ½ mile to the west (your right). More than a dozen Southern cannon on this far end of Lee's battle line poured flanking or enfilading fire into the Union men as they moved out of the North Woods. Union artillery officer Captain Albert Monroe described Nicodemus Heights as *"an active volcano, belching forth flame and smoke."*

Over five hundred cannons were involved in the entire battle, firing an estimated 50,000 rounds of ammunition.

At this point the trail turns left (east) for about a hundred yards. Turn right and continue south on the edge of the East Woods toward the Cornfield.

### Stop 3 - Tricky Terrain and a Complicated Advance

For the next 100 yards you will be walking along the edge of the East Woods. The woodlot went farther south than it does today. This is another area that will be re-planted. All of the woodlots were important as staging and rallying areas for both sides. Something you should look for on this hike and elsewhere on the battlefield is the subtle but deceptive terrain.

As one soldier remembered, *“One who has participated in battle knows how much and how little can be seen - the smoke, the trees, the varying formations of the ground limit the vision. The deafening noise making orders hard to be understood. The ghastly work of*

*shot and shell, the shrieking of some of the wounded...all tend to limit the knowledge of battle outside of a few yards on either side.”*

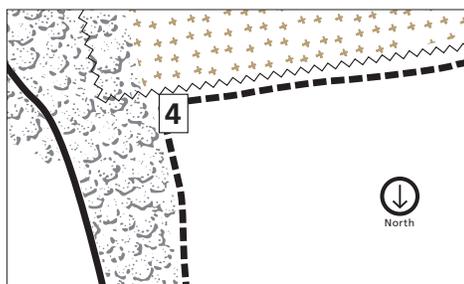
At first light, MGen Hooker ordered two artillery batteries to move to the high ground (to your right, west) and fire point blank at the Confederates soldiers standing in the Cornfield. Their explosive shells were set to burst just 1½ seconds after leaving the gun. This deadly fire helped clear the way for Hooker’s infantry.

Then three 1st Corps brigades moved through this area. One commander was wounded and another ran away, delaying two of

the brigades. This meant that BGen Abrahm Duryea’s Brigade of about 1,000 men advanced alone into the Cornfield at about 6:00 a.m. The two delayed units finally joined them, but in 30 lonely minutes almost half of Duryea’s men would be killed or wounded.

### Stop 4 - Corner Of Death At Antietam

An interesting facet of this battle is how the most numerous casualties often took place along the edges of the battlefield landscape. Borders like this corner; or the southern edge of the Cornfield; along the Hagerstown Turnpike; or in the Sunken Road were deadly.



You are walking in the footsteps of the 12th Massachusetts. Recruited in Boston, these soldiers were the sons and grandsons of the men who led the American Revolution. They advanced south along the East Woods, *“Through the field to the heavy fence that bordered the memorable cornfield where later in the day the dead were literally piled*

*up. Just then a shell struck the fence and exploded right in the midst of us. It seemed for a moment that all was chaos, as dust, splinters, and smoke filled the air; but it staggered us for only an instant, and rubbing our eyes, we saw that most of us were still in fighting trim. Onward to the Cornfield.”*

The 12th Massachusetts continued through the Cornfield to the other side where they collided with BGen Harry Hays’ Louisiana “Tigers.” During the ensuing struggle, the men from Massachusetts lost 224 killed and wounded out of 334 engaged or 67% casualties. This was the highest percentage of loss for any Union regiment that terrible day.

Numerous other units of the 1st Corps advanced past and fought near this spot. Later that morning the Union 12th Corps, commanded by MGen Joseph Mansfield, moved through the East Woods.

General Mansfield, in his first field command, was mortally wounded in the advance. Col Eugene Powell of the 12th Corps, whose Ohio regiment fought here, wrote, *“The sight at the fence (north Cornfield fence) where the enemy was standing when we gave our first fire was awful beyond description, dead men were literally piled upon and across each other.”*

The dead men described were Confederates who started the day over a half-mile to the south at the Sunken Road. Lee ordered these men north toward the havoc in the corn. They pushed all the way to this corner when the powerful 12th Corps arrived to drive them back.

Here the trail turns right (west) and follows the northern boundary of the Cornfield

## Stop 5 - The Most Sacred Ground - The Cornfield

You are about to enter the Cornfield. Take a moment to reflect on the dreadful carnage that permeated this ground, where farmers, laborers and shopkeepers gave up their hopes, their dreams and futures for a cause that both sides believed was right.

You will now be walking in the footsteps of the Iron Brigade who pushed through this field at about 6:30 a.m. These were all mid-western boys from Wisconsin and Indiana. Major Rufus Dawes, elevated into command of the 6th Wisconsin Infantry when his commander was wounded, describes their advance into the corn:

*"We climbed the fence, moved across the open space and pushed on into the corn-field. I halted the left wing and ordered them to lie down on the ground. The bullets began to clip through the corn, and spin through*

*the soft furrows- thick, almost, as hail. Shells burst around us, the fragments tearing up the ground, and canister whistled through the corn above us."*

Major Dawes continues his description as they moved south: *"At the front edge of the corn-field was a low Virginia rail fence. Before the corn were open fields, beyond which was a strip of woods surrounding a little church, the Dunkard church. As we appeared at the edge of the corn, a long line of men in butternut and gray rose up from the ground. Simultaneously, the hostile battle lines opened a tremendous fire upon each other. Men I cannot say fell; they were knocked out of the ranks by the dozens."*

Later that morning, Confederate soldiers under the command of BGen John Bell Hood counterattacked back through the

corn all the way to this northern edge. All morning soldiers attacked around and through this field. By 9:00 a.m. the Cornfield changed hands too many times to count.



Continue south and through the Cornfield. You have traveled .6 of the 1.6 miles of the trail.

## Stop 6 - Georgian Defense and Texas Counterattack

As the men in blue broke out of the corn they faced a solid line of Confederate infantry in the open fields about 75 to 100 yards in front of them. On the Confederate right (your left), men from Alabama and North Carolina struggled to maintain their position. On their left, Virginians of the "Stonewall" Brigade barely held on. The deadly Confederate volleys initially halted the 1st Corps advance, but more Union men moved up and they began to push out into the open fields.

Directly in front of you was Col. Marcellus Douglas' Brigade of Georgians (that's the gray Georgia monument to your front left). Col. Douglas was wounded by rifle fire,

then killed by an artillery shell that blasted him into the air. Southern help first arrived as BGen Harry Hays' Louisiana troops moved up. In just a short time Hays' command was wrecked with every regimental commander killed or wounded. Stonewall Jackson desperately needed more help.

BGen John Bell Hood's Division, including the indomitable Texas Brigade, was waiting behind the Dunker Church for their first hot meal in three days. Jackson called them into battle and *"In less than five minutes we were advancing toward the enemy. In less than fifteen we were sending and receiving death missiles by the bushel."* Hood's men drove north, some turning

west towards the Hagerstown Turnpike and some turning east towards the East Woods. (The rose colored monument just across Cornfield Avenue is the Texas State Monument).

The 1st Texas Infantry moved straight ahead, advancing farther north than any other unit in Hood's command. In this gallant charge through the corn, the 1st Texas lost 82% of their men killed or wounded, the highest percentage for any Confederate unit in any battle of the Civil War. General Hood described the action as, *"The most terrible clash of arms by far that has occurred during the war."*

Stop by the Confederate Monuments, then head west to the Hagerstown Turnpike and turn right (north).

## Stop 7 - The Bugler and The General

Just across the road are two cannons that were part of Battery B, 4th United States Artillery. Battery B moved forward with the initial Union attack in the Cornfield. As soon as the guns had been brought into this position, they came under intense fire from Stonewall Jackson's men. The battery commander, Captain Campbell, was wounded and down. The Battery's fifteen-year-old bugler, Johnny Cook, helped his Captain to safety and returned to the guns. Cannoneers were shot down around him. In one of the most desperate and deadly locations at Antietam, young Cook helped load and fire in the face of an enemy that advanced to within yards of his position.

For his bravery at this battle the former paper boy from Cincinnati, Ohio, would be awarded the Medal of Honor. He is one of the youngest

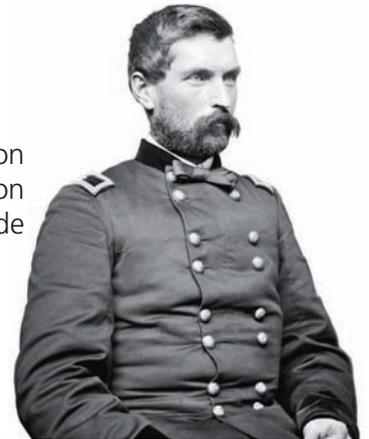
in our history to be accorded this Nation's highest military honor.

Also helping at Battery B was BGen John Gibbon who commanded the Iron Brigade. Corporal James Kent wrote how *"Gen. Gibbon put in a double charge of grape and sighted the gun himself. When that charge went into the ranks of the rebels it lifted a whole windrow of them 12 feet into the air. I saw whole bodies, arms, legs and all sorts of fragments above the corn for a moment, but they, the rebs, stopped coming towards us about that time. That discharge*



15-year-old Johnny Cook,  
Bugler for Battery B, 4th  
U.S. Artillery

BGen John Gibbon  
Commander of the Union  
Iron Brigade



*carried whole rails from the fence clear into their ranks."*

The firepower of Battery B, the Union infantry lined up on the northern edge of the Cornfield, and the arrival of the 12th Corps helped shatter and turn back Hood's counterattack.

Continue north on the Hagerstown Turnpike to the D. R. Miller farm. Most of the buildings on the farm today were not there during the battle.

## STOP 8 - The Miller Farm

This battle not only destroyed the lives of soldiers on the field, it devastated the community where it was fought. The population of Sharpsburg at the time of the battle was about 1,300. For every person in town, there were almost one hundred soldiers present. Obviously the battle destroyed fences and crops, but even more damage was sustained when the 80,000 man Union army remained for two months as uninvited guests.

The local paper reported that *"the country over which the great battle of Wednesday raged presents a melancholy picture of devastation. A number of houses and barns were destroyed, fences scattered as*

*if a tornado had swept them away, hundreds of acres of corn trampled down and devoured, and wreck, ruin and desolation meet the eye at every turn."*

David R. Miller owned this farm which included the Cornfield. He, like the majority of local residents, ran to escape the terror of battle, only to return to a farm that would never be the same. Mr. Miller submitted a damage claim of \$1,237 to the federal government for damage to his farm. The U.S. Quartermaster General reimbursed him \$995 in 1872.

Diseases also ravaged many of the local families. David's brother Daniel died just after the battle. A third Miller brother, Jacob, wrote

how, *"diarrhea was a very common complaint,"* and that *"many other citizens and hundreds of soldiers have been taken with the same, and many died, it is an army disease thus adds to the Horrors of war."*

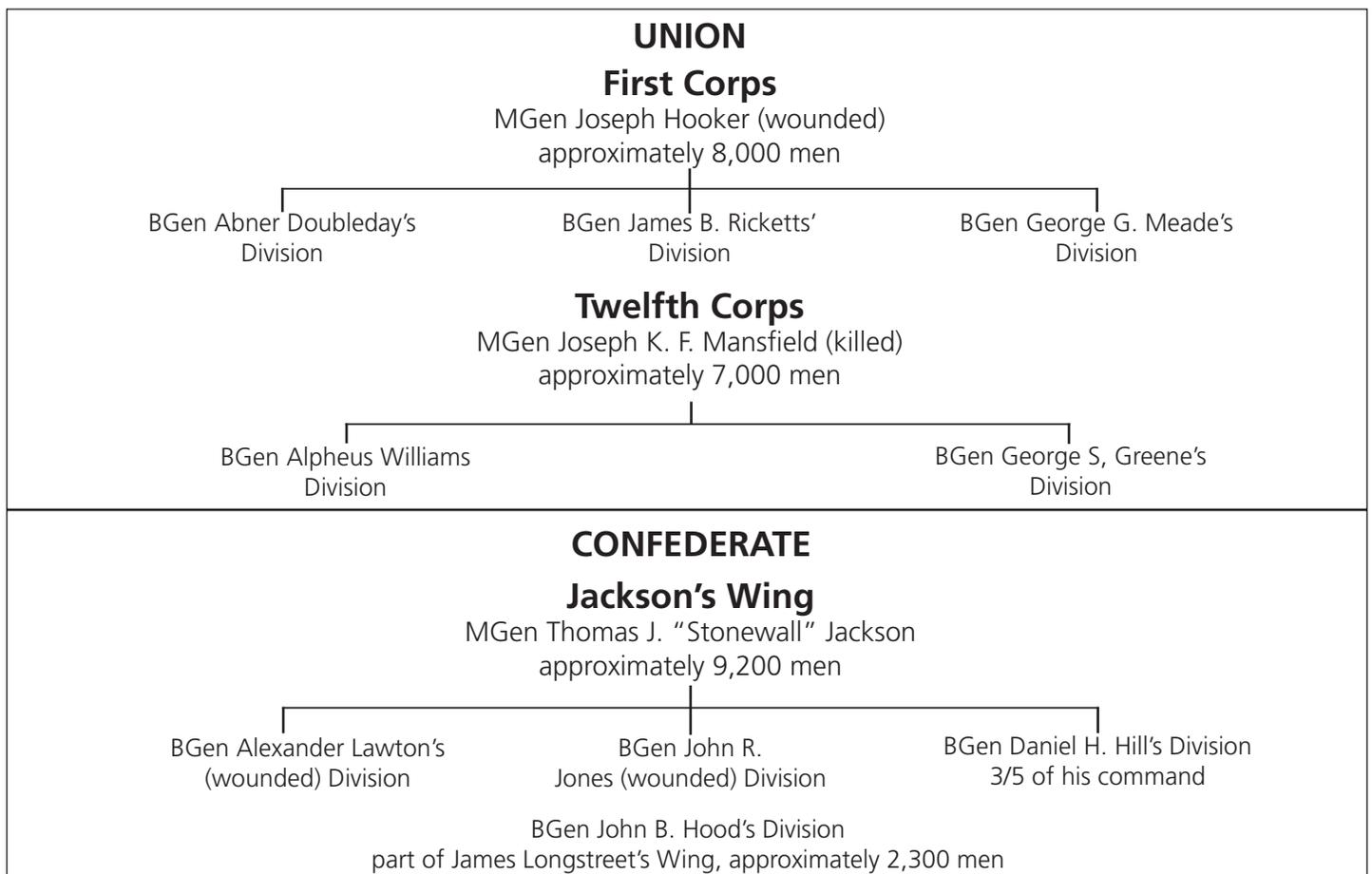
Owner of the Cornfield  
David R. Miller



Finish the hike by continuing north on the Turnpike, then up to the right and back to your car.

## Time Line and Order of Battle for Principle Units Involved

- Daybreak MGen Hooker's 1st Corps begins their advance. Union artillery moves up and fires directly into the Cornfield. Confederate artillery on Nicodemus Heights begins to fire at advancing Union soldiers.
- 6:00 a.m. BGen Abram Duryea's Brigade (Ricketts' Division, 1st Corps) is the first Union Brigade to break out of the Cornfield and engage Stonewall Jackson's Confederates.
- 6:30 a.m. Abner Doubleday's Union Division (led by the Iron Brigade) begins to attack along the Hagerstown Turnpike and in the Cornfield.
- 6:45 a.m. BGen Harry Hays' Confederate Brigade moves north to support Jackson's initial line. Through the East Woods, Col Coulter's and Col Christian's Brigade (Ricketts' Division, 1st Corps) come to the support of Duryea's men who are retreating.
- 7:20 a.m. BGen John Bell Hood's Confederate Division counterattacks into the Cornfield.
- 7:30 a.m. Lee orders Southern troops from BGen D. H. Hill's command at the Sunken Road to move north. They drive all the way into the Cornfield.
- 8:00 a.m. MGen Joseph Mansfield's 12th Corps begins to arrive and drive back Hood's men and the Confederate reinforcements from the Sunken Road.
- 9:00 a.m. Short lull in the action. Confederates have been pushed back to the West Woods. Union General Edwin Sumner's powerful 2nd Corps begins to arrive on the field.



## Conclusion

The landscape that you have just walked was the scene of some of the most horrific fighting in the history of our nation. In his official report of the battle, General Joseph Hooker wrote, *“In the time I am writing every stalk of corn in the northern and greater part of the field was cut as closely as could have been done with a knife, and the slain lay in rows precisely as they had stood in their ranks a few moments before. It was never my fortune to witness a more bloody, dismal battlefield.”*

Later he would write his brother-in-law that the Battle of Antietam *“was fought with great violence on both sides. The carnage has been awful.”* Incredibly, the fighting in the Cornfield represents only one third of the day’s action at Antietam.

At the end of eleven hours of fighting, more than 23,000 men were killed, wounded or missing. General Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia held their ground on the 18th, then retreated that night across the Potomac River and back into Virginia. This battle ended the first Northern invasion by the Confederacy and provided Abraham Lincoln an opportunity to issue his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

