

Monocacy National Battlefield

Frederick, Maryland



Orders have been given to collect the bodies of our dead in one burial ground on the battle-field, suitable for a monument upon which I propose to write: "These men died to save the National Capital, and they did save it."

LEW WALLACE
Major General, U.S. Army



Lieutenant General Jubal Early (left), Confederate commander, and Major General Lew Wallace, Union commander, Battle of Monocacy.

If judged by its consequences rather than its size, the Battle of Monocacy ranks among the important battles of the American Civil War. Here, July 9, 1864, on a checkerboard of gold wheatfields and green cornfields just outside Frederick, Maryland, Confederate forces under General Jubal Early defeated Union forces under General Lew Wallace. The battle cost Early a day's march and his chance to capture Washington, D.C. Thwarted in the attempt to take the capital, the Confederates turned back to Virginia, ending their last campaign to carry the war into the North.

Early's bold raid was part of a plan to divert Union forces away from Robert E. Lee's army at Petersburg, Virginia. Pushing northward through the Shenandoah Valley, Early arrived at Winchester, Virginia, on July 2. After plundering Federal stores at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, Early's men crossed the Potomac into Maryland at Sharpsburg, near Antietam, where a previous Southern offensive had ended in bloody battle two years before.

Early's cavalry collected \$20,000 from Hagerstown residents to spare their town. But at Frederick, where the main body of troops headed, General Early himself demanded, and received, \$200,000 ransom.

Meanwhile, the Confederate actions were having the desired effect on Washington. Responding to alarm caused by Early's advances, General U.S. Grant dispatched a 5,000-man division under James B. Ricketts on July 6, and a few days later sent the full corps under H.G. Wright. Until those troops arrived, however, the only Federal army between Early and the capital city was a ragtag group of 2,300 men commanded by Major General Lew Wallace.

At the time, Wallace, who would become best known for his book *Ben Hur*, was headquartered in Baltimore. Away from the battlefield, his district was used for training recruits. Most of Wallace's men had never seen battle.

Wallace learned that a large enemy force was advancing. Uncertain whether Baltimore or Washington was the Confederate's objective, he knew he had to delay their approach until reinforcements could reach either city.

Frederick Junction, also called Monocacy Junction, three miles southeast of Frederick was the logical point of defense for both cities. The Georgetown Pike to Washington and the National Road to Baltimore both crossed the Monocacy River there, as did the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. If

Wallace could stretch his little army over six miles of riverfront to protect both turnpike bridges, the railroad bridge, and several fords, he could make Early disclose the strength and objective of the Confederate force and delay him as long as possible.

Wallace's prospects brightened with word that the first contingent of Grant's veterans, the troops commanded by General Ricketts, had reached Baltimore and were rushing by rail to join Wallace at the Monocacy.

Battle that Saved Washington

On Saturday, July 9, combined forces of Wallace and Ricketts, numbering about 5,800, were positioned at the bridges and fords of the river. The higher elevation of the river's east bank formed a natural breastwork for some of the soldiers. Others occupied two blockhouses, the trenches they had dug with a few available tools, or took what cover they could among the fences and crops of once peaceful farms.

Confederate General Dodson Ramseur's division encountered Wallace's troops on the Georgetown Pike; General Robert Rodes's division clashed with the Federals on the National Road. Realizing that a frontal attack across the Monocacy would be too costly, Early sent John McCausland's cavalry down Buckeystown Road to find a ford and outflank the Union line.

Confederates penetrated the Monocacy defenses below the McKinney-Worthington Ford and attacked Wallace's left flank. Some of the heaviest fighting of the day took place where

they confronted Ricketts's veterans at a fence separating the Worthington and Thomas farms.

The Federals fought fiercely to hold position, but it was only a matter of time before the superior force—nearly 15,000 Confederates—gained control. A three-pronged attack of Confederate brigades led by Terry, York, and Evans pushed Ricketts back toward the National Road where he was joined by the beleaguered troops who had fought Ramseur and Rodes all day.

By late afternoon the Federals were retreating toward Baltimore, leaving behind over 1,294 dead, wounded, and captured. Later, General Wallace gave orders to collect the bodies of the dead in a burial ground on the battlefield where he proposed a monument to read: "These men died to save the National Capital, and they did save it."

The way lay open to Washington. Early's army had won the field at Monocacy, but at the expense of 700 to 900 killed and wounded and a day lost. The next morning the Confederates marched on, and by midday Monday, Early stood inside the District of Columbia, looking at the earthworks of Fort Stevens.

Lost Opportunity

But even as Early watched, the blue-coated veterans of Wright's corps marched toward Fort Stevens. That night, Wright pushed back the rebels. Early had succeeded in drawing some of Grant's forces away from Lee, but taking Washington no longer seemed possible. The rebel army withdrew across the Potomac at White's Ford, and returned to friendly Virginia.

General Early wrote in a report of the 1864 campaign: "Some of the Northern papers stated that, between Saturday and Monday, I could have entered the city; but on Saturday I was fighting at Monocacy, thirty-five miles from Washington, a force which I could not leave in my rear; and after disposing of that force and moving as rapidly as it was possible for me to move, I did not arrive in front of the fortifications until after noon on Monday, and then my troops were exhausted . . ."

General Grant also assessed Wallace's delaying tactics at Monocacy: "If Early had been but one day earlier, he might have entered the capital before the arrival of the reenforcements I had sent . . . General Wallace contributed on this occasion, by the defeat of the troops under him, a greater benefit to the cause than often falls to the lot of a commander of an equal force to render by means of a victory."

Other Points of Interest

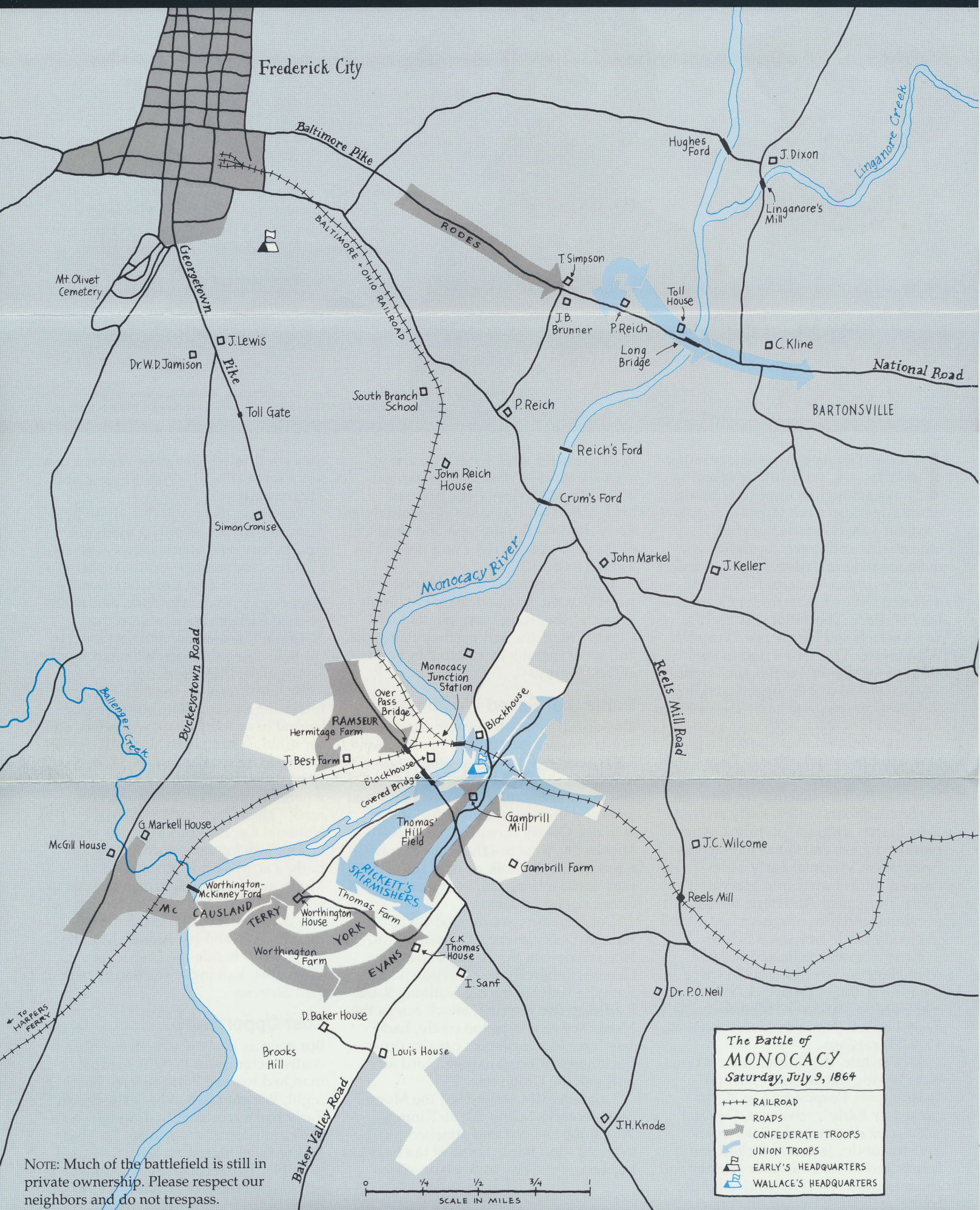
Frederick is rich in Colonial, Revolutionary War, and Civil War history. Walking tours of Frederick begin at the visitor center operated by the Tourism Council of Frederick County, 19 E. Church St., Frederick, Maryland, 301-663-8703.

Well preserved national parks commemorating the Civil War are within an easy drive of Frederick:

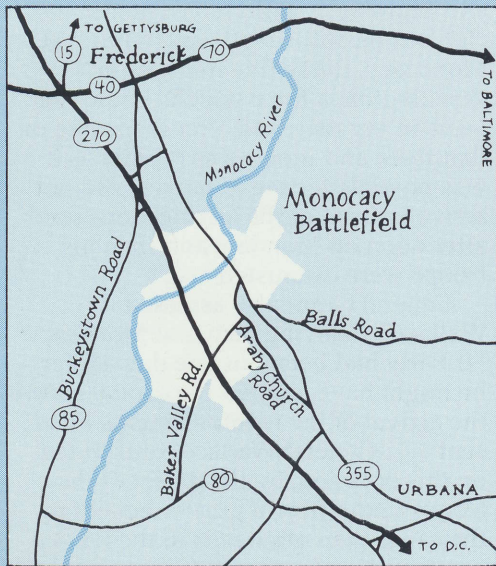
- Antietam National Battlefield at Sharpsburg, Maryland, 25 miles northwest, is the site of the war's bloodiest day, September 17, 1862. 301-432-5124.
- Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, site of the famous battle of July 1-3, 1863, is 36 miles northeast. 717-334-1124.
- Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, 29 miles southwest, is the site of John Brown's raid in 1859 and alternating occupation by both armies during the Civil War. 304-535-6223.

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Frederick, Maryland



NOTE: Much of the battlefield is still in private ownership. Please respect our neighbors and do not trespass.



What to See

A small visitor center on the lower level of the Gambrill Mill features an exhibit of artifacts. An electric battle map orients visitors to the battlefield. The building is handicap accessible. There are five monuments on the field which are accessible by the public roads. The National Park Service is in the process of acquiring the 1,647 acres within the boundaries of Monocacy National Battlefield.

Directions: From Frederick, take Maryland Route 355 south. The visitor center is on the left, one-tenth of a mile past the Monocacy River bridge.

Hours

8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

Daily, Memorial Day to Labor Day;
Wednesday through Sunday, Labor Day
to Memorial Day.

Information

Monocacy National Battlefield is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. For more information, write or call:
Monocacy National Battlefield
4801 Urbana Pike
Frederick, Maryland 21701-7307
301-662-3515 V/TDD
301-662-3430 FAX



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