T
he Battle of Antietam, on September 17, 1862, was the culmination of Gen. Robert E. Lee’s first invasion of the North. As Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia closed 40,000 men into Sharpsburg, Maryland, other Confederate forces moved into Northern Pennsylvania, and the Kanawha Valley of Western Virginia. New areas were to be invaded, and Confederate armies were on the offensive at the same time.

As Lee crossed the Potomac River, he captured Harper’s Ferry at the Battle of Antietam, and the Army of the Potomac was forced to retreat. This was the first major battle fought on American soil, and the largest in American history. About 14,000 Union and Confederate casualties were sustained during the battle, and 1,400 Union cavalrymen escaped to Harpers Ferry, Maryland, where they soon withdrew to Harpers Ferry. Gen. George B. McClellan was preparing for Lee’s Army of the Potomac to oppose Lee. While camped in Frederick, Maryland, a few days later, Lee realized that the 11,000-man Federal garrison at Harper’s Ferry threatened his plans, supply, communication, and retreat. To operate safely north of the Potomac River, Lee decided his army must be in four parts to neutralize the threat. He directed Gen. Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson to envelop Harper’s Ferry with more than 20,000 men, assigned Gen. A. D. Kirke to guard Turner’s Gap near Boonsboro, and ordered Gen. James Longstreet to lead the rest of the army, about 10,000 strong, to Hagerstown, Maryland, near the Mason-Dixon Line.

Lee outlined his plan in Special Order 191 and had it distributed to his senior subordinates. When the army marched to South Mountain the next day, about 11,000 men went to Harpers Ferry and another 4,000 toward Sharpsburg, Maryland. Invasion, Gen. Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson led the remainder over South Mountain, using it as a screen to help escape from Federal forces. George B. McClellan pursuing Army of the Potomac’s right flank. The Federals found a closed cup of Lee’s army near the mountain before the Federals, and was even more critical for the Confederates to hold the South Mountain gap, because until then, it had completed the union and repelled them. This was considered the key to Confederate victory and the capture of Sharpsburg.

Lee concentrated his forces in Sharpsburg, near the town of Sharpsburg, Maryland. A Maryland newspaper reported, “Lee had swept over it and devoured everything between Sharpsburg and Boonsboro. . . . One army, . . . two armies . . . have swept over it and devoured everything within reach.”

L
ine both President Abraham Lincoln personally supervised slavery, he was in addition. In 1862, he issued a proclamation to free the enslaved. Antietam on September 17, 1862, gave Lincoln enough support for such a change. The victory of Antietam (Sharpsburg) on September 17, 1862, gave Lincoln enough support for such a change. This was the turning point in the war for the Union into a war for freedom as well. The Proclamation stated that “all persons held as slaves within any state or designated part of a state, the people thereof which shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.”

In the final version promulgated on January 1, 1863, Lincoln opened the way for blacks to bear arms by declaring that “such persons of the said United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.”

The Union Army of the Potomac swept over 100,000 men of arms and boots, 10,000 pieces of ordnance, and 184,000 horses from advanced supply depots at Frederick and Hagerstown between September 18 and October 21, 1862. The army was much smaller than expected, however, and only 18,000 more troops were available.

Confederate soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia lacked food, shoes, and uniforms, as well as effective small arms, cannons, and ammunition. They also lacked medical facilities, pay, and pay certificates and other measures.

Both Union and Confederate armies were in the countryside. A Maryland newspaper reported, “Lee has swept over it and devoured everything between Sharpsburg and Boonsboro.” Another newspaper reported, “Two armies. . . have swept over it and devoured everything within reach.”

Several days earlier, President Lincoln issued the Proclamation of Emancipation, which freed the enslaved in the Confederate states, thereby transforming the opportunity. Five days later, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed the enslaved in the Confederate states, thereby transforming the war for the Union into a war for freedom as well. The Proclamation stated that “all persons held as slaves within any state or designated part of a state, the people thereof which shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.”

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