

# The railroad's geographic impact on the Battle of First Manassas/Bull Run

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to identify and explore the short-term and long term impacts of railroad use in the American Civil War. In this particular project, the battle of First Bull Run or First Manassas will be the centerpiece in examining the multiple points of impact the Manassas Gap Railroad had on this early-war conflict in terms of geography and logistics. The railroad is widely regarded as one of the keystones in the Union's victory over the Confederacy in 1865. The two opposing governments treated the railroad in different fashions which created a dichotomy of how effectively the two parties were able to utilize the iron horse. Despite the consensus on the important role the railroad played, is its role still understated to this day? In order to examine this issue, the actual historical event of Manassas I is analyzed, identifying how the railroad was employed in this battle, its impact on the geographic location of the conflict, the advantages it provided to each respective combatant, and what might have been if the railroad had not been a key part in bringing this battle to pass. Through the detailed exploration of this topic, one can discover that the railroad not only impacted the logistical aspect of the war but also the geography.

*Keywords:* U.S. Civil War, railroads, military history, First Bull Run, First Manassas

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## Introduction

There is a general consensus on the idea that the railroad played an enormous role in how the American Civil War was fought. The impacts of this technological development include decreasing the amount of time to move troops, greater supply capacity, and the ability to move over longer distances. For example, one wonders whether William T. Sherman would have been successful in his conquest of Atlanta without the Chattanooga Railroad to support his advance, a conquest that proved instrumental in the re-election of Abraham Lincoln. In the words of renowned historian James B. McPherson "The impact of this event cannot be exaggerated."<sup>1</sup>

The question remains, however, whether the railroad still not given as much credit for the role it played in the American Civil War? <sup>1</sup> This article examines the effects that the railroad had on the geography of the conflict, specifically during the battle of First Manassas/First Bull Run and how the geography influenced where and when the battle was fought. The concept of what might have happened if the railroad did not exist in that area is also discussed in order to further examine how the iron horse played a role in the outcome in the first major clash of the American Civil War.

## The Battle

In early July, after Lincoln's call for volunteers to fight against the Confederacy, there was tremendous public pressure in the North for an advance to Richmond. After George B. McClellan's recent victories in relatively small contests in what is now West Virginia, the path seemed more open than ever. Irvin McDowell was the man in charge of the Army of the Potomac at this point in time. He was reluctant however because many of the 90-day enlistments from right after Fort Sumter were near expiration, making him nervous that these troops would be less effective at fighting. His army consisted of about 35,000 soldiers and officers who made their way down the Warrenton Turnpike to face Pierre G. T. Beauregard's Confederate army of 20,000 troops who were station at Manassas Junction.

An important component to the overall Union plan was for General Robert Patterson's army of 15,000 to pin down Joseph E. Johnston's 11,000 soldiers in the Shenandoah valley about 40 miles west of Manassas Junction. This part of the plan was to prevent the likelihood of Johnston reinforcing Beauregard once McDowell moved against him. As it ended up, later renowned Confederate cavalry commander J.E.B. Stuart was able to set a screen for Johnston, allowing the

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<sup>1</sup> McPherson, J. M. (2003). *Battle Cry of Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press.

latter to retreat his troops down the valley to Piedmont where the Manassas Gap Railroad waited to take them east to Beauregard.

McDowell's tactical plan consisted of a flanking attack across the river Bull Run on the Confederate's left flank which actually succeeded in surprising Beauregard who had expected the attack to come along the railroad on his army's right flank. However, the one brigade that opposed the Union advance was able to stall them long enough for some reinforcements to arrive from the South's right flank. After heavy fighting all day around the Henry House Hill, in which the legend of Stonewall Jackson was born, the Union attack had stalled. At around 3:45 in the afternoon, most of the reinforcements from the Shenandoah valley had arrived and Beauregard ordered a general counterattack. This proved to be the final straw as the Union troops, unnerved by the shrill rebel yell, the appearance of fresh enemy troops, and an exhausting day of fighting, began to melt away, eventually turning into a rout. Both Beauregard and Johnston believed their own troops too disorganized for any kind of pursuit, leaving the Army of the Potomac to retreat and lick its wounds. The result of the battle: a resounding Confederate success.

### **The railroad and its significance**

The site of the heavy fighting around the Henry House Hill was only a mile or so from the Manassas railroad junction where the Manassas Gap Railroad, running east from the Shenandoah Valley intersected the Orange and Alexandria Railroad which was headed south to Gordonsville, Virginia, where it became the Virginia Central Railroad. This railroad then ran east straight into Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy.

The Shenandoah Valley was known throughout the war as being a significant source of foodstuffs and supplies for the Army of Northern Virginia as well as the Richmond area in general. It operated in this function even late in the war until Philip Sheridan came through in 1865 and wasted it after the manner of William T. Sherman's March to the Sea.

Although none of this had happened at this point in the war, it remains evident that the Manassas Gap Railroad was important for several reasons. The first reason was that by use of this railroad line, food and supplies could be freighted from the Shenandoah Valley to the Confederate Army of the Potomac.<sup>2</sup> These supplies could also be moved southward to the Richmond area via the Orange and Alexandria. This route, as stated earlier, remained an important well from

which the Confederacy's production center could draw nourishment.

The second reason that the Manassas Gap line was important is based on the idea of troop transport. As one can see by looking at a map of the disposition of Beauregard and Johnston's troops (Figure 1), they had a gap of almost 40 miles between them. Johnston and his 11,000 soldiers were stationed in the Shenandoah to protect the crops and animals from the Union army under Robert Patterson. Beauregard was stationed southeast of him at Manassas Junction, right where the Manassas Gap Railroad intersected the Orange and Alexandria. This position allowed him to guard against any Union advance south, whether it be directly toward him or down the Potomac River. This link of railroad acted almost as a tether from which both Confederate armies could support one another at will. In this particular case, Johnston was actually able to use the railroad to move his troops to the aide of Beauregard as we read earlier, helping sway the tide of battle in the South's favor.

### **The Union's perspective**

The North's battle cry at this point in time was "Forward to Richmond!"<sup>3</sup> Public opinion was that the Union armies should march straight through any opposition and end the war directly. George B. McClellan had helped pave the way for this mode of thinking through his early victories in relatively small engagements the mountains and hills of western Virginia.

The most direct overland route to accomplish this was straight south along the Potomac River. McDowell's army could either march straight to Fredericksburg or first go to Aquia Landing on the Potomac and strike out for Fredericksburg from there. Once at Fredericksburg, one only had to follow the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad or the Richmond road, which ran parallel, in order to interrupt the South's plans for a new capital.

The problem with this plan was that it would leave Washington exposed and Beauregard would be able to cause a significant amount of panic if not capture the city outright. Throughout the war Lincoln was very particular about protecting the North's capital. He recognized that if it fell, Northern support for the war would plummet. Great Britain would also probably intervene in the conflict and France would follow suit. This exposure of the North's vitals would not have been allowed by the President.

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<sup>2</sup> Later known as the Army of Northern Virginia

<sup>3</sup> New York Daily Tribune, June 26, 1861

Some of this reasoning was partly based on the fact that the Confederacy's capital had moved from Montgomery, Alabama to

Richmond, Virginia where its Congress was to convene for the first time on July 20<sup>th</sup>.

There was also a small Confederate force located at Aquia Landing that would have alerted Beauregard of any movement that far south. Another deficiency of any troop movement along the Potomac is that McDowell would likely be trapped with his back up against the river. Military security was not top-notch during the Civil War and southern generals often knew what their counterparts were up to due to these breaches. Indeed, Beauregard was warned of McDowell's movement out of Washington before First Bull Run. If McDowell had marched along the Potomac River, it would have been too easy for Beauregard to pin him up against it and subsequently destroy the North's fighting capabilities in the Eastern Theater.

Lincoln and his generals heard the calls for direct action and knew something had to be done that would not jeopardize the entire country like marching straight to Richmond would. Therefore it made sense to go by way of Manassas junction for a variety of reasons.

Advancing by the Orange and Alexandria with a smaller contingent near Harper's Ferry to pin down Johnston's force made much more sense compared to risking defeat and the capture of Washington. This route provided protection on McDowell's left flank because Beauregard would not attempt to maneuver around that side and risk getting trapped against the Potomac himself. Moving toward Manassas also placed pressure on Beauregard and Johnston whose troops were 40 miles away from each other. Beauregard would either be forced to stand and fight an army 15,000 soldiers stronger or retreat and lose the crossroads so important to linking Richmond and the Shenandoah Valley. Retreating from this position would also leave Joseph E. Johnston in an over-extended position vulnerable to attack by McDowell from the east who would be able to utilize the Manassas Gap Railroad to possibly move in on Johnston's right flank and cut off any escape as Patterson pressured him from the north end of the Shenandoah valley.

Another advantage this rail-line had to offer to McDowell was the idea of being able to supply his own army with crops and food from the Shenandoah while denying the rebels the privilege of doing so at the same time. If he captured this line it would serve as a supply line to support his army advancing toward Richmond. This would supply much of the hay needed to feed the horses and mules used to pull the supply wagons that accompanied every army in that day. As it was, Beauregard decided to stand and fight, Johnston was able to get away under the nose of Patterson, and the South won the battle of First Manassas.

## **No Railroad?**

From this exploration of the various options that the North and South both had in terms of during the days leading up to the battle of First Bull Run, it is apparent that the railroad played a very large factor in influencing each side's decisions. What would have been the case if the Manassas Gap Railroad had not existed at the time or, indeed, if there were no such thing as a railroad for that matter?

This hypothetical alteration of history changes many facets of the battle, perhaps even the outcome. While much conjecture goes into this exercise, it is still based on historical facts that lend it a certain air of validation.

One of the most important elements of the battle is its location. Where would have the battle been fought if not for the railroad? Perhaps there would not even have been the battle of First Manassas or First Bull Run. Based on the methods of logistics and supply one should look at the water ways and roads of the Maryland-Virginia area to deduce the most likely location a battle would have taken place at.

As one looks at the roadways that sprawl over the northern Virginia landscape, several epicenters stand out. These being Fredericksburg, Fairfax<sup>4</sup>, Warrenton, and Front Royal and Winchester in the Shenandoah Valley. Front Royal would not have been probable for the entire Confederate force to be located at which would have left them in an exposed position. It would have been more likely that Johnston would be split from Beauregard to occupy this relatively same position that he did in reality. Winchester, was where Johnston camped in the valley but this position would have been much more forward and unable to support Beauregard in case of attack.

Assuming that Johnston posted up at Front Royal, Beauregard would have three options left: Warrenton, Fairfax, Fredericksburg. Another position that could be considered would be at Centreville, not far from Manassas Junction. However, this would be quite close to Washington D.C. and without the railroad, Johnston would not be able to arrive in time to help Beauregard in the case of a battle. And since the Union would most likely have consolidated their troops in this scenario, Beauregard would have been vastly outnumbered. Thus, Fredericksburg, Warrenton, and Fairfax make the most sense since they are not in such an extended position.

Warrenton makes the most sense out of these remaining options simply because it is closer to Front Royal than Fredericksburg and Fairfax while also being in a strategic position. If Beauregard was located in Fredericksburg, he could defend an approach to

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<sup>4</sup> Not to be confused with Fairfax Courthouse located on the outskirts of Washington D.C.

Richmond well especially being located at a river, which would make it even harder for the Union to successfully attack him as General Ambrose Burnside found out at the Battle of Fredericksburg in the December of 1862. However, he would be leaving a very large gap between himself and Johnston through which the Army of the Potomac could slip through and cut off Johnston's escape routes and destroy his army.

If Beauregard was at Fairfax he could both defend a Union advance straight down the Potomac river while supporting Johnston in the Shenandoah Valley at the same time and vice-versa. However, Warrenton, about 12 miles southwest of Manassas Junction seems to be a better location than Fairfax. Fairfax would have been a rather recessed position that might have allowed the Union army to still get in between Beauregard and Johnston. This position would also allow the Union armies to roam around most of northern Virginia. If Beauregard moved up to Warrenton, it would still allow the same advantages as being at Fairfax while removing some disadvantages.

### Too green?

One must also wonder what the Union general, Irvin McDowell, would have done without the added dimension of the railroad. The federal government was under pressure. The press and public were bolstered by the recent successes of George B. McClellan in western Virginia in a series of small battles. McDowell felt this pressure acutely and offered the idea that his troops were not yet ready for battle. Unfortunately for him, Lincoln recognized the need for some sort of action and induced McDowell to get moving.

Without the railroad one feels that any movement that the North made against the Confederates would be fully directed at the destruction of their Army of Northern Virginia. Without any strategic point other than the Shenandoah Valley, it is likely that the Army of the Potomac would have had Lincoln's full blessing to set its main objective as destroying the opposing army rather than try to use the supplies and crops in the valley. Moving down or alongside the Potomac to Aquia Landing and from there to Fredericksburg would have had no significance other than to somewhat expose Washington to an attack from both Johnston and Beauregard. Without a railroad, Fredericksburg would not have had very much strategic value other than being along the direct path to Richmond. No railroad here also meant that any offensive towards Richmond from here

would be much more difficult to supply with just the use of wagons.

With these assumptions, it would be reasonable to believe that McDowell would have likely pursued Beauregard no matter where he was. However, with Beauregard and Johnston likely being closer to each other, it is debatable whether the outcome of the first major battle of the American Civil War would have been any different given the pressure on McDowell and his deficiencies as an army commander. It would also be determined by the geography of the battlefield itself and the subsequent plans of attack or defense but that is another area that is open to exploration.

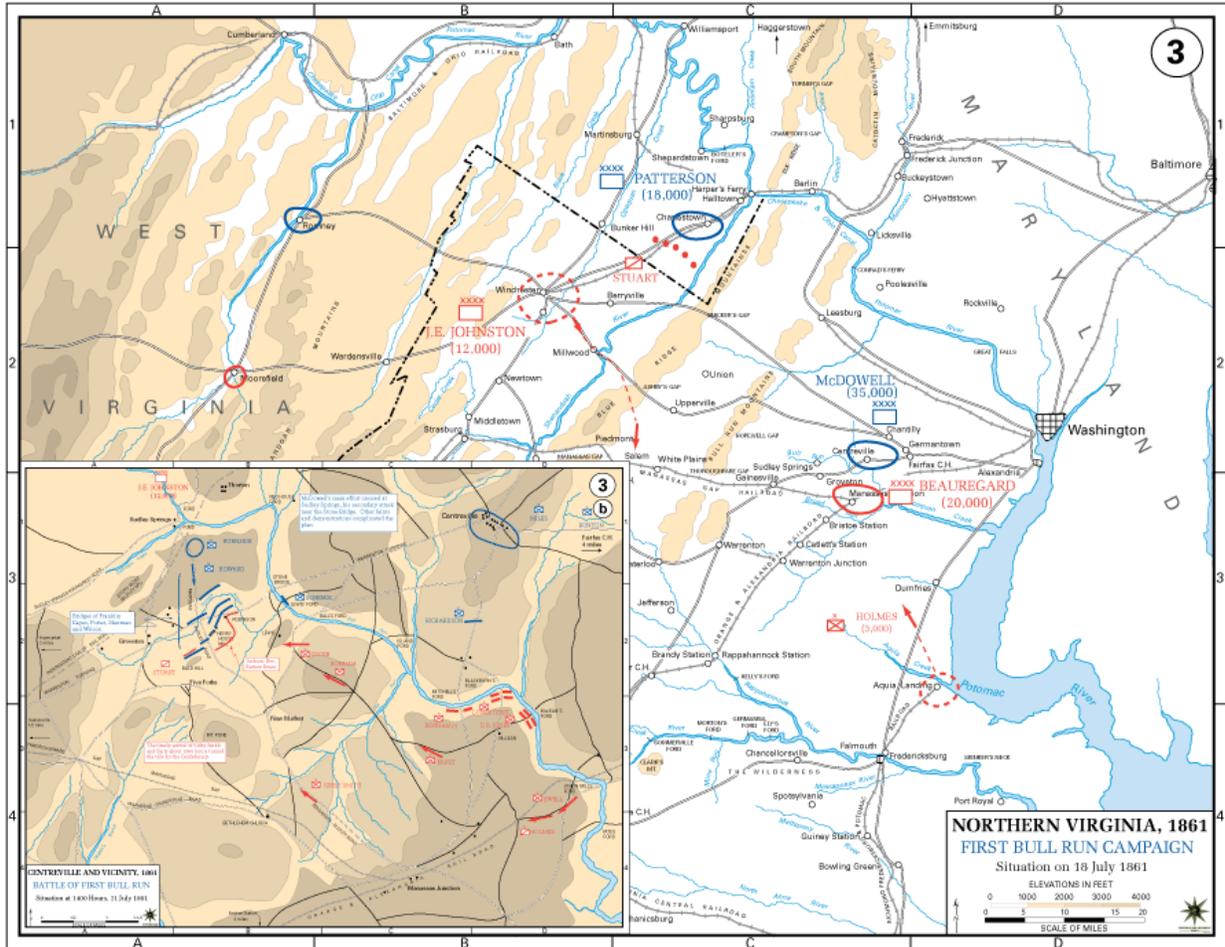
### Conclusion

As we can see from this exploration of what might have been, the railroad had a huge impact on the goals and positions of the various commanders of both the North and the South. Without the railroad, Beauregard and Johnston would probably have not occupied the same areas they did in reality simply due to the fact that they would need to be closer to each other in order to support each other. This would be dictated by which towns were the convergence points for the sprawling road network in Northern Virginia. One might argue that the railroad was the reason some of these selected towns such as Front Royal, Warrenton, Fairfax, and Fredericksburg were where many roads collided. This could very well be true, but it also highlights how the railroad affected and impacted the geography of the American Civil War.

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**Figure 1: Northern Virginia, 1861, First Bull Run Campaign**



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