

The Civil War Battle That Helped Create a State

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The Battle of Bull Run is routinely cited as the first land battle of the Civil War. That battle between Union and Confederate forces took place near Manassas, Virginia, on July 21, 1861. But was this battle really the initial skirmish between the North and the South?

Historians, today, concede that the first land battle actually took place on June 3, in the town of Philippi, in what is now known as West Virginia.¹ Teachers and students often have no knowledge of this battle, and it is rarely cited in K-12 history textbooks. In a review by the author of four 2005 American history textbooks, grades one through twelve, including teachers' editions, there was no mention of the Battle in Philippi, or the role that a young boy played in the events of that day. Yet this Civil War battle, a historical event once considered minor, had impact on the outcome of the war. In analyzing this battle, students engage in historical inquiry that prepares them to judge the significance of little-known events in history.

Setting the Stage

The small town of Philippi, originally called Anglin's Ford and the county seat of Barbour County, lay along the banks of the Tygart Valley River in northwestern Virginia. The covered bridge, an "architectural masterpiece" built in 1852, was the pride of the community. The bridge was an asset to both travelers and the local economy, because people no longer had to rely on the ferry. However, in 1861, the bridge became a hazard, since

Union forces considered it their gateway to the South.²

Prior to the Civil War, the citizens of Philippi were divided in their loyalties to the North and South. The majority were believed to be secessionists, but only by a slim margin. Somewhere between 750 and 800 Confederate troops held camp in Philippi under the command of Colonel George Porterfield, beginning in May 1861.³ Mustered into Confederate service, the Barbour Greys, soldiers from the local area, were first housed in the court house. Altogether, Colonel Porterfield had fourteen companies, five cavalry and nine infantry. They were poorly trained, ill equipped and unprepared for battle. Porterfield's goal was to advance from Philippi to Grafton, about 20 miles away, and gain control of the railroad.⁴

Under the direction of Colonels Benjamin Kelley and Ebenezer Dumont, two columns of Union forces marched on Philippi on the morning of June 2. They were to set up camp that afternoon, attack the town at dawn on the morning of June 3, and capture the Confederate soldiers in Philippi. Kelley's men were to divide into sections, with Kelley leading one and Colonel R. H. Milroy commanding the other. Kelley's men were to attack east of

the river, Dumont's men west of the river, and Milroy's column south of Philippi.⁵ This three-pronged approach would disable Porterfield's troops and cut off all roads from which they might retreat. The commanders agreed that when all troops were in position, Kelley was to fire a single pistol shot, signaling the start of the attack. Dumont's men would move into the valley and take the two-lane covered bridge, while Kelley's and Milroy's men would capture Porterfield's soldiers while they attempted to retreat.⁶

However, a drenching rain impeded Union progress, delaying the arrival of Kelley's troops. A second delay came for both Kelley and Milroy with reports that after splitting into two columns, they became lost, took the wrong fork in the road, or were misdirected by local guides. While Dumont's forces arrived safely on the hill overlooking Philippi, they had no knowledge that Kelley's and Milroy's men had not reached their stations.

At this same time, while the Confederates knew they might be attacked, the soaking rain convinced the Confederate commander that "any army marching tonight must be made up of a set of damned fools." Although Porterfield received several warnings, he and his forces were unprepared for any attack. Figure 1 illustrates the position of Union and Confederate forces at the Battle of Philippi.⁷

Figure 1: Plan of the Battle at Philippi in 1861

The Philippi Races

As Dumont's men took their positions overlooking Philippi, they passed by the farmhouse of Thomas Humphreys. While Mr. Humphreys was not home, Mrs. Humphreys and her 12-year-old son were awakened by the soldiers outside. One son, Newton, had just enlisted in the Barbour Greys, and the family was hopeful that the Confederates would win the war. In the hopes that they could warn Porterfield, Mrs. Humphreys sent one

of her sons by horseback to inform the troops sleeping in Philippi of the sudden danger. Unfortunately, the boy was spotted by Union soldiers, pulled off his horse, and arrested. Mrs. Humphreys threw sticks and rocks at the soldiers, somehow managed to rescue her son and desperately tried to put him back on the horse, but he was again yanked off. Not to be deterred, Mrs. Humphreys pulled out a pistol and fired at two of the soldiers. While she was a poor aim

and did not hit them, Colonel Dumont, hearing the shot, believed it to be the signal from Colonel Kelley to start his attack. Dumont's troops opened fire, giving his men the distinction of firing the first shot in the Civil War. Immediately, the Union army marched down the hill into town to secure the covered bridge.⁸ Figure 2 (see page 36) is a photograph of the Philippi Covered Bridge as it looked in the 1960s.⁹

The battle became known as the "Philippi Races" because of the swift retreat of the Confederates. One newspaper reported the Confederates "scattered like rats from a burning barn ... they ran, fled most ingloriously ... ran like sheep in every direction that promised safety."¹⁰ Union soldiers called them cowards and hollered, "Shirttail retreat!"¹¹ The Confederate soldiers, however, weren't just running scared, but were following Porterfield's orders to fall back and reform at Big Rock near Beverly.¹² Recounting the action in Philippi, a nine-year-old boy reported, "Immediately, Main Street was a mass of retreating humanity ... We descended into our cellar, and stayed there till things got quiet. When we came up, a line of Union troops was standing at 'Attention' from one end of Main Street to the other..."¹³ Porterfield, still in Philippi, noticed a company of soldiers with blue uniforms near the covered bridge. Since his own "Hardy Blues" had a similar uniform, he approached the men before realizing they were carrying the Union flag. Porterfield slowly turned his horse and rode away without being recognized, leaving the commander to be one of the last Confederates to retreat.¹⁴

Kelley's men arrived from the east, but not in time to capture Porterfield's soldiers as they retreated towards Beverly. As Kelley passed through town on the hunt of the Confederates, he fired at a retreating soldier. The soldier fired back and Kelley was wounded. At first thought dead, he eventually recovered and fought until the end of the war.¹⁵ When Milroy finally arrived, he discovered he was north of his intended position, and the area was dominated by Rebel soldiers.



Figure 2: Old Covered Bridge at Philippi on U.S. Highway 250. The only two-lane covered bridge on a Federal Highway. The First Bridge captured in the Civil War.

Both Kelley and Milroy had missed their opportunity to seize the Confederates. Union commanders decided not to follow Rebel soldiers because their men had no horses and were exhausted from their rain-drenched journey.¹⁶

There were fewer than 20 casualties in the battle of Philippi. Private James E. Hangar, a Confederate soldier who was wounded, required leg amputation seven inches below his hip and became the first amputee of the Civil War. Hangar designed an artificial limb for himself, and went on to produce limbs for the Confederate government and for worldwide distribution.¹⁷

Ramifications of the Battle of Philippi

The battle at Philippi was hailed as a Union victory. Soldiers were able to take five Confederate flags, including one that flew over the Barbour County Courthouse. Orville Thomson, a member of Co. G, 7th Indiana Infantry, remembers that the Rebel flag over the courthouse was replaced with the Stars and Stripes. Union soldiers from the 1st Virginia stayed in Philippi, occupying homes and churches. As the enemy invaded Philippi, citizens fled, leaving behind farm supplies and household

goods.¹⁸ Union forces “captured a large amount of arms, horses, ammunition, provisions, and camp equipage.”¹⁹

Although the victory at Philippi was overshadowed by the Battle of Bull Run, historians, such as David Mallinson, suggest that it had extensive political and military consequences. He reports that in losing the battle of Philippi, the Confederacy “succeeded in losing an entire portion of its most important state.”²⁰ By moving Confederate troops out of the area, Union forces were able to take control of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, an important means of transportation linking East to West, thus limiting the Confederates’ ability to move soldiers into the western sections of Virginia.²¹

Losing the western counties of Virginia to Union forces made it difficult for the Confederates to control the Shenandoah Valley and its fertile farmlands. In addition, Confederate soldiers were denied the opportunity for a clear route to march on Richmond. Politically, Union victory in western Virginia led to the election of delegates to a second Wheeling Convention, one that called for the formation of the state of West Virginia.²² A defeat in Philippi, leading to the loss of West Virginia, resulted in continued set-

backs that arguably cost the Confederates victory.

Teaching Students about Historical Significance

Is the Battle of Philippi worth studying? Sexias acknowledges that studying everything in history is impossible. Thus, value must be placed on historical events in order to select those that fit together into a worthwhile story.²³ Hunt suggests there are identified criteria for determining significance, criteria used by authors to assess the relevance and importance of historical events included in history textbooks. These predetermined criteria assess the impact of an event on the people of that time, the number of people that were affected, the length of time they were affected, and whether the event relates to current issues.²⁴ Since the Battle of Philippi is not cited in current United States history textbooks, it is apparent that textbook authors have not deemed it historically significant.

However, more current views suggest that significance cannot be reduced to quantity. These writers suggest that significance is a variable concept that differs among people.²⁵ Inquiry-based methods of studying history encourage students to assess the significance of historical events in light of broader criteria and relevance to their own lives. Sexias indicates that a historical event becomes significant if it relates to other historical phenomena and to students themselves.²⁶ He describes how historians have begun “bringing to center stage the actors, developments, and events previously relegated to the margins, in a determined effort to challenge older assignments of historical significance now seen to be ideologically and historically limited.”²⁷ Implementing variable criteria allow students to understand that “relatively minor events can be highly significant.”²⁸

“Local events and historical details” become significant when students are able to draw relationships between these events and more notable historical events of the time.²⁹ Helping students to make

these connections within their current social context is key to their historical reasoning. Thus, teachers should encourage students to use a wider range of criteria for assessing historical significance, so they might explain how events of the past have influenced the world.³⁰

Judging the Historical Significance of the First Land Battle of the Civil War

When teaching about historical significance, teachers must consider questions such as: What is the scope of the event and why is it remarkable? What are the short and long-term consequences of the event? What connections can be made with the event and current circumstances and lives? How does the event fit in with the bigger picture of the formation of our country? Are students able to use criteria that will broaden their understanding of historical significance?³¹

Before students in secondary classrooms are able to assess the significance of the Battle of Philippi, they must possess background knowledge on pre-war events and conditions in the United States. Discussing the causes of the Civil War and the events leading to it gives students a better understanding, necessary when evaluating the significance of specific battles, such as the Battle of Philippi, and their outcomes. Resources such as *The History of Barbour County; Milestones: A Pictorial History of Philippi, West Virginia, 1844-1994; From Philippi to Appomattox: Narrative of the Service of the Seventh Indiana Infantry in the War for the Union; and A Day at the Races: The First Virginia (U.S.) Infantry at the Battle of Philippi* can help students to learn more about this critical battle.³² Information is also available on websites such as West Virginia History: The Beginning—Philippi, 1861, at www.wvculture.org/hiStory/journal_wvh/wvh13-1.html,³³ and in “Confused First Fight,” in *America’s Civil War Magazine*.³⁴

After studying the details of the Battle of Philippi, students can discuss criteria for evaluating historical significance. Predetermined criteria, as well as crite-

ria created to broaden students’ views of historical significance, are listed in the box below.³⁵

After discussing the criteria with students, teachers might wish to help students to apply the strategy to a notable Civil War battle through the use of large group, small group, and independent work assignments and discussions.

- A large group discussion on these topics will prepare students for an independent assessment of the Battle of Philippi. Teachers can remind students that not everyone has to be in agreement on an event’s significance, because different people have varying views on personal relevance.
- As students individually evaluate the Battle of Philippi, they can use a web map such as the sample in Figure 3 (see page 38). In each oval, students enter details and outcomes of the battle that, in their opinion, are relevant. In addition to those chosen for inclusion, students may choose to incorporate the wounding of Colonel Kelley, the amputation of Private James E. Hanger, or the 20 casualties that the battle incurred.
- For each detail or outcome included, encourage students to brainstorm the short-term and long-term consequences. They can then focus on relationships to other historical events

and, based on additional questions in Table 1, determine the historical significance of each component.

- Large group discussion and debate can continue, with students offering their rationale and justifications regarding the historical significance of the Battle of Philippi.
- Final deliberations should include student speculation on how the United States, and their own lives, would be different if the Battle of Philippi, and other battles in what was then western Virginia, had not been fought, or had ended with Confederate victories.

In this inquiry-based lesson, students draw relationships between the Battle of Philippi, its consequences, and relationship to other events in the Civil War. In so doing, they gain insight into the battle’s relevance to the transformation of our country, the world today, and their own lives. Such inquiry-based approaches allow students to broaden their understanding of historical significance. These strategies encourage students to look beyond predetermined criteria and issues of quantity, so that assessments of historical significance take into consideration what some call relatively minor events and unnecessary historical details. Students become historians, engaged and empowered to make their own determinations about

Table 1. What are the significant and relevant events in history?

Consider the following:

If this battle had not occurred, would West Virginia have seceded?

How important was this event to the people of that time?

How many people were affected by the event and its outcomes?

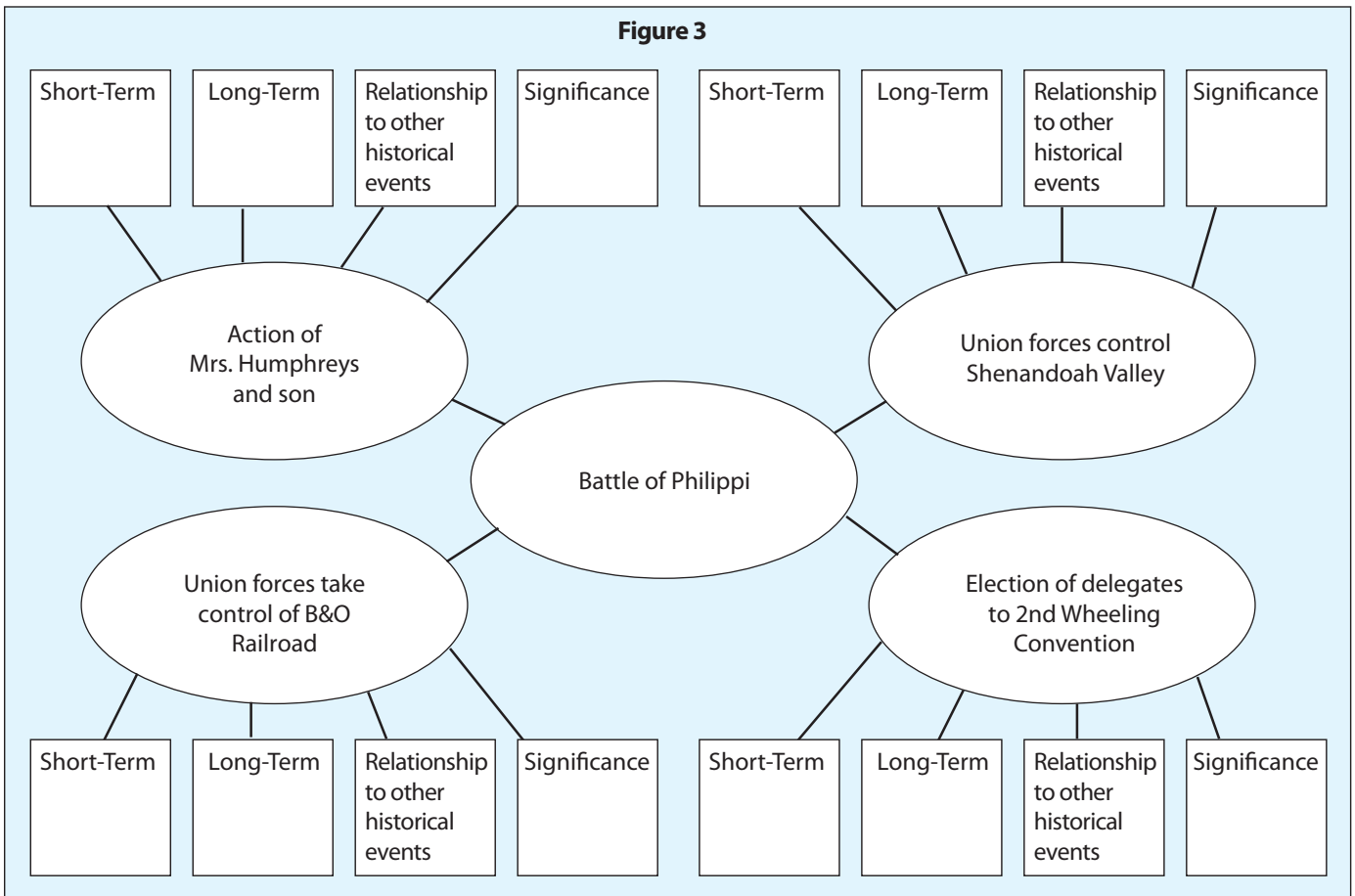
What were the short-term consequences of the event?

What were the long-term consequences of the event?

What is the relationship between this event and other historical events or phenomena?

What is the event’s relevance today and to your life?

Figure 3



historical events and their relevance. By encouraging them to critically analyze and measure significance of little-known events, history has purpose and meaning. Students begin to take an active role because their opinions matter. 🗣️

Notes

1. David Mallinson, "Confused First Fight," *America's Civil War Magazine* (1992): 46-52.
2. Ruth Woods Dayton, "The Beginning, Philippi, 1861," *West Virginia Division of Culture and History: West Virginia History* 13 (1952): 254-266, www.wvculture.org/hiStory/journal_wvh/wvh13-1.html.
3. Jane Mattaliano and Lois Omonde, *Milestones: A Pictorial History of Philippi, West Virginia, 1844-1994* (Virginia Beach, Va.: Donning Co., 1994).
4. Hu Maxwell, *The History of Barbour County, West Virginia: From its Earliest Exploration and Settlement to the Present Time* (Morgantown, W. Va. ACME Publishing Co., 1899).
5. Ibid.
6. Mark E. Bell, "A Day at the Races: The First Virginia (U.S.) Infantry at the Battle of Philippi," *Civil War Regiments: A Journal of the American Civil War* 5 (1997): 1-19.
7. Ibid.
8. Eva Margaret Carnes, *The Tygarts Valley Line: June-July 1861* (Philippi, W.Va.: Barbour County Historical Society, 2003); Bell; Maxwell.
9. Carnes, 49. The Philippi Covered Bridge was destroyed in a 1989 fire. It was rebuilt in accordance with the 1852 plans.

10. Bell, 13.
11. Carnes, 49.
12. Bell, 15; Carnes, 49.
13. Mattaliano and Omonde, 35.
14. Bell, 15; Carnes, 49.
15. Bell.
16. Mallinson.
17. Bell.
18. Mattaliano and Omonde.
19. Bell.
20. Mallinson, 52.
21. Bell.
22. Ibid.
23. Peter Seixas, "Students' Understanding of Historical Significance," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 22 (1994): 281-304.
24. Martin Hunt, "Historical Significance," *History Teacher* (2003); T. Lomas, *Teaching and Assessing Historical Understanding* (London: The Historical Association, 1990).
25. Terrie Epstein, "Deconstructing Differences in African-American and European-American Adolescents' Perspectives on U.S. History," *Curriculum Inquiry* 28 (1998): 397-423; Myra Zarnowski, *Making Sense of History: Using High-Quality Literature and Hands-On Experiences to Build Content Knowledge* (New York: Scholastic, 2006).
26. Seixas.

27. Peter Seixas, "Parallel Crises: History and the Social Studies Curriculum in the USA," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 25 (1993): 235-250.
28. Hunt.
29. Seixas, 1994.
30. Keith Barton, "Best Not to Forget Them: Secondary Students' Judgments of Historical Significance in Northern Ireland," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 33 (2005): 9-44.
31. Hunt; Zarnowski.
32. Maxwell, *The History of Barbour County*; Mattaliano and Omonde, *Milestones: A Pictorial History of Philippi, West Virginia, 1844-1994*; Orville Thomson, *From Philippi to Appomattox: Narrative of the Service of the Seventh Indiana Infantry in the War for the Union* (Published by the author, 1910s.); and Bell, *A Day at the Races: The First Virginia (U.S.) Infantry at the Battle of Philippi*.
33. Dayton.
34. Mallinson.
35. Adapted from Hunt; Lomas; Zarnowski.

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For information on how your state—or another specific state—was involved in the Civil War, visit the National Parks Service's American Battlefield Protection Program website at www.nps.gov/history/hps/abpp/battles/bystate.htm