

Signal Knob

AREA AT WAR

Battlefield Driving Tour

Battle of Fisher's Hill

22 September 1864

1864 Timeline

Late June

Confederate Gen. Jubal Early advances north from the Shenandoah Valley into Maryland.

11-12 July

Early's army skirmishes at Washington DC defenses.

13-17 July

Confederate army returns to the Shenandoah Valley pursued by Federal units.

18 July

Union forces are defeated at Cool Spring.

24 July

Confederates defeat Federals at Second Battle of Kernstown.

30-31 July

Confederate cavalry burns Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.

7 August

Gen. Philip Sheridan assumes command of the Federal Army of the Shenandoah.

19 September

Sheridan defeats Early at Third Battle of Winchester.

22 September

Early is defeated at Fisher's Hill.

Late September

US cavalry begins "the Burning" of mills, barns, and resources of the Valley.

9 October

Confederate cavalry is routed at Tom's Brook by US cavalry; the Burning ends.

19 October

Early is defeated decisively at Cedar Creek; major military action ends in the Valley.

1864: The Year of Decision

For the Shenandoah Valley, the Civil War reached its turning point in 1864, the Valley's "Year of Decision." For nearly three years, the pain and misery of war visited the Shenandoah as Union and Confederate armies marched and fought through the region's fields and villages, with the Confederacy holding a tenuous grasp on the bountiful land. Finally, after continuous military losses and frustration, Federal leaders determined in 1864 to conquer, occupy, or destroy the military forces and provisions of the Valley once and for all. Spring brought Union frustration with a defeat at New Market in May, then a victory on the rolling landscape at Piedmont in June. The Confederate high mark came when Gen. Jubal Early marched north into Maryland and threatened fortress Washington, causing great consternation in the Federal capital. After more losses in the Shenandoah Valley, a determined Ulysses S. Grant turned to a new commander, Gen. Philip Sheridan. By early fall Sheridan delivered several major defeats, dashing Confederate hopes. Federal forces then embarked on a "scorched-earth" campaign that burned and laid waste to much of the Valley's agricultural bounty. In a final attempt to destroy Sheridan's army, Gen. Early met a smashing defeat at Cedar Creek on October 19, 1864. Thereafter, the Confederacy had lost control of the Shenandoah Valley.

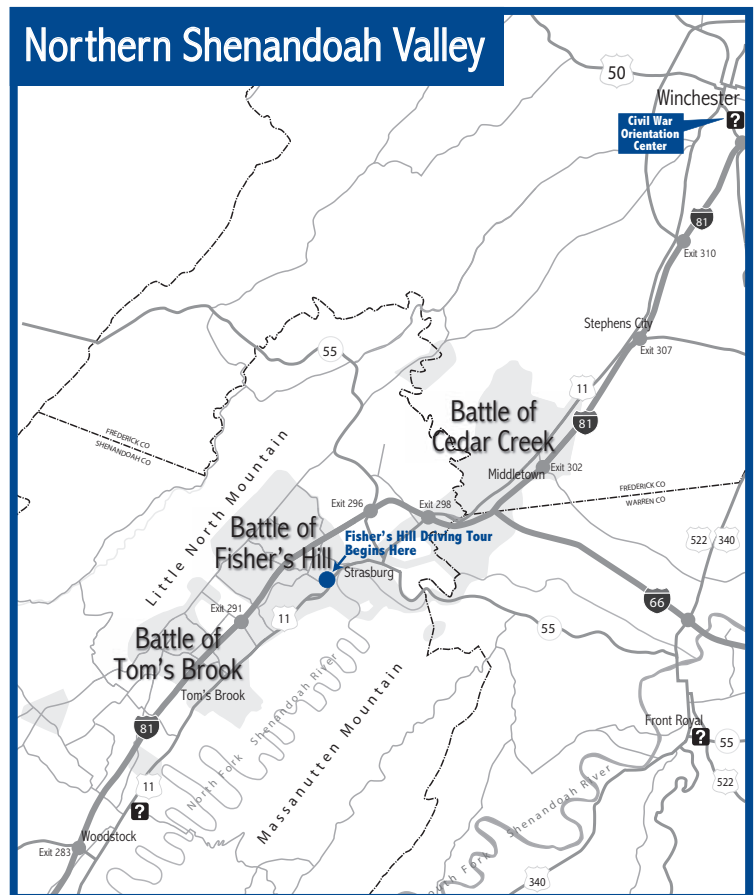
The Waltz

From the time Sheridan assumed command on August 7 through mid-September, the two foes virtually danced about the northern Valley, probing, deploying, marching, matching, and mirroring each other's moves but rarely fighting. Finally Sheridan attacked and defeated Early in the grueling Third Battle of Winchester (19 September), the largest battle of the 1864 Shenandoah Campaign. Early was forced to withdraw southward.

Gibraltar of the Valley

Following the defeat of his forces at Third Winchester, Early withdrew south of Strasburg to Fisher's Hill. Officers in both armies knew the site well and that if properly defended, it could live up to its reputation as the "Gibraltar of the Valley." Anchored on the west by Little North Mountain and on the east by the Massanutten, Fisher's Hill offered Early the opportunity to defend the Valley at its narrowest point.

Confederates had held Fisher's Hill in August and deterred Gen. Philip H. Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah from assaulting the position. Early hoped for the same success in late September. However, circumstances had changed. In August, Early had the numerical capabilities to defend the four mile stretch from the Massanutten to Little North Mountain, but in late September he did not. Nearly 4,000 casualties, the deployment of Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry to the Luray Valley, and the redeployment of elements from Gen. John C. Breckinridge's command to the Department of Southwest Virginia diminished Early's strength and limited his ability to make good defensive use of Fisher's Hill.



The Battle of Fisher's Hill

On the afternoon of September 20, Gen. Sheridan and his staff staired at the lofty heights of Fisher's Hill. After conferring with his corps commanders, Sheridan ruled out a direct frontal assault and contemplated the advice of VIII Corps commander Gen. George Crook to swing around to the west and strike Early's left flank. Sheridan approved the plan.

Crook needed to maintain secrecy throughout the entire flank march, so much of it occurred under the cover of darkness or amid the fall foliage in order to avoid detection from the Confederate signal station atop Signal Knob on the Massanutten. While Crook marched his command, the Union VI and XIX Corps massed north of Fisher's Hill. On September 21 a portion of the VI Corps seized Flint Hill—a piece of high ground north of Tumbling Run essential to Sheridan's plans.

By 2:00 p.m. on September 22 Crook's men began to climb the slopes of Little North Mountain. Approximately two hours later Crook's two divisions formed lines of battle and surged "like a western cyclone" toward the Confederate left. Confederate cavalry under Gen. Lunsford Lomax failed to provide any advance warning or slow the advance. Soon Crook's men rushed headlong in a confused, but determined mass into the main line of Confederate infantry commanded by Gen. Stephen D. Ramseur. Although Confederates tried desperately to stem the tide, the pressure from the flank attack and subsequent frontal assaults of the VI and XIX Corps forced Early to withdraw. Sheridan's troops pursued Early's battered command through the night to Woodstock.

Despite being regarded as a "complete" victory, Early was not yet ready to relinquish control of the Valley. It would not be until Sheridan's victory at Cedar Creek, less than one month later, that Union forces would finally wrest the Valley from the Confederacy's grip.

"Thence we went, sweeping down their works like a western cyclone."

U.S. Lt. Col. Thomas F. Wildes on Crook's flank attack

Following the Tour

NOTE: The tour takes approximately 35 minutes to drive and stop to read the signage but does not include the time for the one-mile walking tour of the battlefield at Stop 3.

Tour Starting Point ~ The tour starts at a wayside on US 11 one mile south of Strasburg, just north of the Battlefield Road (Va. 601) junction. Look for the Virginia Civil War Trails interpretive marker on the west side of the road.

Stop 1 Valley Pike: The "Gibraltar of the Valley" and the commanding view from Signal Knob

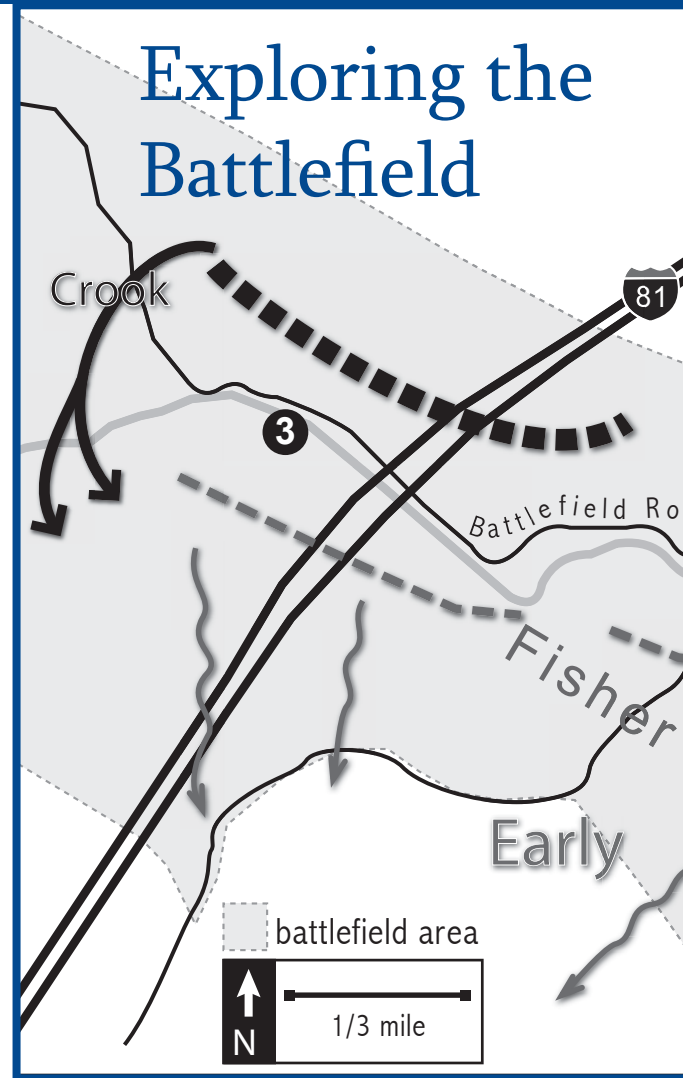
After reading the Civil War Trails "Valley Pike" marker, which has a good perspective map of the Battle of Fisher's Hill, step out and look southeast to the imposing – and easily defendable – ridge of Fisher's Hill on the other side of Battlefield Road. Confederate positions atop this hill could easily engage any Union force traveling along the Valley Pike (US 11) from Strasburg. Looking east – across the Pike – you can see the classic profile of Signal Knob at the north end of the Massanutten and can quickly recognize its significance for observation and signal of any movement in this area of the Valley. The Shenandoah Valley is at its narrowest point here. This, coupled with the dominating geography of Fisher's Hill, bolsters Early's assessment of the terrain when he said, "It was the only place where a stand could be made."

Following the tour: Head south on US 11 and turn right onto Battlefield Road, proceed six-tenths of a mile to Civil War Trails marker on the right.

Stop 2 Fisher's Hill Veterans Picnic Grounds

While driving along Battlefield Road, notice the imposing high ground on your left that constituted the Confederate positions. The Civil War Trails marker describes the annual picnic held in the post-war years to honor the veterans of both sides for more than a half century. After a lapse in the 1960s, the tradition was revised in 2004.

Following the tour: Continue on Battlefield Road, heading west for a 0.2 miles, then turn right onto Copp Road (Va. 757), following the green "Battlefield" sign. After crossing over the bridge, take an immediate left onto Battlefield Road (Va. 601), then follow the "Battlefields" signs for one mile to the battlefield walking tour parking area. The parking area will be on your left shortly after you pass under the Interstate.



Crook

3

Battlefield Road

Fisher's Hill

Early

battlefield area



1/3 mile



Stop 3 Ramseur's Hill: The "Gibraltar" cracks, Union flanking forces advance on Confederate positions

From the parking lot it is a 100-yard walk to the Ramseur's Hill marker and an accompanying brochure that outlines a one-mile walking tour of this part of the battlefield. (You can also download the brochure at ShenandoahAtWar.org.) The terrain is hilly and a little rough but it affords an excellent view from the Confederate positions in this area, especially at the stop near the base of Lookout Tree. From there you can look west and see the modern power-line cut of Little North Mountain which generally marks where Union forces "faced left and charged" into the flank of the Confederate forces, effectively making this position – which was also receiving Union attacks from the north – no longer defensible.

As you take the tour, look north to the high ground on the other side of the road. Union forces seized that ground prior to the main battle, giving them a launching point for their main attack. With Federals and Confederate units positioned on opposite heights – from here all the way east to the Valley Turnpike – the two army's artillery units were able to fire directly at one another. In addition, taking the northern hills not only afforded the Federals a view of the Confederate positions; it also helped mask Crook's western flanking movement from the Confederate observation station on Signal Knob.

Following the tour: Return along Battlefield Road (2.7 miles) back to US 11 and turn right to ascend Fisher's Hill to just beyond where the four lanes merge to two. There is a pull-off to the right with earlier historical markers of this battle.

A flanking attack is directed at the side—or flank—of the enemy's forces, requiring them to defend themselves from attack from two or more directions. The Battle of Fisher's Hill offers an excellent example of the effectiveness of a successful flanking attack.

Stop 4 Rear guard action at Prospect Hill

Looking north you can see the steeple of the Emmanuel Church, which marked the Union positions the day before this battle. Looking west, you can see the modern power-line cut of Little North Mountain which marks where Union forces "faced left and charged" – revealing how severely the Confederate positions were outflanked. Looking south, just beyond the trees, is Round Hill, which, like Signal Knob, provided an excellent observation and signal post; it sits about 1.5 miles south of this point. Still looking south along US 11, about one mile from here is a little rise called Prospect Hill where Confederate forces made a rear guard stand until darkness and Union confusion ended the battle. The stand came at a heavy price. Col. Alexander "Sandie" Pendleton – the favorite staff officer of Stonewall Jackson, the Valley's Confederate commander two years earlier – was mortally wounded while rallying the Confederate rear guard. Historical signage marks that site. The site of the house where Pendleton died in Woodstock is marked with a monument at the corner of Muhlenberg and Dingledine Streets.

Action at Milford (Optional additional stop)

During the fighting at Fisher's Hill, a Confederate cavalry division turned back the Union cavalry at Milford (present day Overall on US 340 in the Page Valley), preventing an attempt to gain Early's rear by crossing the gap to New Market. Sheridan remarked that if his cavalry had been successful, he could have captured Early's army. A Civil War Trails interpretive marker off US 340 at the Warren County/Page County line tells the story of the "Battle of Milford."

The Milford marker is 27.7 miles from the end of the Fisher's Hill tour; a trip to the marker will take you on a remarkably beautiful drive into Page Valley. To reach it, take US11 north (2.8 miles) into downtown Strasburg, then continue onto Va-55 East (10.3 miles) until it reaches US 340 just north of Front Royal. Turn right onto US 340 and continue south for 14.6 miles until you cross over a bridge at the Warren County/Page County line. Overall Road will be to your left shortly after you cross the bridge. Turn left onto Overall Road, then go a short distance until you come to a pull-off next to three interpretive markers, including the Milford marker.

Visitor Information ?

Civil War site brochures and lodging and restaurant information plus group tour information are available at:

Shenandoah County Tourism

600 N. Main St., Suite 101, Woodstock - 888-367-3960
Open Monday to Friday - 9:00am to 5:00pm
www.shenandoahtravel.org

Front Royal - Warren Co. Visitor Center

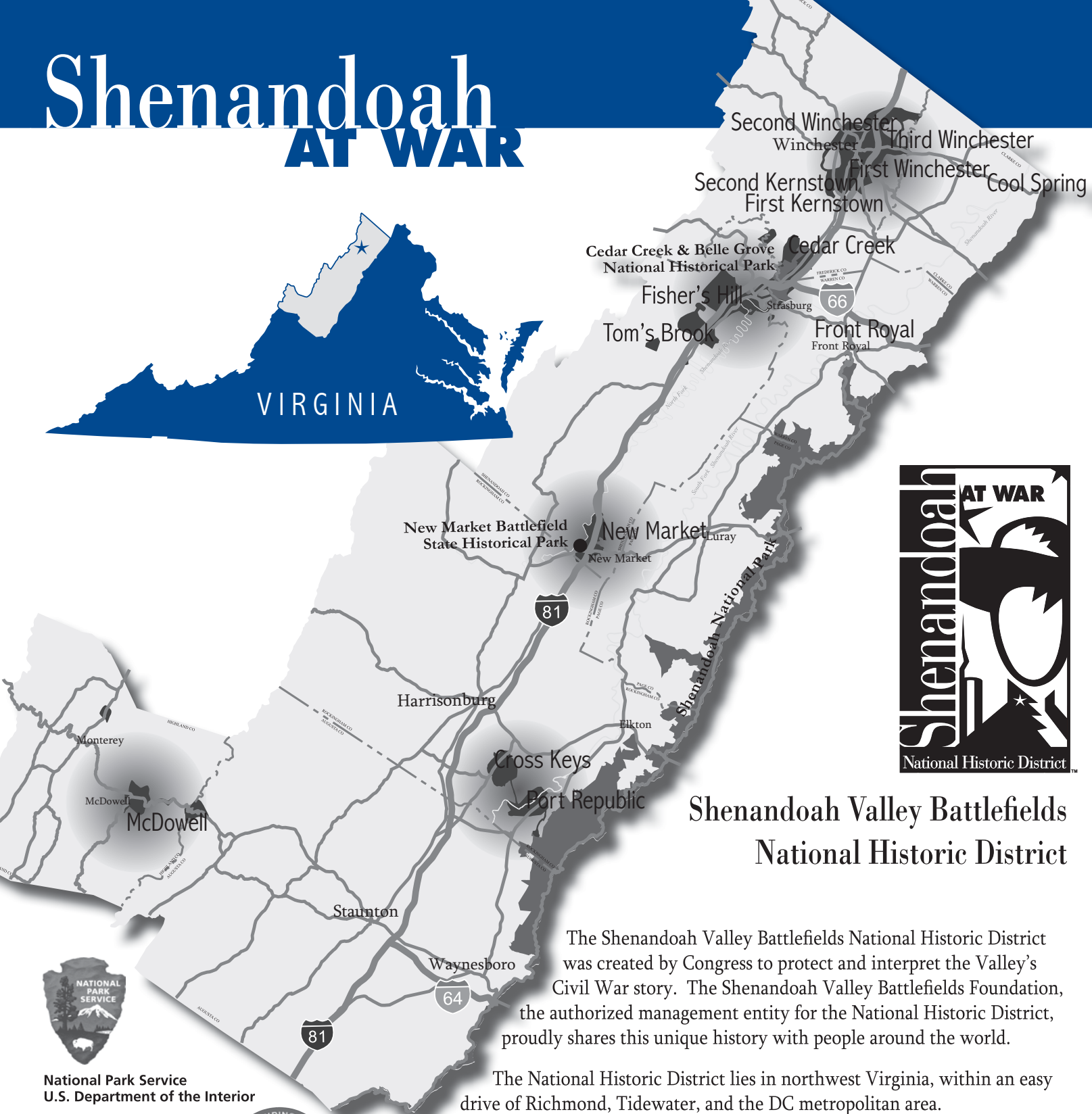
414 E. Main St., Front Royal - 800-338-2576
Open daily - 9:00am to 5:00pm
www.discoverfrontroyal.com

Winchester-Frederick County Visitor Center and Civil War Orientation Center

1360 S. Pleasant Valley Rd., Winchester - 877-871-1326
Open daily - 9:00am to 5:00pm
www.visitwinchesterva.com

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Shenandoah AT WAR



Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District

The Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District was created by Congress to protect and interpret the Valley's Civil War story. The Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation, the authorized management entity for the National Historic District, proudly shares this unique history with people around the world.

The National Historic District lies in northwest Virginia, within an easy drive of Richmond, Tidewater, and the DC metropolitan area.

Interstate 81 runs the length of the District, linking with I-66 in the north and I-64 in the south. From the east and west, the District is also served by US Routes 250 (Staunton), 33 (Harrisonburg), 55 (Strasburg), 50 and 7 (both in Winchester).

www.ShenandoahAtWar.org



To sign up for our monthly "Shenandoah At War" e-newsletter, email us at info@svbf.net.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



www.CivilWarTrails.org



www.VirginiaCivilWar.org



www.Virginia.org