

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of Big Bethel: Jubilation and Despair

By John V. Quarstein

Resources

If you can read only one book

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
Quarstein, John V.	<i>Big Bethel: The First Battle</i> . Mt. Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2011.

Books and Articles

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
Clifford, Gordon E.	4 vols. <i>The Battle of Big Bethel</i> . Richmond, VA: Carlton McCarthy & Co., 1883.
Cobb, Michael J., Edward B. Hicks and Wythe Holt	<i>Battle of Big Bethel: Crucial Clash in Early Civil War Virginia</i> . El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2013.

Organizations

Web Resources

URL	Name and description
https://markerhunter.wordpress.com/2011/07/10/big-bethel-battlefield/	Much of the battlefield is now beneath the Big Bethel Reservoir but some markers remain at the north side of the reservoir on Langley AFB property. This is a personal account of a recent tour of the battlefield.

Other Sources

Name	Description, Contact information including address, email
Big Bethel Walking Park	The Big Bethel Walking Park was established in 2016 on what little remains of the battlefield at 123 Saunders Road Hampton VA 23666. The announcement of the inauguration of the Park is at: http://www.hamptoncvb.net/media/blog/comemorate-the-155th-anniversary-of-civil-war-s-first-land-battle-with-dedication-of-10-historic-markers-at-big-bethel-battlefield-this-saturday-june-11/

Scholars

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Topic Précis

By early June 1861, Union forces under Major General Benjamin G. Butler had occupied the colonial town of Hampton and had built two additional camps, Camp Hamilton just outside the walls of Fort Monroe and Camp Butler on Newport News Point overlooking the mouth of the James River on the very tip of the Virginia Peninsula below the Confederate capital of Richmond. Confederate forces commanded by Major General John B. Magruder with a force of 1,400 men, took up blocking positions north of the union forces at Big Bethel Church located at the Hampton-York Highway’s crossing of the northwest branch of the Back River, also known as Brick Kiln Creek. Here the Confederates prepared a strong, entrenched defensive position with infantry and artillery, supported by cavalry. Butler probed northwards and Magruder probed southwards to Little Bethel Church as the two armies sought to understand what they were facing. On the night of June 9 Butler sent his 4,400-man force led by Brigadier General Ebenezer Peirce, towards Little Bethel Church and then towards Big Bethel. The combination of a complicated plan of advance and darkness led to a severe friendly fire incident between two New York regiments. Magruder ordered a regiment to march towards Little Bethel Church at 3:00 a.m. on June 10. Warned by a civilian of the advance of the Federal force, the regiment returned to the fortifications at Big Bethel to wait for the Federal advance. At about 9:00 a.m. the Federals deployed into a line of battle about 1,000 yards from the Confederate position. An artillery duel was begun which lasted about an hour and then the first Federal attack began. A series of uncoordinated union assaults were effectively countered by the Confederates. At one point the Federals captured a position in front of the Confederate lines occupied by a one-gun

battery (which had been withdrawn). However, a Confederate counterattack drove the union troops back. A further attack by a small number of Confederates meant to capture and destroy a small frame house located in front of the Confederate lines and occupied by Federal sharpshooters, resulted in the death of the only Confederate soldier, Private Henry Wyatt, killed in the battle. In one of the Union assaults Major Theodore Winthrop was killed. At about 12:30 p.m. General Peirce ordered the Federals to retreat. Covering the retreat was a union battery commanded by Lieutenant John T Greble. Greble was killed by a Confederate shell, the first regular army officer and West Point graduate to be killed during the war. Lieutenant Colonel Gouverneur K. Warren organized the gathering of dead and wounded soldiers, including Greble, and saw them removed from the battlefield. The Federal retreat became disorganized with equipment thrown away and Confederate cavalry harassing the retreating men. Big Bethel was a baptism of fire for a nation newly involved in civil war. Southerners rejoiced over the victory. Big Bethel was a complete failure for the Union, and the Northern newspapers were harsh critics and Ebenezer Peirce was singled out as the scapegoat for Union failure. A Massachusetts militia general, Ebenezer Peirce lost control of his force following the friendly fire incident and never gained effective command again, even when striving to organize an orderly retreat. Peirce was labeled incompetent and mustered out of the army after his 90-day enlistment expired. Big Bethel had major consequences for the Union and Confederate forces on the Peninsula. During the next ten months the Federals were content to control the very tip of the Peninsula below Newmarket Creek. The Union was able to use this position to protect the lower Chesapeake Bay as a base for the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron for operations against sites like Port Royal Sound and Roanoke Island. The Confederate victory at Big Bethel: nevertheless, blocked the first Union advance against Richmond via the Peninsula. The battle lines were drawn, and the Confederates maintained control of the Peninsula north of Brick Kiln Creek. The area between the Northwest and Southwest branches of the Back River became no man's land. This strategic situation allowed the Confederates to construct an in-depth defensive system that would eventually befuddle Major General George Brinton McClellan during the early stages of his 1862 Peninsula Campaign. The Confederate victory at Big Bethel: nevertheless, blocked the first Union advance against Richmond via the Peninsula. The battle lines were drawn, and the Confederates maintained control of the Peninsula north of Brick Kiln Creek. The area between the Northwest and Southwest branches of the Back River became no man's land. This strategic situation allowed the Confederates to construct an in-depth defensive system that would eventually befuddle Major General George Brinton McClellan during the early stages of his 1862 Peninsula Campaign. On the national scene, Big Bethel would eventually fade in importance. Even though it would retain its status as the war's first land battle, it was merely a skirmish and would be overshadowed by bloody and decisive engagements such as First Manassas and Shiloh. Almost six thousand men were part of the engagement. The casualties were low, the Union lost 76 men, 18 of whom were killed, and the Confederates lost one killed and 9 wounded. Many of the survivors would go on to greater acclaim, and others would serve their enlistments and go home. All of them would never forget their first baptism of fire that hot day at Big Bethel Church.
