

Virginia Battle of Philippi, 1861



Lander ride at Battle of Philippi

Col. Kelley devised a two-prong attack against the Confederate force in Philippi, approved by Gen. Morris on his arrival in Grafton on June 1. The principal advance would be 1,600 men led by Kelley himself, and would include six companies of his own regiment, nine of the 9th Indiana Infantry Regiment under Col. Robert H. Milroy, and six of the 16th Ohio Infantry. In order to deceive the enemy into thinking the objective was Harpers Ferry, they departed by train to the east. They disembarked at the small village of Thornton and marched south on a back road on the same side of the river as Philippi, intending to arrive at the rear of the town.

Meanwhile, the 7th Indiana under Col. Ebenezer Dumont were sent to Webster, about 3.5 miles (5.6 km) southwest of Grafton. They would unite with the 6th Indiana under Col. Thomas T. Crittenden and the 14th Ohio under Col. Steedman. The column, with a total of 1,400 men under Col. Dumont (with the assistance of Col. Frederick W. Lander, volunteer aide-de-camp to Gen. McClellan), would march directly south from Webster on the Turnpike. In this way, the Union force would execute a double envelopment of the outnumbered Confederates.

On June 2, the Union columns set off to converge on Philippi. After an overnight march in rainy weather, both arrived at Philippi before dawn the following morning. Morris had planned a predawn assault to be signaled by a pistol shot. The green Confederate volunteers had failed to establish picket lines for perimeter security, choosing instead to escape the cold rain and stay inside their tents. A Confederate sympathizer, Mrs. Thomas Humphreys, saw the approaching Union troops and sent her young son on horseback to warn the Confederates. As Mrs. Humphreys watched, she saw Union pickets capture her son and fired her pistol at them. She missed, but her shots began the attack prematurely.

The Union attackers began firing their artillery, which awakened the Confederates from their slumber. Those who were armed fired a few shots at the advancing bluecoats, then Southerners broke and began running to the south, some still in their bed clothes. This caused Union journalists to refer to the battle as the "Races at Philippi". Dumont's soldiers entered the town from the bridge (Col. Lander's ride down the steep hillside through heavy underbrush was considered such a feat of horsemanship that *Leslie's Weekly* gave an illustrated account of it shortly afterward^[5]), but Kelley's column had arrived from the north on the wrong road and were unable to block the Confederate retreat. Kelley himself was shot while pursuing some of the retreating Confederates, but Col. Lander chased down and captured the man who shot Kelley. The Confederates retreated to Huttonsville, about 45 miles (72 km) to the south.