

Civil War Troop Movements at Pine Grove Furnace, 1863 v.2

Pine Grove Furnace and nearby Laurel Forge were not in the main path of the huge armies maneuvering during the Gettysburg Campaign of June and July 1863. Nonetheless, Union forces are documented to have passed through the ironworks. Evidence concerning Confederates is less clear — very probably rebels did not make it to Pine Grove Furnace.

Confederates at PGF before the Battle of Gettysburg?

In late June, the Confederate army was spread across south-central Pennsylvania — with the main force extending up the Cumberland Valley from Chambersburg to Shippensburg and Carlisle and beyond towards Harrisburg. They then converged to fight the Battle of Gettysburg.

One source claims that a few Confederates moved due south out of the Cumberland Valley and across the South Mountains all the way to Pine Grove Furnace, while on their way to Gettysburg. An account written less than 30 years after the battle says that on June 30th elements of the Confederate Third Corps moved south from Newville:

“General Pender's division of Hill's corps was sent from Newville by way of Pine Grove Furnace, on the Newville and Mummasburg road, reaching a point on the latter ten miles northwest of Gettysburg. He stopped for the night with four brigades, as follows: Thomas', Lane's, Scales' and McGowen's.”

— *Gettysburg: How the Battle Was Fought* by James Thomas Long (1891)

The “Newville and Mummasburg road” could refer to modern Route 233 from Newville to Pine Grove Furnace; then modern Bendersville Road south from the furnace across Piney Mountain Ridge towards Bendersville and Arendtsville. Beyond Arendtsville is the hamlet of Mummasburg, located just to the northwest of Gettysburg. These roads all existed in 1863, for example they are shown on the 1858 Cumberland County map published by Henry F. Bridgens.

Major General William Dorsey Pender's men from Georgia and the Carolinas were heavily involved in the fighting at Gettysburg, including “Pickett's Charge.” Pender was hit by artillery fragments on July 2 and died two weeks later.

There is a significant problem with the 1891 book's account. All other sources say that Pender's Division was with the rest of the Third Corps near Chambersburg, not further north, and specify it moved along modern Route 30 to Cashtown and Gettysburg. Is the book totally incorrect, or merely giving wrong unit names to some other troops at Newville?

Most Confederate forces moving up the Cumberland Valley were from General Richard S. Ewell's Second Corps and traveled the “Pike” (modern Route 11) or on Walnut Bottom Road. Some Confederates did pass through Newville during the last week of June. Cavalry scouts rode into the area on June 25th, then on June 27th at least 50 cavalry entered town under the command of “Captain Pierce from Mississippi.” As many as 500 to 1000 other men with a few cannon were meanwhile camped near modern Route 11. They all later moved toward Mount Holly Springs and thence south to Gettysburg; there is no mention in the few available records that any of them instead went due south from Newville.

Anna Watts, wife of Pine Grove ironmaster William Watts, feared the arrival of the Confederates. She hid her valuable silverware at the more modest home of Margaret Weiser, an ironworker's wife. The limited contemporary data available from Pine Grove itself does not mention arrival of Confederates. It should be noted that in any case, PGF and other area ironworks did not suffer the fate of Caledonia Furnace 16 miles to the south, which was deliberately burned by the rebels during the Gettysburg campaign explicitly because it was owned by prominent abolitionist politician Thaddeus Stevens.

Other claims are still made to this day — without documentation — that rebel forces were at or near PGF. However, the closest Confederates that are clearly described were nearly 6 miles north along modern Route 233, near the intersection of modern Route 233 with Pine Road, as well as in Centerville on the Walnut Bottom Road. **The bulk of evidence does not support the idea that Pine Grove Furnace was visited by Southern forces**, but further research is needed. The reason for such a highly specific yet erroneous claim in Long's 1891 book is unknown.

Union troops move through Laurel Forge and PGF, and guard the mountain passes

The Battle of Gettysburg on July 1st, 2nd and 3rd was followed by the withdrawal of Confederate forces, but their intentions and potential remaining capacity to fight were not clear to the Union command. Various northern troops — mostly untested volunteers — were moved towards Gettysburg and surrounding areas. The day after the battle ended, Major General Darius Couch was ordered to move his forces from Carlisle to Gettysburg:

“At 11:30 A.M. on the 4th, [Secretary of War Edwin] Stanton sent Couch the first of a number of messages expressing anger at Couch's delay in pushing troops to [army commander George] Meade. [Brigadier General William F.] Smith did move his division from Carlisle that day, but rather than push through the mountains to join Meade, or move down the Cumberland Valley to attack Lee's flank, he turned at Mt. Holly and moved southwest in the mountains, reaching Pine Grove Furnace that night... Things were not moving much faster in the north with Couch's command... Smith remained at Pine

Grove Furnace and recommended that if his division were committed, it should be broken up to regiment level and distributed to the Army of the Potomac...”

— *The Roads to Falling Waters: A Critical Analysis* by Lieutenant Colonel Rod Burns, a student paper written at the Army War College in Carlisle (March 1988)

In Edwin Coddington’s 1968 book *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, these troops are described as “inexperienced militia.” General Smith was concerned about their ability to march quickly in the dark, and to fight effectively unless bolstered by more seasoned troops.

On July 4th, Pennsylvania and New York Militia — including the New York 23rd and 37th Regiments, among others — marched in heavy rain from Carlisle through the Mount Holly gap. They were accompanied by 10 artillery pieces manned by Philadelphians. These troops mostly belonged to the commands of Brigadier Generals Joseph F. Knipe and John Ewen.

General Smith’s official report said their movement through Mount Holly was “detained for two hours by the arrival of about 2,000 prisoners, paroled on the battle-field, and sent under a flag of truce toward Carlisle.” These were apparently Union men accompanied by a small guard of Confederates. “Wishing to prevent the enemy from getting information of our strength, I was forced to accept the prisoners, subject to the decision of the Government, and turn the rebel escort back.” (The quotes are from “Memorandum of Operations in Pennsylvania and Maryland, June 24-July 15” by General William F. Smith in *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records...*, Series I, Volume XXVII, 1889).

Continuing south from Mount Holly, the 23rd Regiment then turned southwest to Laurel Forge while the 37th remained at the junction of Pine Grove Road with Gettysburg Road (modern Route 34). The unending rain caused Mountain Creek to flood its banks. Supply wagons were stuck in the mud, and some horses drowned. General Smith’s report said “a most furious rain-storm set in, which raised the creeks, carried away bridges, and made the march toilsome in the extreme.”

The New Yorkers arrived soaking wet, hungry and exhausted at Laurel Forge in the early hours of July 5th:

“On, on through rain and mire, one mile, two miles, three miles to the hamlet of Laurel Forge, indistinguishable in the darkness, which gave refuge to all that remained of what was 12 hours before a proud regiment, filling the mountains with the echoes of its fervid patriotic song, now a forlorn, exhausted handful of men clutching greedily the shelter and the hope of rest which the grimy forge offered... The skeleton of the Twenty-Third having gone forward early in the morning, our little private ‘breakfast party’ hastened its departure from the now to us historic hamlet of Laurel Forge, after gratifying the poor woman who presided over the dingy domicile with the sight of more money in her hands, doubtless, than she was accustomed to seeing at one time. The road now began to improve at once. We were getting ‘out of the wilderness’ apparently. A few miles brought us to Pine Grove, another settlement with its furnace and shops.

— *Our campaign around Gettysburg: Being a memorial of what was endured, suffered, and accomplished by the Twenty-third regiment (N.Y.S.N.G.) and other regiments associated with them, in their Pennsylvania and Maryland campaign, during the rebel invasion of the loyal states in June-July, 1863* by John Lockwood (1864)

Other soldiers had already arrived at Laurel Forge on the evening of July 4th: “General Ewen’s Brigade was left to watch the road from Mount Holly to Pine Grove and that from Laurel Forge to Bendersville, over the mountain.” At Pine Grove itself, “the Eighth New York Regiment was sent out to hold the road to Bendersville, where it crosses the mountain south of Pine Grove.” We now know there was no need to guard the roads across the South Mountains into Adams County. The Confederates were far to the south as they returned to Virginia, and never moved back toward the Cumberland Valley.

The residents of Pine Grove Furnace found food and shelter for the Union men. Margaret Weiser, the ironworker’s wife, fed the tired soldiers bread she had baked just before they arrived and onions from her garden. The men used flour from the village to cook their own flapjacks for breakfast.

They were eventually ordered onward to Gettysburg across Piney Mountain Ridge:

“Then shortly we began to ascend again; and we wondered with fear and trembling whether we were entering upon a second mountain road which it would be our wretched fate to climb...”

“At Pine Grove Iron works turned left and ascended a heavy mountain, on the summit of which halted and bivouacked...”

— *Our campaign around Gettysburg* by John Lockwood

At the top of Bendersville Road, probably in the vicinity of the modern ATV parking lot, Lockwood camped beside “one section of artillery” from General Knipe’s Brigade. The next morning (July 6th) these untested Northerners finally moved onward to Gettysburg, having missed the fighting there. They later followed the Confederates’ trail towards Virginia.