

10 Questions . . . with Mike Block

Mike Block is the author of the newest Emerging Civil War Series volume, *The Carnage Was Fearful: The Battle of Cedar Mountain*. Mike serves as the vice-president of the Friends of Cedar Mountain Battlefield. As a public historian, he gives battlefield tours and lectures, focusing on the stirring wartime events in Culpeper County, including at Cedar Mountain. Retiring from the United States Air Force in 2001, he continues supporting the U.S. Government as a consultant.

You have a particular passion for the Civil War history of Culpeper County. How did you first make that discovery?

In 2004, the family moved from Manassas to Bealeton, in southern Fauquier County. While I was unpacking box after box of Civil War-related books, I mentioned to my wife that it was time to give back. A small story in the paper the following week mentioned that the Brandy Station Foundation (BSF) was looking for volunteers. I joined the organization, became a docent at the Graffiti House, and eventually became part of their board. Nearly everyone was focused on the Battle of Brandy Station, so, with support and guidance from mentors Bud Hall and Robert Luddy, I studied the Army of the Potomac's 1863-64 Winter Encampment and Rappahannock Station. From there, the rest of the county's history opened up to me.

How did you get interested in Cedar Mountain, in particular?

I left the BSF in early 2012. Within a month, the Friends of Cedar Mountain Battlefield reached out and asked me to join their board and serve as a public historian. Remember, 2012 was the sesquicentennial of the battle. I had a very steep learning curve, indeed! Once on board, I realized that other than Robert Krick's excellent *Stonewall Jackson at Cedar Mountain*, there was little written on the battle. As my understanding of the brief campaign grew, I began gathering material with the hope of someday telling the story of Cedar Mountain myself.

People tend to look at the battle of Cedar Mountain in isolation, but you have a great way of framing it as the last action of the Peninsula Campaign. Can you explain that briefly?

The official reports for Cedar Mountain are in the volume with Second Manassas. This leads many to believe that they are linked as the same campaign. But looking at the correspondence and chronology of the 1862 Richmond campaign, it was clear to me that John Pope's advance was a maneuver to threaten Richmond from the West. This would also threaten the key railroad junction at Gordonsville, Charlottesville, and Richmond, as well as relieving some of the pressure on the Army of the Potomac at Harrison's Landing. The last thing Lee needed in early August was 40,000 men at Richmond's back door. Pope held the initiative until August 9.

Everyone seems to have an (unfavorable) opinion of John Pope. What do you think of him?

John Pope is an easy man to dislike—an arrogant braggart and a Republican when most of the army leadership were Democrats. I doubt I would have enjoyed his company. He came from the west with a very different way of prosecuting the war, which was the polar opposite of how George McClellan fought. Pope's plan was a good one, but had a poor supporting cast. He hoped to maneuver Stonewall Jackson off the Rapidan River line and had the manpower to achieve it. Unfortunately for Pope, Jackson moved first and blunted the advance at Cedar Mountain. After that, personal animosities within Federal armies in the east—and Robert E. Lee—sealed his fate. But remember, Pope was again successful when sent back west. Lincoln saw value in him. You can't say that about John Fremont or McClellan.

What do you love about the Cedar Mountain battlefield?

It is a pristine battlefield with great trails. The only significant disruption to the ground is Route 15. There is very little housing, and the vistas are without disruption. Cedar Mountain is not owned by the NPS, nor is it a Virginia State Park (yet); it's owned by the American Battlefield Trust. There are more than 400 acres preserved, with several hundred more under some form of protection! This is your battlefield. Most of the local landowners allow the guides to visit private property (with advanced permission), allowing us to tell a complete story. Also, Cedar Mountain, in the early 20th century, was the fifth-most monumented battlefield in America, behind Gettysburg, Antietam, Vicksburg, and Chickamauga. A true hidden gem.

Lightning Round (short answers with a one-sentence explanation)

Favorite primary source?

The letters from the soldiers. They contain the most important, unedited thoughts the writer had on that particular day. And their DNA is present!

Favorite Civil War-related monument?

Impossible to answer. But I always pause at the 11th Pennsylvania monument at Gettysburg to visit Sallie (a Cedar Mountain veteran).

Favorite unsung hero of the Civil War era?

Not a hero, but Colonel John Egbert Farnum, 70th New York Infantry, is a fascinating individual. He needs a biography.

What's a bucket-list Civil War site you've not yet visited?

Chattanooga and Chickamauga. I need to get out to the western battlefields.

Favorite ECWS book that's not your own?

I've written three appendix's for other ECWS authors, so I can't pick those, either. I love the campaign guides and traveling the backroads, so Rob Orrison's and Kevin Pawlak's *To Hazard All: A Guide to the 1862 Maryland Campaign*.