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The Virginia town of Fredericksburg, situated on the Rappahannock River, was the scene of a vicious battle in December of 1862. Union forces had to go through that town as they deepened their invasion of southern territory.

General Ambrose Burnside, then in charge of Union forces, was on his way to Richmond, capital of the Confederacy. Before he could capture Richmond, however, he needed to secure Fredericksburg.

In order to launch an offensive, federal troops had to cross the Rappahannock. An advance contingent of Burnside's men had arrived at Falmouth, across the river from Fredericksburg, by November 17. A pontoon bridge had to be created for the crossing, but the parts had not arrived.

Had General Burnside allowed his troops to cross the river when they first arrived, instead of waiting for the bridge to be installed, the outcome of the battle would likely have been much different. But despite the urging of commanders like Winfield Scott Hancock, Burnside refused to allow a crossing before the bridge was in place.

The delay allowed General Lee to significantly strengthen his defenses.

Astride Traveller, Lee watched the Union preparations, pondering where the attack of the town in which he had courted his wife (Mary Randolph Custis) would take place. A river crossing above or below Fredericksburg would be smart, but he saw no evidence that would happen.

Burnside, believing Lee would not expect a frontal attack, picked that option. It was another mistake.

Worse, Burnside was apparently unaware of advantages he had given his enemy. Once the men in blue crossed the river, they had to make their way through a half-mile open field. Dug in behind the stone fence at Marye's Heights, outside of town, the men in gray waited.

They were further protected by ravines, a marsh, and a drainage ditch leading to a sunken road. (This National Archives picture of the road was taken in May, 1863, after a later battle).

As waves of Union troops approached (about fourteen brigades before the end of the battle), Confederates fired their rifles so fast it was as though they were using machine guns before machine guns were invented.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/MISTAKES-AT-FREDERICKSBURG-Gods-and-Generals>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

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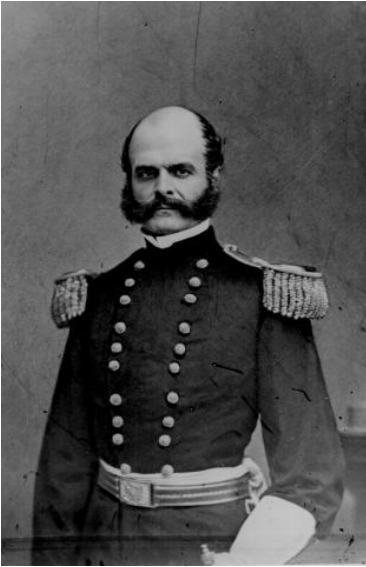
### Fredericksburg, Virginia - February, 1863

Photographed by Timothy H. O'Sullivan. Courtesy, U.S. National Archives, image 165-SB-30.

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### Burnside, Maj. General Ambrose

Courtesy, U.S. National Archives, image 111-B-3698.

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### Fredericksburg - Federal Troops at the River

Courtesy, U.S. National Archives, image 111-B-508.

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### Major General Winfield Scott Hancock

Courtesy, U.S. National Archives, image 111-B-5265.

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### General Robert E. Lee and His Horse "Traveller"

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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### Stone Fence at Mayre's Heights

Image online, courtesy the [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov) website.

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### Marye's Heights, Fredericksburg Battle Scene

Courtesy, U.S. National Archives - image 5/6/05-0578a.

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