

IN THE TRENCHES AT PETERSBURG BY EARL HESS
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CHAPTER TWO

Crossing the James River

Grant's crossing of the James River in mid-June 1864 was a complex operation. It involved disengaging the Army of the Potomac and the Eighteenth Corps from the tangled system of trenches at Cold Harbor, moving them southward more than twenty miles, and building the longest pontoon bridge ever used in the Civil War. Union engineers needed to locate and plan four different lines of fieldworks to protect the movement. Grant hoped to accomplish this without tipping off Lee as to his intentions and then to attack and capture Petersburg, a city that had been fortified for almost two years. The fortifications of Richmond, older and more complex than those of Petersburg, also played a role in the movement. The Confederate Howlett Line that stretched from the James to the Appomattox served as a link between the defenses of both cities.

THE DEFENSES OF RICHMOND

While scouting the terrain to Lee's rear on May 29, Martin L. Smith caught a glimpse of the Richmond defenses. The armies were still maneuvering north and northwest of Cold Harbor at that time, but Smith knew that if Grant continued his attempts to outflank Lee, the time would soon come when "these fortifications must form part of our lines."¹

Starting soon after the firing on Fort Sumter, the Confederates built concentric rings of fieldworks on both sides of the James River. The Inner Line was the first, laid out and constructed by Virginia state engineers as a series of batteries that covered the eastern approaches to the city. Confederate authorities later deemed it too close to Richmond but did not begin work on a more forward line until McClellan's Peninsula campaign threatened to bring the Army of the Potomac near the city. They pushed the completion of the Inner Line and the construction of the Intermediate Line beginning in March 1862. The latter was anchored on both ends at the James River and stretched along the eastern, northern, and western sides of the capital. An extension of it also covered

about half of the southern approaches to Richmond. After Lee took command of the Army of Northern Virginia early in June, he initiated the construction of the Outer Line, a third defense, to protect the city while he massed troops for the Seven Days offensive. The most important purpose of this line was to shield the eastern approaches to the capital, from the James River at Chaffin's Bluff to the Chickahominy River at New Bridge. The Outer Line continued westward past Richmond and then angled south to hit the James upstream from the city. The Outer Line was the most important of the three, and in a sense it made the previous two defenses redundant. Located about five miles from the city, and twenty-six miles in length, the Outer Line was the only one of the three Richmond defenses that Grant tested in the Petersburg campaign.²

The Confederates had anchored the Outer Line at Chaffin's Bluff on the James River, where river batteries held seventeen heavy guns aimed to fire on Union boat traffic. They had lavished a great deal of labor on the network of lines that stretched north and northeast from Chaffin's to form the Outer Line in 1862, and they performed additional work on it the following year.³

A newspaper correspondent for the *Montgomery Daily Mail* conducted an inspection of the Richmond fortifications in the spring of 1864. He noted that a telegraph line thirty miles long ran along the defenses. Military roads connected the concentric rings and "negroes were swarming thick as bees" on the Outer Line, while abatis fronted the redoubts. In fact, the writer noted, the "destruction of timber for abatis, fuel, houses, and to afford play for the guns, has been enormous." The Engineer Bureau of the Confederate War Department had been trying to help Walter Husted Stevens to find laborers to push the defenses to completion since early May. It had relied on pressing slaves and free blacks for the past two years to work on the capital fortifications, with ambivalent results. Stevens wanted at least 1,500 workers, but Secretary of War James A. Seddon refused to call up large numbers of slaves because their masters needed them for spring planting.⁴

THE DEFENSES OF PETERSBURG

The defenses of Petersburg covered all approaches to the city south of the Appomattox River. When Butler approached Petersburg from the north during the Bermuda Hundred campaign in May, the Confederates built a temporary set of fieldworks along the south bank of Swift Creek that effectively blocked the Yankees.

Untouched by direct enemy action, Petersburg had a prewar population of more than 18,000 residents. Railroad connections made it an important point. Called the Cockade City because of a compliment President James Madison paid to the town's volunteers in the War of 1812, it also was an industrial city

with cotton and flour mills, tobacco factories, and iron-casting shops. Five railroads met there. The Richmond and Petersburg line stretched north to the capital, twenty-three miles away. The City Point Branch of the South Side Railroad (usually referred to as the City Point Railroad) led east to a prominent bluff on the south bank of the James River. The Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad stretched off to the southeast, where it connected with Suffolk while the South Side Railroad connected the city with Lynchburg. Finally, the Weldon and Petersburg Railroad linked the city with the important blockade-running port of Wilmington, North Carolina. In addition to the rail lines, six major wagon roads connected Petersburg with the outside world.⁵

The Confederates began fortifying Petersburg in the summer of 1862. Daniel Harvey Hill pushed forward with construction immediately after taking command of the Department of North Carolina on July 17. Lee sent Stevens and Jeremy F. Gilmer to plan the defenses in early August. Hill also assigned Capt. Charles H. Dimmock, a prewar civil engineer, to supervise construction, using three brigades of available troops and more than 1,200 slaves from Virginia and North Carolina. Stevens selected the ground where the line was built east of Jerusalem Plank Road but merely "pointed out" to Dimmock where he should construct the works west of the road before he and Gilmer returned to their usual duties near Richmond.

When George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac evacuated the Peninsula in August 1862, the urgency to finish the defenses of Petersburg waned. Troops were shifted elsewhere, severely reducing the number of available workers, and local slaveowners grew more reluctant to allow their property to work for the government. Dimmock and Samuel G. French, the new department commander, convinced the Petersburg city council to hire slaves and free blacks to work on the fortifications, but it was an uncertain and expensive source of labor. The city defenses were not complete until the spring of 1864.⁶

What came to be known as the Dimmock Line ran for ten miles, with both flanks anchored on the Appomattox River, and included fifty-five batteries that were open to the rear. The works consisted of large parapets, deep ditches, and a sharp profile. The infantry parapet between the batteries was 20 feet thick at the base and 6 feet wide at the top, while the ditch measured 15 feet wide and 6 feet deep. Slight works had been constructed for skirmishers in the form of a gently descending plane dug into the earth for 12 feet before some parts of the line. When this excavating resulted in a perpendicular wall 3 feet deep, the diggers stopped. An admiring Federal officer who saw these skirmish shelters called them "French rifle pits." The Confederates had cut all the timber for half a mile in front of the line and constructed an abatis. By June 1864, most of this obstruction had been removed, and it no longer proved much of an obstacle.

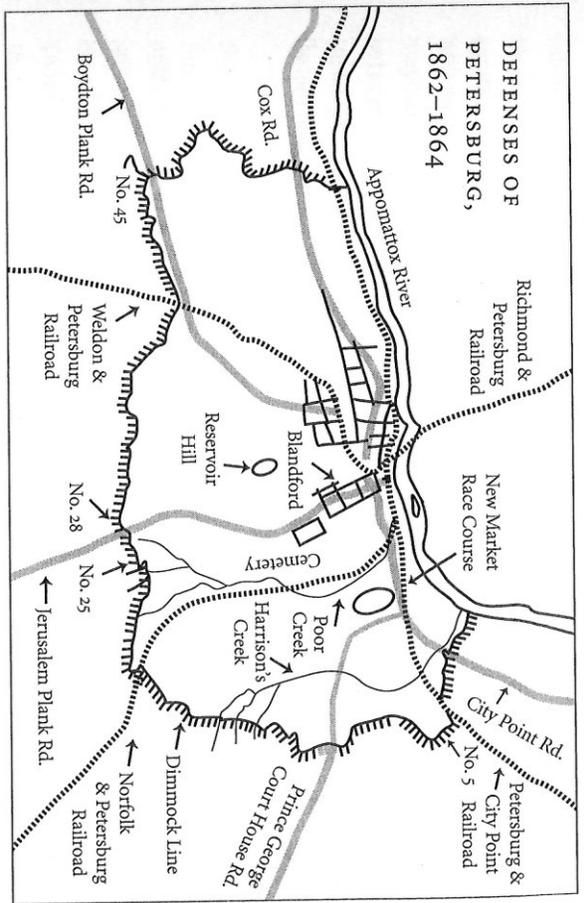
leared space also had begun to grow back with scattered underbrush between the stumps. A military road stretched at least from Jerusalem Plank to Battery No. 5, which formed a prominent salient in the line on the far protecting the approach along the City Point Railroad.⁷

The Federals directly threatened Petersburg for the first time on June 9, 1864. He sent 1,800 Tenth Corps infantrymen, part of Edward W. Hinck's black division of the Eighteenth Corps, and his cavalry division under August V. Iz. The force totaled no more than 4,500 men under the general command of Winfield S. Pruitt. It split into two columns on the way to Petersburg, with more leading the infantry to the Dimmock Line near the City Point Railroad. Kautz took his cavalrymen south of town to Jerusalem Plank Road. Both commanders had authority to attack if they felt there was a prospect of breakthrough through the Confederate defenses.

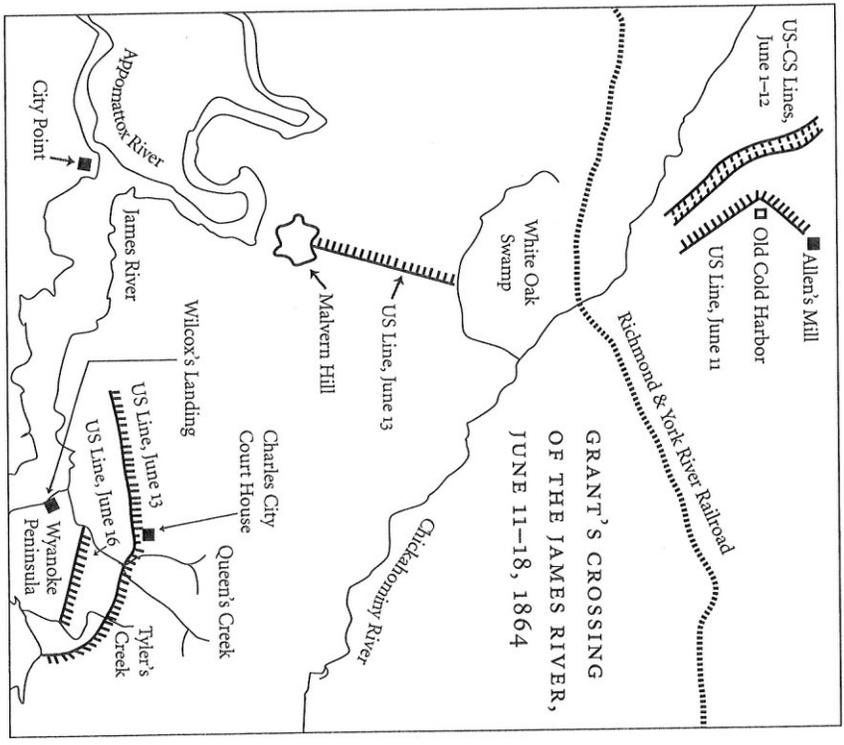
The operation proved to be a failure, even though the Confederates held Petersburg with a meager force. Local reserve troops supplemented Henry A. Slocum's Virginia brigade, with most of the men positioned to confront Gillmore. Fletcher Anderson's Reserve Battalion, bolstered by two guns, confronted the German-born cavalry officer cautiously advanced his skirmish line and was repulsed each time, but his main advance succeeded with artillery support. The dismounted troops approached the Confederate works through ravines without being seen until they were only fifty yards away. As they began to spill into Battery No. 26, the Confederate position became untenable. Raleigh E. Colston, who had come on the scene in time to receive command of the Confederates, ordered a retreat to Reservoir Hill some distance to the rear and near the outskirts of town.

This could have led to the fall of Petersburg, but Kautz ended his pursuit when Confederate field artillery took position on Reservoir Hill and opened fire. James Dearing's cavalry brigade also arrived in time to block further progress, and Kautz withdrew from the Dimmock Line. Gillmore pushed his skirmishers forward along City Point Road, but they stopped as soon as they made contact with the Confederates. Receiving no word from Kautz, he left the vicinity of Petersburg at 1:30 p.m.⁸

Congratulations on the successful defense of Petersburg were muted by the criticism of the Dimmock Line. Colston later claimed that the works were not complete along Jerusalem Plank Road. "With the exception of a few lunettes and redoubts at the most commanding positions, they were barely marked out, and a horseman could ride over them without the least difficulty almost anywhere." Colston remembered that the parapets at Batteries No. 27 and 28 were only waist high. P. G. T. Beauregard, responsible for defending the area north of the James River, was unhappy with the design of the works. "Affair of



Defenses of Petersburg, 1862-1864, and Grant's Crossing of the James River, June 11-18, 1864



yesterday demonstrates fully bad system of defensive works constructed for Petersburg," he wrote. "When will our engineers adopt strong detached inclosed works in preference to elongated and weak continuous lines requiring a large army to hold them?" He felt that enclosed forts, even if unconnected by infantry trenches, could be defended even by small forces. Beauregard ordered hasty work on the Dimmock Line, and a Confederate artillery officer reported on June 10 that it was "still weak; but, much improved." When Beauregard inspected the line the next day, "his presence inspired all with confidence that all that could be done *would* be."⁹

OVER THE JAMES

Grant began to prepare for crossing the James on June 8 by sending Barnard to scout for a new defensive line that could be held by two divisions as a covering force. He wanted it placed a bit to the rear of the present line. Barnard, James Duane, and Nathaniel Michler anchored the right of the new position at Allen's Mill on the Matadequin Creek, a tributary of the Pamunkey River. The line bent forward to include Old Cold Harbor junction as a salient in the center and continued to Elder Swamp near the Chickahominy River. Details from the Second and Sixth Corps began digging this seven-mile-long fortification on the morning of June 10. Two engineer officers, Capt. George L. Gillespie and Lt. William H. H. Benyaurd, divided the line into halves and supervised the infantrymen. Horatio G. Wright's Sixth Corps provided 1,720 men for this work, including 150 men of the U.S. Engineer Battalion, using 1,400 spades, 500 picks, and 100 axes. The work details completed digging at dawn of June 11 and cut military roads from the present line back to the new one the next day. Apparently Lee also considered preparing a smaller, well-fortified position to his rear in case he might need to disengage from the Cold Harbor lines. Martin L. Smith scouted around for a good position for an "Entrenched Camp. With Chickahominy for our side," on June 12.¹⁰

Grant informed Butler on June 11 that he was ready to move the next day. William F. Smith received instructions to ship his Eighteenth Corps back to Bermuda Hundred and then to immediately move out as the point of the Union offensive. Grant also instructed Butler to collect bridging material to facilitate Meade's crossing of the James.¹¹

The Federals pulled out of the Cold Harbor lines soon after dusk on June 12. Smith's corps marched to White House Landing, where it boarded boats and headed for Bermuda Hundred. Winfield S. Hancock's Second Corps and Wright's Sixth Corps occupied the newly constructed line to the rear as the rest of Meade's army disengaged from the battlefield. They evacuated the new defensive line later on the night of June 12, having used it only a few hours, and

the entire Army of the Potomac moved southward across the Chickahominy River. Another new defensive position was needed for the next phase of the movement. Gouverneur K. Warren, commander of the Fifth Corps, apparently directed the laying out of this line. It stretched from White Oak Swamp, a tributary of the Chickahominy River, to Malvern Hill near the James River. Fifth Corps infantry and James H. Wilson's cavalry division dug this five-mile-long line and held it as the other three corps of Meade's army neared the James River on the evening of June 13.¹²

The Confederates realized their enemy was gone from Cold Harbor early on the morning of the 13th, and Lee pulled his men out of their fetid trenches to find out where Grant was heading. Richard H. Anderson's First Corps and A. P. Hill's Third Corps moved south across the Chickahominy and came up against Warren's and Wilson's position between White Oak Swamp and Malvern Hill. In contrast, Lee sent Jubal Early's Second Corps away from the army to save Lynchburg from a Union column under David Hunter, who was advancing up the nearly defenseless Shenandoah Valley.¹³

Lee's problem lay not in being surprised at Grant's move but in being uncertain as to its ultimate objectives. Beauregard had suggested to Bragg as early as June 7 that Grant would likely cross the James and strike at Richmond from Bermuda Hundred, and the *Richmond Examiner* had also predicted the Federal maneuver the same day. Daniel Harvey Hill, who was in charge of the fortifications along the Howlett Line, thought Grant would strike at Petersburg rather than the capital. Warren and Wilson had blocked the Confederate advance so Lee could not send his cavalry to reconnoiter. He had to wait until sizable numbers of Federal troops appeared somewhere before he could determine Grant's objective. Lee considered the possibility that Meade would cross the Chickahominy but remain north of the James and advance toward Richmond in conjunction with Butler on the south side of the river.¹⁴

Lee's willingness to wait played into Grant's hands. On June 13, Nathaniel Michler received instructions to lay out a line near Charles City Court House to demark a fortified bridgehead covering the crossing of the James. The left of Michler's line rested on Herring Creek, the center skirted Charles City Court House, and the right neared the James River downstream. The line covered the approach to Wyanoke Peninsula, formed by a jog of the river southward as it flowed to Chesapeake Bay. About twenty miles southeast of Richmond, Michler traced out a curved line that stretched for eight miles.

The Second Corps reached Wilcox's Landing, upstream from Wyanoke Peninsula but within the confines of Michler's proposed bridgehead, on the evening of June 13. The entire corps deployed along the left wing of Michler's line and started to dig in by dusk. Daniel Chisholm of the 116th Pennsylvania

reported that “we are all busy carrying Rails, boards, logs and everything that will stop a bullet,” completing work “by the light of the moon.” Wright’s Sixth Corps arrived on the morning of June 14 and deployed in the center, while Burnside’s Ninth Corps marched in later that day and constructed the right wing of the line. Warren evacuated his covering position between White Oak Swamp and Malvern Hill early on the morning of June 14, leaving Wilson’s cavalry in place. He marched to the bridgehead, where his men relieved Hancock’s command on the left of the line. The Second Corps then prepared to be the first of Meade’s army to cross the river. By the evening of June 14, the entire Army of the Potomac, except Sheridan’s cavalry and the army trains, was safely inside the bridgehead.¹⁵

Meanwhile, Butler’s part of the program became more apparent. The Eighteenth Corps had made good progress after boarding the boats at White House Landing, steaming down the Pamunkey and the Chickahominy and then up the James River past Wyanoke Peninsula and Wilcox’s Landing. Smith arrived at Bermuda Hundred at 9:00 p.m. on June 14. That was also the day that Grant held a conference with Butler to acquaint him with his plans. He wanted the Eighteenth Corps to strike for Petersburg, aided by Hincks’s division of black troops that had earlier been detached from the corps. Kautz’s cavalry division would go along. Smith had instructions to cross the Appomattox River on pontoons at Point of Rocks, and Grant intended to hurry the Second Corps along to support him as soon as possible. Smith commanded up to 14,000 men while Hancock brought some 20,000 reinforcements.¹⁶

Lee continued to hold his position between White Oak Swamp and Malvern Hill with 29,000 men, most of his available force, on June 14. Despite conflicting reports, he received enough information to conclude that Grant had established a base on the north bank of the James River, and Lee was inclined to believe that Grant meant to operate against Petersburg. But uncertainty plagued Lee’s thinking. A few Yankee stragglers claimed that Grant was heading for Harrison’s Landing, McClellan’s old base on the north bank of the James. Lee knew the strong Federal works there were intact. “I do not think it would be advantageous to attack him in that position,” he confided to President Davis. Grant could use Harrison’s Landing as a base for either crossing the river or advancing up its northern side.¹⁷

The grand movement across the river began on the morning of June 14, when Hancock’s corps boarded boats at Wilcox’s Landing. The pontoon bridge at the head of Wyanoke Peninsula was not yet ready, and Hancock could not afford to wait. A number of steamers began to ferry his corps over the wide river.

Peter Michie had scouted for the best spot to lay the pontoon bridge on June

12 and 13. He recommended three places, and his superiors chose the end of Wyanoke Peninsula, where the water was 80 to 90 feet deep and rose 3 or 4 feet when the tide came in. The James was 1,992 feet wide here, and the approaches to the bridge site needed grading. Grant approved of all these arrangements on the afternoon of June 13, and the engineer troops finished work on the approaches the next morning, with George H. Mendell’s regular engineers building the approach to the bridge site across 150 feet of slimy tidal mud.

The pontoons reached the end of Wyanoke Peninsula by noon of June 14, and James Duane took charge of the project. He relied on 200 regular engineers and 220 men of the 50th New York Engineers to construct the bridge. They lay heavy wooden pontoons of the French type from both banks of the river, placing anchors both upstream and downstream to secure the boats, as the tidal action caused the current to flow alternately in both directions. The water was so deep in the main river channel that Godfrey Weitzel placed three schooners upstream and three downstream from the bridge to add stability, as the anchor ropes were stretched to their limit. Over the course of five hours, the engineers deployed 101 pontoons to make a bridge nearly 2,000 feet long and 10 feet wide. The crossing was delayed several hours to allow Smith’s Eighteenth Corps to steam through a removable section spanning the main river channel on its way to attack Petersburg.

A nearly constant stream of men, horses, wagons, and artillery crossed the pontoon bridge on June 15–16. While the Second Corps and Fifth Corps consumed sixty-two hours in crossing by boat from Wilcox’s Landing, the rest of the army and its artillery crossed in only forty-six hours over the bridge. Fifth Corps artillery chief Charles Wainwright was very impressed by the structure. It was “really a wonderful piece of pontooning,” he wrote, “equal I suspect to anything of the sort ever before done.” Wainwright found it to be “very steady in crossing, nor has there been the slightest trouble so far as I can learn.”

As the troops flowed across the James, Michler located the position for a smaller bridgehead on the north side of the river. He staked it out on June 15, and the Sixth Corps dug it the next day. This fourth and last line to protect Grant’s crossing of the James River stretched from Tyler’s Creek on the right to Queen’s Creek on the left, about three miles, and lay from half a mile to one and a half miles south of the larger bridgehead line. It protected less ground, uncovering Wilcox’s Landing upstream, but still screened the approach to Wyanoke Peninsula and the pontoon bridge.¹⁸

“Since Sunday we have been engaged in one of the most perilous movements ever executed by a large army,” Grant informed his wife on June 15. The crossing greatly uplifted the spirits of the men, who were out of the horrid trenches at Cold Harbor and enjoying the beautiful vistas along the river.

"Where is Grant agoing to elbow us again?" called out a Confederate picket to his Union counterpart.¹⁹

JUNE 15

Lee continued to hesitate on June 15, the first day of fighting outside Petersburg. Beauregard assured him that he could hold the Howlett Line and protect Petersburg, but the Creole general wanted "his original force" back. Therefore, Lee sent Robert F. Hoke's division to his aid. Lee had started the day intending to move Anderson and Hill back to the Outer Line of the Richmond defenses; but Federal cavalry movements created uncertainty, and he decided to remain in place. He ordered another pontoon bridge laid across the James River one mile downstream from Chaffin's Bluff, making a total of three usable bridges across that stream ready for rapid movement as soon as Grant's target became clear.²⁰

Grant's planning had enabled William F. Smith to reach Petersburg with an overwhelming advantage in numbers. His 14,000 men opposed a mere 2,200 Confederates, who were supported by about 2,000 militiamen. Smith concentrated his force at City Point and then approached Petersburg, receiving artillery fire from the Dimmock Line at midafternoon on June 15.²¹

Henry Wise, the crusty commander of a Virginia brigade that had seen long service in the Richmond-Petersburg area, distributed his men from Battery No. 1 to a point on the Dimmock Line near Butterworth's Bridge. To his right the rest of the Dimmock Line was essentially empty. Wise received evidence that trouble was coming, for Dearing's cavalry brigade skirmished with Smith's cavalry advance all day.²²

Smith's approach to Petersburg brought him up against a pronounced salient in the Dimmock Line, formed by Batteries No. 4, 5, 6, and 7. Battery No. 5, the key to this bulge, was located south of the City Point Railroad. Planted atop Jordan's Hill, Battery No. 5 was 600 yards forward of the rest of the line. This part of the Dimmock defenses lay just east of Harrison's Creek and about two miles outside town. The creek valley is about twenty feet deep but has wide, gentle slopes. Observers described the works here as well constructed, and the ground was still open in the front.²³

Smith expected weak defenses at Petersburg because of the relative ease with which Kautz had penetrated the Dimmock Line on June 9, but he was surprised when he saw Dimmock's handiwork. A topographical engineer by training, and naturally cautious when he felt the weight of responsibility, Smith spent two hours scouting the position. Satisfied that he knew what to do, Smith then waited an additional two hours for his infantry to get into position. He would have to go in alone, for Hancock could not get his Second Corps up before dark.

Four hours had slipped by, giving Hoke an important opportunity to march toward Petersburg.²⁴

The Federals finally went in at 7:00 p.m., supported by a short artillery bombardment. Smith had seen on his scout that a ravine between Batteries No. 6 and 7 could be used to gain access to the rear of the Rebel works. The Federals cracked open the Dimmock Line with astonishing ease. Louis Bell's brigade got into the unenclosed rear of Batteries No. 5 and 6 as men from Hiram Burnham's brigade approached Battery No. 5 from the front. Burnham's people got into the ditch and scaled the outer slope of the parapet by sticking bayonets into the dirt, digging their heels into it, or pulling themselves up by grabbing weeds and grass that had grown on the long-unused works.

As Batteries No. 5 and 6 fell, regiments of Hince's division took Battery No. 7 by striking at its rear and front simultaneously. Part of John H. Martin-dale's division took Battery No. 3 as well. Battery No. 8 fell to the 1st and 2nd USCT, and the Confederates evacuated Battery No. 9 when No. 8 fell. The 4th USCT took Battery No. 10 near the Dunn House, and the defenders evacuated Battery No. 11 without a fight. Within a few minutes, all batteries from No. 3 to No. 11 were in Federal hands. The Rebels continued to hold Batteries No. 1 and 2 on the far left, but everything that Smith tried to take had fallen. The amazing thing is that most of this was accomplished by a reinforced skirmish line. Smith had noticed while scouting that the works were lightly held; but he feared casualties from artillery fire, so beefed up his skirmish line rather than expose the battle line too freely. Confederate casualties totaled 378, but Smith never reported his light losses.²⁵

Dusk and the timely arrival of Hoke's division robbed the Federals of an opportunity to exploit their success. Johnson Hagood's South Carolina brigade led the division into Petersburg. At first, David B. Harris directed Hagood to take position in the Dimmock Line near Jerusalem Plank Road. But then word arrived of Smith's attack, and Hagood rushed out along City Point Road to throw his men in Smith's way.

The Carolinians encountered a stream of Wise's men retreating from the Federals. Halting his command, Hagood took two staff members forward to scout the terrain in the growing darkness. Harris then sent out a map of the area, along with a candle and some matches, and Alfred H. Colquitt's Georgia brigade of Hoke's division showed up as well. Colquitt and Hagood consulted and decided to establish a new line west of Harrison's Creek. Hagood placed his own brigade on the far left, resting on the Appomattox, and relieved Wise's men who still held Batteries No. 1 and 2. The South Carolinians dug in, using bayonets and tin plates, in a position where they had good command across the wide valley of the creek. What came to be known as the Hagood Line