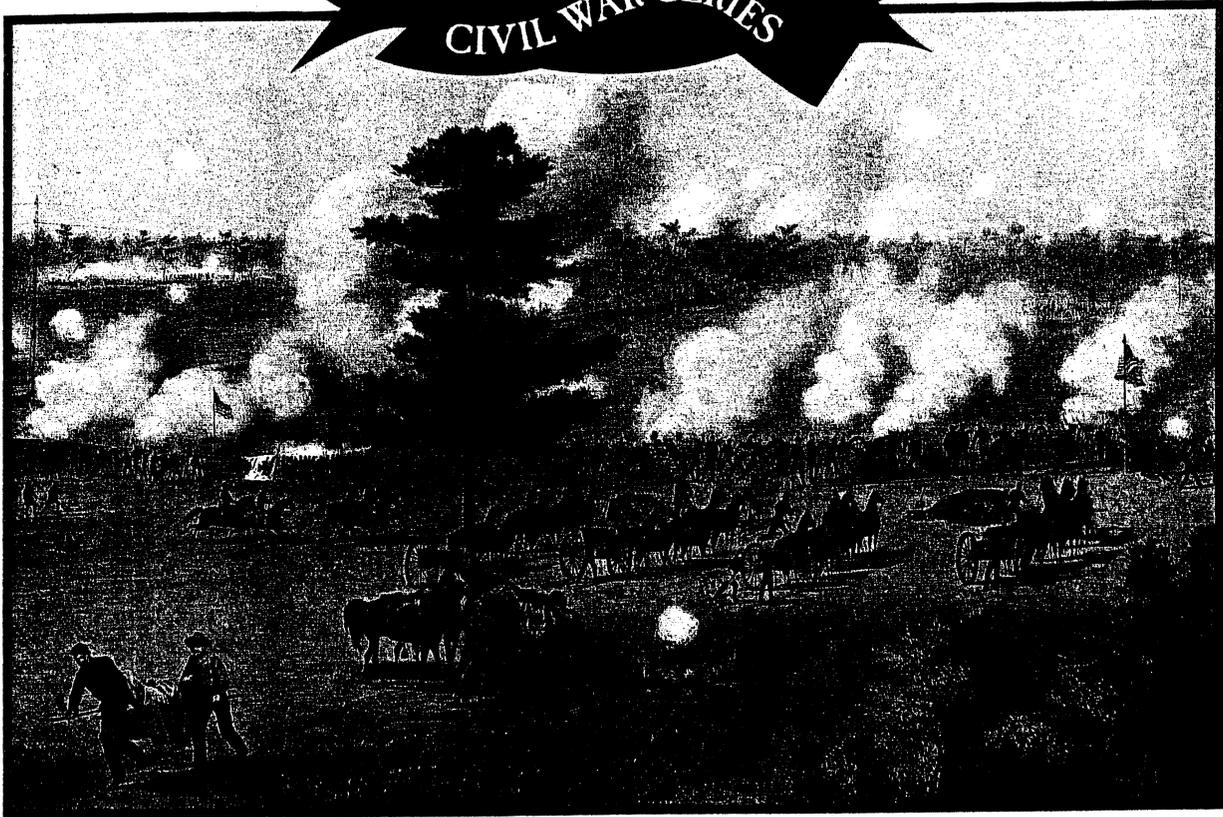


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THE SIEGE OF

PETERSBURG

CIVIL WAR SERIES



# THE SIEGE OF PETERSBURG

When twenty-three-year-old George S. Bernard marched off to war in April 1861 as a member of the Petersburg Rifles, he left behind a city of no small accomplishments. Much of its importance derived from its location, just below the falls of the Appomattox River, where planters transferred their goods to ships for passage to the James River and beyond.

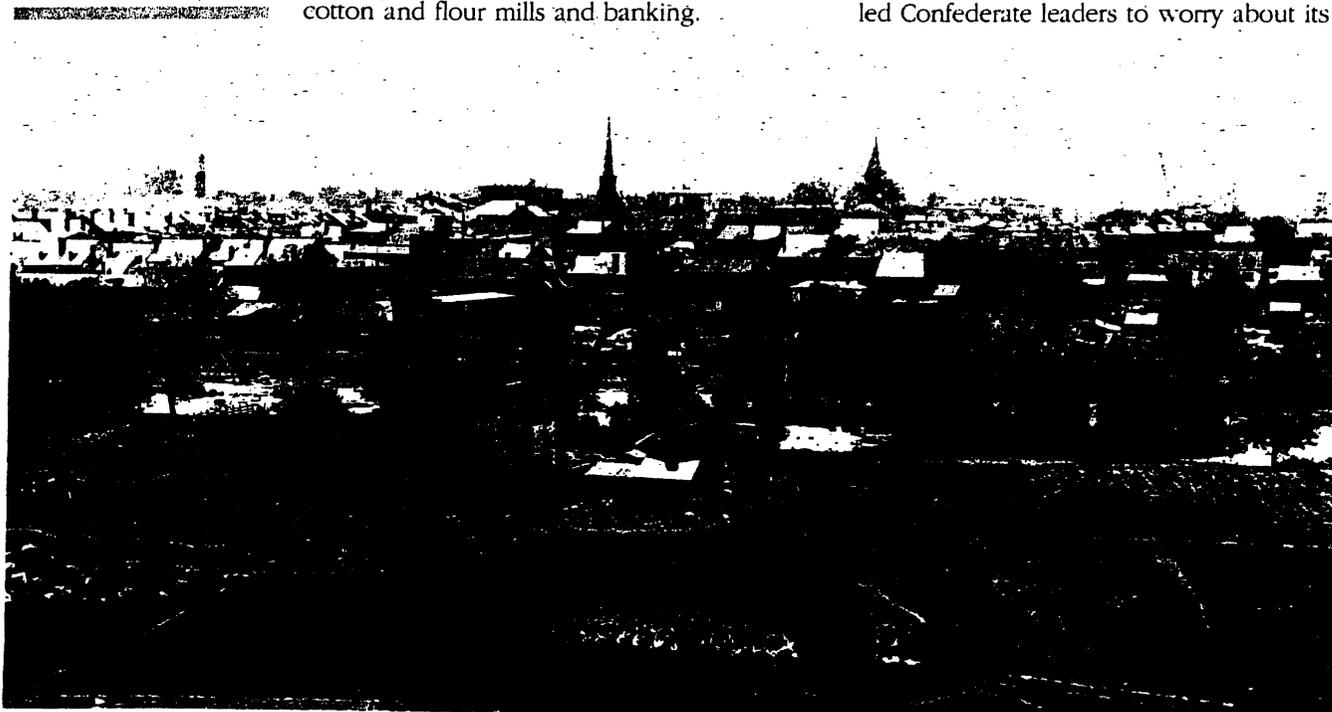
Formally organized by the Virginia General Assembly in 1784, Petersburg was not long in acquiring many of the visible signs of civilization. Paved streets began to appear in 1813, soon followed by a canal bypassing the Appomattox falls; railroad lines linking it to all points of the compass came next, gaslights were introduced in 1851, and a new municipal water system was installed by 1857. All these civic improvements helped attract and hold a substantial business community, based on tobacco manufacture, but also including cotton and flour mills and banking.

Its 1860 population was 18,266, half of which were black, and nearly a third of them were free. Ninety percent of the white half were native Virginians, whose devotion to the cause in 1812 inspired the nickname "Cockade City" in honor of the rosette they wore on their caps. When Civil War came in 1861, Petersburg's men again responded, and they provided the South several infantry companies and artillery units, as well as three troops of cavalry.

All these young men left to fight elsewhere, and for a short while the war was something known only through newspapers. But it all came home when a Union naval blockade established in Hampton Roads, at the mouth of the James, closed down the port of Petersburg. There was some compensatory prosperity as the town's industries expanded to meet the new demands for military matériel. This led Confederate leaders to worry about its

MAY 1865 VIEW OF  
PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA.

(LC)





CAPTAIN CHARLES H. DIMMOCK WAS THE DESIGNER OF THE TRENCH SYSTEM LAID OUT TO PROTECT PETERSBURG.

(NPS)

security. In 1862 Captain Charles H. Dimmock arrived from Richmond to remedy that situation. Employing a large slave labor force, he built a ring of earthworks stretching fully ten miles around the city, a line of fortifications and 55 battery positions that lacked only the troops to man them.

On May 4, 1864, Union forces across the country began a coordinated military advance aimed at the pressure points of the Confederacy, with the primary actions taking place in northern Georgia and northern Virginia. Of immediate significance for Petersburg was one of the secondary operations. That evening, a Federal army of 35,000 under the command of Major General Benjamin F. Butler began landing about eight miles away on the eastern shore of Bermuda Hundred—a thirty-square-mile peninsula formed by the confluence of the James and Appomattox Rivers. On May 5 a unit of black troops

occupied City Point, a small village at the mouth of the Appomattox River. A Confederate hero of Fort Sumter and First Manassas, General P.G.T. Beauregard, was given the job of rallying the region's scattered defenders.

The designated object of Butler's operation was Richmond, but he first tried a little obfuscation. On May 9, a force of about 18,000 that he sent toward Petersburg was met and stopped at Swift Creek by a hastily assembled command not one-third its size. Although usually enjoying numerical superiority, Butler's operations were fatally hampered by his own lack of field experience and squabbling with his two corps commanders over strategy and tactics. What became known as the Bermuda Hundred Campaign unfolded in a series of limited tactical victories for the Federals, which often left the strategic advantage with the Confederates. In fighting at Port Walthall Junction (May 6–7), Chester Station (May 9–10), and Drewry's Bluff (May 16), Butler failed decisively to defeat the forces thrown against him and ran out of momentum. The result was that by May 22, his army had pulled back into Bermuda Hundred, where it began to dig a defensive line across the peninsula's relatively narrow neck. Butler may have been bottled up, but he was far from beaten.

Many of Beauregard's troops had passed through Petersburg on their journey north, but few had been retained to protect it. Recognizing this, Butler sent a mixed cavalry-infantry expedition of 6,500 men to capture the Cockade City on June 9. The horsemen (numbering 1,500) were sent on a wide swing to enter the city from the south, while two columns of foot soldiers marched in from the northeast and east.

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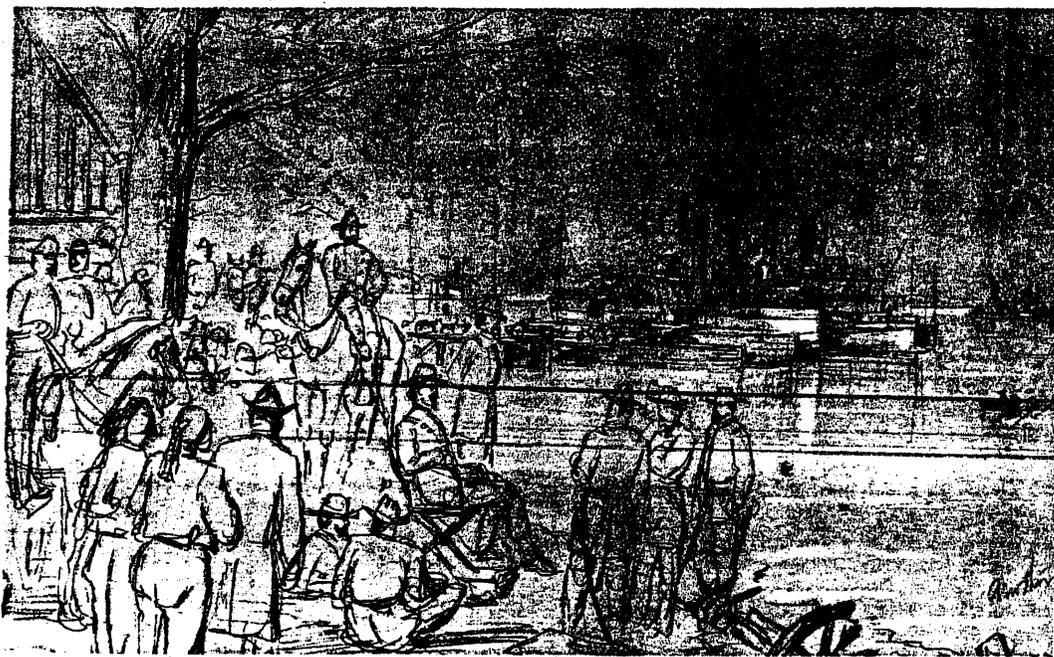
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June 9 became a memorable day in Petersburg history. The tocsin began to sound in the morning, summoning the town's militia—mostly men either too old or too young for regular service. "This is no time for any one to stand back," declared one. "The enemy are now right upon us."

June 9 became a memorable day in Petersburg history. The tocsin began to sound in the morning, summoning the town's militia—mostly men either too old or too young for regular service. "This is no time for any one to stand back," declared one. "The enemy are now right upon us." While the few veteran troops manned the northeastern ramparts, the militia took up a line across the Jerusalem Plank Road facing south. The Yankee infantry probed the Dimmock Line and

demanded "an extraordinary sacrifice of life and blood."

North of the James, the period from May to early June had witnessed a hard-fought campaign, costing the Federal forces under Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant and Major General George G. Meade 54,000 casualties, while the loss to General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was almost 32,000. Blocked east of Richmond after a bloody repulse at Cold Harbor, and unable to bring Lee to bay,



decided not to attack. On the southern front, however, the poorly armed civilians were scattered by the experienced Union troopers, who then pushed a small force toward the center of town. It took a desperate stand near the city reservoir by Graham's Virginia Battery, hastily summoned from across the river, aided by some of the veteran infantry, to turn back the Federals.

Fifteen of the civilians who had rushed to arms were killed, eighteen were wounded, and another forty-five captured. Petersburg had been saved, but, in the words of one survivor, its defense had

WAUD ILLUSTRATION OF HANCOCK'S CORPS CROSSING THE JAMES RIVER.

(LC)

Grant decided on a fresh line of advance. On June 5 he began to make plans with Petersburg the new objective, fully recognizing its strategic importance as a transportation hub for Richmond-bound supplies. He deftly disengaged his army from its Cold Harbor trenches on the night of June 12 and, after a series of hard marches, he began to cross the James River on June 14. Most of the infantrymen were ferried over on transports; but one



PONTOON BRIDGE OVER  
THE JAMES RIVER TO  
WINDMILL POINT.

(NA)

corps and one division, along with all the wagons, artillery, and animals, crossed on an engineering marvel—a 2,100-foot pontoon bridge built from Wyanoke Neck to the base of Windmill Point.

Grant's intention was to attack Petersburg using the Eighteenth Corps from the Army of the James and the Second Corps from the Army of the Potomac, but he failed to coordinate the units involved effectively. Smith's men were marching down from Bermuda Hundred via a pontoon bridge at Point of Rocks, five miles from Petersburg. Hancock's troops had crossed the James at Windmill Point and were nearly fifteen miles distant. It was many hours after the Eighteenth Corps had actually engaged Petersburg's defenders before the Second Corps commander was even told of his part in the operation. As a result, the Eighteenth Corps attacked alone.

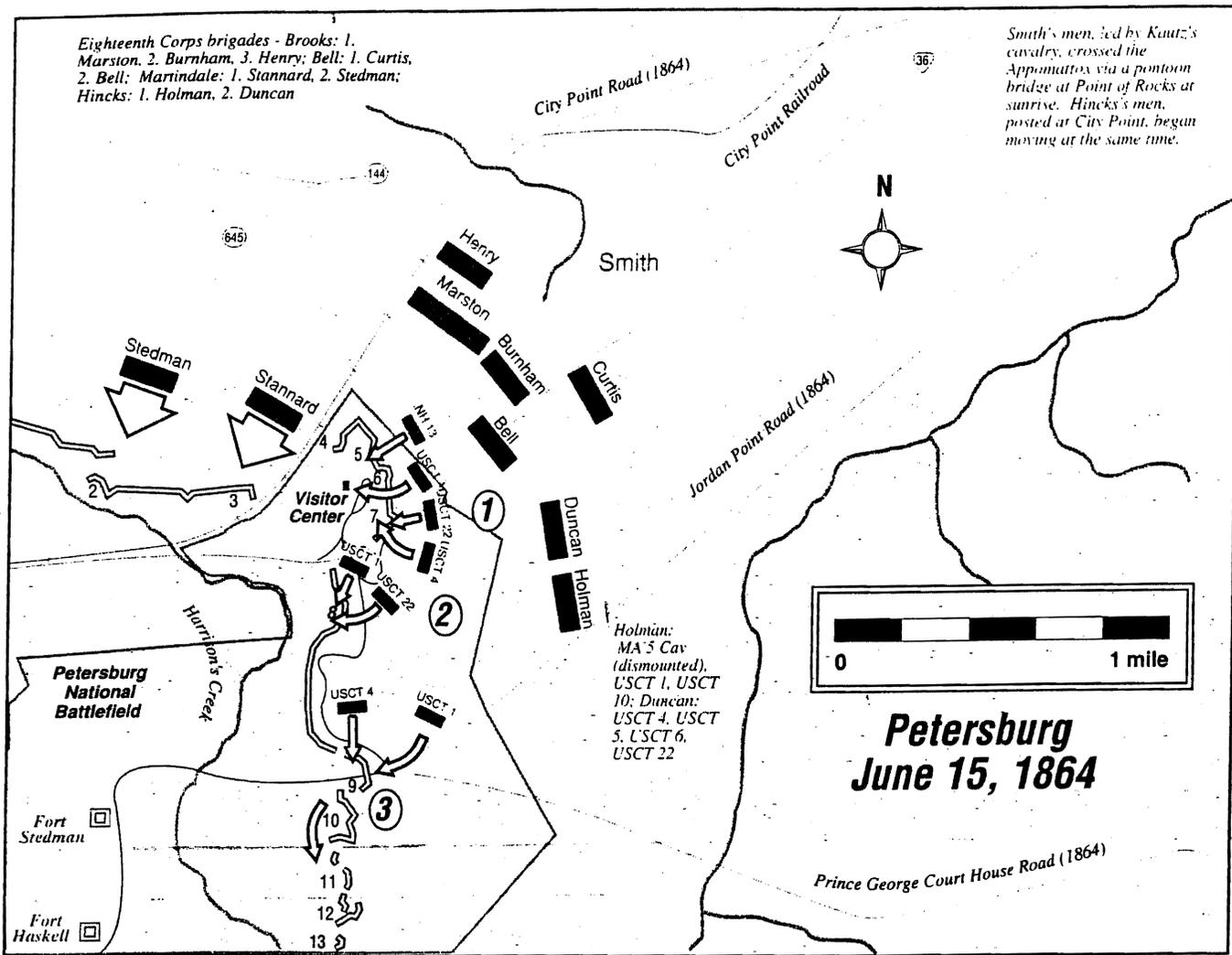
The officer commanding the Union force (which also included cavalry) was Major General William F. "Baldy" Smith, who was something of a martinet. Smith and some of his men had been temporarily transferred to the Army of the Potomac in early June and saw service at Cold Harbor. There, on June 3, he had seen firsthand

the folly of attacking well-manned earthworks. Because of that experience, his march to Petersburg from Bermuda Hundred and City Point was very slow and very cautious. Ironically, his combined force of approximately 15,500 men faced only 2,200 Confederates defending Petersburg, but they were posted behind the forbidding Dimmock fortifications. This disparity of forces was a critical problem for Beauregard. So well had Grant masked the real objective of his march to the James that Robert E. Lee held off reinforcing Petersburg, fearing for Richmond's safety. Determined to defend the Cockade City, Beauregard made a courageous deci-

EDWIN FORBES ILLUSTRATION OF THE  
EIGHTEENTH CORPS  
STORMING DIMMOCK  
LINE ON JUNE 15.

(LC)





**ENEMY AT THE GATES**

*After a cautious approach that occupied most of the morning, and a series of careful reconnaissances that lasted throughout the afternoon, Union Eighteenth Corps commander Maj. Gen. William F. "Baldy" Smith assaults the formidable Dimmock Line at 7 P.M. His widely dispersed attack formations overrun the thinly manned Confederate lines and enjoy great success until darkness and Smith's hesitation bring the operation to a close.*

sion to abandon his Bermuda Hundred lines and hurried these troops south even as Smith's men approached.

Smith's advance was stalled for several hours by stubborn Rebel opposition at an outlying post on Baylor's Farm. Once that was cleared, he spent more time scouting the enemy lines and refining his plans. When he informed his officers that he intended to attack at 4:00 P.M., he learned that his artillery chief, assuming there would be no further action this late in the day, had sent all of his horses to the rear to be watered. It wasn't until 7:00 P.M., thirteen hours after he first made contact at Baylor's Farm, that Smith's assault began. He had correctly divined Beauregard's critical lack of manpower, so, instead of

attacking en masse, he chose a more dispersed skirmishing formation that provided few targets to the Rebel gunners.

White troops from Colonel Louis Bell's brigade overran Battery 5 on the Dimmock Line, while others surrounded neighboring Battery 6. "Here we had to fight hard," wrote a New York soldier. Some of the troops in Brigadier General Edward W. Hincks's all-black division assisted in capturing Battery 6, while others from that unit rolled the line up to the south, taking possession of Batteries 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11. Said one of the white officers in that brigade, "I am now prepared to say that I never . . . saw troops fight better, more bravely, and with more determination." On the other flank of this line,

Rebel Batteries 3 and 4 also changed hands. In this brilliant assault, "Baldy" Smith's men had captured more than a mile of the Dimmock Line. As Beauregard later admitted, "Petersburg at that hour was clearly at the mercy of the Federal commander."



CONFEDERATE WORKS OF DIMMOCK LINE  
CAPTURED ON JUNE 15, 1864.

(LC)

But Smith was feeling anything but sanguine. "I . . . knew that [Confederate] reinforcements had been rushing in to Petersburg," he reported. "I knew nothing of the country in front. My white troops were exhausted. . . . My colored troops . . . could barely be kept in order." Smith decided to risk no more and ordered his men to hold their ground. For the soldiers who had seen the Rebels flee and who now stood within sight of Petersburg, it was an unbelievable decision. "I swore all night," one of them recalled. "I kicked and condemned every general there was in the army for the blunder I saw they were making."

Even the arrival at 9:00 P.M. of the lead elements of the Second Corps did not convince Smith to change his mind. No

night attack was considered; instead the newly arriving units were sent to replace the black troops, and to prepare for an assault early the next day, June 16.

P.G.T. Beauregard was at his best when the outlook was hopeless. Using the

troops that were arriving from Bermuda Hundred, he patched together a makeshift defensive position, anchored on still unoccupied sections of the original Dimmock fortifications, which were now connected by a line his men had feverishly scraped

out behind Harrison's Creek. Beauregard was aided in his efforts by the continuing ineptitude of the Union high command.

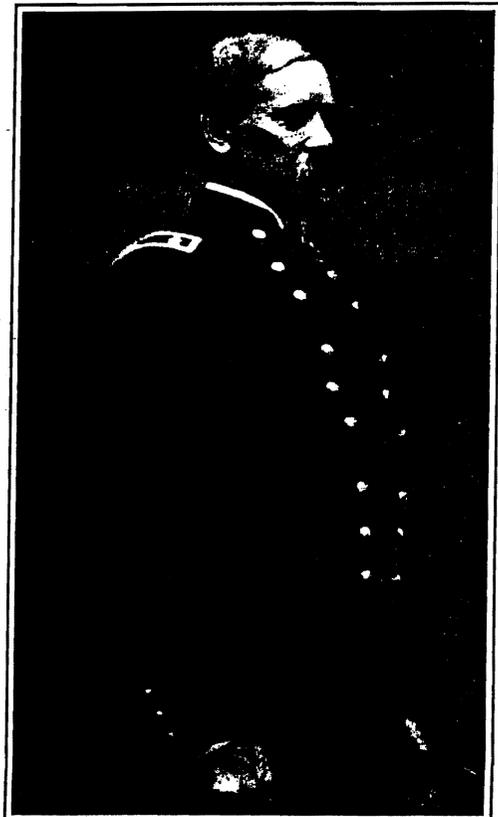
Smith relinquished responsibility to Major General Winfield S.

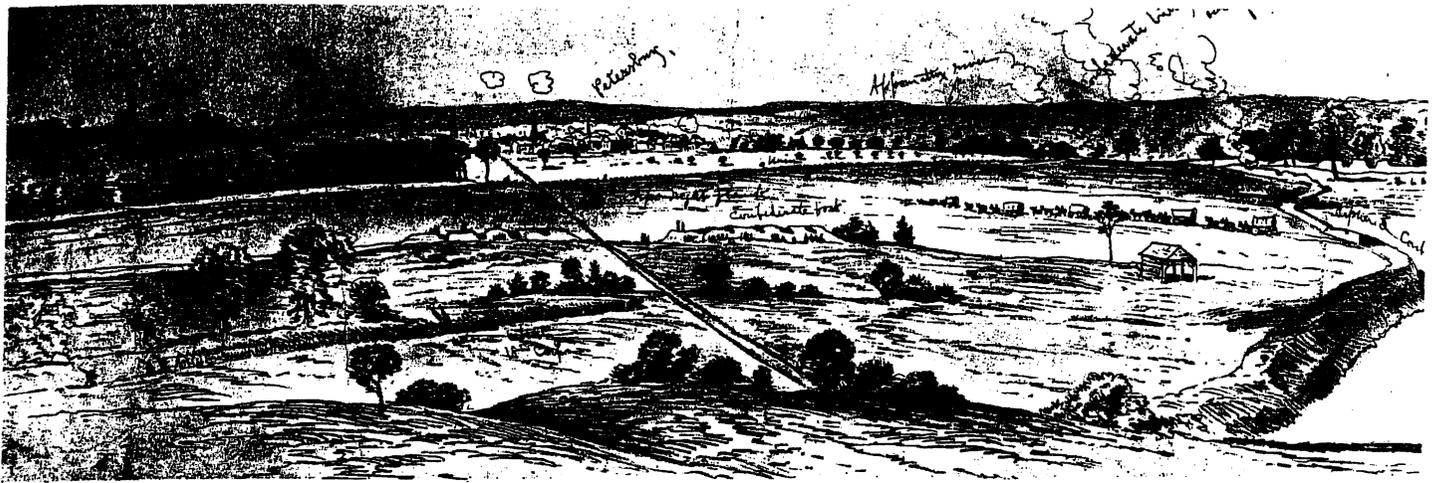
Hancock of the Second Corps, who was suffering from an unhealed wound he had received at Gettysburg. Hancock and Smith failed to combine their forces, and the Federals, on June 16, launched a succession of piecemeal attacks, all of which were repulsed.

On the morning of June 17, Beauregard had in his trenches virtually all of the troops immediately available

MAJOR GENERAL  
WILLIAM F. SMITH

(NA)





VIEW OF THE LINES  
AT PETERSBURG ON  
JUNE 18. ILLUSTRATION  
BY EDWIN FORBES.

(LC)

to him. His lines were struck at dawn in a series of well-planned attacks by the Federals, who had been steadily reinforced by more units from the Army of the Potomac. Two brigades from the Ninth Corps took advantage of a deep ravine and a gap in the Confederate lines to capture a section of Beauregard's position near the Shand house. Follow-up actions later in the day were less successful, but by nightfall it was clear that portions of the Petersburg line had been compromised by the Federal advances. June 18 promised to be a day of decision, with the overwhelming weight of the Union legions certain to swamp Beauregard's thinly spread units.

Beauregard once again rose to the moment. In the early morning hours of June 18, he ordered a secret withdrawal to a new defensive line much closer to town. When the confident Yankees sprang to the attack at dawn, they found empty trenches. There was confusion and hesitation while reports traveled up the chain of command and scouts pushed out to locate the new Rebel positions. Through this unexpected maneuver, Beauregard managed to throw the Federal military machine out of sync. Once more, brigades and regiments lunged forward in a haphazard fashion, allowing the outnumbered defenders to concentrate to meet each in turn successfully. Attempts to coordinate a united assault made by

General Meade (who had been placed in overall command in the field on June 16) fell apart, and hundreds of Union soldiers paid the price.

In one action this day, nearly 900 men in the First Maine Heavy Artillery charged across an open field near the Hare house, right into the sights of Beauregard's waiting veterans. When the dazed survivors reeled back after ten minutes in the open killing ground, 632 of their comrades lay bleeding or dead on that field. "They were laid out in squads and companies," recollected one horrified onlooker. As the

GENERAL P.G.T. BEAUREGARD

(LC)



last column of Federals withdrew at the end of this day, the leading elements of the Army of Northern Virginia entered the town. Lee, who reached Petersburg at 11:00 A.M., now recognized that the focus of combat had shifted here.

Marching at the head of Lee's column was the Twelfth Virginia, which included the Petersburg Rifles. Private George Bernard savored the hometown welcome. "The great number of ladies that greeted us along the streets made us feel more as though we were going to participate in some festivity," he remembered.

Four days of desperate fighting had cost the Federal armies more than 10,000 casualties and the Confederates about 4,000. Grant had not taken Petersburg and now faced a military siege. Lee had been forced into a relatively static position where he had no choice but to stand and defend Petersburg and Richmond.

Ironically, Beauregard's victory lost Lee any hope of regaining the tactical initiative.

Another result was that the Federals now had the second of five railroads supplying Petersburg. Before the battle lines could harden into formidable earthworks, Grant moved to capture one more. On June 21, the Second Corps, under the still ailing Hancock (who would soon be temporarily replaced by Major General David Birney),



THE RAILROAD AT CITY POINT.

(LC)

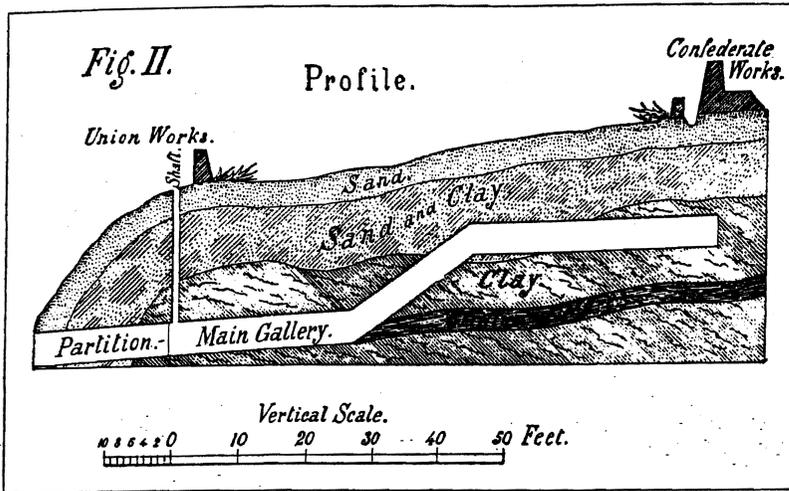
supported by the Sixth, moved south along the Federal line and spread along the Jerusalem Plank Road. Scouting parties actually pushed west as far as the tracks of the Weldon Railroad, and orders were issued for a full-scale advance the next day.

This supply link was too important to surrender without a fight, so when three divisions from the Second Corps moved out from the Jerusalem Plank Road on June 22, two Confederate divisions were sent out from the Petersburg entrenchments to intercept them. These Yankee units were once considered the elite of the Army of the Potomac, but the fighting of May and June had fallen especially heavily on this corps, which had lost so many regimental officers and sergeants that its

A. R. WAUD SKETCH OF THE FIRST CONNECTICUT HEAVY ARTILLERY TAKING PART IN THE MID-JUNE 1864 ATTACK ON CONFEDERATE LINES.

(LC)





AN ILLUSTRATION OF  
THE MINE.  
(BL)

from what was on hand. Perhaps the most vexing problem solved by Pleasants was the matter of ventilation. Fresh air was needed at the tunnel face so Pleasants created a circulating system by heating and expelling the bad air up a chimney shaft dug for that purpose and using an eight-inch-square wooden duct to bring good air in along the floor. The passageway the miners created had an average height of five feet, with a four-and-a-half-foot-wide floor that tapered to two feet at the top.

By July 17 the tunnel had reached a point directly beneath the salient—a distance of 511 feet. Work was briefly halted while examination was made to determine if there was any danger posed by Confederate countermines.

Digging soon resumed, and a pair of lateral galleries were run parallel to the enemy line. On July 27, the Pennsylvanians began to pack the galleries with four tons of gunpowder.

Events elsewhere now influ-

enced this operation. In mid-June Lee had sent one of his army corps to the Shenandoah Valley hoping it could distract and otherwise disrupt Federal plans. In a move partially designed to prevent Lee from reinforcing this army, Grant, on July 26, ordered the Second Corps of infantry and cavalry to the north side of the James, crossing it near Deep Bottom. Lee responded by shifting significant numbers of troops from Petersburg to that sector. The Federal commanders on the north side (Hancock and Major General Philip H. Sheridan) failed to break through, so by July 29 Grant looked for an effort on Burnside's front.

While Pleasants's men had been digging, Burnside had been planning. He had selected his yet untested all-black division to lead the assault, and these men spent the hot weeks of July undergoing special training. Burnside's design was for the troops to advance in three waves; the first and second were to secure the trenches on either side of the exploded mine, while the third would charge directly through the

PLEASANTS SUPERVISING THE ARRIVAL OF POWDER. SKETCH BY A. R. WAUD.

(LC)



gap to capture the high ground beyond. Then, in a July 28 meeting with Meade, Burnside learned that the date for exploding his mine had been set for July 30 and that he could not use his black troops as intended. Meade did not believe that the untried units were up to the task, and he worried about the political fallout should these regiments take heavy losses. Deeply unsettled by Meade's decision, Burnside called in the commanders of his three white divisions and had them draw lots. The short straw went to his least capable division commander, Brigadier General James H. Ledlie.

all nature." Where the redoubt had been was now a steaming hole about 170 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet deep.

The white troops, who had not been prepared to lead the assault, were stunned and slow to recover. By the time the first waves were entering the smoking crater, the equally shaken Confederate defenders were beginning to react. Lacking a coherent plan, Ledlie's division failed to secure its flanks and was unable to mount a drive to the crest. A second white division went in on the heels of the first but was also unable to generate enough momentum to break through. Rebel fire from

At 4:44 A.M. the four tons of gunpowder went off in a cataclysmic eruption. "The earth seemed to tremble," said an Alabama officer, "and the next instant there was a report that seemed to deafen all nature."



WAUD'S DRAWING OF THE EXPLOSION OF THE MINE UNDER THE CONFEDERATE WORKS, JULY 30, 1864.

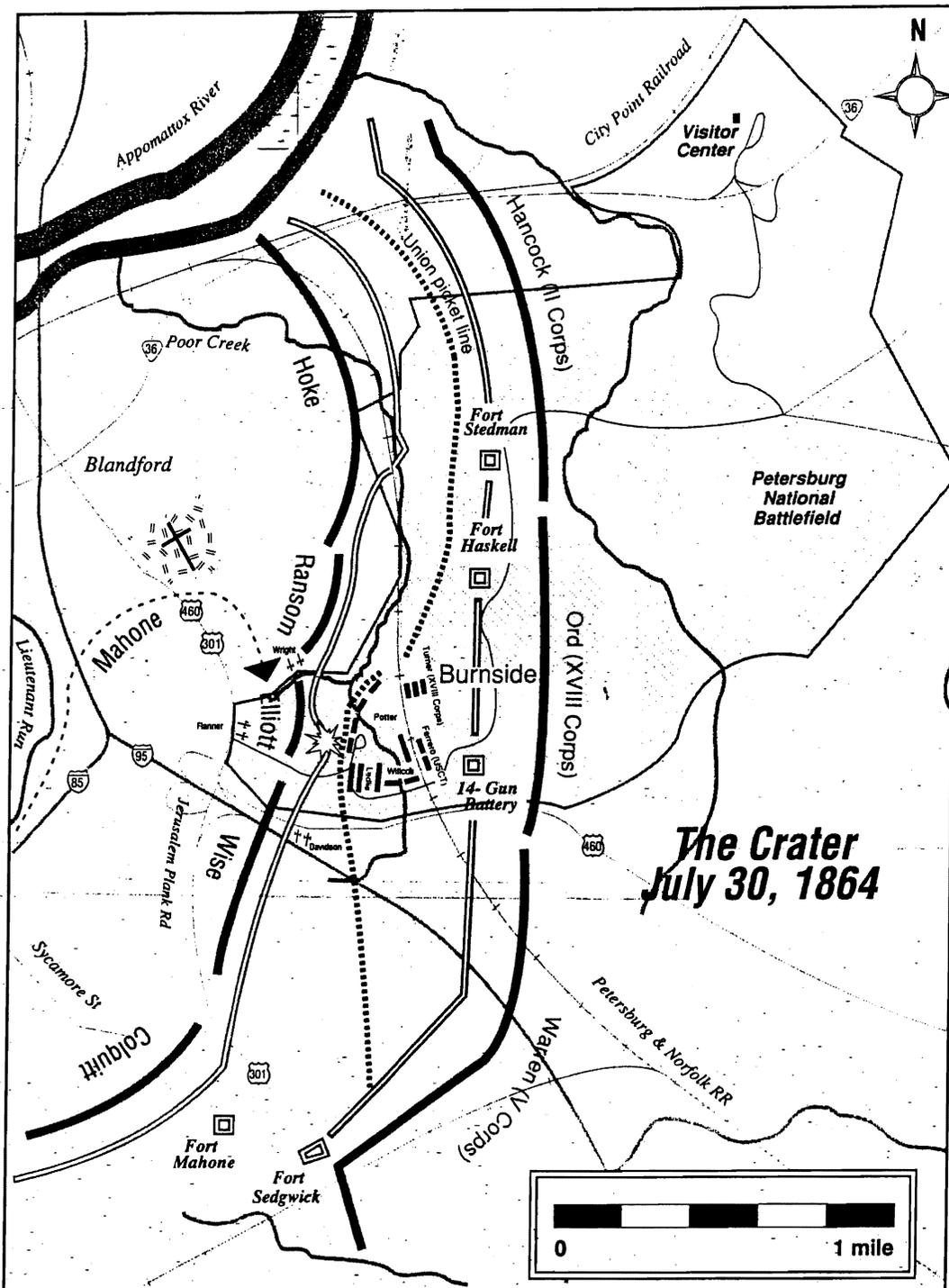
(LC)

At 3:00 A.M., July 30, Lieutenant Colonel Pleasants entered the mine and lit the fuse, which he estimated would burn thirty minutes. Everyone waited in acute anticipation as the time passed with no explosion. Finally, about 4:15 A.M., he sent two men into the tunnel to investigate. They discovered that the fuse had failed at a splice; they relit it and hurried back out to daylight. At 4:44 A.M. the four tons of gunpowder went off in a cataclysmic eruption. "The earth seemed to tremble," said an Alabama officer, "and the next instant there was a report that seemed to deafen

the flanks grew in intensity, even as the first of several counterattacks struck the head of the Federal column. By the time the black troops were committed it was too late. The white units had lost all cohesion; the Confederates had sealed the penetration and were actively reducing the pocket. The Crater became the scene of bitter hand-to-hand fighting, and many of the black troops met a horrible fate. "But little quarter was shown them." Private Bernard recalled. "My heart sickened at deeds I saw done."

### THE MINE

In one of the most remarkable military engineering feats of the Civil War, Union troops (mostly Pennsylvania coal miners) dig a 500-foot tunnel and explode four tons of gunpowder under the Confederate line. The ensuing assault by Union Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside's Ninth Corps is a bloody fiasco. Black troops trained for the operation are replaced at the last minute by untested white troops who do not know the plan. Their failure to break the line and secure the high ground beyond, coupled with fierce Confederate counterattacks, spells the doom of this ambitious attempt to capture Petersburg.



Orders to withdraw were issued by midday, but for many it was too late. Nearly 4,000 Federals were lost in the operation, while the Confederates paid with 1,600 of their own to regain the position. In the recriminations that followed, Burnside and Ledlie (who was likely drunk throughout the action) were relieved of their commands, and three other officers

were censured. Of this operation U. S. Grant later reflected, "It was the saddest affair I have witnessed in the war."

Many of the wounded brought off the field came to one of the field hospitals that had been established at City Point. A once thriving river port that was well in decline when it was occupied by Federal troops in early May, City Point had become

the logistical hub for all operations against Petersburg and Richmond. A Federal officer who viewed the busy scene described it: "Steamboats and sailing vessels, transports and lighters of all kinds, encumbered the river near the improvised wharves on which they were still working. . . . The river bank, rising up high, had been cleared and levelled, so as to make room for storehouses for supplies, and for a station for the railroad. All this had sprung out of the earth as if by magic, in less than a month." City Point itself soon became crowded with barracks, stables, repair shops, a huge bakery, numerous sutler's stores, and even a prison for Union troops known as the Bull Pen.

This activity made City Point a tempting target. A sortie by warships of the C.S. James River fleet was attempted on January 23, 1865, but the Rebel boats were unable to pass sunken obstructions and never made it within cannon shot of the place. A far more successful blow was delivered on August 9, 1864, when a Confederate operative named John Maxwell planted a time bomb (which he called a "horological torpedo") aboard a munitions barge docked near the shore. The resulting explosion destroyed several large buildings, 180 feet of wharf, two million dollars of munitions and supplies, and killed more than forty workers. The blast rained potentially lethal debris all across City Point, including U. S. Grant's headquarters. Grant was uninjured, but one staff officer was struck and an orderly killed.

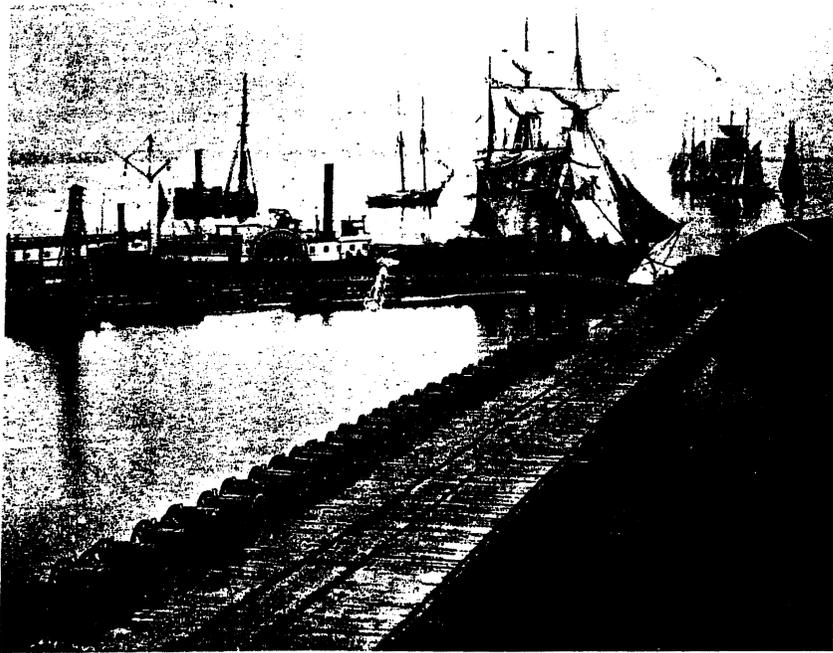


Grant had just returned to City Point from a trip north, where he had organized the Union forces confronting the corps Lee had sent into the Shenandoah Valley in June. General Sheridan, a Grant favorite, had been placed in command there and was getting organized. To buy him some time, and to prevent Lee from sending more men against Sheridan, Grant ordered another expedition to Deep Bottom on August 14. Four days of fighting proved no more conclusive than the First Deep Bottom operation. But Lee had once again reacted by transferring troops from Petersburg to Richmond, so Grant believed that an opportunity now existed to wreck

UNION ADVANCE INTO THE CRATER AFTER THE EXPLOSION OF THE MINE, JULY 30, 1864. DRAWING BY A. R. WAUD. (LC)



CONFEDERATE TROOPS OCCUPY THE CRATER OF THE MINE AFTER THE JULY 30 ATTACK. (LC)



COAL AND ORDNANCE  
WHARVES AT  
CITY POINT.  
(LC)

the Weldon Railroad. Early on the morning of August 18, he sent the Fifth Corps, commanded by Major General Gouverneur K. Warren, out to do the job.

"The men give out fearfully in the sun," Warren reported, but his four divisions—nearly 20,000 men—reached the railroad near the Globe Tavern around 11:00 A.M. The Federal general detailed two divisions to move a short distance toward Petersburg along the Halifax Road for security, while other troops began to tear up the tracks.

With Lee gone to the north side, responsibility for defending Petersburg lay with General Beauregard. Confederate scouts delivered the faulty intelligence that only a small enemy force was involved, so Beauregard told Lieutenant General A. P. Hill to send two infantry brigades to evict the interlopers.

The two brigades, moving south along the Halifax Road, struck Warren's two security divisions at 3:00 P.M. A couple of Yankee brigades that had advanced ahead of the rest were caught off guard and routed, but the remaining units came up in good order, forcing the Rebels to pull back. Beauregard had scored a tactical success but had failed in his strategic objective to drive the enemy away. That he would make another attempt to do so was a foregone conclusion. In the prophetic words of a Massachusetts officer, "It is touching a tiger's cubs to get on that road!"

A distinct difference of attitude separated General Warren from General Grant. Warren thought only of defending his position. "I think . . . it will be safe to trust me to hold on to the railroad," he assured army headquarters on the morning of



WAUD'S ILLUSTRATION  
OF THE EXPLOSION  
AT CITY POINT  
ON AUGUST 9.  
(LC)

August 19. Twelve hours earlier, Grant gave expression to his aggressive intent when he informed Meade, "Tell Warren if the enemy comes out and attacks him in the morning, not to hesitate . . . but to follow him up to the last."

Brigadier General William Mahone, struck at Warren's right flank at about 5:00 P.M., it overran a portion of the Federal line in a sharp little fight. Private Bernard remembered it as "the warmest place [we] were ever in, being subjected to fire from the



THE GLOBE TAVERN ON THE WELDON RAILROAD, WITH THE MILITARY RAILROAD IN THE FOREGROUND.

(LC)

The fact was that on the morning of August 19 a gap of nearly a mile lay between Warren's men and the nearest friendly units of the Ninth Corps. Efforts were made throughout the morning to close the distance even as reinforcements marched toward Globe Tavern. Also, by this time Warren's mission objective had been changed. No longer was he to wreck the tracks and return; instead, he was to maintain his position so that the siege lines might be extended to him.

The Confederates under Beauregard were not idle this morning either. Another sortie was necessary, so a five-brigade attack force was organized. Two of the brigades would again move down the Halifax Road, while the remaining three would hit the right flank of Warren's line. It took all morning and most of the afternoon to get these troops into position, but when the flanking force, commanded by

front, right flank, & rear all at the same time." It was far worse for the Yankees. Two veteran Pennsylvania regiments were scooped up early in the fight, and when the two Southern brigades coming along the Halifax Road joined in, Warren's entire position seemed in jeopardy.

GENERAL WARREN'S MEN FORTIFY THE LINES ON THE WELDON RAILROAD.

(NA)





MAJOR GENERAL  
WILLIAM MAHONE

(NPS)

Once more, however, the Confederates attacked too late in the day with too little. And as the Rebel operation began to lose momentum, Union reinforcements appeared on the scene. Beauregard's men again retired into Petersburg after dark. They had whipped the enemy, but the Union flag still flew over Globe Tavern.

Both sides scrambled to secure the advantage on August 20. Warren now had two Ninth Corps divisions to augment his battered corps. He was a genius at defensive fighting and kept his men busy throughout the day improving their position and tightening his defensive perimeter. He was able to accomplish these tasks because no attack came from Petersburg. It took longer than Beauregard had imagined possible to put together a corps-sized battle group, and it was dark before everything was ready.

Beauregard's attack on August 21 was a reverse image of the August 19

action. Another force pushed down along the Halifax Road, while this time the second group wheeled around seeking Warren's left flank. Unlike August 19, however, the Federal general and his men were prepared for the Rebel battle lines. "Fire low!" Warren urged his troops. "Low! Low!" The Confederates attacked fiercely but were repulsed at every point. Robert E. Lee appeared on the field as the last attacking wave ebbed back, too late to affect the outcome.

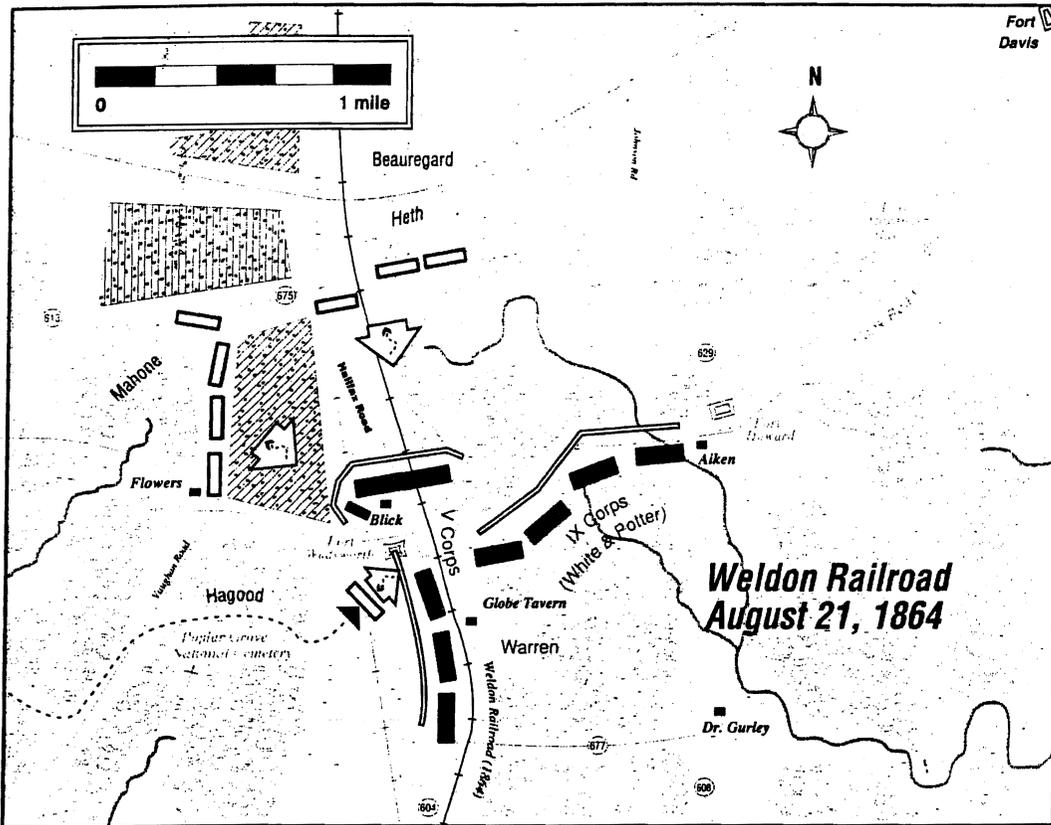
The Federal lodgment on the Weldon Railroad was quickly made part of the larger trench system. Union casualties were about 4,300 to 2,300 Confederates. Lee had lost one of his few remaining supply lines and now had only a single rail route and a roundabout road system to keep his men fed. It was a serious strategic setback. Petersburg was becoming far more difficult to defend, but its fate was linked to Richmond's, and the Confederate capital had to be held.

Now that he controlled the Weldon Railroad near Petersburg, Grant was determined, as he said, "to thoroughly destroy it as far south as possible." With both the Fifth and Ninth Corps busy fortifying



SOLDIERS DIGGING  
EARTHWORKS NEAR  
WARREN STATION ON  
THE U.S. MILITARY  
RAILROAD.

(NA)



**SUPPLY LINE FIGHT**  
 On August 18, Union Maj. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren and his Fifth Corps move out from entrenched lines east of Petersburg to strike at one of the two still operating rail systems bringing supplies into the city. Warren holds his position in the face of sharp counterattacks on August 18 and 19. Reinforced by elements of the Ninth Corps, he turns back the major Confederate effort to dislodge him on August 21. The Federal entrenched line is now extended to this point.

around Globe Tavern, Grant looked for troops to do the wrecking job. He settled on Hancock's Second Corps, just returned from the second Deep Bottom expedition. It was an opportunistic selection that would have tragic consequences. The Second Corps was seriously worn out by its recent fighting north of the James. Nevertheless, by midday, August 22, the first of Hancock's units were moving southward along the tracks, tearing them up as they went.

At first Robert E. Lee thought it was possible only to harass this force with his cavalry, but a report from the able Major General Wade Hampton suggested that the Federal raiders were isolated and vulnerable to attack. Lee pondered the risks and finally agreed. Late in the afternoon of August 24, eight infantry brigades moved out of town on a southwest course. Once clear of the Globe Tavern lines, these soldiers pressed east to link up with

Hampton's two cavalry divisions. The combined force was commanded by A. P. Hill.

On August 25 this battle group caught Hancock's two divisions curled up in a kidney-shaped earthwork near Reams Station, about five miles below Globe Tavern. The Unionists beat back the first Confederate assaults, but then a panic took hold of several of Hancock's regiments due

WAUD'S SKETCH OF THE FIFTH CORPS IN RIFLE PITS.

(LC)



to the Confederate's attack, and the position began to collapse. Private Bernard never forgot the sight as he approached the enemy earthworks of seeing "hundreds of Yankees, most of whom were coming in as prisoners, whilst the remainder were moving up the ditch & getting away." For a while everything was chaos, until finally the battered Federals regrouped long enough to retreat. The day ended in a complete Southern victory, with Union losses of about 2,600 to Hill's 720. Hancock, who felt that his men had received inadequate support from the rest of the army, was bitter. "We ought to have whipped them," he said. Confederate morale received a big boost. "I never saw men so much elated by any fight," declared a North Carolina man.



George D. Shadburne reported that the Federals had gathered a herd of 3,000 cattle at Coggins' Point, a few miles east of City Point. Just two days earlier, Robert E. Lee had suggested to Wade Hampton that the enemy's rear was "open to attack." Prodded by Lee's hint, and armed with Shadburne's report, Hampton now suggested a deep penetration cavalry raid to rustle the Yankee beef.

Lee approved and on the morning of September 14, the cavalryman led four brigades plus detachments from two more (about 4,000 men) out from Petersburg on a looping course that brought them in behind the Federal trenches. Hampton's move caught the Union security forces too dispersed to meet such a concentrated strike. So, when the Rebels burst out of the morning gloom on September 16, they were able to corral the cattle and hustle them back the way they had come. The return trip wasn't without some excitement as elements of the poorly organized Federal pursuit did make contact, but on September 17 Hampton proudly reported his achievement to Lee. A total of 2,486 cattle and 300 prisoners had been taken at a cost of 10 men killed, 47 wounded, and 4 missing. The animals soon disappeared into the maw of the Confederate commissary, and for the next few weeks Federal pickets had to endure a new taunt: "Hello! Yanks! Want any fresh beef?"

None of these setbacks long deterred Grant from pursuing his larger strategic goals. In the Deep South, Sherman occupied Atlanta on September 2, while in the Shenandoah Valley, Sheridan won victories at Opequon Creek (September 19) and Fisher's Hill (September 22). Determined to keep pressing Lee, Grant planned a new Federal movement at Petersburg to cut the

The dull but deadly rhythm of trench warfare picked up again as both sides adjusted to the Federal gains. Beyond the flanks of these entrenchments, scouting parties prowled and clashed in a small but sometimes brutal series of mostly unrecorded engagements. One by-product of this activity was military intelligence regarding the enemy's dispositions. On September 5, a Confederate scout named

WINSLOW HOMER  
PAINTING TITLED  
*DEFIANCE: INVITING A  
SHOT BEFORE  
PETERSBURG, VA,  
1864. A CONFEDERATE  
SOLDIER DARES  
THE FEDERAL  
SHARPSHOOTERS.*

(COURTESY OF THE DETROIT  
INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS)



HAMPTON'S CATTLE  
RAID, SEPTEMBER 16,  
1864. DRAWING BY  
A. R. WAUD.

(LC)

Boydton Plank Road and the South Side Railroad. General Butler argued for a cooperative strike north of the James against Richmond's defenses along New Market Heights and near Chaffin's Bluff. Grant approved this amplification of his Petersburg operation and, on September 29, Butler's soldiers began crossing near Deep Bottom and at Aiken's Landing.

Moving along a more westerly axis than that taken by the two Deep Bottom expeditions, Butler's men stormed and captured the Confederate bastion of Fort Harrison. Unfortunately, some key officers fell in that assault, and Butler's men were not able to exploit their partial breakthrough. A Confederate counterattack, personally organized by Robert E. Lee the following day, failed to dislodge the invaders, who had now established a direct threat to the C.S. capital.

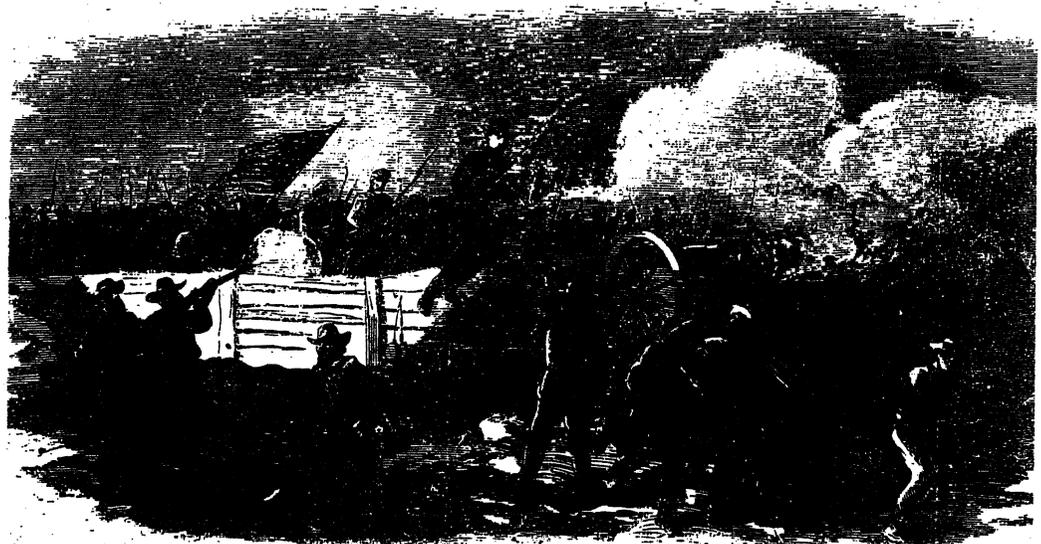
On the very day that Lee attempted to retake Fort Harrison, a Federal force consisting of the Fifth Corps and two divisions from the Ninth (all under General Warren) was moving south of Petersburg. Its

goal was to push west from around Globe Tavern to reach the Boydton Plank Road. Just one serviceable trail led in that direction, and the long Federal column was slow in its passage. When the leading elements emerged into the open near Poplar Spring Church, only a small detachment of Rebel cavalry faced them in slight earthworks thrown up at Peebles farm. It took cautious General Warren some time to set up his attack which, when it went forward at about 1:00 P.M., swept everything before it. Warren then halted to regroup his units and consolidate his newly won position.

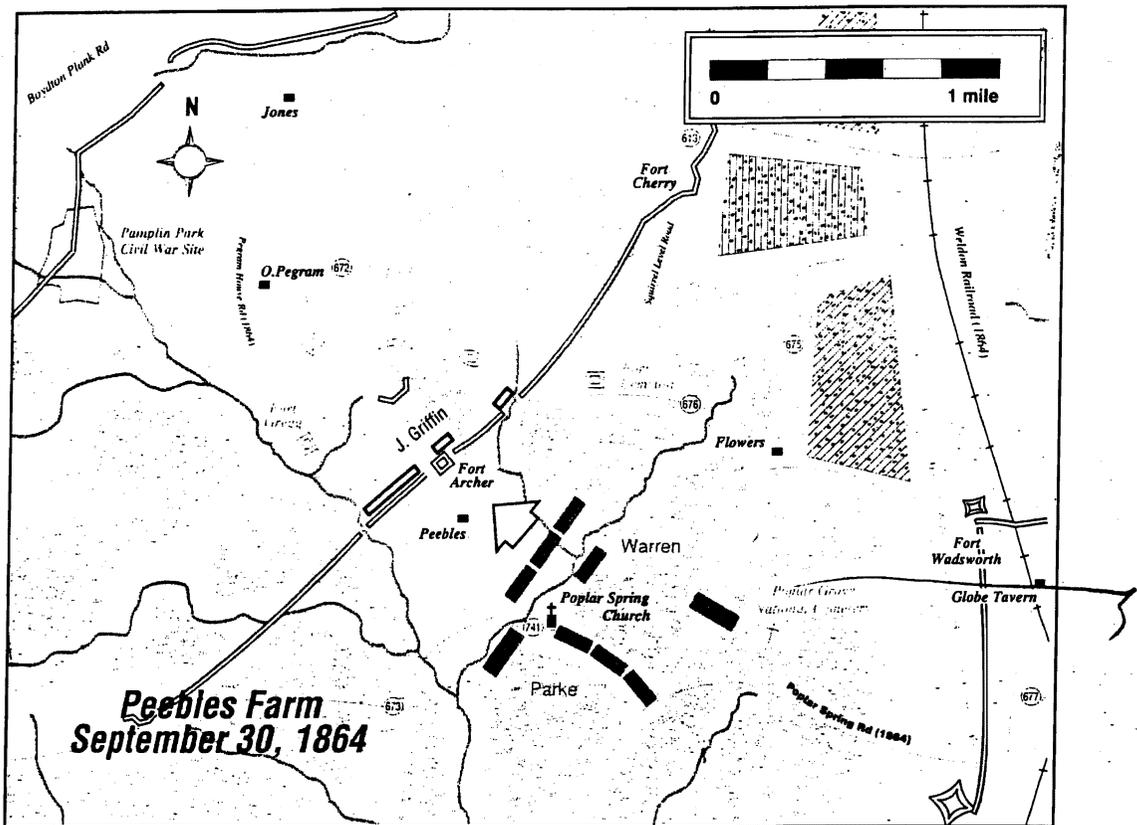
These delays allowed A.P. Hill, commanding in Petersburg while Lee was on the north side (Beauregard had left for Charleston on September 20 and would

SKETCH BY C. H.  
CHAPIN OF COLONEL  
WELCH LEAPING INTO  
THE REBEL WORKS,  
SEPTEMBER 30, 1864.

(LC)



*PUSHING THE EDGES*  
 While the Army of the James strikes General Robert E. Lee's defenses near Richmond, V and IX Corps troops under Gen. Warren (operating from the extreme Union left flank along the Weldon Railroad) move toward the Boydton Plank Road. After overcoming a thin defensive screen near Peebles Farm (action shown here), Warren's men are stopped before reaching the road by C.S. reserves coming out of Petersburg. The end result is another extension of the Union entrenchments to that point, increasing the stranglehold on the Cockade City.



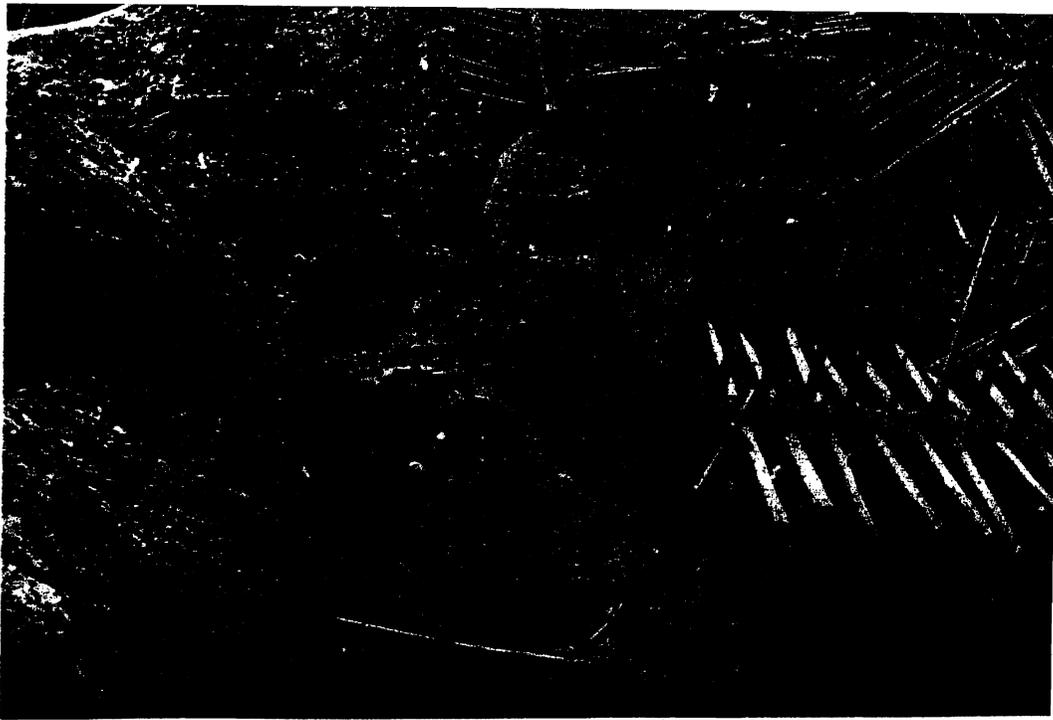
not return), to dispatch a division-sized counterforce that marched down the Boydton Plank Road and took up a blocking position along some trenches that had been dug parallel to it. By the time Warren finally ordered a continuation of his advance toward the plank road, there were veteran Southern infantry in position. The fighting that followed swirled across the fields of nearby Jones's farm in a tumble of disconnected actions that finally stopped the Federals short of their goals.

Both sides paused. In a pattern familiar from the fight along the Weldon Railroad, Warren labored to erect strong defensive works, while the Confederates planned an attack. The battle that took place on October 1 was as brutal and as fiercely contested as any in the Petersburg campaign, with mixed results. The Union forces (which suffered nearly 3,000 casualties) had cut neither the Boydton Plank Road nor the South Side Railroad but had

secured another sector in the growing encirclement of Petersburg, stretching Lee's lines a distance of 30 miles. The Confederates (whose losses in these actions were about 1,300) had prevented a major Yankee breakthrough, but they had relinquished some important secondary road junctions around Peebles farm. Probing attacks in the week that followed merely affirmed the new situation.

Among the most remarkable aspects of the growing Union siege lines were the quantity and diversity of the forts constructed along them. By the spring of 1865 Federal engineers had built thirty-one at Petersburg, with ten more at City Point. Most were named for officers killed in action. Radiating out from the forts, in a seemingly aimless pattern, were the breastworks. Protecting both was an inventory of exotically named military implements, including chevaux-de-frise, gabions, and abatis. (There were actually two Union

Among the most remarkable aspects of the growing Union siege lines were the quantity and diversity of the forts constructed along them.



A DEAD CONFEDERATE  
SOLDIER LIES IN A  
TRENCH SURROUNDED  
BY CHEVAUX-DE-FRISE.

(LC)

siege lines: the "front" line faced Petersburg; the other, the "reverse" line, was a short distance behind the first and pointed in the opposite direction. Its function was to protect the rear of the front line.)

There was no standard fort blueprint; indeed, it seemed that the construction teams were determined that no two would look alike. The largest (finished in March 1865) was Fort Fisher, which covered an area of five acres; certainly one of the most interesting was Fort Stevenson, which was built on the reverse line in a distinctive "inverse W" shape. Some forts became better known than others. Fort Sedgwick, located where the front siege line met the Jerusalem Plank Road, was the one—perhaps most remembered by the Union veterans. Its close proximity to the Confederate batteries made it a prominent target. According to a New York soldier, Fort Sedgwick became known as Fort Hell because "it was nearer the rebel lines, and therefore was subjected to the hottest fire." A gunner who served there wrote, "I expend about 100 rounds of ammunition every day, and the pickets and sharpshooters pour in such a continuous storm of

bullets that the said fort is anything but an agreeable place."

One hard-to-miss target for the Union gunners in the forts and in the forty-two battery positions located in between them was Petersburg itself. The city's eastern district suffered the worst damage, and many of the more than 500 buildings hit by Yankee shells were located east of Sycamore Street. The threat of fire was constant. Soon after the siege began, Petersburg's Common Council organized an auxiliary fire brigade to assist the overburdened regular units. Adding to the

A BOMBPROOF SHELTER  
PARTIALLY MADE FROM  
GABIONS.

(LC)





UNION FT. MORTON  
OPPOSITE THE CRATER.

(LC)

danger was the habit of Federal cannoners to concentrate their aim on burning structures so that attempts to put out the blaze would be met with what one firefighter described as a "perfect storm of shot and shell."

There were ominous portents that the winter of 1864 would be a harsh one for Petersburg's residents. Heating fuel was in short supply, food prices were going up, and the crime rate was increasing. "Never were robberies so frequent in this community and suburbs," declared the *Petersburg Express*. Adding to the distress was the presence of refugee families, many with no local ties. The city did what it could, but too often need surpassed resources. One visitor never forgot the sight of "poor women and children compelled to go among the soldiers and beg for bread to eat."

Before the winter weather shut down active operations for the season, however, there was another Union effort to cut the remaining road and rail supply routes. "I think it cannot be long now before the tug will come which, if

it does not secure the prize, will put us where the end will be in sight," Grant told his wife, Julia, in mid-October. This plan came from General Meade, who was anxious to silence several Northern newspapers critical of his leadership.

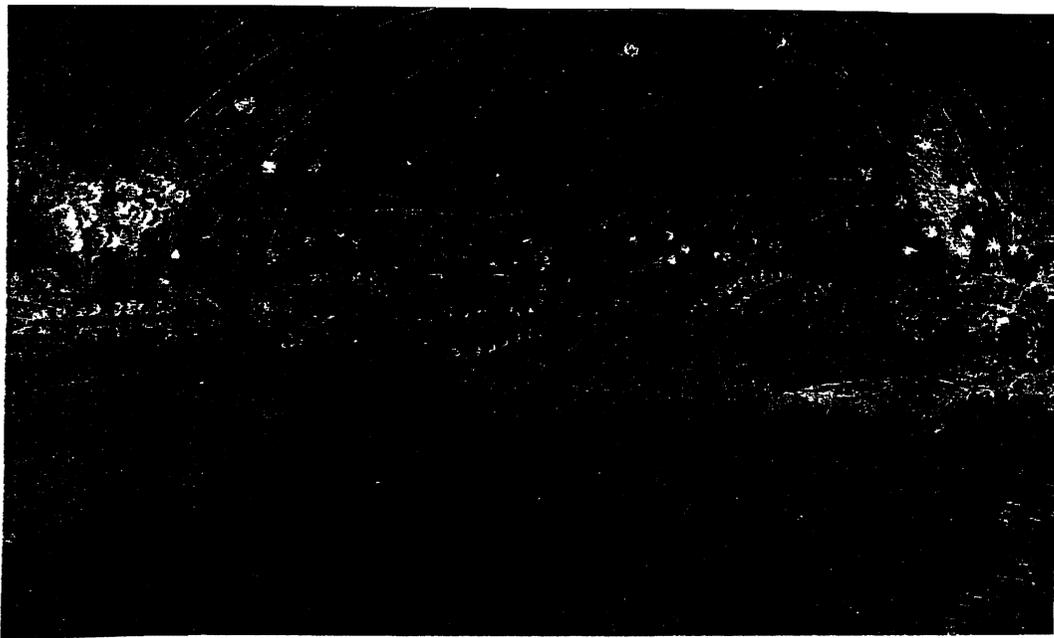
The movement (to be complemented by a diversionary attack north of the James), involved the Second, Fifth, and Ninth Corps and a cavalry division in a broad-front sweep around Lee's right flank. The Ninth would press the Confederate lines opposite Peebles farm and, it was hoped, force a breakthrough. Moving to the left of them was the Fifth Corps, which was to support the Ninth if it was successful and lend assistance to the Second if it was not. The hardest task in the entire operation had been given once more to Hancock's men. They were to march well to the south before turning west, and after crossing a lower section of Hatcher's Run (well beyond Lee's flank), they would move on to the Boydton Plank Road, and from there strike for the South Side Railroad. The cavalry was to screen Hancock's advance and protect his left flank. On October 26, Grant wrote to

AN INTERIOR VIEW OF "FORT HELL,"  
FT. SEDGWICK.

(LC)



*There were ominous portents that the winter of 1864 would be a harsh one for Petersburg's residents. Heating fuel was in short supply, food prices were going up, and the crime rate was increasing.*



PETERSBURG WAS PERIODICALLY BOMBARDED BY FEDERAL ARTILLERY.

(SCW)

Julia, "To-morrow a great battle will probably be fought."

It was well before dawn, October 27, when the Union forces went into motion. The Ninth Corps developed the enemy line but was unable to find a weak point. This left the prime responsibility on the shoulders of Hancock and the Second Corps, which had a hard march along a single road that was barely passable in places. Despite stubborn delaying actions by Rebel outposts at several stream crossings, Hancock's men reached the Boydton Plank Road shortly after 10:30 A.M. They cut it near its intersection with the White Oak Road, a short distance below Burgess' Mill and its associated mill pond.

Up to this point Hancock's only opposition had come from Wade Hampton's cavalry, but confronting him at Burgess' Mill was a line of infantry and artillery posted across Hatcher's Run and covering the Boydton Plank Road bridge. Every passing second meant more defenders were on their way from Petersburg. According to the original plan, Warren was supposed to support Hancock, but his route led him into a nearly impenetrable underbrush. In a very short time his units became lost, confused, and unavailable to Hancock.

At about 1:30 P.M., while Hancock was preparing for the next phase of his advance, Grant, Meade, and their staffs arrived. Grant undertook a personal reconnaissance of the enemy's line behind Hatcher's Run and concluded that a breakthrough would not be possible. Still hoping to punish the Rebels, Grant issued instructions for Hancock to hold his position until noon the next day "in hope of



inviting an attack." Grant and Meade left Hancock about 4:00 P.M.

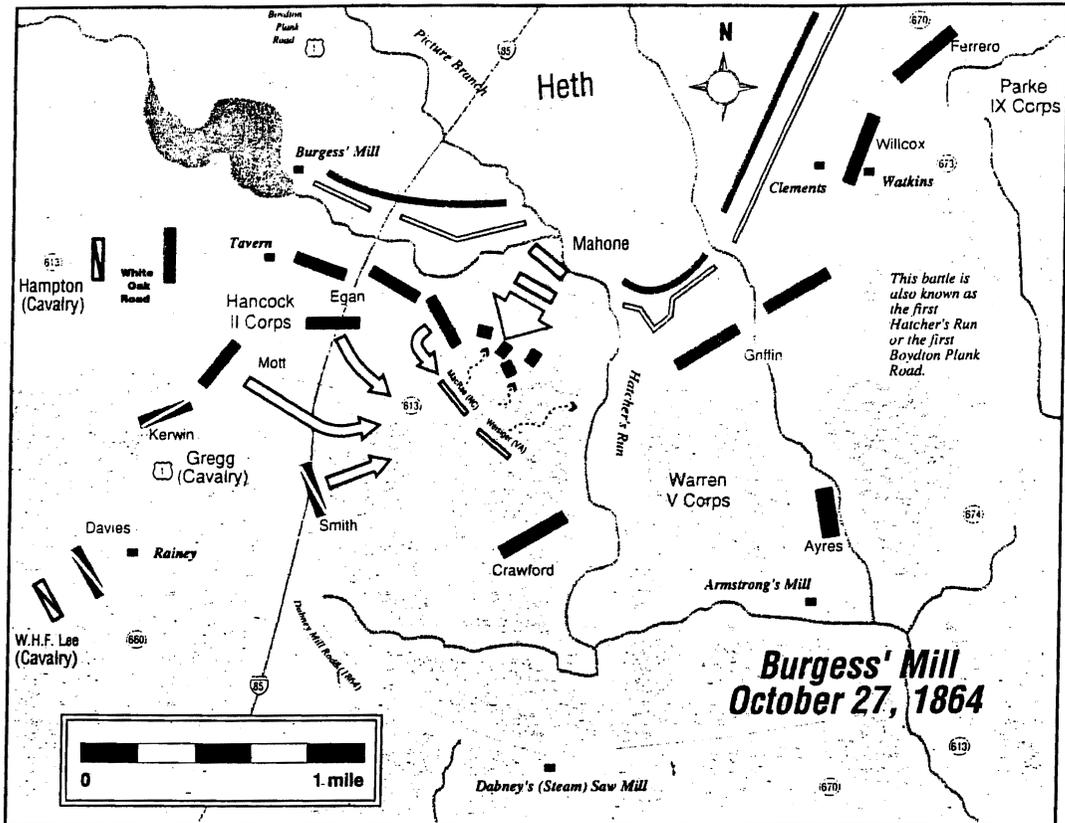
Thirty minutes later the Confederates did attack from three directions. Some of Hampton's cavalry pushed east along the White Oak Road while another portion of it came up the Boydton Plank Road from

HOSPITAL ATTENDANTS HELP THE WOUNDED NEAR HATCHER'S RUN.

(LC)

## CLOSING THE CIRCLE

In an attempt to encircle Petersburg from the south, Grant orders three corps to cut the Boydton Plank Road and the South Side Railroad by pressing and out-flanking Lee's extreme right. Efforts by the IX and V Corps fail. Maj. Gen. Winfield S. Hancock's II Corps reaches the plank road but is caught in converging attacks by Confederate cavalry and infantry (shown here). Following an afternoon of fierce fighting, Hancock retreated after dark, leaving many of his wounded in Confederate hands.



the south, pressing Hancock's rear guard. A force of Confederate infantry led by General Mahone swept down across Hatcher's Run and flanked one Union brigade. This time Hancock's men stood their ground and beat off each attack, though they paid a heavy price for doing so. When night fell, Hancock decided to withdraw along the miserable road his men had used coming out, but a lack of ambulances meant that many of the most seriously injured would be left behind. The morning of October 28 found the Confederates in possession of a battlefield littered with military debris and Yankee wounded. Private Bernard, whose regiment fought here, concluded that the "enemy must have suffered heavily, as they withdrew their troops from the Plank Road."

This time there was no extension of the Union trenches to mitigate the loss of nearly 1,800 men. The Confederates could claim a victory, though their cost was also

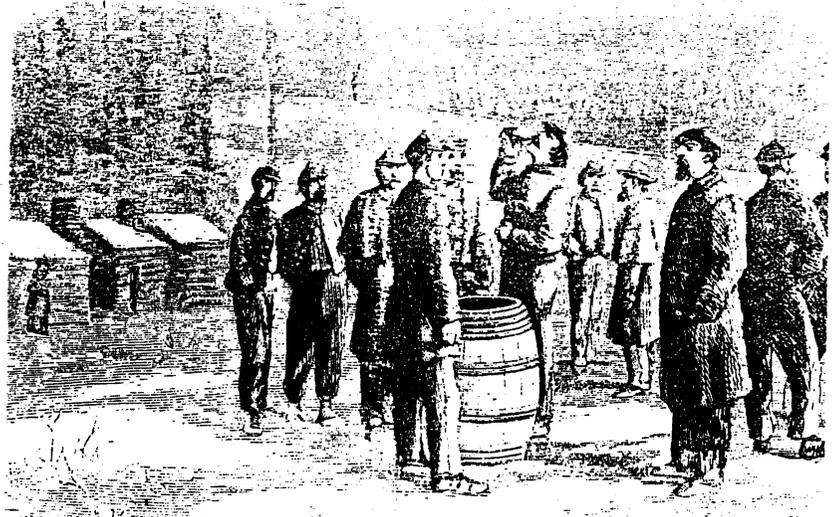
high, about 1,300 men. Among them were two of Wade Hampton's sons, one killed, the other seriously wounded. Never again would this grieving father allow any of his children to serve with him. This combat operation was also the last for Winfield S. Hancock in the Army of the Potomac. The much respected officer would step down on Thanksgiving Day to accept a reassignment.

Hardly had the soldiers returned to their camps when they all—Yank and Reb—became caught up in one of the most important events of the war, the 1864 presidential election. George B. McClellan, who once commanded the Army of the Potomac, headed the peace-oriented Democratic ticket that hoped to oust the Lincoln administration. For Southerners the outcome was seen as a barometer of their hopes for independence. "A great revolution of feeble sentiment is in rapid development in the North," George Bernard

wrote in his diary, "looking to a suspension of hostilities. God grant the movement may result in peace." In a letter written on November 7, a soldier in a Pennsylvania regiment summarized the attitudes expressed by Confederate deserters. "They say if Abe is re-elected they will soon give up, but if McClellan is elected they have the hopes of getting a convention of the states then they will get it fixed up some way that it will be honorable to them."

For the first time, troops in the field would be voting and almost everyone had an opinion. "McClellan was our first commander, and, as such, he was worshipped by his soldiers," declared a Maine private. Countered a New Yorker, "As for McClellan I don't think I shall let my love for the sol-

dier do injury to my principles as a man." The troopers in one cavalry regiment told of an incident at this time: "Two of our pickets were captured . . . and on being asked who they would vote for, replying that they were McClellan men, they were promptly released by the rebel scoundrels, and allowed to poll their votes at liberty."



GRANT, WIFE JULIA, AND SON JESSE  
PHOTOGRAPHED AT CITY POINT.

(LC)



At Grant's headquarters, staff officers and aides fidgeted uncomfortably on election night as Grant read the returns aloud as fast as they were telegraphed to him. Each time he solemnly announced that McClellan was leading. Only after midnight did he confess to his little joke: he had been reversing the count. The soldier vote was 4 to 1 for "Old Abe" and contributed to his popular plurality of 2,203,831 to McClellan's 1,797,019. Summing up the results to a friend, Grant said, "It will be worth more than a victory in the field both in its effect on the Rebels and in its influence abroad."

UNION TROOPS BEING  
ISSUED RATIONS OF  
WHISKY AND QUININE.  
SKETCH BY A. W.  
WARREN FROM  
HARPER'S WEEKLY.

As the weather turned colder and the prospects of further campaigning began to diminish for the year, life on the Petersburg front took on a different rhythm. "Dull, duller, dullest; nothing can exceed the monotony of camp-life," complained a New York soldier. "We read, we look after

# AFRICAN-AMERICANS AT PETERSBURG

At the beginning of the Civil War, Virginia had a slave population of about 491,000 and a free black population of almost 58,000. About half of Petersburg's 18,266 residents were black, of which 3,164 were free. Petersburg was considered to have the largest number of free blacks of any Southern city at that time. Many of the freedmen prospered here as barbers, blacksmiths, boatmen, draymen, livery stable keepers, and caterers. There were also those who owned considerable property, particularly in the communities of Blandford and Pocahontas.

## Serving the Confederacy

When Petersburg became a major supply center for the newly formed Confederacy and its nearby capital in Richmond, both freedmen and slaves were employed in various war functions. More than 850 slaves and free blacks worked for the numerous railroad companies that operated in and out of the city. In the latter part of 1862, when a ten-mile-long defense line was begun around Petersburg, Captain Charles H. Dimmock used both freedmen

and slave labor to construct the trenches and batteries. In the many hospitals that sprang up in the city, blacks served as nurses and servants.

Once the siege began in June 1864, African-Americans continued working for the Confederacy. In September 1864, General Lee asked for an additional 2,000 blacks to be added to his labor force. In March 1865, with the serious loss of white manpower in the army, the Southern army called for 40,000 slaves to become an armed force in the Confederacy. A notice in the April 1, 1865, *Petersburg Daily Express* called for black recruits with the statement, "To the slaves is offered freedom and undisturbed residence at their old homes in the Confederacy after the war. Not the freedom of sufferance, but honorable and selfwon by the gallantry and devotion which grateful countrymen will never cease to remember and reward." It is not known how many responded to this challenge. The war ended before any major contribution could be made.

## Serving the Union: U.S. Colored Troops in the Siege of Petersburg

During the war, a total of 186,097 blacks served in the Union army, with the first regiments activated after September 1862. In front of Petersburg, two black divisions numbering about 7,800 men (nineteen regiments) saw action.

In the initial assault upon the city on June 15, 1864, a division of General Edward Hincks attacked the Confederate Dimmock Line. Comprising 3,500 men from the Eighteenth Corps of the Army of the James, which was commanded by General Benjamin F. Butler, Hincks's troops helped capture and secure a section of the Southern defenses from Batteries 7 through 11. In the initial stage of this action, located at Baylor's Farm on the City Point Road, the black troops also captured a gun from Captain Edward Graham's Petersburg Artillery. On the fifteenth, Hincks's Division lost 378 killed and wounded. They acted in a supporting role on the June 18 assault, suffering a loss of 36 men.

The other division of United States Colored Troops to serve at Petersburg was the Fourth Division, Ninth Corps, under General Ambrose E. Burnside and the Army of the Potomac. Four thousand, three hundred strong, these men were involved in one of the most well-known events of the Siege, the Battle of the Crater, fought on July 30, 1864.

For three weeks, as a Pennsylvania Regiment dug a tunnel under a Confederate fort to blow it up, the black troops were being trained to lead the assault once the battle commenced. The black troops were chosen because they were numerically superior, and having been mainly wagon guards up to this point, they had seen little action. With the white

BLACK TROOPS OF  
THE FOURTH  
DIVISION WITHIN  
UNION LINES AT  
PETERSBURG AFTER  
THE CRATER.

(LC)



troops showing exhaustion after the severe fighting of the campaign from the Wilderness to Petersburg, it was believed the blacks would have a better chance at being successful.

Unfortunately for the black soldiers, the commander of the Army of the Potomac, General George G. Meade, would change Burnside's plan twenty-four hours before the battle. Instead of leading the assault, their division, led by General Edward Ferrero, would now be the last to go in.

Once the explosion took place on the morning of July 30, the three white divisions tried to reach their objective, Cemetery Hill. Stiff Confederate resistance along with a lack of leadership on the Union side, bogged down the Union assault in the area of the Crater. When Ferrero's troops attempted their attack, they ran into a Confederate counterattack led by General William Mahone. As the blacks were forced back into the Crater with Burnside's other troops, stiff hand-to-hand combat now began and the face of battle changed. Some claimed the black troops went into the battle yelling "Remember Fort Pillow," the site of an earlier massacre of black prisoners in Tennessee, while others said "no quarter" was shouted by the blacks. Many of the Confederates were enraged that black troops were being deployed against them, and the fighting became vicious. As a result, many blacks who surrendered were not taken prisoner; the division suffered 209 killed, 697 wounded, and 421 missing or captured, a total of 1,327 or 38 percent of the Ninth Corps loss.

Following the battle, Sergeant Decatur Dorsey of the 39th U.S.C.T. received the Medal of Honor for "rushing forward in advance of his regiment and placing his colors on the Confederate trenches."

Three white officers who commanded black troops at the Crater also received medals.

The division captured approximately 300 prisoners and one battle flag during the

becoming soldiers, and are neither boisterous nor noisy."

These men continued to march with Grant's army and were present at Lee's surrender on April 9, 1865.

#### African-Americans at City Point

With General Grant's logistical supply base located at City Point (now Hopewell) on the James River, African-Americans served in varying



THE CAPTURE OF  
CONFEDERATE  
CANNON BY  
AFRICAN-  
AMERICANS.

(LC)

engagement. In December 1864, all the United States Colored Troops around Petersburg were incorporated into three divisions and became the Twenty-Fifth Corps of the Army of the James. Commanded by General Godfrey Weitzel, it was the largest black force assembled during the war and varied in numbers from 9,000 to 16,000 men.

When Petersburg fell to the Union army on April 3, 1865, some of the Twenty-Fifth Corps marched through the city on their way to Appomattox. A newspaper reporter wrote "A negro regiment passing seems to take special pride and pleasure in maintaining the dignity

capacities for the Union army. The soldiers acted as sentries, guarding the numerous ships that were docked at the wharves. Some employees of the U.S. Military Railroad Construction Corps were Northern blacks and worked as laborers in building the needed facilities. An observer wrote "legions of negroes were discharging the ships, wheeling dirt, sawing the timber, and driving piles." Many also worked at the Depot Field Hospital, with the women serving as laundresses and in the diet kitchen, the men as cooks. About 160 blacks assisted there.

—Chris Calkins



VIEW FROM FT. RICE  
LOOKING TOWARD  
FT. MEIKEL.  
(LC)

the duties of our office; we walk, we ride, we gaze at the sky, the stars, the sun, the moon; yet we are compelled to return to the same surroundings, camps, arms, intrenchments, and lines of defense." As the season changed from fall to winter, sniping along the front seemed to die down. A Rhode Island man observed that it was not unusual for the pickets on both sides to amuse themselves "conversing across the lines, singing songs of the war,

... and doing a little trading when unobserved by their superior officers."

"The winter of 1864-65 was one of unusual severity, making the picket duty in front of the intrenchments very severe," a Federal officer recollected. A soldier in a North Carolina regiment later summed up his unit's term at Petersburg this way: "It lived in the ground, walked in wet ditches, ate its cold rations in ditches, slept in dirt-covered pits."

Helping alleviate conditions on the Union side was the U.S. Military Railroad that ran from City Point behind the trench lines just past Globe Tavern. Knowing that this railroad would not have to last a long time, Federal engineers simply laid the tracks on the ground with minimal grading. Watching one supply train undulate its way across the landscape, a staff officer likened it to a "fly crawling on a corrugated washboard."

The wheels of military justice took no respite, however, and there was no slacking in the punishment of those found guilty of



A TRESTLE ON THE U.S.  
MILITARY RAILROAD.  
(LC)

desertion, rape, or murder. A veteran Confederate officer remembered during this winter that the "scarcity of supplies in the army and still more the suffering of the men's families at home produced a great deal of desertion. . . . Executions were frequent." "It has a gruesome sound," avowed a Union soldier, "but the chief diversion of the latter part of 1864 was the attending of hangings in the vicinity." An area near Fort Stevenson even became known as "Hangman's Ground" because, recalled one onlooker, "there deserters were hanged or shot, usually on Fridays." Recalled another Federal, "We lose all human feelings toward such dastards and traitors."

While the enlisted men on both sides were prepared to call it quits for the year, Grant was not. The failure of his August operation against the Weldon Railroad meant that Lee continued to use it. The portion of the line coming up from North Carolina was intact as far as Stony Creek Depot, about 16 miles below Petersburg. This made it possible for Lee to ship supplies to that point by rail, then transfer them to wagons for transport via the Boydton Plank Road into Petersburg. It was a slow, cumbersome route, but it worked, and Grant was determined to disrupt it. On December 5 he instructed Meade to organize a large-scale expedition to rip up the tracks between the depot and Weldon, North Carolina.

The force Meade put together and placed under the command of General Warren consisted of three divisions from the Fifth Corps, one from the Second, and the Army of the Potomac's sole cavalry division. In all about 22,000 infantry with 4,200 cavalry would take part.

With the mounted units leading, the long column began its march southeast

early on the morning of December 7.

Warren chose not to follow the rail line but moved along the Jerusalem Plank Road, which diverged slightly to the east. Once his men reached Hawkinsville, Warren turned south, crossed the Nottoway River, and passed through Sussex Court House. From there he could strike west to the railroad and spread along it to the north and south to carry out his mission objective.

Warren's cavalry reached the tracks around 9:00

A.M. on December 8. The first units on the scene veered north, quickly reaching and destroying the Nottoway River Bridge. By noon Federal infantry had come up to the railroad line and the pace of destruction accelerated. A Pennsylvania soldier who was there recalled, "As far as the eye could reach were seen innumerable glowing fires, and thousands of busy blue-coats tearing up the rails and piling the ties. It was at once a wild, animated scene."

Back in Petersburg, Robert E. Lee could not let this threat to his supply line go unchallenged. Wade Hampton, whose cavalry had been skirmishing with Warren's column since it set out, was busy organizing his troopers and local defense forces to protect Weldon. To assist Hampton, Lee ordered A. P. Hill to take a hastily organized force down to confront the Yankees.

Hampton's command took up a blocking position along the south bank of



MAJOR GENERAL  
GOUVERNEUR K.  
WARREN  
(LC)



LIEUTENANT-GENERAL  
WADE HAMPTON

(BL)

the Meherrin River at Hicksford (modern Emporia), Virginia.

The Yankee cavalry that was still screening Warren's advance tested Hampton's line on December 9. The vigorous response that met these probes, and the threat of an impending winter storm, convinced

Warren not to attack. That night, a deluge of sleet and rain spread over the men of both

sides, leaving the landscape coated with a glaze of ice and making road movement difficult. Warren withdrew his long column the way it had come in, while squadrons of Hampton's men pressed the rear guard hoping to delay the Yankees long enough for Hill's men to arrive.

The Federal withdrawal now became ugly. At some places, the Union soldiers discovered caches of a local brew of apple jack, and drunken men threatened military discipline. Elsewhere, stragglers from the Union column were waylaid and brutally murdered. Angry Yankee boys turned on the local populace, setting fire to houses,

A CONFEDERATE  
8" COLUMBIAD USED AT  
PETERSBURG.

(NA)



barns, and even slave quarters. "Is this what you call subjugating the South?" one anguished woman screamed at her tormentors.

By December 11 Warren's men had safely retired. Despite forcing the pace of his march in the teeth of the bone-chilling storm, A. P. Hill was unable to close the distance in time to intercept. In his report, General Warren boasted "the complete destruction of sixteen miles of the railroad" at a cost of about 314 casualties. Yet, while the six-day operation severely shook Lee's fragile supply line, it did not break it.

"Peace on earth," a North Carolina soldier wrote in his diary on Christmas Day, adding the pointed question, "good will to men?" Another diarist, this one a Virginian, wrote, "Christmas once again; but oh! how changed from that of former times, when our beloved land was not draped in mourning." A Tarheel officer who was able to ride into Petersburg to attend Christmas services at St. Paul's Church remembered the scene: "Five festoons of cedar hung from the five ornaments in the center of the church to the bannisters of the gallery on each side.

The church was crowded and many were outside and could not get seats at all."

Out along the trench lines, both sides enjoyed an impromptu and unauthorized truce. According to a Georgian, "The men had suspended their work without being so ordered and in a few minutes they were passing in full sight of each other, shouting the compliments of the season, giving invitations to cross over and take a drink, to come to dinner, to come back into the Union, . . . and other amenities, which were a singular contrast to the asperities of war."

Many of the Union troops enjoyed what a New Hampshire soldier noted in



A PICKET WAITS IN A RIFLE PIT IN FRONT OF FT. MAHONE, A. R. WAUD ILLUSTRATION.

(LC)

his diary as a "fine Christmas dinner for all." On the Confederate side there was a concerted effort to see that the men at the front got something special this day. "The newspapers urged the movement forward, committees were appointed to collect and forward the good things to the soldiers," wrote a Virginian in gray. The effort paid off for some. "We had . . . a big Christmas dinner and . . . our Christmas passed off very pleasantly," reported a North Carolina infantryman. In another company the men eagerly waited for the Christmas bounty to arrive. When it did finally show up (two weeks late) it consisted of "one drumstick of a turkey, one rib of mutton, one slice of roast beef, two biscuits, and a slice of lightbread." It was the thought that counted for most, and, recalled a young Rebel, "we thanked our benefactors and took courage."

Yet even amid these holiday reflections, signs of the end were apparent. A New York boy, writing home December 25, observed, "We have cheering news every day—it is evident the confederacy is rapidly falling to pieces."

Surprisingly, even at this point in the war, with his reelection secure and the end of the fighting in sight, Abraham Lincoln was still prepared to negotiate an end to the conflict. While it would have been political suicide for him actively to

promote such talks, it was not impossible for him to use intermediaries to accomplish the same goal. So when a veteran Washington politician named Francis P. Blair, Sr., came to him with a fantastic scheme to unite North and South in a common war against Mexico, Lincoln gave him a pass to travel to Richmond to present his plan to Jefferson Davis in the hope it would lead to broader talks.

Through Blair the groundwork was laid for such a discussion, though it was



Davis who sought to use the occasion to political advantage. If he could force Lincoln to declare a posture of unconditional surrender toward the Confederacy, it might stiffen sagging Southern morale enough to extend the fighting through the summer when, perhaps, the Northern electorate would finally grow weary of the

THE 121ST PENNSYLVANIA INFANTRY PHOTOGRAPHED AT WINTER QUARTERS IN PETERSBURG.

(COURTESY OF JAMES R. WARNER)



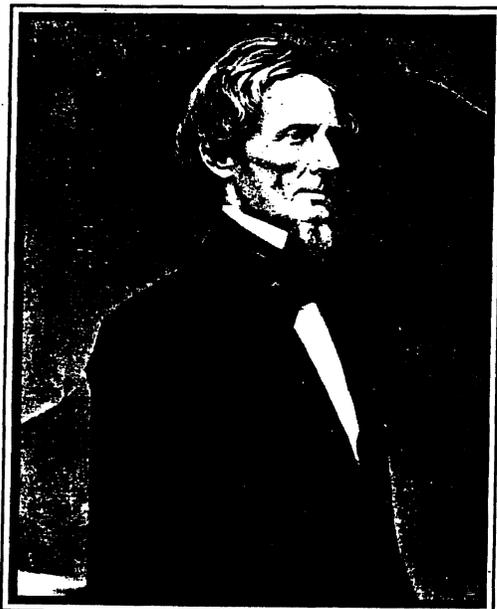
UNION SOLDIERS KILL  
TIME INSIDE THEIR  
WINTER QUARTERS AT  
PETERSBURG.

(COURTESY OF  
JAMES R. WARNER)

bloodshed. To this end Davis appointed three men who favored a negotiated settlement to a peace commission, but he fatally limited their authority by refusing to let them even discuss the issue of Confederate independence. Lincoln arrived at the conference—which took place on February 3 on

board the steamer *River Queen* anchored off Fortress Monroe, Virginia—equally determined to reunite the fractured United States. He was prepared to offer Southern slaveholders financial recompense for the “property” they would lose because of the abolition of slavery, but the discussions never got that far.

The three commissioners returned to Richmond, where two of them appeared at a mass meeting to denounce Lincoln’s demand for “unconditional surrender.” A



JEFFERSON DAVIS

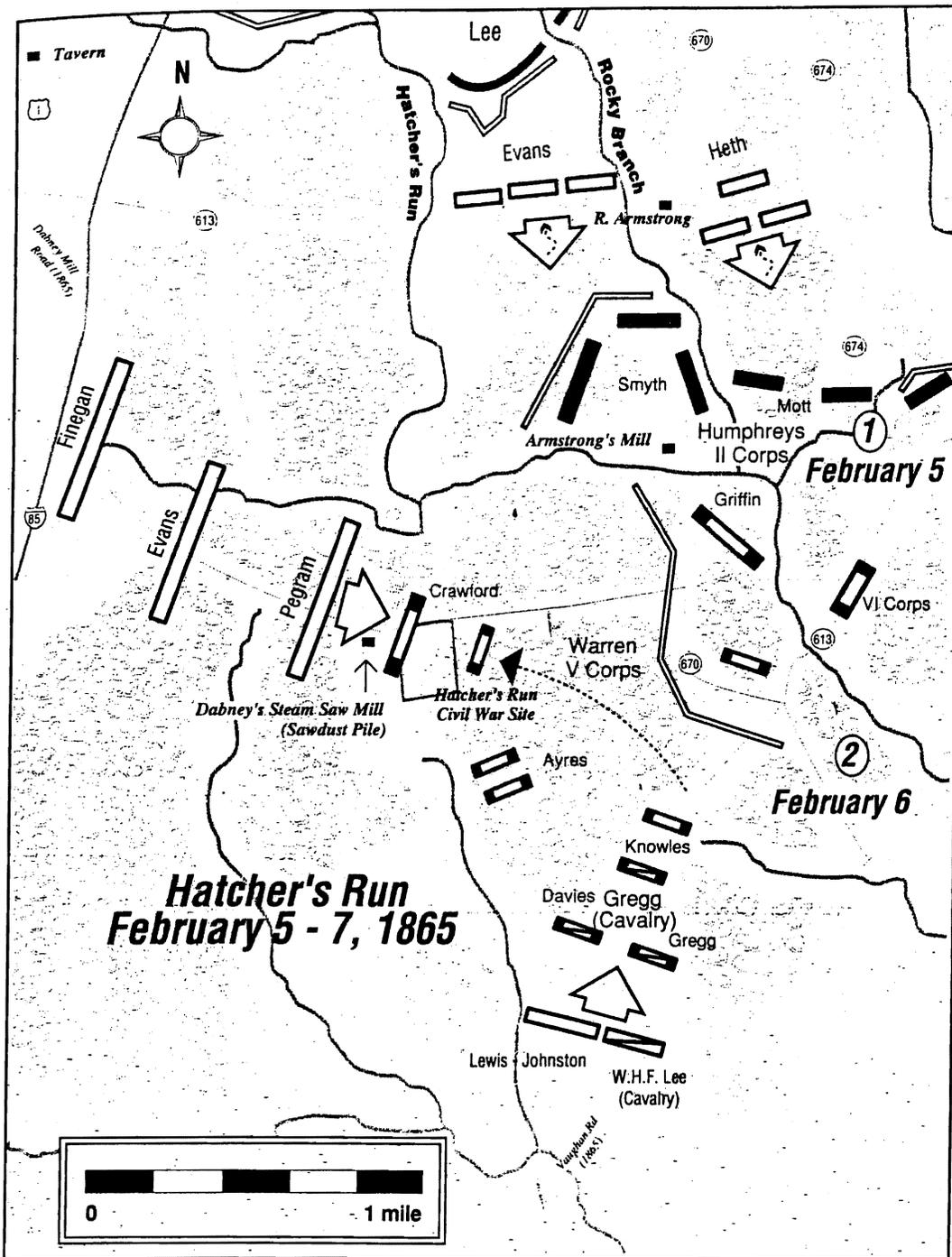
(LC)

Union soldier before Petersburg, after reading accounts in Northern and Southern newspapers, reflected, “Poor deluded wretches these Confederates, they will never unite with us again until every hope of success is lost!”

Grant, who had personally intervened to facilitate the talks, moved with equal purpose to show that there was no lack of will to win. On February 4 he ordered an expedition to the Boydton Plank Road with instructions to interdict the enemy’s wagons that were still bringing supplies up from Stony Creek Depot. General Meade futilely protested the operation, certain that there would be no dramatic victory to satisfy the press, which would then lambast him for ordering such a purposeless undertaking.

This time two infantry corps moved west on parallel routes from the Globe Tavern area, with the cavalry riding to the south. The Second Corps (now under Major General Andrew A. Humphreys) marched along the north side of Hatcher’s Run until it reached the Rebel earthworks that protected the Boydton Plank Road above Burgess’ Mill. Anticipating that there would be a quick and aggressive Confederate response to this movement, Humphreys had his troops prepare defenses around a place known as Armstrong’s Mill. As expected, a strong Confederate battle line emerged from the entrenchments shortly after 4:00 P.M., February 5, and struck at Humphreys’s position.

The main Rebel thrust came against a gap in the Union line that had only been partially filled by New Jersey troops under Brevet Brigadier General Robert McAllister. “They stood nobly and fought splendidly,” McAllister later reported. Three times the gray lines pressed through the thick underbrush, only to be hurled back at each try.



**BOYDTON AGAIN**  
*In support of a cavalry strike against the lower Boydton Plank Road, the Union Second Corps (now commanded by Maj. Gen. Andrew A. Humphreys) and Fifth Corps (still under Warren) challenge Lee's right flank with provocative moves designed to draw a response. On February 5 Humphreys chews up a series of Confederate attacks launched from Petersburg. However, the next day Warren is badly handled by C.S. infantry pushing from the upper Boydton Plank Road, an operation that costs Lee his newly-wed brigadier John Pegram. By extending their lines after the fight, the Federals force Lee to stretch his for more than 35 miles.*

Such was the confusion on the Confederate side that when General Lee himself tried to rally a panicked group, one of them yelled at him. "Great God, old man, get out of the way, you don't know nothing!"

Humphreys's role in this operation was akin to a lightning rod designed to absorb the strikes meant for the other units involved. The other infantry—General Warren's Fifth Corps—moved

south of Humphreys to provide security for the cavalry, which was to ride to the Boydton Plank Road and burn every wagon in sight. The cavalry did reach the road but there discovered that Federal intelligence estimates had greatly overestimated the size of the prize. When the troopers finally pulled back after dark, their total haul was eighteen wagons and fifty prisoners.

UNION SHARPSHOOTERS  
TAKE AIM  
DURING BATTLE.

(LC)



Fearing another attack on Humphreys, both Warren's men and the cavalry closed up on the Second Corps. But dawn, February 6, found each side waiting for the other to move first. When nothing had happened by midday, units were sent out to investigate. The largest collision of these probing forces took place along the south side of Hatcher's Run, near the sawdust pile that marked Dabney's Mill, once a steam-powered sawmill. There Confederate troops under Brigadier General John Pegram met Union infantry from Warren's corps.

AN EXAMPLE OF  
REVETED BREASTWORKS.

(LC)

The combat surged back and forth as each side fed more men into the fighting. In the midst of it, young Pegram, who had

been married just three weeks earlier, was killed. By nightfall the Federals had been shoved back to the defensive position they had occupied at the start of the day.

Tragically, many of the untended wounded on both sides suffered horribly during this encounter because of a freezing rain that began to fall during the latter stages of the battle.

This would be Private Bernard's last fight of the Petersburg campaign and nearly the last day of his life. "I myself received a slight scratch on the cheek," he recorded on February 9, "the position of my head only saving me from a dreadful wound or perhaps death." On March 22 he received a furlough and was at his father's home in Orange County when the end came.

There were some slight engagements on February 7 as the Confederates determined that there would be no further enemy advances. The Federals extended their trench lines out to this point, further stretching Lee's lines, which now ran for 35 miles. The cost to achieve this was about 1,500 Union casualties and 1,000 Confederates.

On March 15, 1865, a British M.P. named Thomas Conolly arrived in Petersburg on a tour of the Confederacy.



Conolly described the town as a "very considerable place with large Markets, Tobacco factories & handsome streets filled with large stores." He visited several dwellings in the city, all which "bore marks of the shelling." It had been a cold winter, one consequence of which added greatly to the challenge of moving about in the dark. In

these stocks when the time came for the army to retreat. It was a warning sign of things to come.

Ominous too was the steady hemorrhage of deserters from the Confederate ranks. As many as one hundred men left each night, some to go home, others to Yankee prison camps. According to official

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*The stresses of the siege also played havoc on family relationships: children especially were affected by the general social breakdown.*

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FAIRGROUNDS  
HOSPITAL USED BY  
CONFEDERATES AND  
THEN THE UNION AFTER  
THE SIEGE.

(NA)

a special column, the editor of the *Petersburg Express* lamented that "nearly every little foot bridge about town has lost half of its timber, while some of them have entirely disappeared. They are stolen at night, and burned as fuel."

The stresses of the siege also played havoc on family relationships: children especially were affected by the general social breakdown. In March 1865, the *Express* reported that "numerous complaints reach us daily of the . . . danger to which citizens are subjected by boys . . . who indulge in the practice of throwing stones about the city."

At Lee's orders, caches of government tobacco were stored in what one soldier described as "sheds & houses of but little value," making it easier to destroy

C.S.A. records, 2,934 soldiers deserted in the month following the fight in which John Pegram died. Southerners now had to shoot at their own in an attempt to frighten others from running. Private Bernard, on picket duty in late March, noted that the "firing at deserters [was now] a thing of nightly occurrence."

Yet, to all outward appearances, Robert E. Lee remained firm in his resolve to continue Petersburg's defense. During his visit, Conolly dined with him. Also present was a young lady who begged Lee not to evacuate the city when spring arrived. Conolly never forgot Lee's response: "Oh Miss, have you no faith in our boys?"

Conolly's dinner took place on March 17. Six days later Lee listened in grim

*After attending a series of meetings in Richmond with Jefferson Davis, Lee came away convinced that there would be no political initiative to end the war, so his task was to preserve his army as long as possible.*

silence as one of his most trusted subordinates outlined a desperate scheme to break the Federal grip on Petersburg. Lee had asked Major General John B. Gordon to find a way to attack the Union entrenchments. After attending a series of meetings in Richmond with Jefferson Davis, Lee came away convinced that there would be no political initiative to end the war, so his task was to preserve his army as long as

crisscrossed with picket trenches, and the Fort was further protected by two distinct lines of entangling obstacles. The main picket line was delineated by a thick row of abatis—small, felled trees that were piled together and interlocked. Directly girding the fort itself was a heavy seeding of breast-high fraises—angled rows of logs with their ends sharpened to points. These stakes were planted about six inches apart and strung together with telegraph wire.

Gordon's solution was worthy of its target. First, while it was still dark, working parties would open avenues through the Confederate defenses by quietly removing any obstructions. Then, using these openings, squads of picked men would infiltrate forward, take out the enemy's advanced pickets and listening posts, and open gaps in the abatis. Through these holes would come fifty axmen whose task it was to chop away sections of the fraise belt. Right on their heels were three storming parties of a



ROBERT E. LEE  
PHOTOGRAPHED ON HIS  
HORSE TRAVELLER AT  
PETERSBURG.  
(DEMENTI-FOSTER STUDIOS,  
RICHMOND, VA)

possible. That meant creating the condition for a breakout from Petersburg, an assignment Lee had handed to Gordon.

After carefully reconnoitering the Federal lines, Gordon settled on Fort Stedman as the best place to attack. An enclosed field redoubt located on the crest of Hare Hill, near the site of the fatal June 18 charge by the First Maine Heavy Artillery, the fort held four guns and was closely supported by batteries north and south of it. Taking it seemed an impossible task. The ground in front of Stedman was

hundred men apiece who were to capture Fort Stedman and its supporting batteries. Once the leading edge of the enemy's line had been secured, a picked force would pass through to seize strongpoints in the Union rear to prevent reinforcements from coming up. Only after the last group had cleared the approach routes would the bulk of Gordon's infantry cross the no-man's land to enlarge the initial penetration. As an added incentive, a major Federal supply depot was located at Meade Station, one mile behind Fort Stedman.



GRANT'S CABIN HEAD-  
QUARTERS (IN FORE-  
GROUND) AT CITY  
POINT. THE EPPES  
HOME, "APPOMATTOX,"  
IS TO THE RIGHT.

(LC)

had been captured. Rebel soldiers also overran two regimental encampments located nearby, and many of the sleepy Federals were clubbed down as they staggered from their tents in alarm and panic. John Gordon himself crossed the no-man's land with the first main wave of infantry to assess how the assault was progressing.

Gordon found that his success up to this point had been deceptive. Despite taking all the initial objectives, the follow-up attacks had failed to widen the breach. South of the breakthrough, Fort Haskell remained in Union hands, while north of it Federal Battery IX barred his way. And then Gordon learned that the deep penetration effort of the picked force had also failed when the guides had lost their way in the darkness. Dawn was close at hand, and each passing minute made it that much easier for the Yankee artillerymen holding an enfilading position on both Gordon's flanks to target his troops. Gordon informed Lee that the gamble had failed, and he received permission to withdraw his men.

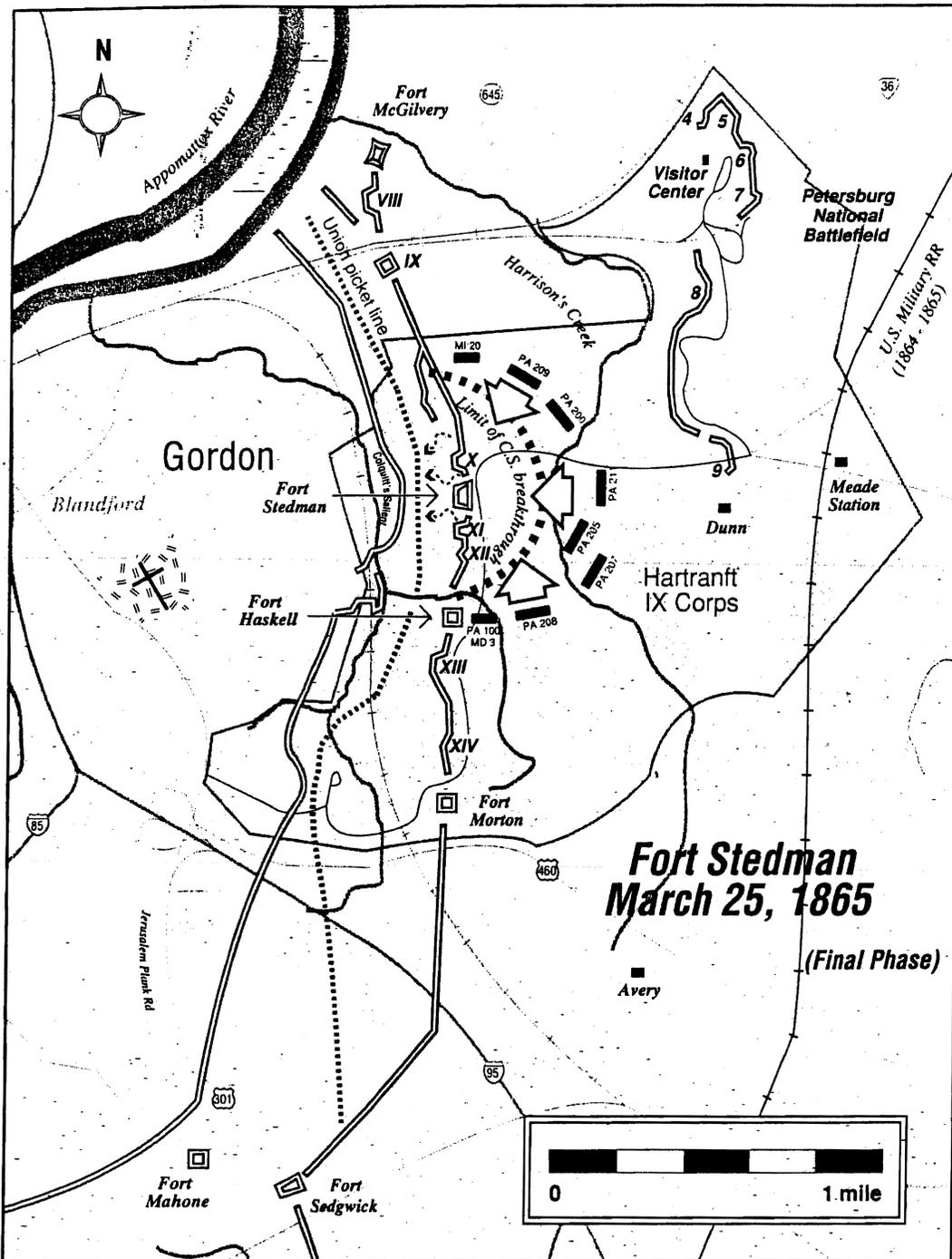
Some of the troops managed to scramble back across the no-man's land,

which was raked by a murderous artillery and musketry cross fire. Those who did not immediately escape were pinned against the captured entrenchments by a massive Union counterattack that rolled forward at 7:45 A.M. "The whole field was blue with them," recalled one dazed Confederate.

The Fort Stedman affair had been a costly failure. Lee had gained nothing at a loss later estimated at about 2,700 men. Federal casualties were perhaps 1,000 all told. What Gordon had termed the "tremendous possibility" had proven no more than a fragile hope based on wishful thinking.

This entire operation, which had required almost half of all the men available to Lee, merely delayed by a few hours the review Lincoln had planned with his troops. When, at midday, the president and his entourage rode on the Military Railroad to Patrick Station, he was shown 1,500 prisoners taken in the morning's fight. General Meade started to read aloud a message from the officer commanding the Stedman front, but Lincoln stopped him and, pointing to the POWs, said, "there is the best dispatch you can show me."

Reasoning that Lee must have had to strip his lines to supply Gordon with troops, the commanders of the Federal Second and Sixth Corps pressed their fronts and successfully overran large sections of the Confederate picket lines. According to General Humphreys of the Second Corps, "Under cover of the artillery and musketry fire of their [main] works the enemy moved out repeatedly with strong force at several points to recapture their picket intrenchments, but were always driven back." These operations cost Humphreys 690 men.



**FORLORN HOPE**  
 In a desperate gamble to force Grant to contract his lines long enough to open an escape route from Petersburg, Lee commits nearly half his available force to a surprise dawn attack on Union Fort Stedman. Despite an initial success, the Confederate troops (under Maj. Gen. John B. Gordon) cannot exploit their breakthrough. Union counterattacks later that same morning (shown here) recapture all of the lost line and many of Gordon's men. Follow-up Federal advances elsewhere capture key portions of the Confederate picket line.

Along the lines in front of Union Forts Fisher and Welch, an officer from the Sixth Corps watched as the Third Brigade of the Second Division was given orders to advance and capture the Rebel picket line. "The brigade gallantly executed the order, and, notwithstanding the rebels brought nine pieces of artillery to bear upon it, and sent reinforcements to the point, the ground was held." Losses to the Sixth

Corps this day were about 400. Confederate casualties in these actions were 1,300.

This was the true Union victory of March 25. The Federal army now held advantageous positions that could be used to launch attacks on Lee's lines with a greater chance of success than before. The situation was summarized by a newspaper editor who wrote: "Thus, instead of shak-



THE MARCH 25  
CONFEDERATE ATTACK  
ON FT. STEDMAN.  
(HARPER'S WEEKLY)

ing himself from Grant's grip, Lee had only tightened it by this bold stroke." In the words of a North Carolina soldier who had survived the operation, the Confederate attack on Fort Stedman "was only the meteor's flash that illumines for a moment and leaves the night darker than before."

While Grant's pressure had kept Lee fully occupied at Petersburg, military affairs elsewhere in the Confederacy had gone from bad to worse. Following his capture of Atlanta, General William T. Sherman had conceived and carried out his "march to the sea," which brought his armies into Savannah, Georgia, on December 21. After

a brief pause to regroup, Sherman had marched north into the Carolinas, fought and won a major battle at Bentonville, North Carolina, on March 19 and 20, and was encamped around Goldsboro awaiting dry roads to continue toward Richmond. Confronting him, but barely opposing him, was all that remained of the once powerful Confederate western army, now led by General Joseph E. Johnston.

In the Shenandoah, Sheridan had crushed the Rebel Army of the Valley at Cedar Creek on October 19 and spent the next months consolidating Union control of the region. Satisfied that there was no

longer any threat there, Sheridan brought his powerful cavalry force back to Petersburg and rejoined Grant in late March.

With Sheridan's arrival, Grant had the mobile striking force he needed to end the siege. He worried that Lee would still find a way to slip out of Petersburg and march south to unite with Johnston,

CAPTURED  
CONFEDERATE BATTERY  
EIGHT, USED TO FIRE ON  
GORDON'S TROOPS.  
(NA)



so he was anxious to cut off Lee's best route in that direction, the South Side Railroad. To accomplish this, Sheridan was instructed to advance west from the Union lines to Dinwiddie Court House on the Boydton Plank Road. From there he would ride north eight miles to reach the railroad tracks. While Sheridan was moving, Federal infantry would also march to the west to secure the Boydton Plank Road below Burgess' Mill and to challenge the enemy's entrenchments dug along the White Oak Road.

The infantry, Warren's Fifth Corps, made contact first and engaged Lee's men in some sharp fighting along the plank road on March 29. A large-scale follow-up action on March 31 moved the Federal

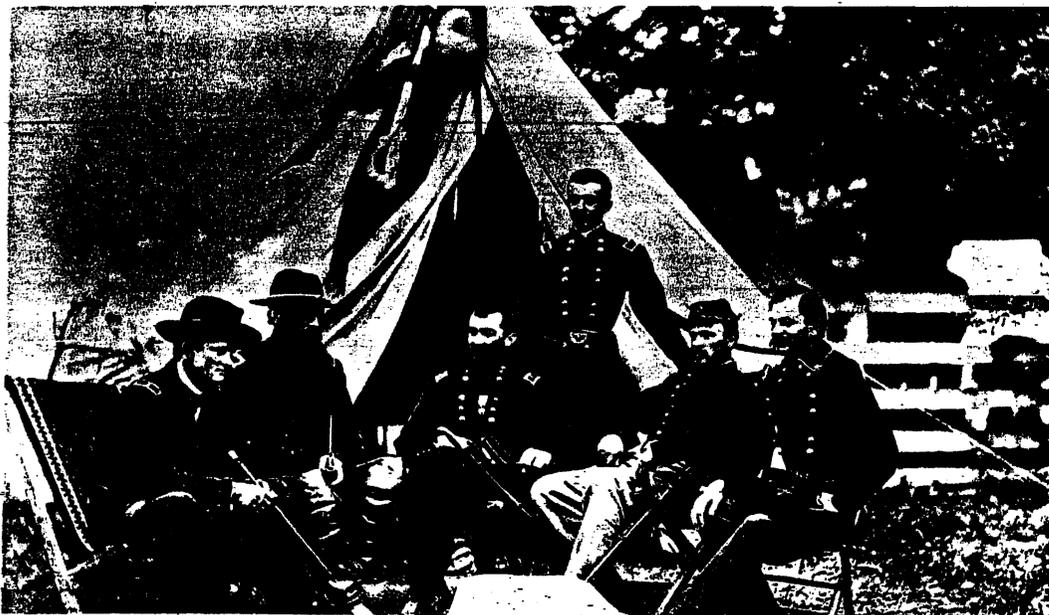
who dispatched a force of infantry under Major General George E. Pickett and cavalry led by Major General Fitzhugh Lee. The two proved too much for Sheridan's men, who, by nightfall, had been pressed back to a tight perimeter around the village. Sheridan's call for help was answered by Grant, who ordered the nearest infantry, Warren's, to come to his aid.

Sheridan reported directly to Grant, while Warren took his orders from Meade (who got them from Grant), so there was some delay and miscommunication as Warren carried out his new instructions. His march toward Sheridan was detected by Pickett, who, fearing the enemy would get in his rear, pulled back. Pickett wanted to take position behind Hatcher's Run, but

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*With Sheridan's arrival, Grant had the mobile striking force he needed to end the siege. He worried that Lee would still find a way to slip out of Petersburg and march south to unite with Johnston.*

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PICTURED (L-R) ARE WESLEY MERRITT, DAVID GREGG, PHILIP SHERIDAN, HENRY E. DAVIS, JAMES H. WILSON, AND ALFRED TORBERT.

(NA)

infantry closer to Lee's White Oak Road line, but the position itself remained in Confederate hands. This proved to be a touch-and-go affair, with several of Warren's divisions routed by much smaller Rebel units before reinforcements stabilized the situation.

Sheridan, on March 31, fought a day-long battle around Dinwiddie Court House. His movement had been reported to Lee,

Lee ordered him to halt short of that point to protect a key road junction known as Five Forks.

Grant had placed Sheridan in overall command of the operation and, worried about Warren's past lack of aggressiveness, had taken the unprecedented step of providing Sheridan with advance approval to relieve Warren of command should the cavalryman feel it was necessary to do so.

# THE HISTORY OF POPLAR GROVE NATIONAL CEMETERY

The Virginia dogwoods were in blossom in the spring of 1865 when the Civil War, America's greatest tragedy, finally came to an end. The four years of conflict on Virginia's bloody battlefields would close with a gentleman's peace at Appomattox Court House on April 9, but not without a great loss of human life. Over 618,000 Northern and Southern men would give their lives as a direct result of this war, many actual battlefield casualties. In July of 1862, the United States Congress passed legislation giving President Lincoln the authority to purchase cemetery grounds "for the soldiers who shall die in the service of their country." Thus efforts began for the establishment of national cemeteries for Northern soldiers killed on Southern battlefields.

In Petersburg and surrounding areas, work would not commence on this directive for about a year after the war ended. During the nine-month campaign most Federal soldiers were buried on the field where they fell. In 1865, the U.S.

Christian Commission located over ninety-five separate burial sites for the approximately 5,000 Union soldiers killed in action during the siege.

On April 17, 1866, Lt. Colonel James M. Moore began his survey of the Petersburg area for a possible location to establish a permanent national cemetery. Rev. Mr. Thomas B. Flower's farm on Vaughan Road, about four miles south of the city, was chosen.

During the war the area had been used as the campground of the 50th New York Engineers, who had constructed a gothic-style pine log edifice named Poplar Grove Church. Left by the army, it was used by local residents to replace the nearby Poplar Springs Meeting House, destroyed during the fighting.

With their base now established, a "burial corps" was assembled to recover the scattered graves. About one hundred men were equipped with twelve saddle horses, forty mules, and ten army wagons. Using this equipment, the actual search and recovery began.

An observer described the operation:

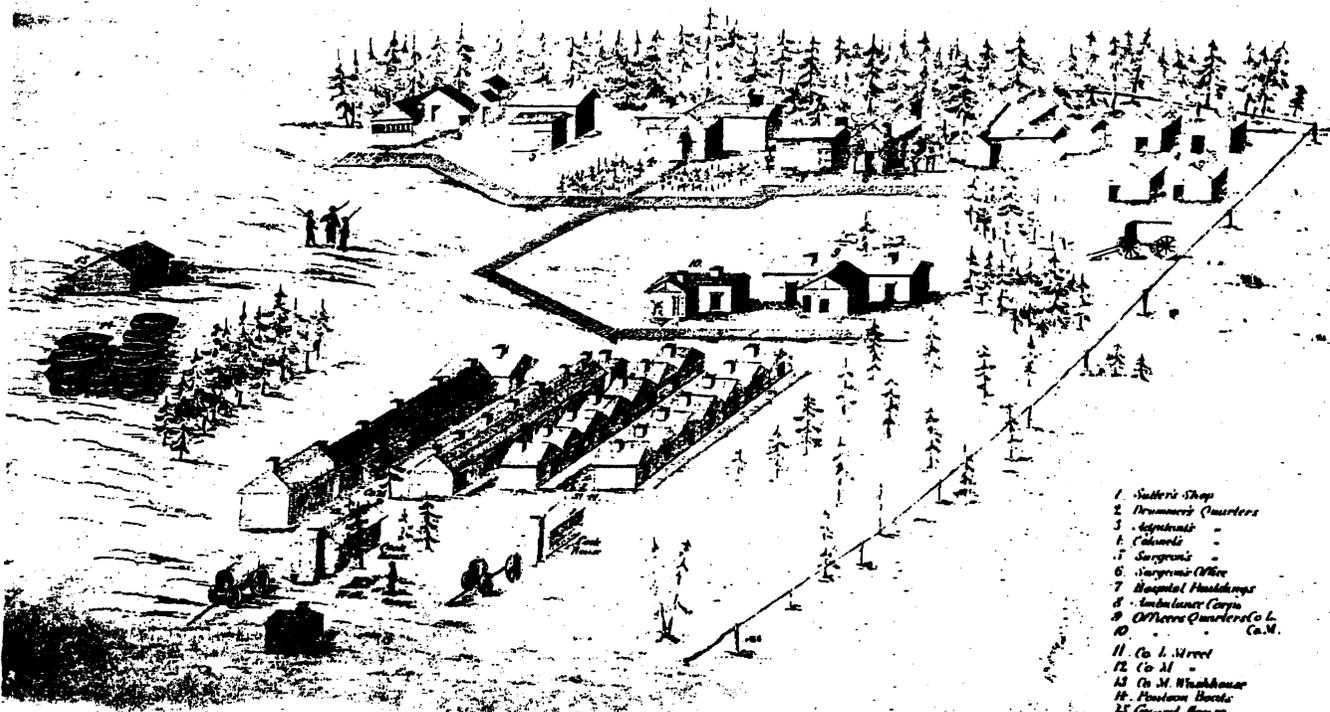
*Some had been buried in trenches, some singly, some laid side by side and covered with a little earth, leaving feet and skull exposed; and many had not been buried at all. Throughout the woods were scattered these lonely graves. The method of finding them was simple.*

*A hundred men were deployed in a line a yard apart, each examining half a yard of ground on both sides as they proceeded. Thus was swept a space five hundred yards in breadth. Trees were blazed or stakes set along the edge of this space to guide the company on its return. In this manner the entire battlefield had been or was to be searched.*

*When a grave was found, the entire line was halted until the teams came up and the body was removed. Many graves were marked with stakes, but some were to be discovered only by the disturbed appearance of the ground. Those bodies which had been buried in trenches were but little decom-*

THE FUTURE SITE OF  
POPLAR GROVE  
NATIONAL  
CEMETERY DURING  
THE SIEGE.

(COURTESY OF VIRGINIA  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY)



1. Suffer's Shop
2. Drummer's Quarters
3. Adjutant's
4. Captain's
5. Surgeon's
6. Hospital Office
7. Hospital Buildings
8. Ambulance Corps
9. Officers Quarters Co. L.
10. Co. L. Street
11. Co. M.
12. Co. N. Washhouse
13. Posters Board
14. Guard House

Camp of the 50th N.Y. Engineers in front of Petersburg, Va. sketched by J.W. Austin, of C.M. Winter 1865.

posed, while those buried singly in boxes, not much was left but bones and dust.

To confirm the latter, "On the 30th of July, 1866, 300 bodies were taken out of the crater and the corpses were as perfect in flesh as the day they were consigned to the pit, two years before. They were fresh and gory, the blood oozing from their wounds, and saturating still perfect clothing."

Remains were disinterred, then placed in plain wooden coffins. When identifying headboards survived, they were nailed to the coffins. Wagons transported remains to the cemetery.

A local resident who lived near Petersburg, Jennie Friend, remembered these men: "The summer of 1866 was a time of searching through the country for the Union dead, to place in the cemetery. Five dollars was given for every collection of bones with a skull. So called spies, deserters, and anything resembling the form of a man was money. All were taken up and sold, and are now enshrined as heroes in their well kept cemeteries . . . the many dead lying about, with partially covered bodies, and worse yet the unearthing of these bodies, made the whole country sickly. In August a terrible form of dysentery swept the community. In every family sickness, and often death added to the distress that already abounded."

The search for burials not only included the battlefields around Petersburg but extended into the Virginia counties of Amelia, Appomattox, Campbell, Chesterfield, Dinwiddie, Nottoway, Prince Edward, Prince George, and Sussex. Many of these were locations traversed by the armies during the final campaign to Appomattox. Bodies were recovered as far west as Lynchburg. From July 1866 to June 30, 1869, disinterring con-



DEAD CONFEDERATE  
SOLDIER IN TRENCH  
OF FT. MAHONE,  
APRIL 3, 1865.

(LG)

tinued until the remains of 6,178 men were placed in Poplar Grove Cemetery. Sadly, only 2,139 of these were positively identified.

Upon completing their assignments, the burial corps returned to their work at the grounds chosen for reinterment around the New York engineer's log church. An early visitor to the site remarked: "The gem of the place was the church. Its walls, pillars, pointed arches, and spire, one hundred feet high, were composed entirely of pines selected and arranged with surprising taste and skill. The pulpit was in keeping with the rest. Above it was the following inscription: Presented to the members of the Poplar Spring Church, by the 50th N.Y.V. Engineers. Capt. M.H. McGrath, architect. Another recalled:

*We rode out to the Federal Soldiers Cemetery at Poplar Grove, and tying our horses in the pine wood outside went in to wander for a while among the graves. The place is laid out in sections, each section with its melancholy forest of white head-boards on which are painted the names and regiments of the dead men below. . . . I wondered who the man was who lay beneath where his home was whether his mother was still alive, away, perhaps,*

*in some far-off part of the world, wondering what had become of her boy, that she had not heard from him for so long, but still hoping that one day he would return to gladden her heart in her declining years. Here he lay, alas! sleeping his long sleep among the unknown dead.*

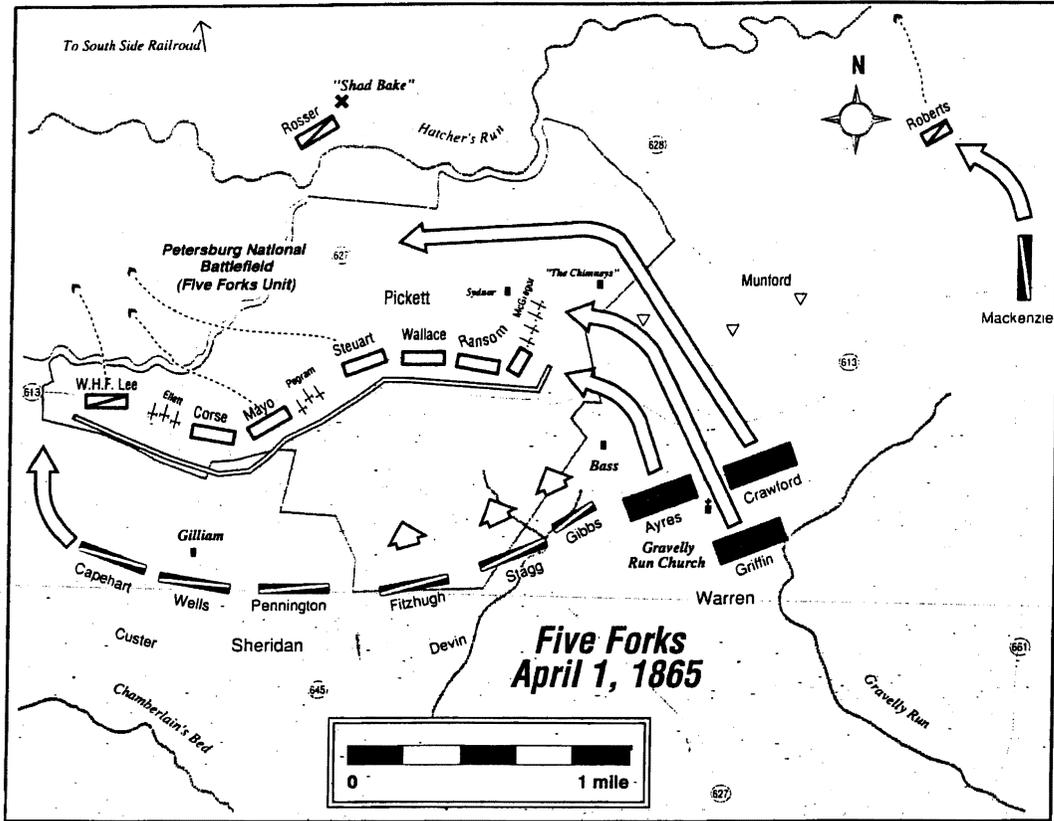
The church survived until April 1868, when, because of its deteriorated condition, the structure was torn down. The area where it stood was then used for burial purposes.

The War Department administered the cemetery until August 10, 1933, at which time the responsibilities were turned over to the National Park Service. The only major change since that period of time was in 1934, when the upright headstones were cut off and placed flush with the ground to facilitate mowing. Only fifty non-Civil War interments have been added to Poplar Grove since its inception, the last being in 1975. Today the cemetery is closed to burials. Some of the last Civil War soldiers to be buried there were twenty-nine recovered on the Crater Battlefield in 1931. They were buried with full military honors.

—Chris Calkins

**WATERLOO OF THE CONFEDERACY**

Fearing that Lee will slip away to the south, Grant orders Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan and his cavalry corps to cut the South Side Railroad. Sheridan is stopped on March 31 near Dinwiddie Court House by a cavalry and infantry force under Maj. Gen. George E. Pickett. Sheridan is reinforced by infantry (under Warren) and Pickett withdraws to Five Forks where he entrenches. Sheridan attacks late on the afternoon of April 1 (shown here) and routs Pickett's command.



THE FIFTH CORPS' ATTACK AT FIVE FORKS ON APRIL 1. ILLUSTRATION BY A. R. WAUD. (LC)

By midmorning Sheridan's men had located the entrenchments Pickett's men had thrown up along the White Oak Road at Five Forks. In addition to the cavalry and infantry that manned the mile-and-three-quarters line, the Confederates had also posted cannon at a few points with a field of fire. Sheridan's men spread out to develop the extent of the position, and their scouting reports erroneously placed the enemy's left flank much farther east than it was.

Sheridan formulated a simple battle plan. He would mass all of Warren's infantry against the enemy's left, and while his troopers pressed all along the front, the foot soldiers would turn the flank. The roads were muddy and the terrain a tangle of underbrush, so it took Warren's men until almost 4:00 P.M. to form where Sheridan wanted them. The restless, combative cavalryman attributed these delays to Warren's lack of leadership.



Finally, between 4:15 and 4:30, the attack commenced.

Just about every element in Sheridan's plan failed to perform as intended. His cavalymen were unable to mount any serious advance against the White Oak Road line and were, for the most part, spectators to the combat that did take place. The infantry advance also faced serious problems. As dictated by Sheridan, Warren's corps advanced in a two-division front with the third following on the right as a reserve. Sheridan intended for the right front division (Brevet Major General Samuel W. Crawford commanding) to strike the angle of the enemy's works, with the left front (under Brevet Major General Romeyn B. Ayres) taking the line head-on. But the faulty cavalry reconnaissance now bedeviled the execution of these instructions: The real flank was well west of where Sheridan thought it to be, so much so that General Crawford's division missed it completely as it moved forward, and Ayres's men took fire from their left as they brushed past it.

Ayres needed about fifteen minutes to reorient his units and to mount an attack toward the flank. This maneuver broke contact with Crawford, who continued to advance as ordered and was soon lost to sight in the heavy thickets. The reserve following Crawford, Brevet Major General Charles Griffin's division, halted while its commander sorted things out. Warren, trying to hold a central position, sent all of his aides galloping off to reorient his errant divisions, and, when that failed, he rode out to take command himself. Sheridan, riding with Ayres's advance, led the charge that breasted and captured the left flank of Pickett's White Oak Road line.

Helping the Federals immeasurably was a command paralysis on the Confederate side. When most of the day had passed with no sign of an attack, both Pickett and Fitzhugh Lee rode off to a shad bake with Major General Thomas L. Rosser, whose reserve cavalry was camped on the north side of Hatcher's Run. The two officers neglected to notify their next in command that they were absent, so there was a fatal break in the Confederate chain of



MAJOR GENERAL PHILIP SHERIDAN AT THE BATTLE OF FIVE FORKS.

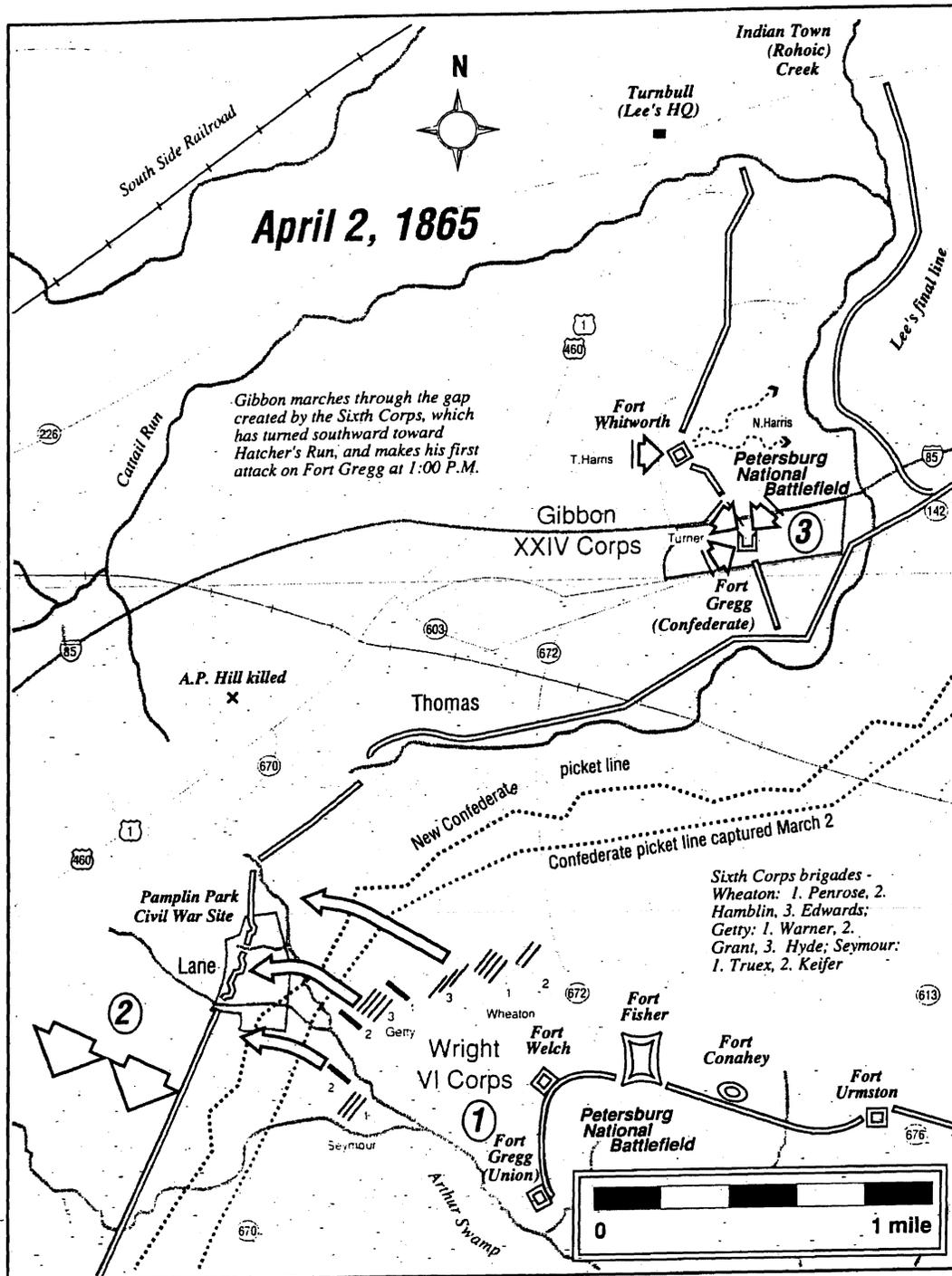
(LC)

command. With no one in overall control, Southern soldiers fought the blue waves in isolated pockets of resistance. In a crowning piece of irony, atmospheric conditions so muffled the sound of battle that neither Pickett nor Fitzhugh Lee knew that anything was happening until it was far too late to reverse the situation.

After Ayres's men stormed and overran the return, dazed Confederates tried to organize a new defensive line to face them, but Griffin moved in on Ayres's right and beat them down. Then Crawford appeared, coming down from the north, directed there by General Warren. Now

**BEGINNING OF THE END**

Following Sheridan's victory at Five Forks, Grant orders an all-out effort against Lee's Petersburg lines. An attack by the Ninth Corps along the Jerusalem Plank Road fails to break through on the eastern side of town. Further west (as shown here), a massive assault by Maj. Gen. Horatio Wright's Sixth Corps rips a fatal hole in Lee's defenses and rolls up the line all the way to Hatcher's Run. A follow-up attack on Petersburg by Maj. Gen. John Gibbon's Twenty-fourth Corps is stopped by a last-ditch stand made by Lee's troops in Forts Whitworth and Gregg. Not shown here is the final combat action of this day which takes place at Sutherland Station on the South Side Railroad. At midnight Lee begins his evacuation of the Cockade City.



Sheridan's cavalry came alive and swept around the Confederate right, only to be caught up in a wild melee that allowed many of the Rebel infantrymen to escape.

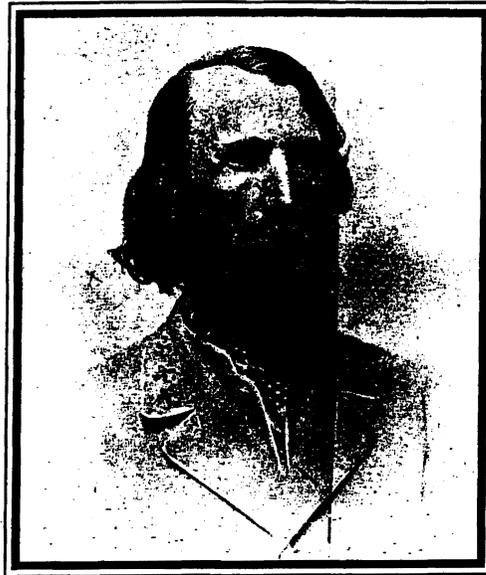
Nevertheless, it was a stunning victory. Of the 9,200 men under Pickett and Lee, nearly a third were killed, captured, or wounded, at a loss to Union arms of slightly more than 800. The way was now wide open to the South Side Railroad, and

Robert E. Lee's best escape route was closed. When Warren reported to Sheridan for new orders he was shocked to learn that he had been relieved of his command. As Sheridan saw it, Warren had failed to handle his corps effectively in the fight, and he felt that the infantry officer was not the man to lead it in the critical days ahead. Warren believed that he had contributed to Sheridan's victory and deeply

resented the action taken against him. He would spend the rest of his life seeking vindication for what he accomplished on April 1 at Five Forks.

Grant now ordered an all-out assault on Petersburg for April 2. The principal attacks were carried out by the Ninth Corps, which advanced from Fort Sedgwick along the Jerusalem Plank Road, and the Sixth Corps, which struck at the enemy lines opposite Forts Fisher and Welch. The Ninth Corps troops became embroiled in a bitter trench fight that dissipated the force of their attack and allowed the hard-pressed defenders, commanded by General Gordon, to hold the line, though the fighting lasted throughout the day.

The results were dramatically different on the Sixth Corps front. The corps commander was able to mass his men in the no-man's land during the night thanks to the strategic positions seized on March 25. Almost the entire Sixth Corps surged forward at first light and rolled over the heavily outnumbered defenders, tearing a huge hole in Lee's line. While one portion of the Sixth Corps pushed ahead to the long-coveted South Side Railroad, the bulk of it wheeled left and began to roll up the Confederate line along the Boydton Plank Road as far as Burgess' Mill.



LIEUTENANT GENERAL  
A. P. HILL  
(LC)

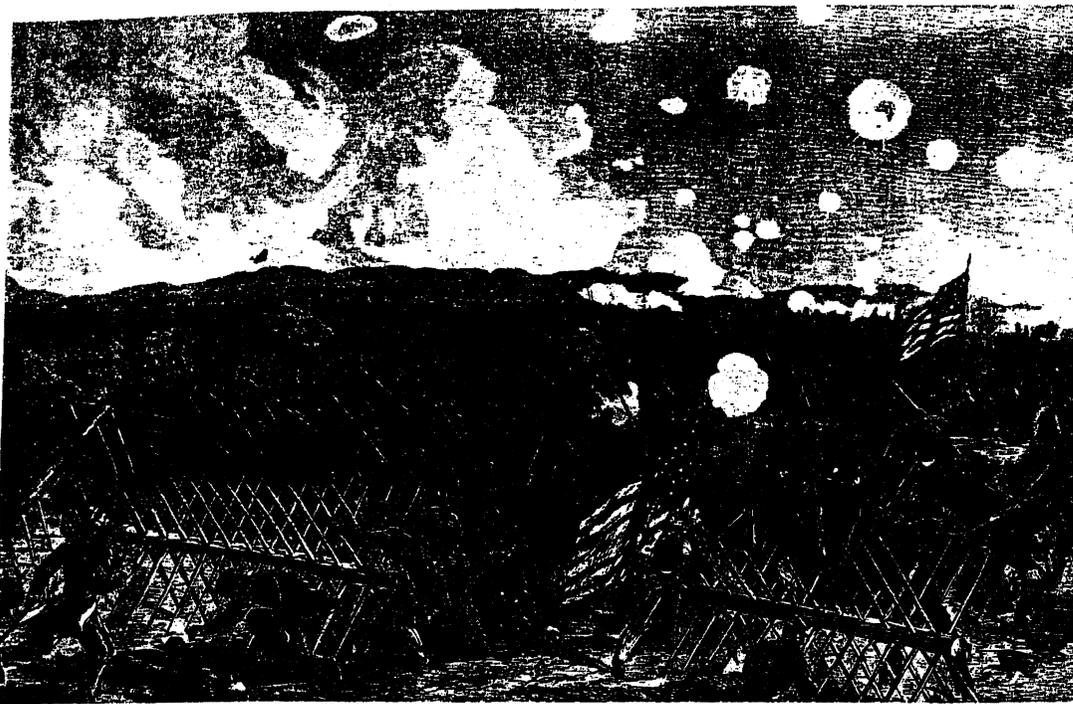
Robert E. Lee, whose headquarters was nearby at the Turnbull House, now worked to patch together a defensive line much closer to the town. A. P. Hill, whose corps had been shattered by the Sixth Corps attack, rode into the maelstrom to rally his men and was killed by a pair of Pennsylvania soldiers. Lee's only hope of preventing the capture of Petersburg and the complete destruction of his army lay with the defensive line he was knitting together along Indian Town Creek. Two redoubts stood slightly advanced from that line, and it was critical that they be held as long as possible. The two posts, named Fort Gregg and Fort Whitworth, held a pair of cannon apiece. Into them Lee ordered four Mississippi regiments—the Twelfth

*Lee's only hope of preventing the capture of Petersburg and the complete destruction of his army lay with the defensive line he was knitting together along Indian Town Creek.*



THE STORMING OF  
FT. GREGG ON APRIL 2.  
ILLUSTRATION BY  
A. R. WAUD.

(LC)



A. R. WAUD'S  
ILLUSTRATION FROM  
HARPER'S WEEKLY OF  
THE CHARGE OF THE  
NINTH ARMY CORPS ON  
FT. MAHONE.

and Sixteenth into Gregg, and the Nineteenth and Forty-eighth into Whitworth.

A fresh Federal corps, the Twenty-fourth, marched through the breach and formed to assault the two redoubts. The first attack stepped off at about 1:00 P.M. The badly outnumbered defenders stopped this initial effort and a second one that soon followed. Even though Federal soldiers now swarmed all around Fort Gregg, its garrison was able to keep them at bay. Not until the units manning Fort Whitworth withdrew under orders and uncovered Gregg's flank were the Yankees able to overrun the garrison by sheer weight of numbers. To one Rebel observer, it seemed as if "the battle flags of the enemy made almost a solid line of bunting around the fort." Inside Fort Gregg, the fight was short

DRAWING FROM  
HARPER'S WEEKLY OF  
THE CONFEDERATE  
EVACUATION OF  
PETERSBURG.

and brutal. "The rebels had recklessly fought to the last," declared a Federal. Of the 300 who defended Fort Gregg, 56 were killed and 200 wounded. The price paid by the attackers was 714. The breakthrough by the Sixth Corps was achieved at a cost of 1,081, while the best estimates put the Confederate losses this day at more than 5,000.

The defense of Forts Gregg and Whitworth had

bought Lee time and weakened the force of the Union attack. When the battered survivors of the assault moved forward to the Indian Town Creek line they found it manned by reinforcements that had just arrived from Richmond. The final engagement of this bloody day was fought to the west at Sutherland Station between the Union Second Corps and the troops that had abandoned the White Oak Road line near Burgess' Mill. In the evening Lee issued general withdrawal orders. Warned during the day by Lee that this was going to happen, Jefferson Davis and the Confederate government fled the capital on the evening of April 2.

Those of Lee's men who remained in Petersburg that night had to cross to the



north side of the Appomattox and follow routes leading to their designated point of concentration, Amelia Court House. "Silently and gloomily the army in long columns marched out from the breastworks and marched through the desolate streets of Petersburg," remembered one veteran. "We had little to say, . . . and we all wondered, what next."

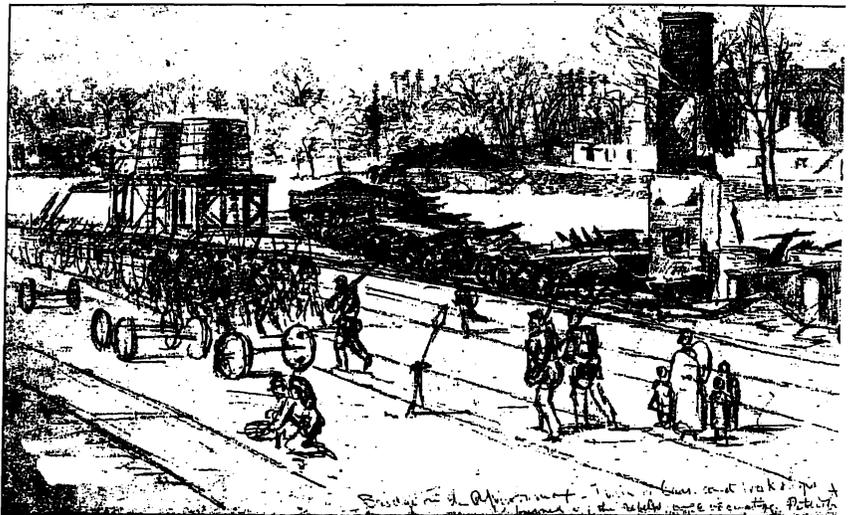
It was shortly after 1:00 A.M., April 3, when the first reports came in from Union pickets that the enemy was abandoning the town. Flames were visible from the burning tobacco warehouses that had been set on fire. All along the perimeter Union pickets filtered into the empty enemy trenches and confirmed that the Rebels had indeed gone. A little after 3:00 A.M. a flying squad of Michigan soldiers, moving along the City Point Road, entered Petersburg from the east and raised a United States flag over the courthouse. "Our hearts were too full for utterance, so we clasped hands and shed tears of joy, for we knew that the beginning of the end had come," recollected one of them. Troops from the Sixth Corps met the city's mayor west of the town at dawn to accept Petersburg's formal capitulation.

Meade, Grant, and Lincoln all visited Petersburg on April 3. At midday Meade and Grant rode off to the west to organize the pursuit of Lee's retreating army, while Lincoln toured the town before returning to City Point. On his way into Petersburg his party had passed near the site of the Ninth Corps fight on April 2, and Lincoln saw the bodies of some of the Yankee soldiers who had fallen in that struggle. According to one of those with Lincoln, "big tears ran down the President's cheeks."

By April 4 Petersburg had become a rear echelon, as the focus of operations

moved westward with Lee's disintegrating army and toward the final showdown at Appomattox Court House on April 9. But the triumph of having at last occupied the city that had so long defied them was felt throughout the Union ranks. One young soldier ended his diary entry for April 3, "My heart overflows with happiness too deep for words."

Years afterward, a Confederate who survived the rigors of the campaign for the Cockade City cautioned future historians: "The story of Petersburg will never be written; volumes would be required to contain it, and even those who went through the trying ordeal, can not recall a satisfactory outline of the weird and graphic occurrences of that stormy period."



The many military actions that took place here were a testament to Grant's firm resolve and his willingness to learn from experience. "Grant is a man of such infinite resource and ceaseless activity," an officer stationed at City Point marveled, "scarcely does one scheme fail before he has another on foot; baffled in one direction he immediately gropes round for a vulnerable point elsewhere." For Lee, the siege represented possibly the lowest period of his professional career. Denied any

FEDERAL TROOPS PASS THE BURNED BRIDGE TO THE SOUTH SIDE RAILROAD SHOPS IN PETERSBURG, A. R. WAUD ILLUSTRATION.

(LC)



UNION ARMY WAGON  
TRAIN LEAVES  
PETERSBURG ON  
WASHINGTON STREET.

(LC)

freedom of movement, he could only wait to react to the enemy's actions. And penned up at Petersburg, he was unable to influence events elsewhere.

The Petersburg Campaign cost the North about 42,000 men and the South about 28,000. In the cold calculations and neutral nomenclature of the army statisticians, these men fell in 6 major battles, 11 engagements, 44 skirmishes, 6 assaults, 9 actions, 3 expeditions, and 1 affair.

Although no comprehensive count was made of the civilian casualties during the period, it seems that less than half a dozen citizens died as a direct result of the siege.

It was the longest military investment of a city in United States history. The nine and a half months of operations left its mark in the form of miles of trenches and strongpoints, many which remain today to remind us of the events which took place here from mid-June 1864 to early April 1865. These rounded yet still impressive mounds offer silent tribute to the courage, valor, and fortitude of the Billy Yanks and Johnny Rebs who so long battled for the city. If duration and endurance are the prime measurements of sacrifice, then Petersburg is indeed the most hallowed of ground.

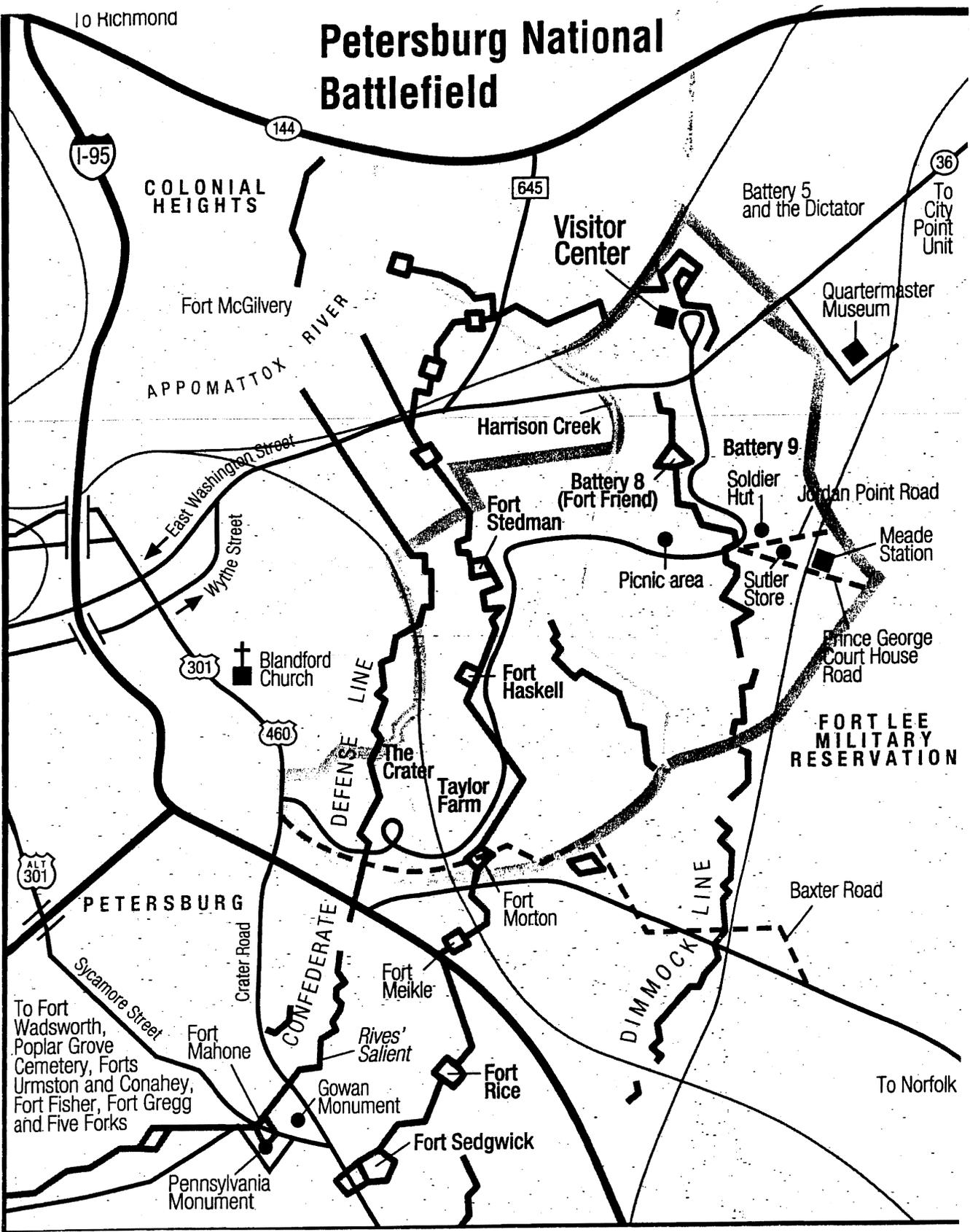


THE CRATER AFTER THE  
FALL OF PETERSBURG.

(LC)

To Richmond

# Petersburg National Battlefield



COLONIAL HEIGHTS

Fort McGilvery  
APPOMATTOX RIVER

Visitor Center

Battery 5 and the Dictator

To City Point Unit

Quartermaster Museum

Harrison Creek

Battery 9

Battery 8 (Fort Friend)

Soldier Hut

Jordan Point Road

East Washington Street  
Wythe Street

Fort Stedman

Picnic area

Sutler Store

Meade Station

Blandford Church

Fort Haskell

Prince George Court House Road

FORT LEE MILITARY RESERVATION

301

460

DEFENSE LINE

The Crater

Taylor Farm

ALT 301

PETERSBURG

Fort Morton

Baxter Road

To Fort Wadsworth, Poplar Grove Cemetery, Forts Urnston and Conahey, Fort Fisher, Fort Gregg and Five Forks

Crater Road

CONFEDERATE

Fort Meikle

Rives' Salient

Fort Rice

Gowan Monument

Fort Sedgwick

Pennsylvania Monument

DIMMOCK LINE

To Norfolk