

# THE PETERSBURG CAMPAIGN AND SIEGE



15 June 1864—1 April 1865

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In early June 1864, General Robert E. Lee told Lieutenant General Jubal A. Early, "We must destroy this army of Grant's before he gets to the James River. If he gets there, it will become a siege, and then it will be a mere question of time."

Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant's objectives that spring were to capture Richmond and destroy Lee's army. After his attempt to take Richmond by direct force failed at the battle of Cold Harbor in early June, Grant concluded that "the key to taking Richmond is Petersburg." Most of the major supply lines into the capital converged at Petersburg and were funneled into one line, the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad. If Petersburg could be captured, then only the Richmond and Danville Railroad would be left to supply the city of Richmond.

In 1860 the population of Petersburg was around 18,000; by 1864 it had increased to about 22,000 because of refugees and military personnel. Located on the south bank of the Appomattox River at the fall line, Petersburg was a shipping port as well as a rail center. It was protected by defensive earthworks constructed by Captain Charles H. Dimmock with slave labor. The earthworks were in the shape of a flattened horseshoe, with both ends rest-

ing on the south bank of the Appomattox. The Dimmock Line, as it was called, was ten miles in length and contained fifty-five batteries for artillery. When Grant first attacked, a skeleton force of troops under General P. G. T. Beauregard held the eastern front, two and a half miles from the center of the city.

Major General William F. "Baldy" Smith's Eighteenth Corps attacked Confederate batteries 5-11 on June 15. Troops commanded by brigadier generals John H. Martindale, William T. H. Brooks, and Edward N. Hinks captured a section of the Dimmock Line, held by Brigadier General Henry A. Wise. They did not take advantage of their success and press on into the city, so the Confederates were able to build a secondary line closer in. For the next two days, as more of Grant's men arrived, they attempted, unsuccessfully, to breach this temporary defensive position. On the night of June 17 the Confederates withdrew to a third, stronger line just outside the city limits. Grant assaulted these lines with his entire army on June 18 but was thrown back. His attack was uncoordinated, and Lee arrived with reinforcements. The next day Grant began the prolonged siege.

The Petersburg campaign lasted nine and a half months, was spread over 176 square

miles, and involved six major battles, eleven engagements, forty-four skirmishes, six assaults, nine actions, and three expeditions. The Federal army suffered 42,000 casualties; the Confederate, 28,000. Grant's forces averaged 109,000 men, while Lee's numbered 59,000. The Confederate defense line not only protected Petersburg but ran the distance of the Bermuda Hundred peninsula, then crossed the James River to terminate northeast of Richmond. Lee had to spread his force over a thirty-five-mile front.

On June 19 Grant ordered the Union position fortified with rifle pits, trenches, and forts, and he sent a force to block the Weldon Railroad, Lee's supply line connecting him to Weldon and Wilmington, North Carolina. A bold move by Confederate forces on June 22 quickly sent the Union forces reeling back to the safety of their lines with the loss of many prisoners. The Federals did, however, succeed in extending their trenches west across the Jerusalem Plank Road, where they dug in closer to the Weldon Railroad.

Another Union effort involved a group of Pennsylvania soldiers, former coal miners, who dug a tunnel under a Confederate salient southeast of the city. Their plan was to explode a mine at the end of the tunnel and, in the ensuing chaos, press through the gap in the fortifications and on into Petersburg. Major General Ambrose E. Burnside had given an untested division of black soldiers special training to lead the assault that would follow the explosion. Major General George G. Meade changed the battle plan and ordered Burnside to send in white troops first. The mechanical operation itself was a success, with the detonation going off early on the morning of July 30. Burnside's unprepared white division went forward, but the men crowded into the crater instead of fanning out to continue the assault, making the Federals easy targets for Confederate artillery and mortars. The blacks, the final division to be sent in, were hit by the southern counterattack. When it was over, the Union had suffered 4,000 casualties and the

Confederacy less than 1,300. Grant reported to Halleck, "It was the saddest affair I have witnessed in the war. Such opportunity for carrying fortifications I have never seen and do not expect again to have."

Within a few weeks Union troops led by Major General Gouverneur K. Warren were once again on the move to seize the Weldon Railroad. On August 18 they were successful, withstanding a three-day counterattack at Globe Tavern by Lee's men, vainly attempting to regain the supply route. On August 25 Federal soldiers led by Major General Winfield S. Hancock were defeated by Lieutenant General A. P. Hill's columns at Reams Station, twelve miles south of Petersburg. Even with the victory of Reams Station, Lee was unable to use the Weldon Railroad farther north than Stony Creek Depot, sixteen miles south of Petersburg. At that point he had to load his supplies into wagons for the cross-country journey to Dinwiddie Court House via the Flat Foot Road. From this county seat village the wagons followed the Boydton Plank Road into the city. Consequently, this roadway and newly developed supply route became an intermediate objective for Grant's army.

Grant continued his alternating blows first north, then south of the James River. In late September he authorized Major General Benjamin F. Butler to pressure Lee at Fort Harrison and at New Market Heights. At the same time Grant ordered two offensive movements to gain the Boydton Plank Road and then capture the last remaining rail connection into Petersburg, the South Side Railroad. There was fighting in the final days of September and the first of October in the Peebles farm area, just west of Warren's position on the Weldon Railroad. Although Grant was unable to reach his goal, he gained more ground for his army so it could extend its trenches westward. On October 27 another force was sent out that briefly held the Boydton Plank Road near Burgess Mill on Hatcher's Run. A combined attack by Confederate infantry and cavalry sent the Federals back to their lines.

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There was little battle action during the winter. Rain, snow, and sleet made the sandy Virginia byways too sloppy for any major movement of forces. The men built small shacks and log huts to protect themselves from the weather. However, in three days of fighting at Armstrong's Mill on February 5-7, Grant was able to extend the Union lines all the way to Hatcher's Run, less than three miles from Boydton Plank Road.

As spring came and the muddy roads began to harden, Lee knew that the Federals would soon start their major thrust for the South Side Railroad. He decided to attack the Union positions on the eastern front at Fort Stedman to force Grant to move men from the lines west of Petersburg. Lee had concluded that he would soon have to move out of Petersburg to save his army, and he needed an escape route toward General Joseph E. Johnston in North Carolina. The southern offensive began early in the morning of March 25, and the Confederates were initially successful in capturing the fort and the adjoining lines. However, by noon a Union counterattack had regained the lost ground, and the Confederates were forced to retreat to their lines. The stage was now set for Grant's final spring campaign.

The Union columns began their march from their entrenchments on the morning of March 25, and by evening they held the Boydton Plank Road near its intersection with Quaker Run. On the thirty-first, as the Federals pushed in, there was fighting both south of the Little Oak Road and at nearby Dinwiddie Court House. Lee's men made a desperate attempt to keep the Federals away from the

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South Side Railroad by holding the important road junction at Five Forks. On the evening of April 1 a combined Union force of infantry and cavalry defeated Major General George E. Pickett at Five Forks. The path was now open to grab the last Confederate supply line into Petersburg.

Grant quickly sent orders for an all-out assault. On the morning of April 2 two Federal corps made attacks at different points along the Confederate defenses. One corps forced a breakthrough that isolated a section of Lee's army near Hatcher's Run. Confederate Lieutenant General A. P. Hill was killed while riding forward to close this breach. Major General Edward O. C. Ord's Army of the James attacked a Confederate outpost west of the city, Fort Gregg, eventually overwhelming its defenders. In a final fight at Sutherland Station, the South Side Railroad was officially cut by Federal forces. That night Lee began withdrawing his forces from the city to the north side of the Appomattox River, where they would begin their westward trek.

The morning of April 3 General Grant and President Lincoln met briefly in Petersburg. They discussed the president's plans for a lenient policy toward the South after the anticipated surrender. With this policy in mind, Grant rode off to catch up with his army, now on the road to Appomattox.

Petersburg National Battlefield is at Petersburg, Virginia, 25 miles south of Richmond on Interstate 65. There are 2,761 acres of the historic battlefield within its authorized boundaries; 1,206 of these are privately owned.

Petersburg National Battlefield  
Statement of Significance

On May 5, 1864 the Union Army of the Potomac engaged the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia in what became the longest protracted engagement of the American Civil War. The contest ended on April 9, 1865 with the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Court House, just over eleven months later. For nine and one half months those armies faced each other on the battle fields in and around Petersburg, Virginia; the longest siege of any city in North America.

From June 9, 1864 until April 2, 1865 in a 176 square mile area south of the James River, the two armies fought 6 major battles, 11 engagements, 44 skirmishes, 6 assaults, 9 actions, 3 expeditions and 1 affair, resulting in a total of 70,000 casualties. The Army of the Potomac was under the command of Maj. Gen. George G. Meade. Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, General-in-Chief of all Union armies elected to make his headquarters in the field with the Army of the Potomac thereby making the village of City Point the *de facto* headquarters of the Union Army for over nine months.

To support the (roughly) 120,000 Union troops, City Point became the site of the largest and most complex logistics operation of the Civil War and its James River anchorage one of the busiest seaports in the world.

With Gen. Robert E. Lee in command of the 65,000 man Army of Northern Virginia, the battle fields at Petersburg were the scene of most of the direct confrontations between the two most famous generals of the Civil War, Grant and Lee.

In the U. S. House of Representatives Report No. 887 (April 15, 1926) the Congress explained its intent in establishing Petersburg National Battlefield. "Manassas was, in the largest sense, the beginning of the war; Gettysburg was high tide of hostilities on both sides, but Petersburg was the final field where the fratricidal struggle was fought to a finish. There, if anywhere, should be a permanent memorial to a restored peace between the States. Such a memorial, in the form of a park, would commemorate the highest ideals and exploits of American valor and strategy, without the taint of bitterness or shame to either side. ... The committee believes that the marking and preservation of the battlefields of the siege of Petersburg, according to the plan recommended by the commission and as embodied in this bill will serve very practical, educational, historical, military, and patriotic purposes, and recommends the passage of the bill".

The establishing legislation is equally clear. "In order to commemorate the campaign and siege and defense of Petersburg, Virginia, in 1864 and 1865 and to preserve for historical purposes the breastworks, earthworks, walls, or other defenses or shelters used by the armies therein, the battle fields at Petersburg, in the State of Virginia, are declared a national battlefield ..."  
(Act of July 3, 1926, 16 U.S.C. § 423)

The National Battlefield presently consists of 10 units totalling just over 2,400 acres extending 35 miles. It includes the City Point Unit, the Main unit where much of the hardest fighting occurred and the Five Forks Unit where Lee's defense was finally overstretched. Seven days after the fall of Petersburg, the Civil War in Virginia was over.

## Major Battles Around Petersburg, 1864-1865

Date	Engagement	Losses	
		U.S.A.	C.S.A.
16 May 1864	Second Drewry's Bluff	3,500	3,000
20 May	Ware Bottom Church	702	800
15-18 June	First Petersburg	10,586	4,000
22-23 June	Jerusalem Plank Road	2,962	700
22-30 June	Wilson-Kautz Raid	1,445	300
27-28 July	First Deep Bottom	488	700
30 July	The Crater	3,798	1,500
14-18 Aug.	Second Deep Bottom	2,901	1,500
18-21 Aug.	Globe Tavern (Weldon RR)	4,279	2,300
25 Aug.	Second Reams Station	2,742	720
28 Sept.-1 Oct.	Fort Harrison	3,327	1,700
29 Sept.-1 Oct.	Peebles Farm	2,889	1,300
7 Oct.	First Darbytown Road	458	700
13 Oct.	Second Darbytown Road	437	50
27 Oct.	Fair Oaks	1,603	100
27 Oct.	Burgess Mill	1,758	1,300
5-7 Feb. 1865	Hatcher's Run	1,539	1,000
25 March	Fort Stedman	2,087	4,000
31 March	White Oak Road	1,867	900
31 March	Dinwiddie Court House	450	600
1 April	Five Forks	750	3,000
2 April	Second Petersburg	3,361	6,500