

# PETERSBURG CAMPAIGN – OVERVIEW

## (June 1864 – April 1865)



The city of Petersburg began as a military outpost, Fort Henry, in 1645. A century later, the city evolved into one of Virginia's most important centers of commerce. Before the Civil War, Petersburg was one of the few large commercial and industrial centers in the South. The city was the transportation hub connecting Richmond, the Confederate capital, with the rest of the nation. During the Civil War, Northern troops surrounded Petersburg in 1864 beginning the longest siege of any American city, ten months.

The Petersburg Campaign is significant for a variety of reasons. The Campaign of Petersburg made the Confederate government in Richmond ineffective. Shipment of military supplies and equipment was no longer feasible with the loss of this vital rail center. The hope of reviving the Confederate States of America as an independent nation was lost. The forces at Petersburg were under the personal command of Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, General-in-Chief of all Federal forces, and General Robert E.



Lee Commander of the Army of Northern Virginia. During this campaign, President Lincoln met with Grant at City Point to explain the need for magnanimous terms of surrender to ensure that the restoration of the Union occurred with emancipation intact. For the first time during the war, African Americans played a significant role. In all aspects of the campaign, particularly at the initial assault on Petersburg, the Battle of the Crater, and in the actions north of the James River these troops acted with distinction.

When the Petersburg Campaign began, the Civil War was more than 3 years old. After 36 months of conflict, the Union and Confederate forces stalemated in Virginia. The southern states were on the verge of being split in two east of the Mississippi. The ability of the north to provide supplies and new troops was beginning to have a greater impact with each passing day. To end the war, northern strategists devised a two-prong attack. First, a southern arm, led by General William T. Sherman, aimed at destroying General Joseph E. Johnston's Army of Tennessee. Second, a northern arm, commanded by General George Meade, focused on defeating General Robert E. Lee and his Army of the Northern Virginia. To implement this strategy, President Lincoln appointed General Ulysses S. Grant as commander of all the Union armies.



In May of 1864, a series of fierce engagements at the Wilderness and around Spotsylvania Court House began what was ultimately the final campaign against the Army of Northern Virginia. Failing

to destroy Lee's army around Fredericksburg, General Grant pressed his forces south towards Richmond. Following minor engagements at North Anna and Totopotomoy Creek in May and a frontal assault at Cold Harbor in June, Grant was unable to outflank or overrun General Lee. He then decided to cross the James River, capture Petersburg, isolate Richmond, and cut the southern supply lines.

Petersburg became an increasingly vital road and rail center to the Confederacy. Its capture would certainly lead to the abandonment of Richmond. General Grant designed the Petersburg Campaign to take permanent physical possession of the major transportation links: the Jerusalem and Boydton Plank roads, and the Petersburg and City Point, Norfolk and Petersburg, Petersburg and Weldon, and South Side railroads. Over the nine-and-a-half months from June 1864 to April 1865, General Grant attempted to cut these supply lines through the two assaults on Petersburg and the battles at Weldon Railroad, Pebbles Farm, Boydton Plank Road, Hatcher's Run, and Five Forks. On April 2, General Lee ordered the evacuation of Petersburg. The final surrender of confederate forces in Virginia was but a week away.



## CITY POINT DEPOT, 1864-65 (Present Day Hopewell, VA)



“The supply depot at City Point supported the Union forces better than at any time during the war. City Point grew into an extremely efficient and diverse supply depot of over 280 buildings capable of providing all the support services necessary to keep a world-class army combat-effective. The port facilities consisted of eight wharves covering over eight acres with warehouses totaling over 100,000 square feet of the wharves. An intricate rail network of over 22 miles of track spanned from the wharves to directly behind the Union lines. During the campaign, the track grew together with the Union

siege lines to transport over a half million tons of supplies directly to the combat units. City Point provided unequalled Class I (rations) support to the Union Army such as fresh meat and over 100,000 loaves of fresh bread daily. The massive repair shop located at City Point maintained the force of over 5,000 wagons and the 60,000 animals necessary to support Grant's army. During the siege of Petersburg, the first-class hospitals built at City Point became capable of treating 15,000 wounded with medical care unsurpassed in a field environment. For Grant to control the entire Union military machine, a highly efficient communication system was created at City Point that allowed Grant effective communication with not only Washington, but all of the Union forces throughout the country.” (Source: Captain Robert O. Zinnen, Jr., “City Point: The Tool That Gave General Grant Victory,” *Quartermaster Professional Bulletin*, Spring 1991)

