

INTRODUCTION & SCENE SETTING

With the foresight of a military genius, Robert E. Lee met with General Jubal Early at the beginning of June 1864, and advised him that the Confederate forces must at all costs “destroy this Army of Grant’s before it gets to [the] James River, if he gets there it will become a siege and then it will be a mere question of time.” The events of the following months, beginning with the sequence of slaughter known as the “Overland Campaign” involving battles at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, North Anna and Cold Harbor, and ending with the final breaking of the siege of Petersburg on April 2, 1865, were to prove how right he was.

Earlier in 1862, at the commencement of his Tennessee River campaign, General Ulysses S. Grant had commented to army surgeon Major John Hill Brinton, “The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is.

(BRIEF TIMELINE OF PETERSBURG CAMPAIGN)

- 1 June 15, 1864. The Union XVIII Corps arrives and breaks through the eastern end of the Dimmock Line forcing the Confederates to withdraw to a temporary secondary line along Harrison’s Creek. Although reinforced by the II Corps, Smith fails to follow up his success. Following two more days of fighting, during which more of the southern section of the Dimmock falls, the Confederates withdraw from Harrison’s Creek to inner defense works, and the siege begins.
- 2 June 21, 1864. The Union II Corps, supported by the VI Corps, attempts to cut the Weldon Railroad. Lee retaliates the next day by counterattacking with Willcox’s and Mahone’s divisions of Hill’s III Corps, which forces the II Corps back to the Jerusalem Plank Road, where they dig in.
- 3 July 27, 1864. Elements of the Union X Corps, reinforced by the II Corps, cross the James River at Deep Bottom to attack the Richmond defenses, which diverts part of the Confederate force defending Richmond. Realizing the potential of this tactic, Grant uses it on two further occasions.
- 4 June 25, 1864. The Petersburg mining operation begins. On July 30 the mine is detonated under Elliott’s Salient. The Union IX Corps, supported by elements of the V and XVIII Corps, fails to break through the Confederate lines, and many of its men are trapped and killed, wounded or captured in the Crater during a Confederate counterattack led by Mahone.
- 5 August 18, 1864. The Union V Corps mounts a second attempt to cut the Weldon Railroad. Griffin’s division destroys the tracks while Ayres’ Division, supported by Crawford’s Division, holds off a Confederate counterattack. Hill’s III Corps counterattacks the next day and the V Corps withdraws to Globe Tavern and digs in. Lee is repulsed and loses control of the upper part of the Weldon Railroad.
- 6 August 21, 1864. The Union 1st and 2nd divisions, II Corps continue the destruction of the lower part of the Weldon Railroad near Reams’ Station. The next day, the Confederate III Corps plus Wade Hampton’s cavalry attack and break through the faulty Union earthworks, forcing Hancock to withdraw by the end of the day.
- 7 September 30, 1864. Elements of the Union V and IX Corps, plus Gregg’s cavalry, advance westward to cut the Boydton Plank Road and Southside Railroad, and attack Confederate earthworks at Peebles’ Farm. Hill counterattacks and drives them back to Pegram’s Farm. A Confederate flanking attack along Squirrel Level Road is repulsed the next day. Reinforced by elements of the II Corps, Union forces continue to advance on October 2 and extend the Union lines to Peebles’ and Pegram’s farms. The II, V, and IX Corps, plus Gregg’s cavalry division, capture the Boydton Plank Road on October 27–28, but a Confederate counterattack by Heth’s Division and Hampton’s cavalry near Burgess’ Mill isolates the II Corps and forces a retreat. The Confederates retain control of the Boydton Plank Road for the rest of the winter.
- 8 February 5, 1865. Gregg’s cavalry, shielded by the V and II Corps, attempt to capture the Boydton Plank Road, but are repulsed by elements of Gordon’s II Corps and Hill’s III Corps at the Battle of Hatcher’s Run. Union forces dig in and extend their siege lines to the Vaughan Road.
- 9 March 25, 1865. Attempting a breakout of the siege lines, Gordon’s corps attacks Fort Stedman but is repulsed by a Union counterattack organized by Hartranft’s 3rd Division, IX Corps.
- 10 March 29 and 31, 1865. Sheridan’s cavalry and the V Corps seize control of the Boydton Plank Road and force the Confederates under Bushrod Johnson back to the White Oak Swamp Road. Pickett’s Corps is isolated and forced to withdraw, leaving the Southside Railroad undefended.
- 11 April 1, 1865. Sheridan defeats Pickett at Five Forks and captures the Southside Railroad. Grant orders an advance along the whole front, and Petersburg falls the next day.

The gallant defense of the small garrison at an unfinished Confederate earthwork called Fort Gregg bought the time Robert E. Lee needed in order to conduct a withdrawal from Petersburg and Richmond during the night of April 2-3, 1865. Serving one of the guns, a Confederate cannoneer is shown pulling the lanyard as Union troops storm over the breastworks at the moment the fort fell. (Courtesy of the National Park Service)



Get at him as soon as you can. Strike him as hard as you can, and keep moving on." At forts Henry and Donelson, Vicksburg and Chattanooga, Grant demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach to warfare. Once appointed general-in-chief of all the Union armies on March 12, 1864, based on his success in the western theater of war, he had the opportunity to put this philosophy into action on the grand scale in order to achieve the final defeat of the Confederacy.

On taking command, Grant's plan was simple. With a determination to use the greater manpower of the Northern States, he called for a "simultaneous movement all along the line," and advised Major General George G. Meade, commanding the 115,000-strong Army of the Potomac, "Lee's army will be your objective point. Wherever Lee goes, there you will go also." In conjunction with this, the Western army, now commanded by General William Tecumseh Sherman, was ordered to capture Atlanta in Georgia, and then "get into the interior of the enemy's country" to inflict as much damage as possible. Meanwhile, the 30,000-strong army under Nathaniel Banks would capture Mobile in Alabama. An army of equal size under Benjamin F. Butler would advance up the peninsula in Virginia to threaten Richmond, and Franz Sigel's command of 26,000 men would invade the Shenandoah Valley to destroy the "breadbasket" of the Confederacy. However, Grant's 1864 strategy did not all go according to plan. Although Sherman achieved remarkable success by capturing Savannah, Georgia, Banks was defeated in the Red River Campaign, Butler failed in his attempt to approach Richmond, and Sigel was defeated in the valley. Much seemed to hinge on the success of the campaign in Northern Virginia.

Accompanying the Army of the Potomac, commanded by Major General George G. Meade, Grant conducted a relentless pounding of Lee's army in a costly campaign of attrition through the battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, North Anna and Cold Harbor. Crossing the Rapidan River on May 4, he halted his large army of approximately 107,500 men for the night in the Wilderness near Spotsylvania Court House. The next day, Lee surprised him in the two-day indecisive battle of the Wilderness, which cost 18,000 Union and 11,000 Confederate casualties.

Farther south, most of Butler's 33,000 Union soldiers in the X and XVIII Corps, Army of the James, advanced up the James River on May 5, in a

combined army-navy fleet of 120 transports, gunboats, ironclads and assorted vessels, in an additional attempt to close in on Richmond. Seizing Wilson's Wharf and Fort Powhatan, seven miles upriver, and City Point a further 12 miles closer to the Confederate capital, his forces advanced into Bermuda Hundred, but were prevented from progressing further by strong Confederate fortifications. Constructing his own defenses, Butler launched an unsuccessful attempt to capture Drewry's Bluff on May 12, the failure of which he blamed on Major General Quincy Adams Gillmore.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to draw the Confederates out of the Wilderness, Grant headed southeast toward Spotsylvania Court House, but part of Lee's forces arrived there first. On May 8 the battle of Spotsylvania began, culminating in brutal hand-to-hand combat in the Confederate earthworks at a point subsequently called the "Bloody Angle." After a repulse by Confederate artillery on May 18, Grant marched his vast army east and south. However, Lee forced the Union army apart at North Anna Creek by deploying his own force in an inverted "V," and on May 26, as Grant advanced toward Richmond, Lee formed a strong defensive line along Totopotomoy Creek. On May 30 Lee attacked part of Grant's army near Bethesda Church, and on June 1 the armies clashed in the battle of Cold Harbor. Three days later Grant launched a frontal attack to break Lee's line, but was repulsed with 12,000 Union soldiers killed or wounded. Strategically the "Overland Campaign," which ended after the slaughter at Cold Harbor, was a Union success as Grant's army was only about six miles from Richmond. But it had cost 60,000 Union casualties, plus perhaps 35,000 Confederate losses, and Richmond was still in Confederate hands.

Having failed to break through at Cold Harbor on June 4, Grant decided to change his strategy. Instead of confronting and defeating Lee's army in the open north of Richmond, he decided to capture the Confederate capital by crossing the James River and approaching it from the south. By cutting the Confederate supply lines and capturing Petersburg with his larger army and superior resources, he believed he could either starve Lee's Army of Northern Virginia into submission or lure them away from Richmond for a decisive battle.

Although the campaign that followed involved nine and one-half months of siege warfare, which represents the longest siege in American military history, it also consisted of a series of six major battles, 11 engagements, 50 skirmishes, six assaults and four expeditions, as Union forces at first tried to capture Petersburg in an all-out attack, and then concentrated on seizing the various road and rail supply routes south of the city that formed the lifeline of the Confederate capital.