

★ THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS OF THE CIVIL WAR ★

THE OVERLAND CAMPAIGN



4 MAY – 15 JUNE 1864



Gen. U.S. Grant's

Cover: *Union troops cheering General Grant in the Wilderness*, by Edwin Forbes
(Library of Congress)

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THE
OVERLAND
CAMPIGN



4 MAY – 15 JUNE 1864

by
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INTRODUCTION

Although over one hundred fifty years have passed since the start of the American Civil War, that titanic conflict continues to matter. The forces unleashed by that war were immensely destructive because of the significant issues involved: the existence of the Union, the end of slavery, and the very future of the nation. The war remains our most contentious, and our bloodiest, with over six hundred thousand killed in the course of the four-year struggle.

Most civil wars do not spring up overnight, and the American Civil War was no exception. The seeds of the conflict were sown in the earliest days of the republic's founding, primarily over the existence of slavery and the slave trade. Although no conflict can begin without the conscious decisions of those engaged in the debates at that moment, in the end, there was simply no way to paper over the division of the country into two camps: one that was dominated by slavery and the other that sought first to limit its spread and then to abolish it. Our nation was indeed "half slave and half free," and that could not stand.

Regardless of the factors tearing the nation asunder, the soldiers on each side of the struggle went to war for personal reasons: looking for adventure, being caught up in the passions and emotions of their peers, believing in the Union, favoring states' rights, or even justifying the simple schoolyard dynamic of being convinced that they were "worth" three of the soldiers on the other side. Nor can we overlook the factor that some went to war to prove their manhood. This has been, and continues to be, a key dynamic in understanding combat and the profession of arms. Soldiers join for many reasons but often stay in the fight because of their comrades and because they do not want to seem like cowards. Sometimes issues of national impact shrink to nothing in the intensely personal world of cannon shell and minié ball.

Whatever the reasons, the struggle was long and costly and only culminated with the conquest of the rebellious Confederacy,

the preservation of the Union, and the end of slavery. These campaign pamphlets on the American Civil War, prepared in commemoration of our national sacrifices, seek to remember that war and honor those in the United States Army who died to preserve the Union and free the slaves as well as to tell the story of those American soldiers who fought for the Confederacy despite the inherently flawed nature of their cause. The Civil War was our greatest struggle and continues to deserve our deep study and contemplation.

RICHARD W. STEWART
Chief Historian



THE OVERLAND CAMPAIGN 4 MAY–15 JUNE 1864

The clerk barely gazed over his register as the short, brown-bearded man, clad in a plain linen duster and accompanied by only his teenage son, approached the desk at Willard's Hotel. It was late on the afternoon of 8 March 1864, and the slouching, taciturn traveler looked like any number of office seekers or country visitors to Washington, D.C. The clerk told him that a room might be available on the top floor. The man said that would be fine, and he signed the register. When the clerk swung around the book, he saw the entry—"U.S. Grant and son, Galena, Ill." He suddenly remembered that the hotel had an elegant suite on the second floor, and he came from behind his desk to personally carry the general's bag upstairs. Having settled into his luxurious accommodations and eaten dinner, Ulysses S. Grant went across the street to attend a reception at the Executive Mansion, where he met President and Mrs. Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State William H. Seward. The next day, he returned to receive from the president his commission as lieutenant general, with command over all the armies of the United States.

Strategic Setting

The nondescript outward appearance of the 41-year-old Ohio native belied the inner toughness and dynamism that had annihi-

lated two Confederate armies and routed a third. One staff officer remarked that Grant “habitually wears an expression as if he had determined to drive his head through a brick wall, and was about to do it.” Plain-spoken and reserved, he impressed people more with his moral character than his intellect. He seemed to operate not according to principles in books but by intuition and common sense. Contrary to so many later evaluations, he did not simply bludgeon his way to victory. As the Vicksburg Campaign had shown, he could maneuver and improvise, pragmatically adjusting to different situations. Unlike many commanders, he displayed remarkably little concern with what his opponent was doing out of his sight, figuring he would make the enemy dance to his tune. Above all, he built his approach to war on aggression and relentless pressure. His philosophy was to “find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike at him as hard as you can and as often as you can, and keep moving on.”

General Grant
(Library of Congress)



The new commander soon showed his talents as a strategist. Although President Lincoln and Grant’s predecessors had attempted to take advantage of superior Northern manpower and materiel through coordinated action, Grant enforced cooperation with orders for simultaneous offensives by Union forces across the board. Even departments with defensive missions, he figured, could carry out their tasks best by advancing, thus not only keeping the initiative but also diverting scarce Confederate troops from more critical points. The primary objective of these operations would be the destruction of the South’s armies and resources to make war. In the West, Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman would lead three armies from

Chattanooga, Tennessee, into Georgia, breaking up General Joseph E. Johnston's Army of Tennessee and inflicting all possible damage to the Confederate infrastructure. Once he had extricated himself from a secondary campaign into Louisiana, Maj. Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks would capture Mobile, Alabama, one of the South's last two major ports, and then drive northeast to hook up with Sherman.

In the East, along with his duties as general in chief, Grant would exercise direct field supervision of the Virginia Theater and the Army of the Potomac, which he would accompany. Although he undoubtedly wished to avoid the snares of Washington's political infighting and the Army bureaucracy—which he left in the capable hands of his War Department chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck—he was clearly influenced by the importance of the Virginia Theater and by the popular expectation that he himself would take on the renowned General Robert E. Lee. Implicit in the latter was the hope that he could shake up the Army of the Potomac, which had suffered repeatedly at Lee's hands. That army's officers viewed the newcomer from the West with suspicion, and their commander, Maj. Gen. George G. Meade, offered to step down in order to allow Grant to bring in his own man. Impressed by Meade's self-effacement, Grant chose to retain him and his principal subordinates, appointing just one protégé, Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan, to command the army's three-division cavalry corps.

Whoever the army commander was, Grant's very presence created an awkward situation. By and large, he tried to give only general directives and leave details and implementation to

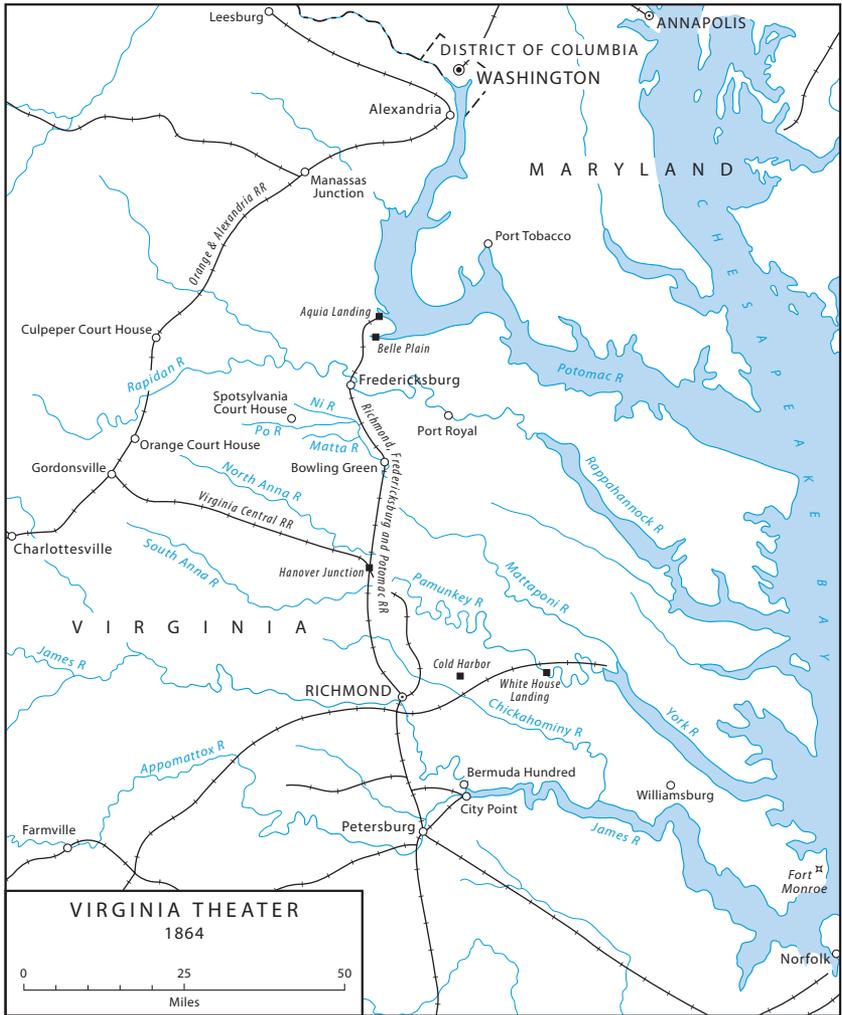
General Meade
(Library of Congress)



Meade, but having a superior looking over his shoulder and, at times, giving tactical direction left the competent, but temperamental, 48-year-old patrician from Philadelphia uncertain over his exact sphere of authority. To complicate matters further, a distinct clash of cultures existed between the new man and the eastern army. As a legacy of its first commander, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, the Army of the Potomac took a more cautious, cerebral approach to military operations, the mentality of the careful engineer who wants to know the entire system and the factors influencing it before putting it to work. This was the culture that the aggressive, intuitive Grant wanted to change.

But first, he would need to develop a strategy for the Virginia Theater, and that meant a close look at the terrain (*Map 1*). One hundred miles separated the two capitals of Washington and Richmond, a stretch of rolling hills giving way in the east to flatlands. Although this countryside was more cultivated and developed than the rough terrain of the West, it still presented obstacles for an invader. It was cut by numerous east-west waterways, including the Rappahannock River and its tributary, the Rapidan River; the Ni, Po, and Matta Rivers, which joined to form the Mattaponi River; the North and South Anna Rivers and Totopotomoy Creek, which combined to form the Pamunkey River; the Chickahominy River, which flowed into the James River; and finally the James itself. These streams all eventually reached Chesapeake Bay, ruled by Union gunboats and a secure line of supply for Union forces operating near the Tidewater coast. Inhabited areas contained farms and small towns, connected mostly by dirt roads that, depending on the weather, often turned to dust or mud. A few railroads crisscrossed the region: the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac running south from Aquia Landing on the lower Potomac through Fredericksburg to Richmond; the Orange and Alexandria, curving southwest along the Blue Ridge foothills from Union-occupied Alexandria, through Culpeper Court House, Gordonsville, and Charlottesville, to Lynchburg; and the Virginia Central, running east from the fertile Shenandoah Valley, the breadbasket of Lee's army, through Charlottesville and Gordonsville to meet the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac at Hanover Junction.

In Virginia too, Grant would aim for simultaneous, mutually supporting drives that sought to destroy enemy armies and resources. At first, he considered detaching 60,000 men from Meade's army at Culpeper and, using Northern sea power, land them along the Atlantic coast for a drive inland to cut Richmond's



MAP 1

communications with the South. Finding that the concept reawakened old fears in the Lincoln administration of uncovering Washington, he opted instead for an overland approach by the Army of the Potomac, supported by four subsidiary offensives. From West Virginia, two columns, totaling 8,500 men under Brig. Gens. George Crook and William W. Averell, would advance into

southwest Virginia, destroy the lead mines and saltworks in that region, and break up the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad. They would then turn northeast into the Shenandoah Valley to link up with Maj. Gen. Franz Sigel's 9,000-man force, which would drive southwest from Martinsburg, West Virginia. Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler's Army of the James, about 30,000 strong, would advance up the south bank of the James River, threatening Richmond and the key rail center of Petersburg, thirty miles south of the capital, and thereby pinning down Confederate forces in that area.

In his orders to Meade on 9 April 1864, Grant wrote, "Lee's army will be your objective point. Wherever Lee goes, there you will go also." Although Grant anticipated eventual cooperation with Butler, he preferred to fight Lee's Army of Northern Virginia to the north, outside the Richmond fortifications. From Culpeper, the army could either move farther west, blocking Lee from the Valley with its supplies and the Blue Ridge-shielded invasion route to the North, or drive southeast, a path that would take him across the Rapidan into the tangled woodlands of the Wilderness. The latter would leave him less dependent on a long railway supply line that was vulnerable to cavalry and guerrilla raids and in a better position to cooperate with Butler and to cut off Lee from Richmond. In the end, Grant adopted the southeast line of advance.

Whatever line Grant adopted, he would have to deal with Lee, who was already a legend in the North as well as in the South. For almost two years, the great Southern chieftain had repeatedly hurled back the Army of the Potomac's drives on Richmond, and, on two occasions, he had carried the war into the North. Aggressiveness, audacity, and a surpassing moral toughness characterized Lee's approach to war. Perhaps the war's best example of a Napoleonic commander, he seized every opportunity to take the offensive. Even against long odds, he would swiftly maneuver for an advantageous position and rain hammer blows against the opposing army's flanks and weak points until his adversary, often more mentally than physically beaten, abandoned the campaign. Lee's approach reflected his conviction that, against the North's superior numbers and resources, the South could not afford to be passive but must strike, destroying the Union armies when possible, and thus achieve a moral ascendancy that would undermine Northern popular support for the war effort. Lee did not command all of the Confederate armies—only President Jefferson Davis could do that—but his immense prestige gave him great

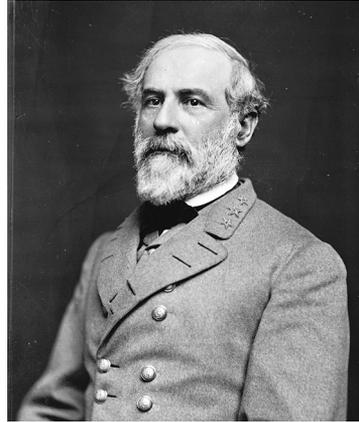
influence among Confederate leaders in strategic matters beyond his army.

Despite Lee's unceasing desire to take the war to his opponent, Confederate strategy in the spring of 1864—to the extent a unified strategy existed—centered on the defensive. Lt. Gen. James Longstreet, Lee's veteran First Corps commander who had just returned from a disappointing fall campaign in east Tennessee, could push for a drive into Kentucky, but, in practical terms, the South lacked the resources to do much more than repulse the coming offensives and hope that the war-weary Northern public would turn the Lincoln administration out of office in the election that autumn.

The problem, as always, was that a passive defense required scattering slender Confederate resources to guard a vast territory. Aside from the Army of Northern Virginia, facing the Army of the Potomac from behind the Rapidan near Orange Court House, the Confederates had stationed about twenty thousand troops to cover railroads and key points in the Eastern Theater from West Virginia to South Carolina. Lee could argue that to protect everything was to protect nothing and that these troops would make the greatest impact by joining his own army, but Davis and his military advisers could not easily ignore threats to populated areas, critical resources, and essential transportation networks, to say nothing of the clamor for local defense among a Southern populace as tired of the conflict as were their Northern counterparts.

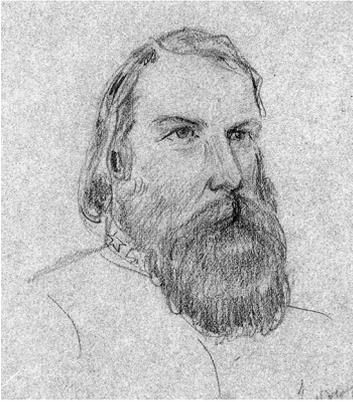
When the push did come, at least Lee could count on his thoroughly professional Army of Northern Virginia, numbering about sixty thousand men in the spring of 1864. Most were experienced troops who had enlisted or been drafted for the duration, with fillers going to older regiments, where they learned the warrior's trade from veteran comrades. In general, morale was high; defeat did not even seem a possibility—most soldiers discounting the

General Lee
(Library of Congress)



debacle at Gettysburg as an anomaly—although desertion was an increasing problem by April. Lee’s corps commanders—the steady, hard-hitting Longstreet; perky, bald, one-legged Lt. Gen. Richard S. Ewell of the Second Corps; and the impetuous but sickly Lt. Gen. Ambrose Powell Hill of the Third Corps—were tough, experienced fighters with subordinates well schooled in Lee’s aggressive style. Lee directed them through a minimal staff, consisting

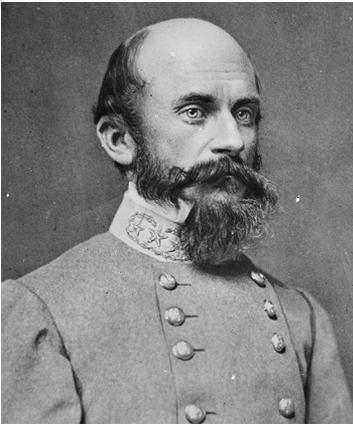
*General Longstreet,
by Alfred R. Waud
(Library of Congress)*



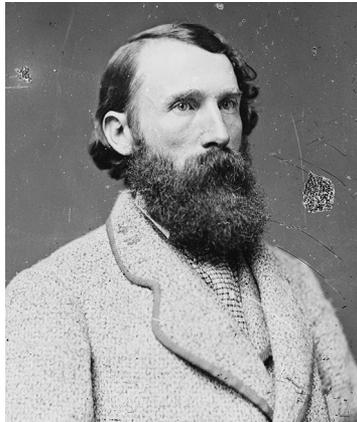
of a few overworked secretaries and personal aides who left him with a heavy workload that eventually took its toll. For intelligence, Lee relied on the reports of his flamboyant, yet capable, cavalry commander, Maj. Gen. James E. B. “Jeb” Stuart, as well as Northern newspapers and an extensive network of spies and scouts. In addition, he benefited from operating in friendly country.

Lee’s major problem that spring was a lack of subsistence and transportation. Although the South produced plenty of

*General Ewell
(Library of Congress)*



*General Hill
(Library of Congress)*

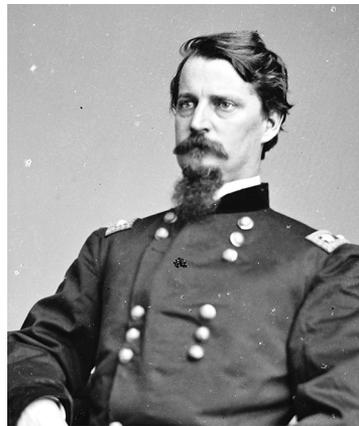


food, poor management, narrow local interests, and a rickety rail network left his army with barely enough supplies to maintain operations—and then only after Lee had dispersed his troops to forage. Thus, as the campaign season approached, the First Corps was far south of the rest of the army at Gordonsville, while most of Stuart's three-division cavalry corps remained southeast of Fredericksburg to gather provender for men and horses alike.

Meade's 100,000-man Army of the Potomac did not have to worry about its next meal, but it faced other challenges as the campaign season loomed. In many of its veteran regiments, the three-year terms for which volunteers had enlisted at the start of the war were due to expire during the spring and summer, and the Federal government could offer only bounties and furloughs as inducements to reenlist. Surprisingly, about twenty-seven thousand men did so—over half of those eligible—but considerable disruption would plague the army in camp and field as the others left. In addition, the short-timer status of several units would affect their fighting qualities in the coming battles. To replace the departing veterans, Grant turned to heavy artillery regiments that had spent the war in the fortifications around Washington and converted them to full-time infantry formations. Other units would have to cope with green bounty men, draftees, and substitutes to replace the heroes of 1861, and the North increasingly relied on African American regiments to maintain manpower levels.

The Army of the Potomac faced other problems, some inherent in its size advantage over Lee's army. Partly to reduce the number of headquarters reporting to him, Meade had recently reorganized the army from five corps to three: the II Corps under the inspirational but ailing Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock; the V Corps under the young but controlling Meade protégé, Maj. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren; and the VI Corps, under the much beloved, solid, but stodgy Maj. Gen. John Sedgwick. In addition,

General Hancock
(Library of Congress)



General Warren
(Library of Congress)



General Sedgwick
(Library of Congress)



General Burnside
(Library of Congress)



Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside would bring his 16,000-man IX Corps to serve directly under Grant, a concession to Burnside's seniority to Meade. In contrast to Grant's small circle of intimates, Meade had a huge staff under the able Maj. Gen. Andrew A. Humphreys. Although this group had grown more professional over time, it still was prone to lapses and did not have the intelligence and operations experts that distinguish a modern staff. The army benefited from a sophisticated supply system, using an extensive rail and water network with depots in Washington and Baltimore.

It was slowed, however, by a cumbersome supply train that, despite Grant's efforts to reduce it, still had 4,300 wagons, 835 ambulances, and a huge cattle herd at the campaign's start.

Operations

THE WILDERNESS

On 4 May, as the dogwoods bloomed, the campaign opened. Just past midnight, the Army of the Potomac moved out of its camps at Culpeper toward the Rapidan River. Behind a cavalry screen that drove off Confederate pickets, the V and VI Corps marched over two pontoon bridges at Germanna Ford, while the II Corps and the supply train crossed downstream at Ely's and Culpeper Mine Fords. By midafternoon, the V Corps had reached Wilderness Tavern, where the Culpeper Plank Road met the east-west Orange Turnpike, and Grant had ordered the IX Corps, which had been guarding the Orange and Alexandria, to make a forced march to Germanna Ford. Both Grant and Meade believed that Lee would either retreat to the North Anna or take up a strong position to the west at Mine Run, where he had blocked a similar Union advance the previous November. Although the Union generals now halted the V Corps to allow the wagon train to catch up, they still hoped to move quickly through the Wilderness to the headwaters of Mine Run and outflank that position. But Lee had already received word of the Union advance and, instead of reoccupying the Mine Run line, moved quickly east to catch the Federals in the Wilderness. His Second Corps drove along the Orange Turnpike, while the Third Corps moved parallel farther south along the Orange Plank Road. Lee, however, hesitated to bring on a general engagement until the First Corps had finished its long march from Gordonsville.

Largely because of poor cavalry reconnaissance, Grant and Meade knew little of Lee's dispositions until about 0620 on 5 May, when Warren reported making contact. His pickets on the turnpike had clashed with enemy infantry forming a line of battle on the western edge of Saunders Field, a ragged clearing two miles west of Wilderness Tavern. As part of the army's turning movement, the V Corps had sent most of its units from Wilderness Tavern southwest along a woodland path toward Parker's Store on the Orange Plank Road, leaving Brig. Gen. Charles Griffin's division on the turnpike as a flank guard. The II Corps, meanwhile, was taking a wider loop from its bivouac to the east at Chancellorsville through Todd's Tavern to Shady Grove Church, just beyond the Po River to the south. Now Lee, instead of retreating or taking

a strong position at Mine Run, was actually offering battle, and Grant and Meade were happy to oblige him. Meade told Warren to attack with his whole corps, directed Hancock to bring up the II Corps from Todd's Tavern, and sent Brig. Gen. George W. Getty's division of the VI Corps to occupy the critical intersection where the Brock Road from Wilderness Tavern to Todd's Tavern met the Orange Plank Road. Grant also ordered the IX Corps' advance to cross the Rapidan and support the offensive.



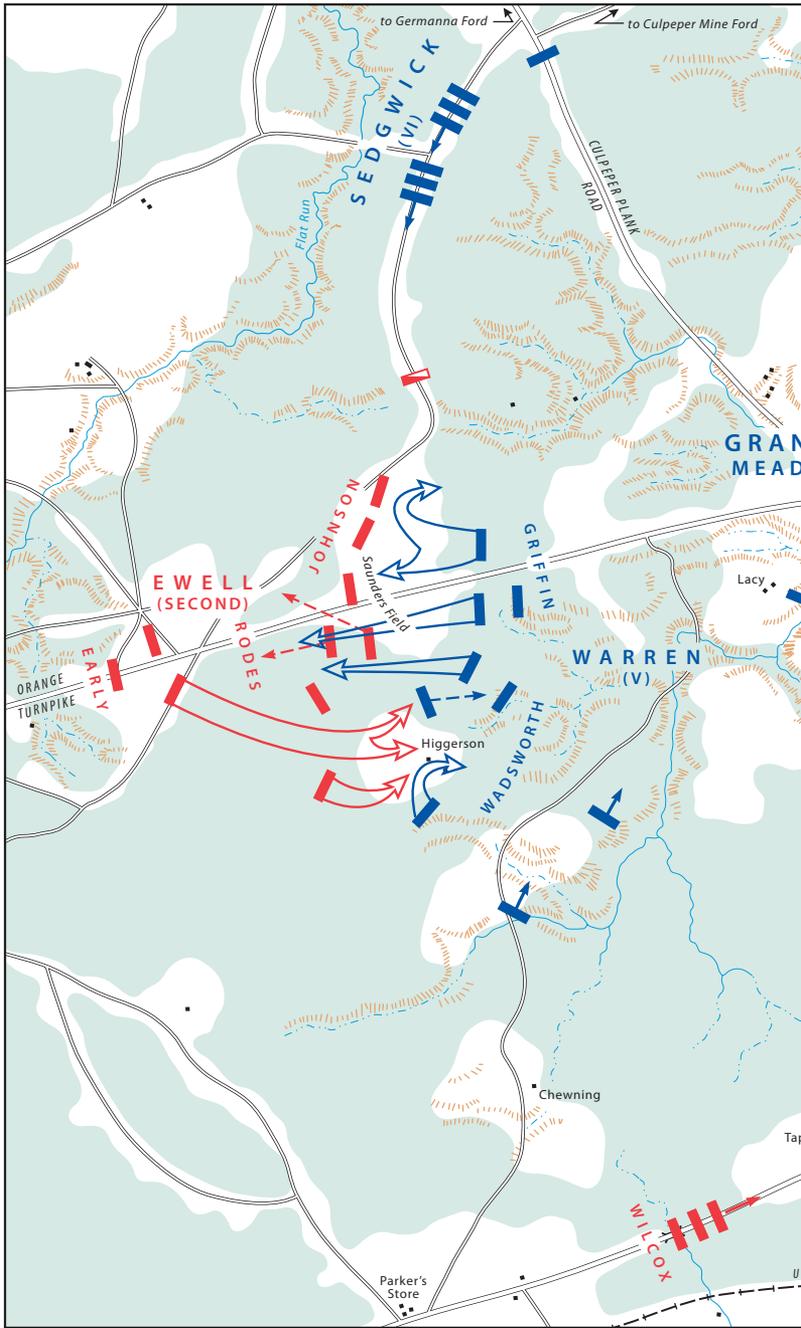
View of Brock Road–Orange Plank Road intersection looking southwest, c. 1887 (Virginia Historical Society)

Now the rugged terrain of the Wilderness came into play (*Map 2*). Brig. Gen. James S. Wadsworth's division of the V Corps left the path to Parker's Store and tried to move northwest through dark thickets of second-growth underbrush—choked with brambles, briars, and vines—in order to come up on Griffin's left. Units found it impossible to form any sort of line, nor could they see farther than a few yards in any direction. It took Wadsworth four hours to advance barely a mile, and, by the time he arrived at his assigned position about 1300, he had lost contact with the division on his left. He attacked across the Higginson farm clearing with his flank in the air, was hit hard by Confederate Maj. Gen. Robert E. Rodes' division of Ewell's corps, and fell back in confusion. Alongside the

turnpike, Griffin achieved some success, routing a brigade of Maj. Gen. Edward "Allegheny" Johnson's division, but the Confederates rallied, brought forward reinforcements, attacked Griffin's exposed right, and drove him back through Saunders Field. A furious Griffin rode up to army headquarters and loudly denounced Brig. Gen. Horatio G. Wright of the VI Corps for not moving up his division to support Griffin's right flank. Puzzled by this insubordination, Grant asked Meade, "Who is this General Gregg? You ought to arrest him." Normally tempestuous in battle, Meade calmly buttoned Grant's coat as if he were a child, good-naturedly stating, "It's Griffin, not Gregg, and it's only his way of talking."

Meade might not have been so amiable had he known how close his army had come to disaster just to the south. Had Hill's Third Corps beaten the Federals to the Brock Road–Orange Plank Road junction, it would have cut off Hancock's II Corps from the rest of the Army of the Potomac. When Getty, riding ahead of his men, reached the intersection at about 1130, he found only a few retreating Federal cavalymen in the path of Maj. Gen. Henry Heth's Confederate division, whose skirmishers were visible in the road to the west. Deploying his staff to simulate a larger force and cause the Southerners to hesitate, Getty rushed his division into position, where they fired a volley that halted the Confederate drive. Shortly afterward, Hancock arrived on the scene and took charge. Under appeals from Meade, he tried to organize his arriving corps for an assault but encountered as many problems in deploying his men in the thick woods as had Warren farther north. Finally, at Meade's insistence, he launched an attack late that afternoon with Getty's division and whatever II Corps units he could get into line. The Union troops struggled to keep their formation in the tangled underbrush and had little idea of enemy dispositions, but they drove back Heth until evening, when the counterattack of Maj. Gen. Cadmus M. Wilcox's Confederate division brought the Union assault in the smoke-shrouded woods to a halt.

With nightfall, each side took stock. So far, Lee was pleased with the course of the battle, having forced the Federals to fight in the Wilderness without bringing on a general engagement while his army was still separated. Although Hill's weakened corps was too exhausted to entrench against the expected Union attack on the morrow, the First Corps and Maj. Gen. Richard H. Anderson's division of Hill's Third Corps were due to arrive by morning and

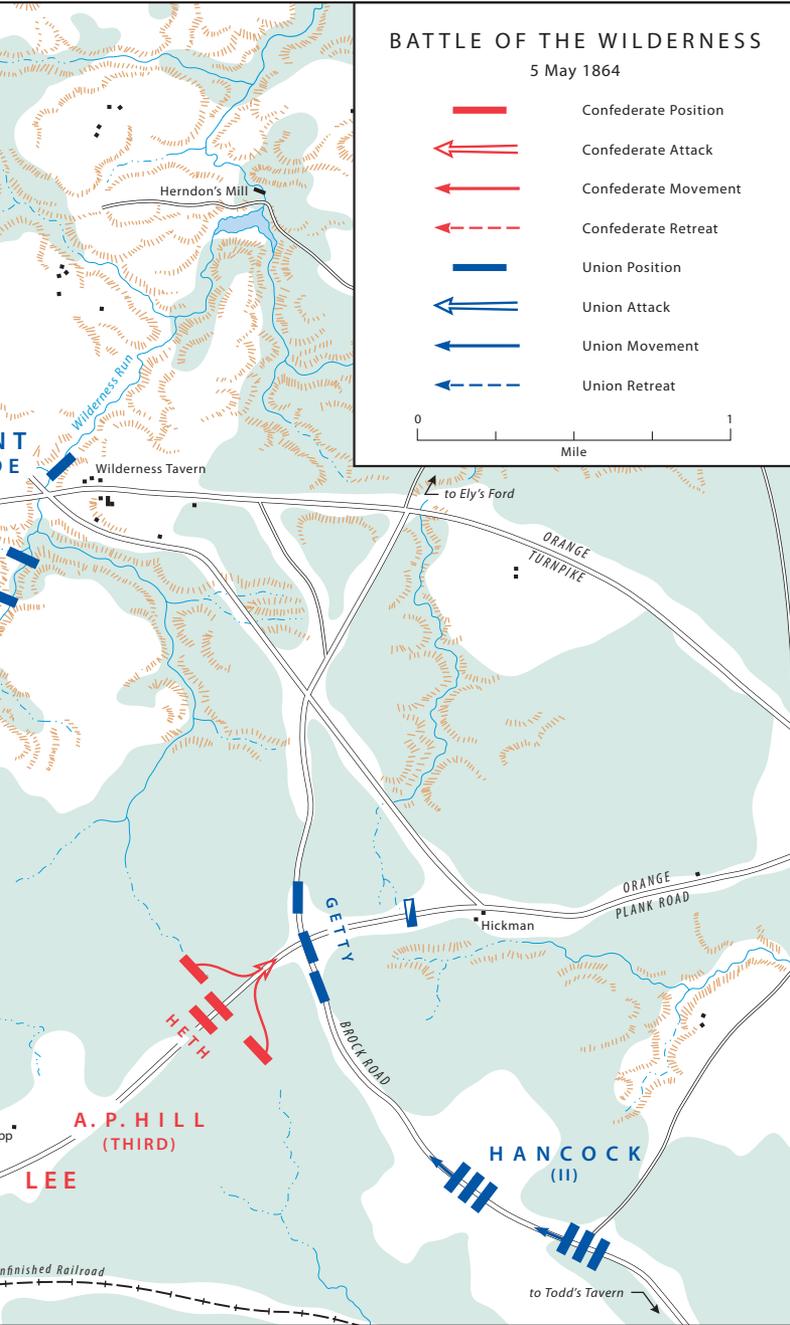


MAP 2

BATTLE OF THE WILDERNESS

5 May 1864

-  Confederate Position
-  Confederate Attack
-  Confederate Movement
-  Confederate Retreat
-  Union Position
-  Union Attack
-  Union Movement
-  Union Retreat



be available for a counterattack, while Ewell would strike at dawn to draw attention from Hill.

For Grant and Meade, it had been a frustrating day, but they saw an opportunity to wipe out Hill's two divisions at dawn before Longstreet's arrival. Reinforcing Hancock with Wadsworth's division, which had made another long trek through the woods to get into position north of the Orange Plank Road, Grant directed an attack at 0430 by the II Corps to destroy Hill, while the V and VI Corps pinned down Ewell, and the newly arrived IX Corps advanced down the trail to Parker's Store to hit Hill's left and rear. Doubtful of Burnside's ability to reach his position in time, Meade asked for a postponement, and Grant moved back the start time to 0500 on 6 May (*Map 3*).

As instructed, Hancock struck at precisely 0500. While one division faced south on the Brock Road to guard against a Confederate attack from that direction, four divisions advanced in three massed lines, mostly south of the Orange Plank Road, and Wadsworth's division struck Heth's left flank north of the road. The hungry, tired Confederates fired a volley or two and then retreated toward the farm clearing of the Widow Tapp, about a mile to the west. The Union offensive fell into some confusion as Wadsworth's advance became entangled with the Federals along the Orange Plank Road. Still, Hancock was exultant. To Col. Theodore Lyman of Meade's staff, he shouted, "We are driving them, sir; tell General Meade we are driving them most beautifully!" Lyman informed the II Corps commander that Burnside's IX Corps had not yet reached the field. "I knew it!" Hancock roared, "If he could attack now, we would smash A. P. Hill all to pieces."

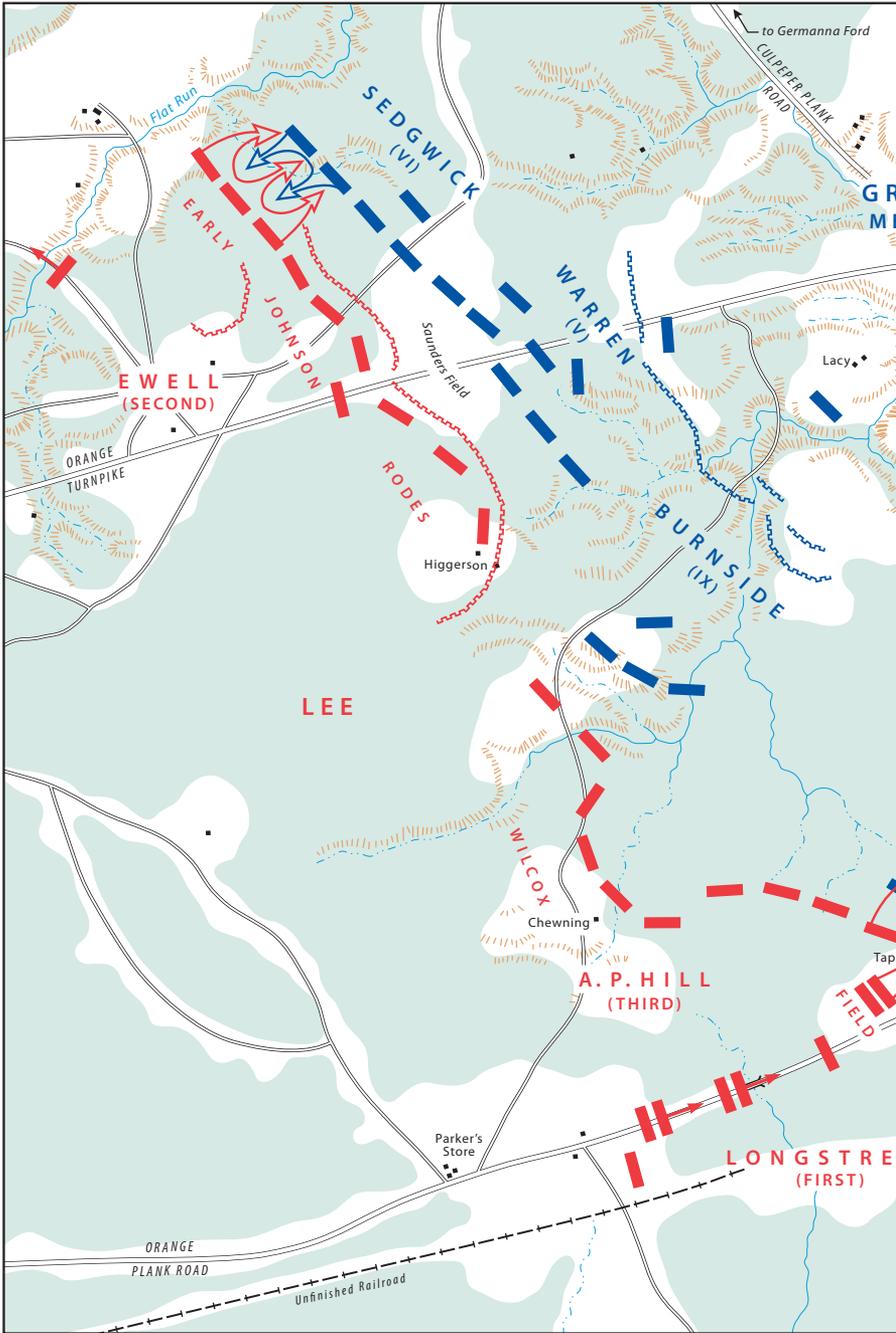
Across the Tapp field, as the remnants of Hill's corps streamed toward the rear and Lt. Col. William T. Poague's batteries strove to keep the Federals at bay, Lee saw Longstreet's vanguard arrive in the nick of time. While Hill's retreating men passed through their lines, Brig. Gen. Joseph B. Kershaw's division deployed in the fields south of the road, and Maj. Gen. Charles W. Field's division formed north of the road. Lee spurred his horse to Field's lead unit, Brig. Gen. John Gregg's Texas Brigade, as if to lead the attack himself. "Go back, General Lee, go back!" screamed the Texans. After a reluctant Lee had ridden to the rear, the Texas Brigade launched a counterattack that bought the Confederates valuable time but cost the unit almost two-thirds of its strength. By midmorning, the rest of Field's division and Kershaw's division south of the road had

driven the Union troops—their formations hopelessly entangled and running low on ammunition—halfway back to the Brock Road intersection. At Hancock's urging, Meade pressed Burnside to hurry southwest on the Parker's Store road, but the IX Corps, exhausted by a march of forty miles during the past thirty-six hours, had reached only the Chewning farm about a mile short of the store by midmorning. Hancock, meanwhile, worried by reports of Confederates at Todd's Tavern a few miles to the south and by the whereabouts of Longstreet's third division under Maj. Gen. George E. Pickett—actually posted at Richmond—further reinforced the troops guarding the Brock Road.

Hancock was correct to be wary but misjudged the point of danger. About 1000, Lee's chief engineer, Maj. Gen. Martin L. Smith, reported to Longstreet that he had found an unfinished railroad grade, parallel to and south of the Orange Plank Road, that provided a covered approach to within a few hundred yards of the Union left flank. Longstreet's capable chief of staff, Lt. Col. G. Moxley Sorrel, funneled four brigades from the First and Third Corps into the cut, where they took up a position perpendicular to the Union line on the road. At 1100, screaming the rebel yell, the Confederates struck, rolling up the Union flank "like a wet blanket," as Hancock later described it. Wadsworth was mortally wounded while trying to rally his troops for a counterattack, and the Union line, already disorganized by the dense woods and the repulse of the morning attack, fled toward the Brock Road junction. There, Hancock, looking magnificent astride his horse, rallied his men, and they began to dig earthworks along the road.

Now it was the Confederates' turn to become confused in the thick woods. Sorrel's counterattack force became entangled with the units on the Orange Plank Road, and, in the chaos, Longstreet fell, severely wounded in the neck by his own men. The same volley of musketry mortally wounded one of Longstreet's brigade commanders, Brig. Gen. Micah Jenkins, who was riding at his side. Not until 1600 could Lee sort out his troops and launch a new attack on the Union works along the Brock Road, but the Confederates could penetrate the Federal line at only two points and were quickly ejected. In places, the dry woods around them caught fire, burning to death the severely wounded of both sides who could not escape the rapidly spreading flames.

As the sun fell, a new crisis arose on the Union right. Ewell's dawn attack had made little headway, and Union counterthrusts

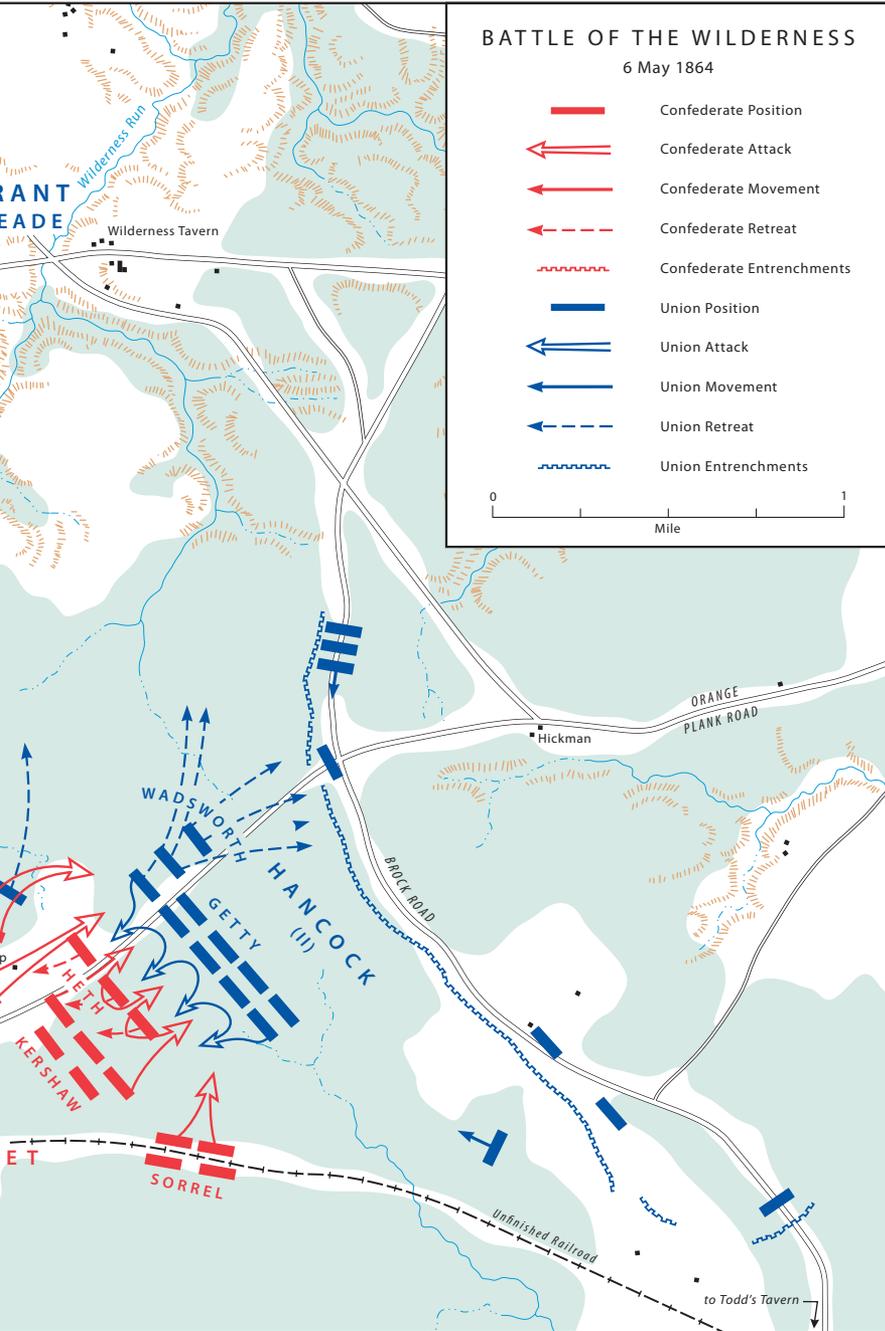


MAP 3

BATTLE OF THE WILDERNESS

6 May 1864

- Confederate Position
- Confederate Attack
- Confederate Movement
- Confederate Retreat
- Confederate Entrenchments
- Union Position
- Union Attack
- Union Movement
- Union Retreat
- Union Entrenchments



fizzled against the dug-in Confederate line. Brig. Gen. John B. Gordon, a brigade commander in Maj. Gen. Jubal A. Early's division on Ewell's extreme left, confirmed scouts' reports that the Union VI Corps' right flank was in the air. Early was skeptical of achieving much with a single brigade and wary of a counterattack by the IX Corps, so he initially rejected Gordon's plea for a strike. Later in the day, however, the arrival of another brigade and reports of the IX Corps' presence on Longstreet's front led Ewell to authorize the move.

About 1800, as the Federals on the right stacked arms and cooked dinner, two Confederate brigades drove in the Union pickets and struck that flank, driving into the VI Corps' rear, while a third brigade hit the Union front. Two Federal brigades dissolved under the onslaught, losing their commanders to capture. At Meade's headquarters, consternation reigned among staff officers who recalled Lt. Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's flank attack at nearby Chancellorsville a year earlier, and one panicked officer warned Grant that Lee was about to cut off the army from its Rapidan crossings. Removing his ever-present cigar, Grant replied, "I am heartily tired of hearing about what Lee is going to do. . . . Go back to your command and try to think what we are going to do ourselves, instead of what Lee is going to do." Grant's confidence was fully justified. Sedgwick was already rallying his corps and feeding in reinforcements, while the Confederates were having trouble maintaining their cohesion and direction in the dense woods and growing darkness. Gordon later would argue that an attack earlier in the day would have won a crushing victory, but, given his force's limited strength, his claims seem overblown.

Still, in two days the Army of the Potomac had sustained a terrific beating. The Confederates had smashed both Union flanks and inflicted over seventeen thousand losses, about the same as the year before at Chancellorsville, at a cost of eleven thousand of their own men. Repeatedly the Union army had shown itself to be clumsy, unresponsive, and less resourceful in the Wilderness than its Southern counterpart.

Characteristically, however, Grant saw the battle as a draw in which he had inflicted significant damage on his opponent. While he did not have the foggiest notion of what military professionals would later call operational art, he saw the battle not as an end in itself, but as the first in a series of engagements

to crush Lee's army. Since further combat in the Wilderness would achieve little, he decided not to retreat, but to move ten miles southeast down the Brock Road, around Lee's flank, to Spotsylvania Court House. If he could reach that key crossroads first, he would position himself between Lee and Richmond, forcing Lee to attack his superior force in open country. At 0630 on the morning of 7 May, he issued orders for a night march to Spotsylvania. During the day, he shifted his supply base from Culpeper to Belle Plain, six miles southeast of Aquia Landing on the Potomac, and started his wagon train south. At 2030, Warren's V Corps pulled out of line and began its march down the Brock Road, behind the cover of the II Corps' front. Near the Brock Road–Orange Plank Road intersection, the Union troops cheered lustily as Grant, Meade, and their staffs passed—riding not back toward the river crossings or Fredericksburg, but south, toward Richmond.

SPOTSYLVANIA COURT HOUSE

It did not take Lee long to discern his adversary's next move. During the morning of 7 May, his patrols had discovered that the Federals had taken up their bridges from Germanna Ford and were no longer guarding the road to that crossing. To prepare for a possible move south, Lee had his engineers cut a new road south through the woods, parallel to the Brock Road, to the vicinity of Corbin's Bridge on the Po River, a few miles west of Todd's Tavern. From there, his army would have a clear road to the courthouse. When midafternoon reports indicated that the Union artillery reserve near Wilderness Tavern was moving south, Lee concluded that Spotsylvania was Grant's objective and told his First Corps, now under Anderson, to use the new road to move at dark to the courthouse. At 2200, Anderson started. Due to raging fires in the Wilderness and the lack of a suitable rest area, he kept his men on the march throughout the night. At Blockhouse Bridge, where the First Corps recrossed the Po downstream from Corbin's Bridge, he halted his command at daylight to eat breakfast. At this point, a messenger arrived from Maj. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee, the commanding general's nephew and one of Stuart's division commanders, calling for help against the V Corps' advance. Two of Kershaw's brigades immediately marched to Fitzhugh Lee's line. There, Stuart was waiting to position them where the Brock Road, en route to the courthouse, crossed a rise named Laurel Hill.

Attacking up Laurel Hill was Warren's V Corps, which had endured a difficult night as the advance of the complex Union maneuver. To keep the Brock Road free of unnecessary traffic, the VI Corps was to march east to Chancellorsville and then southwest on the Catharpin and Piney Branch Church Roads to rejoin the Brock Road at Laurel Hill. The IX Corps was to follow the VI Corps to Piney Branch Church, where it would remain as a reserve, while the II Corps would hold its position and then proceed behind the V Corps to Todd's Tavern. Sheridan's cavalry was supposed to screen the advance and clear the Brock Road all the way to Spotsylvania, with one division occupying the cross-roads ahead of the infantry.

But the Army of the Potomac's knack for slowness once again came into play. The VI and IX Corps found their path to Chancellorsville blocked by ambulances loaded with wounded en route to Fredericksburg. The V Corps' march ran into a 200-yard stretch of inch-deep water, which the long column had to pick through, one man at a time, backing up the corps for miles. When the head of the column reached Todd's Tavern—five miles south of the Orange Plank Road intersection—about midnight, it found two cavalry divisions asleep in the fields. An angry Meade ordered Brig. Gen. David M. Gregg's cavalry division to hurry west and capture Corbin's Bridge, while Brig. Gen. Wesley Merritt's division was assigned to capture Blockhouse Bridge and clear the path southeast to the courthouse. Merritt had advanced barely two miles when he ran into Fitzhugh Lee's roadblock of felled trees, guarded by dismounted Confederate troopers backed by artillery. A brisk firefight ensued, and Merritt requested support from Warren's lead division, commanded by Brig. Gen. John C. Robinson. By midmorning of 8 May, the Federals had pushed Lee's cavalry to the foot of Laurel Hill.

Exhausted after an all-night march, the Union advance now confronted about four hundred yards of open field, the ground rising to a line of pine trees on the crest where Lee's cavalry had piled some logs and fence rails to make a crude breastwork. Robinson wanted to bring up his whole division for a full-scale attack, but Warren, still burning from criticism that he had acted too slowly in the Wilderness, decided to strike before the Confederates could finish their works and bring up reinforcements. The lead Union brigade advanced on the east side of the road to within sixty yards of the enemy line, where it was hammered by a point-blank volley

and forced to take cover behind a shallow depression. West of the road, Col. Andrew W. Denison's Maryland Brigade drove across the Spindle Farm, briefly penetrating the works on the crest, before Kershaw's troops threw them back down the hill. Robinson fell when a Confederate minie ball shattered his left knee, and his attack soon disintegrated. As more V Corps units arrived, Warren threw them into action piecemeal, telling his tired, hungry troops to clear the road if they wanted to draw rations, but they could make no headway against the ever-stronger Confederate position.

Frustrated, Warren re-formed his troops along the tree line in front of Laurel Hill and sent word to Meade that he faced a powerful force of enemy infantry. Meade tried to hurry the VI Corps to the front, but it took five hours before Sedgwick could deploy his men on Warren's left. Reluctant to put the senior but plodding Sedgwick in charge, Meade instead enjoined cooperation between the two corps, earning a blast from the punctilious Warren, who demanded that Meade choose a single commander. When the combined attack finally began at 1800, just a few V Corps units joined two VI Corps divisions, which were speedily repulsed.

As darkness fell on 8 May, the two sides rushed up reinforcements and extended their lines. From west to east, the Union divisions of Brig. Gen. Samuel W. Crawford, Brig. Gen. Lysander Cutler, and Griffin held the V Corps' front from near the Po River to the Brock Road. East of the road, the VI Corps' line—composed of the divisions of Brig. Gens. James B. Ricketts, Thomas H. Neill, and Horatio G. Wright—curved northeast to the modest hut of a farmer named Brown. The II Corps remained in the area of Todd's Tavern, while the IX Corps shifted northeast toward the Fredericksburg Road to extend the Union line in that direction. The Federals had only the haziest idea of Lee's position, which lay behind dense woods and numerous skirmishers.

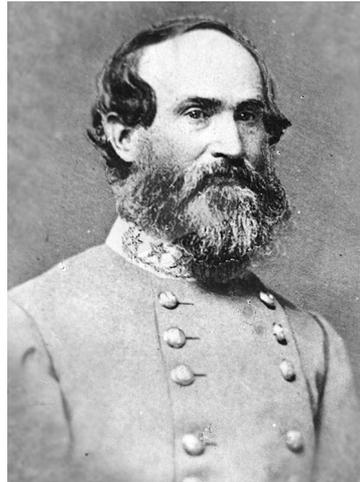
Having deployed the rest of the First Corps and driven off Brig. Gen. James H. Wilson's Union cavalry division, which had briefly occupied the courthouse, Lee hastened to bring up his other two corps. Arriving on the First Corps' right about 1700, Ewell extended his line during the night, running it to the north along a low ridge and then bending it back to enclose a bulge or salient, dubbed the Mule Shoe because of its U-shaped configuration. When told about the salient, Lee expressed his displeasure, for he knew that such positions tended to disperse the defenders'

fire and therefore required more men than straight-line fortifications. But he made the best of the situation by arranging to pack the tip with artillery and ensuring that it would be well entrenched. Meanwhile, after initially putting the Third Corps on his left along the Po, Lee shifted it to the right to cover the approaches to the courthouse from Fredericksburg. To replace Hill, who had asked to be relieved due to a chronic illness, he chose Early, a prickly personality, but also a rugged, skillful fighter.

Meanwhile, Union army headquarters at Piney Branch Church erupted with acrimony. Furious with the bungled night march, Meade took out his frustrations on Sheridan. Among other things, he blamed the cavalry commander for not screening the army, not clearing the road to Spotsylvania, not informing the army of the enemy's movements, and wasting his cavalry's energies on meaningless brushes with Stuart. Never one to suffer criticism gladly, the fiery Sheridan shot back that Meade's orders to his cavalry, bypassing him, had foiled his own plans and wasted the Union cavalry's numerical superiority on frivolous missions, when it should have been hunting down the enemy's cavalry. Expecting Grant to reprimand his insubordinate cavalry leader, Meade took up the matter with the general in chief, only to have Grant tell him to give Sheridan the opportunity to whip Stuart in an independent raid. Accordingly, Meade issued the necessary orders, and Sheridan departed with almost all of the cavalry on the morning of 9 May.

Having found his path to Spotsylvania blocked, Grant thought of following Sheridan in a flanking maneuver toward the North Anna River, but once he saw that Lee was concentrating his whole army at Spotsylvania, he decided to stay and fight. His main objective remained Lee's army. That army, he believed, would be easier to defeat if it did not take cover in the massive entrenchments surrounding Richmond.

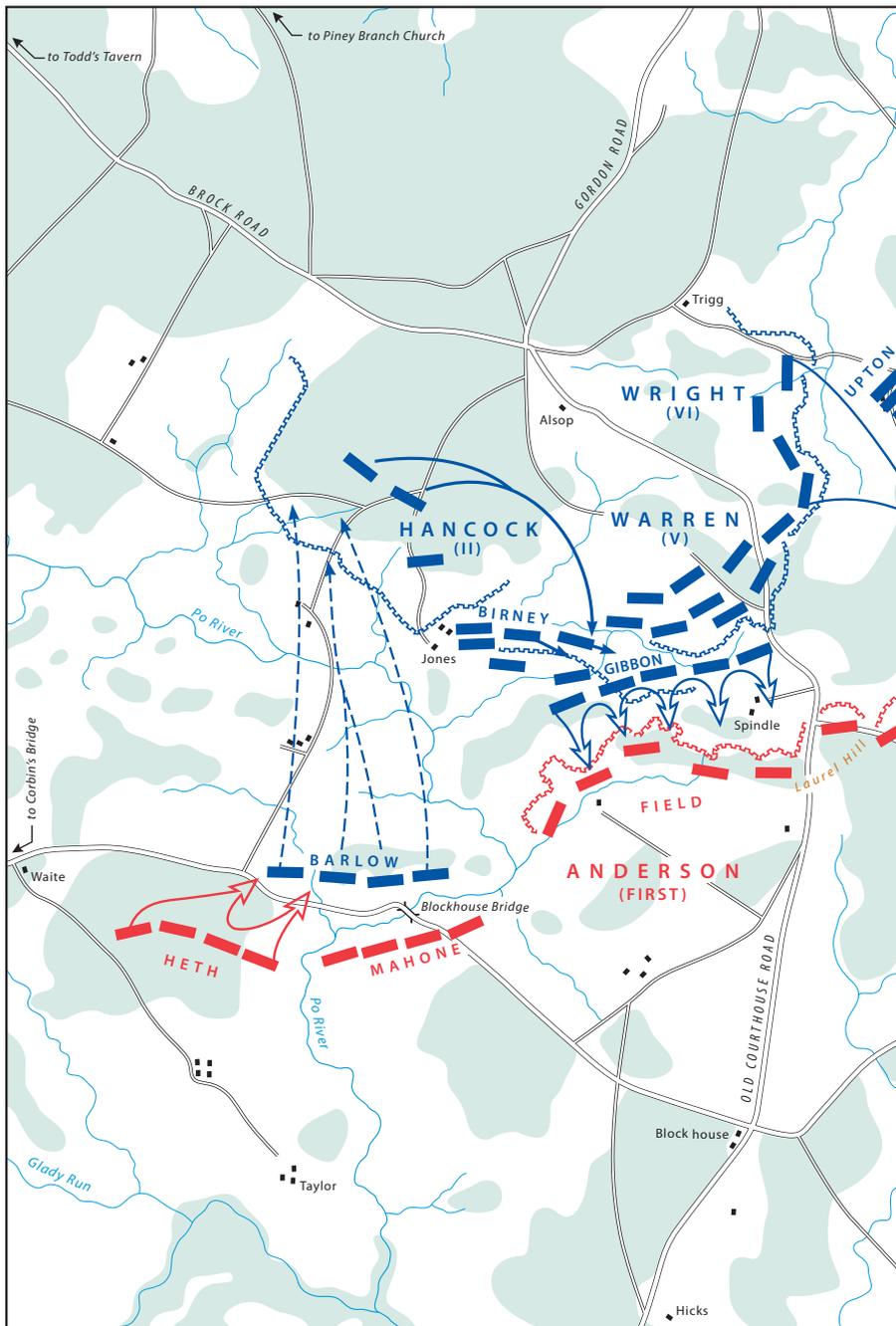
General Early
(Library of Congress)



Freed from the tangled Wilderness, Grant now maneuvered to find—or create—a weak point in Lee’s line. During 9 May, the Federal V and VI Corps fortified their positions—the latter losing Sedgwick to a sniper’s bullet shortly after he had uttered the immortal words, “They can’t hit an elephant at this distance.” Meanwhile, the Union II and IX Corps felt for Lee’s flanks. On the Union left, Brig. Gen. Orlando B. Willcox’s division of the IX Corps drove south on the Fredericksburg Road to reach Gayle’s house on the Ni River, just short of the courthouse crossroads, at 0700. At the time, only a brigade from Ewell’s corps and some cavalry stood in his path, but they fought vigorously, leading Willcox to inform Burnside that he faced superior numbers. By midafternoon, Early’s Confederate Third Corps had arrived and the opportunity for a breakthrough passed.

The action now shifted to the Confederate left. Hearing that Early had departed from Hancock’s front near the Po River on the Union right, Grant ordered the II Corps to attack Lee’s left and rear. By dark on 9 May, Hancock had crossed the winding Po west of Todd’s Tavern and then driven east to Blockhouse Bridge, but he found the Po too deep to recross in the face of Lee’s entrenchments there. Aware of Hancock’s advance and eager to strike a blow, Lee had Anderson’s old Third Corps division, now under Brig. Gen. William Mahone, shift to a position facing Hancock, while Heth’s division returned from the right during the night to threaten Hancock’s right flank from the south. Believing this move had thinned the rest of Lee’s line, Grant told Meade at 1000 on 10 May to bring the II Corps back across the Po, except for one division to serve as a decoy. The II Corps would then join the V and VI Corps for a massive assault at 1700 (*Map 4*).

The splitting of the II Corps resulted in several anxious hours for the “decoy” division on the far side of the Po. During the morning, the II Corps divisions of Maj. Gen. David B. Birney and Brig. Gen. John Gibbon recrossed the Po and took up positions next to and in support of the V Corps’ right. Left between the folds of the Po, Brig. Gen. Francis C. Barlow, a former lawyer and one of the Union army’s best combat commanders, executed a fighting retreat during the afternoon against Heth’s fierce attacks and managed to get his division back across the Po by nightfall. Recalled by a nervous Meade to supervise Barlow’s withdrawal in person rather than to coordinate the main strike, Hancock held back Birney from the main assault to support Barlow if necessary.



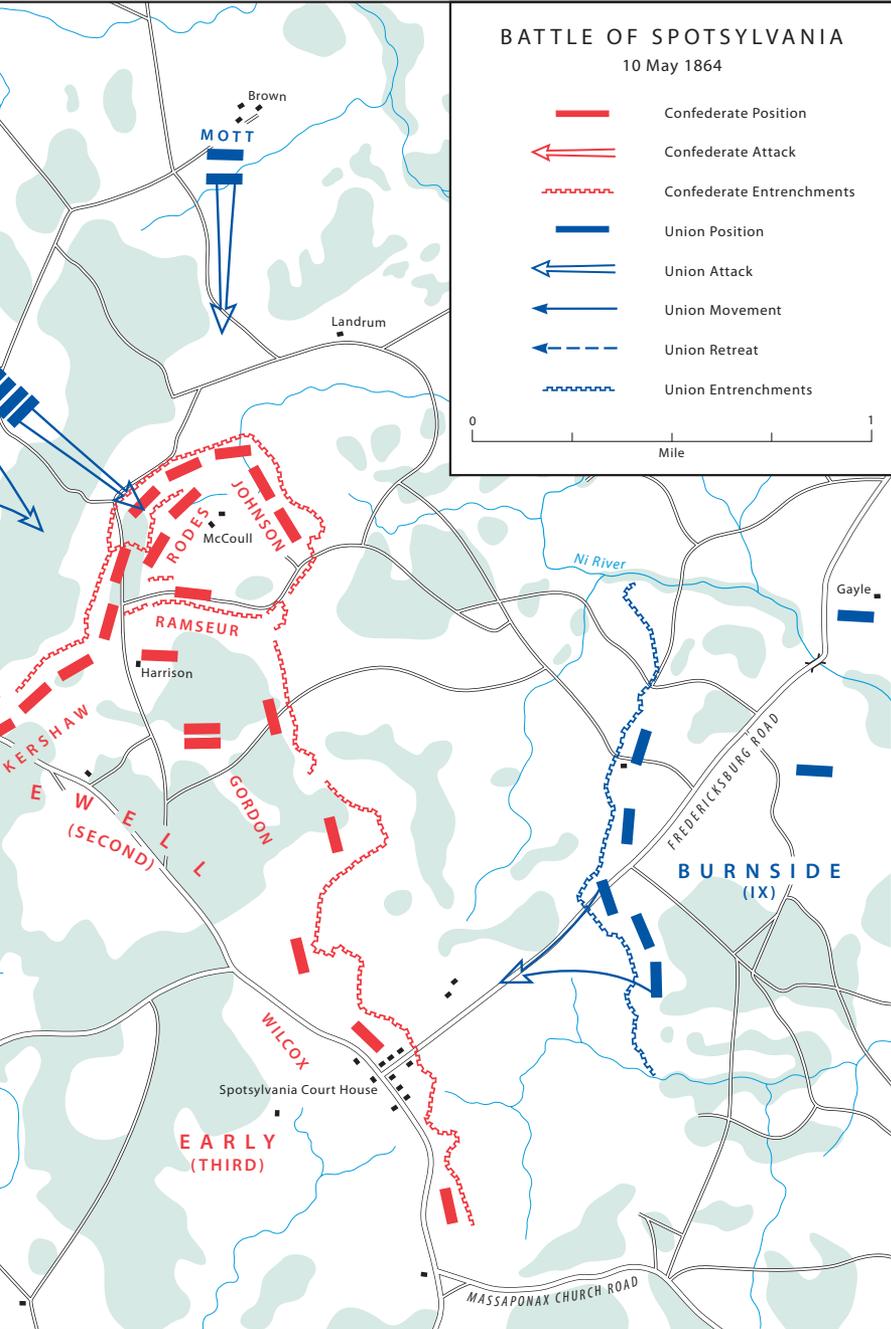
MAP 4

BATTLE OF SPOTSYLVANIA

10 May 1864

- Confederate Position
- Confederate Attack
- Confederate Entrenchments
- Union Position
- Union Attack
- Union Movement
- Union Retreat
- Union Entrenchments

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Without Hancock's supervision, the Union drive lost its coordination. Perceiving a weakness to his front, Warren requested and received authorization to launch his attack an hour early at 1600. His columns soon lost their cohesion in the dense woods and abatis—consisting of sharpened logs and other man-made obstacles—in front of the rebel works. When the Federals did reach open ground, heavy Confederate fire tore them apart within minutes. The repulse forced a delay in the general assault to allow the V Corps time to regroup. Unaware of the delay, Brig. Gen. Gershom Mott's small II Corps division—already dispersed from having to cover the wide gap separating the VI and IX Corps—attacked at 1700 across open ground toward the tip of the Mule Shoe and was mangled by canister from massed enemy artillery. Two hours later, Gibbon and Birney at last began their advance on Laurel Hill, receiving just token support from the V Corps. Only a lone brigade of Birney's division breached the works before a counterattack drove the Federals back to their starting point.

Confederate entrenchments with abatis at Spotsylvania
(Library of Congress)



Only on the VI Corps' front did the Union attack achieve even partial success. In the assault on the western face of the Mule Shoe salient, Wright, the new commander of the VI Corps, elected to use a task force of twelve picked regiments under Col. Emory Upton, a brilliant, intense, young West Pointer from New York. Once the Union skirmishers had scattered the Confederate picket line, Upton took his regimental commanders to the edge of the woods two hundred yards from the enemy position, showed them the terrain, and described his plan. They would advance on the run from the woods in four lines of three regiments each. No man would stop to fire his weapon; indeed, all but the first line would forge ahead with their muskets loaded but uncapped. The first line would penetrate the works and drive on, spreading to cover the flanks of the breach, with the lines behind it ready to support as needed.

General Wright
(Library of Congress)



Colonel Upton
(Library of Congress)



At 1835, Upton's 5,000 men burst from the woods and sprinted across two hundred yards of open ground. Working through the abatis in their path, they stormed the works with fixed bayonets, capturing hundreds of prisoners from a surprised brigade of Rodes' Second Corps division and driving off the rest. But the Confederates reacted quickly. Ewell brought up his reserves,

contained the penetration, and counterattacked. Upton's men fell back to the exterior side of the works and repulsed one assault, but, when no support arrived, the seething colonel obtained permission to withdraw his force. He had lost 1,000 men but had inflicted about 1,250 casualties, including 950 prisoners, on the Confederates.

Upton's limited success impressed Grant. He believed the attack would have split Lee's line wide open had it been properly supported. Most of those around army headquarters blamed Mott's division for the absence of support, but the general lack of coordination and Wright's cautious decision not to exploit the breakthrough due to approaching darkness were much more culpable. Afterward, Grant reportedly remarked, "A brigade today—we'll try a corps tomorrow."

True to his word, at 1500 on 11 May, the general in chief told Meade to shift Hancock's II Corps under cover of darkness from the right to a position between the VI and IX Corps. From there, the II Corps would launch an early morning assault on 12 May against the supposedly weak tip of the Mule Shoe salient. The IX Corps would make a vigorous attack in support, while the V and VI Corps stood ready to strike should the opportunity offer itself. The ever-optimistic Grant remained convinced that, even if they had not yet achieved a clear tactical victory, the Federals were inflicting far more damage on the enemy than the Confederates could sustain. Earlier that day, he had sent a wire to Halleck in Washington, expressing satisfaction over the course of the battle, asking for fresh troops, and informing the chief of staff of his intention to "fight it out on this line if it takes all summer."

Grant's confidence was betrayed by the comedy of errors that now ensued. When Hancock asked for the exact point of attack and directions to the jump-off area, he could not get a reliable answer from Meade's headquarters. Two of Hancock's staff, the chief of staff, Lt. Col. Charles H. Morgan, and Maj. William G. Mitchell, accompanied by Lt. Col. Cyrus B. Comstock of Grant's staff, tried to conduct a reconnaissance but became lost in a downpour and ended up at IX Corps headquarters. The flustered Morgan did not return to II Corps headquarters until dark.

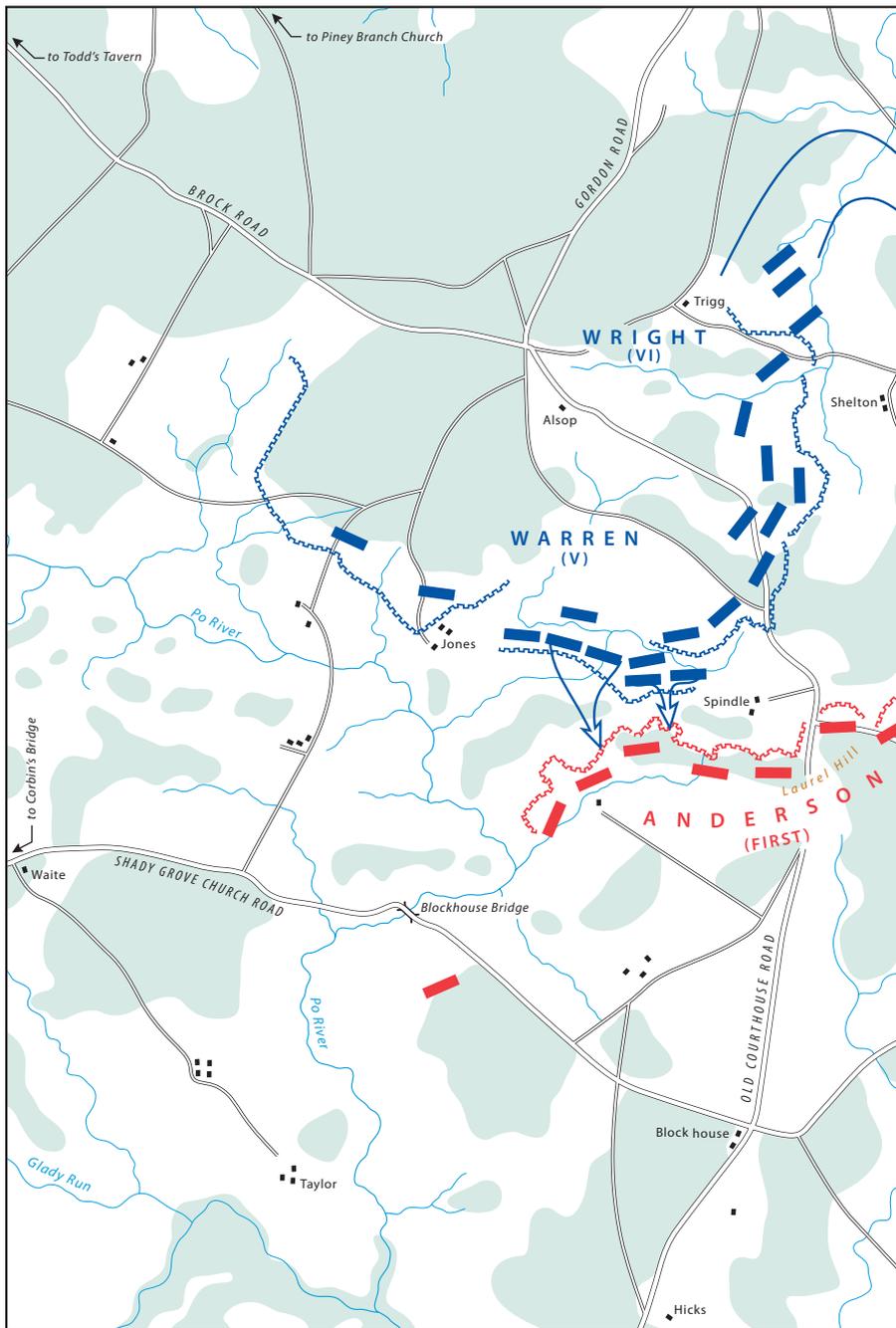
Morgan's rough day was not over. At 2200 he and a member of Meade's staff joined Barlow's division, which was on its way to spearhead the attack, but they could tell Barlow little about the objective, the plan of attack, or even the route to the jump-off

point. Maps proved useless. As the already tired troops marched along the narrow road through the rain, mud, and darkness—with Morgan profanely admitting he did not know the way—the whole situation became so comical to Barlow that he finally exclaimed, “For Heaven’s sake, at least face us in the right direction, so that we shall not march away from the enemy and have to go around the world and come up in their rear.”

Shortly after midnight, the head of the column reached the Brown house, where Barlow obtained some information from a lieutenant colonel who had participated in Mott’s ill-fated 10 May attack. On this basis, Barlow formed his division in a dense column similar to Upton’s, while Birney’s division was arranged in a more conventional linear formation on Barlow’s right with Gibbon’s division in support. About 0430 on 12 May, nineteen thousand men began to advance in the approximate direction of the Mule Shoe tip, under orders not to fire until they had reached the Confederate position (*Map 5*).

Now the Federals finally had some luck. Lee was well aware of Sheridan’s raid, which was then approaching Richmond, and he also was worried about Butler’s threat to the Confederate capital and Petersburg. During the day, he had received word of Hancock’s departure from the Po line, the movement of the Union wagon trains to Fredericksburg, and some shifts in the IX Corps’ front. Thinking that Grant might be preparing to withdraw toward Fredericksburg, Lee directed his artillery to leave their forward positions and be ready for a rapid march. Thus, Ewell’s chief of artillery removed thirty-two of the forty guns from the Mule Shoe salient without telling Johnson, the senior commander in that sector. Around midnight, pickets in front of the Mule Shoe reported hearing a noise like rushing water to the northwest. Johnson pleaded with Ewell to return the missing guns, and Ewell in turn appealed to Lee, who gave his permission. But it took time to find the batteries, hitch up the horses, and start them back toward the salient. The guns arrived about 0430, just as the Union attack was closing on the Confederate works.

Blundering through the early morning fog and uncertain of their direction, Hancock’s men happened to hit just the right spot at the Mule Shoe’s tip. They captured or drove off Confederate pickets, tore through the abatis in front of the enemy position, and then broke into a run over the last hundred yards. Confederate infantry, its powder dampened by

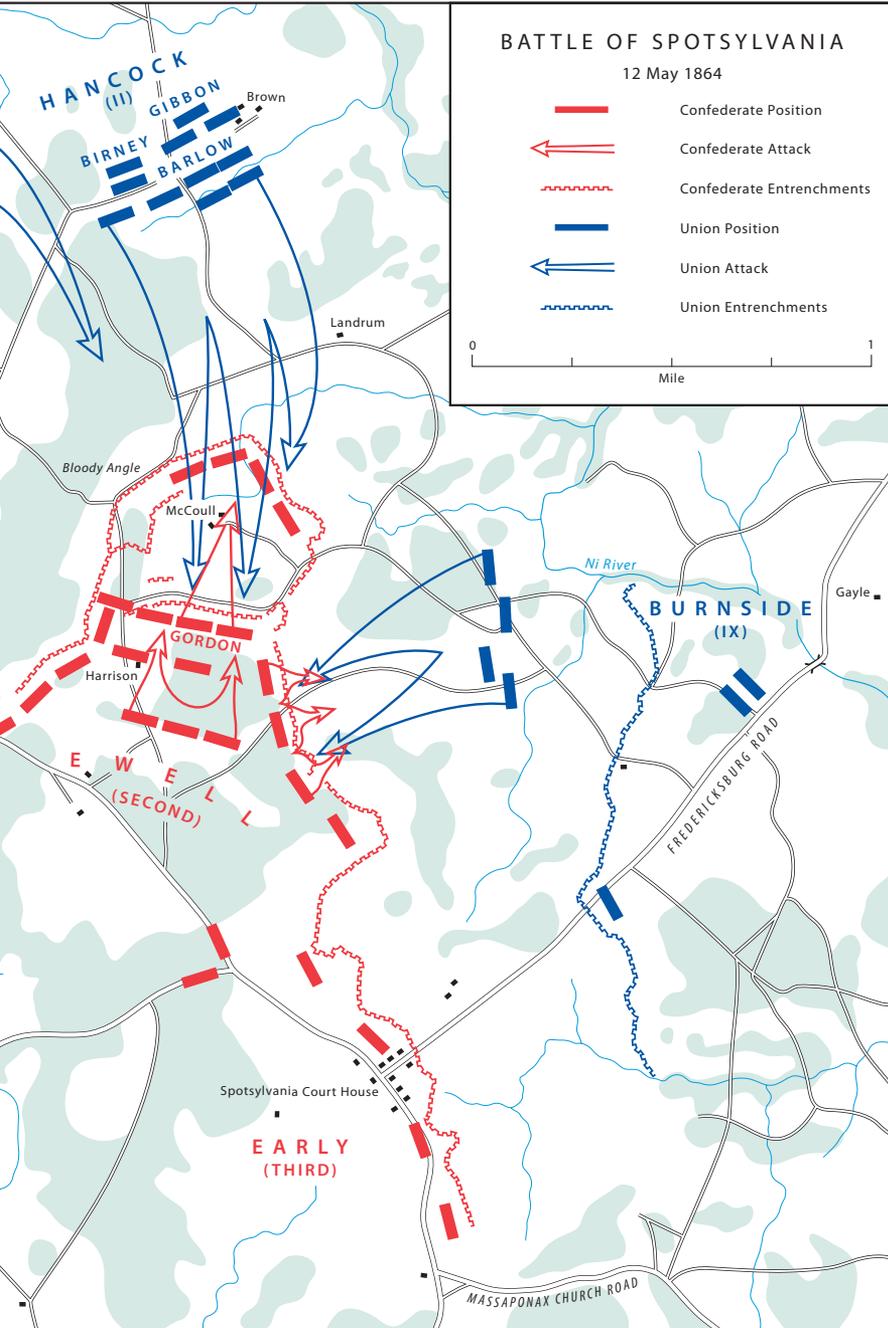


MAP 5

BATTLE OF SPOTSYLVANIA

12 May 1864

-  Confederate Position
-  Confederate Attack
-  Confederate Entrenchments
-  Union Position
-  Union Attack
-  Union Entrenchments



rain, could get off only a ragged volley—and the newly returned artillery just a few scattered shots—before the Federal attackers poured over the earthworks. They overpowered the Southern defenders, capturing twenty guns, thirty flags, thousands of small arms, and hundreds of men, including Johnson, a brigade commander, and a large contingent of the renowned Stonewall Brigade. Barlow's and Birney's men drove down the shoulders of the salient, outflanking defenders and forcing them to retreat. Already, however, the impetus of the attack was slowing. The victorious Federals had become a disordered mass, twenty men deep in places, with more and more troops piling into the works from behind—while some escorted Confederate prisoners back to Union lines, and others stopped to rifle the enemy bivouac for food and valuables before rejoining their comrades in a vague forward movement. Hancock ordered up still more reserves, and officers strove to rally their men and reorganize for a more concerted effort to widen the breach in Lee's line.

But the Confederates reacted quickly. Behind some intervening pines at the McCoull House a few hundred yards from

Battle of Spotsylvania, showing Hancock's attack on the Mule Shoe, by Thure de Thulstrup (Library of Congress)

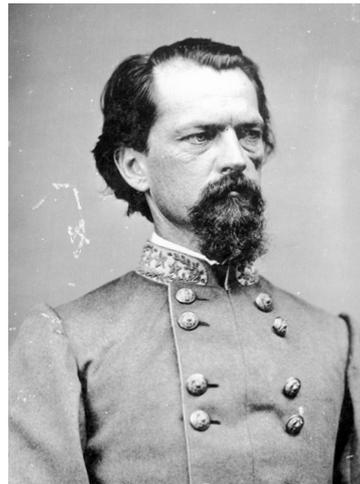


the salient tip, Gordon—in temporary command of Early’s division—sensed the crisis from the number of fugitives streaming to the rear. Sending in a brigade to slow the Union advance, he formed his other brigades for a counterattack. Lee joined him, and, for a moment, it appeared that the commander of the Army of Northern Virginia once again intended to lead the attack in person. Finally, as his men chanted, “Lee to the rear,” Gordon interposed himself and his staff between their commander and the Northerners, and a sergeant guided Lee’s horse away from the action. Gordon then struck, driving the disorganized Union formations before him. By 0700, he had forced his way back to Johnson’s original trench line at the tip. Lee and Ewell pumped in additional reinforcements that shoved the Federals back to the outer side of the salient earthworks. There, however, Union resistance stiffened, and Grant had Meade throw in the VI Corps on the II Corps’ right.

For roughly twenty hours, the two sides grappled in perhaps the fiercest—and most fabled—confrontation of the Civil War: the fight at the section of the Mule Shoe known as the Bloody Angle. From the tip of the salient to its western face, Union and Confederate soldiers challenged each other at close quarters, separated in places by only a rampart of earth and logs. Men fired into each other’s faces, stabbed between crevices with bayonets, or reached over the parapet to drag their opponents into captivity. Here and there, soldiers mounted the works and fired muskets passed up to them until enemy bullets cut them down.

Artillery crews tried to provide close support but lost heavily to a tremendous volume of musketry that obliterated the surrounding vegetation, sawing in half an oak tree that reportedly measured twenty inches in diameter. All the while, an intermittent rain filled the trenches with muddy water,

General Gordon
(National Archives)



in which the dead and wounded commingled and were trampled underfoot.

At Grant's order, the whole Army of the Potomac was now in action, Burnside's IX Corps attacking the east face of the salient and Warren's V Corps launching yet another assault on Laurel Hill. The Federals made little effort at maneuver. At this point, Grant was trying to conquer by sheer mass, but at the Bloody Angle, the length of the front did not allow enough space for all the men the general in chief was throwing into the action. While the Confederates held, Lee's engineers rushed to construct a new line across the base of the Mule Shoe. By 0300 of 13 May, their work was finished, and the Confederates withdrew, leaving Union troops in possession of the Bloody Angle. It had been a brutal twenty hours. The Army of the Potomac had added another 6,000 to 7,000 men to its casualty lists, but Lee's army had suffered an even more grievous 8,000 losses, including 4,000 prisoners.

Having endured eight days of almost continuous fighting, the exhausted combatants now rested, while Grant considered his next move. Probes of the new Confederate line on 13 May indicated that it was too strong for a frontal assault, so Grant returned to maneuver. He decided to march the V Corps from the Laurel Hill sector behind the rest of the Union front to a new position on the Union left, on the Fredericksburg Road and next to the IX Corps. The VI Corps would follow and form on the V Corps' left across the Massaponax Church Road. The two corps would then attack Lee's exposed flank at 0400 on 14 May.

The elements now intervened. When Warren's men began their trek at 2100 on 13 May, a torrential downpour turned the roads into rivers of mud. Anticipating the problem, Warren had posted guides and built fires at intervals along the line of march, but the darkness, rain, fog, and mud were too much for the fatigued troops. At 0400 on 14 May, only a thousand men had reached the attack area, with the rest of the V and VI Corps strung out for miles to the rear. After repeated postponements, Grant finally canceled the assault at 0900. During the afternoon, Lee discovered the V Corps' withdrawal and began shifting his First Corps to the courthouse area, closing Grant's window of opportunity.

For the next three days, the two armies faced each other as the rain fell, seemingly without respite. Grant moved most of the II Corps from his right to a spot near the Ni's intersection with the Fredericksburg Road, ready to reinforce either flank, and the

Army of the Potomac welcomed the first of 17,000 reinforcements, mostly from green heavy artillery regiments that had been manning the Washington fortifications. When the sun returned on 17 May, Grant quickly marched the II and VI Corps back to their old positions on the Union right flank for a dawn attack that he hoped would catch Lee unawares.

The 18 May assault, however, was a disaster. This time, the Federals did not enjoy the benefits of fog, a vulnerable salient, absent enemy artillery, and damp powder among the defenders. Confederate lookouts in the belfry of the courthouse had discovered the Union march on the previous day, and Ewell's Second Corps, with Rodes' division posted on the left and Gordon's on the right, was ready, having had five days to strengthen its position. The Union advance bogged down in the abandoned trenches around the old Mule Shoe, and it was not until 0800 that two II Corps divisions and one VI Corps division attacked.

Within an hour, it was over. Massed Confederate artillery swept the ground in front of the defenses, blasting Union troops with shell and case shot. Despite the devastating fire, the Federals pressed on through the abatis and made several vain attempts to reach the Confederate earthworks. But the attacks only succeeded in adding 2,000 of Meade's men to the casualty lists and leaving many of the survivors thoroughly disgusted. One Union infantryman remarked that in the thickets of the Wilderness, no one had expected brilliant generalship, but, in the more open country of Spotsylvania, "it was the duty of our generals to know the strength of the works before they launched the army against them."

THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY, THE JAMES RIVER, AND YELLOW TAVERN

The Army of the Potomac's flagging morale was not buoyed by news from elsewhere in Virginia—news especially dismaying after some early successes. In southwest Virginia, Crook's 6,500 Federals had defeated Brig. Gen. Albert Jenkins' 3,000 Confederates at Cloyd's Mountain on 9 May, and the next day they burned the railroad station and supply depot at Dublin and the New River Bridge on the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad. Hearing false reports of Grant's defeat, however, Crook withdrew to Union, West Virginia, where he was joined on 15 May by Averell. With just 2,000 cavalry, Averell had stopped short of the saltworks at Saltville when he received word of

superior Confederate forces there; later, Brig. Gen. William E. “Grumble” Jones with 4,500 men repulsed Averell’s assault on the lead mines at Wytheville. The Union general managed to tear up only a few miles of track near Christiansburg before meeting Crook.

In the meantime, Sigel had driven south on the Valley Turnpike from Martinsburg to the village of New Market, where on 15 May his 9,000 Federals met Maj. Gen. John C. Breckinridge’s 5,300 Confederates—including 227 cadets from the Virginia Military Institute. Breckinridge skillfully advanced his brigades between the turnpike and the north fork of the Shenandoah River, leapfrogging his artillery batteries to create a steady barrage of fire support. At one point, he reluctantly ordered the cadets to fill a gap in his line. Though outnumbered, Breckinridge pressed the Union ranks back to Bushong’s Hill, where Sigel launched a feeble counterattack in a futile bid to stem the tide. Breckinridge then made a final thrust that captured five guns, inducing the Union commander to order a general retreat down the Valley. In the Battle of New Market, the Federals had lost 840 men, the Confederates 530. From Washington, Halleck wired the bad news to Grant, remarking that the hapless Sigel “will do nothing but run. He never did anything else.”

As was the case in other parts of Virginia, the reports from Butler’s theater of operations were initially encouraging but soon turned sour. Protected by Northern sea power, Butler landed his army at Bermuda Hundred on 5 May. A peninsula formed by the confluence of the Appomattox River and the James River, Bermuda Hundred lay about twenty miles down the James from Richmond and eight miles down the Appomattox from Petersburg. Butler’s orders were to entrench, concentrate his 30,000-man force, and operate along the south bank of the James against Richmond, gaining a foothold as far upriver as possible. At most, the Confederates had about 7,000 men in the entire Richmond-Petersburg department and just 750 men in Butler’s immediate vicinity at Petersburg.

Aware that his proximity to these key points would draw considerable attention, Butler turned cautious despite his heavy numerical superiority. Instead of driving on the Confederate capital, he had his troops fortify his base at Bermuda Hundred and make tentative probes toward the Richmond-Petersburg Railroad.

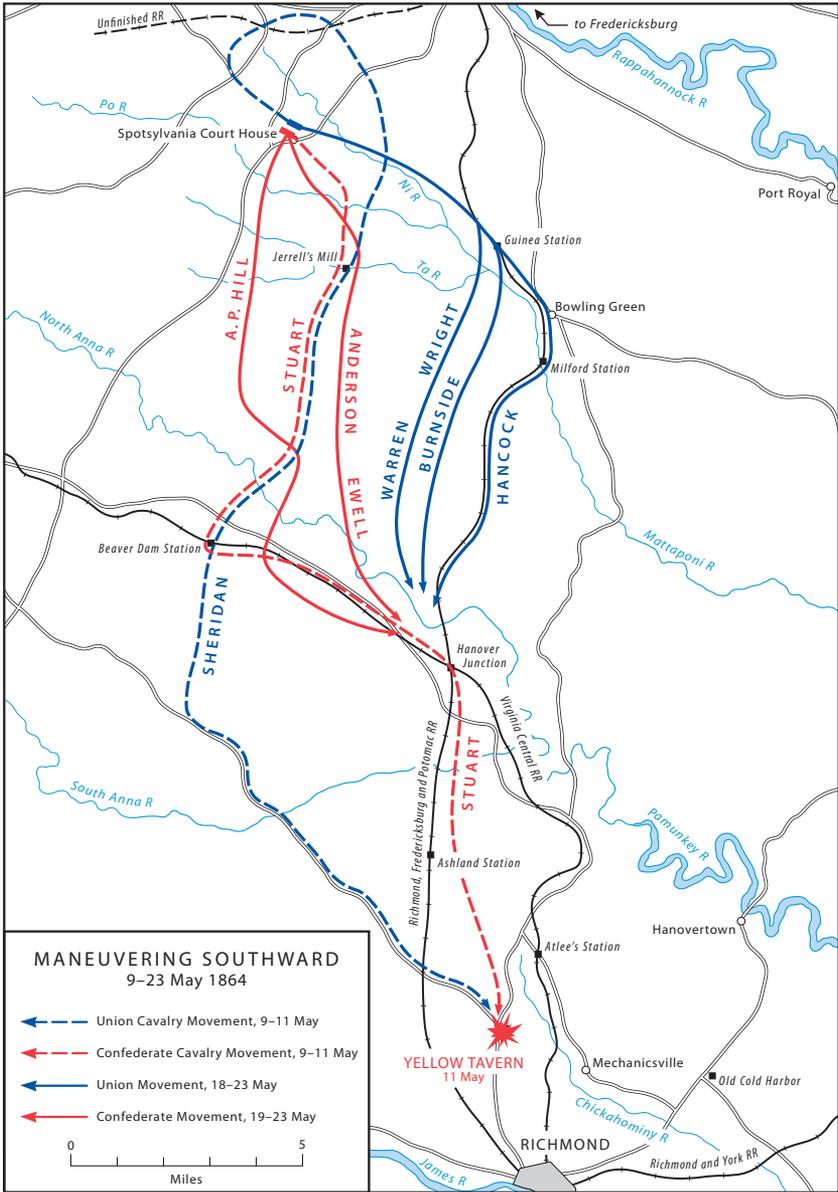
An amateur general, Butler bickered with his more seasoned, if disingenuous, corps commanders—Maj. Gen. Quincy A. Gillmore of the X Corps and Maj. Gen. William F. “Baldy” Smith of the XVIII Corps—rather than listen to their advice.

Hearing that Grant was moving south, on 12 May Butler began advancing toward Richmond to divert attention from the Army of the Potomac. By 14 May, he had penetrated Richmond’s outer defenses near Drewry’s Bluff. Meanwhile, the Confederate commander, General Pierre G. T. Beauregard, rushed troops to the threatened sector. On 16 May, Beauregard attacked Butler with a hastily assembled force of twenty thousand men. The Confederates drove the Union right flank from the river and the protection of the Union gunboats, forcing Butler to retreat into his fortifications across the Bermuda Hundred peninsula. Beauregard also dug in, containing Butler’s Army of the James as effectively as if he had corked it inside a bottle.

The only bright spot in these subsidiary Union operations came courtesy of Sheridan (*Map 6*). Departing on 9 May from the Army of the Potomac’s rear area, his twelve thousand horsemen and thirty-two guns started down the Telegraph Road toward Richmond in a massive, thirteen-mile-long column, intent on fighting Stuart’s cavalry wherever they could find it. At Jerrell’s Mill on the crossing of the Ta River, Sheridan’s column took the Mountain Road, a more westerly route that ran parallel to the Telegraph Road. The Federal rear guard, meanwhile, clashed with Confederate horsemen at Jerrell’s Mill and Mitchell’s Shop, five miles to the south. Stuart led three of his brigades in a vain attempt to strike Sheridan as he crossed the North Anna River, but the Union cavalry commander had his advance, under Brig. Gen. George A. Custer, safely over the river by dark on 9 May. Once across, Custer seized the Confederate supply depot at Beaver Dam

General Sheridan
(Library of Congress)





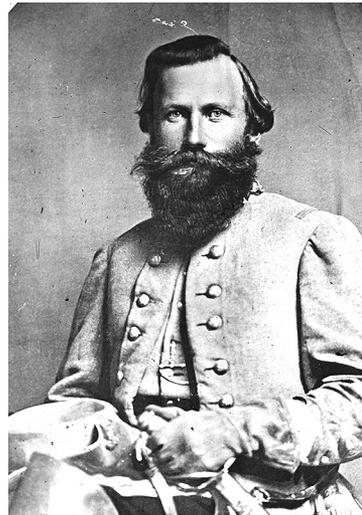
MAP 6

Station on the Virginia Central, burning a hundred railroad cars, two locomotives, some much-needed medical supplies, and 1.5 million rations of bread and meat, while freeing about 300 Union prisoners.

As the Northern troopers continued south on the Mountain Road, Stuart led his cavalry down the Telegraph Road and, thanks to some hard riding, managed to get between Sheridan and Richmond. He had already notified the authorities in the capital of the Federals' approach, and he now planned to block the advance with two brigades while the third attacked the Union rear. At Yellow Tavern, an abandoned way station where the Telegraph Road met the Mountain Road, Stuart's two forward brigades assumed an L-shaped ambush formation that Stuart hoped would enable him to trap his foe between his own forces and the Richmond garrison. But such was not to be. Enjoying a three-to-one numerical superiority, the Federals easily broke through two successive Confederate blocking positions, first in the morning and then in the late afternoon of 11 May.

A tactical victory for Sheridan, Yellow Tavern had mixed overall results. The futile attempt to trap the Union cavalry proved costly to the Confederates, for Stuart was mortally wounded while trying to rally his men in a driving thunderstorm. The battle, however, did give the Richmond garrison time to man its fortifications, inducing Sheridan to bypass the Confederate capital and continue to the James, reaching Haxall's Landing on 14 May. The Richmond expedition cost each side about 600 casualties, including the irreplaceable Stuart. Sheridan also had destroyed a priceless quantity of Confederate supplies, damaged rail communications, and defeated the Southern cavalry, but his absence left Grant and Meade blind until his return on 24 May.

General Stuart
(Library of Congress)



THE NORTH ANNA

Back at Spotsylvania, Grant had some thinking to do in the aftermath of the 18 May debacle. Through 20 May, he had lost 18,400 men at Spotsylvania compared to Lee's 12,000 casualties. However, Confederate successes elsewhere had enabled Lee to draw 2,500 reinforcements from the Valley and 7,000 from Richmond, with more to come. Grant, likewise, had received some reinforcements from Washington—mostly green heavy artillerymen—but Meade's army continued to hemorrhage veterans due to combat losses and expiring enlistments. At the close of the battles for Spotsylvania, the numerical disparity between the two armies was narrower than at any other time in the campaign—67,000 Federals to about 53,000 Confederates.

Furthermore, morale in the Union army had dropped to a low point. For two weeks, the soldiers had endured fierce combat, frequent night marches, incessant battle noise, and prolonged contact with the enemy that left little time for sleep. Some units, notably the V Corps at Laurel Hill, had displayed considerable reluctance in attacking works that they had already failed to seize. Although Grant, Meade, and their respective staffs still got along relatively well, mounting tension bubbled just beneath the surface, mostly due to the strains of the awkward command situation and frustration over missed opportunities. The real frustration, though, lay in the Federals' inability to pry the Confederates out of their entrenchments for a decisive fight in the open.

Despite his brave words of the previous week, Grant had decided that it was time to leave the Spotsylvania line, and, on 18 May, he drafted orders for yet another shift around Lee's right flank. (*See Map 6.*) His next maneuver resembled his earlier side steps to the southeast—but with a twist. Once again, the Army of the Potomac would change its base, this time from Belle Plain to Port Royal, a small tobacco town farther down the Rappahannock. To induce Lee to leave his entrenchments, Grant planned to hold most of Meade's army near Spotsylvania, while Hancock's II Corps executed an elaborate turning movement. It would first march east to the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad at Guinea Station and then south across the Mattaponi River to Bowling Green and Milford Station, roughly twenty miles distant. Grant hoped that Lee would take the bait

and strike Hancock's isolated corps, thereby exposing Lee's own army to an attack in the open.

Grant immediately began to set his trap. During the night of 18–19 May, the VI Corps and then the IX Corps leapfrogged the V Corps to take position on the Union left, near the lower reaches of the Po River. After shifting to Anderson's Mill on the lower Ni, the II Corps was ready to start its march from behind the Union left. On the extreme right, the V Corps' line bent back and ran across the upper Ni along the northern side of the Fredericksburg Road to the hills near the Harris farm, where a brigade of heavy artillery regiments guarded the flank.

Suspecting that Grant might have uncovered his supply line to Fredericksburg, Lee directed Ewell to probe the Union right flank. By this time, Ewell could count only about six thousand men in his decimated Second Corps, and he chose to take most of them on this rather hefty reconnaissance in force. He set out around 1400 on 19 May.

Hearing reports of Ewell's approach, the Army of the Potomac's senior leadership once more overreacted to a suspected Confederate flank attack. Meade ordered Brig. Gen. Robert O. Tyler's division of heavy artillery regiments to reinforce the right flank. He also postponed the II Corps' scheduled move for that evening, telling Hancock and Warren to each send a division as additional support.

Meade's concern proved unfounded. Standing upright in exposed ranks to trade volleys with Rodes' and Gordon's veteran divisions at close range, Tyler's artillerymen-turned-infantrymen lost heavily but held their ground until Ewell finally withdrew about 2100. The fight at the Harris farm had cost the Confederates about 900 casualties, including 400 prisoners, compared to the Union heavies' 1,500 losses.

Freed from the momentary distraction at the Harris farm, Grant launched his maneuver. Hancock began his turning movement at 2200 on 20 May and reached Milford Station by the next afternoon, capturing a few troops from Pickett's division on their way from Richmond to reinforce Lee. The rest of the Army of the Potomac followed Hancock on 21 May. Originally supposed to drive down Telegraph Road, the V Corps instead took a safer route farther east and closer to the II Corps via Guinea Station, its lead brigade advancing as far as a little crossroads named Madison's Ordinary. Next in line, the IX Corps skirmished with Confederate

troops at the Telegraph Road crossing of the Po before angling east toward Guinea Station. The VI Corps brought up the rear. In Caroline County, the Federals found themselves in a rich, open countryside largely untouched by war. Union foraging parties and stragglers had a field day plundering sheep, chickens, and cattle. Lacking cavalry, however, the Federals missed Lee's army by the narrowest of margins. During the night of 21–22 May, Union outposts near Madison's Ordinary heard the noise of troops—Lee's Confederates—marching along the Telegraph Road, only a mile and a half to the west.

Lee had responded quickly to Grant's maneuver. It is doubtful that the Virginian even realized the exposed position of the Union II Corps. As far as he was concerned, Grant was just shifting southeast to cross the Pamunkey, outflank the North Anna line, and force the Army of Northern Virginia into the Richmond fortifications, an outcome that Lee dreaded. Instead, Lee decided to pull back to only the North Anna. Having just moved Ewell to his right during the night of 20–21 May, he started the Second Corps at about midday on 21 May down the Telegraph Road toward the key railroad center of Hanover Junction, just behind the river. The First Corps followed the Second Corps down the road, while the Third Corps, once again under A. P. Hill, marched farther to the west.

As Lee's army approached the North Anna, the campaign's rigors were starting to tell on the Confederate high command. In addition to the gravely wounded Longstreet, both Ewell and Hill were ill, and Lee was intervening in lower-level tactics to an unusual degree, a strain that was taking a severe toll on his health. But Lee was cheered by the arrival of Breckinridge's division from the Valley, along with Pickett's three brigades and another brigade from Beauregard. During 22–23 May, his forces assembled along the North Anna, with Hill on the left, Anderson in the center, and Ewell on the right.

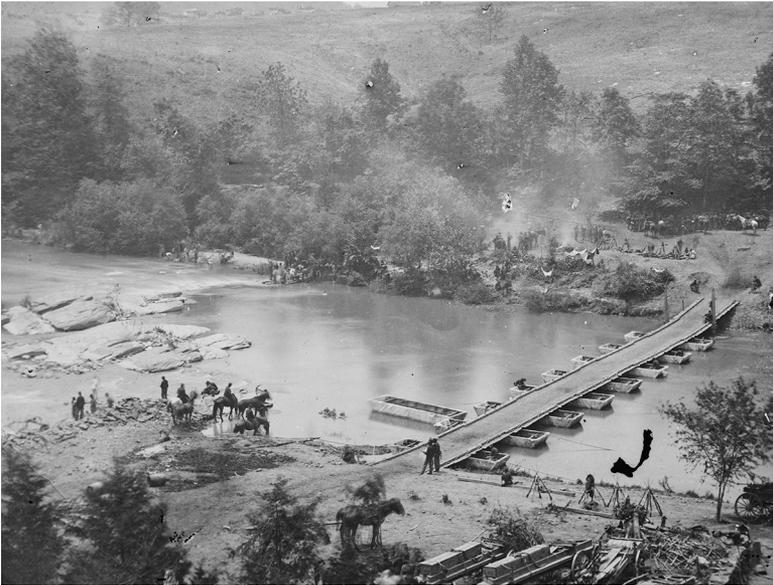
Situated just twenty-one miles north of Richmond, the North Anna River provided a good—if not ideal—defensive position for Lee short of his capital. One hundred fifty feet wide, it could be forded or bridged at only a few points, but, because the northern bank was generally higher than the southern, Union artillery would command most of the crossings, making a close defense of the river line difficult. Running parallel to the river on the south bank, the Virginia Central Railroad, Lee's critical supply line to

the Valley, made its way to Hanover Junction, which was shielded by the eastern end of Lee's line. On its way south to Hanover Junction, the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad traversed the North Anna just east of the Telegraph Road crossing at Chesterfield Bridge. Covering the north side of the bridge was a redoubt held by Col. John W. Henagan's South Carolina brigade of Kershaw's First Corps division.

During 23 May, the Army of the Potomac closed up to the river line. Lee had thought that Grant might rest his forces once he found the Confederates in his path behind the river, but Grant had no such intention. Optimistic as ever, he believed that the Confederates had been shaken by the fighting around Spotsylvania, and he decided to keep up the pressure on Lee by forcing the river line. Poor maps hindered the army's concentration, as the V Corps took a road that the II Corps intended to use and then lost precious time working out a new route. By early afternoon, however, the II Corps was approaching Chesterfield Bridge, while the V Corps had moved five miles upstream toward Jericho Mills. Discovering Henagan's position, Hancock brought up twenty guns to lend support, and then, about 1600, he launched an attack with three brigades. The Federals quickly overran the works, capturing some Confederates and driving the rest across the river. Having occupied the north bank, the II Corps' advance halted for the night.

Farther west, the V Corps secured a lodgment at Jericho Mills Ford. Starting in the early afternoon, Warren sent Griffin's division across the North Anna's fifty yards of waist-deep water and up the steep banks on the far side, while engineers scrambled to build a pontoon bridge. The rest of the corps soon followed. By evening, Warren had almost all of his infantry over the river and in line of battle: Crawford in the woods next to the river on the left, Griffin in the center, and Cutler moving into position in the more open ground to the right.

Dug in behind the Virginia Central less than two miles to the south, Confederate General Wilcox received word that three Union brigades had crossed the North Anna, and, with Hill's blessing, he advanced with his division to crush them. His left wing struck Cutler's troops in motion, sending the once-stalwart Iron Brigade and the Pennsylvania Bucktails fleeing to the rear. Warren threw in reinforcements, including the Maryland Brigade, which shoved some of Cutler's fugitives off the bridge as it hurried



*View from the north bank of the North Anna River crossing at Jericho Mills
(Library of Congress)*

to the south bank. The V Corps artillery, meanwhile, unleashed a hailstorm of fire that stopped the Confederates. Unsupported by the rest of Hill's Third Corps, Wilcox withdrew to the railroad after dusk, having lost 730 casualties to Warren's 370. The Federals had forced the North Anna line at one point and were poised to do so at another, compromising Lee's defenses.

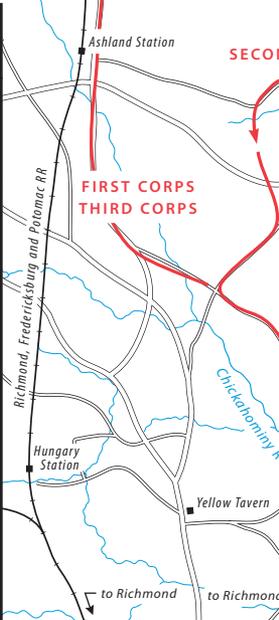
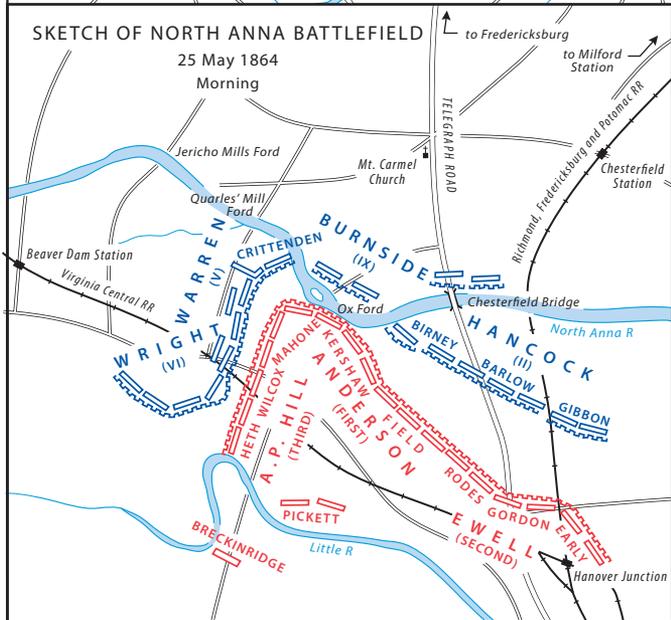
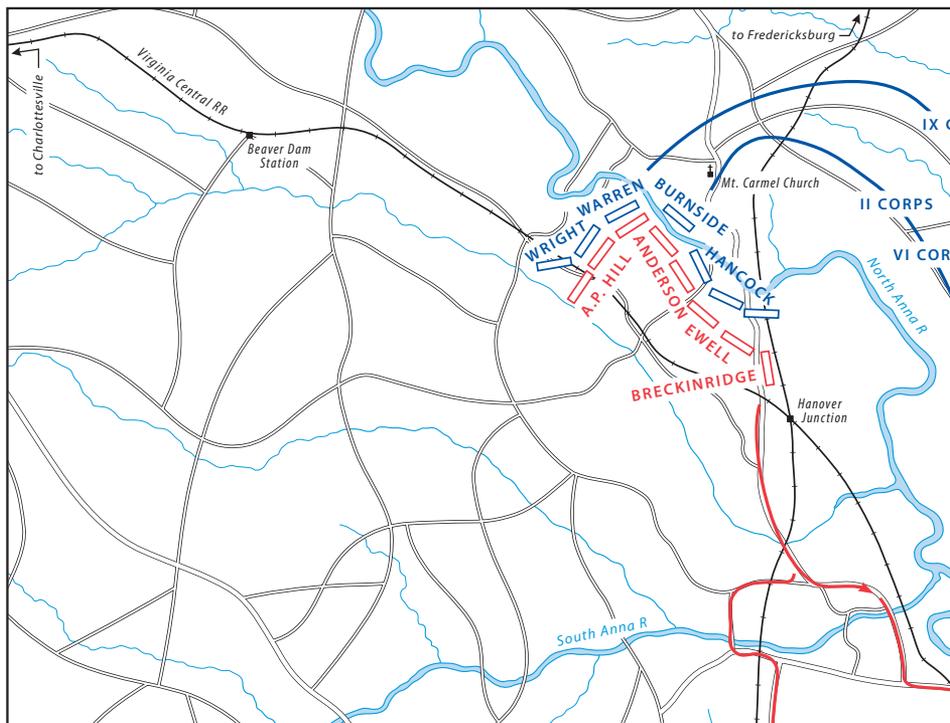
That evening, an ailing Lee met with his key subordinates and staff officers under a tall oak tree at Hanover Junction. All agreed that the junction was too important a site for the army to abandon. After consulting with his engineers about the terrain, the Confederate leader laid out a new and ingenious defensive position. It took the shape of an upside-down V, with the point at Ox Ford, one of the few places where the southern bank of the North Anna rose above the northern bank (*Map 7*). From west to east, Heth's, Wilcox's, and Mahone's divisions of the Third Corps would hold the high ground along the western shank of the V, while Kershaw's and Field's divisions of the First Corps and Rodes', Gordon's, and Early's divisions of the Second Corps occupied the swampy terrain along the eastern shank. Some of

Ewell's units, along with Pickett's and Breckinridge's divisions, formed the reserve. After the war, one of Lee's former aides stated that the general had planned to draw the Union army across the North Anna on both flanks, enabling him to use his interior lines and reserves to crush one wing before the other could come to its support.

If setting a trap was indeed Lee's intent, then Grant and Meade came far closer to tripping it than they would have liked. During the morning of 24 May, the II Corps crossed the North Anna and occupied the abandoned Confederate trenches in the sector, while the V Corps, supported by the VI Corps, advanced southward from the Jericho Mills bridgehead. Fugitive slaves and Confederate prisoners told credulous Union officers that Lee's army was in full retreat, and Union commanders saw an opportunity to catch the Confederates in the open.

Burnside's IX Corps, however, was stymied by the formidable Confederate position at Ox Ford. Seeking to outflank what appeared to be a mere outpost, Burnside had Maj. Gen. Thomas L. Crittenden's division cross upstream at Quarles' Mill Ford to clear the south bank for the rest of the corps. But Crittenden's lead brigade under Brig. Gen. James H. Ledlie ran into Hill's imposing earthworks. Ledlie asked Crittenden for reinforcements but was rebuffed and told to proceed with the "utmost caution." His martial ardor likely inspired by the bottle, Ledlie disregarded Crittenden's admonition and launched a frontal assault, which Mahone's Confederate division easily repulsed with a lethal combination of rifled musket and canister fire.

On the other side of Ox Ford, Gibbon drove to within a mile of Hanover Junction, where he was hit by a ferocious counterattack launched by Rodes' division. Only then did it dawn on the Union commanders that Lee had not retreated and that the Federals now occupied a precarious position. The Confederates' Ox Ford salient had split the Union forces in two, with the V Corps and VI Corps on the western half of the inverted V and the II Corps on the eastern half. But if Lee had any intention of crushing the isolated II Corps, a fever that kept the general bedridden for most of the day prevented him from doing so. In the meantime, Grant and Meade sought to extricate the Army of the Potomac from Lee's trap. They ordered the II Corps to dig in, canceled the V Corps' advance, and directed the IX Corps to cut roads and build bridges to improve the line of communications between the two wings of the army.

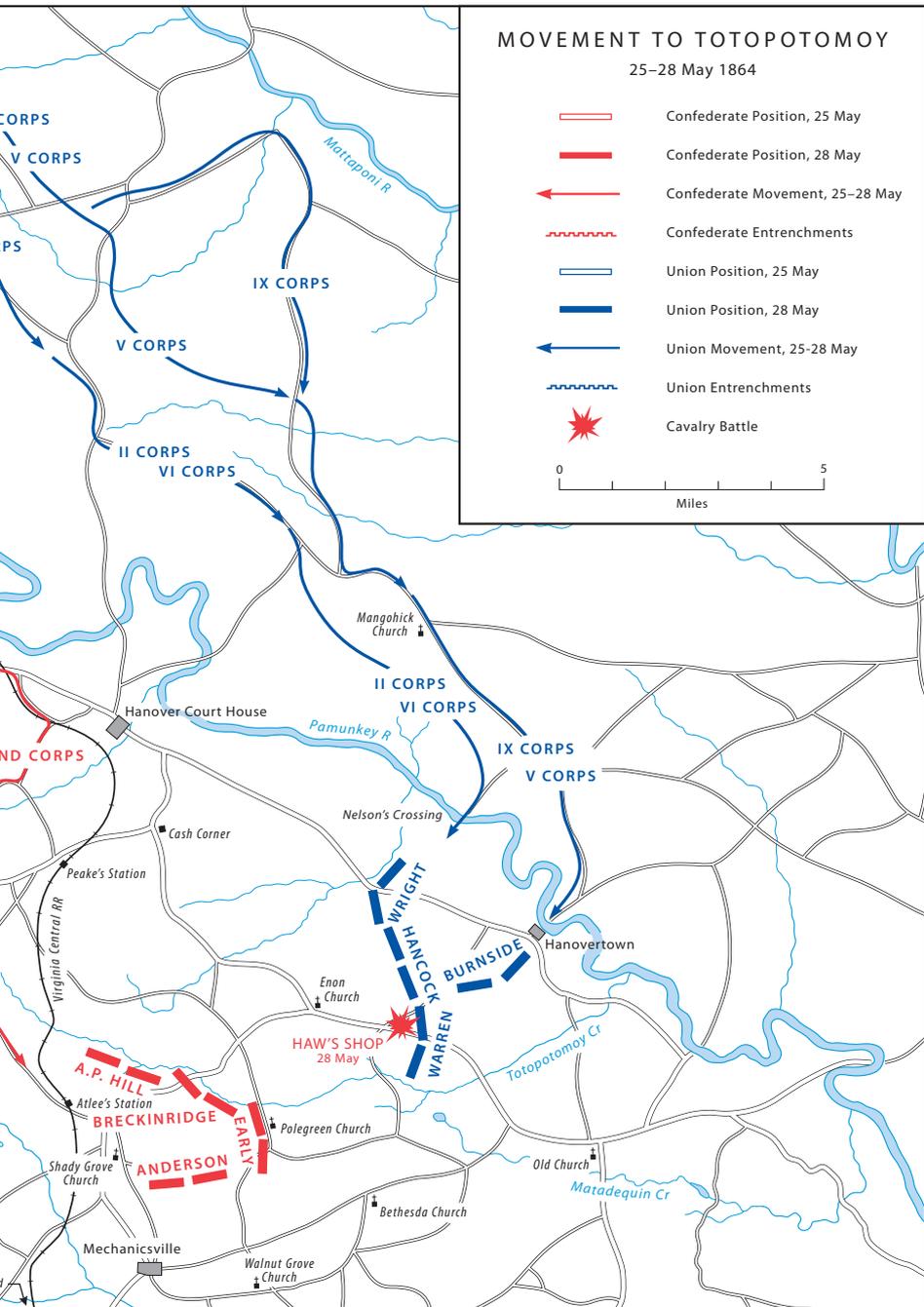


MAP 7

MOVEMENT TO TOTOPOTOMOY

25-28 May 1864

-  Confederate Position, 25 May
-  Confederate Position, 28 May
-  Confederate Movement, 25-28 May
-  Confederate Entrenchments
-  Union Position, 25 May
-  Union Position, 28 May
-  Union Movement, 25-28 May
-  Union Entrenchments
-  Cavalry Battle



Once again, General Grant took stock. Sheridan's cavalry had just returned from its Richmond expedition, and Grant had cleared up a longstanding command problem by officially assigning the IX Corps to the Army of the Potomac. In order to rejuvenate operations in the Shenandoah Valley, he sent Maj. Gen. David Hunter to replace Sigel and to destroy the Confederate logistical infrastructure in the Valley, driving as far south as Charlottesville and Lynchburg. No longer expecting any results from Butler, he directed that the bulk of the Army of the James join the Army of the Potomac, leaving just enough troops on the Bermuda Hundred peninsula to hold the mouth of the Appomattox River at City Point.

As for Meade's army, Grant and his generals met on the evening of 25 May to consider their next move. For a time, Grant pondered a quick drive west to cut the Virginia Central and then launch a direct attack on Richmond from the north, a move that might surprise Lee after so many shifts to the southeast. In the end, he chose the safer option of another sidestep to the southeast, which would protect his communications and enable him to cover his right flank with the Pamunkey River as he advanced. Once again, the army changed its base, this time to White House Landing, where the Pamunkey River flowed into the York River. Having lost about 4,000 casualties in the North Anna fighting compared to the Confederates' 2,500, the weary Union army prepared for the next phase of the campaign.

COLD HARBOR

The two armies were returning to familiar ground. Roughly two years before, they had grappled on the eastern outskirts of Richmond between the Pamunkey River to the north and the James River to the south. Between the two rivers, a series of streams cut across the low-lying terrain from west to east, including Totopotomoy Creek and Matadequin Creek, which flowed into the Pamunkey; and the Chickahominy River, which wound north and east of Richmond and then emptied into the James. (*See Map 7.*) Early summer rains could turn the low, wooded banks of these waterways into all but impassable swamps. Settlement in this muggy Tidewater region went back to colonial times. An intricate road network crisscrossed the region, but most roads were little more than dirt paths that connected the area's numerous farms, their sandy soil worn out from years of tobacco farming. Col. Edward Porter Alexander,

the noted Confederate artilleryman, remembered “a country generally flat with many small clearings, & thin woods, & scattered pines. No long ranges, but favorable to cross fires and smooth-bore ricochet firing.”

During the last days of bloody May 1864, the Army of the Potomac was again on the march. Before leaving the North Anna, Federal demolition details tore up track and burned cross-ties along the Virginia Central and the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroads. By early morning on 27 May, all Union troops south of the North Anna had returned to the north bank under cover of darkness. In the meantime, while Wilson’s cavalry division demonstrated on the Army of the Potomac’s right flank, Sheridan’s other two cavalry divisions led the way, heading southeast along the north bank of the Pamunkey. The VI Corps, with the II Corps following, moved on a course roughly parallel to the river, while the V Corps, trailed by the IX Corps, took a similar route past Mangohick Church, a short distance to the north and east. Grant, meanwhile, directed Butler to send Baldy Smith’s XVIII Corps by transport to White House Landing, and Brig. Gen. Henry W. Benham in Washington received orders to proceed with his engineer brigade and pontoon bridges to Fort Monroe at the mouth of the James.

The Union vanguard moved fast. By 0900 on 27 May, Sheridan’s lead cavalry division under Brig. Gen. Alfred T. A. Torbert had traversed the Pamunkey, driven off Confederate pickets, and occupied the old tobacco port of Hanover town, about thirty miles from the North Anna. Screened by the cavalry, Brig. Gen. David A. Russell’s advance division of the VI Corps crossed there two hours later. The next day, 28 May, the V Corps reached Hanover town, while the rest of the VI Corps and the II Corps moved over the river at

*General Smith, by Alden F. Smith
(Library of Congress)*



Nelson's Crossing several miles to the northwest. By the end of the day, the Federals had established a bridgehead three miles wide and over a mile deep and were edging farther south.

Alerted by his pickets and cavalry along the Pamunkey, Lee had his army on the move by 27 May. Unsure of Grant's precise route, he withdrew south to Ashland, ten miles below the North Anna, and then headed southeast for nine miles to Atlee's Station on the Virginia Central, just nine miles northeast of Richmond. Lee wanted to establish another blocking position on the high ground behind Totopotomoy Creek, the next natural barrier between Grant and Richmond. On 28 May, he placed the Second Corps, now under Early—who had taken command from the ailing Ewell—on his right flank near Polegreen Church. He stationed the rest of his army parallel to the Totopotomoy, along the Shady Grove Road, ready to counter a Union flanking movement across the Pamunkey.

During 28 May, each side's cavalry was cautiously probing the no-man's-land between the Pamunkey and Totopotomoy, trying to learn the other's intentions. Both Sheridan and Maj. Gen. Wade Hampton—a wealthy South Carolina planter who had become the senior cavalry officer in Lee's army after Stuart's death—had their horsemen reconnoiter the intervening roads in force. At midmorning, Hampton's cavalry contingent collided with Gregg's cavalry division near a hamlet known as Haw's Shop. After driving in the Union advance with a mounted charge, the Confederates dismounted and dug in near Enon Church, their flanks protected by a stream on the left and a pond on the right. Despite enjoying a distinct firepower advantage with their breech-loading and repeating carbines, the Union horsemen could make little headway against the Confederate position, and, about 1500, Sheridan had Torbert send Custer's brigade to reinforce Gregg. Having learned from prisoners the dispositions of the V and VI Corps to his front, Hampton was disengaging when Custer's dismounted troopers launched an attack that routed the Confederates and inflicted heavy casualties. The Federals suffered 300 killed and wounded at Haw's Shop compared to slightly higher Confederate losses, but both sides had obtained the information they needed.

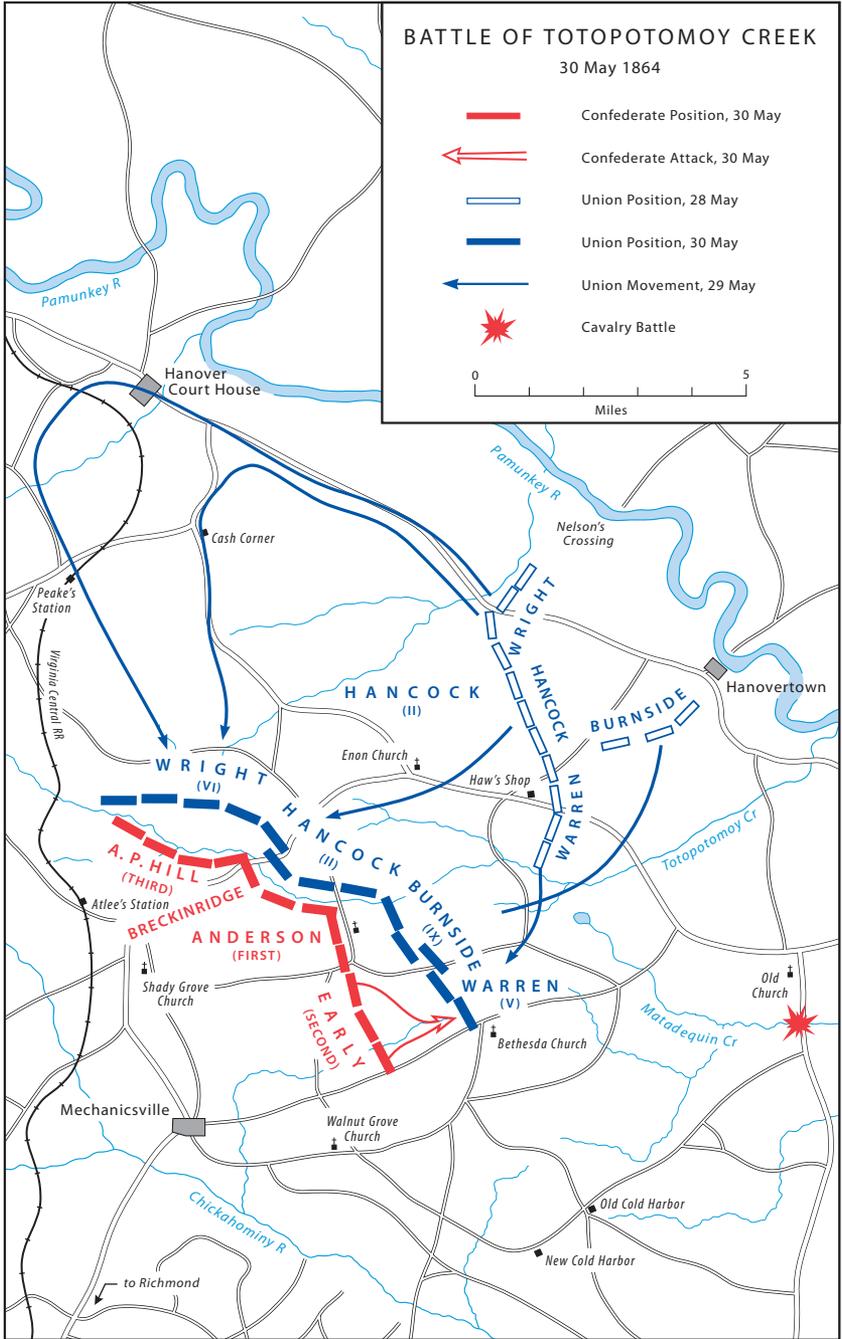
With the Union army only about ten miles from Richmond, Lee's concern was real. To Early he stated, "We must destroy this army of Grant's before he gets to [the] James River. If he gets there, it will become a siege, and then it will be a mere question of time."

As he aligned his forces along the Totopotomoy—placing Early on the right with Anderson in support, Breckinridge in the center, and Hill on the left—he renewed his pressure on President Davis for reinforcements from Beauregard. Finally, after two days of tense messages—followed by a high-level meeting and a warning from Lee of impending disaster—on 30 May Beauregard agreed to send Maj. Gen. Robert F. Hoke’s division.

Before long, however, the ever-aggressive Lee saw an opportunity to deal the Federals a crippling blow. The Union advance had split Meade’s army into two sections. From west to east the VI and II Corps held the north side of the Totopotomoy, and the IX and V Corps lined up on the south side. On 30 May, Early used the discretion Lee had given him to strike the presumably exposed V Corps on the Union left (*Map 8*). Using two newly cut military roads that led from the Shady Grove Road south to the Old Church Road, Rodes’ division caved in the Union flank at Bethesda Church and drove Crawford’s division northward all the way to Shady Grove Road.

The Confederates, however, could not finish the job. Warren formed a new line facing south and buttressed it with massed artillery, which may explain why Early’s efforts to goad Anderson into joining the assault came to naught. At 1830, Maj. Gen. Stephen D. Ramseur launched an attack with Early’s old division, but he received no support from either Gordon’s division, which was still moving into position on his left, or from Rodes’ division, which was protecting the Confederate right flank. One of Ramseur’s brigades closed to within fifty yards of Warren’s line but lost its commander, most of its officers, and 60 percent of its men to a firestorm of musketry and artillery before withdrawing. To the east, at Matadequin Creek, Torbert’s troopers threw back Brig. Gen. Matthew C. Butler’s cavalry probe around the Federal left and pursued the Confederates toward a dusty crossroads called Old Cold Harbor.

The gravity of war seemed to be drawing the two armies toward this obscure dot on the map. It consisted of one storm-beaten inn, where weary travelers could get a cold drink and a bed—hence its name, rendered doubly incongruous by the steamy summer weather and the inland locale. The place was called Old Cold Harbor to distinguish it from New Cold Harbor, a road junction one mile to the west. For the armies, the real significance of Old Cold Harbor lay not in the tavern but in five key roads that



MAP 8

met there, connecting the hamlet to Richmond, Bethesda Church, Old Church, White House, and the bridges over the Chickahominy. Having begun to land at White House on the afternoon of 30 May, Smith's XVIII Corps from the Army of the James was supposed to move up the Pamunkey the next day, and Grant, via Meade, ordered Sheridan to keep a close watch on Old Cold Harbor in case Lee tried to interpose himself between the XVIII Corps and the rest of the army. Meanwhile, on 31 May, the Army of the Potomac probed Lee's line along Totopotomoy Creek but found it well entrenched and in a naturally strong position.

To the south, Sheridan went beyond the usual reconnaissance and screening mission of cavalry, instead employing his troopers as a well-armed, mobile strike force to seize key points. At Old Cold Harbor, Fitzhugh Lee's two brigades had dug in astride the roads approaching from the east. Late that afternoon, Lee was joined by the advance brigade of Hoke's division, which filed into line on the Confederate left. Within the hour, Sheridan attacked dismounted with Torbert's and Gregg's divisions. After an initial repulse, Torbert outflanked Hoke's poorly deployed North Carolinians on the northern end of the line, while Custer's brigade launched a mounted saber charge against the center. The Confederates gave way, leaving the important intersection in Union hands. Sheridan wasted no time gloating. Believing that Confederate reinforcements were on the way, he quietly withdrew his troopers from the crossroads late that evening.

But Cold Harbor had suddenly become a focal point for both armies. The presence of Union cavalry at Cold Harbor confirmed Lee's belief that Grant was again shifting around the Confederate right flank. Eager to regain the initiative, on the afternoon of 31 May, he pulled Anderson's First Corps out of the center of his line and sent it south to join Hoke, drive off Sheridan, and strike the Union advance. At first Grant and Meade did not share Lee's appreciation of Cold Harbor's importance, but that would soon change. Late on the afternoon of 31 May, V Corps pickets detected Anderson's movement, and then Sheridan reported that he had captured Cold Harbor but had encountered infantry as well as cavalry. Alarmed about his left, at 2145, Meade ordered Wright's VI Corps to leave its position on the Union right and march fifteen miles behind the rest of the army to support Sheridan at Cold Harbor. To fill what would become a three-mile gap between the V and VI Corps, Grant directed Smith's XVIII Corps to go to Cold Harbor from

the Pamunkey. Through Meade, he also instructed Sheridan to reoccupy Cold Harbor and hold the place at all costs until the VI Corps arrived. Fortunately for Sheridan, the Confederates had not discovered his departure, and he was able to resume his position without a fight by 0300 on 1 June.

For the Federal high command, 1 June was a day of frustration. Fatigued by weeks of forced marches and incessant fighting, and feeling its way through a maze of dusty, unfamiliar roads, the VI Corps did not reach Cold Harbor until 1000. In Smith's orders, one of Grant's staff officers had mistakenly substituted New Castle Ferry on the Pamunkey for Cold Harbor, causing the XVIII Corps to lose four or five hours in repeated marching and counter-marching before arriving at Cold Harbor that afternoon.

Nevertheless, the Federals were able to concentrate their strength at the crossroads. Left to fend for himself, Sheridan still managed to turn back several Confederate attempts at daylight to dislodge him—thanks to the firepower of his repeaters and breechloaders and to Anderson's poorly managed assaults. The Confederates at length gave up their attacks and dug in, with Kershaw's division going into position on Hoke's left, Pickett deploying to the left of Kershaw, and Field forming the First Corps' left flank. For much of the day, the Union VI Corps filed into line mostly south of the Richmond road, with Neill's division refusing its flank to guard the far left, Russell anchoring the center, and Ricketts occupying the right, just north of the road. It was not until late afternoon that Smith's XVIII Corps finally arrived: Brig. Gen. Charles Devens' division tied into the VI Corps' right, followed by Brig. Gen. William T. H. Brooks' division in the center, and then by Brig. Gen. John H. Martindale's division on the right.

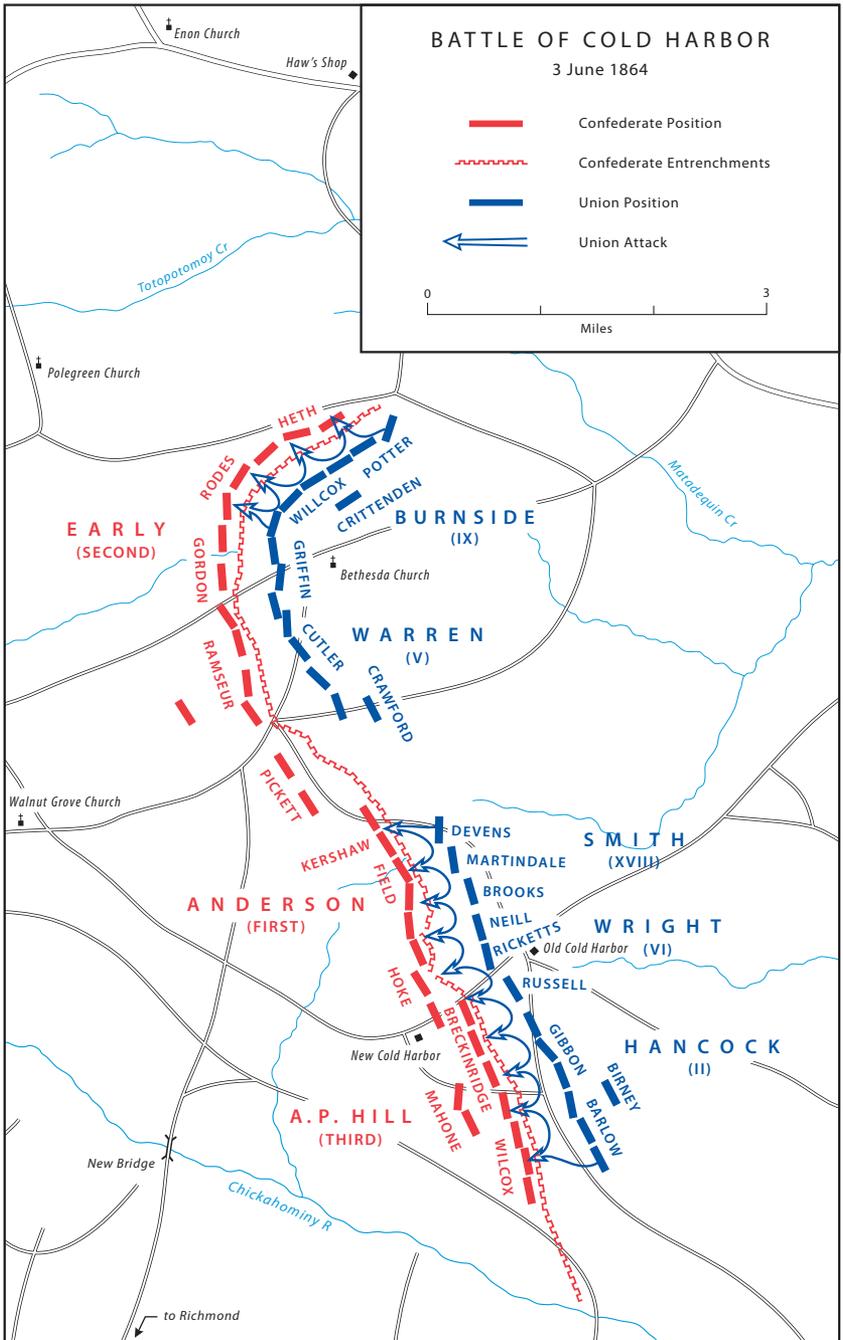
Under orders from Grant and Meade, who both saw an opportunity to strike a Confederate corps before it could dig in, the two Union corps attacked at 1800 and achieved a few minor breakthroughs, especially near the VI Corps–XVIII Corps boundary area, where a ravine sheltered the Federal approach. Angered by poor coordination between the VI and XVIII Corps and by the V Corps' inactivity in the face of enemy diversions from its front, at 2100, Grant and Meade directed the II Corps to execute a night march to the far left and join the VI Corps and XVIII Corps in a dawn assault at Cold Harbor.

The long succession of mishaps only confirmed the utter exhaustion and frustration plaguing both the Union commanders

and their fighting men, who—after a month of relentless campaigning—had clearly reached the limits of their endurance. Marching on a dark night amid oppressive heat and choking dust and having to rely on inaccurate maps of a road network that resembled a rat’s maze, Hancock’s II Corps took what a staff officer assumed to be a shortcut, only to find that the path was too narrow for its artillery train. The corps therefore had to backtrack, adding six miles to what should have been a nine-mile trek. Even under ideal conditions, the II Corps probably would not have reached Cold Harbor in time for a dawn assault. As it was, the weary troops took all morning to stumble into position on the VI Corps’ southern flank, while the XVIII Corps, having rushed to the scene the day before, was just then being resupplied with ammunition. Given these circumstances, at 1330, Meade called off the attack for another four hours. Grant, apparently convinced that Lee’s army was on the verge of collapse, postponed it until 0430 the next morning in order to deliver the knockout blow.

The delay would prove fateful. It did not take Lee long to discern what Grant was planning to do. Assuming that Grant must have weakened his right, Lee sent Early’s Second Corps and Heth’s Third Corps division to strike Burnside’s IX Corps, which was refusing the Union right flank near Bethesda Church. Rodes’ and Heth’s divisions scattered two IX Corps brigades and took almost six hundred prisoners, but Griffin’s V Corps division counterattacked and the IX Corps rallied, stalling Early’s assault. His probing attack completed, Lee took steps to strengthen his position. He shifted Breckinridge’s division to Hoke’s right and then deployed Wilcox’s and Mahone’s divisions of Hill’s Third Corps on Breckinridge’s right. The newly arrived Confederates, as well as Anderson and Hoke to the north, had plenty of time to study the terrain, lay out their trenches with clear fields of fire, and occupy Turkey Hill near the Chickahominy, in order to secure their right flank.

On the Union side, Grant ordered a general assault for 3 June, with the II, VI, and XVIII Corps making the main effort, supported by the V and IX Corps (*Map 9*). The general in chief left the details to Meade and his staff, but, aside from designating the 0430 jump-off time, Meade made few other arrangements to ensure a coordinated attack. Throughout the rainy night of 2–3 June, the Federals could hear the Confederates laboring on their fortifications with pick and shovel. According to a member of Grant’s staff,



MAP 9

a sense of foreboding led some Union soldiers to write their names and addresses on pieces of paper that they pinned to their backs, so that their bodies could later be identified.

The Federal assault at Cold Harbor on the morning of 3 June was an unmitigated tragedy. At 0430, following a ten-minute bombardment of the Confederate entrenchments, the Union troops climbed from their fieldworks and charged. The Confederates sprang to their parapets and opened fire with a devastating combination of minié ball and case shot. Given the convex shape of the Union line and the lack of coordination, the attack formations soon diverged, leaving the advancing Federals even more exposed to a deadly crossfire.

Here and there a few Union units enjoyed some limited success. South of the Richmond road, near the extreme Federal left, Barlow's division struck a portion of Breckinridge's line, where an excessively solicitous Confederate colonel had allowed his regiment to withdraw from their rain-filled trenches and dry out. Barlow's men quickly overran the position, capturing over four hundred prisoners and eight artillery pieces, but they soon found themselves isolated and under a tremendous fire, which forced them back to a patch of sheltered ground fifty yards below the enemy works.

Elsewhere, the attack soon stalled. On Barlow's right, Gibbon's division found its way barred by a swamp and suffered heavy losses in working around it. From a starting position ahead of the II Corps' right, Russell's VI Corps division waited to allow Gibbon to come up on its left, but Gibbon's line was shattered before the connection could be made, leading Russell's division to suspend its advance. Along the VI Corps' center and right, Ricketts' and Neill's formations disintegrated in the face of an overwhelming Confederate fire. Meanwhile, on the XVIII Corps' front, Baldy Smith borrowed a page from Upton's Spotsylvania tactics and attempted to funnel Brooks' division through a ravine with Martindale's division advancing on the right, but intense enemy fire tore huge gaps in the XVIII Corps' line, stopping its progress well short of the Confederate works.

To the north, the V and IX Corps' futile assault further inflated the Federals' already prodigious losses. Although the Union attack had clearly sputtered out within a half hour of its start, a frazzled Meade hesitated to declare it over, leaving Grant to do so at 1330. The myth that the Union army had lost 7,000 men



View of the Cold Harbor battlefield
(Library of Congress)

within a half hour on 3 June overstates the case, but the actual casualties were frightful enough: 5,000 to 6,000 killed, wounded, and missing—most within the first hour—compared to fewer than 1,500 Confederates.

The debacle at Cold Harbor resulted in the first extended pause of the campaign. After some tense negotiations, on 7 June the two sides finally agreed to a truce to bury the dead and bring in the wounded, but by then most of the latter had either died under the blazing Virginia sun or had made their way back to friendly lines. The two armies skirmished, maneuvered, and built earthworks, advancing and countering by regular siege parallels in a manner reminiscent of earlier wars. But the miles of barren landscape presaged the vast wasteland that would stretch across the Western Front during the First World War. The back-breaking work; hot and humid weather; lack of sleep; poor sanitation, food, and water; piles of human corpses and animal carcasses; deadly snipers; and artillery fire all conspired to make life hellish for both sides.

In the Army of the Potomac, officers and enlisted men expressed frustration with their leaders, and Grant himself wondered at the Army of the Potomac's apparent inability to execute even the simplest plans. At times, he might have engaged in some soul-searching. He later admitted in his memoirs that he regretted only two attacks during his career: the 22 May 1863 assault at Vicksburg and the 3 June 1864 strike at Cold Harbor. But within two days of the disaster, he was planning his next move—thereby inaugurating a new campaign.

In deciding to cross the James River and strike Petersburg, Grant was shifting the focus of his operations. He had run out of room to maneuver the Army of Northern Virginia into the open, where the Union army could destroy it. Instead, he would attack Lee's sources of supply. On 6 June, he sent two staff officers to find a good crossing site on the James. The next day, he sent Sheridan with two cavalry divisions toward Charlottesville to link up with Hunter. Sheridan and Hunter would attack Lee's breadbasket in the Shenandoah Valley and his communications with it; their raid would also draw off the enemy's cavalry, leaving Lee blind. This, Grant hoped, would enable Meade's army to cross the James River unopposed, link up with Butler, and seize Petersburg, thus cutting Lee's supply lines with the rest of the South. Grant also took steps to change his base from White House to City Point at the confluence of the Appomattox and the James Rivers opposite Bermuda Hundred.

On 12 June the final act of the Overland Campaign opened. The XVIII Corps moved first, marching back to White House and boarding transports for the return trip to Bermuda Hundred. In the evening, after Wilson's cavalry division had secured Long Bridge on the Chickahominy, Warren's V Corps crossed and took up a screening position at a crossroads hamlet called Riddell's Shop, an act designed to trick Lee into thinking that Grant planned to make only a short detour into the area between the Chickahominy and the James. After dark, the II and VI Corps fell back to a prepared position to cover the move, and the IX Corps, shielded by the V Corps, traversed the Chickahominy at Jones' Bridge.

On 13 June, the carefully choreographed maneuver continued. The II Corps crossed the Chickahominy at Long Bridge and, by evening, had marched to Wilcox's Landing on the James, about ten miles east of City Point, where it was joined by the VI and IX Corps on 14 June. Lee soon discovered Grant's departure

from Cold Harbor but, unable to penetrate the Union screen, he merely moved his army south of the Chickahominy to the Malvern Hill area. On 14–16 June, meanwhile, Grant’s army crossed the 2,100-foot-wide James by ferry at Wilcox’s Landing and by pontoon bridge at Weyanoke Point, three miles downstream. On reaching the south bank of the James, the II and XVIII Corps began their drive on Petersburg, raising the curtain on a new campaign.

Analysis

The confrontation of Lee and Grant has dominated evaluations of the Overland Campaign. Based largely on Lost Cause mythology, traditional assessments have denounced Grant as a butcher and portrayed Lee as overwhelmed by superior numbers and resources. Other studies have taken a much more even-handed view. Grant, J. F. C. Fuller noted, “was a man of thought. Lee was a man of impulse.” According to T. Harry Williams, “Lee was the last of the great old-fashioned generals, Grant the first of the great moderns.” Yet, as other scholars have remarked, the two were more alike than different. Both were Napoleonic generals who sought to concentrate against the enemy’s weak point, whether flanks or front, and destroy his army, achieving great moral results in doing so. Both were supremely aggressive, self-controlled, rugged characters who tended toward optimism and simply refused to quit. Neither fully realized the impact that rifled weapons technology had on the war’s tactics; consequently, each tended to exaggerate the enemy’s weaknesses, which sometimes led them into launching costly, fruitless attacks.

In the brutal contest of maneuver that was the Overland Campaign, Grant finished with the advantage. Lee’s tactical gifts indeed were on full display, as he skillfully countered Grant’s thrusts and made masterful use of terrain for the defensive, all the while seeking an opportunity to take the offensive. Nevertheless, although he made some isolated assaults at Grant’s flanks, Lee was unable to hold the initiative for long because the Union leader never wavered from his single-minded focus on destroying the Southern armies. After each setback, Grant adjusted and moved on, instinctively practicing the operational art by making a series of battles serve the ends of the campaign. At the tactical level, rather than simply bludgeon Lee, he often used maneuver to threaten the

Confederate chieftain at different points, compelling him to shift troops from one sector to another until those rapid movements exposed a weak point that Grant could strike.

Grant's greatest tactical problem lay in his inability to goad the Army of the Potomac into keeping pace with his conceptions—in a word, to “dance” with the Army of Northern Virginia. In 1864, Meade's army was arguably the most professional force in the history of the republic. Nevertheless, though experienced in the details of large-scale administration and logistics, the army's high command all too often proved overly methodical, cautious, and slow-footed, leaving it incapable of responding to a tactical opportunity with the necessary speed and agility. Its efficiency lagged all the more as the casualties mounted, as more and more veterans departed due to expiring enlistments, and as fatigue set in over the course of the grueling campaign. Although Lee's overworked staff made its share of miscues, his army nevertheless beat its adversary to the punch time after time. Small wonder that Grant, by the end of the campaign, mulled over what was wrong with his army.

When it came to the use—or misuse—of cavalry, however, both Grant and Meade deserved considerable criticism. Unlike European cavalry, which traditionally performed as shock troops in massed charges, American mounted soldiers mostly functioned as light cavalry, using their horses for mobility, but dismounting to fight like infantry. This remained the case during the Civil War, with cavalry carrying out raids as well as reconnaissance and screening missions. While Lee and Stuart both understood the importance of these functions, the Union commanders often did not. Meade, for one, sometimes wasted his cavalry on train guard duty, and even Sheridan, the former infantryman, was slow to grasp the cavalry's strengths. As a result, the Union army entered the Wilderness in a virtual state of blindness and remained so while Sheridan conducted his raid on Richmond during the operations around Spotsylvania and the North Anna.

Still, the Union cavalry did have an impact, particularly in the latter stage of the campaign. The instincts of the hard-hitting Sheridan led him to develop his cavalry into a highly mobile, well-armed strike force that could defeat a comparable force of Confederates and secure key points ahead of the Union infantry, as it had demonstrated at Cold Harbor. It is ironic that when Sheridan took two cavalry divisions on a raid toward Charlottesville in mid-June, Lee sent most of his cavalry in pursuit, thereby blinding

himself at the very moment when Grant began his move to the James.

For both sides, the issue of cavalry use and misuse paled beside the matter of achieving decisive results while on the tactical offensive. Generals sought to accomplish this by striking the enemy's flanks or rear, but they invariably encountered problems in moving their forces into position, coordinating with friendly units, and maintaining command and control—difficulties exacerbated by dense woods, poor roads, and intervening water courses. As the primary units of maneuver, brigades often saw their attacks break down into disjointed lunges by individual regiments over broken terrain.

To maintain unit cohesion, both sides attempted easier, but more costly, frontal assaults. Union forces sometimes employed dense, columnar formations that endeavored to move swiftly across the intervening ground, an approach that worked twice at Spotsylvania. But even when such attacks achieved a breakthrough, they often became disorganized and, without quick and massive support, became vulnerable to the inevitable Confederate counterattack. Likewise, as early war battles had already demonstrated, artillery proved much more effective on the defensive than in close support of the offensive.

The advantages of the defensive were further enhanced by one of the salient features of the Overland Campaign—the extensive use of field fortifications. Within an hour of halting, a unit could construct a formidable system of earthworks; within twenty-four hours, it could make them almost impregnable. Protected by such fortifications, the Confederates—who were usually on the defensive—could employ a thinner, more extended line with minimal reserves, thus making maximum use of their manpower. The Federals responded by attempting to maneuver the Southerners out of their works, but, in almost every case, Lee's army was able to beat them to the decisive point.

The Overland Campaign, writes historian Mark Grimsley, “saw the most savage, sustained fighting of the entire war.” In forty days, the Army of the Potomac lost over 55,000 men killed, wounded, or missing. A recent study shows that Lee lost perhaps 33,600 men. But mere statistics can only begin to convey the damage sustained by the two armies. The Army of Northern Virginia had lost over a third of its senior leadership and most, if not all, of its offensive capability. Meade's army had lost almost as severely in its officer

corps and even more heavily in the number of veteran troops who returned home after their enlistments had expired. Officers noted that the remaining veterans no longer seemed as eager as before and that both they and the new arrivals attacked without zeal—and sometimes not at all. After an initial gush of enthusiasm over Grant's steady progress, the Northern press became increasingly critical over the mounting butcher's bill.

What had been accomplished? By the end of June, Grant was not much closer to Richmond than he would have been had he sailed his army up the James in transports at the start of May. Although he still held the initiative, his shift down to Petersburg amounted to an admission that he could not destroy Lee's army in the field. Still, the Overland Campaign had done irreparable damage to the Confederates—after all, Grant could replace his losses, whereas Lee could not—placing the Federals firmly on the road to final victory at Appomattox Court House.



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