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Culp's Hill: Key to Union Success at Gettysburg

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Abstract

Brigadier General George S. Greene's position on Culp's Hill during the Battle of Gettysburg is arguably the crucial lynchpin of July 2, 1863. Had this position at the barb of the fishhook defensive line fallen, Confederate General Robert E. Lee and his army would then have been positioned to take Cemetery Hill, thus breaking the curve of the hook on the Union right. This most likely would have sent the Union into retreat, leaving the direct route to Washington unguarded. Fortunately, valiant efforts were made by men like Generals George S. Greene and Henry H. Lockwood in order to preserve the Union Army's possession of the hill and, as a result, preserve the Union itself. While leaders distinguished themselves during the Battle of Gettysburg with exceptional decision-making and ingenuity, the battle for Culp's Hill also embodied the personal cost these decisions made, as evidenced by the experience of Marylanders who literally fought their neighbors. [excerpt]

Keywords

Culp's Hill, Gettysburg, Battle of Gettysburg

Culp's Hill: Key to Union Success at Gettysburg

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Historical Essay

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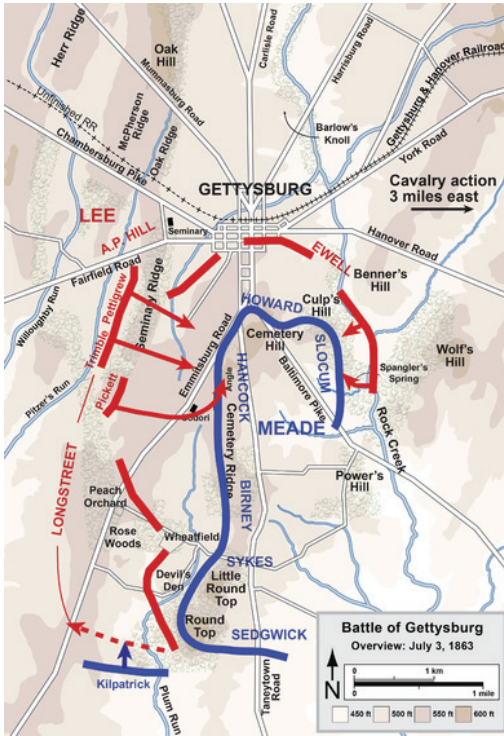


Diagram 1

(Source: Wikimedia)

Culp’s Hill was under siege on July 1, 2, and 3, throughout the entirety of the Battle of Gettysburg. It was a strategic position, both in its proximity to the Union supply lines along the Baltimore Pike, and in the defense of the hook along nearby Cemetery Hill. The Union troops were under the command of Major General Henry W. Slocum while the Confederates were part of Major General Edward Johnson’s Third division. Lt. General Richard S. Ewell’s inaction on July 1 gave the five upstate New York brigades under Brigadier General George Sears “Pap” Greene, holding Culp’s Hill, much needed time to better their defenses.¹⁵² They had been

152 William A. Frassanito, *Gettysburg: A Journey In Time* (Gettysburg: Thomas Publications, 1975): 129-130.

left undermanned by the decision to move several divisions to reinforce the western side of the hook. One key aspect of the Union defense was the implementation of earthen breastworks along the north ridge of the hill from the base of the hill, near Spangler's Spring, up the hill towards the north. The breastworks were the idea of General Greene, a West Point engineering graduate. On July 2, 1863, Greene was in charge of the Union troops on the eastern slope of Culp's hill. The breastworks were completed by noon, and stretched across the hillside.¹⁵³ Colonel Charles Candy of the 66th Ohio then formed a support line running southwest from the right rear of Greene's 137th New York, facing the lower hill.¹⁵⁴ The implementation of Candy's earthworks would appear useless at first because General Thomas Kane's second brigade arrived and took a defensive position upon lower Culp's hill, thus putting Candy's men behind the frontline. Later these defenses became crucial as a fallback position, as the Union forces would later retreat from lower Culp's hill. By noon on July 2nd, just over 8,600 Union troops defended Culp's Hill in a line stretching about a half mile from the north crest of the hill to Spangler's meadow.¹⁵⁵ The building of breastworks was a key decision in giving the Union men a psychological as well as a strategic advantage over the Confederate soldiers. While the battle was delayed, trench building gave the men something to do to keep them busy, and the sound of their construction was noted to provoke anxiety in the CSA troops waiting down the hill. Lt. Randolph McKim of General Steuart's Brigade reported that despite some skirmishing by the 1st North Carolina earlier in the

153 John A. Archer, *Culp's Hill at Gettysburg: "The Mountain Trembled"* (Gettysburg: Thomas Publications): 22-23.

154 *Ibid.*, 25.

155 *Ibid.*, 26.

morning, the regiment remained mostly in waiting, listening with growing apprehension. He said:

Much of my time after nightfall had been spent on the front picket line, listening to the busy strokes of Union picks and shovels on the line, to the rumble and the tramp of their troops as they were hurried forward by Union commanders and placed in position. There was therefore, no difficulty in divining the scene that would break on our view with the coming dawn. I did not hesitate to say to both Ewell and Early that a line of heavy earthworks and guns with infantry ranks behind them, would frown upon us at daylight. I expressed the opinion that even at that hour, 2 o'clock A. M., by a concentrated and vigorous night assault we could carry those heights, and that if we waited until morning it would cost us 10,000 men to take them.¹⁵⁶

The breastworks were formed by filling in the space between large boulders with earth and stones along the ridge, felling trees to reinforce the breastworks thus providing protection from gunfire as well as a lookout and place to shoot between logs. One Union soldier, Jesse Jones of the 60th New York recounted, “Culp’s Hill was covered with woods: so all the material needful were at our disposal. Right and left the men felled the trees, and blocked them up into a close log fence.”¹⁵⁷ Although some combatants of the Civil War era considered breastworks a sign of cowardice, the use of these fortifications would greatly reduce the number of casualties in this battle. Early in the battle, the breastworks gave the thinly spread and outnumbered Union troops a definite advantage in obscuring their true numbers, as well as providing shelter from the assault. Under General Greene’s leadership, a system of rotating all available regiments to the front guaranteed that troops were reloaded and ready to engage the enemy. When they exhausted their

156 Randolph McKim, *General Stewart’s Brigade*, Southern Historical Society Papers, Vol. 40, 258.

157 Archer, *Culp’s Hill at Gettysburg*, 25.

ammunition, they dropped back to allow the next fresh regiment to begin firing helped to greatly increase the rate of fire of Union troops.

Another key element that led to the Union victory was the effectiveness of Union response to Confederate artillery. While observing the Union line, Johnson realized that the Union cannons on Cemetery Hill appeared formidable. The Confederates would have to count on the effectiveness of Ewell's artillery. Around 4:00 p.m. on July 2, Confederate cannons opened fire upon Cemetery Ridge from artillery positions on Seminary Ridge and Benner's Hill. During this time, Union commander Major General John W. Geary saw the opportunity to launch an attack *enfilade* (attacking an enemy along its long axis) against the Confederates.¹⁵⁸ The Third North Carolina and the Second Maryland also received "enfilading fire from Green's New York Brigade, which was posted in an angle of the works."¹⁵⁹

Shortly after Geary had called guns upon the crest of the hill and had begun to attack the enemy, Confederate cannons turned their attention towards Culp's Hill. Although Geary's tactics had drawn cannon fire upon Culp's Hill, it was especially damaging to Carpenter's Allegheny Battery and the Chesapeake Artillery. Another problem that arose for the Confederate gunners, in particular upon Benner's Hill, was that Union Marksmen easily identified their silhouettes and casualties began to further rise. Eventually after coming under fire from both Union artillery and marksmen fire, Latimer's battalion on Benner's Hill was given permission to withdraw, which relieved the Union line of artillery fire from that direction.¹⁶⁰

158 Archer, *Culp's Hill at Gettysburg*, 79-80.

159 WW Goldsborough, *The Maryland Line in the Confederate Army*, 104.

160 *Ibid.*, 37.

Even before the main fighting had begun, Major General Edward Johnson put himself at a great disadvantage. Johnson's advancing force was weakened when he gave the order to the Stonewall Brigade to remain on the Hanover Road in the event that a Union threat would attack from the southern end of the battlefield. This decision would put Johnson down some 1,300 men from his original attacking force which could have played a key role in loosening the Union hold on Culp's Hill.¹⁶¹ Without these needed men, the arduous journey would become only more difficult. To add to the rugged terrain of boulders and fallen timber that hindered their ascent up the slope, the Confederate forces were then also engaged in heavy skirmish action. Skirmishers from Greene's division greatly slowed the Confederates advance; Sgt. M. L. Olmsted from the 102nd New York recounted: "we in the heavy timber made every tree and rock a veritable battlefield, and probably during the whole war a more stubborn skirmish fight was never waged."¹⁶² With the efficient use of the Union skirmishers, the advancing confederates were reduced even before reaching the line of earthworks.

161 Archer, *Culp's Hill at Gettysburg*, 105.

162 Ibid, 47.



Breastworks on Culp's Hill

(Source: Wikimedia)

It is important to note that Brigadier General George H. Stuart's 1st Maryland division was at the southern end of the Confederate line. This put them in direct contact with the 1st Maryland Eastern Shore Infantry of Lockwood's Union brigade from Maryland on lower Culp's Hill near Spangler's Spring on July 2. This situation literally pitted neighbor against neighbor, with the opposing colors being carried by cousins. The meaning of the Civil War had become a metaphoric reality in their engagement on Culp's Hill. Stuart's Marylanders did not fare well, but according to Union Colonel James Wallace "our old friends and acquaintances" (from the

Confederate battalion) were “sorrowfully gathered up... and tenderly cared for” by Lockwood’s Marylanders after the battle.

The fighting went into the night on July 2. Lieutenant General Jubal Early’s division advanced up the northeastern slope and in the process captured several batteries. This small victory was short-lived. Colonel Samuel Carroll and the Gibraltar Brigade were able to retake Rickett’s Battery and repel the Confederate infantry from the hill. At the end of July 2nd, the Confederates held lower Culp’s Hill, but had failed to take any other part of the hill. The orders on July 3rd remained unchanged - control the hill. Their inability to adjust their strategy to capture the hill would become apparent on July 3rd when they would be completely repulsed from the hill. Even some officers of the C.S.A. believed the order to charge the hill again July 3 to be a suicide mission. Before starting the charge, Captain William H. Murray addressed his men telling them, “Goodbye, it is not likely that we shall meet again.”¹⁶³ This prophetic statement would be fulfilled as he led his men up Culp’s Hill to try to take the earthworks once again. He was mortally wounded in the attempt and died on the field.

Major General Edward “Allegheny” Johnson led the Confederate attack on the western side of Culp’s Hill. He had a large numerical advantage on July 1 over the Union that did not exist at any other point during the battle. He did not capitalize on his ability to break into the fish hook on southern Culp’s Hill. Johnson’s error lay in the fact that he did not adequately focus his resources on capturing the seven acre meadow (later known as the Pardee Field) running between lower Culp’s Hill and the

163 Daniel Carroll Toomey, *Marylanders at Gettysburg* (Baltimore: Toomey Press, 1994).

Baltimore Pike which the Confederates would have to cross to advance, thus putting the men on open ground and subject to fire.

The battle, which ensued on Culp's Hill on July 3, involved 22,000 troops, and one fifth of all the ammunition expended in the battle.¹⁶⁴ Union guns on Cemetery Hill aided the assault while the Confederates had Ewell's artillery on Benner's Hill. Geary enfiladed the enemy with their own cannons.¹⁶⁵ Despite the Confederates' grueling efforts over seven hours on July 3 to capture Culp's Hill, they were defeated by eleven o'clock in the morning by the outnumbered, but entrenched, Union forces in some of the most intense, and close-quarter fighting of the entire battle. One of the victim's of the battle, Wesley Culp, was a grandson of the original landowner of Culp's Hill. He had joined the Virginia Second Infantry (Stonewall Brigade) and had just returned from town after visiting his sick mother when he rejoined his brigade and was killed on Culp's Hill.¹⁶⁶

Without first capturing Culp's Hill, the Confederate plan to take Cemetery Hill from the east could never have come to fruition. Thus, as long as Cemetery Hill was held by Union forces, the opportunity remained for them to win the Gettysburg Campaign. If the Union had lost Cemetery Hill it is likely that they would have been forced to retreat, leaving Washington, D.C. exposed, and the Union demoralized. Fortunately for the safety of the United States capitol and the war effort, men like George Sears Greene and the Twelfth Corps courageously defended Culp's Hill. Although the struggles at Culp's Hill were significant in achieving the Union victory

164 "Culp's Hill, Then and Now: An Interview with Charlie Fennel," <http://www.civilwar.org> (accessed October 22, 2011).

165 Archer, *Culp's Hill at Gettysburg*, 79-80.

166 Stephen Sears, *Gettysburg* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003): 246.

at Gettysburg, it does not seem to hold the same fascination as Devil's Den, Little Round Top, and Pickett's Charge. This may be for the simple fact that George Sears Greene was a man who did not highly publicize his role in the actions of July 2, 1863.

The surreal horrors of war were epitomized by the Marylanders who came face to face on the battlefield. Although these men fought on opposite sides, they still realized the human cost of the battle. This horror was all too real to the battle participants, but was as yet unknown to the American public. It was the accounts of these soldiers, as well as the photographers and visitors to the battlefield in the weeks following Gettysburg that would shock the conscience of America.

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