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The Gettysburg Campaign

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Abstract

The Battle of Gettysburg has inspired a more voluminous literature than any single event in American military history for at least three major reasons. First, after three days of fighting on July 1–3, 1863, General Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia and Major General George G. Meade's Army of the Potomac lost more than 51,000 dead, wounded, captured, and missing, making Gettysburg the costliest military engagement in North American history. Second, President Abraham Lincoln endowed Gettysburg with special distinction when he visited in November 1863 to dedicate the soldiers' cemetery and delivered his immortal Gettysburg Address. Finally, Gettysburg gave the Union its first significant victory over General Lee; the subsequent euphoria helped to fix in popular memory – if not in objective history – an enduring image of Gettysburg as the turning point of the Civil War.

Keywords

Gettysburg Campaign, potomac, civil war, union, General Lee, Abraham Lincoln

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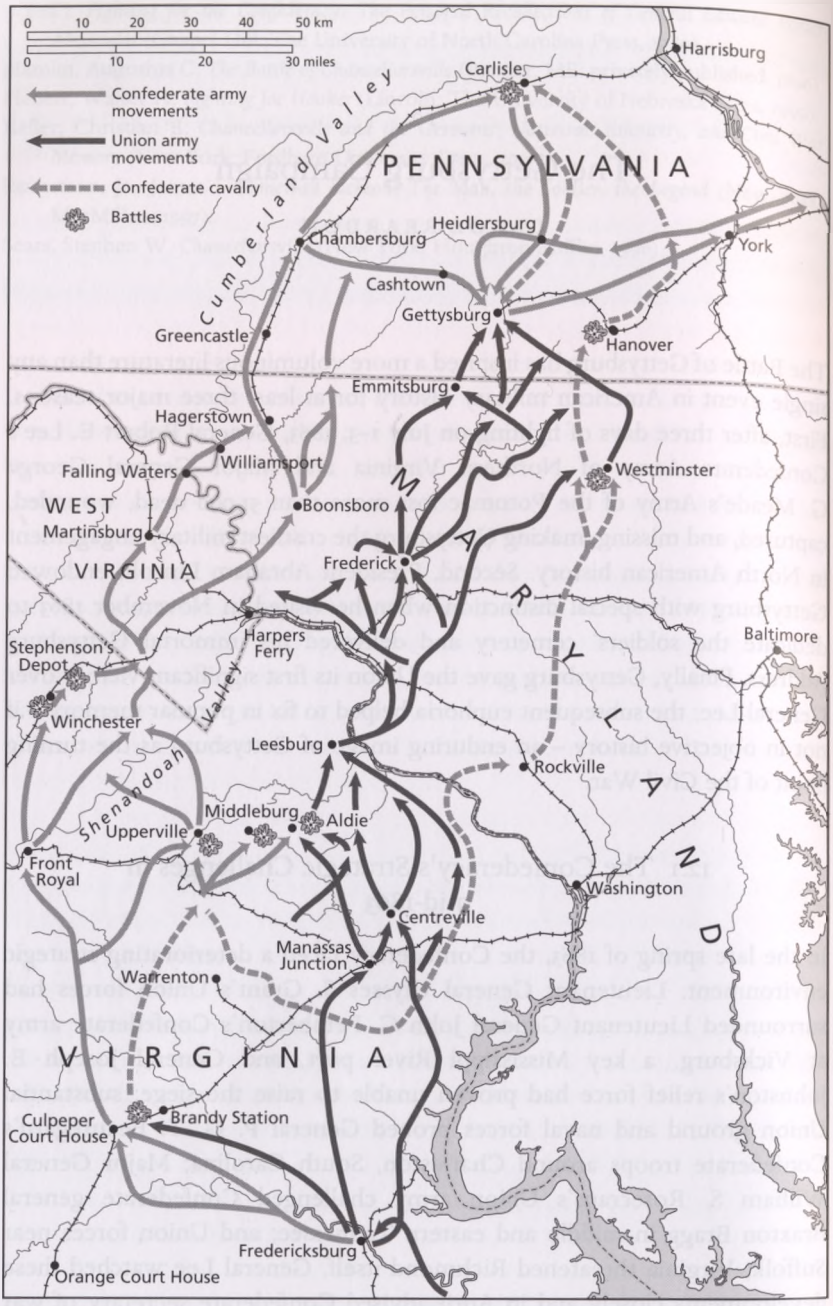
The Battle of Gettysburg has inspired a more voluminous literature than any single event in American military history for at least three major reasons. First, after three days of fighting on July 1–3, 1863, General Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia and Major General George G. Meade's Army of the Potomac lost more than 51,000 dead, wounded, captured, and missing, making Gettysburg the costliest military engagement in North American history. Second, President Abraham Lincoln endowed Gettysburg with special distinction when he visited in November 1863 to dedicate the soldiers' cemetery and delivered his immortal Gettysburg Address. Finally, Gettysburg gave the Union its first significant victory over General Lee; the subsequent euphoria helped to fix in popular memory – if not in objective history – an enduring image of Gettysburg as the turning point of the Civil War.

12.1 The Confederacy's Strategic Challenges in mid-1863

In the late spring of 1863, the Confederacy faced a deteriorating strategic environment. Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant's Union forces had surrounded Lieutenant General John C. Pemberton's Confederate army at Vicksburg, a key Mississippi River port, and General Joseph E. Johnston's relief force had proven unable to raise the siege; substantial Union ground and naval forces probed General P. G. T. Beauregard's Confederate troops around Charleston, South Carolina; Major General William S. Rosecrans's Union army challenged Confederate general Braxton Bragg in middle and eastern Tennessee; and Union forces near Suffolk, Virginia threatened Richmond itself. General Lee watched these developments closely and in April advised Confederate secretary of war James A. Seddon that "the readiest method of relieving pressure on



12.1 The Gettysburg campaign. Drawn by Cox Cartographic Ltd.

General Johnston and General Beauregard would be for this army to cross into Maryland" and head north.[1]

Lee also faced dire challenges of his own, especially a serious shortage of food for his army and its animals. He could not tap into large parts of the Shenandoah Valley, the heart of Virginia's agricultural production, now under Union military occupation. Two years of war had devastated farms in Virginia's Tidewater and Piedmont, as well. By mid-April, Lee wrote his wife that he needed to "establish our supplies on a firm basis," and opportunity beckoned after Lee defeated the Army of the Potomac under Major General Joseph Hooker at Chancellorsville on May 1–3, 1863.[2] Despite the loss of 13,000 men and the death of Lieutenant General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, Lee informed his civilian superiors that the time had come for a northward advance by his army to sweep Union troops from the Shenandoah Valley, to push the Army of the Potomac out of Virginia, and to give the state's farmers a chance to plant and harvest a crop. Additionally, he argued, the disruption caused by such a campaign would afford "greater relief" to the Confederate "armies in middle Tennessee and on the Carolina coast than by any other method."[3]

Brief snippets in postwar memoirs suggest that Lee's plan did not win the immediate support of the Confederacy's senior military and political leaders, and other alternatives – including sending Lee himself or parts of his army to the western theater – received active consideration before President Davis finally gave the nod to Lee's offensive into Union territory. No detailed minutes survive to explain or prioritize the factors that shaped the discussions, however, and since Lee started his summer offensive with no public announcement from the Davis administration, the public press speculated extensively about the goals of the campaign. Credible suppositions – including Lee's desire to improve his logistical base and take active operations onto Northern soil – blended with grandiose claims for designs to capture Washington, to forge formal alliances with European powers, to force Grant to lift the siege at Vicksburg and redeploy his troops against Lee, or even to force Lincoln to surrender by completely destroying the Army of the Potomac on northern soil.

The lack of clear specifics for Lee's campaign extended to his plans for his army's goals in Pennsylvania. After reorganizing his army following Jackson's death from two corps into three – under his second-in-command, Lieutenant General James Longstreet, and newly promoted lieutenant generals Richard

1 Clifford Dowdey and Louis Manarin (eds.), *The Wartime Papers of Robert E. Lee* (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), p. 430.
2 Dowdey and Manarin (eds.), *Wartime Papers*, p. 438.
3 Dowdey and Manarin (eds.), *Wartime Papers*, pp. 434–5.

S. Ewell and A. P. Hill – he ordered his army northward on June 3. Lee issued no formal commander's intent to inform the actions of his senior subordinates. Nor did he make a public announcement to Pennsylvanians to explain his army's presence as he had done during the Maryland campaign in 1862. One major criticism of Lee's generalship in the summer of 1863 centers on his failure to send his 75,000-man army into Pennsylvania with a clearly defined mission. Lee left behind an evidentiary void that authors of Gettysburg campaign narratives have filled with both reasonable assumptions about his logistical concerns and more dubious notions such as his intention to capture eastern Pennsylvania's anthracite coal fields.[4]

12.2 The Union Reaction to Lee's Move North

General Hooker missed Lee's initial northward moves, but his horsemen caught Major General James E. B. Stuart's Confederate cavalry off guard near Brandy Station, Virginia on June 9, and sent them reeling. The setback did not deter Lee. He continued to push toward the Shenandoah Valley for the protection of the Blue Ridge Mountains. On June 14–15, Ewell's 2nd Corps at the head of Lee's advance routed the Union garrison at Winchester. Ewell entered Pennsylvania on June 22, and his men gathered supplies so aggressively that Lee issued two special orders to chastise his men for their "instances of forgetfulness."[5] For the next week, Confederate troops continued to fill their logistical needs, reached the outskirts of Harrisburg, and easily repulsed challenges from Pennsylvania's Emergency Militia. Hooker initially considered a thrust toward the Confederate capital, but Lincoln reminded him sternly that "Lee's army and not Richmond, is your sure objective point."[6] Hooker began his belated pursuit by sending his cavalry against the tail of Lee's army still in Virginia, but at Middleburg, Upperville, and Aldie, Stuart's Confederate horsemen effectively blocked them.

By June 27, with Lee already in Pennsylvania, Hooker had finally entered Maryland. Under War Department pressure to pursue more aggressively, Hooker sent a sharply worded dispatch demanding reinforcements and expansion of his authority. Early on June 28, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton

4 See *Army and Navy Journal*, vol. 1, October 10, 1863.

5 For the text of Special Orders Nos. 72 and 73, see United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 127 vols., index, and atlas (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), specifically series I, volume 27, part 3, pp. 912–13 and 942–3 (hereafter cited as *OR*; all subsequent citations are of series 1 unless otherwise noted).

6 *OR*, 27(1): 35.

relieved Hooker of command of the Army of the Potomac and replaced him with Major General George G. Meade. The order also provided Meade with a daunting two-part mission; he had to protect Washington and Baltimore, as well as find and fight Lee. With incomplete knowledge of the deployment of the 94,000 men in his seven-infantry corps and cavalry – and even less information on Lee's troops – he nonetheless issued orders to resume the march toward Pennsylvania the day following his promotion. Selective reading of Meade's initial orders enabled detractors to describe his contingency plan for a defensive stand along Pipe Creek on the Maryland border as evidence of his lack of aggressiveness; but Meade understood both his offensive and defensive missions and expressed clear willingness to "assume the offensive from this place" should opportunity offer.[7]

On June 30, Meade sent Brigadier General John Buford's 2,800-man cavalry division to Gettysburg to find and report back on Lee's movements. Buford's troopers fanned out to the north, east, and west along seven of the ten roads that converged in this crossroads town. They reported a strong Confederate presence north and west of town and exchanged shots with reconnoitering Confederate infantry along the Chambersburg Road west of town. Buford correctly predicted to Meade that a fight would start near Gettysburg the next morning.

12.3 July 1: The Battle Begins

When Lee heard of Meade's promotion, the Army of Northern Virginia stretched from the Maryland border near Hagerstown north to Chambersburg and then east to the outskirts of Harrisburg. Lee lacked reliable information about the Army of the Potomac's activities and intentions. Because Stuart had interpreted Lee's June 23 orders to "take position on the right [east] of our column" to justify a wide-ranging swing to the east of the entire Union army as well – a decision still hotly debated by students of the battle today – he had not kept Lee reliably updated on Meade's movements.[8] Thus, Lee prudently ordered his overstretched army to concentrate near Cashtown, Pennsylvania, about 8 miles northwest of Gettysburg. His corps commanders knew not to bring on a fight until the entire force had arrived.

7 George Gordon Meade (ed.), *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade, Major General, United States Army*, 2 vols. (1913; reprint edition, Baltimore, MD: Butternut and Blue, 1994), vol. II, p. 11.

8 *OR*, 27(2): 316.

Brigadier General Henry Heth's division from A. P. Hill's 3rd Corps had probed toward Gettysburg on June 30 and engaged with Buford's troopers, mistaking them for local militia. Early on July 1, they advanced again down the Chambersburg Road and once again met Buford's men, this time near Marsh Creek, approximately 3 miles west of Gettysburg. A brief exchange of shots here started the Battle of Gettysburg at approximately 7:00 a.m.

The terrain west of Gettysburg rolled across a series of gentle ridges ideal for defense. On McPherson's Ridge, 1 mile west of town, Buford established the line he determined to hold and sent back a constant stream of information to update Major General Meade and Major General John F. Reynolds, commanding the I Corps, the closest Union reinforcements. On Seminary Ridge, the final height between McPherson's Ridge and Gettysburg, Buford used the cupola of the Pennsylvania Lutheran Seminary's Old Dorm to observe Heth's advance and the measured withdrawal of his troopers to McPherson's Ridge. As pressure grew on the outnumbered cavalrymen – Heth had put two full infantry brigades into his first line – Reynolds finally reached the battlefield and took charge of the fight. His arrival changed the asymmetric infantry-versus-cavalry meeting engagement of the early morning to a more conventional and sustained infantry clash. Even if Heth had not sought a fight, he now faced one.

Reynolds had no time to plan a battle. He simply responded to the threat in his front and tried to stop Heth. About 10:45, while ordering his famous Iron Brigade against the Tennesseans and Alabamians pouring into a woodlot on McPherson's Ridge, Reynolds fell dead, shot through the head. Major General Abner Doubleday, the I Corps' senior division commander, succeeded to command with little knowledge of the situation or Reynolds's intentions. The Iron Brigade cleared the woods and bought Doubleday time to consider his options – attack, withdraw, or hold on – while other I Corps troops stopped a brigade of Mississippians and North Carolinians in the bed of an unfinished railroad on the north side of the Chambersburg Road, capturing several hundred Confederates. Noon brought a brief calm for Doubleday and Heth to decide their next moves; both determined to continue the fight for McPherson's Ridge.

The sudden arrival around noon of substantial Confederate reinforcements broke the quiet. Major General Robert E. Rodes's division from Ewell's 2nd Corps had planned to rejoin Lee near Cashtown, but the sounds of Heth's fight against the Union I Corps drew them instead toward Gettysburg. As they emerged from the woods on Oak Hill, a height just north of McPherson's Ridge, the two generals realized they held a seemingly

perfect position to envelop the right flank of Doubleday's I Corps. Ewell, however, still operating under orders not to engage until the army concentrated, faced an interesting choice: obey his original instructions, or take advantage of a promising opportunity to attack.

First, Ewell turned Oak Hill into a formidable artillery platform. Then, he ordered Rodes to assault the right flank of the I Corps line, which, he believed, rested in a woodlot on a slight ridge extending south from Oak Hill, now designated Oak Ridge. Rodes planned a coordinated attack of three brigades, with Colonel Edward A. O'Neal's Alabamians on the left, Brigadier General Alfred Iverson's North Carolina brigade in the center, and Brigadier Junius Daniel's North Carolinians on the right.

The plan seemed reasonable and straightforward, but it fell apart from a series of inexplicable errors. O'Neal's Alabamians attacked first and alone. They attacked through low ground behind Oak Ridge, expecting little resistance. When they found an entire I Corps brigade in a line of battle blocking them and then spotted the head of Major General Oliver O. Howard's newly arrived XI Corps entering the fields north of Gettysburg and threatening their left flank, the Alabamians fired a few volleys and withdrew. O'Neal failed to report these unanticipated developments to Rodes or Ewell, and Iverson and Daniel advanced still believing they aimed at an unprotected Union flank. Unfortunately for Iverson's men, the Union troops who repulsed O'Neal redeployed behind the crest of Oak Ridge and caught the Tar Heels in close-range volleys. Nearly half of them fell dead or wounded within fifteen minutes, and Iverson, who had remained on Oak Hill, refused to ride forward to rally the survivors. Daniel's brigade could not succor them either. Instead of advancing westward, they unaccountably veered south, away from Oak Ridge and toward the railroad cut and the Chambersburg Pike. This costly episode – as with the debacle at the railroad cut – demonstrated that overall Confederate success could also include individual and small-unit failures.[9]

The arrival of Howard's XI Corps certainly complicated Ewell's decisions, but it also gave the Union forces at Gettysburg its fourth different commander on July 1. He astutely left Brigadier General Adolph von Steinwehr's division on Cemetery Hill, a prominent treeless elevation on the southern edge of Gettysburg, to establish a strong defensive position to serve, if

9 Robert K. Krick, "Three Confederate Disasters on Oak Ridge: Failures of Brigade Leadership on the First Day at Gettysburg," in Gary W. Gallagher (ed.), *The First Day at Gettysburg: Essays on Confederate and Union Leadership* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1992), pp. 92–140.

needed, as a rallying point. Howard then ordered Doubleday to continue holding the I Corps line west of Gettysburg on McPherson's Ridge. He then turned his attention to Ewell's approach from the north. While Rodes's men pressed their attacks from Oak Hill northwest of town, Howard learned that Major General Jubal Early's division under Ewell's corps had begun to deploy battle lines astride the Harrisburg Road northeast of Gettysburg. Howard quickly ordered his remaining two divisions under Major General Carl Schurz and Brigadier General Francis C. Barlow to positions north of the town to stop Ewell. Both division commanders were military amateurs, and their dispositions showed it. Schurz failed to close a gap between his left flank and the right flank of the I Corps, and the strength of the two XI Corps divisions combined proved insufficient to cover the front assigned to them. Barlow created an additional gap between his division and Schurz by advancing against orders to take possession of a knob of high ground in his front.

As Howard completed his dispositions, General Lee reached the battlefield. From his position west of Gettysburg, he could not see Howard and Ewell's lines north of Gettysburg, but he had received enough positive news to abandon his intention to concentrate his army before accepting battle. At mid-afternoon, Lee ordered an attack along his entire line, from northeast to northwest to west.

When Early launched his assault on Barlow's division northeast of Gettysburg, the troops on the right flank of the XI Corps line were unprepared to receive the attack. Barlow fell badly wounded and many of his soldiers broke for the rear, significant numbers of them captured in the unfamiliar streets of Gettysburg. Northern newspapers of the day blamed the entire XI Corps – not just Barlow's division – for repeating their collapse at Chancellorsville, when they crumbled under Stonewall Jackson's flank attack. Once again, the press labeled them as "Howard's Cowards," the "Flying Half-moons" from their crescent-shaped corps badge, or, in reference to the significant number of German-born soldiers in its ranks, the "Flying Dutchmen."[10] But the entire XI Corps did not deserve such opprobrium. Schurz's men on the center and left of Howard's line north of town stood fire well and, for a while, effectively resisted Ewell's assaults. In the end, however, the XI Corps line north of town evaporated. The retreat of Howard's XI Corps rendered vulnerable the right flank of the I Corps line on Oak Ridge. With victorious Confederates pushing into Gettysburg from the north, Rodes

10 For a comprehensive perspective that sees beyond questions relating to ethnicity, see A. Wilson Greene, "From Chancellorsville to Cemetery Hill: O. O. Howard and Eleventh Corps Leadership," in Gallagher (ed.), *First Day at Gettysburg*, pp. 57–91.

launched a second attack from Oak Hill. The Union troops had little remaining ammunition, and they finally received orders to abandon their position, too.

The center and left of the I Corps line continued to hold McPherson's Ridge west of town. Daniel's North Carolinians, who had failed to support Iverson, found themselves embroiled in a tough fight against a newly arrived brigade of Pennsylvanians under Colonel Roy Stone near the railroad cut and the McPherson farm buildings. Few of the Pennsylvanians had seen serious battle action before Gettysburg, but they faced north to repulse several assaults by Daniel's Tar Heels and then redeployed under fire to face west to receive the attack by a fresh brigade from Heth's division. To their immediate south, the Iron Brigade continued to fight in the woodlot where General Reynolds fell earlier that day. Their fight against Brigadier General James Johnston Pettigrew's North Carolinians on the afternoon of July 1 holds a prominent place in Gettysburg lore. Before it ended, the Iron Brigade's 24th Michigan alone lost eight officers killed and nearly 80 percent of its men killed, wounded, and missing. One company of the 26th North Carolina entered the fight with eighty-eight men in ranks and suffered 100 percent casualties. After about two hours of fighting, the survivors of all the I Corps infantry brigades that fought that day on McPherson's Ridge – along with a massed battery of seventeen cannon astride the Chambersburg Road – made a last stand on Seminary Ridge. At about 3:45 p.m., Lee sent forward Major General W. Dorsey Pender's fresh division of Hill's 3rd Corps to carry the position. The Union defenders held on until Colonel Abner M. Perrin's South Carolinians finally pierced the center of the Union line near the Seminary's Old Dorm.[11]

By about 4:00 p.m., the Union line north and west of Gettysburg had collapsed, and Cemetery Hill south of town teemed with disorganized survivors. Near the gatehouse of Evergreen Cemetery, Doubleday and Howard clashed over troop deployments and command authority. The arrival of Major General Winfield S. Hancock, commander of Meade's II Corps, ended further debate. Carrying with him Meade's written authorization to make decisions in his name – necessary, since both Howard and Doubleday outranked him – Hancock ordered Howard to hold Cemetery Hill and, over Doubleday's objections, sent one I Corps division to hold adjacent Culp's Hill. Slowly, order was restored.

11 J. Michael Miller, "Perrin's Brigade on July 1, 1863," *Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 13 (July 1995): 22–32.

About 5:00 p.m., observing the chaos on Cemetery Hill, Lee ordered Ewell to attack Cemetery Hill "if practicable" and without renewing a prolonged fight. Ewell evaluated the situation, considered what he knew about it – and mostly what he did not know – and deemed Rodes's and Early's divisions too disorganized to mount another attack. He decided against making the attack. Observers then and historians today still debate the correctness of his decision.

Late on July 1, Lieutenant General Longstreet arrived at Lee's headquarters near the seminary. After congratulating Lee on his success that day, Longstreet inquired about orders for his 1st Corps for the following morning. He was surprised to learn that Lee intended to stay and fight at Gettysburg. Longstreet later recalled that Lee had expressed a desire to launch an offensive campaign but to fight defensive battles on ground he chose. Now he seemed to have abandoned that notion. When Lee asserted that if the Union army remained at Gettysburg in the morning, he would attack, Longstreet countered that if the Army of the Potomac still held its line, then Meade wanted Lee to attack. Lee stood his ground, however, and Longstreet later recalled the exchange as one of the few times he ever saw Lee "lose his vaunted equipoise."[12]

12.4 July 2

As Lee settled in for the night, Major General Meade finally reached Gettysburg about midnight. After speaking with several senior subordinates, he ordered the entire Army of the Potomac to close on Gettysburg. He made his first thorough reconnaissance of the battlefield at first light on July 2. After considering – and quickly rejecting – an attack option, he designed a defensive line that soon became known as "the fishhook." The pointed barb of the hook rested near Culp's Hill, and Major General Henry W. Slocum's XII Corps joined the I Corps troops sent there by Hancock to defend it. The bend in the hook rested on Cemetery Hill, where Howard's XI Corps remained in place. The long shank of the fishhook extended south from Cemetery Hill along a height known as Cemetery Ridge; Hancock's II Corps held the line immediately south of Cemetery Hill, and Major General Daniel E. Sickles's III Corps filled the southern extension of the ridge. Little Round Top, its western slope recently deforested, stood just north of Big

12 James Longstreet, "Lee in Pennsylvania," in *The Annals of the War* (Philadelphia: *Philadelphia Weekly*, 1879), p. 434.

Round Top, the two hills anchoring Meade's fishhook. When his V and VI Corps arrived, Meade could use them to strengthen any part of his line or hold them in reserve. In Napoleonic terms, Meade had fashioned an inherently strong interior line, about 4 miles long.

As July 2 dawned, however, Lee found himself in the unfamiliar position placing his numerically inferior army on an exterior line that ultimately stretched for 7 miles, beginning east of Culp's Hill, continuing westward through Gettysburg, and then reaching south along Seminary Ridge. About 1 mile separated Seminary Ridge from the shank of the Union fishhook on Cemetery Ridge. Lee still planned to fight, and – because Stuart still remained absent – he ordered Captain Samuel Johnston, a staff engineer, to reconnoiter the Union dispositions. Just where Johnston went and what he saw remain one of Gettysburg's great mysteries. In any case, he reported the presence of Union troops on the hills just south of Gettysburg, noted more troops extending partway down Cemetery Ridge, and claimed that the Round Tops remained unoccupied.

Based on Johnston's flawed report, Lee developed his battle plan for July 2. He assigned the main effort to Longstreet's 1st Corps, intending for them to move south of Gettysburg and then attack northward along the Emmitsburg Road toward the town to roll up the left flank of the Union line along Cemetery Ridge and take Cemetery Hill in reverse. To coordinate with Longstreet, Lee ordered Ewell to use his 2nd Corps to initiate a diversion – with the option to turn it into a full-fledged attack – against Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill. A. P. Hill's 3rd Corps held Lee's center, its mission to support Longstreet and Ewell.[13]

Longstreet once again expressed strong opposition to Lee's plan. When he failed to change Lee's mind, he reported that only the divisions of Major General Lafayette McLaws and Lieutenant General John Bell Hood had reached Gettysburg; Major General George Pickett's division had not arrived. Lee permitted Longstreet a brief delay for Hood's final brigade to arrive and made up for Pickett's absence by giving Longstreet authority over Lieutenant General Richard H. Anderson's division of Hill's 3rd Corps. Still, Longstreet did not begin to move into position until about 11:00 a.m. Lee had expressed a desire that Longstreet move with both speed and secrecy, and when McLaws reported that his route took them in view of a Union signal station on Little Round Top, Longstreet ordered a countermarch that better sheltered their march, delaying the attack further. About 3:30, when

13 *OR*, 27(2): 318.

Longstreet's troops finally reached the western slope of Seminary Ridge well south of Gettysburg, he asked McLaws how he planned to deploy his lead division for the attack. McLaws stated his intention to crest the ridge, march eastward until astride the Emmitsburg Road, face his line to the north, then attack to roll up the left flank of the Union line. When the Confederates reached the top of Seminary Ridge and saw their intended battleground, however, they immediately realized that it looked nothing like Captain Johnston had described it. A large peach orchard and the open fields along the Emmitsburg Road, all reported as unoccupied, now teemed with Union troops.

These soldiers belonged to Sickles's III Corps. Meade had ordered Sickles to hold the southern end of Cemetery Ridge and to cover Little Round Top, but Sickles quickly realized that if he pushed out to the peach orchard and the Emmitsburg Road, he could deny Confederate batteries an advantageous position. He had abandoned such a position at Chancellorsville, and Confederate artillery rushed in and inflicted heavy losses on the III Corps; he did not want to repeat the experience. Twice Meade denied Sickles permission to move forward, but finally, about 2:00 p.m., the III Corps advanced without authority. Sickles placed one division along the Emmitsburg Road facing west. To cover Little Round Top, he faced his second division to the southwest, angling it back to fill the space between the road and the hill. Sickles's action disrupted Meade's fishhook and isolated the III Corps from the rest of the Union army. Moreover, he had insufficient manpower to hold the left of his line. He left wide gaps between his troops in the peach orchard, those in the sizable Rose's Wheatfield, and those near the massive rock formation now known as Devil's Den. Sickles's new line also included an indefensible salient at the peach orchard that could be attacked from west and south simultaneously.

Regardless of these weaknesses, Sickles's advance rendered unworkable Lee's original orders to attack up the Emmitsburg Road and roll up the Union flank. Although Longstreet informed Lee of the significant changes in the military situation along this portion of the Union line since early morning, Lee refused to alter his initial plan. To match the new reality, Longstreet now deployed his troops to make a frontal assault against Sickles's entire line. While McLaws's men remained in place to attack Union troops at the peach orchard, where they initially had planned to deploy, Longstreet shifted Hood to McLaws's right flank to attack the left of the III Corps line closest to the formidable Round Tops. Scouts reported a way around those hills that would threaten the Union rear area and reduce the need for frontal attacks. But Lee

had grown impatient, and Longstreet ordered Hood to attack. Hood – one of Lee's most aggressive subordinates – responded with the only formal protest in his military career.

When Meade learned of Sickles's forward movement, he rode out toward the peach orchard, and, after a heated exchange with Sickles, ordered the III Corps back to its original position, with an important codicil: "if General Lee will let you." Just then, Longstreet's artillery opened on Sickles's line. Meade immediately changed Sickles's orders, instructing him to hold his line, rather than risk a controlled withdrawal that might collapse under Confederate pressure and destroy the entire Union line. Meade then informed Sickles that he would support the III Corps line with reinforcements from quiet portions of the fishhook. Rival interpretations of Sickles's actions and Meade's response to them have fueled one of Gettysburg's most heated controversies, and vitriolic postwar exchanges between supporters of each general still influence how historians evaluate this series of command decisions.

When Longstreet's infantry assault began, Hood's two leading brigades – the Alabamians under Brigadier General Evander M. Law and the Texas Brigade under Brigadier General Jerome B. Robertson – stepped off toward their respective objectives, Little Round Top and the left of Sickles's III Corps line at Devil's Den. Imperfectly understood orders, disruptive Union artillery fire, and the effective work of the US Sharpshooters on the skirmish line caused the two brigades to intermingle. Effective command and control broke down, as three of Law's and two of Robertson's regiments headed for Little Round Top, while two Alabama regiments and Robertson's two remaining units closed in on Devil's Den. Hood fell wounded early in the fight, leaving no senior commander to unsnarl the confusion.

On the crest of Little Round Top, an outstanding observation point, Major General Gouverneur K. Warren, the Army of the Potomac's chief engineer, spotted the gun barrels and bayonets of Longstreet's men glinting in the late afternoon sunlight. Even before the attack started, Warren realized that the Confederate battle line extended well beyond the end of Sickles's left flank on Devil's Den. Except for a signal team, Warren stood nearly alone. As a staff officer, he had no authority to order combat troops to defend the hill, but Colonel Strong Vincent, ordered to take his 1,400-man brigade from the V Corps to reinforce the line in Rose's Wheatfield, exercised his initiative to divert to Little Round Top.

Vincent's four regiments quickly formed a battle line on the southern slope of Little Round Top, and their stand has become one of Gettysburg's most famous episodes. The Confederates first attacked Vincent's right flank and

then moved to hit his center. The stand of Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain's 20th Maine on Vincent's left flank and – at the time – the left flank of the entire Army of the Potomac, however, generally receives disproportionate attention. After several unsuccessful attempts by Law's Alabamians to break Chamberlain's line by frontal assault, the 15th Alabama maneuvered around his left flank. The Maine colonel counted only 386 men in ranks, but he managed to refuse his left flank to allow it to confront directly the new threat while the right half of his regiment continued to face south. When ammunition ran low, Chamberlain ordered his men to fix bayonets. As he reported it, he gave orders for the left of his line to charge down the hill, swing to the right – like a gate – and clear their front. The exhausted Alabamians retreated in disorder when Chamberlain's men hit, and the threat to Little Round Top and the Union left flank evaporated. During the postwar years, Chamberlain and his soldiers seldom agreed on the details of the fight – or who deserved the credit for the victory – but nobody challenged the end result.

The same good fortune did not extend to Sickles's advanced line. At Devil's Den, Confederate attackers received unexpected reinforcements. Brigadier General Henry L. Benning's Georgia brigade should have followed Law's Alabamians to Little Round Top, but in the confusion of battle they entered the fight at Devil's Den instead. The addition of Benning's firepower helped to bring the Devil's Den fight to a quick and victorious end for Southern arms. Sickles's overmatched Union defenders finally withdrew to Cemetery Ridge. The most intense fighting then shifted to John Rose's nearby wheatfield, separated from Devil's Den by a small woodlot. For complexity and confusion, no aspect of the Battle of Gettysburg defies analysis quite like the fight in the wheatfield. For about ninety minutes, the rival forces attacked and counterattacked through the trampled wheat and through the woods surrounding it. Like a series of crashing waves, troops from four separate Confederate brigades were fed into the fight against soldiers from at least eleven Union brigades. Nowhere did Meade fulfill his intention to support Sickles's line as completely as he did here; reinforcements from the II and V Corps reinforced the original III Corps defenders in close combat that at time flowed north and south and then east and west. Possession of the field may have changed six times and no single individual commander exerted control over it. In the end, Confederates held the western edge of the field, Union soldiers held the woods to the east, and over 6,000 men had fallen.

Longstreet's attack then progressed toward Sickles's line along the Emmitsburg Road. South Carolinians attacked the III Corps salient at the peach orchard from the south while Brigadier General William Barksdale's Mississippians assaulted the position from the west. Union artillery broke the Carolinians' attack, but Barksdale's Mississippians could not be stopped. The collapse of the peach orchard salient now rendered vulnerable the left flank of Sickles's line along the Emmitsburg Road, and Longstreet now sent forward Anderson's division – the 3rd Corps troops assigned by Lee to cooperate in Longstreet's main effort – to attack that line frontally. Lee's initial plan to outflank and roll up the Union line had apparently been forgotten. As the III Corps readied to receive Anderson's frontal attack, heavy Confederate artillery fire – some of it coming from batteries just arrived in the peach orchard as Sickles had feared – raked down their line from the left. The III Corps line on the Emmitsburg Road began to give way. In the chaos, a cannonball hit Sickles in the right leg, completely shattering it and requiring amputation.

Although it is often unappreciated, the Union army now faced a crisis. When Sickles moved forward from Cemetery Ridge, no other Union troops had filled the gap he left. Only a few hundred yards behind Sickles's original line, nearly unprotected, lay the Taneytown Road, one of Meade's two lines of supply, communication, and, if needed, retreat. A hastily organized line of Union batteries bought time for Major General Hancock of the II Corps, commanding the nearest unengaged troops, to cobble together a battle line on south Cemetery Ridge to face Brigadier General Cadmus Wilcox's Alabamians and Colonel David Lang's small brigade of Florida infantry from Anderson's division of A. P. Hill's 3rd Corps. The sacrifice of the 1st Minnesota infantry – often cited as an 82 percent loss – often claims the spotlight, but other troops from the II Corps – and even regiments from the Union I and XII Corps, the latter sent by Meade from the quiet Union right flank on Culp's Hill – helped to seal the breach here. After these troops repulsed the charge of Anderson's third brigade to enter the fight, Brigadier General Ambrose Wright's Georgians – who some accounts claim reached the crest of Cemetery Ridge itself – the sun set shortly after 7:00 p.m., finally ending the Confederate main effort on July 2.

But quiet did not fall over the entire battlefield. Lee's original orders required Ewell to launch a diversion on the Confederate left flank at the sound of Longstreet's guns. At approximately 4:00 p.m., Ewell's artillery on Benner's Hill had opened against Union batteries on Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill. At twilight, after his guns fell silent – his batteries were entirely

overmatched– Ewell ordered his infantry forward. He sent Major General Edward Johnson's division against Culp's Hill. They did not realize that, since Meade had sent most of Slocum's 10,000 soldiers to help Sickles, only a brigade of 1,500 New Yorkers under Brigadier General George S. Greene held the hill. Greene, an engineer, had his men erect breastworks and clear a field of fire on the wooded slopes, giving him a decided advantage now that he faced at least 5,000 Confederate attackers. The sun fell as Johnson's Confederates captured the lower half of Culp's Hill. The upper half, however, remained securely in Union hands, since Colonel David Ireland's 137th New York – much like the 20th Maine on Little Round Top – refused its flank on the right of Greene's line and fought off Confederate attacks from two directions. Ewell's second assault targeted the northern and eastern slopes of Cemetery Hill. Two brigades – the Louisianans of Brigadier General Harry T. Hay and the Tar Heels of Colonel Isaac Avery – hit XI Corps brigades, still badly mauled by their fight on July 1, broke their line, and even captured Union cannon on the crest of the hill. But darkness and the timely arrival of reinforcements from Hancock's II Corps finally repulsed the attackers. The fighting on July 2, the battle's costliest day, finally ended in darkness. While Antietam still ranks as the Civil War's bloodiest day, July 2 at Gettysburg remains a plausible candidate for the second position.

12.5 July 3

As comparative quiet fell over the battlefield, the rival commanders followed far different courses. After only five days in command, two of them locked in battle, Major General Meade needed to know the state of his army and the state of mind of its key generals. He listened more than he talked at a midnight gathering of his senior commanders. Major General Daniel Butterfield, his chief of staff, then posed three questions. Should the army stand at Gettysburg or withdraw? Should the Army of the Potomac take the offensive or remain on the defensive? If the army stayed, but remained on the defensive, how long should they await Lee's next move? Their consensus – stay, remain on the defensive, and reconsider options in twenty-four hours if Lee took no action – fully suited Meade's own preferences.[14] Lee held no such

14 Two interesting accounts of the so-called "council of war" can be found in Meade (ed.), *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade*, vol. II, p. 97; and John Gibbon, *Recollections of the Civil War* (New York: Putnam's, 1928), p. 187. As junior officer present, Gibbon cast the first vote for each of the three questions so he could not be influenced by his superior's preferences.

meeting with his senior commanders. He believed that July 2 had resulted in partial victories on both flanks. Although his army had suffered significant losses, he remained convinced that continued attacks against those weakened points, launched early in the morning, would bring decisive victory. As he wrote in his report, for July 3, "the general plan was unchanged."[15]

Artillery fire opened early, but Lee's guns did not break the silence. Late on July 2, after supporting Sickles, the XII Corps returned to Culp's Hill and found Ewell's men occupying some of their breastworks. With Meade's permission, Union batteries opened fire about 4:30 a.m. on Confederate troops on lower Culp's Hill and near Spangler's Spring at its base. The bombardment lasted only about fifteen minutes, but it prompted Ewell to launch his early-morning attack. From 5:00 a.m. until nearly 11:00 a.m., fierce fighting flared all along the line. At Spangler's Spring, a misunderstanding of orders to gather intelligence on the location of the Confederate line resulted in a needless frontal attack that resulted in the loss of several hundred Union soldiers. Union fortunes fared far better on Culp's Hill itself, however, where Greene's original defenders, now heavily reinforced by the rest of the XII Corps and others, took full advantage of the protection their breastworks offered to throw back Ewell's attack with heavy loss.

About 9:00 a.m., the duration and intensity of the Culp's Hill fight – and Longstreet's failure to match Ewell's attack with his own offensive push against the Union left – convinced Lee to reevaluate his options. Suspecting that Meade had reinforced his flanks, Lee now considered an attack against the Union center on Cemetery Ridge. Longstreet again respectfully disagreed, offering his professional opinion that "no 15,000 men" arrayed for battle could break that line. Longstreet's postwar detractors accused him of insubordination for resisting Lee's plan; in reality, he responsibly fulfilled his obligation as the army's second-in-command to critique and offer alternatives to high-risk plans. In the end, Lee decided to assault the Union center on Cemetery Ridge. His decision to do so still stands among the most controversial aspects of his generalship at Gettysburg.

Lee fleshed out his new plan with four additional decisions. First, he designated the assault's target, an area on Cemetery Ridge marked by a conspicuous clump (or copse) of trees. Second, to neutralize the numerous Union batteries, he took the unusual step of ordering a preliminary artillery bombardment before the infantry assault. Third, he assigned the troops to

15 *OR*, 27(2): 320.

make the attack, selecting Pickett's 5,500-man Virginia division from Longstreet's 1st Corps, the survivors of Heth's division, and two brigades from Pender's division, the latter two commands from Hill's 3rd Corps. While Pickett's men were fresh, all of Hill's units suffered heavily on July 1; Heth's men went into action on July 3 under temporary command of General Pettigrew, and after Pender fell mortally wounded late on July 2, Major General Isaac R. Trimble took command of his troops assigned to the charge. In total, approximately 13,000 infantry formed the attacking force. Finally, Lee gave Longstreet command of the attack. Longstreet suggested that Lee give the assignment to an officer who possessed greater confidence in the plan, but, after an awkward silence, he accepted his professional obligation to "adopt his views and execute his orders as faithfully as if they were my own."[16]

At approximately 1:00 p.m., Confederate artillery opened. Estimates of the bombardment's duration range from ten minutes to four hours. Lee's chief of artillery, Brigadier General William N. Pendleton, failed to manage ammunition resupply, and many Confederate shells overshot their marks. Still, Union batteries near the copse of trees suffered significant damage, and Confederates noticed that gun crews were removing damaged guns. Union artillerymen needed twenty to thirty minutes to replace damaged batteries with fresh ones. Could the Confederate infantry cross the valley between Seminary and Cemetery Ridge – not quite a mile – in that time?[17]

Although Longstreet still opposed the charge – and even considered stopping it when he learned of the low supply of artillery ammunition – he finally nodded assent to Pickett's request for orders to advance. Pickett's Virginians deployed in a deep swale near the Henry Spangler farm in the valley between Seminary and Cemetery Ridges. Pettigrew's and Trimble's men emerged from the trees on Seminary Ridge nearly one-quarter mile north of Pickett's men, pushing through the smoke of William Bliss's burning farm buildings. The terrain between Seminary and Cemetery Ridges gently rolled, its hollows running north and south offering protection, especially to Pickett's Virginians, during their advance. Additionally, a ripple of ground running west to east between the two ridges meant that Pickett's division and

16 James Longstreet to A. B. Longstreet, July 24, 1863, quoted in James Longstreet, "Lee in Pennsylvania," p. 414.

17 See Gary W. Gallagher (ed.), *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 254–9; and James Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1895), p. 392, for Confederate perspectives on the effectiveness of the bombardment.

Pettigrew's and Trimble's men advanced independently and out of sight of each other until they neared the Emmitsburg Road that ran across their front several hundred yards west of the Union center on Cemetery Ridge.

On Cemetery Ridge, Major General John Gibbon's division of Hancock's II Corps deployed behind a stout stone wall that ran south to north in front of the copse of trees. Pickett's Virginians advanced toward Gibbon's command. The open area around the copse of trees became known as the Angle, since it was encompassed by the stone wall on two sides; just north of the trees, the wall turned abruptly to the east and then after 100 yards, extended again to the north. Brigadier General Alexander Hays's division held the II Corps line north of the Angle, and Pettigrew's and Trimble's troops mostly fought against this command. The distinctions are important for understanding the very different perspectives that participants bring to their accounts of "Pickett's Charge."

Until the attacking Confederates reached the Emmitsburg Road, Union artillery, including some fresh batteries, exacted the greatest cost. Controversy arose when Brigadier General Henry J. Hunt, Meade's chief of artillery, wanted to fire deliberately to conserve ammunition for the final Confederates push, while Major General Hancock insisted that his corps batteries maintain a high rate of fire to steel his men. Hancock won the argument on the field, but it continued for decades in print.[18]

By contrast, Union infantry held its fire until the Confederates came close enough for effective massed volleys. When soldiers on Gibbon's left opened fire, they noticed Pickett's troops shifting away from them and toward the clump of trees, wrongly attributing the action to the accuracy of their fire. Pickett's three brigades made this movement purposefully, however, with their commanders leading from the front. Brigadier General Richard B. Garnett, on horseback against orders, fell dead when his men halted about 25 yards from the stone wall to fire their initial volley at Gibbon's defenders. Brigadier General James L. Kemper, deployed to Garnett's right, fell seriously wounded, his men rescuing him from near capture. Brigadier General Lewis A. Armistead brought up Pickett's second line and led across the wall all the Virginians who would follow him. The Union line broke in two places as Confederate infantry – as many as 1,500 or perhaps only a handful – poured into the Angle. As the Union line stiffened and

18 See Francis A. Walker, "General Hancock and the Artillery at Gettysburg," in Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (eds.), *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York: Century, 1884–9), vol. III, pp. 385–6, and Henry J. Hunt, "Rejoinder," in ibid., III, pp. 386–7, for opposing views.

reinforcements arrived, Armistead fell mortally wounded. General Pickett, who had accompanied his division as far as the Emmitsburg Road, sent for reinforcements to exploit the breach, but none came. After an intense fight in the Angle that lasted perhaps twenty minutes, three Vermont regiments threatened to envelop Pickett's right flank. Pickett pulled his men back with a loss of approximately 60 percent of them. But "Pickett's Charge" was not a one-sided bloodletting. Some regiments in Gibbon's division that fought at the Angle suffered losses that exceeded 40 percent, and both Hancock and Gibbon fell wounded.

Pettigrew's and Trimble's commands fared no better. They did not penetrate the Union line where Hays's division held it, although some Mississippi troops later claimed they did. Indeed, according to Hays, the Confederate attack was repulsed even more quickly than it took him to write about it. Still, as the fate of the 11th Mississippi illustrates – its 592 men fought only on July 3, and lost 312 – Pettigrew's men did not give way without a fight. Pettigrew and Trimble both fell wounded. Colonel James K. Marshall – one of Pettigrew's brigade commanders – was killed, another wounded and captured, and a third performed so poorly that he soon resigned. When Union troops enveloped the left of their line, however, Pettigrew's and Trimble's survivors withdrew as well. General Lee met them all back on Seminary Ridge and accepted full responsibility for the attack.

The repulse of "Pickett's Charge" ended the battle's most intense infantry fighting. Four miles to the east of Gettysburg, however, Stuart's Confederate cavalry – they had finally arrived at midday on July 2 – clashed with Union horsemen under Brigadier General David M. Gregg. Rival skirmish lines of dismounted troopers opened the fight. Stuart then ordered a mounted charge, one of the largest sabre-to-sabre clashes of the entire war, that newly promoted Brigadier General George A. Custer's Michigan cavalry finally blunted. After the war, suggestions arose that Stuart had orders to attack the rear of Cemetery Ridge simultaneous with Pickett's frontal assault, but no contemporary evidence supports the notion. At the same time, south of Gettysburg, Union troopers under newly promoted Brigadier General Wesley Merritt advanced northward up the Emmitsburg Road to threaten Lee's left flank. A combined force of Confederate infantry and cavalry stopped Merritt, but near the base of Big Round Top – an extension of Merritt's action along the road – Brigadier General Elon J. Farnsworth suffered a similar reverse. Farnsworth received orders to advance over rocky terrain that was not well suited to the operation of cavalry, leading to a heated exchange between Farnsworth and his superior. Ultimately,

Farnsworth personally led his men forward and fell mortally wounded. Unlike the clash between Stuart and Gregg, the cavalry fights on the southern periphery accomplished little. But they ended the battle.

12.6 The Retreat and Pursuit

On July 4, amid sporadic skirmish fire, Major General Meade issued a congratulatory order to his army but canceled the traditional Independence Day salute to the nation lest the Confederates reopen the battle. Late in the day, in heavy thunderstorms, Lee pulled back his troops to Seminary Ridge, abandoning Gettysburg and his line east of it. To withdraw his army, he started his combat troops and 5,000 Union prisoners on a direct route for Hagerstown and then to the Potomac River crossings at Williamsport, Maryland. He sent by a longer route toward Chambersburg and then south to Williamsport his 17-mile-long wagon train of sick and wounded soldiers, all he could transport, while leaving thousands to be cared for by Northern military and civilian medical personnel.

Meade's cavalry followed Lee closely, but the Union infantry did not follow until July 5. Heavy rain that slowed Meade's pursuit also destroyed the pontoons Lee was relying upon to remove his army safely across the Potomac. Thus, Meade caught up with Lee at Williamsport. Meade prepared to attack on July 13, but bad weather once again forced a delay. When the skies cleared on July 14, Lee's army had crossed on rebuilt bridges. A frustrated Abraham Lincoln wrote Meade a letter bemoaning Lee's escape, but he never sent it; instead, he publicly congratulated Meade and his army on their victory. Meade's inability to mount an aggressive pursuit of Lee after Gettysburg still colors evaluations of his generalship.

According to official records, the Army of the Potomac lost 3,155 killed, 14,529 wounded, and 5,365 captured and missing at Gettysburg. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia lost 2,592 killed, 12,709 wounded, and 5,150 captured and missing. The raw numbers considerably understate the battle's impact on the two forces, however. Approximately 5,000 of the wounded died of their injuries; Gettysburg's final death toll exceeds 10,000. Reynolds's death, the wounding of Hancock and Sickles, as well as the loss of over a dozen brigade and division commanders shattered Meade's senior leadership. Lee lost no corps commanders, but he soon missed their fallen subordinates; he especially lamented the loss of irreplaceable regimental and company commanders. The two armies sparred at Bristoe Station and Mine Run later in 1863, but major active operations did not resume until the start of the Overland

campaign in May 1864, when Lee once again took on Meade, now considerably overshadowed by the arrival of Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant.

The battle's impact touched far more than the rival combatants. Hundreds of Pennsylvanians incurred uncompensated damage to property and livelihood. Gettysburg's 2,400 residents struggled to provide for well over 20,000 wounded soldiers until army surgeons organized a system to care for them. Within a few days, both curious gawkers and grieving families arrived, the latter to retrieve the remains of loved ones – if they could be found. Trench graves crisscrossed trampled farm fields. Huge clouds of greasy black smoke from burning over 5,000 dead horses and mules created a stench that only peppermint oil or camphor could block. Teenagers made money by collecting battlefield artifacts; several local children died when live artillery rounds exploded in their hands. Pennsylvania governor Andrew Curtin authorized local attorney David Wills to purchase land for a military cemetery, and Wills secured 17 acres on Cemetery Hill for that purpose. In time, Wills invited Edward Everett, the premier orator of his time, to deliver the dedicatory address and invited President Lincoln to add "a few appropriate remarks." On November 19, 1863, to an audience of perhaps 15,000, Lincoln delivered his brief, but decidedly eloquent, Gettysburg Address.

In time Gettysburg played a central role in inspiring a spirit of national reunion after the Civil War. John B. Bachelder, a wartime militia officer who became the first "official" historian of the battle, turned Gettysburg into a literary and interpretive battleground, one where the objectivity of history and the subjectivity of national memory freely intertwine even today. He invited veterans from both armies to return to Gettysburg, and his interviews with them helped him to approve locations for many of the monuments that still stand on the battlefield's woodlots, hillsides, and farm fields. But he was also a hotel owner and entrepreneur who promoted an image of Gettysburg as the "high water mark" of the Confederacy and the turning point of the war to attract visitors. Although Meade's victory at Gettysburg, both alone and when combined with Union success at Vicksburg on July 4, provided a welcome outpouring of excitement – one Philadelphia newspaper emblazoned "Waterloo Eclipsed" as a headline above its Gettysburg coverage – it did not last long.[19] News of the New York draft riots, the failure at Fort Wagner in mid-July, the inactivity in the eastern theater in the fall of 1863, and the Union defeat at Chickamauga in September soon quieted the short-lived euphoria of July.

19 *Philadelphia Enquirer*, July 6, 1863.

Ultimately, the results of the Battle of Gettysburg did not change the strategic picture dramatically for either side. Lee did not surrender until twenty-one months later, and historians argue that Antietam, Vicksburg, Atlanta, the 1864 elections, among others, had more lasting impact. But popular memory still places Gettysburg above them all.

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