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Debacle at Petersburg: The Battle of the Crater: An Interview with A. Wilson Greene

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Abstract

Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming [2018 CWI conference](#) about their talks. Today we are speaking with A. Wilson Greene. Mr. Greene recently retired from a 44-year career in public history. He spent sixteen years in the National Park Service, served as the first director of the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites (now the Civil War Trust), and was the founding director of Pamplin Historical Park & the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier, where he worked for 22 years. Greene holds a Masters degree in History. He is the author of numerous articles in scholarly and popular publications and six books, including his latest: *A Campaign of Giants: The Battles for Petersburg, Volume 1, From the Crossing of the James to the Battle of the Crater* (UNC Press, forthcoming). [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Battle of the Crater, CWI Summer Conference, Petersburg Campaign, Petersburg National Battlefield, United States Colored Troops

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Debacle at Petersburg: The Battle of the Crater: An Interview with A. Wilson Greene

By [Ashley Whitehead Luskey](#)

Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming [2018 CWI conference](#) about their talks. Today we are speaking with A. Wilson Greene. Mr. Greene recently retired from a 44-year career in public history. He spent sixteen years in the National Park Service, served as the first director of the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites (now the Civil War Trust), and was the founding director of Pamplin Historical Park & the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier, where he worked for 22 years. Greene holds a Masters degree in History. He is the author of numerous articles in scholarly and popular publications and six books, including his latest: [A Campaign of Giants: The Battles for Petersburg, Volume 1, From the Crossing of the James to the Battle of the Crater](#) (UNC Press, forthcoming).



A. Wilson Greene. Image courtesy of PetersburgArea.org

CWI: What are some of the greatest challenges of interpreting the Battle of the Crater?

GREENE: The Battle of the Crater involved dozens of regiments from each army. Deciphering their positions on a very restricted battlefield and determining the timing of their participation in the battle is a difficult challenge—perhaps an impossible one. Unit integrity on the Federal side disappeared shortly after each brigade arrived at the Crater. Three Confederate brigades made counterattacks, all joined by remnants of the forces deployed along the Confederate line prior to the explosion of the mine. While their positions at the outset of their assaults are more or less certain, once they arrived at the front, they become as intermingled as the Federals. Earl Hess says that unpacking the tactical situation at the Crater was the hardest task he’s faced in writing his many accounts of Civil War battles. I found it equally puzzling.



The Crater. Image courtesy of the National Park Service.

CWI: How did what happened at the Crater shape (or re-shape) the nature of the Union siege of Petersburg? How was the Crater represented in the northern and southern press? By politicians?

GREENE: The Union high command would not order another frontal assault against the Confederate defense line until the final offensive on April 2, 1865. Instead, Grant and Meade sought to envelop the Confederate right flank and sever the remaining Southern lines of communication. Of course, for several Union officers, most importantly Ambrose Burnside, the Crater re-shaped the leadership of the IX Corps. William Mahone’s stature as the most reliable of Lee’s lieutenants took a huge step forward following events on July 30. The Northern press could not sugar-coat the defeat at the Crater and their reporting plunged Lincoln and his administration into their lowest ebb—so much so that Lincoln would predict his defeat at the polls in November. Southern newspapers celebrated this overwhelming victory, never missing a chance to denigrate the enemy’s use of African American troops in the attack. The defeat buoyed the Democrats in the North—at least to the extent of making them optimistic that the war would not soon end, ensuring that their candidate would be elected in the fall. By the way, I take issue with calling events at Petersburg a “siege,” but that’s a different story!

CWI: Often, when people visit the site of the Crater for the first time, they are shocked by how small it is in comparison to how large it looms in the history of the war and both the scale and brutality of the fighting that occurred there. Why did this battle turn into the debacle that it is now known for? What role does race and race relations play in the story of how the battle unfolded and how it has been remembered?

GREENE: As for the size of the Crater, frankly we are fortunate that anything is left of it at all. Petersburg National Military Park (as it was originally designated) was not established until the late 1920s and protection not given the Crater until a few years later. By then, the battlefield had served as a farm, a golf course, and a tacky tourist attraction, significantly altering the landscape. My first job in history was at Petersburg National Battlefield in 1973 and I recall that the Crater, even then, was unfenced and served as an attractive place for biking and other inappropriate activities. The National Park Service has done a better job of protecting what's left of the Crater than it has of interpreting the volatile racial aspects of the battle. As I was preparing my book on the first six weeks of the Petersburg Campaign, I was shocked at the amount of evidence of racial atrocities committed at the battle that I found. Although the United States Colored Troops of Ferrero's division were only one of six Union divisions engaged at the Crater, their presence dominates the memory of the battle, especially from the Confederate perspective. Kevin Levin's book is a must-read for explaining why otherwise civilized Southerners, accustomed to following the mores of their time, behaved in such an outrageous way. By the way, their excesses generated no repercussions, either officially or in the press. In fact, when General Mahone called a halt to the slaughter, a Richmond editor called him on the carpet for not ordering the murder of every black soldier. As for why the Union attack failed, two factors come to mind. First, and more importantly, was the poor Union leadership, abetted by a broad misunderstanding of the way the attack was to be conducted. James Ledlie receives the bulk of the blame for this—and deservedly so—but Burnside, Meade, and Grant all contributed to the failure. Secondly, the Confederate response proved fast and effective. The window of opportunity for the Federals closed relatively quickly and the Confederates conducted both their holding actions and their counterattacks quite well.



United States Colored Troops from the 4th Division of the IX corps, following the Battle of the Crater. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

CWI: How aware were Confederates of the Union's tunneling efforts in this part of the battlefield? How did they seek to counteract such efforts? Were there other instances of tunneling as a military strategy during the Civil War, and why weren't they successful? How did Civil War soldiers justify tunneling and mining in an age where questions of honorable and just warfare were constantly under debate?

GREENE: Although E.P. Alexander claimed to be the one to determine that the Federals were mining underneath Pegram's (Elliott's) Salient, a number of other Confederates also deduced that probability. General Lee authorized an extensive countermining operation, both at Pegram's Salient and nearby Colquitt's Salient, indicating that he gave credibility to the threat. There were those on the Confederate side—just as there were skeptics among the Federals—who argued that the distance between the Union lines and Pegram's Salient was just too long to allow a mine to be

ventilated adequately. As the countermining efforts failed to uncover the existence of tunneling, the doubters began to hold sway, and sarcastic accounts of Grant burrowing into the streets of Petersburg began to appear. The Federals were aware of the countermines, and took steps to shield their work from the Rebels. There was nothing particularly new in warfare about mining. Grant exploded a mine in late June 1863 at Vicksburg, which led to a prolonged battle over a Confederate strongpoint. Had operations at Vicksburg continued, Grant was prepared to detonate additional mines. Confederate soldiers did think that exploding the mine and killing more than 300 men in the process was dirty pool, and Henry Pleasants, the mine's architect, expressed some regret that such a deadly expedient was necessary. But compared to the outrage over Grant's use of black soldiers to make the attack, the explosion of the mine was never overly controversial.