

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of Fredericksburg

By **James K. Bryant II**

Confederate President Jefferson Davis remarked in mid-March 1862 that Fredericksburg was “right in the wrong place” making it difficult to hold once Federal forces occupied the heights on the opposite side of the Rappahannock River. Located at the falls of the river and situated midway between Washington, D.C. and Richmond, Virginia, this historic town of 5,000 residents in 1860 would prove to be “a position of Manifest importance to us and the enemy,” as Major General Irvin McDowell commanding Federal forces occupying the town asserted in mid-April 1862. Fredericksburg not only became a key military terrain feature for both sides but also suffered from the hard fortunes of war.¹

On the evening of November 7, 1862, Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside, commanding the IX Corps, received orders placing him in command of the Army of the Potomac succeeding Major General George Britton McClellan. This change brought an end to the tenuous relationship that had existed between McClellan and President Abraham Lincoln. Although emerging as the victor of Antietam in Maryland on September 17, 1862, McClellan failed to pursue the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia under General Robert Edward Lee over the course of several weeks. Taking command of the army concentrated in and around Warrenton, Virginia, Burnside formally divided it into three “grand divisions” of two corps each. The Right Grand Division under Major General Edwin Vose Sumner comprised the II and IX Corps; the Left Grand Division under Major General William Buell Franklin comprised the I and VI Corps; and the Center Grand Division under Major General Joseph Hooker consisted of the III and V Corps.

Burnside, meeting with his immediate superior Major General Henry Wager Halleck, proposed switching his operations eastward along the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad (RF&P). In his estimation, moving by way of

¹ [Varina Howell Davis], *Jefferson Davis, Ex-President of the Confederate States of America: A Memoir*, vol. 2 (New York: Belford Company, 1890), 193; G.W. Redway, *Fredericksburg: A Study in War* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1906), 72; Irvin McDowell to E.M. Stanton, April 18, 1862 in United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 12, part 1, p. 428 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 12, pt. 1, 428).

Fredericksburg would be the shortest route in the capture of Richmond even if impending winter weather intervened. Moreover, the Fredericksburg route enabled the army to be sustained by undisturbed water supply lines from the Potomac River via landing wharfs at Aquia Creek (Aquia Landing) and Potomac Creek (Belle Plain). The RF&P would be easier to repair and provide his army an additional supply link.²

Halleck, wary of Burnside's plans, returned to Washington and reported to Lincoln. Not sharing in Burnside's belief that the capture of the Confederate capital would deal a crippling blow to the enemy's cause, Lincoln had reminded McClellan a month before, "We should not so operate as to merely drive him [the enemy] away. As we must beat him somewhere, or fail finally...." The fight needed to be brought to the Army of Northern Virginia, not Richmond. Two days later, Burnside received Halleck's telegraph communicating Lincoln's conditional approval of his plan. "He thinks it will succeed, if you move very rapidly," Halleck cautioned, "otherwise not."³

Burnside put his army in motion on November 15. Executing a feint from Warrenton in the direction of Confederate positions near Culpeper, Burnside rapidly shifted his army east. Sumner's Right Grand Division arrived in Falmouth just opposite Fredericksburg on November 17. The next day, Hooker's Center Grand Division halted at Hartwood Church six miles northwest of Falmouth. Franklin's Left Grand Division marched to Stafford Court House ten miles northeast of Falmouth.

The Federal objective of crossing the Rappahannock River was in easy reach when Burnside was informed that the pontoon bridges needed to cross had not arrived. Although portions of the II Corps had silenced Confederate artillery across the river, Burnside denied Sumner's request to cross his troops at a shallow point and occupy lightly defended Fredericksburg. Fearing the possibility of having portions of his army isolated by the river in enemy territory, Burnside decided to wait until the rest of the army arrived securing his base of supply as well as the pontoon bridges. Heavy rains soon made the river impassable without bridges.⁴

As late as November 19, Lee was still in the dark over Burnside's intentions. Unconvinced that Fredericksburg was the enemy's true objective, Lee preferred falling back 25 miles further south to the North Anna River where the terrain provided his army a better defense of Richmond with minimal casualties. Lee had earlier sent a force of 1,500 troops to occupy Fredericksburg as a precaution. "My purpose was changed not from any advantage in this position," Lee later wrote, "but from an unwillingness to open

² A.E. Burnside to G.W. Cullum, November 7[9], 1862 in *O.R.*, I, 19, pt. 2, 552-553; Testimony of Brigadier General Herman Haupt, December 20, 1862 in United States Congress, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, part 1, *Army of the Potomac* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1863), 682 (hereafter cited as *RJCCW* pt. 1, 682).

³ Lincoln to George B. McClellan, October 13, 1862 in *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), 378; H.W. Halleck to [A.E.] Burnside, November 14, 1862 in *O.R.*, I, 19, pt. 2, 579.

⁴ Testimony of Major General E.V. Sumner, December 19, 1862 in *RJCCW* pt. 1, 657.

more of our country to depredation than possible.” He also hoped to collect much-needed supplies and provisions in the Rappahannock River Valley.⁵

Buying time for an anticipated defense along the North Anna River, Lee had ordered the First Corps under Lieutenant General James Longstreet stationed at Culpeper to begin its trek to the southeast. The Second Corps under Lieutenant General Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson was given discretionary orders to remain in the Shenandoah Valley taking every opportunity to “cripple and embarrass the general movement of the enemy,” but be ready to unite with Longstreet’s Corps in the event of battle. When Lee learned that the Federals had not yet crossed the Rappahannock, he ordered Longstreet’s Corps to concentrate at Fredericksburg.⁶

Stalled by the lack of bridges to cross the river, Burnside called for the formal surrender of Fredericksburg on November 21. By this time Lee with Longstreet’s Corps was already camped in positions behind the town. Civilian authorities in Fredericksburg delicately negotiated a truce between the two contending armies resolving that the town would not be shelled as long as its residents did not consent to Confederate forces using the town to shell Federal forces first. In spite of this doubtful agreement, Fredericksburg residents had begun their exodus to safety in the surrounding countryside if not further south.⁷

Jackson’s Corps began arriving in the vicinity of Fredericksburg on December 1 and within two days the Army of Northern Virginia stretched into a 32-mile front along the Rappahannock River. Longstreet’s men anchored the left flank of the army in fortified positions near Banks Ford about three miles above Fredericksburg. His line continued for seven miles in a southeasterly direction, occupying Marye’s Heights behind Fredericksburg and the high ground known as Spotsylvania Heights parallel to the RF&P. Near Hamilton’s Crossing, where the railroad intersected the Mine Road below town, Longstreet’s line linked with Jackson’s men. Here the Confederates in unfortified positions stretched for an additional 20 miles to Port Royal.

Having lost the element of surprise, Burnside realized that his ability to cross the Rappahannock would not go uncontested even when army engineers arrived with the delayed pontoon bridge trains on November 25. Two days later Lincoln paid Burnside a brief visit. On board the transport steamer, *Baltimore*, anchored in the middle of Aquia Creek, Lincoln assured his general that he should conduct his military operations when he felt ready of success in spite of military bureaucracy and wanted his plans free from as much risk as possible. The President expressed his preference of crossing some troops 12

⁵ R.E. Lee to Thomas J. Jackson, November 19, 1862-9 a.m. in *O.R.*, I, 21, 1021; R.E. Lee to James A. Seddon, December 16, 1862 in *O.R.*, I, 21, 549.

⁶ R.E. Lee to Thomas J. Jackson, November 19, 1862-9 a.m. in *O.R.*, I, 21, 1021.

⁷ J.B. Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary at the Confederate States Capital* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott and Company, 1866), 1:194-196; William R. Stilwell, *The Stilwell Letters: A Georgian in Longstreet’s Corps, Army of Northern Virginia*, ed. Ronald H. Moseley (Atlanta, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002), 82.

miles below Fredericksburg at a massive bend in the Rappahannock known as Skinker's Neck while the rest of the Army of the Potomac crossed closer to Fredericksburg. Burnside viewed this as a viable plan with the hope that Lee would shift troops south weakening his positions behind Fredericksburg and leaving the town vulnerable to Federal capture.

The next day, four U.S. Navy gunboats ventured up the Rappahannock in support of the impending Federal movement at Skinker's Neck. As the gunboats neared Port Royal, they were fired upon by Confederate artillery batteries attached to Major General Daniel Harvey Hill's Confederate division and Major General James Ewell Brown Stuart's horse artillery. Unable to proceed further, the gunboats fell back. Not only was Skinker's Neck off the table with regard to Burnside's offensive operations, but the presence of sizable Confederate artillery indicated that Jackson's Corps had arrived.

Burnside decided to attack Lee's army in a manner that the Confederate commander would least expect: directly at or near Fredericksburg. Assuming that the failed gunboat expedition at Port Royal signaled a significant buildup of Confederates below Fredericksburg, Burnside surmised that the Army of Northern Virginia had to be weak in its center. That weak center was Fredericksburg. Burnside revised his plans on December 9. Sumner would cross his men into Fredericksburg, while Franklin crossed further south with Hooker acting as a general reserve to reinforce Sumner and Franklin as needed. The Army of the Potomac, at this time, had slightly over 118,000 men available for duty.⁸

Construction began on six pontoon bridges at three locations in the early morning hours of December 11. Two bridges were started at the upper end (Upper Crossing) of Fredericksburg. Another bridge was started at the lower end (Middle Crossing) of town. Another three bridges were started one mile below Fredericksburg at Deep Run (Lower Crossing).

Federal engineers made initial progress under darkness and foggy mists. Once the fog lifted, Mississippi troops holding the town contested the Upper and Middle Crossings as Texas troops attempted to slow construction at the lower crossings. Brigadier General Henry Jackson Hunt, Burnside's artillery chief, taking advantage of the high ground across the river from Fredericksburg known as Stafford Heights, amassed 147 guns commanding the river crossings. At 9:00 a.m., Hunt began the fearful bombardment of

⁸ The Army of the Potomac had 118,292 soldiers at Fredericksburg. Federal strength (117,049) is based upon those reported as "present for duty equipped" on December 19, 1862. Sumner's Right Grand Division reported 27,736; Franklin's Left Grand Division reported 46,892; and Hooker's Center Grand Division reported 39,984. Miscellaneous units totaled 2,437 on December 10. Reserve Artillery strength (1,243) reported on December 31, 1862 and added to the December 10 total is based upon those listed as "Present for duty." Abstract from tri-monthly return of the Army of the Potomac, Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside commanding, for December 10, 1862 in *O.R.*, I, 21, 1121; Abstract from return of the Army of the Potomac, Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside commanding, for December 31, 1862; camp near Falmouth, Va." in *O.R.*, I, 21, 924.

Fredericksburg in response to Confederate artillery south of town signaling the Federal crossing. “We could see the old town burning in many places,” reported a Confederate artilleryman on Telegraph Hill near Lee’s headquarters, “while old men, women, and children, and mothers with infants in their arms came in large numbers pouring out of their devoted city.” Hunt’s bombardment failed to dislodge Confederate sharpshooters posted in buildings near the river. Volunteers among the infantry jumped into boats crossing the river under fire and established protective bridgeheads keeping back enemy sharpshooters from the Upper and Middle Crossings allowing the engineers to complete the bridges.⁹

The fight for the streets of Fredericksburg would become one of the few instances of urban warfare in the American Civil War where the primary units involved on both sides were no larger than regiments or companies. Supporting Federal artillery continued to fire shells overhead into town. Eventually, the Confederates yielded the town to the Federals. Fredericksburg, under Federal occupation, fell victim to unrestrained looting and pilfering described in numerous diaries, memoirs, and reminiscences.

Burnside inspected his lines late in the day on December 12. Gaining the heights behind Fredericksburg would be Sumner’s responsibility. The II Corps under Major General Darius Nash Couch would advance through town, attacking Confederates on Marye’s Heights and occupying this position once the enemy was defeated or retreated. Brigadier General Orlando Bolivar Willcox leading the IX Corps would act in support of Couch’s operations forming on the left of the II Corps extending its lines south of town across Hazel Run just before reaching Deep Run. Willcox was expected to maintain a communications link with Franklin’s units.

Following his inspection on the right of his army, Burnside headed south to the positions held by Franklin. The Richmond Stage (or Bowling Green) Road running roughly parallel to the RF&P was the important thoroughfare running south of Fredericksburg and a key landmark of direction for Federal troops poised to attack Jackson’s Confederates at Prospect Hill and Hamilton’s Crossing. Franklin and his corps commanders, Major General John Fulton Reynolds (I Corps) and Major General William Farrar “Baldy” Smith (VI Corps), pressed Burnside to turn Lee’s left flank with a strong attack from their sector using both corps and supporting units from Hooker’s Center Grand Division. They shared Burnside’s belief that Lee had fewer forces in their vicinity and was stretched thin as far south as Port Royal. Federal strength in numbers could overwhelm their adversaries compelling Lee to shift troops off of Marye’s Heights to repel Franklin’s attacks. Sumner could then capture the heights with fewer casualties. Therefore, Franklin’s command would launch the primary attack, while Sumner’s attacks against Marye’s Heights would become a secondary operation. Later that evening Burnside’s headquarters ordered Hooker, whose command was still on the other side of the river, to send two III Corps divisions across to support Franklin.

⁹ Henry Robinson Berkeley, *Four Years in the Confederate Artillery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 36.

By December 10, the Army of Northern Virginia had over 78,000 men in a defensive posture. Lee had two salients in his defensive line. These salients or bulges were several hundred yards in front of the main lines following the natural contours of the terrain. Overwhelmed by Federals in large numbers on their exposed sides, these salients could collapse causing breaches in the Confederate positions. The first salient was located at Prospect Hill, just above Hamilton's Crossing in front of Franklin's position, which was the highest elevation until Willis Hill was reached five miles to the north. The second salient, located at the base of Willis Hill and the southern end of Marye's Heights, was open for capture by Sumner's men. Lee still had troops on the march from Port Royal on the evening of December 12. Burnside, whether he realized it or not, had designated his attacks against positions that held the best potential to fall.¹⁰

Given the nature of the terrain on Jackson's front, Major General Ambrose Powell Hill's Division manned the two-mile first line of defense from Prospect Hill near Hamilton's Crossing, running north to Longstreet's right flank located south of the Lansdowne Valley Road and the military road built by the Confederates connecting the two corps. Brigadier General William Booth Taliaferro's Division formed part of the second line to the left rear of A.P. Hill. Soon, the division of Brigadier General Jubal Anderson Early would form to the right of Taliaferro, completing the second line. Major General Daniel Harvey Hill's Division, making a twenty-mile forced march from Port Royal, would form behind Taliaferro and Early, acting as Jackson's corps reserve. Jackson would have a defense in depth. Two brigades of Stuart's cavalry extended the Confederate line from Hamilton's Crossing to Massaponax Creek.

One glaring flaw in Hill's position was a 400 to 600 yard gap between two of his front-line brigades. Within this gap was a thick tangled growth of trees in the midst of a swampy morass that protruded in the direction of the enemy, extending across the RF&P tracks. While guns could not be placed inside the gap or provide direct cover to the area without hitting friendly troops, Confederate artillerymen placed their guns on both sides of the gap providing oblique fire for its defense.

Around 7:30 a.m. on December 13, Franklin received Burnside's written orders for the attack at Prospect Hill. Franklin and his subordinates reviewed the order several times going over the meaning of the particular phrase "you will send out at once a division at least to pass below Smithfield [Manor], to seize the height near Captain Hamilton's." Literally taking the orders to mean sending out a single division to "seize" rather than "carry" Prospect Hill, Franklin concluded that his part in the coming battle would be simply an armed reconnaissance or observation in force of the enemy lines. Franklin gave Reynolds's I Corps the responsibility of making the assault while Smith's

¹⁰ Confederate strength (78,500) is based upon those listed as "Present for Duty" on December 10, 1862. Longstreet's Corps reported 34,931; Jackson's Corps reported 33,705; Stuart's Cavalry reported 9,146; and the Army Reserve Artillery reported 718. Abstract from field return of the Department of Northern Virginia, commanded by General R.E. Lee, December 10, 1862; headquarters Fredericksburg, Va. in *O.R.*, I, 21, 1057.

VI Corps protected Reynolds's right flank and guarded the Lower Crossing keeping the lines of retreat open. Reynolds chose Major General George Gordon Meade's division of 4,500 men to spearhead the assault with Brigadier General John Gibbon's 4,000-man division on Meade's right providing support.¹¹

Meade's Division starting behind the Richmond Stage Road would have to cross a mile-wide open field that sloped into a gradual depression until reaching the RF&P near the Confederate lines. Its immediate objective, once reaching Prospect Hill was to gain possession of the military road accurately reported to be behind the Confederate lines linking the corps of Jackson and Longstreet. Gibbon's Division formed on the right of Meade in support. On Meade's left was Major General Abner Doubleday's division facing south with its right flank resting on the Richmond Stage Road.

Major John Pelham, commanding J.E.B. Stuart's horse artillery battalion, led a Napoleon cannon and its crew down to the Hamilton's Crossing Road where it intersected with the Richmond Stage Road. At 10:00 a.m. situated in low ground concealed by hedgerow growth, Pelham gave the order to fire. The Battle of Fredericksburg had begun.

The Federal advance toward Prospect Hill ground to a halt as the men were ordered to lie prone. Pelham's lone gun fired off three good shots before Federal artillery supporting Meade's advance and artillery from across the Rappahannock returned fire in Pelham's general vicinity. Pelham continued to change his gun's position and fire at the Federal left flank. At one point Stuart sent a second gun to Pelham, but it was soon disabled after firing one shot. As elements of Doubleday's Federals moved toward the intersection, Pelham withdrew. Doubleday's entire division would now remain in this position protecting the left flank of the Army of the Potomac leaving Meade unsupported on his left.

Meade's and Gibbon's divisions remained prone until 1:00 p.m. when two Federal shells scored hits on Prospect Hill destroying the ammunition chests of artillery posted behind A.P. Hill's position. The resulting explosions were the unofficial signal for Meade to continue his advance. Meade's leading troops, with fixed bayonets, plunged toward the dense finger of woods that concealed portions of the railroad. The men negotiated the marsh to the railroad emerging into the very center of the large gap in A.P. Hill's line. Here they encountered unsuspecting South Carolinians under Brigadier General Maxcy Gregg who had been placed immediately behind the gap. Attempting to rally his troops, Gregg was mortally wounded by a Federal bullet. Back near the railroad one of Meade's brigade commanders, Brigadier General Conrad Feger Jackson attempting to straighten out his lines for a charge was struck down by an enemy bullet. In the confusion, smaller groups of Federals captured larger numbers of Confederates as well as several unit flags. Meade realizing he had made a breakthrough, needed reinforcements to sustain his efforts. Gibbon, at this time, had managed to move his

¹¹ Jno. G. Parke to Major-General [W.B.] Franklin, December 13, 1862-5:55 am in *O.R.*, I, 21, 71.

brigades forward and advanced to within 50 yards of the Confederate position. Heavy enemy fire, rough terrain, and low ammunition forced Gibbon's men back. The fight for Prospect Hill hung in the balance for both sides.

Early's Division behind A.P. Hill in the woods heard firing in their front. A courier arrived pleading for reinforcements in A.P. Hill's position. Soon after, Early received orders from "Stonewall" Jackson to move his division to the right of the railroad behind D.H. Hill's Division for potential action farther south on the Richmond Stage Road. Facing a conundrum, Early chose to send the bulk of his men to fill the widening gap of the Federal breakthrough. After several attempts, Meade was able to obtain reinforcements and the fight for Prospect Hill resumed with both sides surging back and forth. The close proximity of the battle lines and the heavy casualties gave the general area the name "Slaughter Pen." After four and a half hours of battle, the fight for Prospect Hill was over. The Confederates held their positions. Meade afterward encountered his immediate superior, John Reynolds. "My God General Reynolds, did they think my division could whip Lee's entire army?" As the fighting subsided Confederate artillery began shelling Franklin's headquarters, and a shell struck his cavalry commander Brigadier General George Dashiell Bayard mortally wounding him.¹²

Casualty figures for both sides at Prospect Hill were roughly equal, with Jackson's Second Corps losing 3,398 while Franklin's Left Grand Division and other attached Federal units tallied 5,333 in loses. The fighting in this sector was clearly a pitched battle—whoever emerged victorious here would become victorious in the overall battle.

Edwin Sumner and his generals in the Right Grand Division did not relish their mission. Like Franklin Sumner followed his orders to the letter, however, Sumner understood unlike Franklin that his part in the ensuing battle would be a secondary attack in support of the Left Grand Division's main attack to the south. The path before the II Corps' three divisions—running from the western edge of Fredericksburg to the foot of Marye's Heights---was a mile of open plain dominated by the local fairgrounds and a sprinkling of homes and outbuildings. Running diagonally across the plain (southeast to northwest) was a canal ditch providing a spillway for the Rappahannock canal to the north. The ditch, 15 feet wide and 5 feet deep, was flanked on both sides by stone and wooden boards. Three feet of water remained in the ditch. Frederick Street to the south and Hanover Street to the north leading out of town marked the general flank boundaries of the initial Federal assaults.

A second major obstacle for the Federals involved the high ground immediately behind Fredericksburg. Confederate artillery batteries were positioned on the crests of Marye's Heights and neighboring Willis Hill to the south. The artillery continued past

¹² Meade quoted in O.R. Howard Thomson, et al., *History of the "Bucktails": Kane Rifle Regiment of the Pennsylvania Reserve Corps* (Philadelphia, PA: Electric Printing Company, 1906), 236.

Marye's Heights occupying high ground extending north past Hanover Street. The exact center of the Federal attack would land where the left flank of Major General Lafayette McLaws' Confederate division overlapped with the right flank of Brigadier General Robert Ransom, Jr.'s Division, positioned at the base of Marye's Heights and Willis Hill, creating a third obstacle for the attacking Federals. Portions of Ransom's Division occupied positions along the Telegraph Road where it ran between William and Hanover Streets. As the Telegraph Road continued south hugging the base of Marye's Heights, it became flanked on both sides by stone retaining walls. It was here that the road, after many years of heavy travel took on a sunken appearance, which Confederate infantrymen used to their advantage by turning the road and wall into a long, protective rifle pit. Portions of McLaws' men under Brigadier General Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb occupied positions along the Telegraph (or Sunken) Road to the immediate right of Ransom's men and just south of William Street. Lieutenant Colonel Edward Porter Alexander, one of Longstreet's artillery commanders, commented to him, "General, we cover that ground now so well that we will comb it as with a fine-tooth comb...A chicken could not live on that field when we open on it."¹³

At 11:00 a.m. Brigadier General William Henry French's Federal division of the II Corps began what would be the first of seven assaults in the attempt to take Marye's Heights. French's troops cleared out Confederate sharpshooters on the outskirts of Fredericksburg and made for the canal ditch, becoming bogged down in knee-deep water. Heavy Confederate artillery fire rained down on them as they attempted to reform with fixed bayonets "through a perfect storm of bullets, shot, and shell" according to one Federal participant. Forced to lie prone amid the heavy artillery fire from Marye's Heights and now well directed small arms fire from behind the stonewall along the Sunken Road, French's Division soon lost its momentum. Confederate infantry posted behind the artillery on the heights braved the slopes to reinforce their comrades whose ammunition was running low along the Sunken Road. It was at this point that General Cobb, in command along the Sunken Road, was mortally wounded by shrapnel from a Federal shell that struck nearby.¹⁴

Couch ordered Brigadier General Winfield Scott Hancock's Division to reinforce French in the effort to take the heights. Federal batteries across the river opened up in support of this second Federal assault on the heights with several shells falling short of their objective causing friendly casualties in the Federal ranks. Eventually Hancock's attack stalled and he called for further reinforcements. Brigadier General Oliver Otis Howard commanded the last of Couch's II Corps divisions and was order to move to the right of Hancock's men. Meanwhile, Sumner ordered Brigadier General Samuel Davis Sturgis's IX Corps division to work its way to the left in tandem with Howard to carry the Confederate position. At the time Howard began the third assault attempt on Marye's

¹³ Alexander quoted in James Longstreet, "The Battle of Fredericksburg," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, eds. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (New York: The Century Company, 1884, 1888), 3:79.

¹⁴ William P. Seville, *History of the First Regiment, Delaware Volunteers* (Wilmington DE: Historical Society of Delaware, 1884), 57.

Heights, Ransom had committed all of his available troops in the defense of Marye's Heights and the Sunken Road. Reinforcements from McLaws soon arrived with the order to "double up" and hold the position at all costs. Coordination between Howard's Division and Sturgis's Division did not materialize. Both made piecemeal attacks one after the other leaving approximately 4,798 Federal casualties on the field after four unsuccessful assaults. Around this time, Meade and Gibbon were withdrawing their divisions after failing to sustain the breakthrough near Prospect Hill. Burnside ordered Franklin to continue his attacks on Prospect Hill with the hopes that Federal victory could be had in spite of the stalled assaults in front of Marye's Heights.

Brigadier General Charles Griffin's V Corps division crossed into Fredericksburg in the early afternoon of December 13. An additional brigade from the III Corps under Colonel Samuel Spriggs Carroll had been ordered to reinforce Griffin. This fifth assault moved forward and was immediately hit by Confederate artillery fire. Broken ranks continued pressing on as the air "filled with shot, bursting shells, and the deadly minnies," recalled a New York officer. Griffin's men had reached the farthest limit of the previous assaults but soon the ranks disintegrated as the men sought protection in any depression and swale on the muddy field that could be found.¹⁵

In the wake of Griffin's attack, Burnside received confirmation that Franklin had not renewed the assaults to the south and repeated his directives for an all-out attack at Prospect Hill. Franklin shaken by the failure to capitalize on the breakthrough and concerned about aggressive Confederate movement near Deep Run decided to maintain a defensive posture for the duration. Burnside ordered Hooker to release his remaining two V Corps divisions to support the beleaguered II Corps troops in front of Marye's Heights. Hooker rode into Fredericksburg to personally survey the situation having already received reports of the high Federal casualties already incurred. After consulting with several key officers, the normally aggressive Hooker concluded that further assaults would prove too costly. He returned across the river to Burnside's headquarters pleading with him to halt any further attacks. Insistently, Burnside ordered Hooker's divisions to take Marye's Heights with specific orders issued at 4:00 p.m. for Brigadier General Andrew Atkinson Humphrey's V Corps division of 4,500 "green" Pennsylvania troops to make a sixth assault to carry the Confederate works.

The batteries of the Washington Artillery under Colonel James Burdge Walton had commanded the crest of Marye's Heights hammering away at the successive Federal attacks for five hours and running dangerously low on ammunition. Around 3:00 p.m., Walton sent a request to Lieutenant Colonel Edward Porter Alexander for replenishment. Alexander opted to replace Walton's guns with his own artillery battalion instead of sending ammunition. Under severe Federal artillery fire from Stafford Heights, Alexander brought up his guns, but it would take a few minutes to make the change

¹⁵ Eugene Arus Nash, *Forty-Fourth Regiment New York Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 1861-1865* (Chicago, IL: R.R. Donnelley and Sons, 1911), 115.

giving a moment of grief to the Confederate high command and a moment of hope for the Federal high command.

Generals Lee and Longstreet observing the removal of Walton's guns sent immediate orders for them to remain until they saw Alexander's guns going into position. Humphrey's Division moved in for the attack. As the Pennsylvanians advanced they soon became affected by uneven terrain and enemy obstacles that had stymied prior assaults. Alexander's fresh guns on the heights and Confederate infantry tightly packed behind the stone wall, up to three and four ranks deep, caused Humphrey's efforts to melt away. Humphreys would have the highest casualties of any of the assaults that day.

Brigadier General George Washington Getty's Division was ordered to make another attempt to hit the Confederate position on the right similar to Sturgis's earlier attack. Oncoming darkness brought immediate confusion as Getty's men made the seventh and final assault on Marye's Heights. Thickening mud, dead and dying Federal comrades lying upon the field, and a steady barrage of Confederate fire halted Getty's efforts by 6:00 p.m. "The attack of our division," wrote Colonel Rush C. Hawkins, commanding a brigade in Getty's Division, "was one of the most disastrous defeats to the Union forces during the war."¹⁶

Longstreet's Confederate First Corps suffered 1,511 casualties for the day. Federal casualties from both Sumner's and Hooker's Grand Divisions amounted to 7,480 that were mingled with an even higher number of unhurt survivors, in a one-and-a-half mile swath, left out on the open plain in front of the stone wall below Marye's Heights – giving the fighting here the appropriate and rightful designation as the Slaughter of Fredericksburg.

"It is well that war is so terrible," General Robert E. Lee commented during the height of the Federal assaults against Marye's Heights on December 13, 1862, "we should grow too fond of it." The display of bravery and courage subsided with the termination of hostilities soon ushering in the stark reality of war and its consequences. Ambrose Burnside suffered 12,653 casualties, while Lee only lost 4,909 at Fredericksburg. The cries of the wounded and dying on the cold field that bitter evening would be etched into the memories of soldiers on both sides.¹⁷

Burnside conceding defeat withdrew the Army of the Potomac across the Rappahannock on December 16. "If there is a worse place in hell," Lincoln remarked upon confirmation of the defeat at Fredericksburg, "I am in it." After a failed attempt to renew the offensive, disgruntled subordinate generals, and low morale in the ranks,

¹⁶ Rush C. Hawkins, "Why Burnside Did Not Renew the Attack at Fredericksburg," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 3:127.

¹⁷ Lee quoted in Emory M. Thomas, *Robert E. Lee: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 271.

Burnside was relieved of command on January 25, 1863. In his place, Lincoln appointed Major General Joseph Hooker.¹⁸

The Battle of Fredericksburg proved to be the Army of Northern Virginia's easiest victory during the war. It remained to be seen what Hooker would do to boost the morale of the Army of the Potomac and turn it into an instrument that would sustain the Lincoln Administration's policies in 1863 The Year of Jubilee.¹⁹

¹⁸ Lincoln quoted in James M. McPherson, *Tried By War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 145.

¹⁹ The defeat at Fredericksburg came less than three weeks before the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863. Upon taking command, Hooker recognized that low morale not only rested in the recent defeat, but also from elements in the army opposed to emancipation. As early as March 1863, such opposition began to wane. "Victory is what we want no matter whether Hooker, Burnside, or McClellan leads us," proclaimed Major Rufus R. Dawes of the 6th Wisconsin Infantry, "If there remains any one in the army who does not like the Proclamation, he is careful to keep quite about it." See Rufus R. Dawes, *Service with the Sixth Wisconsin* (Marietta, OH: E.R. Alderman and Sons, 1890), 126.