

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

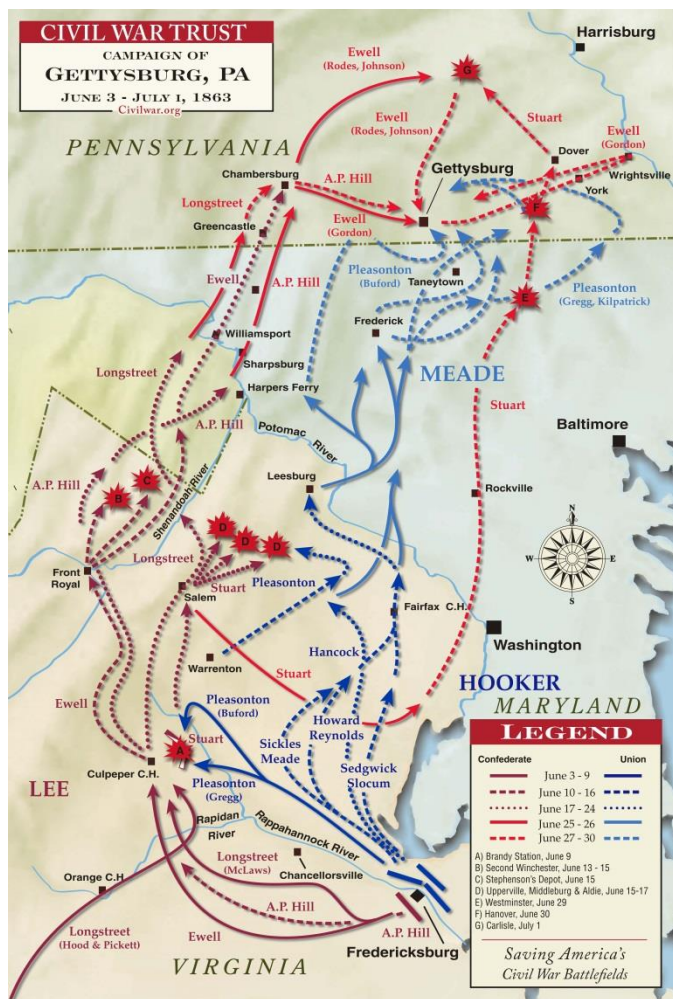
The Battle of Gettysburg

By Garry E. Adelman with James Taub, Civil War Trust

After his May 1863 victory at the Battle of Chancellorsville, Confederate General Robert E. Lee ordered his Army of Northern Virginia into the Blue Ridge Mountains where his northward movement was screened by the terrain. Using

what intelligence he could assemble, Union Major General Joseph Hooker, succeeded on June 28 by Major General George Gordon Meade, aimed to keep the main body of his Army of the Potomac between General Lee and the U.S. Capital at Washington. In late June, Confederate forces were spread out on a 90-mile front across south central Pennsylvania, with Union forces edging ever closer to the Southerners.

Lacking most of his cavalry, which was engaged in a raid around the Federal army, General Lee was unaware of the approaching Federal forces until the end of June, whereupon he ordered his three corps to converge near Gettysburg. At that same time, the most advance Union element—Brigadier General John Buford's cavalry division—arrived in Gettysburg on June 30, 1863. Buford saw the importance of controlling the network of ten



roads that converged at the town square and deployed his brigades to the west and north of town. The stage was set for the bloodiest and most famous of all North American battles.

Strength of the opposing forces at Gettysburg¹		
	Union	Confederate
Battle strength	93,693	70,136
Infantry corps	Seven (avg. 11,000 each)	Three (avg. 21,000 each)
Infantry divisions	19 (avg. 4,050 each)	Nine (avg. 7,000 each)
Infantry brigades	51 (avg. 1,500 each)	37 (avg. 1,800 each)
Infantry regiments	247 (avg. ~310 each)	168 (avg. ~350 each)
Cavalrymen	11,800, in three divisions	6,660, in one division
Cannons	360	280

July 1, 1863

In the early hours of July 1, Major General Henry Heth's Confederate division moved toward Gettysburg along the Chambersburg Pike. As the weary Southerners drew near the first line of Buford's pickets, an officer from Illinois leveled a carbine and fired. The Battle of Gettysburg had begun. Southerners from Heth's division deployed into lines of battle with one brigade on each side of the Pike and advanced against the dismounted cavalrymen. ²

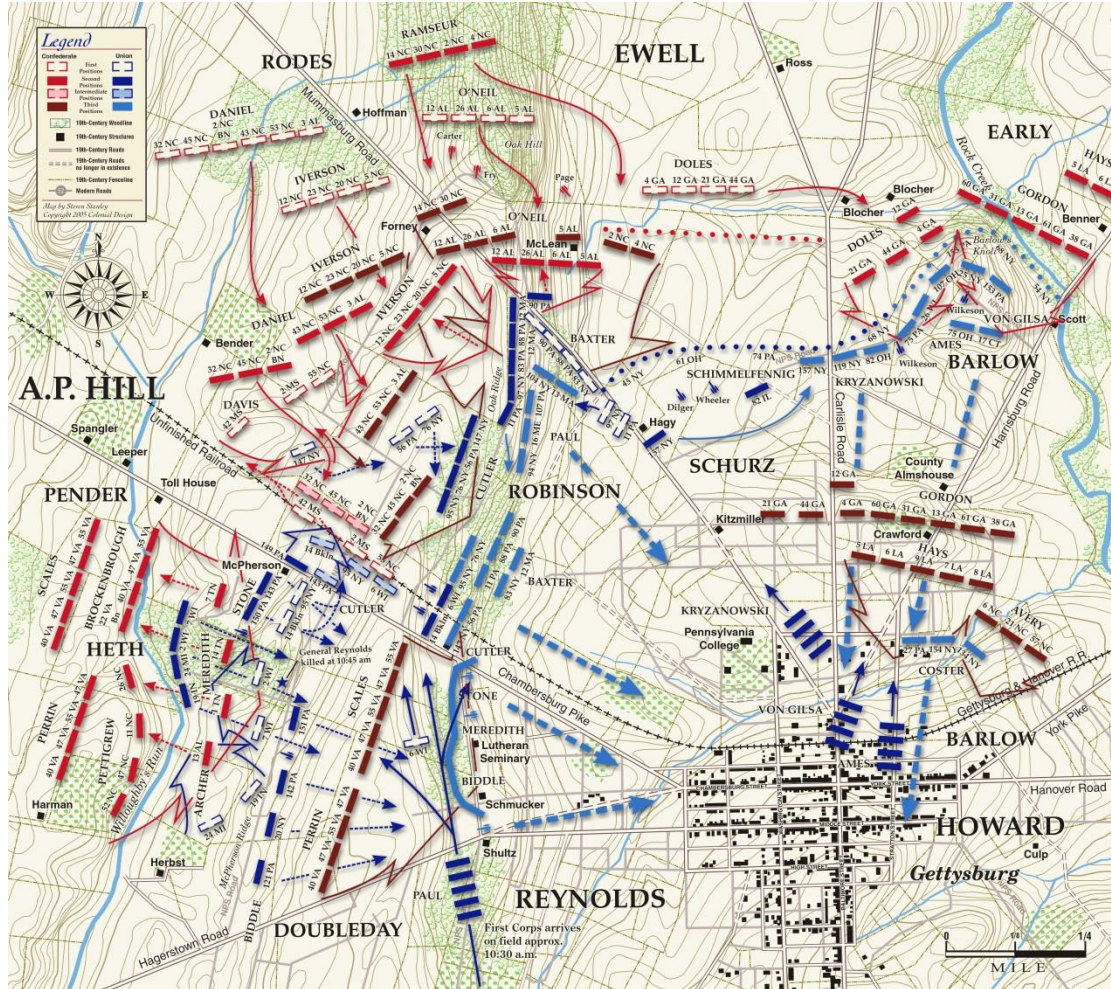
As Buford's men fell back to the edge of Herbst Woods, the Confederates ran into the lead elements of the Union First Corps, under Major General John Fulton Reynolds. Infantry against infantry, fighting intensified on both sides of the Pike. Reynolds was killed just as the fighting began—the first of ten generals killed at Gettysburg, and the highest ranking.

Confederate Major General Robert Emmett Rodes arrived with his division on Oak Hill in the early afternoon. Rodes outnumbered his opposing force under Major General John Cleveland Robinson's division, but Rodes's initial assault was poorly coordinated. His men were bloodily repulsed. Rodes reformed and tried again as a new Federal Corps, the XI under Major General Oliver Otis Howard, took position north of

¹ Strength figures come from John Busey and David Martin, *Regimental Strengths and Losses at Gettysburg* (Highstown, N.J.: Longstreet House, 2005).

² For a description of the initial fighting see Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg-The First Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

Gettysburg. Howard's numbers were small, his position was low in elevation, and his right flank sat alone on a small rise now known as Barlow's Knoll. Upon that flank arrived a new Confederate division under Major General Jubal Anderson Early. When the combined force of Rodes and Early attacked, the XI Corps fell back after brief but bloody combat.



The Union men were fighting a losing battle on their left flank as well. After a savage firefight in Herbst Woods, the First Corps men fell back to Seminary Ridge where they blasted the advancing Rebels with cannon and small arms fire. Reinforced by Confederate Major General William Dorsey Pender's division, the Confederates pressed on until the Union line collapsed. I and XI Corps Union soldiers walked, ran, and stumbled through and around Gettysburg with elated Confederates in pursuit. General Lee arrived near Gettysburg just in time to witness his victorious soldiers giving chase.

Thousands of Meade's men were captured but others reformed around a small but powerful reserve force on Cemetery Hill, south of the town. Confederate soldiers probed, but did not attack. Gettysburg's first day was over and with some 17,000 casualties; it

was one of the costliest days of the entire war. In the wake of this Union defeat, General Meade arrived on the field.

July 2, 1863

For 26 hours after the first day's fight, reinforcements arrived for both sides until both armies were at full strength. By afternoon, the Confederate line wrapped around the Union position, which now resembled a giant fishhook. The Federals enjoyed several advantages including more men, high ground, the home ground, and interior lines, which allowed General Meade to easily reinforce threatened sectors. In the afternoon, however, Union Major General Daniel Edgar Sickles moved his III Corps forward to a peach orchard where he felt he could better employ his artillery. This movement, made without specific orders, created a lengthy bulge in the fishhook position and made Sickles' line too long to man. With open gaps in Sickles' position, General Meade was forced to strip other parts of his line, creating new and vulnerable gaps within his position.

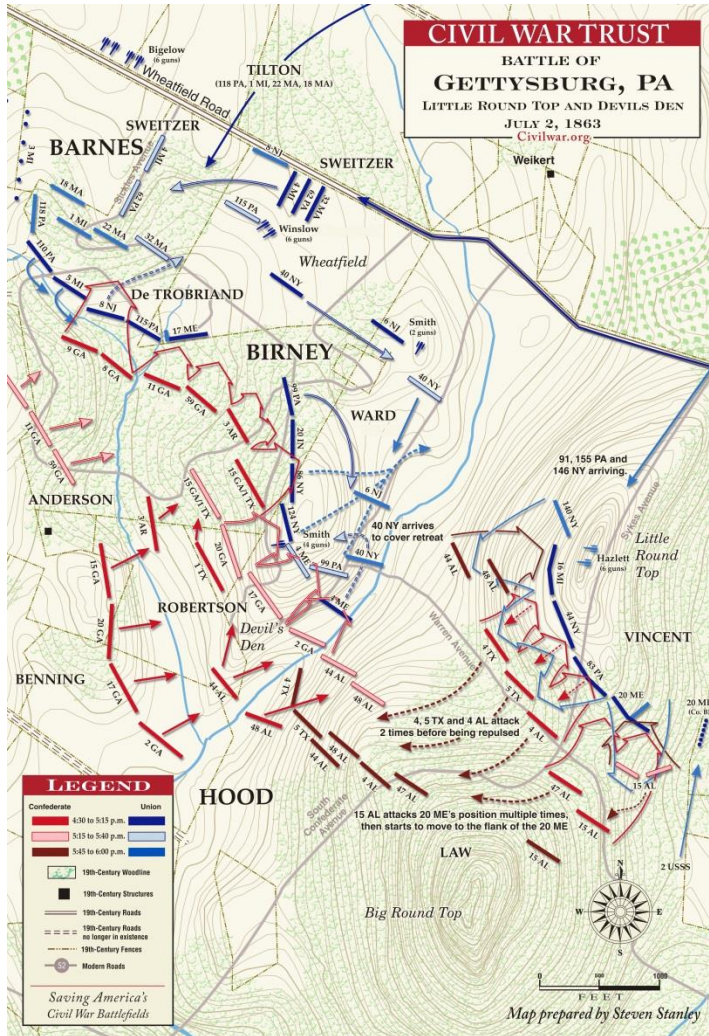
General Lee wanted to attack with all three of his corps—Lieutenant General James Longstreet on the Federal left, Lieutenant General Ambrose Powell Hill upon the center and Lieutenant General Richard Stoddert Ewell's Corps on the Union right—but things did not start well for Lee. The attack did not begin until the late afternoon and even then, Lee's units did not attack in concert.

Three Confederate divisions, under Major Generals John Bell Hood, Lafayette McLaws and Richard Heron Anderson attacked the Union left and center. Hood's men moved first, under a hail of iron and lead. His brigades split and comingled. Some slammed into Union III Corps troops at the jumble of boulders known as Devil's Den while others assaulted the just-arrived V Corps soldiers upon the rock-strewn Little Round Top. After it changed hands three times, Devil's Den fell to the Confederates but the Yankees clung tenaciously to Little Round Top.

As General McLaws men enter the fray, fighting swirled around a wheat field and Sickles' peach orchard. Sickles' men lost the Peach Orchard but, reinforced by men from the Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's II Corps and Major General George Sykes' V Corps, fight it out with Hood's and McLaws' men in and around the Wheatfield. The trampled wheat changed hands several times. It was the bloodiest fighting at Gettysburg and the Southerners came out on top.

At this time, around 6:30 p.m., there was a half-mile gap in the middle of the Union line on Cemetery Ridge—created when a II Corps division was ordered to help the III Corps near the Wheatfield. McLaws' men, joined by others from General Anderson's division pressed on to exploit the gap and break through the Union line on Cemetery Ridge, but General Hancock's II Corps men held and plugged the holes in the nick of

time. Other Confederates poured out of the Wheatfield in a late-day attempt to capture Little Round Top but were thrown back by fresh Union troops in what is now called the Valley of Death.



The fighting finally ceased on the south end of the battlefield. In what General Longstreet termed “the best three hours fighting ever done, by any troops, on any battlefield”³ the Southerners faced more than twice their number and threw back the Union line at several points. More than 14,000 men were added to the casualty rolls, however, and the day was not yet done.

While the fighting was dying out on the south end of the field, Confederate General Ewell’s Corps began its assault on the Union right.⁴ Two of General Early’s brigades swept toward Cemetery Hill, obscured

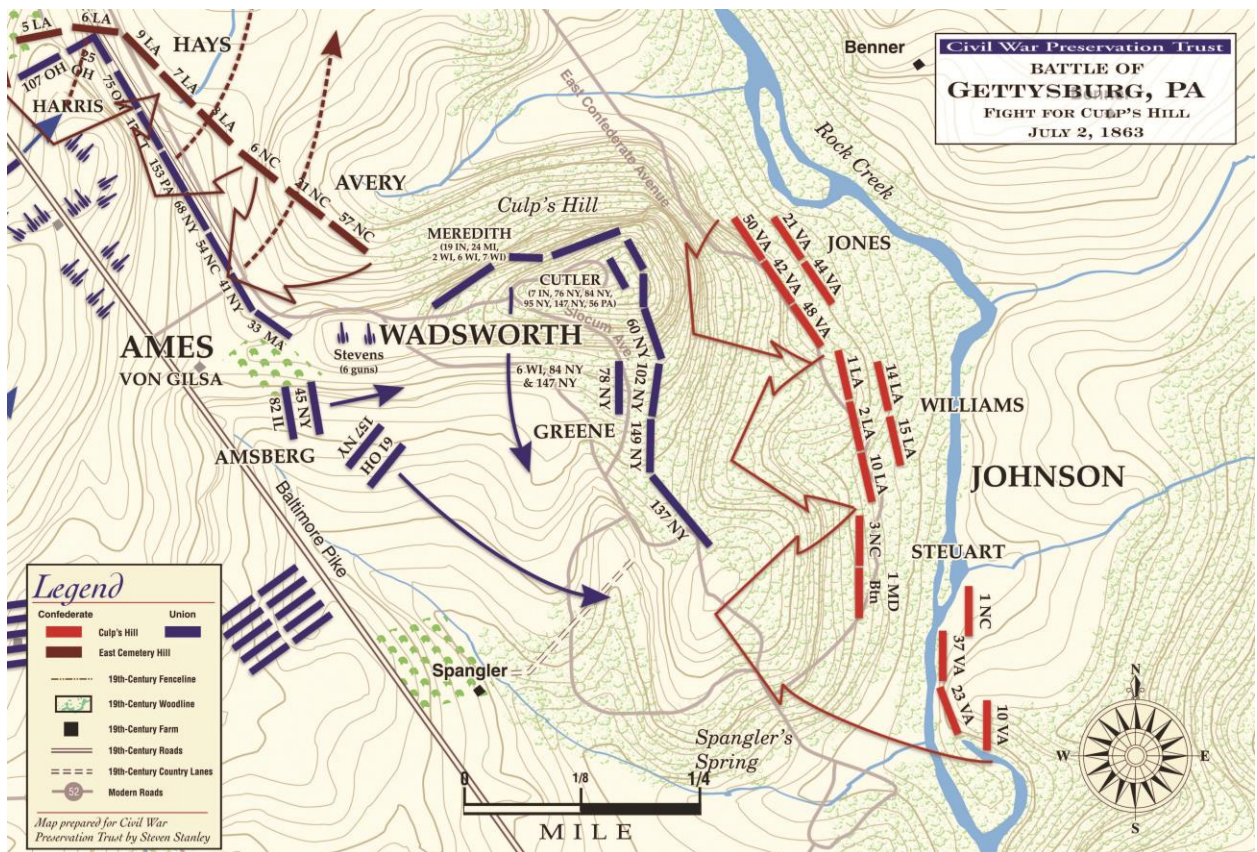
by the gathering darkness. The Union line was thinly held by battle-weary XI Corps soldiers who were quickly overwhelmed. Confederate soldiers swarmed to the top of East Cemetery Hill and if they could capture and hold all of Cemetery Hill, the battle would have been over. Union General Hancock, however, had sent reinforcements on a hunch

³ Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg, the Second Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), Preface.

⁴ For a description of fighting at Culps Hill and Cemetery Hill see Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg-Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

and they arrived just before the Southerners could exploit their gains. Early's men were thrown back just as Confederate Major General Edward Johnson attacked the adjacent Culp's Hill. The Union men had already built strong earthworks on Culp's Hill but many of these were empty—five of the six brigades of Major General Henry Warner Slocum's XII Corps had been sent to reinforce Sickles.

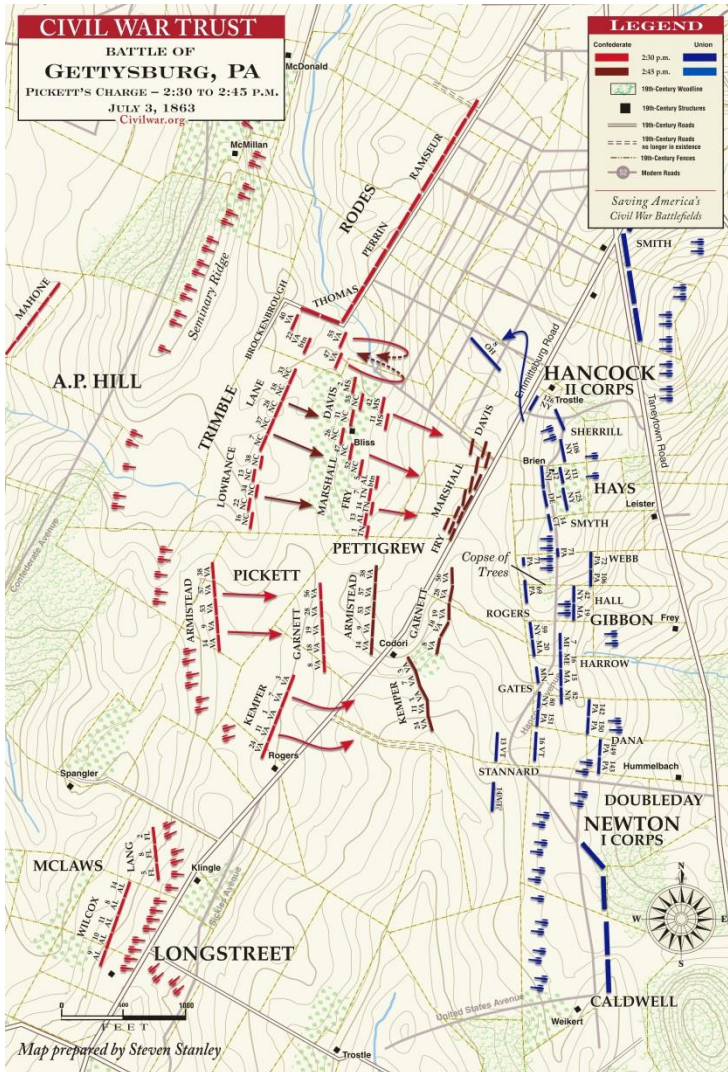
Only 1,300 Union men held the hill against Johnson's attacking force of 4,500. The defenders stood firm in savage nighttime fighting, but some of Johnson's men secured a foothold in abandoned Union trenches on the lower slopes of the hill. By 10:00 p.m. the fighting had finally ended. The Confederates had made some gains but the Union still had more men and stronger position. Gettysburg was already the bloodiest battle of the Civil War with one terrible day remaining.



July 3, 1863

General Lee saw an opportunity on his left. He added three brigades to his attacking force hoping to capture Culp's Hill in an early morning assault. General Meade, however, also planned an attack there and had the advantage of numbers—his five XII Corps brigades had returned to the Culp's Hill vicinity and Meade ordered still more reinforcements to this sector. The Union men attacked first, just before sunrise. For seven

hours the battle raged. Lee's men fought desperately, but by 11:00 a.m. the Confederates were forced out of their captured entrenchments. More than 40,000 men had become casualties at Gettysburg and General Lee has already ordered another, massive assault.



Having been rebuffed on both flanks on July 2, Lee reasoned that his enemy might be weak in the center on July 3. After all, just a few thousand men from Anderson's division had pierced the Union center the day before. General Meade had anticipated such a move, however, and was ready to meet the attack.

Lee's assault was formed around his only fresh division—that of Major General George Edward Pickett. To Pickett's three brigades, Lee added six more, with another pair in support, and put the entire force under General Longstreet.

At 1:00 p.m. 160 Confederate cannons bombarded the Union center, hoping to weaken the position. Union artillery responded and the roughly 90-minute barrage was the largest of the Civil War. When the guns fell silent, Union troops and cannons,

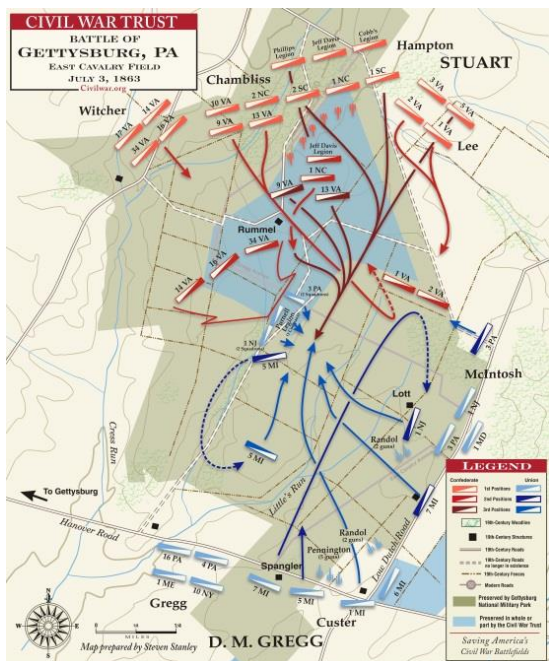
mostly those of General Hancock's II Corps, remained in strength in the Union center on Cemetery Ridge.

At around 3:00 p.m. Pickett's Charge commenced. The line was more than one mile wide. It was a beautiful sight, but made an easy target for long-range Union artillery

on Cemetery Ridge and on Little Round Top. Exploding shells tore fearsome gaps in the Confederate line as they steadily advanced over the mile they had to traverse.⁵

Parts of the Union line advanced to form a pincer around the attacking force. Meade has also ordered 20,000 reinforcements to converge upon the Union center. When the Southerners entered Union rifle range, men fell in droves. Fewer than half of Lee's men reached the Emmitsburg Road but with more Confederates coming up in support, some pressed on and successfully breached the Union position on Cemetery Ridge. A ferocious melee ensued while thousands of Union reinforcements poured into the fight. With Confederate attackers dwindling, Lee's men didn't stand a chance and most of those who made it to Cemetery Ridge were killed or captured. Scarcely half of the men who made the attack, returned to Seminary Ridge. Lee's moment of great opportunity had become his greatest defeat, by far.

As events unfolded in the center, horsemen were active on both flanks.



Confederate cavalry commander, Major General Jeb Stuart, led a powerful movement to swing around the Union right but was met and halted east of Gettysburg by Union cavalry under Brigadier Generals David McMurtree Gregg and George Armstrong Custer. South of Gettysburg, Union cavalry attempted to compromise the Confederate right flank but failed in every attempt. The Battle of Gettysburg had ended with more than 50,000 casualties.

After the Battle

Lee was soundly defeated in a major battle for the first time but remained on the field in hopes of baiting Meade into a costly attack of his own. When Meade did not attack, Lee began his retreat through the

mountains that night with a miles-long wagon train of wounded. Lee took up a strong position along the Potomac River and Meade declined to attack what all agreed was an impregnable position. By mid-July, Lee was back on Virginia soil.

In the battle's wake, Gettysburg was a place of horror. Wounded soldiers outnumbered the local citizenry by more than twelve to one. Every home, church and farm became a hospital. Most of the dead were buried where they fell. Some were tossed into rocky chasms while others remained exposed to the elements. With the smell of

⁵ For a description of Pickett's Charge see James A. Hessler, and Wayne E. Motts. *Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg: A Guide to the Most Famous Attack in American History* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beattie, 2015).

death permeating the entire vicinity, local citizens acted to rebury the Union victors in an organized cemetery.

More than 3,500 Union soldiers were reinterred from their battlefield graves into the new Soldiers National Cemetery—the first such American cemetery located on a battlefield. As the work progressed, the organizers held a dedication ceremony on November 19, 1863. More than 15,000 people attended. Famed politician and orator Edward Everett was the main speaker but President Abraham Lincoln delivered the “few appropriate remarks”⁶ now known as the Gettysburg Address. In two minutes, Lincoln covered the history of the Republic, the raging war, the need to continue the fight and laid out a vision for the future. His words gave increased purpose to the loss of life in the Civil War and concluded “with the hope that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”⁷

Gettysburg was the first battlefield to be preserved as a park, with the first parcels purchased and held for that purpose in August 1863. The park grew to more than 1,000 acres under private organizations until the creation of the Gettysburg National Military Park in 1895. The Park was placed under the stewardship of the National Park Service in 1933, in whose care more than 8,000 acres of Gettysburg’s hallowed ground remains to this day.

⁶ Local Gettysburg lawyer Judge David Wills to Abraham Lincoln, November 2, 1863, <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/asset-viewer/the-formal-invitation-judge-david-wills-to-abraham-lincoln-november-2-1863/OwE55-jX3Q-Dkw?hl=en> , accessed March 14, 2017.

⁷ Abraham Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address." The Civil War Trust. <http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/primarysources/gettysburg-address.html> , accessed March 14, 2017.