

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

George E. Pickett

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Confederate Major General George Edward Pickett was born into the wealth and privilege of Virginia's antebellum elite. However, Pickett's life did not follow a predictable route and he ended up a broken and bitter man, dying at the age of 50, remembered chiefly for a failed military charge that he did not plan or lead.

George Pickett was born into the slaveholding elite of Henrico County, Virginia in 1825. His parents worried, though, that slaveholding no longer promised a secure future for their eldest son, and sought to direct him toward law; however, young George showed little interest or talent for the bar, and instead sought out a career in the military. He graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1842 last in his class, but in time to fight in the Mexican War and earn brevets for bravery. He also made lifelong friendships with fellow comrades, including most importantly James Longstreet. Despite the poor prospects of life in the pre-war army, he showed little signs of seeking any other civilian employment and cast his lot with the military, moving about the western frontier to isolated locations, far from his Virginia family and home. He married Sally Minge in 1851, but she and their newborn baby died, casting him into a deep depression. A few years later, while stationed in Washington Territory, Pickett settled into a stable domestic existence with an Indian woman and their son James. But her sudden death left him bereft again and he gave his young son up to live with a white foster family. During the "Pig War," a border dispute with the British, Captain George Pickett revealed traits that would become more apparent during the Civil War: rashness, excitability, and an inability to see the "big picture." It did not bode well for his future.

The outbreak of hostilities between North and South brought Pickett home to defend his native Virginia. By September 1861, he was commissioned a colonel by the Confederate States of America and stationed in the lower Rappahannock River. He was valued greatly by the new southern nation: a veteran with 15 years of experience in the army, Pickett seemed ready to take a prominent role in the Confederate's high command. He soon gained promotion to brigade commander and led his men through the Battle of Williamsburg, Seven Pines and the Seven Days. During the second day of the Battle of the Seven Pines, his "Gamecock" brigade fought tenaciously, earning praise from D. H. Hill and James Longstreet. During the Seven Days, at the Battle of Gaines's Mill, Pickett was injured in the shoulder, seriously enough that he had to leave his command for several months to recuperate. While away from the army, Pickett missed out on the

important campaigns of Second Manassas and Antietam, returning to the army in the fall of 1862. He was promptly (and perhaps surprisingly) promoted to major general, responsible for 15,000 hard-worn Confederate soldiers.

Meantime, Pickett had begun a romance with a young woman from Suffolk, VA, Sallie Corbell. Corbell would later claim that she met and fell in love with Pickett when she was a child before the war, but it seems more likely that the two commenced their courtship during his convalescence in the late summer of 1862. Corbell was 18 years old and a student at the Lynchburg Female Academy. By the spring of 1863, during the Siege of Suffolk, their romance was the talk of Lee's Army. Soldiers complained that Pickett was riding off to see his lover, with or without permission, returning bleary eyed the next morning to oversee his troops. One of Longstreet's staff remarked: "I don't think his division benefited from such carpet-knight doings on the field."

George Pickett had other issues on his mind as General Robert E. Lee prepared for his invasion of Pennsylvania in June 1863. Pickett began to sense that the Civil War was a different kind of war, a conflict where the enemy did not follow the "rules of war," that he had come to believe in as a cadet at West Point. At the Battle of Williamsburg, Pickett complained of "dastardly subterfuges of an enemy pretending to surrender in order to stop fire to allow their reinforcements to come up and enable them to pour in a deadly volley upon an honorable and too unsuspecting foe." Further, Pickett was anxious to prove himself as leader of a division. He and his troops remained in reserve at the Battle of Fredericksburg and they were limited to siege operations at Suffolk. Lee's bold Pennsylvania Campaign, it seemed, would make things right again to affirm Pickett's abilities as a soldier and leader.

Pickett's division was the last to arrive on the field during the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg. Initially, General Robert E. Lee kept them out of the fray while the rest of the Confederates fought in and around the rolling hills that surrounded the town. By the evening of July 2, Lee had determined to strike Union commander's George G. Meade's center, aligned along Cemetery Ridge. He selected Pickett's division to spearhead the charge, supported by other commands. Unlike his corps commander and close friend, James Longstreet, who believed the plan would fail, Pickett was sanguine of success. There are some postwar allegations that claim Pickett was drunk or worse, hiding in a barn or behind a tree during the charge. These charges appear to be without merit. Pickett properly prepared his troops for battle and then moved about the field, conversing with various staff members as the operation unfolded. Where he faltered was in the aftermath: there are numerous accounts of Pickett staring into space, crying and behaving despondently when staff and other soldiers confronted him about what to do once it was clear the charge had failed. When General Lee confronted Pickett, Lee urged him to organize the remnants of his division and prepare for a counter attack. Pickett complained bitterly that he had no division. Lee directly and sharply reminded Pickett that this moment and battle had nothing to do with him: "Come General Pickett, this has been my fight and upon my shoulders rest the blame."

Indeed, George Pickett did blame Lee and others for the loss of his division at Gettysburg. He never really recovered from that moment, professionally or personally. Pickett wrote a scathing and bitter report of the battle, lashing out at subordinates, and apparently even at Lee himself. Lee demanded that Pickett destroy the report and replace it with one that merely stated the facts. "We have the enemy to fight and must carefully at this critical moment, guard against dissensions which the reflections in your report would create," Lee chided Pickett. Pickett, though, refused to file another formal report of Gettysburg.

In the months that followed Gettysburg, Pickett descended into a downward spiral. He and his beloved Sallie married in September 1863 and that must have provided him with some solace. But his division was in tatters. Meantime, Pickett became responsible for the Department of North Carolina which encompassed eastern portions of Virginia and North Carolina where Union troops had a strong presence. Federal raids were constant, as well as problems caused by southern Unionists; in short it was a difficult region to control for any military commander, even more so for a man like George Pickett who craved stability and simplicity. The worries expressed at Williamsburg had only increased and now, after the terrible loss of his division at Gettysburg, Pickett seemed destined for collapse. Ordered to retake the port city of New Bern, NC in February 1864, he faltered and failed, and immediately lashed out, again blaming subordinates and General Lee. Soon after the botched expedition, a group of captured soldiers were discovered to be ex-Confederates who had deserted to the Union army. Gen. Pickett personally confronted the prisoners, threatening them: "God damn you, I reckon you will hardly ever go back there again, you damned rascals; I'll have you shot, and all other damned rascals who desert." The twenty-two men were court-martialed, found guilty, and executed in three separate mass hangings in Kinston, N.C.

By May of 1864, George Pickett, exhausted and embittered by the subsequent months of disappointment and loss, collapsed. He spent a week in bed before returning to field command with the Army of Northern Virginia. However, these were the final, waning days of the Confederacy and Pickett's reconstituted division was a mere shadow of its former self. Desertion and disaffection plagued the ranks. Over one ten-day span in March 1865, some 10% of Pickett's men vanished from the ranks. Pickett's final ignominy came at the Battle of Five Forks, when Union forces attacked his position, broke his lines, and began to roll up the Confederate right flank. The first few hours of the battle Pickett was nowhere to be found: he and other officers were enjoying a leisurely shad bake. Suddenly realizing the seriousness of the situation, Pickett desperately attempted to rally his troops, but it was too late. Eight days later, Robert E. Lee surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House. Lee was so disappointed with Pickett's performance at Five Forks that he removed him from command. Spotting Pickett at the surrender ceremony, Lee demanded: "Is that man still with this army?"

The war was over, but George Pickett had new worries. The U.S. War Department began a formal court of inquiry into the “murder” of Union soldiers at Kinston in 1864. Pickett, fearing that he would be charged with war crimes, fled to Montreal. He assumed a new name, cut his hair and lived in a boarding house. His wife worked teaching Latin to support him and their young son George, Jr., while Pickett lay ill. Eventually, largely due to the intervention of Ulysses S. Grant, the inquiry ended, and the Picketts were able to return to Virginia and try to begin their lives anew.

However, George Pickett had never known any other life except that of a soldier. He struggled to find employment. He tried farming and selling insurance. He was even apparently offered command in the Egyptian Army. But his health remained poor and family finances precarious. In 1875, George Pickett died from “gastric fever.” He was only 50 years old.

Unlike many ex-Confederates, George Pickett rarely ever spoke publicly about the war. John Mosby wrote famously of an encounter with Pickett in 1870, when he happened to meet him in the streets of Richmond and accompanied him to visit the aging Robert E. Lee. After a cold and strained exchange with his former commander, Pickett allegedly scoffed to Mosby: “He had my division massacred at Gettysburg.” Mosby responded: “Well, it made you immortal.” George Pickett’s immortality meant little to him. He went to his grave embittered and angered by the war. His devoted widow would spend the rest of her life trying to make him the hero he never was. LaSalle Corbell Pickett spent more than fifty years writing books, giving public lectures, fabricating “facts,” if needed, all intent on creating a mythic soldier and “hero of Gettysburg” that has lingered until today.

George Edward Pickett

Born	January 25, 1825, Richmond, VA
Died	July, 30, 1875, Norfolk, VA
Buried	Hollywood Cemetery, Richmond, VA
Father	Robert Pickett
Mother	Mary Johnston Pickett
Wife (1851)	Sally Minge Pickett
Wife (1863-1875)	Sallie “LaSalle” Corbell Pickett
Career Milestones	Graduate of United States Military Academy Captain United States Army Colonel Confederate States of America Major General Confederate States of America
