


Unparalleled Horror

The Battles of Jerusalem Plank Road and the Crater, June 19–July 31, 1864

by Sean Michael Chick and John F. Schmutz

EMERGING CIVIL WAR SERIES



Unedited Excerpt

SB

Savas Beatie
California

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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	viii
FOREWORD <i>by Timothy Ross Talbott</i>	xiii
PROLOGUE	xix
CHAPTER ONE: Securing Deep Bottom, June 19–22, 1864	1
CHAPTER TWO: The Battle for Jerusalem Plank Road, June 20–22, 1864	9
CHAPTER THREE: The Battle for Jerusalem Plank Road, June 23–24, 1864	21
CHAPTER FOUR: The Wilson-Kautz Raid, June 22–July 2, 1864	31
CHAPTER FIVE: Interlude Between Union Disasters, June 25–July 20, 1864	45
CHAPTER SIX: Fighting at Deep Bottom, July 21–27, 1864	61
CHAPTER SEVEN: Eve of the Crater, July 28–29, 1864	69
CHAPTER EIGHT: The Crater Assault, July 30, 1864	79
CHAPTER NINE: Mahone’s Counterattack, July 30, 1864	91
CHAPTER TEN: The Crater Retaken and Its Aftermath, July 30–31, 1864	103
EPILOGUE: Hopes Dimmed and Hopes Raised	111
APPENDIX A: Driving Tour of the Petersburg Campaign	117
APPENDIX B: From Lynchburg to Washington: The Shenandoah Valley, June 19–July 31, 1864 <i>by Scott C. Patchan</i>	125
APPENDIX C: Finding a Scapegoat: The Crater Investigations	131
APPENDIX D: William Mahone, “Hero of the Crater” <i>by Charles R. Knight</i>	137
APPENDIX E: The Cockade City	149
ORDER OF BATTLE: Jerusalem Plank Road and the Wilson-Kautz Raid	154
ORDER OF BATTLE: Deep Bottom and the Crater	160
Suggested Reading	167
About the Authors	170

List of Maps

Maps by Hal Jespersen

Jerusalem Plank Road, June 22, 1864	15
Jerusalem Plank Road, June 23, 1864	23
Grant's Second and Third Offensives	33
Battle of Deep Bottom, July 27–28, 1864	64
The Crater, 4:30 a.m., July 30, 1864	80
The Crater, 5:15 a.m., July 30, 1864	85
The Crater, 6:00 a.m., July 30, 1864	88
The Crater, 8:30 a.m., July 30, 1864	97
The Crater, 2:00 p.m., July 30, 1864	105
Petersburg Driving Tour	116

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Foreword

BY TIMOTHY ROSS TALBOTT

Ulysses S. Grant's "no backward steps" mentality came from a desire to bring the war and its attendant horrors to a conclusion and securing victory. Throughout the Overland Campaign, from the Wilderness to Cold Harbor, the Army of the Potomac made its fair share of missteps. Yet, it was ever forward-looking, searching for opportunities to get an advantage on their foe. Forced to fight largely on the defensive by Grant's aggressive mode of war, Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia attempted to minimize the amount of ground they lost, by inflicting as many casualties as possible, and launching counterattacks where he thought they could do the most damage. As Grant decided to move his operations south of the James River, to focus on Petersburg and its important lines of communications, the armies followed much of the same pattern established in the Overland Campaign.

Despite several leadership miscues that robbed the Army of the Potomac of potential early success, and against an impressive defensive effort on the part of P. G. T. Beauregard's outnumbered force, tasked with protecting Petersburg, Grant and Maj. Gen. George Meade were able to push back part of Petersburg's eastern defensive line about a mile. With Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia finally arriving at Petersburg on June 18, the Cockade City was saved; but for how long? Sean Michael Chick tells the exciting drama of this opening act of the Petersburg

The citizens of Petersburg remembered the Crater on the 100th anniversary with a simple monument erected in Petersburg National Battlefield. (smc)

Ambrose Burnside on June 11 or 12 reading a newspaper. With him is the famed photographer Mathew Brady, with a tree behind him. Burnside organized his USCT division with Edwin Stanton's enthusiastic support. (loc)



Campaign well in his previous Emerging Civil War series volume, *A Grand Opening Squandered: The Battle for Petersburg, June 15-18, 1864*.

Almost immediately, after the guns died down from the Union assaults on June 18, Grant was planning his next moves. Chick explores Grant's Second Offensive at Petersburg, as well as the Third Offensive, in this book, with the action at the Crater written by John F. Schmutz. As readers will find, the siege situation at Petersburg did not mean that the armies were totally static; far from it.

Most wagon roads and railroads that radiated out from Petersburg, like the spokes of a wheel, appeared during the city's antebellum years. As Petersburg developed into Virginia's second largest city, fueled mainly by its tobacco markets, and milling and manufacturing works along the Appomattox River, it needed transportation networks to facilitate trade and travel, which in turn spurred economic growth. When the war arrived, those routes became communication arteries that pumped the Confederacy's lifeblood (manpower and supplies) into the campaigns and battles that helped keep the young nation alive.

Grant's First Offensive eliminated any possible Confederate use of the short nine-mile City Point Railroad. It also reduced the already limited Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad's operation. Despite this initial success, others remained open to Confederate operations. The Jerusalem Plank Road and

This relief is featured on the 48th Pennsylvania monument in Petersburg. (sh)



the Weldon Railroad were the next two nearest to Union lines. However, additional traffic came into Petersburg by way of the Boydton Plank Road, which ran to the southwest, and the Southside Railroad, that ultimately ran west to Lynchburg. The Southside Railroad also connected to the Richmond and Danville Railroad at Burkeville Station.

Grant's ambitious plans for his Second Offensive yielded mostly negative results. Due to poor communication, a challenging landscape, and determined Confederate counterattacks, Union II and VI Corps forces fell far short of capturing and holding the Weldon Railroad. In addition, a Union cavalry raid, far behind Confederate lines, succeeded in damaging the Southside and Richmond and Danville Railroad lines, but it largely fell apart when a prompt Confederate response was able to rally and protect an important bridge. The raiders were barely able to make it back to Federal lines after Confederate cavalry and infantry blocked them at Reams' Station. For Grant, perhaps the only real positive outcome was securing a bridgehead at Deep Bottom landing on the north banks of the James River to use in potential future operations against Richmond.

The Third Offensive also witnessed its fair share of Federal mistakes. Utilizing the Deep Bottom position secured the month before, Union cavalry and infantry crossed the James River in late July only to meet strong Confederate resistance, including some from Petersburg, which turned back the movement. Additionally, in a well-planned, but poorly executed operation on the east side of Petersburg, a mine explosion on July 30 created a temporary opening in the Confederate line, but due to poor field leadership, and a strong Confederate counterattack, what became known as the Battle of the Crater also proved fruitless for the Army of the Potomac.

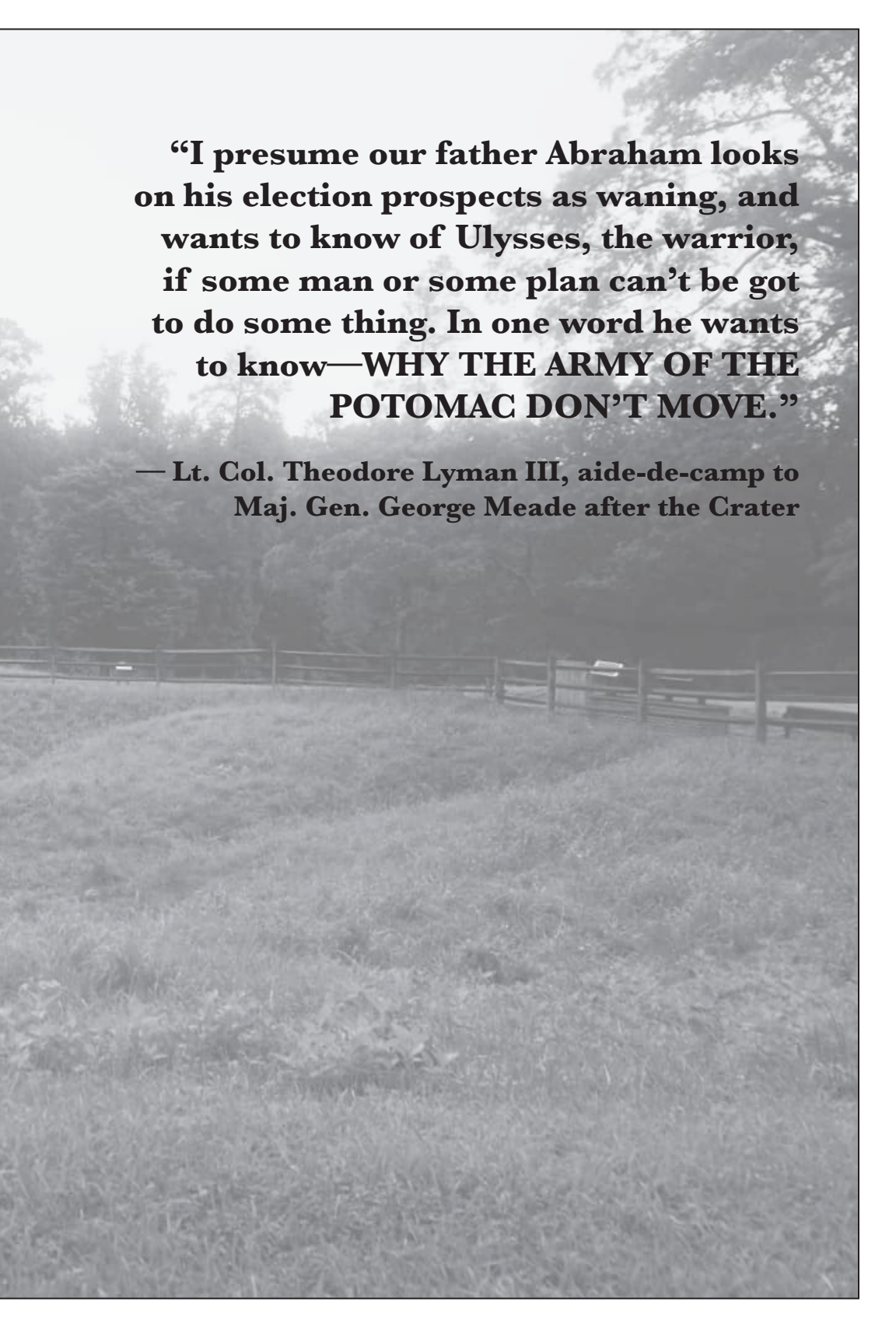
This study is a worthy follow up to *A Grand Opening Squandered*. Readers will find it accessible, yet also thorough in its explanation of these momentous events at Petersburg during June and July 1864.



This image shows Federal cannon firing in support of the Crater assault. The Union artillery underperformed in the battle due to terrain, Rebel trenches, and poor coordination. (flbscw)

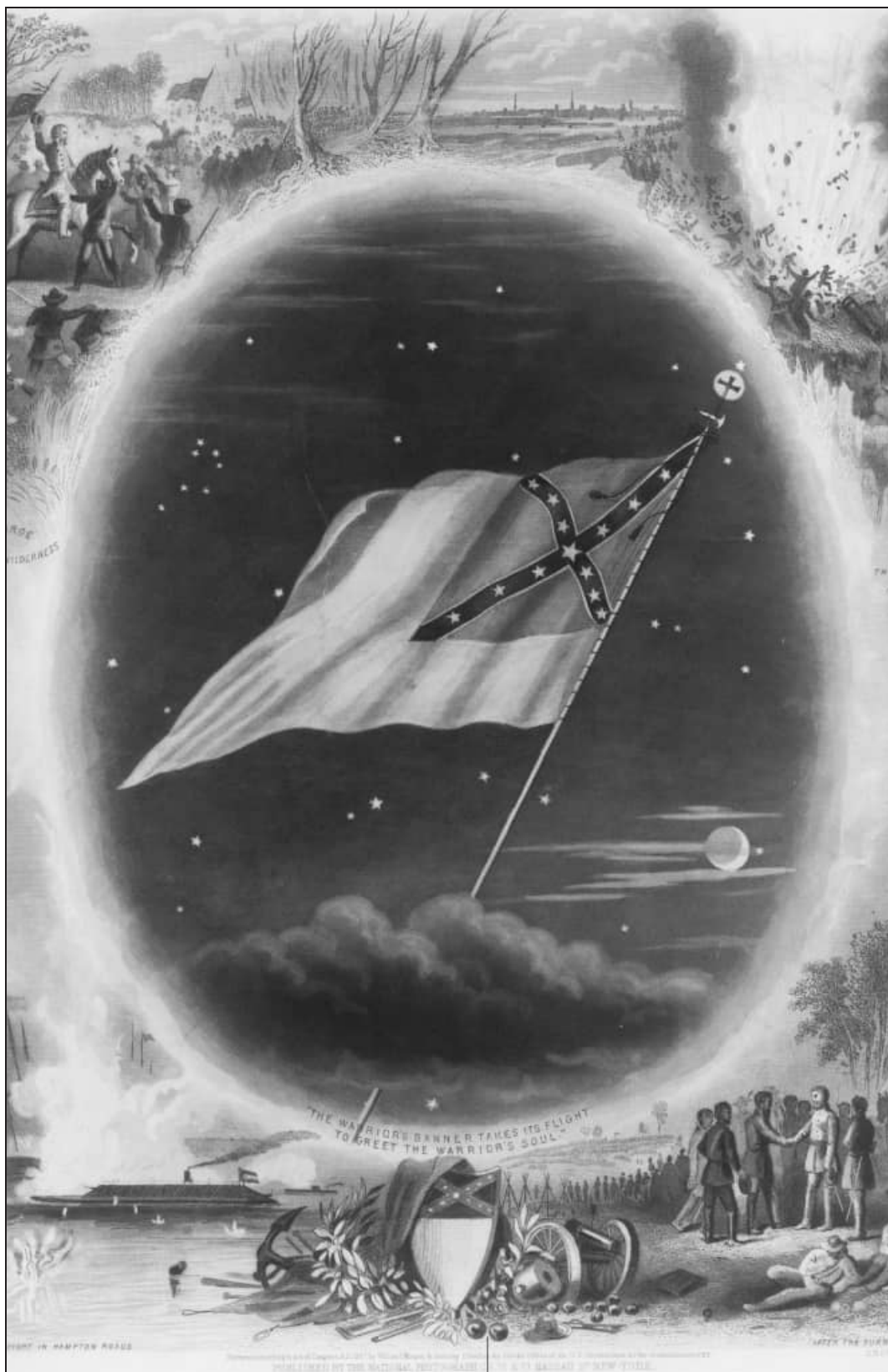
TIMOTHY ROSS TALBOTT was Director of Education, Interpretation, Visitor Services, and Collections at Pamplin Historical Park and is currently the Chief Administrative Officer for the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust in Fredericksburg. He is the founding member and President of the Battle of New Market Heights Memorial and Education Association.





“I presume our father Abraham looks on his election prospects as waning, and wants to know of Ulysses, the warrior, if some man or some plan can’t be got to do some thing. In one word he wants to know—WHY THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC DON’T MOVE.”

— Lt. Col. Theodore Lyman III, aide-de-camp to Maj. Gen. George Meade after the Crater



BIGHT IN HAMPTON ROADS

THE WARRIOR'S BANNER TAKES ITS FLIGHT TO GREET THE WARRIOR'S SOUL

AFTER THE BURN

THE NATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPANY, 110 N. 3RD ST. BALTIMORE, MD. U.S.A.

Prologue

A physically exhausted Lt. Col. Henry Pleasants slumped on the parapets of the Union breastworks. His hand was blistered and sore from using the flat of his sword on the backs of IX Corps soldiers hiding in the massive hole. That hole would become known as the Crater, and it was of his creation. There, he witnessed the shattered remnants of four divisions of the IX Corps struggling to retreat amid a hurricane of lead surrounding the Crater. What had started out as an inventive plan to breach the Confederate lines had ended in disaster.

More than 18,000 Union troops had been committed to the assault against, what was initially, little more than a regiment. Ten hours later, the two sides engaged in hand-to-hand combat in ankle-deep blood amidst a floor strewn with bodies. One could hardly move without stepping on the dead, which in many places, were now three or four deep. The heat was intense, with temperatures reaching 100 degrees, and the struggling Federals were without water. They were trapped there. Any attempt to retreat would result in a barrage of fire. Once the Confederate forces fought their way into the “horrid pit,” they butchered many of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). Many prisoners were killed with bayonets and the butts of muskets. The USCT who survived were corralled up in a stone-littered field and robbed of their possessions by local reserves.

In 1867, the National Photograph Company of New York City published a print by William T. Morgan and Anthony Dibrell, no doubt meant to be sold to former Confederates. The flag featured is the second national, with the quotation “The Warrior’s Banner Takes Its Flight / To Greet the Warrior’s Soul.” Around it are noted Civil War moments. Clockwise: The Crater, Lee’s surrender, Virginia versus Monitor, and Lee at the Wilderness. (loc)

When the sun rose on July 31, the horror was not over. Corpses rapidly putrefied in the sun, emitting such a nauseating smell that many vomited. Then, there were the wounded lying about on the field, already frantic with hunger and thirst. Sharpshooters on both sides made it hard to save such men. Informal truce flags flew at times, but not often enough.

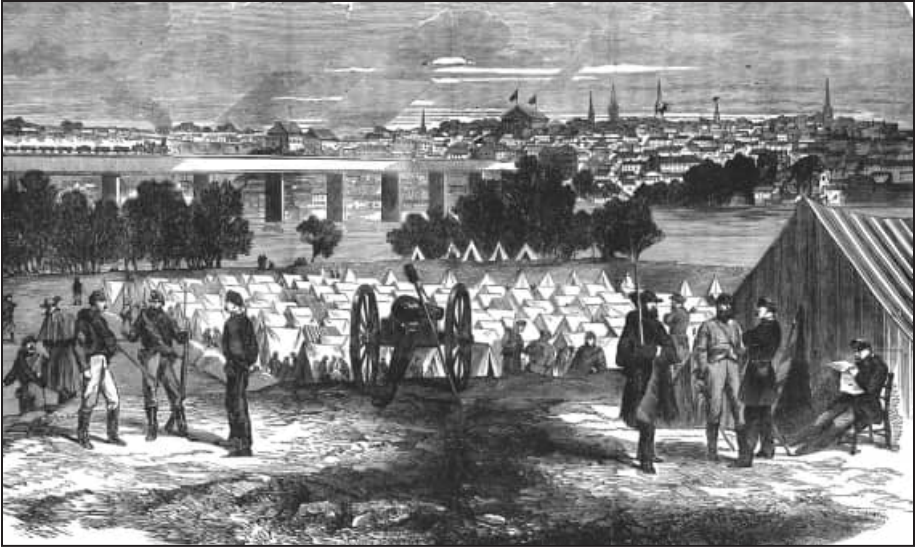
Major General Ambrose Burnside reported to Maj. Gen. George Meade that the wounded were between the lines and could be retrieved under a flag of truce. Meade sent back a letter addressed to Gen. Robert E. Lee requesting a cessation of hostilities. However, he cautioned Burnside that if an informal arrangement could be made, that it was unnecessary to present the formal communication to Lee. Apparently, Meade wished to avoid any admission of defeat, which a formal flag of truce would imply.

Burnside delivered a note at noon requesting a truce. It was denied, as it had not originated with Meade, a sign that, like at Cold Harbor, Lee wanted Meade to admit he was beaten. A formal communication was dispatched, but by then it was too late in the day. Thus, the wounded between the lines were left through another long night because of the peevishness of generals.

The USCT prisoners were marched into Petersburg in a formation designed to amuse the local population, as well as humiliate the prisoners.

E. F. Mullen sketched the gruesome Crater burials for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. Confederates look on in the background while most of the work is done by USCT and black laborers. (flin)





Officers were placed at the head of the column, four abreast. Volleys of abuse from the crowd assaulted the 200-man parade. Many USCT prisoners were from eastern Virginia and were returned to slavery. Others were relocated to an island in the Appomattox River, where they remained until August 3, without food. Thereafter, many died in Confederate prisons.

View of Richmond, VA., from the prison camp at Belle Isle, James River. Belle Island is situated in the James River, a little above the bridge that connects Richmond. (flbscw)



Securing Deep Bottom

CHAPTER ONE

JUNE 19–22, 1864

In the aftermath of the failed June 18 Union attack on Petersburg, both sides fortified. Brigadier General Armistead L. Long thought the trenches “arose, as if by touch of a magician’s wand” and showed as “an enduring monument of the ability of the engineers of the Army of the Potomac.” While the trenches generally preserved life by offering protection, existence in them was at best drudgery. Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* arrived, leading to a new nickname for the Confederate army: “Lee’s Miserables.”

Petersburg came under direct fire, first near the railroad depot, then more indiscriminately, often focused on church steeples, or the Petersburg Courthouse. By July 7, many of Petersburg’s 20,000 residents had evacuated. Under that artillery fire, the bridges north of Petersburg could only be used at night, which slowed Lee’s ability to move troops between Petersburg and Richmond.

Lee set up his headquarters at the Shippen House on the north bank of the Appomattox River. Lee was gloomy, and warned President Jefferson Davis, “My greatest apprehension at present is the maintenance of our communication south. It will be difficult and I fear impracticable to preserve it uninterrupted. . . . I fear it would be impossible to prevent a sudden attack aimed at a distant point.” Lee confessed, “[W]e shall at last be obliged to take refuge behind the works of

At Deep Bottom Park, the pier in 2025 is at the same location as the pontoon bridge put up in 1864. (smc)



On June 19, Edwin Forbes of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* came upon a soldier of the USCT. Forbes wrote his "attitude suggested utter abandon, and whose pallid face caused me to think him dead." Forbes drew the man, who woke up and "looked at me in a dreamy fashion, then drowsily closed his eyes again as if too exhausted to interest himself in anything, and remained motionless." (loc)

Richmond and stand a siege, which would be but a matter of time."

Lee had little faith he could destroy enough of Meade's army to force them away from Petersburg. There was seemingly no way to repeat his 1862 victory at Gaines' Mill. Grant, unlike former Army of the Potomac commander George McClellan, had the full backing of Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. Major General Henry Halleck, former commander of the armies, and now chief of staff, had stopped scheming against him. Confederate Lt. Gen. James Longstreet, an antebellum friend of Grant's, had predicted Grant, "will fight us every day and every hour till the end of this war. In order to whip him we must out-manuever and husband our strength as best we can." The question was, could Grant break Lee and take Richmond to secure Lincoln's reelection, and therefore reunion on the Republican Party's terms?

McClellan had become the favorite to oppose Lincoln in the presidential election of 1864. A speech he made at West Point on June 16 was well received, and some West Point cadets cheered McClellan as "our next president." However, McClellan's commitment to continuing the war worried the party's smaller, but vocal peace faction, led by former Ohio Congressman Clement Vallandigham. As such, his nomination was not assured, and more importantly, the Democrats had

a serious fracture in their party. Regardless, additional setbacks in Virginia, and the war's mounting losses, made Lincoln and his allies nervous as November approached.

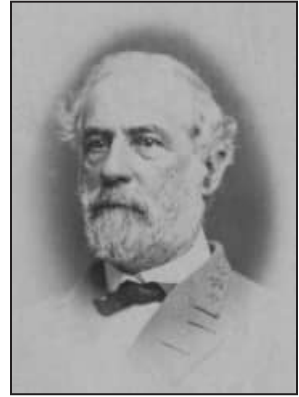
The presidential nominating convention was delayed until late August 1864. The Democrats needed to mollify the various factions in the party, and they believed if Grant was still stalled in August, then the announcement of McClellan, who had arrived at the gates of Richmond with far fewer losses, would resonate. Democratic operative Robert Dun surmised, "Grant has gone up 'like a rocket & will come down like a stick.'"

Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles noted that "the immense slaughter of our brave men chills and sickens us all," and was leading many to question Grant. The price of gold rose. Sarah Butler, the perceptive wife of Union Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler, thought "there is a clear though unexpressed feeling that the campaign is a failure so far, or nearly so. Every possible encouragement has been given to Grant by the papers and the Government, but he must win now to save himself, and the country."

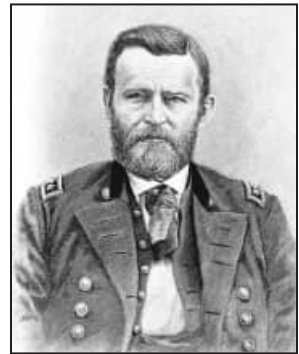
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On June 19, Grant and Butler went to Deep Bottom, on the north bank of the James River, southeast of Richmond. The area received its name because of the extreme depth of the river at that point. Grant wanted Butler's Army of the James to establish a bridgehead, connecting Bermuda Hundred on the south bank to the north bank. From there, Grant could threaten Richmond. Butler ordered Brig. Gen. William T. H. "Bully" Brooks, temporarily commanding the X Corps, to secure the area. Brigadier General Robert Foster's division was ordered to hold the position "at all hazards" until a pontoon bridge was ready.

Lieutenant General Richard S. Ewell commanded the Richmond defenses. Ewell's best troops were at Bottom's Bridge on the Chickahominy River, guarding against a threat from Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan's Union cavalry. In reaction to Butler's movements, Ewell called out the Richmond Defense Troops,



When Robert E. Lee was superintendent of West Point, Edward Ferrero was the dance instructor, where he met with Lee's approval. At Petersburg, Ferrero led the USCT division in the IX Corps. (loc)



Although Ulysses S. Grant was unpopular in June 1864, discontent was not as common as it was after Shiloh, when Grant's men openly jeered him and wrote letters fantasizing about hanging him for allowing Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston to surprise their encampment. (hubn)



On June 19, William Johnson of the 23rd USCT was executed in full view of the Confederates to show them that the Federals would not tolerate mistreatment of Southern women. Instead, just as Johnson perished, a shell killed Sgt. Maj. George F. Polley of the 10th Massachusetts, who days before carved into a wooden headboard the words, "Serg.-Major George F. Polley, 10th Mass. Vols.; Killed June ___, 1864," telling his colonel, "I guess I'll leave the day blank." On June 19, the enlistments expired; Polley split up the headboard to make coffee. The 10th Massachusetts left the front the next day. (loc)



George Washington Custis Lee was Robert E. Lee's oldest son, and while frail, he was a good engineer and was close to Jefferson Davis, serving on his staff while holding commands in the Richmond defenses. (loc)

mostly clerks and laborers, commanded by Brig. Gen. George Washington Custis Lee.

On the morning of June 20, Maj. Gen. George Edward Pickett, commander of the Bermuda Hundred lines, and Capt. John Kirkwood Mitchell, commander of the James River Squadron, planned a joint army-navy attack. The Federals, though, detected it, and their warships struck first. Lt. William Harwar Parker, master of the ironclad *Richmond*, thought, "The whole affair . . . was a *fiasco*. . . . The fact is we were wrong in yielding to the clamor of the army to 'do something.'"

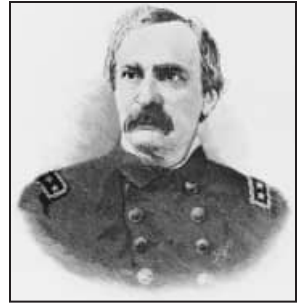
Lee again tried to "do something," by sending Maj. Gen. Henry Heth's division to Chaffin's Bluff. While Heth could not attack as Lee wished, Lee's prescience and Heth's presence prevented the Union from expanding the bridgehead.

Deep Bottom would remain secure until the end of the war. The James River Squadron could do little with the obstructions blocking their path. The ships would be important if the Federals ever got to Chaffin's Farm, a fortified position on the north

bank of the James River, but there was little chance of them making a successful attack. However, Battery Dantzler and Rebel ships and obstructions also meant the Union navy could do little. Stalemate prevailed on the James.

The landing at Deep Bottom produced immediate results in the Union's favor, however. Major General Wade Hampton's cavalry confronted Sheridan at White House on the Pamunkey River. Sheridan's horsemen were returning from brutal fighting at Trevilian Station, tired and bloodied. "There will never be a better opportunity to crush this cavalry than is now offered," Hampton thought. "If I can get the troops, I will follow him to the last." Lee, though, had to keep Heth at Chaffin's Bluff. Hampton defeated Sheridan at Samaria Church on June 24, but without the timely arrival of more infantry, it did not become the great triumph he had hoped for.

However, Deep Bottom's value was more long term. With the position secured, Richmond and its vicinity could be threatened. As such, Lee would have to shuffle troops between three areas now: Petersburg,



William Harwar Parker
doubled as master of CSS
Richmond and superintendent
of the Confederate States
Naval Academy. (nhhc)



Delavan Bates leads his USCT into the Confederate earthworks. One Confederate captain refused to surrender, imploring his men to "Kill 'em! Shoot 'em! Kill the damned niggers!" His exhortations were quickly quieted with a bayonet. (dov)



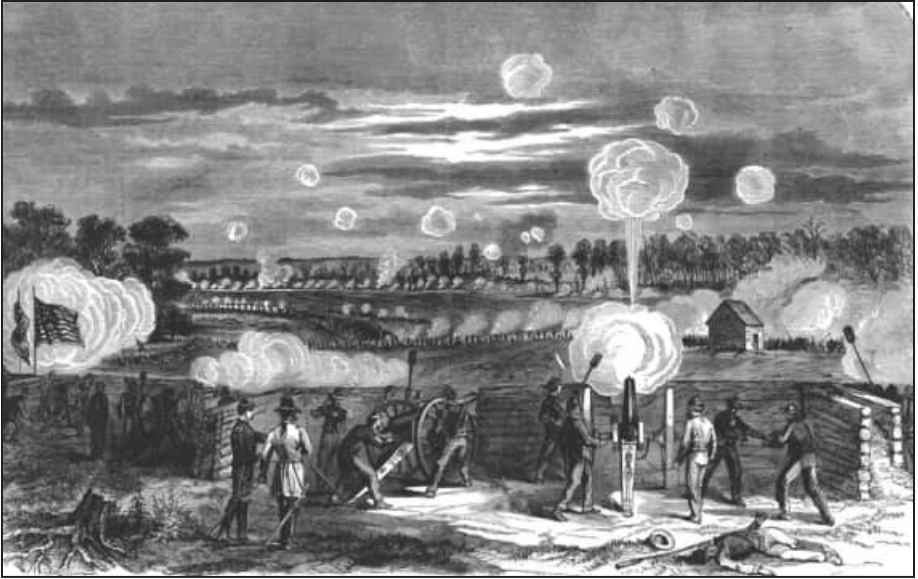
The pontoon bridge at Deep Bottom would see much use throughout the long campaign. (loc)

Richmond, and Bermuda Hundred, the peninsula between the two cities. Bermuda Hundred would remain a quiet sector during the war, but Richmond and Petersburg would see major fighting. For the outnumbered Lee, it was a bad situation. Making it worse, Lee generally was more nervous about Richmond, with near dire consequences on July 30.

* * *

Other plans were in the works on the south side of the James. Brigadier General Robert B. Potter of the Federal IX Corps noticed how close his lines were to those of the Confederates. In particular, he noted a position held by Capt. Richard G. Pegram's artillery. Pegram refused to move back from his vulnerable position on June 18 because his men were exhausted. As a result, he was exposed, and the Federals on the other side took note.

Opposite Pegram, Potter's men erected Fort Morton, named for Maj. James St. Clair Morton, killed in the fight on June 17. The Union's breastworks there were positioned on the crest of a ravine, framed by the railroad cut and Taylor's Creek, and formed a bulge. Directly in front, on a swell of ground, stood Pegram's Salient, later Elliott's Salient.



The 48th Pennsylvania was in a ravine slightly more than 130 yards from the salient, the closest to the Confederate lines. The regiment consisted largely of coal miners from Schuylkill County. Henry Pleasants, while resting in a bombproof, overheard one of his men boasting that they could “blow that damned fort out of existence if we could run a mine shaft under it.”

After exploring the ground on June 21, Pleasants consulted with Potter. If the fort could be breached, a quick march could take Union troops to Cemetery Hill, where artillery would dominate Petersburg. Potter was impressed and sent a report to Burnside.

Federal cannon shelled Petersburg, one man admitted, they “threw a few shells into Petersburg in pursuance of [our] favorite amusement, to try to ‘wind up the town clock.’” Lee could not attend Episcopal services in the city because the church was a prominent structure and therefore, a magnet for cannonballs. The rector came to Lee’s headquarters to perform services. In the Rebel lines, Henry Wise wrote, they “have stricken the 1st Presbyterian and knocked a large hole in its walls. Such is their religion!” (flbscw)

End of Unedited Excerpt