

RETREAT
from
VICTORY

THE BATTLE OF MALVERN HILL AND THE
END OF THE SEVEN DAYS, JULY 1, 1862

Francis Augustín O'Reilly

Unedited Excerpt



Savas Beatie
California

© 2026 Francis Augustín O'Reilly

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

First edition, first printing

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: O'Reilly, Francis Augustín, 1965- author

Title: Retreat from Victory : The Battle of Malvern Hill and the End of the Seven Days, July 1, 1862 / by Francis Augustín O'Reilly.

Other titles: Battle of Malvern Hill and the End of the Seven Days, July 1, 1862

Description: El Dorado Hills, CA : Savas Beatie, [2026] | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "O'Reilly examines the singular struggle at Malvern Hill in depth and from a wide variety of perspectives, including its implications for the war, the armies, the opposing governments, the people, and slavery. He pieces together the tactical movements of troops on the battlefield and the intentions of leaders on the front lines and in the halls of government in Washington, D.C., and Richmond. Above all, he gives voice to the soldiers, sharing their experiences in combat and on campaign"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025044815 | ISBN 9781611217674 hardback | ISBN 9781611217681 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Malvern Hill, Battle of, Va., 1862

Classification: LCC E473.68 .O74 2026

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025044815>



Savas Beatie

989 Governor Drive, Suite 101

El Dorado Hills, CA 95762

916-941-6896 / sales@savasbeatie.com / www.savasbeatie.com

All of our titles are available at special discount rates for bulk purchases in the United States. Contact us for information.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	viii
Prelude: Malvern Hill: Haunted by Victory	xi
Chapter One: The Run Up to Malvern Hill	1
Chapter Two: July 1, 1862: Road to Battle	23
Chapter Three: The Artillery Duel	54
Chapter Four: The Point of No Return	86
Chapter Five: Attack on Armistead's Front	111
Chapter Six: Assaults on D. H. Hill's Front	140
Chapter Seven: Battle West of Willis Church Road	201
Chapter Eight: Magruder's Last Act	220
Chapter Nine: Struggle by the Crew House	246
Chapter Ten: McLaws's Assaults	260
Chapter Eleven: Final Assaults	281
Chapter Twelve: Nightmare After Dark	316
Chapter Thirteen: The Road to Harrison's Landing	332
Appendix A: The Confederate Flag Captured by William J. Wittich, 83rd Pennsylvania	377
Appendix B: Union Army of the Potomac Order of Battle	381
Appendix C: Confederate Army of Northern Virginia Order of Battle	392
Bibliography	404
Index	424
About the Author	436

LIST OF MAPS

The Seven Days Battle, June 25–July 1, 1862	xxv
Malvern Cliffs, 5:00 p.m., June 30, 1862	15
Initial Positions, July 1, 1862	25
Malvern Hill Battlefield	26
Artillery Duel, 3:00 p.m.–5:00 p.m., July 1, 1862	57
The Attack of Wright, Mahone, and Edmonds, 5:30 p.m., July 1, 1862	124
D. H. Hill's Assault, 7:00 p.m., July 1, 1862	146
Couch's Counterattack, July 1, 1862	172
Colquitt's Assault, July 1, 1862	179
Toombs's Assault	183
Palmer and Howe's Counterattack	189
Armistead and Cobb's Assault, July 1, 1862	204
Anderson and Barksdale's Assault, 7:00 p.m., July 1, 1862	231
Ransom's First Assault, 8:00 p.m., July 1, 1862	251
Kershaw's Battle, July 1, 1862	264
Winder and Stafford's Battle, July 1, 1862	273
Caldwell's Battle, July 1, 1862	277
Semmes's Assault, 8:30 p.m., July 1, 1862	293
Ransom's Second Assault, 9:00 p.m., July 1, 1862	309
Union Base at Harrison's Landing, July 1862	345

Photos have been placed throughout the text for the convenience of the reader.

PRELUDE

Malvern Hill: Haunted by Victory

“One Continuous Battle by Day and March by Night”

No sooner had the sun set and the last gun fired, than the soldiers were on the march again, heading south. Men hurried to escape the battlefield and the converging enemy which threatened to entrap them. A Connecticut artilleryman noted, “It was one continuous battle by day and march by night.” Already Union and Confederate armies had fought a succession of battles on the doorstep of the Confederacy’s capital at Richmond: Golding’s Farm (King’s Schoolhouse), Mechanicsville or Beaver Dam Creek, Gaines’ Mill, and this day, Savage’s Station. Four days of ceaseless combat and movement had set the wheels in motion that would go a long way to decide the legitimacy of the Confederacy as an independent nation—and to determine the fate of a more perfect Union of the United States of America. Despite intense fighting and heavy casualties over the past few days, nothing had yet been resolved. As a result, the struggle would intensify, and eventually spark a revolution that would not only clarify matters, but fundamentally change America forever.¹

Robert E. Lee and George B. McClellan were locked in a death-struggle in the swamps east of Richmond during the last week of June 1862, mid-stride in what eventually became known as the Seven Days’ battles. So far, Lee’s plan to drive the Federals away from Richmond’s environs seemed to be working. He had pried McClellan loose from his imposing defenses astride the Chickahominy River; the Northern commander aimed to establish a new base of operations on the James River under cover of the U.S. Navy. Lee, adapting to the changing circumstances,

¹ *Massachusetts Spy*, July 16, 1862.



General Robert E. Lee *Library of Congress*

set out to annihilate McClellan's army before it could reach its new base. Lee's execution, however, had begun to falter.²

The crisis of the American Civil War came to a head in the summer of 1862, and it was reflected in the predicament of the field commanders battling for Richmond. Both Lee and McClellan had reached the moment of decision. Robert E. Lee inherited a disparate collection of commands cobbled together in the last few weeks to create the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. The bulwark of the army was its infantry. Foot soldiers came from 12 states, representing every state that had seceded the previous year, and one that had not—Maryland. They were a cross section of American farm boys, laborers, craftsmen, skilled artisans, and city dwellers. Most of them were between the ages of 18 and 45. Some had joined the Confederate army in the heady intoxicating days of 1861 and had lost some of their exuberance following the initial euphoria of the battle of First Manassas, when long months passed and little action occurred to bring the war to a successful conclusion. Others had been in service since 1861 and had yet to meet the Federals in battle; and still others had entered the service in the spring of 1862 as part of the Confederate military reorganization and expansion driven by the first ever Conscription Act in April. This led some to question the abilities of the first group, and the motivations of the second.³

The fundamental building block for this army was the regiment. Regiments banded together to form brigades, which became the element of engagement on the battlefield. Lee's army consisted of 41 brigades in the Seven Days' battles. Brigades grouped together, sometimes as small as two brigades and as large as six brigades, to form divisions. Divisions became the element of maneuver, logistics, and command in Lee's army. Lee had 10 divisions, led by commanders such as James Longstreet, Ambrose Powell Hill, Daniel Harvey Hill, Benjamin Huger, Theophilus Holmes, William H. C. Whiting, John Bankhead Magruder, Lafayette McLaws, David Rumph "Neighbor" Jones, and the already illustrious Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson. Some of these commanders enjoyed extensive campaign and battle experience. Others had neither. For all of them, the Seven Days would be the first time they attempted to work and fight together as one; and outside of one brigade under former Virginia governor Henry A. Wise, this would be the first time any of these generals fought under Lee.⁴

2 Judkin Browning, *The Seven Days' Battles: The War Begins Anew* (Santa Barbara, 2012), 89.

3 Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldiers of the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1943), 124–5, 330–1; Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1952), 303–4.

4 *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880–1901), Series 1, Vol. 11, Part 2, 490. (Hereafter cited as *OR*.)

Supporting the infantry, Lee also possessed cavalry and artillery. His cavalry, a small collection of regiments, followed the flamboyant and theatrical young Brig. Gen. James Ewell Brown “Jeb” Stuart. Stuart had whipped his command into a high state of efficiency. The artillery, on the other hand, was anything but efficient. The cannon had been dispersed throughout the army. Batteries—a combination of anywhere from four to six guns per command—had been parceled out to individual infantry brigades as direct fire support rather than placing them in a centralized command more conducive to massed firepower. Infantry commanders failed to comprehend the possibilities of concentrating large numbers of guns wielded by knowledgeable artillery commanders. Brigade and division commanders expected to mass their own cannon as needed, which left the artillery as a whole misunderstood, undervalued, and underutilized. Lee recognized the benefit of both arguments. He permitted brigades to keep attached batteries, but he also saw the need to create an artillery reserve that could provide massed firepower with direction. He appointed an affable West Point graduate who had become an Episcopal minister, Brig. Gen. William Nelson Pendleton, to head several battalions of Reserve Artillery. Pendleton’s initial guidance lacked focus or direction—and in the end, when it counted, did more harm than good.⁵

Another important element of Lee’s army resided with his staff officers, both those who reported directly to Lee and those who orbited around his subordinate commanders. American armies had invested little thought in formal staff development by the mid-nineteenth century. The staff officers became the field representatives of their generals’ authority, if not little more than their factotums, on the battlefields. In a day and age when communications relied on couriers, generals depended on their staff officers to execute their orders and enforce their wills in combat. Generals granted these representatives the authority to adapt their plans to changing circumstances. Though Lee himself had been an efficient staff officer under Winfield Scott in Mexico, he had surrounded himself with a staff entirely too small for the work at hand. Lee’s staff struggled, not only being too few in number, but also executing elaborate—often quixotic—orders that demanded split-second timing to coordinate. The staff and the orders could often be confused and confusing, uncertain in their commander’s intent and misleading in their guesses. Many miscues over the course of the Seven Days’ battle could be attributed to Lee being new to command, and his staff officers being unfamiliar

Unless otherwise stated, all references are from Series 1, Volume 11, Part 2.); Wiley, *Life of Johnny Reb*, 290–1.

5 Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 167; Jennings Cropper Wise, *The Long Arm of Lee*, 2 vols. (Lynchburg, VA, 1915), 1:40–1, 147.

with their general, unfamiliar with his army, and unfamiliar with the area. This dilemma would get worse before it got better.⁶

Backing up Lee's army was the Confederate government in Richmond—a government in crisis. President Jefferson Davis was attempting to forge a new nation in North America under the most extreme duress. He had an impressive political and military resume and a strong conviction to create a government infrastructure for the Confederacy that would protect the tenets of Southern rights, Southern politics, Southern economics, Southern ideology, and Southern slavery. Forming a government proved much easier than forging a new nation—and to attempt it in the midst of war was the worst-case scenario. The Confederacy had existed for a little over a year, but daily the news went from bad to worse in the first six months of 1862. Confederates had lost their hold on Kentucky and most of Tennessee; Union forces had made inroads along the Carolina coast and across northern Virginia. The largest city in the South, New Orleans, had fallen in April. Confederate armies had been defeated or captured at Island Number 10, Fort Henry, Fort Donelson, and Shiloh. And now, the largest field army ever assembled on the North American continent up to that time—the Union Army of the Potomac—had marched, maneuvered, and fought its way to the virtual outskirts of the Confederate capital at Richmond. Even the Davis's niece lamented, "The Cause of the Confederacy looks drooping and sinking. . . . I am ready to sink with despair." A Confederate cavalry officer declared, "Our cause is hopeless."⁷

Under these circumstances, Davis struggled to legitimize the government in Richmond—one whose authority would be recognized and respected by the United States and the rest of the world's nations. Davis wrestled with creating a genuine nation—a Confederacy in practice as well as in principle. The people of the South had been quick to embrace secession rhetoric, but slow to identify themselves with the Confederacy. They believed in the idea of a separate nation, but hesitated to identify themselves as a distinct people from other Americans. They believed Southerners had a right to secede but balked at the nascent Confederate government when it attempted to regulate and mobilize their resources for a common defense. They could see themselves as various groups—Virginians, Georgians, Carolinians—united against a common threat, but not bound by a common nationality—Confederates—forged to confront a singular threat.

6 Robert E. L. Krick, *Staff Officers in Gray: A Biographical Register of the Staff Officers in the Army of Northern Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 2; Kevin Dougherty, *The Peninsula Campaign of 1862: A Military Analysis* (Jackson, MS, 2005), 27.

7 James M. McPherson, *Tried By War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (New York, 2008), 90.

Agrarians resented the Richmond government imposing regulations to curtail the production of cash crops, such as tobacco and cotton, and to concentrate on creating staple grain crops—such as wheat, corn, and potatoes—to feed and sustain the new nation. They wished to avoid financial loss and often tried to circumvent the new government's laws and regulations. They exploited the economy with price-gouging speculation and illegal black-market transactions, which only destabilized the market more and led to galloping inflation and the depreciation of Confederate currency. The government attempted to enforce regulatory price-fixing restrictions which seemed even more intrusive than those of the United States Federal government. Not all Southerners identified with the Confederacy or its cause, especially if it hindered their laissez faire economic practices. They paid lip-service to the Confederacy but guarded their resources for their own financial benefit as insurance, in case the new nation failed.⁸

As the spring of 1862 offered a non-stop string of setbacks and defeats, people in the South questioned the ability of the government in Richmond to sustain the Confederacy. While thousands served in the field with the Confederate armies, there were many more who watched cautiously from a distance, afraid to commit themselves to a cause or a nation that might not last through the summer. The ultimate test for the Confederacy's legitimacy loomed in the Federal army's direct threat to Richmond. If the capital fell, ideologically, the Confederacy might also collapse. Successfully defending itself against an existential threat might give the Confederacy a just claim to legitimacy. The world watched and waited—and so did Southerners who had yet to truly identify themselves as Confederates.⁹

Together, Lee's Army of Northern Virginia numbered 90,000 men, many of whom came from communities and states that wrestled with Confederate identity. The army also represented a common bond and purpose that united different people and blended them into a common experience which fostered a shared identity. Some were die-hard nationalists. In the Mississippi brigade of Col. William Barksdale, the soldiers recognized particularly outspoken groups by Confederate names, like the Confederate Guards (Company G, 17th Mississippi), or the Confederate Rifles (Company A, 18th Mississippi), or the Vicksburg Confederates (Company K, 21st Mississippi), but even among them, no one

8 James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York, 1988), 439–40; Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* (Columbia, SC, 1971), 17, 104; Browning, *The Seven Days' Battles*, 158.

9 Gary W. Gallagher, "A Civil War Watershed: The 1862 Richmond Campaign in Perspective," *The Richmond Campaign of 1862: The Peninsula and the Seven Days*, ed. by Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), 20; Charles P. Roland, *An American Iliad: The Story of the Civil War* (Lexington, KY, 1991), 217, 259; Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate Nation: 1861–1865* (New York, 1979), 32–3.

matched the intensity of Company C, 18th Mississippi, which was known simply as, “The Confederates.” The implication was that not everyone shared the same level of commitment as The Confederates. The question remained would Lee and his lieutenants be able to coordinate these disparate elements together for one decisive moment on the battlefield?¹⁰

Desperation and uncertainty not only haunted Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, it gnawed at Abraham Lincoln and George B. McClellan as well. President Lincoln anxiously needed a victory. He often seemed at odds with his army commander in the East, the fastidious McClellan, but at the same time, earnestly wanted to see the exacting general succeed. Outside of the setback caused by “Stonewall” Jackson’s recent campaign in the Shenandoah Valley, Lincoln believed the war in 1862 appeared to be on track. Success marked his military forces’ efforts everywhere, which only raised expectations for his premier fighting force then perched within eyesight of Richmond. The struggle between the North and South had been turning, changing—morphing from an insurrection in 1861 to a rebellion in 1862. Insurrection centered on a small locus of radical secessionist “fire-eaters” who had deluded the masses and seized power in the South; but this rebellion crystallized into a set-piece of resistance, pitting governments and armies against each other. Many Northerners now began to perceive the struggle drifting from rebellion into revolution: a contest not only between armies and governments, but a war between peoples and cultures. Some in Washington even endorsed more strident measures to deal with the Southerners, transforming the war into one against property—and against slavery. They drafted a Confiscation Act designed to wage a more encompassing war against the South and its cornerstone of slavery.¹¹

McClellan firmly resisted such notions. Lincoln might be a moderate Republican surrounded by radicals who preached abolition of slavery, social re-engineering, and wealth-redistribution, but McClellan was a conservative Democrat who narrowly viewed the rebellion as a war targeting only those actively resisting Federal authority. He was not waging war against a whole society, which for many exhibited a non-committal allegiance to the nascent Confederacy. The general wished to avoid alienating neutral onlookers by confiscating their property or wealth—or eliminating the social injustice of slavery. McClellan attempted to preserve the Constitution and restore the Union to the status-quo antebellum. Profound loss of life and property would directly hinder the general’s ability to

10 Brian K. Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances: The Seven Days Battle* (Bloomington, IN, 2001), 403.

11 James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York, 1990), 74–5.

restore harmony and mend common bonds. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles noted disparagingly, “He likes show, parade, and power. . . . Wishes to outgeneral the rebels, but not to kill and destroy them.”¹²

McClellan believed he had formulated an ideal solution to ending the war without egregious bloodshed or long-lingering rancor. He created the Army of the Potomac. It dwarfed all previous American field armies. It had the same infrastructure as Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. It combined 176 regiments, from 17 states, representing every state still in the Union except Ohio, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, and Kentucky. Even the new Union state of California had a contingent represented in McClellan’s army. They served in a Pennsylvania outfit, the 72nd Pennsylvania, which became known informally as the “California Division.” For geographical reasons, McClellan placed troops raised by eastern seaboard states as his army’s core. Western states tended to split their forces between protecting their own regions and defending Washington, D.C.

McClellan divided this formidable force into 11 divisions, which he then combined into five army corps. Unlike Lee, who used divisions as his maneuvering element, McClellan expected his corps to be the primary element in managing the battlefield. His corps commanders—Brigadier Generals Edwin Vose Sumner, Samuel P. Heintzelman, Erasmus D. Keyes, Fitz John Porter, and William Buell Franklin—represented a cross-section of old established generals appointed by the president, and new, younger officers loyal to McClellan for their appointments.¹³

McClellan’s infantry had a sprinkling of veterans from First Manassas and Ball’s Bluff, but most of the soldiers had no experience at all with combat. McClellan trained and drilled his force relentlessly through the fall and winter of 1861–1862—and once positioned on the Virginia Peninsula within miles of Richmond, they appeared ready for action. McClellan’s infantry made up in numbers what it lacked in experience: his Army of the Potomac fielded more than 105,000 troops.¹⁴

McClellan’s artillery was superior to Lee’s in every sense. Union artillery boasted better manufactured and more reliable cannon and ammunition. Instead

12 McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, 31; Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1909–1911), 1:107; D. Scott Hartwig, *To Antietam Creek: The Maryland Campaign of September 1862* (Baltimore, 2012), 30.

13 Stephen W. Sears, *Lincoln’s Lieutenants: The High Command of the Army of the Potomac* (Boston, 2017), 165–7, 190. The Northern states not represented in the Army of the Potomac had sent troops to fight in the Western Theatre of the war.

14 Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 319; Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee’s Lieutenants: A Study in Command*, 3 vols. (New York, 1942), 1:538; Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 521; Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 402. Freeman stated the Army of the Potomac was 105,000. Sears calculated the Federal army was 90,000 at Harrison’s Landing—after 16,000 casualties in the campaign. Burton counted 89,000 at the outset of the campaign.



Major General George B. McClellan *Library of Congress*

of diffusing batteries among brigades, McClellan combined several 6-gun batteries into battalions attached to infantry corps and divisions. This allowed the artillerists to concentrate their firepower while still reassuring the infantry commanders of direct support. Col. Henry J. Hunt, a career soldier and innovator, also created

an artillery reserve, massing 17 batteries in five artillery brigades for even greater firepower.¹⁵

Federal cavalry, on the other hand, was a non-entity. This costly arm of the service required two-years of hard training to achieve any proficiency. No one in the cost-conscious War Department dreamed in 1862 that the war would last long enough to consider such an expensive and time-consuming investment worthwhile. What little professional cavalry that existed had been divided into small, ineffective cadres for guard duty and escorts. McClellan never envisioned cavalry as a combat-wing of the army or a counter to Jeb Stuart's Confederate horsemen.¹⁶

McClellan formed a personal staff that was somewhat larger than Lee's, certainly as loyal as Lee's if not more so. They spent a great deal of time familiarizing themselves with roads and byways and mapping out an elaborate line of communications for the Federal army. McClellan's staff may have understood the area surrounding Richmond better than the Confederates did.

Despite having a larger, well-trained army, McClellan maneuvered around Richmond like a calculating chess-master with slow, inexorable purpose. Lincoln and the loyalists yearned to see the Army of the Potomac crush the Confederates and capture Richmond. McClellan, however, saw victory in different terms. The overwhelming numbers, the meticulous advance, all were part of a methodical plan designed to open the Rebels' eyes to a singular conclusion: they could not hope to defeat or destroy this massive Federal army. McClellan intended to use the Army of the Potomac to compel the Confederates to renounce secession and return penitently to the Union before they paid a greater penalty for resistance.

McClellan's campaign envisioned limited military victory—but it ignored the issues that caused the war in the first place. In 1862, Lincoln intended to restore the Union either with or without slavery. His priority was to destroy the Confederacy as a fundamental threat to the United States before it could hope to force a substantive peace on its own terms. While McClellan sought the dismantling of the Confederacy without any long-term resolution, Lincoln focused on the restoration of a perpetual Union. The president's political objectives were at odds with his general's military strategy. Grand strategy married political goals with military action. Unfortunately, when political and military strategies fail to mesh, they almost invariably fail to succeed.¹⁷

15 Sears, *Lincoln's Lieutenants*, 98–9.

16 Stephen Z. Starr, *The Union Cavalry in the Civil War*, 3 vols. (Baton Rouge, 1979), 1:67, 208.

17 McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, 73; Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 355.

McClellan not only found himself at odds with Lincoln's political goals, but also with the president's vision for military operations. McClellan required an overwhelming force to overawe his opponents. He expected Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee to concentrate every available Confederate to defend Richmond—in fact, Davis and Lee had been pulling troops from the Carolinas and the Shenandoah Valley to protect the capital. This required McClellan to mobilize significantly more troops than his opponent. McClellan bombarded Lincoln and the War Department with demands for more troops. Lincoln shared what he could, but the president also diverted soldiers to other theaters of operation. McClellan's own campaign had maneuvered to the cusp of Richmond, but with less-than-intimidating numbers. He not only lacked the strength to compel the Rebels to capitulate, he feared their parity in numbers might actually provoke the Confederates to attack. At the onset of the Seven Days' battles, McClellan shifted his priorities from saving the Union to saving the Union's premier army. Instead of driving on to Richmond, McClellan attempted to escape from Lee's onslaught along the Chickahominy River.

McClellan consistently inflated the numbers of his enemies, counting not only the Confederate troops in front of him, but also the troops that could conceivably confront him in the next couple of days or weeks. McClellan's persistent pleading for reinforcements irritated Lincoln, but the president tried to oblige his general as much as possible. Despite his own reservations, the president sent additional units to the Army of the Potomac. The stream of Union reinforcements, however, failed to placate McClellan. The war was about to get bloodier by McClellan's reckoning, because the government failed to give him enough troops to intimidate the Rebels into submission. When Lee struck the Federals north of the Chickahominy River on June 26, McClellan's worst fears had been realized—the Confederates had massed their resources while McClellan accused Lincoln of squandering theirs. Now McClellan was engaged in a race across the Virginia Peninsula, determined to establish a safe new base on the James River, under the protection of the U.S. Navy.¹⁸

The Federals controlled only a couple of roads to extract their immense forces, wagon trains, and cattle herds. The Confederates, on the other hand, benefitted from significantly more roads, that interdicted them.

McClellan's elaborate plans to invest Richmond and end the war started to fall apart well before the Seven Days. Arguably, it started almost as soon as the smoke cleared from the Seven Pines battlefield on May 31, 1862. Leading up to that time, the Union commander advantageously maneuvered into position east of Richmond. A Union force, under Brig. Gen. Irvin McDowell, started overland

18 Edwin C. Fishel, *The Secret War For the Union* (Boston, 1996), 160.

from Fredericksburg to join McClellan and threaten Richmond from the north. McClellan stretched his right flank north of the Chickahominy River to meet McDowell. The Confederate field commander around Richmond at the time was Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, who may have been even more diffident and difficult than McClellan. The converging Federal forces, however, provoked Johnston to attack the Federals before their numbers became overwhelming. Learning that McClellan's army straddled the Chickahominy River, with the bulk of its forces north of the stream, Johnston targeted the weaker southern wing. An ugly spring freshet aided the Confederates, causing the Chickahominy to rise and swamps to back up, isolating McClellan's weaker southern wing from possible reinforcements. A series of elaborate but bungled Confederate attacks started the battle of Seven Pines with some promise for Johnston's army, but it soon sputtered into a piecemeal firefight without teeth or merit. Union Brig. Gen. Edwin V. Sumner, a soldier long in experience and short in insight, willed his troops across the flooded Chickahominy and negated the crisis. Joseph E. Johnston sustained a serious wound that removed him from command and paralyzed all Confederate attempts to regroup or press their assault. The Confederates withdrew into the Richmond defenses more discouraged than ever.¹⁹

Johnston was gone. His replacement was Robert E. Lee. The new commander was largely unknown among the soldiers. A Confederate ordnance officer, Maj. Edward Porter Alexander, asked a friend on President Davis's staff, Col. Joseph Ives, about Lee. Alexander's colleague said Lee would be bold and aggressive and "if there is one man in either army, Confederate or Federal, head and shoulders above every other in audacity, it is General Lee! His name might be Audacity. He will take more desperate chances, and take them quicker than any other general in the country, North or South." Jefferson Davis was banking on that when he appointed Lee to command.²⁰

Lee had never commanded anything like the Army of Northern Virginia. It was large and in distress. The new commander worked tirelessly to reinvigorate the Confederate army. He not only inherited Johnston's army, but also Johnston's dilemma: McClellan still posed an immediate threat to the capital and needed to be destroyed or driven away as soon as possible. Irvin McDowell's Federals had been redirected back to Fredericksburg, much to McClellan's chagrin and

19 Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 11.

20 Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee*, 4 vols. (New York, 1934–1936), 2:92; Edward Porter Alexander, *Military Memoirs of a Confederate: A Critical Narrative* (New York, 1907), 110–1; Edward Porter Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*, ed. by Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill, NC, 1989), 91.

Lee's relief, but McClellan still had more than enough men to worry Richmond's defenders. Lee needed to alleviate the crisis. He noted McClellan still straddled the Chickahominy but had repositioned most of his forces south of the river following the battle of Seven Pines. McClellan's base of supplies at White House Landing on the Pamunkey River served as the life-line for McClellan's operations, but it necessitated splitting the Union army to guard both banks of the Chickahominy. Lee entrusted his savant cavalry commander, Jeb Stuart, to probe McClellan's right flank north of the river. Stuart boldly rode a full circuit around McClellan's army, not only showing an element of brinkmanship, but to mask the true purpose of his reconnaissance. Stuart discovered a vulnerability on the Federal right flank—and identified several ways for the Confederates to descend upon it. True to the War Department clerk's prediction, Lee hatched an audacious plan to preempt the imminent siege of Richmond. Lee had held command for little over three weeks, but he was determined to go on the offensive.²¹

Lee marshaled forces with a speed and precision that belied his inexperience as a commander working on this scale. He initiated a number of deceptions to mislead his opponent about his true intentions, even sending a couple of brigades under Brig. Gen. William Henry Chase Whiting away from Richmond to join "Stonewall" Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley. Chase Whiting made a display of leaving Richmond but quickly disappeared from Federal view once he reported to Jackson. Lee then had Jackson and Whiting shift east of the Blue Ridge Mountains to join him for the showdown battle with McClellan's army north of the Chickahominy.²²

Lee met with his chief lieutenants at the Mary Catherine Dabbs house on the Nine Mile Road on the eve of the Seven Days. The commanding general explained the vital need to attack. The Confederates had gathered 90,000 men—making it the largest army in the Confederacy. Lee intended to drive the Federals back from Richmond by attacking McClellan's isolated right wing north of the Chickahominy. He selected six divisions for his mobile strike force north of the river, picking the most vigorous brash young officers for the task: James Longstreet, Thomas J. Jackson, Daniel Harvey Hill, Ambrose Powell Hill, William H. C. Whiting, and Richard S. Ewell. Lee left a much smaller, but sizable force of about 25,000 south of the river to protect Richmond against a direct assault. Lee entrusted this assignment to Maj. Gen. John Bankhead Magruder, an old soldier with a fondness

21 Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants*, 1:283, 287.

22 C. B. Denson, *An Address Containing A Memoir of the Late Major-General William Henry Chase Whiting of the Confederate Army* (Raleigh, NC, 1895), 21; Lenoir Chambers, *Stonewall Jackson*, 2 vols. (New York, 1959), 2:8, 12; Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants*, 1:489.

for pomp and pageantry, and an aptitude for deception. He regally lived up to his nickname, “Prince John.” He worked with divisions led by Benjamin Huger, John R. Jones, and Lafayette McLaws. Farther south, Theophilus H. Holmes offered him support. These commanders, with the exception of McLaws perhaps, represented an old guard of established but aging warriors. Lee had everything set for his surprise onslaught to begin on Thursday, June 26, 1862.²³

Incredibly, McClellan allowed Lee almost a month to build his forces and improve the Richmond defenses. The Federal commander had served with Lee during the Mexican War, and the young Northerner had perceived none of the audacity that Joseph Ives claimed to see in the Virginian. McClellan dismissed Lee as being an officer inferior to even Joseph E. Johnston, confiding to Lincoln that Lee was, “too cautious and weak . . . is wanting in moral firmness . . . and is likely to be timid and irresolute in action.” The Union commander spent the weeks following Seven Pines reallocating the bulk of his army south of the Chickahominy River and plotting precise increments of advance to take Richmond by siege-like approaches. Most of this internal housekeeping preoccupied the Federal commander and left his opponent unfettered to formulate his own plans.²⁴

Almost as incredible, McClellan still came close to derailing Lee’s entire operation before it ever began. On Wednesday, June 25, as Lee massed his troops on Chickahominy Bluff overlooking the lifeless village of Mechanicsville, McClellan unexpectedly struck the Confederate defenses near Oak Grove on the Williamsburg Road and Golding’s and Garnett’s farms above the Nine Mile Road. This led to a day of heated skirmishing on a wide front, suggesting McClellan might have preempted the Confederate plans—and tried to take advantage of the Rebels’ weakened defenses. In truth, McClellan did have some inkling of Lee’s movements. He had been monitoring Stonewall Jackson’s imminent arrival. He had warned the Union V Corps commander, Brig. Gen. Fitz John Porter, to hold the north bank of the Chickahominy until McClellan could dictate the pace and flow of action south of the river. The Federal commander chose that day to restart his systematic investment of Richmond, reclaiming the initiative by modest approaches. The Rebels challenged the move, which surprised the Federals, making McClellan question whether Lee had weakened his defenses at all. When McClellan refused to escalate the action, Lee pushed ahead with his own plan of attack.²⁵

23 Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 403.

24 George B. McClellan, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence, 1860–1865*, ed. by Stephen W. Sears (New York, 1989), 310.

25 Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond*, 189; Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 51.

multi-faceted attack plan that required split-second timing and coordination to have everyone converge simultaneously at the point of contact. In the nineteenth century, when communications relied on couriers and runners, the general staff was small and inefficient, the battlefield was wooded and swampy, and the road network was crude and unfamiliar to army cartographers. All of these factors combined to disrupt the Confederates' plans.²⁶

Stonewall Jackson failed to arrive when and where expected. Fitz John Porter raised the alarm when he advanced three Federal brigades to Beaver Dam Creek immediately outside of Mechanicsville. On his own initiative, A. P. Hill slipped the leash late in the afternoon and assailed Porter. Assuming A. P. Hill had liaised with Stonewall Jackson and the two of them had initiated the battle, Lee hurried the rest of his forces across Meadow Bridge and onto the battlefield. Only then did Lee learn that Jackson had not appeared and that he had been committed to a battle by A. P. Hill's impulsiveness. Lee spent the rest of the day playing catch-up to redeem the situation. In the interim, A. P. Hill and D. H. Hill launched a number of uncoordinated and costly frontal attacks right into the twilight. Jackson never reached the field. Porter's Federals had adeptly obstructed his approach. In the swamps around Richmond, it was difficult to detour around roadblocks, necessitating removing them instead. Jackson was uncharacteristically sluggish and even more uncommunicative than usual. The general felt sick and had lost a great deal of sleep hurrying to join Lee's army. The unfamiliar setting and limited roads overtaxed his already drained physical stamina, curtailing his ability to adapt to the circumstances quickly and creatively. Jackson's presence was nonetheless felt. In the evening, he camped within earshot of the battle crackling along Beaver Dam Creek. Jackson's proximity compelled Porter to evacuate Beaver Dam Creek and fall back to Gaines' Mill.²⁷

Porter made another stand on Thursday, June 27, 1862—defending Boatswain's Swamp at Gaines' Mill. Lee's army pitched into the Federals perched on high ground around the Watt's and Adams's farms. The Confederates again lacked coordination, and Stonewall Jackson entered the battle late. Lee's Rebels hammered away, suffering prohibitive losses trying to destroy one isolated wing of the Union army. Fitz John Porter's troops also sustained heavy casualties defending the ground until sunset. By the time Lee's Confederates overran the

26 Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 404–5.

27 Chambers, *Stonewall Jackson*, 2:40; Dougherty, *Seven Days*, 113.

Federal position, darkness and confusion had overtaken the field, allowing the Federals to escape.²⁸

McClellan ordered Fitz John Porter to abandon his defenses north of the Chickahominy River. This compromised the Federal supply base at White House Landing, and McClellan ordered the base dismantled and moved. The Federal commander considered operating against Richmond from a different axis. The Army of the Potomac received orders to march south—McClellan pointed them to the James River. The Federals could advance along the river and depend on the U.S. Navy to protect their base of supplies and line of communications. McClellan's army needed to cross several obstacles, including White Oak Swamp, to get to the James River. With McClellan in retreat, Lee had succeeded in alleviating the immediate threat to Richmond. Lee now shifted gears, anxious to damage the Union army as much as possible before it got away.²⁹

Initially, Lee was frozen in place, uncertain whether McClellan intended to retreat down the Peninsula to Yorktown and Fort Monroe, or head to the James River. Lee sent Jeb Stuart's cavalry to investigate the White House base and scout the roads to the east. Longstreet, Jackson, and the two Hills prepared to pursue in any direction once McClellan's intentions became clear. Lee ordered Prince John Magruder to keep a close eye on the Federals south of the Chickahominy River. Magruder had kept the Yankees busy for the last couple of days with noisy demonstrations, but now he grew timid when the whole Union army concentrated on his front. Magruder failed to keep close tabs on the Federals, and McClellan's men easily broke contact and started south on June 28, 1862.

Stuart soon determined that McClellan was heading south to the James River. Lee pressed Magruder to delay the Yankees until the rest of the Confederate army could recross the Chickahominy and join him. The anticipated arrival of Jackson made Magruder somewhat bolder as he probed the empty Union camps around Fair Oaks and Seven Pines. When Jackson continued to dally north of the Chickahominy River, Prince John lost his enthusiasm, launching only half-hearted forays against the Federal rearguard at Savage's Station. By the end of the day, Lee's army was crossing the river, but the Union forces had gotten away. Lee criticized Magruder for failing to pin down McClellan's army. Magruder was both relieved to have the Confederate army reunited on the same side of the

28 Burton, *Extraordinary Circumstances*, 137.

29 Browning, *Seven Days*, 89; Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants*, 1:540–1.

Chickahominy and peeved that Lee did not appreciate the long odds facing his comparatively small force.³⁰

Things had not gone as planned for the Confederates. The Federals had burned their bridges across the Chickahominy River. This forced Lee's main body to waste time either doubling back to bridges closer to Richmond or building new spans beside the charred ruins left by the Federals. At sunset on June 29, McClellan had a good head start on the Rebels. The Federals, however, had only one or two routes through the swamps to reach the James River, cramming the roads leading south. Traffic slowed to a crawl, allowing Confederates a chance to catch up and sever the Federal line of retreat on June 30. This was McClellan's biggest fear—and Lee's greatest opportunity to bring the Union army to bay.

30 Douglas Crenshaw, *The Battle of Glendale: Robert E. Lee's Lost Opportunity* (Charleston, SC, 2017), 35–6.

CHAPTER ONE

The Run Up to Malvern Hill

“I Dread the Result If We Are Attacked Today”

Federal artillery, wagon trains, and other assorted military detritus crept sluggishly southward in an unending exodus that had begun almost a week previous. A procession of nearly 5,000 wagons, 400–500 ambulances, 350 artillery pieces, 50 siege guns, and 2,500 head of cattle inched along, as well as countless horses and mules groaning under the weight of their burdens. Strung out in single file, it was estimated the supply train could have stretched for nearly 100 miles. Soldiers caked in sweat and grime lumbered out of the dusty woods and swamps, and climbed a gentle slope past neatly gathered shocks of wheat, past non-descript farm houses and slave cabins, past prim orchards, until they drew up in front of a stately manor which gave this hilltop its name—Malvern Hill. Within the next twenty-four hours, Union and Confederate armies battling around Richmond would give this hilltop an indelible place in history.¹

For now, Federal artillerymen, foot soldiers, and teamsters sprawled across the grounds and orchards of the Malvern house, grateful for a moment’s respite. Famished troops craved food and rest. Federals crossing an uncut field of wheat stuffed their pockets and knapsacks with fistfuls of ripe grain. Hungry U.S. Regulars broke ranks and attacked a nearby meadow filled with blackberries. Some of the soldiers made a beeline for the river. “Hundreds of men,” noted an observer,

1 Martin T. McMahon, *Portland Advertiser*, July 26, 1862; John M. Coski, *The Army of the Potomac at Berkeley Plantation: The Harrison’s Landing Occupation of 1862* (n.p., 1989), 2; Comte de Paris, *History of the Civil War in America*, ed. by Henry Coppee (Philadelphia, 1876), 2:132–3; George B. McClellan, *Report on the Organization and Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac; to Which is Added an Account of the Campaigns in Western Virginia with Plans of Battle-fields* (Freeport, NY, 1970), 256.

“were swimming and washing in the stream, and the whole scene was about as strange and inspiring as one could imagine.”²

The architect of this idyllic setting, Thomas Cocke, had been the colonial high sheriff of Henrico County and a member of colonial Virginia’s House of Burgesses. He had overseen the construction of the manor sometime between 1690 and 1700. It was a simple one and a half story brick affair with a gabled roof, showcasing a fine example of glazed brickwork, in a diamond-pattern known as “diaper work.” At one time, it had been the home of Robert Nelson, brother of Thomas Nelson of Yorktown, who had been a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Benjamin Franklin Dew owned the property at the time of the Civil War. Before the Union army arrived, Dew’s family had taken refuge in Richmond, 15 miles away. McClellan briefly claimed the house as his headquarters and shared it with Fitz John Porter, the dynamic and energetic leader of the Union V Corps.³

The house stood on a naked bluff overlooking the glistening blue-silver waters of the James River. A soldier said the view was, “magnificent and beautiful.” The southern exposure dropped precipitously toward the river, causing those who barely perceived a hill to the north to refer to the southern and western escarpment as the Malvern Cliffs. Wagons slowly lurched along the rustic road that led down the steep slope to the river bottoms—and the waiting protection of the U.S. Navy.⁴

Commander John Rodgers patrolled the James River with several gunboats, including the USS *Galena*, USS *Aroostook*, USS *Mahaska*, USS *Jacob Bell*, and their tenders. The navy’s proximity offered the promise of security for McClellan’s 95,000-man Army of the Potomac. McClellan had long considered changing his base to the James River, thinking it would be easier to secure under the guns of Commander Rodger’s gunboats. But the Federals were not safe just yet. The army’s

2 William B. Styple, *McClellan’s Other Story: The Political Intrigue of Colonel Thomas M. Key, Confidential Aide to General George B. McClellan* (Kearny, NJ, 2012), 153; Theodore V. Brown, “Some Recollections of Malvern Hill,” *The National Tribune*, March 10, 1904.

3 Robert A. Lancaster, *Historic Virginia Homes and Churches* (Philadelphia, 1915), 104–5; *National Register of Historic Places Nomination for Malvern Hill, 1969*, Virginia Department of Historic Resources, 1969; *The National Register of Historic Places* (Department of the Interior, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, 1978), 515; Marc R. Matrana, *Lost Plantations of the South* (Jackson, MS, 2014), 29–30; Philip Alexander Bruce and Richard Lee Morton, eds., *History of Virginia: Virginia Biography* (Chicago, 1924), 6:643; James McPherson, *The Most Fearful Ordeal: Original Coverage of the Civil War by the Writers and Reporters of the New York Times* (New York, 2004), 155; William F. Biddle to John C. Ropes, March 27, 1895, John C. Ropes Collection, Boston University. Regrettably, the Malvern house burned in 1905. Parts of the chimneys were still evident in 2024.

4 William B. Weeden, “The Battle of Malvern Hill, As Seen by an Officer of Artillery,” in Edward E. Hale, ed., *Stories of War Told By Soldiers* (Boston, 1880), 51; “J. T. S.” [Joel T. Scott], *Columbus Weekly Enquirer*, Aug. 19, 1862.



“Malvern Hill”—the Malvern house. *National Archives*

wagon trains, even condensed, still extended for eight miles from beginning to end. Wagons glutted the bottoms and backed up onto Malvern Hill. Despite the efforts of McClellan’s personal staff, the roads remained blocked. It became evident that the exhausted Federal army would have to hold Malvern Hill at least until the trains cleared the area and allowed the army unimpaired passage to the river. As tired as he was, McClellan wrestled with the logistics of establishing a new base of operations from scratch.⁵

End of Unedited Excerpt

5 Dexter F. Parker, *Massachusetts Spy*, July 16, 1862; George B. McClellan, *McClellan’s Own Story* (New York, 1887), 429.