

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## The Battle of Five Forks

By Edward S. Alexander

### Resources

If you can read only one book

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
McCarthy, Michael J.	<i>Confederate Waterloo: The Battle of Five Forks, April 1, 1865, and the Controversy that Brought Down a General</i> . El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2017.

### Books and Articles

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
Alexander, Edward S.	<i>Dawn of Victory: Breakthrough at Petersburg, March 25-April 2, 1865</i> . El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2015.
Bearss, Ed and Chris Calkins	<i>The Battle of Five Forks</i> . Lynchburg, VA: H.E. Howard, 1985.
Bearss, Edwin C. and Bryce A. Suderow	<i>The Petersburg Campaign, Volume 2: The Western Front Battles, September 1864-April 1865</i> . El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2014.
Calkins, Chris	<i>The Appomattox Campaign, March 29-April 9, 1865</i> . Conshohocken, PA: Combined Books, 1997.
_____.	<i>History and Tour Guide of Five Forks, Hatcher's Run and Namozine Church</i> . Columbus, OH: Blue & Gray Magazine, 2003.

Greene, A. Wilson	<i>The Final Battles of the Petersburg Campaign: Breaking the Backbone of the Rebellion.</i> Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000.
Hess, Earl J.	<i>In the Trenches at Petersburg: Field Fortifications &amp; Confederate Defeat.</i> Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
Trudeau, Noah Andre	<i>The Last Citadel: Petersburg, Virginia, June 1864-April 1865.</i> Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1991.

## Organizations

Organization Name	Description, Contact information including address, email
Petersburg National Battlefield Virginia	<p>Petersburg National Battlefield preserves 1,215 acres of the Five Forks battlefield, including a visitor contact station and museum. A five-stop driving tour and eight miles of hiking trails cover many of the key locations from the engagement on April 1, 1865. The site of the shad bake is not publicly accessible.</p> <p>The park grounds are open every day of the year except for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years Day from 8:00 a.m. until dusk. The gate to the Visitor Contact Station opens at 8:00 a.m. and closes at 5:00 p.m. The Visitor Contact Station is open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.</p> <p>The Five Forks Battlefield Visitor Contact Station's address is 9840 Courthouse Road, Dinwiddie, VA 23841, 804-469-4093. Their website is: <a href="http://www.nps.gov/pete/index.htm">www.nps.gov/pete/index.htm</a></p>
Petersburg Battlefields Foundation	The Petersburg Battlefields Foundation's vision is to inspire and educate the public about the Petersburg Campaign of the Civil War. Their mission is to lead a regional initiative to preserve, interpret, and promote

	<p>the Campaign’s diverse cultural, natural, and historic resources. Part of their activities include maintenance projects on the Five Forks battlefield.</p> <p>Contact Info P.O. Box 1975, Prince George, VA 23875, <a href="mailto:info@petebattlefields.org">info@petebattlefields.org</a>.</p> <p>Their website is:  <a href="http://www.petebattlefields.org">www.petebattlefields.org</a></p>
<p>The American Battlefield Trust</p>	<p>The premiere private preservation organization, the Civil War Trust has actively preserved and interpreted many key sites in Dinwiddie County pertaining to the final battles around Petersburg.</p> <p>The Civil War Trust has preserved 387 acres at Hatcher’s Run, 903 acres at White Oak Road, 419 acres at Five Forks, and 407 acres of the Petersburg Breakthrough Battlefield. Interpretive walking trails allow visitors to tour Confederate entrenchments at Hatcher’s Run and along White Oak Road. The Petersburg Battlefields Trail, in partnership with Petersburg National Battlefield and Pamplin Historical Park, provides interpreted access to the ground where the VI Corps began their decisive charge on the morning of April 2, 1865. The site of A.P. Hill’s death is also preserved by the Civil War Trust and marked with a small granite monument.</p> <p>Their website is:  <a href="https://www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war/battles/five-forks">https://www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war/battles/five-forks</a></p>
<p>Pamplin Historical Park</p>	<p>Located on the site of the April 2, 1865 breakthrough, the battle that ended the Petersburg Campaign and led to the evacuation of the Confederate capital at Richmond, the Park’s 424 acres include four award-winning museums, four antebellum homes, living history venues, and shopping facilities. The Park is in Dinwiddie county, near Petersburg, Virginia.</p> <p>The award-winning National Museum of the</p>

	<p>Civil War Soldier forms the Park’s centerpiece. Here, the story of the 3 million common soldiers who fought in America's bloodiest conflict is told using the latest museum technology. An impressive artifact collection is set amidst lifelike settings.</p> <p>The Park is open daily from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.</p> <p>The park address is 6125 Boydton Plank Road, North Dinwiddie, VA 23803, 804-861-2408.</p> <p>Their website is:  <a href="http://www.pamplinpark.org">www.pamplinpark.org</a></p>
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### Web Resources

URL	Name and description
<a href="https://www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war/battles/five-forks">https://www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war/battles/five-forks</a>	The American Battlefield Trust provides maps, articles, and videos pertaining to Five Forks and other battles and sites around Petersburg.
<a href="http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Five_Forks_Battle_of">www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Five_Forks_Battle_of</a>	This is the Encyclopedia of Virginia’s entry on the Battle of Forks.
<a href="http://www.beyondthecrater.com/resources/bat-sum/petersburg-siege-sum/ninth-offensive-summaries/the-battle-of-five-forks-april-1-1865/">www.beyondthecrater.com/resources/bat-sum/petersburg-siege-sum/ninth-offensive-summaries/the-battle-of-five-forks-april-1-1865/</a>	This is an article and bibliography on the battle that is part of an impressive website exclusively devoted to the study of the full Petersburg campaign.

### Other Sources

### Scholars

Name	Email
Edward Alexander	<a href="mailto:ealexander1865@gmail.com">ealexander1865@gmail.com</a>

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## Topic Précis

The Battle of Five Forks marked the largest single engagement in the last offensive (March 29 to April 2, 1865) of the Petersburg campaign. At the start of the offensive Grant's forces numbered around 120,000 while Lee had around 50,000 men. Continuing his strategy of trying to outflank Lee's entrenched troops in the Richmond-Petersburg lines, Grant launched the Army of the Potomac into motion on the morning of March 29, 1865. Learning of the new threat to his right flank, Lee began to gather those reserves he could spare, sending troops to oppose the Federal advance, and the fighting started almost immediately with a small union victory at the Battle of Lewis Farm. In bad weather, the Confederates gathered in a position south of the South Side Railroad, the last supply line into Petersburg at a crossroads called Five Forks and Union forces advanced northwards towards them. Cavalry skirmishing took place on March 30 while the Confederate forces went into position at Five Forks. On March 31 Pickett and Fitzhugh Lee advanced with a combined force of infantry and cavalry against the Federal forces and fought at the Battle of Dinwiddie Court House. The Confederates pushed the federal forces back until they were able to form and hold the line just north of the town, a tactical victory for the Confederates. At the same time as Pickett and Fitzhugh Lee fought this action a separate Confederate force under Brigadier General Samuel McGowan left the entrenchments defending Petersburg and attacked Union forces four miles northeast of the action at Dinwiddie Court House. In the Battle of White Oak Road three Confederate brigades routed two Union divisions but were unable to follow up this success because of a swollen river blocked organized pursuit. McGowan withdrew to his starting position and then, pressed by Federal reinforcements withdrew all the way back to the Confederate entrenchments from which they had started. Despite their initial setback in the morning, the Federals success on the White Oak Road that evening now isolated Pickett and Fitzhugh Lee's divisions to the south above Dinwiddie Court House. Cut off from support and direct communications, Pickett decided to withdraw early the next morning. On the morning of April 1 Pickett's men lined the White Oak Road behind hastily constructed fortifications, along a front of nearly two miles, centered on crossroads at Five Forks. Cavalry under Colonel Thomas Munford protected their left flank which cavalry under Fitzhugh Lee protected the right. The General Sheridan, commanding the Union force, devised a plan of battle called Union cavalry to attack on the Confederate right and center to hold those forces in place while General Gouverneur Warren's V Corps attacked the Confederate left. As the attack commenced Colonel Munford sent couriers to alert Pickett and Fitzhugh Lee. They could not be found. They were in fact having lunch with General Thomas Rosser, under the impression that the Union forces were not advancing. The three generals dined for several hours on shad, a local seasonal fish. They had failed to inform anyone of their location and the shad bake resulted in a lack of coordination between the various infantry, cavalry, and artillery commands which doomed any chance of a successful repulse of the gathering Union force. Fitzhugh Lee afterward claimed that an acoustic shadow prevented them from hearing the battle. Only Rosser publicly admitted to their feast. Warren's V

Corps attacked around 4:00 p.m. Missing their mark which was the left flank of the Confederate forces, Warren's men swept entirely around the Confederates taking up a position in their rear and the Confederate forces began to retreat. General George Custer commanding the Union cavalry on the Confederate right attempted to sweep around their flank as well to trap the retreating Confederates but was stopped by Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry. This allowed those who fled from Five Forks—Pickett among them—to use a narrow road leading northwest across the stream as the only available avenue to complete their escape. The battle ended with the Union forces controlling all the roads radiating from Five Forks having suffered 800 casualties to the Confederate 3,000, the majority of whom were captured. Capture of the junction itself was not the purpose of Grant's offensive. The South Side Railroad remained in Confederate hands at nightfall and Sheridan planned to strike for it the next day. Sheridan relieved Warren of command for acting too slowly. Warren resigned his commission and sought vindication. He was exonerated by a court of enquiry in 1882, unfortunately a few months after his death. On April 2 repeated attacks by Union forces destroyed A.P. Hill's Corps (Hill was killed) and cut all roads west and south out of Petersburg and captured sections of the South Side Railroad. With this defeat Lee withdrew the Petersburg garrison across the Appomattox River the night of April 2 and planned to link with the Richmond Garrison at Amelia Courthouse. Confederate authorities set about destroying items of military value and the fires meant to prevent tobacco, cotton, and ordnance from falling into Federal hands engulfed larger portions of Richmond's financial and manufacturing districts. On April 3 Federal forces entered Richmond and Petersburg. Union forces, spearheaded by the Five Forks victors, pursued the retreating Confederates until April 9 when, surrounded on three sides, Lee surrendered his army to Grant at Appomattox.

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