

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Petersburg Campaign, June 15, 1864-April 3, 1865

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The campaign for Petersburg, Virginia during the Civil War's final year spanned 292 days. Often identified as a "siege," the contest for Petersburg is better understood as a relentless series of offensives orchestrated by Union forces designed to either break directly into Petersburg or sever the city's communications. Unlike a true siege, the Confederates were never completely surrounded or isolated from their supplies. The 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign, the efforts to capture Wilmington, North Carolina in 1864 and 1865, and most directly, the complex combat east of Richmond and north of the James River all should be understood as components of the Petersburg Campaign.

The armies in Virginia focused on Petersburg during the last year of the war because of the city's transportation assets. Located at the head of navigation along the Appomattox River some twenty-three miles south of the Confederate capital at Richmond, Petersburg had been established more than two hundred years before Virginia seceded from the Union. The city still functioned as a port in 1861 but railroads dominated its transportation infrastructure. Five lines converged at Petersburg, including the Petersburg (and Weldon) Railroad leading south through North Carolina to the port of Wilmington and the South Side Railroad connecting Petersburg with Lynchburg 124 miles to the west, where other lines connected to the Shenandoah Valley and Tennessee. Petersburg held the key to Richmond's survival: capture Petersburg and Richmond could not be held.

President James Madison dubbed Petersburg the "Cockade City" during the War of 1812. The town boasted a population of more than 18,200 in 1860 making it the second largest city in Virginia. When the Old Dominion seceded in April 1861, Petersburg became the seventh-largest city in the entire Confederacy. A larger percentage of its free population was African American than in any other Southern metropolis.

There was no significant military action at Petersburg through the first three years of the war, although between the summers of 1862 and 1863 the Confederates constructed an elaborate defensive line encircling the city on the east, south, and west.

These works were called the Dimmock Line, after the engineer officer who superintended their construction, and they consisted of fifty-five artillery batteries and connecting infantry works. On May 5, 1864 a large Union army commanded by Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler landed at Bermuda Hundred, less than ten miles northeast of Petersburg. Outnumbered Confederate forces eventually contained Butler's offensive but the Federals retained a firm grasp on the James River on the Bermuda Hundred peninsula and near the confluence of the James and Appomattox rivers at City Point, a scant eight miles downstream from Petersburg.

An even larger threat emerged in mid-June 1864 when the Army of the Potomac under Major General George Gordon Meade executed a secret crossing of the James well below City Point. Union General-in-Chief, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, planned to use Butler's and Meade's armies to converge on Petersburg and capture the important city before the Army of Northern Virginia under General Robert E. Lee could shift south from its Richmond defenses.

Grant landed his blow on the evening of June 15. Butler's brigades captured nearly three miles of the Dimmock Line east of town, including several batteries conquered by African American troops. Darkness and uncertainty caused the blue-clad commanders to defer exploiting their success until the next morning. By then, the local Confederate commander, General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, had rushed reinforcements from his works opposite Butler's main body at Bermuda Hundred and created a new line of defense.

For the next three days Grant tested Beauregard's mettle with a series of determined if uncoordinated frontal assaults. By the evening of June 17 Beauregard, outnumbered six-to-one, retreated to a third defensive perimeter closer to Petersburg and informed General Lee that unless he was reinforced, he would be compelled to abandon Petersburg. Until then, Beauregard's messages to Lee had lacked specificity, leaving Lee uncertain as to the location of Grant's various army corps. But once he learned definitively that the entire Union army had gathered opposite Petersburg, Lee rushed to Beauregard's rescue. By the time the Federals launched their next series of attacks on June 18, Lee's divisions had filed into place and the First Petersburg Offensive ended with the city still in Confederate hands.

Undaunted, Grant ordered a Second Offensive to commence the next week. This time he would send two of his army corps around Lee's far right flank to anchor on the Appomattox River astride the railroads leading south and west. He also sent a large body of cavalry to raid the railroads farther out, including the Richmond & Danville Railroad, the one line that fed into Richmond without first passing through Petersburg. These efforts failed, although the cavalry raiders interrupted rail traffic into Petersburg for several weeks and the infantry managed to extend its lines as far west as the Jerusalem Plank Road.

Meade and some of his officers argued that conducting formal siege operations offered the only viable means of conquering Petersburg. Grant agreed—but only for a few days. Both armies dug elaborate lines of earthworks, batteries, forts and communication trenches but very little formal siege engineering, such as that which Grant did at Vicksburg the previous year, took place at Petersburg.

By far the campaign's most interesting excavation belonged to the 48th Pennsylvania Infantry, a unit that included nearly one hundred coal miners and engineers. They belonged to the Union IX Corps, which had gained a position on June 18 in a ravine only a few hundred yards short of a Confederate fort known as Pegram's or Elliott's Salient. One of the miners observed that if they could run a shaft under that fort and fill it with black powder, an explosion would blast a giant hole in the middle of the Confederate defenses. Meade and his engineers had their doubts about this ambitious and unorthodox operation and their limited support of the endeavor matched their tepid enthusiasm.

However, the Pennsylvanians managed to construct a tunnel 517 feet long and then dig lateral galleries in which they placed some eight thousand pounds of black powder. By July 30 the mine was ready. General Grant had conducted an offensive operation north of the James that failed to achieve any military objectives except to draw all but about eighteen thousand Confederates to that side of the river. The stage had thus been set for a massive Union attack to follow the mine explosion, resulting in the capture of Petersburg against a depleted Southern defense.

The powder ignited at 4:44 a.m. and created an enormous crater where Pegram's Salient had stood. More than three hundred Confederates died from the blast and a gap in Lee's line about five hundred yards wide yawned invitingly to the waiting Yankees. However, Northern commanders had issued a multitude of different orders concerning how to make the attack and none of the subordinate officers knew with any certainty what they were supposed to do. Moreover, at the eleventh hour General Meade had vetoed the plan to use a division of United States Colored Troops to lead the charge, fearing the political fallout should the inexperienced blacks not be up to the job. The Ninth Corps commander, Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside, allowed his white division commanders to draw lots to determine who would lead the assault instead and as it turned out, arguably the worst general in the Union army drew the short straw. Brigadier General James Hewett Ledlie was a heavy drinker and a coward. Instead of directing his troops up to and around the Crater, Ledlie found a safe haven in a bombproof shelter nursing a dose of Dutch courage while his leaderless men stopped in awe to gape at the crater and the chaotic scene left by the explosion. When Confederate artillery fire began to rain down on the crater, the Federals plunged into the hole for protection, squandering the window of opportunity that had beckoned them forward.

Union reinforcements merely added to the confusion. Confederate Major General William Mahone shifted three of his brigades to launch a series of counterattacks that by early in the afternoon had driven the hapless bluecoats back to their own lines, inflicting

nearly four thousand casualties in the process. The black division eventually made its assault and Mahone's men—infuriated by the specter of fighting former slaves—perpetrated atrocities, killing many of their black prisoners before Mahone ordered the slaughter to cease. Grant considered the Battle of the Crater an unprecedented disaster and returned to his strategy of moving gradually west to capture Lee's remaining supply arteries.

In August, September, and October Grant launched his Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Petersburg offensives. He succeeded in capturing the Petersburg (and Weldon) Railroad in August forcing General Lee to offload his North Carolina supplies eighteen miles south of Petersburg and then place them in wagons to go up the Boydton Plank Road into Petersburg. Both armies extended their lines farther west during the autumn. Grant always conducted a twin attack north of the James River to keep pressure on both flanks of Lee's outnumbered men. The Confederates faced odds of between two-to one and three-to-two throughout the campaign and despite Lee's perpetual desire to bring the battle to his enemy, he rarely had the opportunity to become the aggressor.

The re-election of Abraham Lincoln in November 1864 relieved General Grant of the pressure to show progress around Petersburg. Other Union armies had captured Atlanta and tamed the Shenandoah Valley allowing Northern voters to believe that the Union could win the war, despite the bloody stalemate at Petersburg. When cold rains turned the local roads into quagmires, both armies went into miserable winter camps. The surrounding forest disappeared as axmen felled trees to build wooden huts and provide fuel for thousands of camp and cook fires. The Northern soldiers benefited from a new Military Railroad that brought supplies from Union logistical headquarters at City Point right to the front lines. The Confederates suffered more. Food supplies ran short from time to time and even when the Confederates enjoyed a full meal, their fare assumed a dull and routine quality. Civilians in Petersburg suffered as well. Rampant inflation had destroyed their buying power and shortages of everything from firewood to clothing left many families almost destitute.

Grant executed a limited offensive in early February during a break in the weather but not until late March did the campaign's decisive combat commence. General Lee, now general-in-chief of all Confederate armies, realized that with Major General William Tecumseh Sherman marching relentlessly northward through the Carolinas and another Union force under Major General Philip Henry Sheridan poised to join Grant from the Shenandoah Valley, his ability to hold Petersburg and Richmond must eventually come to an end. A small Confederate army in North Carolina under General Joseph Eggleston Johnston attempted to thwart Sherman's progress but if Johnston failed, Lee believed that only by combining his army with Johnston's could the Confederate military remain viable.

In order to pave the way for just such a maneuver, Lee ordered nearly half of his army to coordinate an assault on March 25 against a Union strongpoint east of Petersburg called Fort Stedman. Lee hoped that by capturing Fort Stedman and the adjacent Union

line, he would compel Grant to loosen his ever tightening grip on Lee's remaining supply routes. Facing a constricted Federal army, Lee might then detach some of his divisions to join Johnston and defeat Sherman, then return with Johnston in tow to attack Grant. Failing that, Lee might use the ground opened by his "Last Grand Offensive" to extricate his entire army and join Johnston somewhere between Greensboro, North Carolina and Danville, Virginia.¹

The Confederate attack in the pre-dawn hours of March 25 managed to capture Fort Stedman and several hundred adjacent yards of the Union line. But Union reserves counterattacked and regained the lost ground, killing, wounding, or capturing nearly four thousand of Lee's irreplaceable veterans. To make matters worse, west of Petersburg two Union corps swept away four miles of the Confederate picket line placing thousands of Federals within close proximity of the main Confederate defenses.

In late March the weather began to moderate, drying the sandy roads and making possible the movement of men and vehicles. Grant's thoughts now turned once again to the offensive, aided by the arrival of Sheridan and his ten thousand seasoned troopers. Grant's final Petersburg initiative would target the Boydton Plank Road and the South Side Railroad, Lee's two remaining Petersburg supply lines. Grant conducted a strategy session with Admiral David Dixon Porter and Generals Sherman and Sheridan at his City Point headquarters and President Lincoln arrived from Washington to be present when Grant finally solved the Petersburg puzzle.

On March 27 three Federal divisions secretly disengaged from their trenches north of the James River and took position on the left of Grant's Petersburg lines. This released the II Corps to join the V Corps and Sheridan's cavalry in executing a huge flank attack that began on March 29. Sheridan quickly captured Dinwiddie Court House on the Boydton Plank Road and a V Corps force vanquished a Confederate division at the Lewis Farm, breaking the Plank Road in a second spot.

Lee, now realizing that the massive Union offensive he anticipated had begun at last, called on all of his cavalry and his only reserve division—Major General George Edward Pickett's—to take position below the South Side Railroad at an intersection called Five Forks. In combination with three infantry brigades that he had placed on the extreme right of his army along White Oak Road, Lee hoped to drive back the Federals before they could reach the South Side Railroad and isolate him from his communications.

On March 31 two Confederate attacks achieved unlikely, if temporary, successes. Along White Oak Road a gray-clad assault drove two V Corps divisions from the field before a counterattack led by Brigadier General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain regained the lost ground. To the southwest near Dinwiddie Court House, Pickett and the cavalry

¹ A. Wilson Greene, *The Final Battles of the Petersburg Campaign* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 108.

likewise scattered two of Sheridan's divisions before Union reserves under Brigadier General George Armstrong Custer stabilized the battlefield. It had been a close call but at the end of the day the Federals had averted a disaster and inserted themselves behind Pickett and between him and the rest of the Confederate army. Lee, at last, had been stretched too thinly to cover his entire front with an unbroken defense.

On April 1 Sheridan exploited this situation by attacking Pickett at Five Forks, where the Confederates had retreated during the night and established a thin line of trenches protecting the direct route to the South Side Railroad. Major General Gouverneur Kemble Warren, commander of the V Corps, became temporarily if understandably confused about the location of Pickett's left flank and by the time he corrected his error, Sheridan had sacked him. Warren's mistake had little impact on the battle's outcome as half of Pickett's force became casualties, mostly prisoners of war. The Confederate survivors fled to the northwest, opening the road to the tracks beyond.

Grant now saw his chance. He had avoided ordering a frontal attack ever since the fiasco at The Crater. The victory at Five Forks, however, convinced Grant that Lee would detach troops to repair the damage inflicted by Sheridan and thus fatally weaken his lines elsewhere. If the Federals attacked simultaneously at dawn on April 2, they were sure to find the vulnerable spots and pierce Lee's previously unassailable fortifications.

Before dawn on April 2 the Union offensive began. About six miles southwest of Petersburg along a stretch of Confederate works defended by ten North Carolina and Georgia regiments buttressed by twenty cannons, the Union VI Corps did break through. The local Southern commander, Lieutenant General Ambrose Powell Hill, rode out from his headquarters to investigate the crisis and two VI Corps men spotted him. Hill ordered them to drop their guns but both Yankees fired. Corporal John Mauck's aim was true and Hill fell dead, one of the highest-ranking Confederate officers to be killed in battle during the entire Civil War.

General Lee learned of the Breakthrough and informed Richmond that he would attempt to hold Petersburg until dark could shield his withdrawal. He advised the Confederate government to evacuate its capital immediately. By then the VI Corps had swept up the rest of Hill's defenders and now, joined by troops from the Army of the James, turned back toward Petersburg. The VI Corps routed Lee out of his headquarters while the XXIV Corps of the Army of the James attacked two small outposts called Fort Gregg and Fort Whitworth. Outnumbered eight thousand to five hundred, the Confederates managed to hold the two forts long enough for reinforcements to arrive and man the innermost Confederate line. Every Rebel in Fort Gregg became a casualty in what became known as the Confederate Alamo.

The South Side Railroad fell at Sutherland Station that afternoon and Union attacks south of Petersburg gained a partial success. But Lee's intrepid defenders on April 2 managed to persevere until nightfall. After dark Lee quietly evacuated his

Petersburg lines, crossing the Appomattox River and heading west, hoping to rendezvous with General Johnston. Instead, of course, he would surrender to General Grant at Appomattox Court House one week later.

Union troops occupied Petersburg on April 3. The African Americans in town greeted the Federals as liberators but the white population remained in their homes behind shuttered windows. While fires did consume a few buildings, the scene in Petersburg proved much less destructive than in Richmond, where looting and flames destroyed much of the business district.

The Petersburg Campaign claimed some seventy-thousand casualties—forty-two thousand Federals and twenty-eight thousand Confederates. The armies built more than thirty-seven miles of opposing trench lines including those in Bermuda Hundred and north of the James River. The entire campaign encompassed more than five hundred square miles. Today, much of that historic land remains to be explored in Petersburg National Battlefield, Pamplin Historical Park, and lands protected by the Civil War Trust.
