

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of Gaines's Mill

By **Brian K. Burton**

Confederate Major General Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson walked the battlefield of Gaines’s Mill the morning of June 28, 1862. As Jackson surveyed the ground over which men from Brigadier General John Bell Hood’s brigade had charged the evening before, he became more and more impressed with the effort and results. Finally he said, “The men who carried this position were soldiers indeed!”¹

Many soldiers fought at Gaines’s Mill, one of the most ferocious of the war and the key battle in the Seven Days, the series of battles fought near the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia in late June and early July, 1862. That can be seen from the situation on the morning of June 27. Four of General Robert E. Lee’s six Army of Northern Virginia commands—26 of his 35 brigades—were north of the Chickahominy River, facing one corps of the five in Major General George Brinton McClellan’s Army of the Potomac—nine of 32 Union brigades. On the south bank of the river the situation was almost exactly reversed: 23 Union brigades matched up with nine Rebel brigades. By going on the offensive north of the river, Lee could threaten McClellan’s supply line from White House Landing on the Pamunkey River; by attacking south of the river McClellan could threaten Richmond.

McClellan, convinced that the Confederates outnumbered him substantially, believed his only choice to achieve victory was a siege using heavy artillery transported and supported by the railroad from White House Landing, on the Pamunkey River, to Savage’s Station on the south side of the Chickahominy. His view of the relative strength of the two armies was such that even with the substantial Rebel force he knew to be north of the river, he thought he was outnumbered or at best even south of the river. Such odds precluded an attack, and if his supply line was going to be cut, he would have to temporarily abandon the strategic offensive to establish a new one—on the James River, south of his position, this time. That would mean the army would have to retreat. Brigadier General Fitz John Porter’s V Corps would have to hold off Lee’s hordes north of the river for another day while McClellan made ready to march the rest of the army south.

For his part, Lee was convinced he could not win a siege against McClellan’s army and artillery. So he needed to seize the initiative and push the Army of the Potomac from

¹ John Bell Hood, *Advance and Retreat: Personal Experiences in the United States and Confederate Armies* (New Orleans: Hood Orphan Memorial Fund by G. T. Beauregard, 1880), 28.

its forward position, with at best even numbers. The way to do that was to concentrate force on one flank, hoping that the combination of movement and surprise would keep McClellan from attacking the Army of Northern Virginia's smaller force south of the river. The only flank that could be approached reasonably was the north one, with Porter's corps separated by the river from the rest of the army. Bringing Jackson down from the Shenandoah Valley, and concentrating most of the rest of his army with Jackson, might be enough to flank Porter. If Lee could force Porter to retreat, he could cut McClellan's supply line, forcing him out of his positions and into the open, where he would be vulnerable. Because Jackson was late getting to a flanking position, Lee's first attempt at this failed at Mechanicsville on June 26. But he got a second chance on June 27.

Lee's plan to take advantage of that opportunity was fairly simple. It was developed after he found that Porter, following McClellan's orders, had given up his strong defensive position behind Beaver Dam Creek, east of Mechanicsville. Jackson's men, reinforced by Major General Daniel Harvey Hill's division, would take a roundabout route to Old Cold Harbor, about five miles east of Mechanicsville. Major Generals Ambrose Powell Hill and James Longstreet would follow the direct road from Mechanicsville to Old Cold Harbor. Lee expected that Longstreet and A. P. Hill would find Porter poised behind Powhite Creek, a small stream about three miles east of Beaver Dam Creek on which Dr. William Gaines had built a mill and a dam forming a pond. Jackson at Old Cold Harbor would flank this position, forcing Porter to retreat, at which point A. P. Hill and Longstreet could pursue in the attempt to defeat and perhaps destroy Porter's force.

There was nothing inherently wrong with Lee's plan, except for one detail. Porter had not stopped at Powhite Creek. Instead, he had moved to Boatswain's Swamp, a meandering watercourse less than a mile east of Powhite Creek. Brigadier General George Webb Morell's division took its place on the left side of the line, where open fields sloped to the swamp, on the other side of which the ground rose sharply to a plateau about 50 feet above the stream. Morell used multiple lines of defense, with artillery on the plateau. On Morell's right Brigadier General George Sykes' division, composed mostly of U.S. Regular Army troops, held a position with fewer natural advantages but that also was more difficult to reach. In reserve was Brigadier General George Archibald McCall's division of Pennsylvania Reserves, which had seen the bulk of the fighting at Mechanicsville.

Porter's position was strong, as strong as any taken thus far in the war. It was compact enough that his corps could cover it; the left flank was protected by swampy ground near the Chickahominy, and the right covered the road from Old Cold Harbor to Grapevine Bridge across the Chickahominy. This was important because Porter's men would need Grapevine Bridge and two others to cross the Chickahominy and rejoin the rest of McClellan's army that night.

Lee didn't know of Boatswain's Swamp; it wasn't on his map of the area, and he apparently did not ask any local resident. But Boatswain's Swamp was the right place to be; it was stronger as a position than Powhite Creek and it was closer to the necessary bridges, making the crossing easier in any event. This lack of knowledge was crucial in

one respect. Jackson, at Old Cold Harbor, would be not on Porter's flank but facing Sykes' division of Regulars.

- A. P. Hill's division, leading the Rebel march, had two possible roles during the advance. If he found the Union force in a prepared position, he needed to fix that force in place until Jackson could reach a flanking position. If he found the Northerners retreating, on the other hand, he needed to pursue them to try to engage and destroy them. Hill first found a few Union pickets at Powhite Creek; this was the second scenario, and he brushed them aside with ease. However, that ease was Lee's first indication that all was not well. The second came at the sight of the real Union position. Here was Hill's first scenario, and he immediately launched an attack to fix the enemy in place.

Hill's leading brigade was commanded by Brigadier General Maxcy Gregg, who sent his South Carolinians against Colonel Gouverneur Kemble Warren's two-regiment brigade of New Yorkers to the east of a road from the New Cold Harbor settlement past the McGehee house near the road from Old Cold Harbor to Grapevine Bridge. A Union officer remembered, "Hell itself seemed to break loose on our division."² In an action that would be repeated throughout the afternoon, Gregg and Warren exchanged charge and counter-charge across the swamp. In succession, as they came to the field, the rest of Hill's division joined the fight. Brigadier General Lawrence O'Bryan Branch's North Carolina troops moved to Gregg's right, supported by Brigadier General William Dorsey Pender's men. Brigadier General Joseph Reid Anderson attacked on Branch's right against elements of Morell's division. Brigadier General James Jay Archer moved to Anderson's right and fought men from Brigadier General John Henry Martindale's brigade. Brigadier General Charles William Field's brigade supported Anderson, then Archer.

Hill's attack took the good part of the afternoon to play out, and in a tactical sense it was a costly failure. Taking around 13,000 men into the fight, Hill probably lost 2,000 men killed and wounded. But in a strategic sense Hill's attack put pressure on Porter's men that never really stopped and ensured that Porter would not be able to shift troops easily from more advantageous ground to any other sectors.

One of those sectors would be confronted by Stonewall Jackson's men, but only after a wrong turn cost them time. D. H. Hill, joining Jackson's column from another road, took the lead because of the wrong turn and reached Old Cold Harbor in good time. Reconnoitering beyond that crossroads, Hill found the Yankees in line facing him and not their flank, as Lee had thought. Jackson pulled Hill's troops back to take stock of the unexpected situation. Meanwhile, Major General Richard Stoddert Ewell's division marched to Hill's right, in response to orders from Jackson, who had heard from Lee. Again, the brigades wound up advancing and attacking as individual units from left to right. Brigadier General Arnold Elzey's men charged some of Sykes' Regulars, that action setting into a firefight. Some of Brigadier General Isaac Ridgeway Trimble's brigade moved

² Richard Tylden Auchmuty, *Letters of Richard Tylden Auchmuty* (n.p.: privately printed, n.d.), 69.

through A. P. Hill's left to attack more of Sykes' division, including Warren's men. They got nowhere.

The Louisianans of Colonel Isaac Gurdon Seymour's brigade were even more unfortunate. Moving to Trimble's right into areas that had already seen heavy fighting, they met reinforcements: Elements of McCall's V Corps division and Brigadier General John Newton's brigade of Brigadier Henry Warner Slocum's VI Corps division, sent in response to Porter's request for aid by McClellan. Seymour was killed and his brigade, including the famous Louisiana Tigers, stopped. One Confederate said of the Yankees' position and the obscuring remnant of musket discharges, "We fired only at the smoke of their guns."³

Jackson's two other divisions, commanded by Major General William Henry Chase Whiting and Brigadier General Charles Sidney Winder, were supposed to move to Ewell's right to support A. P. Hill by the same order Ewell received. Whiting, in the lead, was given some confusing directions by Jackson's quartermaster but got his troops moving, eventually moving all the way around A. P. Hill's division and connecting with Longstreet. Winder, with his own brigade and that of Brigadier General Alexander Robert Lawton, got lost and instead of moving to the right moved to the left, toward D. H. Hill.

These movements on the northwest bank of Boatswain's Swamp were paralleled by reinforcements southeast of the swamp. Brigadier General George William Taylor's brigade of Slocum's division joined Newton in the center of Porter's line, and Colonel Joseph Bartlett's brigade of the same division reinforced Sykes' line. The pieces were in place, and the battle reached its climax. Although there was no general order from Lee to advance all along the line, the effect of orders given to Jackson and Longstreet, at different times, was the same. Troops from all six Confederate divisions moved toward the swamp and the waiting Union lines, with four divisions of Northerners waiting for them. For the Confederates the whole campaign may have seemed on the line—a defeat might leave Richmond wide open. For the Union, the possibility of being cut off from the rest of the army was very real.

On the Confederate left, D. H. Hill's division, along with Winder's brigade, charged Colonel Robert Buchanan's Regulars and Bartlett's reinforcements. The Confederates' superior force and problems on the flanks eventually forced the Federals to retreat, but not before an epic combat between the 20th North Carolina of Brigadier General Samuel Garland's brigade and the 16th New York of Bartlett's brigade over a section of artillery; that fight cost the two regiments a combined 466 men killed and wounded. One New Yorker said, "The air at this time was too full of lead for standing room."⁴ Lawton, advancing to Winder's right, encountered little opposition and reached flanking positions on both his left and his right, compelling more Northerners to retreat.

Farther west, Trimble was joined by part of Whiting's division, and together they forced back portions of Newton and Taylor's brigades, along with the Pennsylvania

³ Henry E. Handerson, *Yankee in Gray* (Cleveland: Press of Western Reserve University, 1962), 96.

⁴ Cyrus R. Stone Memoir, Stone Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul MN.

Reserves in this area. Two Union regiments—the 4th New Jersey of Taylor's brigade and the 11th Pennsylvania Reserves of Brigadier General George Meade's brigade—were captured essentially whole as the resistance around them collapsed.

In perhaps the most remembered charge of the battle, Brigadier General John Bell Hood, of Whiting's division, took the 4th Texas (his old regiment) and part of the 18th Georgia to the right of the rest of Whiting's men, aiming at a spot across the swamp where the ground seemed a bit more favorable. Without pausing to fire, the Texans and Georgians rushed Martindale's men, who had been fighting without reinforcement all day. They finally could not withstand the force of Hood's charge and that of Brigadier General George Edward Pickett's brigade of Longstreet's division, on Hood's right. Three of Longstreet's other brigades, commanded by Brigadier Generals Cadmus Marcellus Wilcox, Roger Atkinson Pryor, and Winfield Scott Featherston, charged Brigadier General Daniel Adams Butterfield's brigade and forced it to retire.

As the Confederates moved up the slope and onto the plateau toward the Union artillery, a sound heard by very few soldiers in Civil War battles came to their ears—the sound of cavalry charging. Brigadier General Philip St. George Cooke's cavalry reserve was posted near the Union left. When Cooke saw infantry giving way and artillery unprotected, he ordered the 5th U.S. Cavalry up the slope. The Confederates easily repulsed this charge, and controversy ensued after the war regarding the charge's impact on Porter's ability to save his guns (the Union lost 19 guns in the battle).

Just after the failed cavalry charge, the brigades of Brigadier Generals Thomas Francis Meagher and William Henry French, from the Union II Corps, arrived on the field. McClellan had sent them in response to Porter's plea in the afternoon. They helped calm the retreating Yankees and prevented any further Confederate attacks, allowing Porter's and Slocum's men to cross the river during the night.

After the war, one of Lee's staff wrote that many in the army considered Gaines's Mill the most stubbornly fought battle in which they were engaged. The 9th Massachusetts of Griffin's brigade started the day with 60 rounds of ammunition per soldier. In the middle of Porter's position, they fired all their ammunition, scavenged off the killed and wounded, and used all they found. The regiment lost 206 killed and wounded, the most casualties of any Northern regiment. Other Union soldiers could fire their muskets only after ramming the cartridge down the barrel by putting the rammer against a tree and hammering the stock. Several Confederates, including Stonewall Jackson, wrote or said that Gaines's Mill was the loudest battle they had been in.

Casualties reflected it. About 8,700 Confederates were killed and wounded out of 57,000 effectives engaged. About 4,000 Federals were killed and wounded out of about 31,000 effectives actually engaged. Nearly 3,000 more Federals were missing, and no doubt some of those were killed or wounded as well. The four Union divisions engaged each lost at least 20 percent of its effective strength. Longstreet's division equaled that percentage of loss, and A. P. Hill's division suffered nearly as much. Compared to other one-day battles, only at Antietam and Fredericksburg (during both of which it was on the

offensive) did the Army of the Potomac suffer more casualties than at Gaines's Mill. For the Confederates it was even worse: only at Antietam as a one-day battle did they suffer more casualties, and likely only at Gettysburg and Chickamauga did they incur more casualties in any single day of the war.

Gaines's Mill is also one of those rare battles in which it is hard to criticize anyone who fought in it. The strongest critiques involve the two army commanders. Lee's plan undermined by his lack of knowledge of Boatswain's Swamp, and his seeming lack of effort to find out more about the nature of the land over which he was marching was the root cause of the battle's being fought as it was instead of as he envisioned. McClellan, beset by his corps commanders' reports of enemy activity and his own view of the armies' relative strengths, nonetheless sent reinforcements to Porter when asked, but they weren't strong or early enough to prevent defeat.

Strategically the battle wound up costing the Union little and gaining the Confederacy little. Porter was able to hold off Lee long enough so that McClellan could start to change his base, and he was able to cross the Chickahominy that night with what was left of his corps. Lee gained access to the Northern supply line, but after it was no longer the supply line. He would capture White House Landing and gain the stores the Yankees had not managed to destroy, but that was it. McClellan had decided to retreat on June 26. So while Gaines's Mill was Lee's first victory with the Army of Northern Virginia, it was costly and bereft of real results.

That night, George McClellan penned one of the most notorious telegrams of the war to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. After making several patently false statements about the fighting and his inferiority in force, he wrote the last two sentences, perhaps emotionally distraught and expecting to be relieved of his command as a result:

“If I save this army now, I tell you plainly that I owe no thanks to you or to any other persons in Washington.

“You have done your best to sacrifice this army.”⁵

⁵ United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 9, part 1, p. 61. These two sentences were deleted at the telegraph office before Stanton received the telegram.