

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

On the Road to Appomattox, March 29 to April 9, 1865

By **Chris Calkins**, Sailor's Creek Battlefield Historical State Park

“It will become a siege and then it will be a mere question of time.” Such were the words of General Robert E. Lee in June, 1864, as he prophesied about what was to become the final year of the conflict in Virginia. Pinned down for nine and a half months with his army protecting both Richmond and Petersburg, the time had now come when his men had only two major supply lines left to continue their resistance.¹

As the coming of spring, 1865, showed itself to the men in the trenches surrounding the two Confederate strongholds, they knew the final campaign was about to begin. By now, most of the Southern defenders had given up any hope for an independent nation. Their motivation to carry on the struggle was embodied in their revered general, whose life centered around duty and honor to his country. The last gasp of any real hope for these men had faded away more than four months previous when Lincoln was re-elected as president and declared, from that point on, it would be a fight to the finish. By March, only the Richmond & Danville Railroad was open to the capital city, and the South Side Railroad, coming from Lynchburg, was all that ran into Petersburg. Lee, realizing that the tightening noose would soon strangle him, decided he would have to cut loose from his defensive position, yet protect these life lines in the process.

On Saturday, March 25, he allowed his Second Corps commander, Lieutenant General John Brown Gordon, to take the offensive and attack the Federal lines east of Petersburg in the neighborhood of Fort Stedman. Although briefly successful for a short period that morning, a Union counter-thrust quickly recaptured the position and Lee's gamble was all for naught. The Southerners then readied themselves for General Ulysses S. Grant to make the next move as word came in that some of his troops were moving to the west of Petersburg. Their objective could only be the South Side Railroad.

The final week of March brought heavy rains to the Petersburg area. Consequently, rivers, creeks, and rivulets were swollen beyond their banks by the freshets that followed. Leading Grant's offensive were the troops of Major General

¹ Freeman, Douglas Southall, *R.E. Lee: A Biography*. 4 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935, 3:398, Lee to General Jubal A. Early.

Gouverneur Kemble Warren's V Corps and Federal cavalry, newly arrived from the Shenandoah Valley. These horsemen were commanded by General Philip Henry Sheridan who would eventually be placed in overall command of this expedition. Their first objective would be to gain a stronghold on the Boydton Plank Road, using it as a jump-off point to capture the South Side. Warren succeeded in doing this by moving up the Quaker Road on March 29. A Confederate reconnaissance force was forced back into their entrenchments along White Oak Road after a brief fight around the Lewis farmhouse. Simultaneously, Sheridan's troopers pushed on Dinwiddie Court House, from which point they could head northward toward the railroad.

Lee was well aware of Grant's objective and formed a mobile force of infantry under the command of Major General George Edward Pickett, sending him westward to protect the crucial supply line. Pickett would later be joined by grey horsemen under Major General Fitzhugh Lee, the general's nephew. The Virginian of Gettysburg fame moved his men to Five Forks, a crossroads about four miles beyond Lee's entrenched right flank, located at Claiborne and White Oak roads, and held by Lieutenant General Richard Heron Anderson's Fourth Corps (now merely Major General Bushrod Rust Johnson's Division). Finding no enemy at the forks on March 31, Pickett moved south to intercept Sheridan at the Court House. He successfully stopped the Federal cavalry movement a mile north of the county seat village, and nightfall put an end to any further fighting.

To the east, Warren and his men were not quiet this day. Attempting to intercept the White Oak Road between Pickett and Anderson, the V Corps followed an old woods road leading off the Boydton Plank Road in that direction. Before reaching the White Oak Road, elements of Anderson's force moved out of their trenches and attacked, sending the bluecoats scurrying back to a branch of Gravelly Run. Regaining their composure and counterattacking, the Federals were not only able to gain a foothold on the White Oak, but were also capable in sending a force to threaten Pickett's left and rear near Dinwiddie Court House. Seeing the predicament he was now in, the Southern general fell back to his original position of that morning: Five Forks. At this point he received a dispatch from Lee stating- "Hold Five Forks at all hazards. Protect road to Ford's Depot and prevent Union forces from striking the south-side railroad. Regret exceedingly your forced withdrawal, and your inability to hold the advantage you had gained."²

Saturday, April 1, found Pickett's men building slight breastworks parallel to and along the White Oak Road, running a mile east and west from the forks. All seemed quiet in their front, so some of the high command (Pickett, Fitz Lee and others) rode to the rear and partook in a shad planking, a sort of fish bake. With the area being so heavily timbered, the men could not see or hear what was transpiring before them except

² Freeman. *R.E. Lee*. 4:36, LaSalle Corbell Pickett. *Pickett and His Men*. Atlanta: Foote and Davies, 1899, 386.

for short distances. In reality, Sheridan was placing his troopers in their front, while moving Warren into position to attack their left flank. Finally, around 4:00 p.m., the crash of musketry was heard as blue infantry appeared in their front. Resistance was heavy but eventually gave way as the Confederates fell back on the forks. Simultaneous with this, Major General George Armstrong Custer's cavalry rode down upon their right flank. By the time Pickett would reach his men, all was lost. It was every command for themselves. There were brief pockets of resistance here and there but nothing could stop Sheridan's momentum. By dark, the road to the South Side was open. That night, upon receiving news of this victory, Grant sent orders for an all-out assault the next day at chosen points along the Petersburg lines.

Major General Horatio Gouverneur Wright's VI Corps would be one to lead Sunday morning off by assaulting and breaking through Confederate lines southwest of the city protecting the Boydton Plank Road. Southeast of Petersburg, Major General John Grubb Parke's IX Corps attacked along the Jerusalem Plank Road and captured the outer works but could not puncture the inner. Back on Wright's front, Confederate Third Corps commander, Lieutenant General Ambrose Powell Hill, rode to rally his men only to be killed in a confrontation with two Federal soldiers. Following Wright's breakthrough later that day came Major General Edward Otho Cresap Ord's Army of the James, who attacked two outpost forts protecting Petersburg's west side: Forts Gregg and Whitworth. After the Homeric defense by a small group of Southerners in these two bastions, during which most were either killed, wounded or captured, nightfall brought an end to any further major fighting. Eight miles to the west, the day closed with a symbolic stand by a group of Confederates at Sutherland Station. Holding off three attacks, they finally yielded their position and turned the South Side Railroad over to the Northern infantry. The events of this day left Lee with no alternative: both Richmond and Petersburg must be evacuated that night.

By 8:00 p.m. on the evening of April 2, 1865, the dejected troops of General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia began crossing the Appomattox River from Petersburg over four different bridges. As the following wagons rumbled across, the various elements moved into Chesterfield County and Lee's evacuation plans were in implementation. Those troops leaving the Petersburg lines under lieutenant generals James Longstreet (First-Third Corps which combined with A.P. Hill's Corps after his death on April 2nd) and John B. Gordon (Second Corps), would follow routes along the River, Hickory and Woodpecker roads, eventually to reach Amelia Court House on the Richmond & Danville Railroad. Segments of the Confederate army, those of Major General William Mahone, would leave from their positions along the Howlett Line and others from the defenses surrounding Richmond. Lee had hoped to rendezvous his troops at Amelia, thirty some miles to the west, where he had expected supplies to be waiting for his men. Upon issuing the rations to the army, he planned to follow the rail line to Danville (104 miles) and hopefully link up with the Army of Tennessee under General Joseph Eggleston Johnston in North Carolina. Leaving the Richmond-Petersburg front were approximately 58,000 Confederate forces who were pursued by 76,000 soldiers in the Federal army.

Departing the capital city, Richmond, were troops led by Lieutenant General Richard Stoddert Ewell, followed by Naval and Marine forces from Drewry's Bluff. South of the Appomattox River, and moving through Dinwiddie County, were remnants from the fighting along White Oak Road and the Five Forks area under generals Fitzhugh Lee and Richard Anderson who now commanded the forces of generals George Pickett and Bushrod Johnson. This element of Lee's army would be pursued by the Federal forces of General Philip Sheridan's cavalry and Major General George Gordon Meade's Army of the Potomac. General Ulysses S. Grant, along with General E.O.C. Ord's Army of the James, would basically march parallel to the South Side Railroad as they moved in the direction of Burkeville Junction (the intersection of Richmond & Danville and South Side Railroads) to cut off Lee's advance in that direction.

The day of April 3 , besides having the Union Army occupy both Richmond and Petersburg, would see action between the retreating force and pursuing army at Namozine Church in Amelia County. This would become a running fight between both Northern and Southern cavalry forces with three Corps (V, II, and VI) of the Army of the Potomac right behind. The other, the IX, followed the Army of the James and worked diligently in realigning the gauge of the South Side to accommodate the rolling stock of Grant's Military Railroad. Ord's forces were composed of the XXIV Corps, along with parts of the XXV Corps made up of United States Colored Troops.

As the Confederate army continued its trek toward Amelia Court House on April 4, further rear guard action took place at Deep Creek, Tabernacle Church and Beaverpond Creek. While Lee's forces trudged into the county seat village, members were sent down to the rail station to look for the expected rations...these did not materialize. As more and more of the Army of Northern Virginia piled into Amelia Court House, Lee made the fateful decision to appeal to the local citizens for any surplus food items they had, thus expending precious time in waiting around the county seat. Up to this point he had had a one-day's lead on Grant's army but now would lose it. In his official report of the campaign Lee noted "This delay was fatal and could not be retrieved."³

Realizing that Lee was concentrating his force at Amelia, fast riding Union cavalry and accompanying infantry swung around to the south of the town and headed for the next station on the Richmond & Danville, known as Jetersville. Located south and west of Amelia Court House and across Lee's line of march, Federal troops began entrenching there to thwart any advance made by the Confederates. Lee, receiving this distressful news, decided to make a night march around the dug in Union army at Jetersville, and would now head for Farmville where he was informed that 80,000 rations

³ 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 46, part 2, p.1265 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 46, pt. 2., 1265).

awaited him there. Before implementing this action that evening, the general learned that a wagon train intended for his son's soldiers, those of General George Washington Custis Lee, had been pounced upon by Federal cavalry that day and was destroyed near Painesville. In a following running fight, both forces would clash at nearby Amelia Springs until nightfall.

The morning of April 6 dawned in the camp of Humphreys' II Corps when word arrived that the tail end of Lee's column was moving past the Amelia Springs resort north of Jetersville and along a ridge road running parallel to Flat Creek. Federal skirmishers were dispatched in pursuit and now the II Corps was in motion. They would eventually be following the Confederate column which was strung out thus: Longstreet, Anderson, Ewell, the main wagon train, and Gordon acting as rear guard. Continual fighting would take place in what can be termed a running gun battle. Every so often Gordon's men would make a stand such as that at the hamlet of Deatonsville. Eventually the armies would come to the crossing of Little Sailor's Creek where a final rear guard action would take place that evening.

Further to the south, at Burkeville Junction, Ord's Army of the James moved along the South Side Railroad. Determining that Lee's column was heading toward Farmville, and that the nearby High Bridge might be used to cross over the Appomattox River, the general dispatched two infantry regiments (54th Pennsylvania and 123rd Ohio) along with three companies of the 4th Massachusetts Cavalry to destroy it. Approaching the 126 foot high and 2,400 foot long railroad structure from the south, the "bridge burners" were soon pounced upon by members of Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry. In desperate hand-to-hand fighting, the horse soldiers suffered heavy casualties in the senior ranks on both sides. The Federal losses were General Theodore Read, killed, and Colonel Francis Washburn, mortally wounded. The Southern forces lost General James Dearing mortally wounded (the last Confederate general to die in the war) along with majors John Knott and James Thomson, and Colonel Reuben Boston, all killed. The High Bridge was saved from destruction, at least for the time being.

Back at Sailor's Creek, Sheridan's three cavalry divisions led by major generals George Custer, Thomas Casimer Devin and George Crook, took turns in attacking Lee's wagon train along his line of march. Carrying out hit-and-run tactics at major crossroads, the Union cavalry was able to cause a gap in the Confederate column and cut off those elements under Anderson and Ewell along Little Sailor's Creek. To alleviate some of the pressure behind Ewell, the main wagon train and Gordon would turn onto another roadway, the Jamestown Road that crossed Sailor's Creek two miles further north. It was now near 5:00 p.m. and the Battles of Sailor's Creek were about to begin.

Sailor's Creek would become three separate engagements, all fought simultaneously and spread out about one to two miles apart from each other. Ewell's Corps would be assaulted by Horatio Wright's VI Corps at the Hillsman farm and along Little Sailor's Creek. Anderson, with Pickett and Johnson, would make their stand a mile further beyond at Marshall's Crossroads. They would be attacked by Union cavalry

commanded by Major General Wesley Merritt. At the confluence of Big and Little Sailor's Creek, known locally as the Double Bridges, Gordon, protecting the wagons, faced off against Humphreys at the Lockett farm. Nightfall would bring about an end to the fighting at the creek with a terrific loss for Lee's Army of Northern Virginia.

The toll was 7,700 Southerners who were killed, wounded or captured. The general officers taken prisoner were- Richard Ewell, Custis Lee, Seth Maxwell Barton, Joseph Brevard Kershaw, James Phillip Simms, Dudley McIver Dubose, Eppa Hunton II, and Montgomery Dent Corse. Federal estimates for casualties amounted to 1,180 men of which 170 were killed. The day closed with Ord's men skirmishing with Longstreet at Rice's Depot on the South Side Railroad.

With the Federal army now on his heels, Lee decided to make another night march as his men moved toward and into nearby Farmville. Some would cross the Appomattox on the High Bridge, while others on a wagon bridge below. Gordon's Corps would then follow the railroad into Farmville, while another contingent, led by Mahone, marched directly to the Cumberland Court House Road via the Jamestown Road. South of the river others would follow the direct road into Farmville while skirmishing at the Sandy and Bush river crossings. Lead elements of Longstreet's Corps reached Farmville where they found the waiting rations at the train station. Distribution began among the hungry Confederate soldiers but soon Federal cavalry advanced upon Farmville and the trains were closed up and sent westward to Pamplin's Depot. Lee then ordered his troops to cross the Appomattox River north into Cumberland County with instructions to burn all bridges behind them including High Bridge and the lower wagon bridge, four miles downriver.

Three miles north of the town of Farmville the Army of Northern Virginia began entrenching near Cumberland Church to protect their wagon train as it continued its westward movement. Constructing trenches in a "fish hook" fashion, Mahone's division held the left flank position while Gordon and Longstreet's men filled in the rest of the defensive line.

The threat against this line soon came in the form of Humphreys II Corps. Earlier that morning, the Federals reached High Bridge as the Confederates began burning a few of the western spans. Extinguishing the fire on the lower wagon bridge over the Appomattox River, the Northern soldiers were able to make a passage and then head the five miles to Cumberland Church. Finding the Confederates entrenched there, preparations were made to assault the position held by Mahone. Unable to turn the flank, nightfall brought an end to the fighting as Lee's men began the third night march in a row. Their destination was Appomattox Station, thirty-eight miles away where more supply trains awaited them. That night General Grant was now in Farmville and from his headquarters in a local hotel he sent his first dispatch to Lee concerning the possibility of surrender. Upon receiving and reading the message the Confederate commander handed it to Longstreet who remarked "Not yet." On the other hand, President Lincoln, at City Point, received a message from Grant who informed him that Sheridan sent

correspondence that “If the thing is pressed I think that Lee will surrender.” Lincoln responded “Let the thing be pressed.”⁴

By following the various routes to Appomattox Station via Appomattox Court House, Lee’s men had a march of some eight miles further than had they stayed south of the river and paralleled the South Side Railroad. This left that route open to the Union army of only thirty miles to the station. To pressure the Confederate line of march, both the II and VI Corps followed behind Lee’s troops while the rest of the Federal army stayed south of the river on the shorter road. Their line of march was Sheridan’s cavalry, Ord’s Army of the James, and the rear being brought up by Griffin’s V Corps.

Throughout the day of April 8, both armies tramped along in their race to Appomattox Station and the supply trains waiting for them there. Custer’s troopers, in the lead, received information about the location of these trains and set off to capture them before Lee’s troops could get there. Leading the Confederate line of march this day was the surplus wagon and artillery train under General Reuben Lindsay Walker. After passing through Appomattox Court House his men went into camp about a mile away from the station.

As the armies moved along this day pretty much unmolested, a series of messages were passed between Grant and Lee. In one concerning the possibility of surrender Grant received a message from Lee asking what terms would be offered. This provoked a series of correspondence between the two until a face-to-face meeting was decided upon the next day.

Custer’s cavalry reached the four supply trains at Appomattox Station first that evening and captured them without a major incident. Seeing Walker’s artillery going into position, the Union troopers made a series of attacks on their camp, eventually scattering the Confederates and capturing twenty-five cannon. This engagement now placed elements of the Federal army across the path Lee had intended follow in his march toward Danville.

Lee, now setting up his headquarters near Appomattox Court House, heard the fighting three miles away at the station and realized that the Federal army was now in his front. Earlier that day, with his army down to two corps, he switched the line of march so that Gordon now led the army with Longstreet holding the rear. Fitzhugh Lee’s cavalry would support Gordon’s Corps.

Instructing Gordon to prepare for a breakthrough attempt early on the April 9, preparations were made for a morning attack. Assembling his men at the edge of the village and supported on his right flank by cavalry, at dawn the Confederate battle line

⁴ *O.R.*, I, 46, pt. 3, 187; Sheridan, Philip H. *Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan*. 2 vols. New York: Charles L. Webster, 2:187.

moved forward and encountered elements of Crook's cavalry. These were easily pushed back but then, along a far ridge, Union infantry were seen forming in battle line. These proved to be soldiers of Ord's Army of the James. As they began making their forward movement, Gordon's men realized that the armies escape route was sealed off so they began to fall back toward the village. Soon another threat faced them as Griffin's V Corps arrived on the scene and began to move upon Gordon's left flank. Word was sent to Lee of the impending situation and soon white flags of truce began appearing along Gordon's battle line around 11:00 a.m. The fighting ground to a halt as it did likewise in the Confederate rear now being pressed by the Union II and VI Corps. Grant, by employing a giant pincers movement, had forced Lee's army into submission made possible by the situation provided at Farmville. The two generals now set about to meet and discuss the terms of surrender.

Obviously the Appomattox Campaign was the most successful Grant's men ever carried out during the war in that it culminated in the surrender of Lee's army. By the time the Southern commander would reach Appomattox after this six day march, he could only muster close to 30,000 effectives to be paroled. Grant would have in a ten mile ranger about 63,000 men while his casualties for the week would amount to about 8,600 soldiers in bringing about this victory. At the surrender conference in the parlor of Wilmer residence, in the village of Appomattox Court House, the two came to a mutual agreement over terms. By 3:30 that afternoon, it was all over. Grant's magnanimity toward the Confederates would do much to soothe the pain of their misfortune. As soon as it was over, Federal soldiers began going into the Southern bivouacs with extra rations to share with their former enemies. Three days later, after turning in their equipment and being officially paroled, the Southerners were free to go home.

As soon as it was over, Federal soldiers began going into the Southern encampment with extra rations to share with their former enemies. For the next two days, the Confederate cavalry and artillery were disbanded while parole passes were cranked out on printing presses for the men to show they were officially paroled and could go home unmolested. Officers were allowed to keep their swords and side arms, while those who had supplied their own horses for the service were allowed to keep them. Grant even allowed free government transportation home to those parolees who might pass through Union lines. Finally on the third day after Lee and Grant's meeting at the McLean's house, April 12, was set aside for the formal surrender ceremony of the Confederate infantry.

Before he left Appomattox, Grant appointed Brigadier General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain to carry out the details for this event. He would command the First Division, V Corps, and move into the village at day break, while spreading these troops along the main avenue, the Richmond-Lynchburg Stage Road. Chamberlain and his staff would be mounted at the right flank of the line which extended east to west through the Court House. To the north and across the Appomattox River, lay the final Confederate army's camp site. Forming up for the last time as the Army of Northern Virginia, Lee's men, now led by General John Gordon, crossed the shallow river in column as they marched up to the head of Chamberlain's line. The decimated Southern ranks almost shown as a

sea of red, the predominate color of Confederate flags being held so close to each other. When Gordon at the van reached Chamberlain, he heard the clattering of rifles as the Federal soldiers went to “carry arms” in salute to their former enemy. The Southern columns, in seeing this, caught the spirit of the moment and returned the honor.

For the next few hours, the Confederate infantry marched between the two lines of Union soldiers along the Stage Road and, many times they wept unashamedly as they furled for the last time their banners and set weapons in rifle stacks, then marched back to their final bivouac. As Chamberlain later wrote, it was “honor answering honor.” After this event took place, the Southerners were free to go home.⁵

To the Confederate soldiers who saw it to the end, no matter how unsurmountable the situation seemed, their beloved commander left them with these words “You will take with you the satisfaction that proceeds from the consciousness of duty faithfully performed.... With an increasing admiration of your constancy and devotion to your country...I bid you all and affectionate farewell. R.E. Lee.” And so, after four years of bloody conflict, one of the most tragic episode of our nation’s past, the American Civil War, came to an honorable close in Virginia.⁶

⁵ Chamberlain, Joshua Lawrence. *The Passing of the Armies*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1907, 261.

⁶ Freeman. *R.E. Lee*. 4:154-5. This is from General Orders # 9 issued at Appomattox.