

American Civil War Roundtable (NSW Chapter) Inc

Meeting 12 March 2007:

Spotsylvania Courthouse - The clash of Grant and Lee at the Crossroads

Spotsylvania is about halfway between Washington and Richmond in a part of the beautiful rolling Virginian “Piedmont” – about 12 miles west of Fredericksburg. The major battle at **Chancellorsville** (Confederate losses: 13,000 [22%], Union 17,000 [17%]) had taken place nearby on 2 May 1863 – where **Lee**, up against “Fighting Joe” **Hooker**, lost “Stonewall” **Jackson** as a result of being shot by nervous Confederates who mistook the reconnaissance party coming back from the front for Union cavalry. At **Fredericksburg** in December 1863 the Union Army had suffered one of its worst defeats of the war- 13,000 casualties, about the same number as at **Antietam**.

In the summer of 1863, Ulysses S **Grant** had achieved great success in the West – in particular achieving the surrender of **Vicksburg**, on the Mississippi, on the Fourth of July after a long siege. James McPherson describes the capture of Vicksburg as “the most important strategic victory of the war, perhaps meriting Grant’s later assertion that “the fate of the Confederacy was sealed when Vicksburg fell.”

Lincoln had supported Grant through 1862 and ’63 against accusations of reluctance to take Vicksburg and complaints concerning his drinking. In the end, some say his predisposition to alcoholism may have made him a better general. His struggle for self-discipline enabled him to understand and discipline others; the humiliation of prewar failures gave him a quiet humility that was so conspicuously absent from so many generals with a reputation to protect... (McPherson p. 589)

In 1864 Congress revived the rank of lieutenant general (last held by George Washington) and Lincoln had promoted Grant to this rank with the title of general in chief. Grant designated Sherman as his successor in the West and came East to make his headquarters with the **Army of the Potomac** – though **Meade** (the victor at **Gettysburg**) remained in charge of this Army subject to Grant’s strategic orders. Phil Sheridan also came East to take over the Army’s cavalry.

In the spring of 1864, following wintering over in the **Culpeper** area north of the Wilderness Grant launched a multi-pronged grand offensive aimed at destroying Confederate armed forces in Virginia. He sent Gen. Benjamin **Butler** to threaten both Richmond and **Petersburg** from the east, knifing his Army of the James between the two cities after landing at Bermuda Hundred. Another Union force, led by what turned out to be a succession of Union generals, was to drive south through the **Shenandoah Valley**, destroying crops and forcing Robert E. Lee to worry about his western flank.

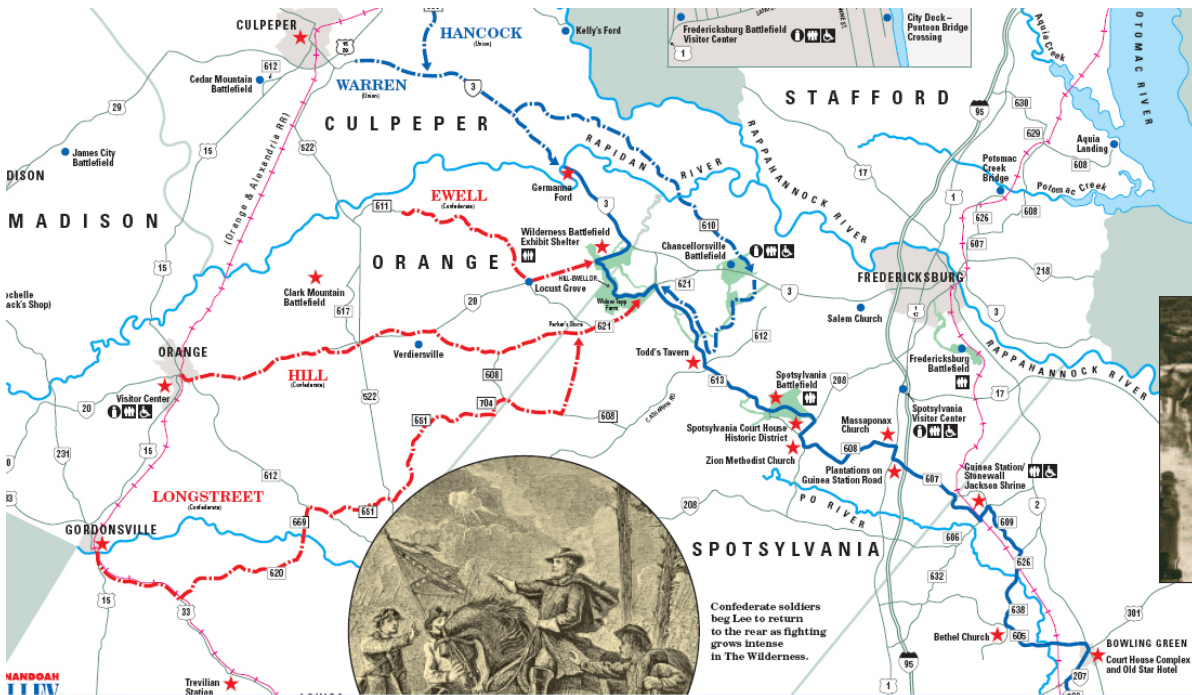


Grant vs. Lee

The main thrust — the one that Grant himself oversaw — was aimed almost directly south from Union camps near Culpeper to the Confederate capital. This march would pit Grant's Army of the Potomac against Lee's famed **Army of Northern Virginia**. While the Bermuda Hundred and Valley campaigns sputtered, Grant's "**Overland Campaign**" kept going. It took six bloody weeks for Grant to slug his way from the Wilderness to the gates of Petersburg. But he finally had pinned Lee's army down. The end was less

than 10 months away.

Despite Union success, as the 1864 campaign opened effective troops were not so easy to find and Confederate morale was high. With a Presidential election due in 1864 the South hoped to rob the North of further success and see war-weariness result in a **Peace Democrat** being elected who would negotiate Confederate independence.



To my mind, it is important to understand the terrain in the area south of the Rapidan/Rappahannock River. Dense scrub oak and pine woodland known as **The Wilderness** with interspersed grassy patches made it very difficult for large numbers of troops to pass in orderly fashion without using the established roads: Orange Plank Road, Orange Turnpike etc.



With memories of the previous year in mind, Lee decided not to contest the river crossing but to hit the bluecoats in the flank as they marched through the Wilderness where their superior numbers 115,000 to 64,000 – would count for less than in the open. (McPherson p. 724) The battle The Wilderness took place on May 5 and 6 1864. The Yankees preponderance of troops produced only immobility in these dense, smoke-filled woods. On 5 May Lee found himself close to the front but was persuaded to go back by members of a Texas brigade from **Longstreet**'s force before Longstreet was injured – again by a Confederate bullet. General **John B. Gordon** at the other end of the line in an evening assault captured two Northern generals and spread panic among the Federal lines. In such circumstances, previous Union commanders would have retreated behind the nearest river. But Grant had told Lincoln “whatever happens, there will be no turning back.”



(Bloody Angle in 2003)

Discussion questions

- 1) What was the effect of the geography, season and weather on the events of early May 1864?
- 2) How similar in age are the re-enactors shown to the troops who fought in May 1864?
- 3) What special skills did U S Grant bring to the confrontation at Spotsylvania?
- 4) What part did the forthcoming US Presidential election play in the battle for Spotsylvania?

Bruce McLennan
March 2007

References:

- 1) **The Wartime Papers of Robert E. Lee**, Clifford Dowdey ed., Da Capo Press, 1961
- 2) **Battle Cry of Freedom – the American Civil War**, James M. McPherson, Penguin, 1988
- 3) **US National Parks Service** website (www.nps.gov/frsp/wildspot.htm) and **Civil War Traveler** website (www.civilwartraveler.com)
- 4) Wilderness and Bloody Angle photos by B McLennan, 2003
- 5) **Spotsylvania Courthouse – The clash of Grant & Lee at the Crossroads** Written, Produced and Directed by Robert L Hodge, Wide Awake films