

On Richmond's FRONT LINE

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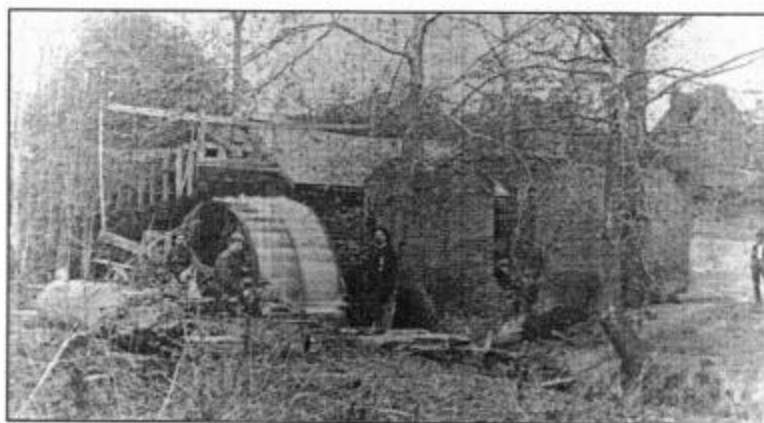
Spring 2002

Gaines's Mill Issue:

Gaines's Mill: Lee's First Victory

For six hours on June 27, 1862, nearly 100,000 men fought one of the deadliest battles of the Civil War. Now called the Battle of Gaines's Mill, it is best known among historians and students as the first major victory in the distinguished career of Confederate commander R. E. Lee. One can apply other superlatives as well. It was the second largest battle in American history up to that point, and it was the largest single attack ever delivered by Lee. Few subsequent battles matched the appalling casualty rate of Gaines's Mill. Most important, that bloody afternoon launched the Confederate army on a wave of momentum that shifted the entire emphasis of the war in Virginia and remained unbroken for a full year. Viewed in this light, the bitter action at Gaines's Mill stands out as the showpiece event of the Seven Days Campaign.

George McClellan's Army of the Potomac stood east and north of Richmond that June, uncomfortably astride the swampy gash known as the Chickahominy River. McClellan's commitment to the Richmond and York River Railroad as his primary line of supply hampered his flexibility, protecting that artery dictated the nature of the general's plans for the capture of Richmond. R. E. Lee latched upon that fact and drew up a plan that called for "Stonewall" Jackson to bring his army from the Shenandoah Valley and threaten the railroad while the primary Confederate force confronted McClellan east of Richmond. That



Gaines's Mill itself, seen in this 1880's image, was rebuilt after the war.

combination would force the Union army into either a retreat or an epic battle. Either alternative looked better than a siege of the capital city.

Although Lee and Jackson did not operate at peak efficiency at first, they achieved their objective. On June 27 their united force of approximately 60,000 men converged on the Union Fifth Corps, commanded by Fitz John Porter. McClellan already had abandoned his railroad line, and had left Porter behind as a speedbump in Lee's path. With their backs to the Chickahominy, the 28,000 men of the Fifth Corps faced difficult odds on the sultry afternoon of the 27th. Porter arranged a stout defense. The United States Regulars anchored his right, George Morell's division held his left, and McCall's division of Pennsylvania Reserves stood in support. A powerful concentration of well-served artillery buttressed the line.

Lee remained unaware of the par-

ticulars of the Union defense, but a glance at the map caused him to realize the great physical advantage his army enjoyed. Swinging into action, Lee began the fight with the six brigades of A. P. Hill's division. Once his men became engaged in the woods along Boatwain's Creek, Lee fed more troops into the battle. Five of James Longstreet's six brigades moved up on Hill's right, while Jackson brought his own divisions in on the Confederate left. The resulting blast of small arms fire impressed those who survived it. After the war many veterans listed Gaines's Mill as the loudest battlefield they had experienced.

Reinforcements patched up the lines for both sides as the sun sank. Slocum's division crossed the river and boosted Porter's force to about 34,000, while Lee brought up the last of Jackson's troops. In a final hasty

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The Battle of Gaines's Mill

Letter of 1st Sgt. Edward O. Wright, Co. D, 5th New York (Duryée's) Zouaves

July 7, 1862

Following the bloody battle of Gaines's Mill on June 27, 1862, the colorfully uniformed 5th New York Zouaves won praise from friend and foe alike for the manner in which they repeatedly counterattacked the advancing units of General Maxcy Gregg's South Carolina brigade. A veteran of the 1st SC. Rifles called the Zouave onslaught "the most desperate charge I ever witnessed in the war." The ground on which this fierce clash took place is currently privately owned, and threatened with development. An excerpt from a post-battle letter describes the action from the New Yorkers' perspective. Its author, 23-year-old Edward Wright, was mortally wounded two months later in the battle of Second Manassas.

"Just before the battle of the 27th, I put my knapsack in one of the company wagons, with a number of others, and have not seen it since. We fell back as far as Cold Harbor, destroying everything in the shape of commissary stores that we could not take along, and finally formed in position to receive the onset of the enemy, who we knew would soon be up.

We lay here in the hot sun for two hours before any signs became manifest of the enemy's appearance; suddenly our pickets came running in from the woods below us; the rebels ran up a section of a battery, unlimbered, and opened upon us, while a regiment of infantry came to the edge of the woods and pelted away, while we returned the fire with interest, compelling them to seek the cover of their favorite underbrush. . . . At 3 o'clock the rebel guns were nearly silenced, and our regiment was drawn some distance off to the left of our original position, and drawn up in a narrow lane somewhat protected by thatch fences on either side. In our rear were planted six Napoleon guns, which had done splendid execution so far, and soon we saw a rebel regiment advancing, under cover of the woods, by the flank, evidently intending to get to our rear if possible. This whole battery immediately opened upon them with grape and

canister at short range, and with horrible execution; they were completely mowed down at every discharge, and were scattered in utter confusion. Two of our men were killed and two wounded by this battery in consequence of their firing at such a low range.

In about twenty minutes the rebels came out of the woods again, and no sooner did our Colonel [G.K.] Warren see them than he ordered us out into the field, when the men went out with a rush and a yell, rallying their colors, which were planted in front, and the way the rebels skedaddled for the woods was a caution for all rash individuals. The ground was covered with their dead and dying, and I distinctly remember seeing one unfortunate scotch drop; as I took my rifle from my shoulder, as he was making the tallest kind of time for the woods.

Our men fired with great rapidity, and as the rebels were crowded among the trees and underbrush, scarcely a shot failed of effect. Here Capt. [William T.] Partridge of Co. I was shot dead, by rashly exposing himself in front of all his men; but the man that shot him in turn received the contents of fifteen or eighteen rifles, and fell like a log. . . . Maj. [Harmon D.] Hull's fine horse was shot from under him. Col. Warren's was wounded three times, but did not drop. He himself had his cap shot off with a rifle ball, but was not injured. I do not believe there is a staff in the army equal to ours. The regiment had now been under fire for four or five hours; we had lost a great many in killed and wounded, and the men were so exhausted as to be scarcely able to stand; and as another regiment came up to relieve us, we fell back on the hill, where we expected a little rest.

In less than five minutes, Col. Warren came dashing up, and ordered Lt. Col. [Hiram] Duryea to march us to the field again, and although our pieces from constant use had become so foul that half of them were unfit for service, and the regiment (what was left

of it) could hardly walk, we were taken back under fire of the enemy, and kept there until dark, supporting a battery of artillery of ten pieces, which fired forty rounds to each piece, holding the enemy in check until all our forces had left the field. We now fell back a mile and a half, where our division bivouacked for the night. . . .

Brian C. Pobanka, a member of the RBA's Board of Directors, is writing a history of the 5th New York Zouaves.

Pair of Richmond Battle fields Make Most Endangered List

(Richmond, Va.) – Two local Civil War sites were declared among the ten most endangered battlefields in the nation by the Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT) and the Richmond Battlefields Association (RBA). The two battlefields, Gaines's Mill and Cold Harbor, were identified in CWPT's annual report on the status of America's Civil War battlefields.

"We need to act quickly to save America's battlefields," remarked CWPT President James Lighthizer. "Without swift and decisive action, sites like Gaines's Mill and Cold Harbor will be little more than a memory within a few years." "The Gaines's Mill/Cold Harbor battlefields offer an unmatched preservation opportunity," RBA spokesman Robert K. Krick added. "Lee's first great victory in 1862 unfolded on the same ground where Grant suffered brutal losses in 1864. This is an incomparable opportunity to save two major battlefields in a single site."

The report, entitled *America's Most Endangered Battlefields*, lists the ten most endangered battlefields in the nation and what can be done to save them. The battlefields were chosen based on geographic location, military significance, and the immediacy of current threats. The two battlefields overlap, and were considered as a single site in the report.

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Battlefield for Sale...in 1862?

The following advertisement from the October 22, 1862, *Richmond Dispatch* represents the plight of many families whose comfortable prosperity disappeared as a result of the Seven Days battles.

"For sale privately...that valuable farm, known by the name of 'Springfield,' on which Mrs. Watt resided, containing about three hundred and sixty acres: about 100 acres of low grounds, some 30 of which are cleared and set in grass; and about 70 in oak, hickory ash, and maple timber, of fine quality; about 180 acres of uplands are cleared and in fine heart, and about 80 acres are in upland timber. This farm has on it a good dwelling, with seven rooms, besides passages and closets; quarters for thirty-five to forty-five servants, stables, corn, carriage, smoke, and kitchen houses. The dwelling and some of the other homes were damaged by the shelling of Friday's battle, the 27th of July [sic]. The land is finely watered with springs and running streams in every field. Upwards of



The Watt House a year after the battle

sixty thousand pounds of hay have been mowed from the meadow, and are for sale on the farm at this time....Terms made known on day of sale. Geo. Watt, Agent."

Today the Watt House is the centerpiece of the National Park Service property at the Gaines's Mill battlefield. Approximately 600 acres surround the old home. The rest of the original farm, once for sale less than four months after the battle, remains in private ownership.

Annual Meeting

Saturday, June 8, 2002

The annual business meeting will be held at the Old Log Cabin behind the Fort Harrison visitor center at 2:00pm. Parking is available at the Fort Harrison visitor center.

Check the website for directions.

RBA Annual Tour

Thursday, June 27, 2002

Come tour the Gaines's Mill Battlefield with Ed Bearss and Robert E. L. Krick 140 years to the day . . . to the hour . . . after the battle!

The walking tour is FREE

The tour will begin at 6:30pm sharp at the Watt House on the Gaines's Mill Battlefield.

Check the website for further updates.

On *Richmond's*
FRONT LINE

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...Lee's First Victory

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assault, the Confederate infantry used momentum and fire discipline to force its way through the Federal lines at two spots. Union and Confederate formations matched each other with courage and daring. The heroic charge of John B. Hood's "Texas Brigade" offset the unflinching stand of Butterfield's brigade on the Union left. Jackson's old "Stonewall Brigade," inextricably mixed with Alabamians, North Carolinians, Georgians, and Marylanders, fought at short range with the Regulars and others.

By sunset Porter's force had lost two dozen cannon and the battlefield. Darkness shielded the retreat to the southern bank of the Chickahominy River. Lee's army had triumphed in a direct frontal attack against partially

entrenched defenders, but counted 9000 men killed and wounded as the penalty. Porter's casualties numbered about 6000, of which approximately one-third were captured. Expressed another way, there were 13,000 men shot in six hours, or, one man shot every 1.66 seconds over the course of an entire afternoon. Gaines's Mill marked the debut in Virginia of a more terrible form of warfare. Later that week a captain in one of the United States regiments struggled to put his thoughts and memories on paper: "You can perhaps imagine but never realize the scenes...a railroad accident is slight compared with it...The worst of nightmares, if you should wake up suddenly and find it all true, is not as bad; it haunts me like a nightmare yet."

...Endangered Battlefields List

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Today, the fortunes of Gaines's Mill and Cold Harbor continue to overlap. Because of their proximity to Richmond and Interstate 295, the twin battlefields face imminent threat from development. Three housing developments litter the perimeter of Gaines's Mill, and the upper half of Cold Harbor is already lost beyond recall. A housing development, hauntingly called "The Fields of Cold Harbor," is currently under construction.

"These battlefields are the last tangible reminders of sacrifices made by those who wore the blue and gray," Lighthizer noted. "When we destroy the land, we destroy the memory of that sacrifice."

Yes!

I WANT TO HELP PRESERVE OUR NATION'S HERITAGE, PLEASE SIGN ME UP.

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