

# On Richmond's FRONT LINE

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## Cold Harbor Issue

# The Battle of Cold Harbor

In the minds of most Civil War enthusiasts, the name Cold Harbor stands for carnage. The contending armies pulled into their massive entrenchments there on May 30, 1864. Two weeks and almost 20,000 casualties later, they left for the even bleaker landscape at Petersburg. Although the

ing north of Bethesda Church ended in Confederate defeat. The following day Union cavalry, led by the hard-bitten Philip H. Sheridan, claimed the Old Cold Harbor crossroads several miles farther south. Although Confederate horsemen rushed to the scene, they arrived too late to restore the situ-

Despite those troubles the Confederates had no difficulty in fighting defensively. General Grant played into their hands by grossly underestimating his foe at Cold Harbor. He felt that Lee's army was demoralized and close to collapse. That misappreciation, combined with his natural aggressiveness, prompted Grant to hurry his infantry to Cold Harbor for a hasty attack late on June 1, 1864. Men of the 6<sup>th</sup> Corps found a weak spot in the Confederate line and exploited it, capturing some 750 of Lee's men and fracturing the line just east of New Cold Harbor. Darkness ended the fight, but the day's events seemed to confirm Grant's views on the vulnerability of Lee's army.

After waiting to bring up the rest of his army, Grant ordered an all-out attack across his 7-mile front on the morning of June 3. Nearly 100,000 men were to hurl themselves against Lee's extended lines in what could have been one of the grandest assaults of the war. When the attackers stepped out at 4:30 that morning, they confronted carefully built earthen fortifications buttressed with abundant Confederate artillery. Some Union officers scarcely attempted to obey Grant's orders. One brigade commander deemed the assault "impracticable" and made no effort. The 5<sup>th</sup> Corps and the 6<sup>th</sup> Corps hardly participated. Ambrose Burnside, the



*Disinterring Union dead after the war, for reburial at the Cold Harbor National Cemetery.*

standard view of this famous battle is largely correct—there was indeed much slaughter and futility—it tends to overlook the maneuver and generalship employed by both armies.

General Ulysses Grant extended his army southward on May 30, seizing control of the roads near Bethesda Church. Confederate corps commander Jubal Early fell upon Grant's flank that afternoon and inaugurated the Battle of Cold Harbor. The fight-

ing north of Bethesda Church ended in Confederate defeat. The following day Union cavalry, led by the hard-bitten Philip H. Sheridan, claimed the Old Cold Harbor crossroads several miles farther south. Although Confederate horsemen rushed to the scene, they arrived too late to restore the situ-

ation. Sheridan's capture of the five-way road intersection drew R. E. Lee's attention to the area, and on the morning of June 1 a poorly organized Confederate counterattack faltered northwest of the crossroads. In addition to piling up casualties, the latest attack by Lee's subordinates illustrated the waning offensive power of his army. Insufficient numbers and shaky leadership plagued Confederate offensive operations at Cold Harbor.

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# The Battle of Cold Harbor

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awkward yet well meaning commander of Grant's 9<sup>th</sup> Corps, launched his attack several hours after everyone else. His men actually threatened and harmed the Confederate line above Bethesda Church.

The most serious fighting at Cold Harbor—in fact, the action that has made the battle famous even today—occurred at the spots where the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Corps launched determined charges. Winfield Hancock threw two-thirds of his 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps at the Confederate line below Old Cold Harbor. Although he broke Lee's line at one vulnerable point, hand-to-hand fighting led to the eviction of Hancock's men after the loss of more than 3000 men in one hour's time. This was standard late-Civil War combat. Farther north, General William F. Smith's 18<sup>th</sup> Corps absorbed the worst punishment of the day. Blindly attacking across open fields, Smith's men were slaughtered by the hundreds without inflicting any noticeable damage on the Confederate

defenders. Some of Smith's men piled up bodies of dead comrades to act as breastworks. "It was more like a volcanic blast than a battle," remembered one survivor. Because of the unmanageable length of his line, it took Grant a long time to realize that his morning attack had failed on every front. Nine hours later he telegraphed the authorities in Washington: "Our loss was not severe...." This surely would have been interesting news to the 6000 or so blue-clad men killed and wounded during the failed assault.

After the June 3<sup>rd</sup> thrashing, Grant shifted his attention to maneuver. Nine days later his army left the sun-baked entrenchments at Cold Harbor and moved south across the James River toward Petersburg. Lee's army counted about 5000 casualties at Cold Harbor—considerably more than most people realized then or now. The Federal army incurred more than 13,000 casualties over the same period, most of them in the first week of the battle.

That was 5000 fewer than Grant had lost in just two days at the Wilderness in May 1864, but at that battle he had achieved calculable results, exchanging losses for gains. He did not manage such a trade at Cold Harbor, and the futility felt by many survivors has come down through the years to symbolize the bloody battle at Cold Harbor.

Preservationists have enjoyed no more success than Grant did 158 years ago. Rampant development has ruined the area around Bethesda Church, and the southern half of the battlefield is in harm's way. Cold Harbor continues to be on Richmond's front line.

[Editor's Note: A book on this notorious battle, written by Gordon Rhea (of the RBA's advisory board), is slated for publication this summer. It will be the most detailed and accurate study of the battle to date.]

## Round Table & Group Contributors

Civil War roundtables and other organizations are among the staunchest supporters of the RBA. The following is a list of recent donations from Civil War groups.

### DONATIONS OF \$500 OR MORE

Central Va. Battlefields Trust

Central Va. Civil War Collectors Assn.

Civil War Preservation Trust

First Defenders CWRT

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### OTHERS

Civil War Education Assn.

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Old Baldy CWRT of Philadelphia

Roanoke CWRT

16th Reg. Va. Volunteer Inf. Living

History Assn. & Atlantic Guard

Soldier's Aid Society

# Cool Arbor or Cold Harbor?

Even in 1862 and 1864 Richmonders and soldiers alike pondered the correct spelling of this famous place, and the origin of its name. Soldiers called it Coal Harbor, Cool Arbor, and Cold Harbor. Most looked in vain for a body of water with an attached harbor. The following extracts from a wartime issue of the *Daily Richmond Examiner* add more evidence to the confused mix:

"In a previous article we stated there was a tradition that the name had been given it by Tarleton. But...our attention has again been called to the matter, and we are surprised to learn from highly respectable authorities that Cold Harbour was a name in Hanover long before the Revolutionary era....[There are] several traditions of the origin of the name, one of which was that it was so called because a number of drunken Indians had, on one occasion in the early colonial times, been frozen to death near the spot. But we are inclined to believe that the name was brought to us across the ocean by our ancestors, the first settlers of Virginia....[It] becomes of interest to know whether there was such a place in England....[We] find a communica-



*Old Cold Harbor Tavern as it appeared after the war*

tion from Mr. Hyde Clarke, to which he appends one hundred and thirty-eight Cold Harbours and three Cold Arbours to be found in the different counties of England."

The newspaper offered several theories on what the name meant, and indecisively concluded: "we have exhausted the learning within our reach going to explain the origin of the appellation; and, for the present, we have done with the subject."

## RBA Annual Tour

As part of its public awareness aims, the RBA intends to sponsor an annual tour on one of Richmond's battlefields. This year we chose Gaines's Mill, the largest of the Seven Days battles. Thursday, June 27, 2002, was the 140th anniversary of that fierce encounter.

Famed historian and guide Edwin C. Bearss—who also is a member of the RBA's advisory board—kindly agreed to lead the tour, despite being at Gettysburg that morning and having to make a forced march of his own to get to Gaines's Mill. A large crowd showed up (approximately 140 people) and enjoyed Ed's remarks for about 25 minutes, until a severe thunderstorm with lightning drove everyone to their vehicles prematurely. After a long rain

delay the remnants of the group reassembled in the parking lot for some concluding comments by Ed. The walking tour turned into a talk, but those who stayed enjoyed the opportunity to stand on the battlefield with Ed right at the 140th anniversary of the battle, to the minute.

Despite the rotten weather, both the RBA and the battlefield received welcome exposure. Many attendees learned about the organization for the first time, and Ed spoke fervently about the importance of the Richmond area battlefields and the need for their preservation. We thank Ed for his usual cheerful assistance, and hope for more accommodating weather at next year's tour.

### On Richmond's FRONT LINE

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## Richmond Battlefields Association's Annual Meeting

Saturday, June 8, 2002, the RBA held its first annual business meeting. A handful of members joined most of the board at the old log cabin at the Fort Harrison battlefield, south of Richmond. Board member Hobson Goddin, the dean of Richmond area Civil War preservationists, began the meeting with some reflections on the history of the site. In 1927, he said, a group of prominent Richmonders, inspired by Dr. Douglas Southall Freeman, made Fort Harrison the first in a series of battlefield purchases. That early group eventually bought much of the land around Richmond that became the foundation of the Richmond National Battlefield Park. The log

cabin, scene of RBA's business meeting, dates from that period. It had served as the park's first headquarters some 60 years ago.

In 1951, the first meetings of the Richmond Civil War Roundtable were held at that same log cabin. Prominent historians, such as Dr. Freeman, spoke at the roundtable during its formative years. That group survives today as one of the oldest Civil War roundtables in the country.

Now that historic log cabin served, for a day at least, as an appropriate location for the first public meeting of the Richmond Battlefields Association, which is dedicated to the acquisition and preservation of additional battle-

field land around the capital city of the Confederacy.

The rest of the RBA business meeting followed form, with a financial statement given by our treasurer, and some remarks from the president on the status of various projects. The members in attendance also had an opportunity to ask questions or make comments.

We hope, of course, that in future years the RBA will have preservation successes to celebrate. The annual meeting will become a large event that brings the members and the Board of Directors together for history and business.

**Yes!**

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

*(Please print)*

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