

# On Richmond's FRONT LINE

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## Richmond Threatened by Butler's Army

Many casual students of the 1864 battles below Richmond find it difficult to sort out the various actions. How, for instance, did the Second Battle of Darbytown Road differ from the First Battle of Darbytown Road, or First Deep Bottom from Second Deep Bottom? Two characteristics of those battles complicate matters even more: nearly all of them are known by many different names, and most of them are unpreserved and difficult to tour. The historical portion of this newsletter will focus on the Second Battle of Fair Oaks, and will attempt to separate that fight from the confusing welter of similar actions fought nearby, by many of the same troops, at nearly the same time.

Broadening one's view to encompass the front lines at Petersburg in the summer and autumn of 1864 is essential to understanding what happened outside Richmond in that period. Union planners repeatedly designed simultaneous advances on both fronts. Implementing this simple strategy forced Confederate defenders to guard key locations and prevented them from reinforcing one front by borrowing from another, which in turn allowed the Unionists to make full use of their superior numbers. It is remarkable, in retrospect, that the various probes did not produce

more decisive results.

After a failed advance on October 13, 1864, southeast of Richmond (the Second Battle of Darbytown Road), General Grant's subordinates schemed for another two-headed advance just a fortnight later. While the Second



*Eighteenth Corps commander Godfrey Weitzel may have looked this dispirited after his failed offensive on October 27.*

Corps extended the Union left below Petersburg, toward the Boynton Plank Road and Burgess's Mill, Federal troops from the Army of the James on the Richmond side of the river had orders to attack the Confederate Exterior Line. The ensuing clash outside the Confederate capital on October 27 is most often called the

Second Battle of Fair Oaks.

Although Benjamin Butler's Army of the James technically had been "bottled" at Bermuda Hundred since May, the majority of it occupied positions north of the James River, won during the fighting on September 29-30 at Chaffin's Farm. To execute the plan for October 27, Butler left a thin screen along the main lines and sent most of his two corps (the Tenth and Eighteenth, under generals Terry and Weitzel respectively) on a difficult march northeastward. Butler hoped that hard marching toward the Williamsburg Road would place his strike force on the Confederate flank just east of Richmond.

The troops guarding the Darbytown Road, Charles City Road, and Williamsburg Road corridors came from the Army of Northern Virginia. The constant pressure against Richmond in 1864 had forced local defense troops and other irregulars into service elsewhere along the lines, but veterans from the main army defended the most likely points of Union advance. General James Longstreet, his maimed arm still in a sling from his wound at the Wilderness in May, had just returned to command the forces

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## Development at Cold Harbor

A very small but significant portion of the Cold Harbor battlefield has been destroyed in recent months. An open lot adjacent to the national cemetery was purchased by developers, apparently without ever having been on the public market. A new house has arisen on this tract of land, less than 100 yards from the mass grave at the back wall of the cemetery and perhaps 200 yards from the edge of the national park.

This is part of the location where the Union Sixth Corps first met resistance in its

late-afternoon attack at Cold Harbor on June 1. Emory Upton's brigade, with the Second

Confederates fell back several hundred yards to their prepared position, now within the land protected by the national park.

The RBA belatedly learned that developers owned this property, and immediately opened contact with them about the parcel. But it was too late. Construction of the house had commenced and another piece of historic

ground has been lost.



*This recent photograph, looking north, shows the new construction, with the mass grave marker flanked by American flags.*

Connecticut Heavy Artillery in the front, pushed back skirmish-

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## Eyewitness Account

[These excerpts from an unidentified Confederate correspondent's letter in the *Richmond Enquirer*, November 12, 1864, offer a glimpse of how the Southern people learned about the battle of October 27].

It was soon ascertained...that the 18th corps had made a detour around the White Oak Swamp and was advancing in heavy columns up the Williamsburg and Nine Mile roads, so that new dispositions had to be made to meet these new developments. Gen. Longstreet at once ordered Gen. Field to take position on the Nine Mile Road.

He moved the division with great celerity and gained the Williamsburg road just in time to repel an assault and save the fort and guns immediately on the road. On his arrival he found that the enemy's heaviest forces were massed upon that road and that would be the point of main attack. In that surmise, he was not disappointed, as the sequel will show.

Two or three brigades of negroes had been sent up the Nine Mile road and had charged and carried the works and captured one piece of artillery just as the Hampton Legion, of Gary's cavalry, was going into position. But the 24th Virginia cavalry coming up, they, in conjunction with the Legion, charged and regained the works and artillery and drove the negroes back with heavy slaughter.

Severe skirmishing and artillery duels were being waged on the Darbytown and Charles City roads, and one or two determined assaults had been made upon Hoke's line, but had been handsomely repulsed.

In the meantime, the enemy had planted two heavy field batteries near the Williamsburg road and were shelling our works most furiously. Their artillery was handled with great skill and precision. Our batteries did not respond because they desired to hold their fire for the advance of

the infantry. Their silence misled the enemy. Soon a line of battle debouched from the woods on the left of the Williamsburg road, evidently bent upon the capture of the fort....They had to advance through an open and level field for half a mile....and when within five hundred yards, Anderson's, the Texas, and Bratton's brigades poured terrible volleys of minnies from their Enfield rifles into their wavering ranks, and by the time they arrived within two hundred yards the fire from the artillery and musketry had become so destructive that they broke in every direction and were charged by our skirmishers. The result, in addition to one hundred dead and many wounded, whose bodies encumbered the field, was the capture of 500 prisoners, several hundred stands of arms, three guidons and eight battle flags. In their retreat they scattered, by the wayside, many guns and a large amount of equipage of every description.

# Second Fair Oaks (contd.)

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north of the James. His presence undoubtedly buoyed the spirits of the defenders.

When Longstreet learned of the Union move he hurried Charles Field's division to a position astride the Williamsburg Road. Farther north, nothing more than dismounted cavalry watched the Nine Mile Road. Neither the Army of the James nor Charles Field's division existed two and a half years earlier, but many men in those organizations recognized the familiar landscape from the Seven Pines/Fair Oaks battles of May 31 and June 1. The Confederate line of defense stood more or less atop the position held against McClellan in June 1862. The King's School House/Oak Grove battlefield of June 25 lay just in front of the entrenchments. Union attackers would move across that ground once again on the afternoon of October 27.

After a long period of indecision, General Weitzel timidly pushed forward a brigade on each side of the Williamsburg Road.

The Confederates not only fought from behind stout entrenchments, they also had an ideal field of fire. No one was surprised, then, when the small Union attack force stalled in front of its objective and the men sought whatever shelter they could find.

The Texas Brigade (now under a senior colonel) and Bratton's South Carolina brigade were responsible for repulsing Fairchild's and Cullen's brigades, respectively. Seeing an opportunity, some aggressive Confederates left their breastworks and collected prisoners in astounding numbers. While the rest of Weitzel's command watched, nearly 1000 of their demoralized comrades surrendered.

The only bright spot of the day for the Unionists came farther north, on the Nine Mile Road, where a brigade of black troops under Colonel John Holman actually pierced the Exterior Line of defenses there and temporarily captured a cannon or two. A counterattack by General M. W. Gary's cavalrymen, fighting dismounted, soon drove Holman's

men off.

Confederate casualties from these late-war actions are notoriously difficult to calculate, but the number used by modern historians is fewer than 100. Union losses reached nearly 1600, including more than 500 in the diversionary Tenth Corps skirmishing along the Darbytown Road.

Today this battlefield essentially is lost. The Richmond airport and its sprawl quite literally sit atop the ground in front of the Confederate breastworks, where the heaviest action took place. Even so, a few key landmarks remain, and anyone interested in trying to tour those places should secure a copy of the unpublished driving tour pamphlet prepared by Noah A. Trudeau. The Richmond National Battlefield Park headquarters at Chimborazo Visitor Center can provide a photocopy.

## A Remarkable Capture

An amazing episode occurred as part of the fight on October 27, involving Captain J. Banks Lyle, an officer of the 5th South Carolina Infantry then detached on staff duty. "In their retreat," wrote a Confederate, "a number of the enemy took refuge in a wash, or gully, which ran through a depression in the field some three or four hundred yards in front of our line." Lyle "saw that they were whipped and would surrender if called on to do so." Taking two volunteers, the captain walked in front of his own lines, toward the ravine. A few confused Confederates fired on him at long range, but Lyle soon reached his target. One Union officer harangued his men in hopes of shaking their malaise, but to no

avail. "In full view of friend and foe," Captain Lyle "accomplished the capture and made them file out without arms and move on to our lines....The number of officers and men captured was about six hundred, with three stands of colors and swords by the armful."

It is easy to suspect that the facts of this tale have been stretched since the war, and perhaps the numbers are a bit inflated. But the story certainly is true, as several war-date affidavits prove. Captain Lyle survived the war (and nine wounds) to become a schoolteacher in Oklahoma Territory. General John Bratton called this, "The most conspicuous feat of personal valor and skill that came within my knowledge during the war...."

### On *Richmond's* FRONT LINE

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# 2005 Annual Meeting

This year's annual meeting is scheduled for Saturday, June 11. Although some of the particulars are yet to be sorted out, we do know that our gathering will be at the Cold Harbor battlefield.

We will meet at Beulah Presbyterian Church, just north of the Cold Harbor crossroads. The original church, which stood at that site, burned to the ground on June 1, 1864.

In an effort to make this year's meeting memorable, we have arranged access to a large, privately owned chunk of the battlefield. Most of the annual meeting

will be spent walking the portion of the battlefield where Gen. William F. "Baldy" Smith's Eighteenth Corps troops attacked on June 1 and June 3, 1864.

This land is criss-crossed with entrenchments, historic road traces, and other interesting features. Our tour will walk in the footsteps of the Eighteenth Corps, all the way from Beulah Church to just in front of the Confederate lines. There will be a special emphasis on the *\_\_\_\_\_* of Stannard's and *\_\_\_\_\_* brigades on June 3.

As always, the meeting will

include a chance for members to socialize among themselves and with the board of directors. The time of the meeting will be announced in the next newsletter, to be mailed early in May. That newsletter also will provide more details on the annual gathering, together with historical information on the ground we will be visiting. Keep an eye on the RBA's website for updates, and please plan to take advantage of this opportunity to see a significant piece of the battlefield up close.

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

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