
GETTYSBURG: THE TOPOGRAPHY THAT SAVED THE UNITED STATES

By Benjamin Wyman

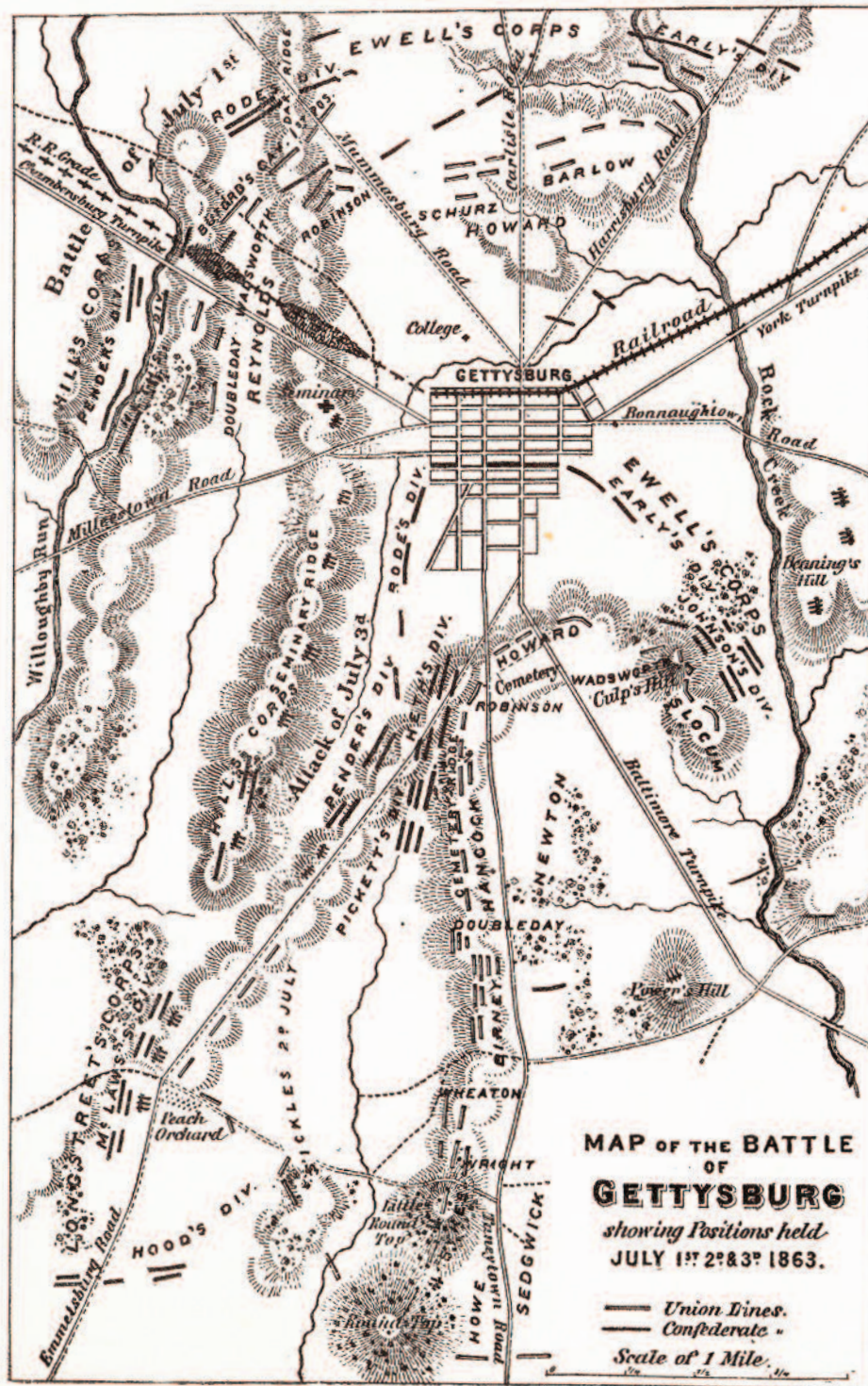
Many scholars have analyzed the Battle of Gettysburg and the factors that determined its outcome. This work argues that the topographical features on the extreme left flank of the Union army, which the Union troops held on July 2, were the primary factors in a Federal victory at Gettysburg. Focusing on the second day of the battle and the terrain the two armies fought over on the left flank of the Union army, this article combines an analysis of topography and leadership in what would prove to be a pivotal Confederate defeat at the high tide of the Civil War. It argues that the deficiency of Confederate knowledge about the terrain of southeastern Pennsylvania, the Union troops' supreme position, and natural protections such as rocks, trees, and elevation, were decisive contributors to Union victory. Ben Wyman graduated from the University of Maine with a dual BA in History and Political Science, and later an MA in Communication. His first article, "The American Dream, Equal Opportunity, and Obtaining the Vote" was published in the inaugural edition of the *Cohen Journal* in 2015. He currently lives in Portland, Maine.

"Soldier and priest with hymn and prayer
have laid the stone,

And every bone shall rest in honor
there."—Herman Melville, "Gettysburg"

"In great deeds something abides. On great
fields something stays. Forms change and
pass; bodies disappear; but spirits linger, to
consecrate ground for the vision-place of
souls. And reverent men and women from
afar, and generations that know us not and
that we know not of, heart-drawn to see
where and by whom great things were suf-
fered and done for them, shall come to this
deathless field, to ponder and dream, and lo!
the shadow of a mighty presence shall wrap
them in its bosom, and the power of the vi-
sion pass into their souls."—Joshua L.
Chamberlain, "Dedication of 20th Maine
Monuments at Gettysburg"

Since the conclusion of the Battle of Gettysburg just over 150 years ago, there have been countless volumes written about particular aspects of the battle; was it General Robert E. Lee's arrogance that cost the Confederates the battle or was it just the first appearance of strong Federal leadership in General George



"Map of Gettysburg battlefield, 1863" in Rossiter Johnson, *Campfire and Battlefield* (Boston: Desmond Publication Company, c. 1896). Collections of Maine Historical Society, 973.7 J626c, MaineMemory.Net # 4327.

Meade and subordinates? Nearly all historians agree that Gettysburg was the turning point in the American Civil War, which ended in the surrender of the Confederacy less than two years later. Most also attribute causation to the different leaders involved and consider the action of the 20th Maine, led by Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain on the slopes of Little Round Top, to be the primary factor in the Union victory.¹

Some historians have also explored the role topography played in the battle. Bradford Willard, for example, argued that the Union position on the high ground was the primary factor in their victory. However, this work argues more specifically that the topographical features on the extreme left flank of the Union army, which the Union troops held on July 2, were the primary factor in a Federal victory at Gettysburg. Focusing on this second day of the battle and the terrain the two armies fought over on the left flank of the Union army, this work combines an analysis of topography and leadership in what would prove to be a pivotal Confederate defeat at the high tide of the Civil War. It argues that the deficiency of Confederate knowledge about the terrain of southeastern Pennsylvania and the Union troops' supreme position, which was supported by natural protections such as rocks, trees, and elevation, were decisive contributors to Union victory.²

The Gray

In May 1863, General Lee and his Confederate Army of Northern Virginia crushed the larger Union Army of the Potomac under General Joseph Hooker at the battle of Chancellorsville in Virginia. The masterful way in which Lee flanked Hooker and defeated his troops went down in military history as one of the greatest strategic battle plans of modern warfare. Lee, who was renowned as one of the best military minds in America by his allies and enemies alike after his numerous victories in the preceding year of the Civil War, had by 1863 cemented his legacy with his overwhelmingly decisive victory at Chancellorsville. The Union troops fled the field in disarray and panic, Hooker was sacked by President Abraham Lincoln soon thereafter, and the European powers of France and Great Britain were considering recognizing the Con-

federacy as an independent nation and sending their own military to end the War Between the States. After a series of incredible victories against larger odds, Lee could see the end of the war and could almost feel his fingers grasping a Confederate victory, but even as the Union troops fled the field in panic and dishonor, fate took away Lee's "right arm." At the conclusion of the battle, General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson was wounded and had to have his left arm amputated, taking Jackson's extraordinary leadership away from Lee when he most needed it to quickly end the war. Upon hearing of Jackson's injury, Lee remarked, "He has lost his left arm, but I have lost my right."³

Soon after Jackson lost his arm, he died from pneumonia on May 10, leaving Lee without his most trusted General. As a result, Lee had to reassemble his army and create a new 3rd Corps. His new right-hand general was James Longstreet, who he often called "my old war-horse." The 1st Corps was commanded by General Longstreet, who, after the death of Jackson, was simply "one of the ablest generals of the Confederate army." The 2nd Corps—Jackson's old corps—were then commanded by General Richard Ewell, and General Ambrose Powell (A. P.) Hill commanded the newly created 3rd Corps. Ewell was a West Pointer, two years ahead of Longstreet and seven ahead of Hill, who had served in the Mexican War and in Arizona fighting the Apaches. Ewell was considered "brave and devoted" but also had a "queer character" with a "peculiar pop-eyed look and a bald domelike head which gave him something of the appearance of a nervous pigeon." Richard Ewell had also suffered the loss of his leg from the knee down after a Union bullet shredded it at the Second Battle of Bull Run the previous summer. The amputation traumatized Ewell and even made him question Lee's decision to promote him to corps command: "I don't feel up to a separate command," he wrote, and expressed no desire to "see the carnage and shocking sights of another field of battle." The commander of the newly created 3rd Corps, General A. P. Hill, was a "nervous, wiry man with the persistent chip of under appreciation on his shoulder and a bevy of chronic illnesses when under stress" but "was precisely the kind of cantankerous, combative officer Lee wanted in command." Hill was a chronic thorn in the side of Jackson and his staff, and this was not for-

gotten upon the passing of the general. As a result, Lee optioned for Hill to lead the new 3rd Corps rather than risk the clash of personalities almost certain to result with Hill's commanding the 2nd Corps.⁴

Because of the creation of a new corps and the promotions of two division commanders (Ewell and Hill) to corps command, Lee was in a situation unlike anything he had faced during the previous year while he was in command of the Army of Northern Virginia. Lee had always had Jackson and Longstreet as his two corps generals and knew when a battle plan materialized in his mind that Jackson, his aggressive general, would ensure the details would be taken care of and would rapidly assault the enemy wherever he found them. With Longstreet, Lee also knew that his vision for the battle would be carried out, but in a more cautious manner; Longstreet never hit the enemy unless he could hit hard where it hurt the most. With Jackson and Longstreet in command of the two corps of the Army of Northern Virginia, Lee could trust the battle would turn in his favor, as his two generals would see to the details hidden in the mastermind of the great general. But because of cruel fate in the late spring and early summer 1863, when Lee was first putting forth his ideas and preparing for an invasion of the North, his army was at its least coordinated. Lee was forced to embark on the most important campaign of the Civil War with two untested corps commanders, into a foreign landscape where the thunder of war would decide the course of American history.⁵

The campaign that resulted in the climactic battle of Gettysburg in July 1863 started as a plan put forth by Lee to take the war to the North; to demoralize the public there; to gain the support of at least one European nation; and perhaps even more importantly, to give Virginia a chance to heal from the ravages of the war. The farms and plantations of northern Virginia had been plundered by invading armies, and even by the Army of Northern Virginia, countless times since the start of the war and had not received any respite. It was Lee's intention to not only strike a blow in the North that could end the war, but also to allow Virginia farmers the chance to supply a good crop for his troops upon their return.⁶

The plan for the Gettysburg campaign had first taken shape in February 1863, when

Stonewall Jackson had instructed his acclaimed topographer, Jedediah Hotchkiss, to create a map of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia all the way to Philadelphia. Hotchkiss was told to keep his "preparations . . . a profound secret." After slipping into enemy territory dressed as a civilian, Hotchkiss reported plenty of supplies and resources for an invading army. The idea was to allow Lee to "maneuver [and] alarm the enemy, threaten their cities." If he could force the Army of the Potomac to attack him on his own terms, on the ground of his choosing, the Federal army would be "seriously disorganized and forced to retreat across the Susquehanna—an event which would give him control of Maryland and Western Pennsylvania, and . . . would very likely cause the fall of Washington city and the flight of the Federal government." Over the course of the spring, Lee pondered the invasion with more intensity and, after the death of Jackson, felt an invasion was not only practical, but a necessity for the survival of the Confederacy.⁷

Lee had to convince many people, however, that such an invasion was indeed practical at a time when Union forces in the West had the important Confederate city of Vicksburg under siege. The fall of Vicksburg would cause the Confederacy to lose access to the Mississippi and, in effect, be split in two. Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy, wanted Lee to send two of his own brigades to the West to aid the Confederate forces at Vicksburg, but Lee would have none of it. He had something else in mind for his forces. Lee convinced Jefferson Davis and his own General Longstreet that an invasion and any subsequent battles would be conducted on the "tactical" defensive. "We were not to deliver an offensive battle," Longstreet remembered years later, "but to so maneuver that the enemy should be forced to attack us . . . offensive strategy, but defensive tactics." As a result, Lee was given Davis's blessing to invade southern Pennsylvania and end the war on his own terms.⁸

The Blue

In June 1863, while Lee was planning for his invasion of the North, the Union Army of the Potomac was in shock and its soldiers disheartened by a series of defeats. Not only had they just suffered the worst defeat of the war at Chancel-

lorsville, but they had also lost badly at the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862. Each campaign seemed to bring about some new defeat, which led to a new commander, while the men of the army became decidedly more indifferent to their leaders. The soldiers of the Army of the Potomac were good men, some barely older than boys, but good men nonetheless. They believed in the cause of the Union, and they believed in the men who stood alongside them in line, but they no longer trusted their leaders save for those who served directly over them. The generals who commanded the brigades, divisions, and corps of the army were good men, except for those who were involved in the game of musical chairs for the overall command of the army. The latter were considered unqualified to command a force so large by most of the men they led.⁹

When the Army of Northern Virginia crossed the Rappahannock River and pushed north, Lee left his 3rd Corps, commanded by General Hill, at Fredericksburg to attempt to divert General Hooker from his actual movements. Hooker knew Lee was up to something and sent a telegraph to President Lincoln on June 5 asking for specific instructions. Lincoln replied later that day with the advice to “in one word . . . not take any risk of being entangled upon the river, like an ox jumped half over a fence, and liable to be torn by dogs front and rear without a fair chance to gore one way or kick the other.” Lincoln’s response showed, in one phrase, his complete lack of trust in Hooker’s ability to successfully engage Lee. Three weeks later, Hooker offered his resignation to Lincoln—which Lincoln promptly accepted—and was replaced on June 28 by Major General George Gordon Meade, commander of the 5th Corps. Upon hearing of his promotion to overall commander of the Army of the Potomac, Meade exclaimed: “Well, I’ve been tried and condemned without a hearing, and I suppose I shall have to go to execution.” Upon hearing that Meade was the new Federal commander, Lee said, “General Meade will commit no blunder in my front, and if I commit one he will make haste to take advantage of it.”—an elegant way of saying George Meade would likely do nothing rather than run the risks of doing something.¹⁰

Everything was going exactly as Lee had hoped it would. The Army of the Potomac was

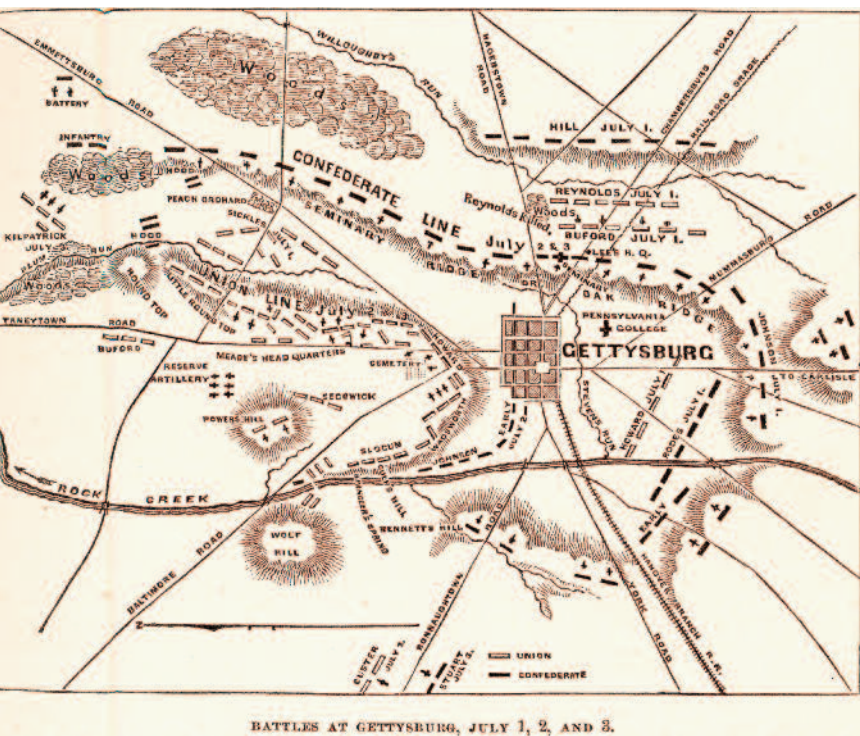
virtually unaware of his movements, and as a result of Lincoln’s lack of trust in Hooker, the Federal army had not even harassed Lee’s rear. As Lee had predicted at the start of the campaign, Lincoln was more concerned about “protecting Washington than capturing Richmond.”¹¹

The Campaign

The long march by the Federal Army to get to the Potomac River and to keep General Lee’s forces away from Washington was one long drawn-out nightmare for the men. They marched at a fast pace through the scorching Virginia heat and rain. When General Meade replaced Hooker on June 28, he had to put together an army that was scattered across northern Virginia and southern Maryland and coordinate a plan to follow Lee and remain between the Confederates and Washington.¹²

Meade recalled all of the moving parts of the army to Frederick, Maryland, and then placed them in a defensive position along Pipe Creek, less than ten miles from a secure supply link in Westminster. As the Union troops marched through Maryland, their spirits rose to a height not seen in months. They were back in a country untouched by war where they were greeted with enthusiasm from the local population. They were an army that had been defeated, but “had risen anew,” and as a soldier in the 3rd Corps remembered: “There is not that sourness in the countenance of every passers-by which greeted us in our wanderings over the ‘sacred soil’ of the ‘old Dominion.’” The men in the Army of the Potomac were ready to prove themselves on their home soil.¹³

At the same time Meade was organizing his troops along Pipe Creek, Lee advanced north into southern Pennsylvania and moved into terrain completely unfamiliar to himself and his army. The roads, rivers, mountains, ravines, valleys, and every other natural feature were almost entirely unknown. Lee and his staff had only generalized maps of the main roads and towns scattered throughout the area. In the nineteenth century when ways of gathering information were very primitive, the armies relied on their cavalry forces to keep the main body of troops informed on the movements of the enemy, especially when moving through terrain unfamiliar to the commanders of the army. Lee did not



"Battle at Gettysburg, 1863" in Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial History of the Civil War in the United States Vol. III* (Hartford, CT: Thomas Belknap, 1874). Print is of original wood engraving. This map shows three important roads—Emmitsburg, Taneytown, and Baltimore—converging at Gettysburg. Collections of Maine Historical Society, 973.7 L899p, MaineMemory.Net # 4333.

have that luxury during his march north into Pennsylvania.¹⁴

When the Army of Northern Virginia began its march north in June, Lee had given General J. E. B. Stuart discretion to detach his cavalry command from the main army and move independently. That order gave Stuart the ability to raid enemy supply lines and communication links wherever he could find them and even allowed him to do a little raiding in Union territory, which frightened the inhabitants of southern Maryland and Pennsylvania. However, it deprived Lee of knowing where the Union army was. After the battle at Gettysburg, Lee listed his "ignorance of the movements of the enemy" as a key reason for his loss. According to historian G. D. Sheffield, Lee and his army were not entirely blind, but at best they "advanced into Pennsylvania suffering from acute myopia." As a result of Stuart's cavalry moving independently from the main force of the army, Lee's troops stumbled into Gettysburg blind.¹⁵

On June 28, a scout in the employ of General Longstreet named Henry Thomas Harrison, a Tennessean, reported that Hooker had crossed over the Potomac and had two army corps at Frederick, another near the town, and two near South Mountain. Harrison also brought the news that Meade was the new Federal commander. Longstreet promptly informed Lee, who at first was skeptical of the scout. However, with no word from Stuart on the whereabouts of the enemy, Lee soon took Harrison's report seriously and changed his army's direction. Lee quickly acted to fend off a Federal threat to his rear and supply line by ordering the army to concentrate at either Cashtown or Gettysburg where he would concentrate his scattered troops to face a Union challenge.¹⁶

Gettysburg was the country town where all the major roads converged. Running northeast from Gettysburg was the road to Philadelphia; north was the road to Carlisle; the southwest road ran to Hagerstown and the Harrisburg Road. South of the town were three important roads running like arteries through the town connecting it with the countryside: the Emmitsburg road, Taneytown road, and the Baltimore pike. This would play an important role in the battle. If the two armies met at Gettysburg, the terrain would strongly favor the defender because of the high ground to the south and east of the town. Gettysburg itself lay on low ground between two little streams, Rock Creek and Willoughby's Run, which were two minor branches of the large Monocacy River. Between the town and Willoughby's Run was a ridge of slightly higher ground known as Seminary Ridge, which the Confederates would occupy during the battle. The high ground to the south of town would have a commanding position in a pitched battle thanks not only to elevation, but also to the natural protections of loose rocks and trees afforded to the defenders to create breastworks to shield themselves from the enemy's fire. The terrain to the south of town, which the Union army came to occupy, contained a shorter length of high ground called Cemetery Ridge. This ground held the commanding view of Cemetery Hill at its northern end. Less than three miles south of the town, Cemetery Ridge ended and gave way to lower ground covered by a peach orchard and a rocky area known as "Devil's Den." Little Round Top and Round Top further south overlooked both

these features. Near the peaks of the latter two in particular, “loose boulders of trap lay conveniently for construction of breastworks.”¹⁷

The battle at Gettysburg was never supposed to occur where it did. The morning of July 1 brought the distant sound of artillery fire to Lee’s ears, which urged him to hurry to Cash-town where he found General Richard Anderson’s division of Hill’s corps and asked him for news of the battle. Anderson, who had no news, remembered Lee stating, “I cannot think what has become of General Stuart . . . I am in ignorance as to what we have in front of us here. . . . If it is the whole Federal force, we must fight a battle here.” The Confederate division that first marched towards the town on the morning of July 1 belonged to the 3rd Corps under A. P. Hill. The previous day, Hill had received reports of Union cavalry inside the town and feared that meant there would be Federal infantry close behind. Hill quickly dismissed the cavalry inside the town, saying it was “probably a detachment of observation.” With that in mind, Hill gave permission for General Harry Heath’s division to move into Gettysburg the next day to obtain a supply of shoes rumored to be in the town. Heath’s division engaged the Union cavalry in the town under the command of General John Buford and, in doing so, confronted a much larger force than anticipated. The Battle of Gettysburg had begun. Before the battle started, however, Buford anticipated the ferocity of the upcoming engagement. He told one of his subordinates, “You will have to fight like the devil to hold your own.”¹⁸

The first day of the battle saw only detached contingents of the two armies engaged, as both still had troops strung out along the roads. At the end of the day, however, the Confederates were in high spirits. They had driven the Union cavalry and their reinforcements from the 1st Corps of the Army of the Potomac out of Gettysburg, and one of the best Federal generals—General John F. Reynolds in command of the 1st, 3rd, and 11th corps of the Army of the Potomac—had been mortally wounded. The men of the Army of Northern Virginia were the only ones in great spirits at the conclusion of July 1, however, because Lee and his senior officers knew that the Federal troops who had been driven from the field during the day had quickly settled into the high ground on Cemetery Ridge and Culp’s Hill on the right of the Federal lines.

General Winfield Hancock, the commander of the 2nd Corps—the ablest general next to Reynolds in the Federal army—had arrived late in the afternoon, saw the importance of Culp’s Hill, and ordered his men to secure it. General Lee arrived on the field late in the afternoon, and he too saw the importance of the high ground, which the Federals had seized. Upon observing that “some of those people” were taking position on Culp’s Hill, Lee approved an attack on it by General Ewell’s corps. However, he left the implementation of it to Ewell himself. In his report after the battle, Lee wrote, “General Ewell was instructed to carry the hill occupied by the enemy, if he found it practicable. . . . He decided to await Johnson’s division . . . which did not reach Gettysburg until a late hour.” Ewell’s decision to delay and not attack the Federals on Culp’s Hill brought him a great deal of criticism, especially when, after the battle, some Federal officers testified they could not have withstood a strong attack. But it was also clear that Ewell’s troops were in no condition to launch an assault after the fighting earlier in the day. General Rhodes’s division alone had 3,000 casualties out of 8,000 men. The absence of General Stuart and the Confederate cavalry also attributed to Ewell’s lack of desire to pursue an aggressive assault on Culp’s Hill. General Doubleday, a Union general involved in the first day of fighting, stated years later: “If Hill had only known what a meager force we had, he might have swept us away . . . but the absence of the cavalry had cut off all sources of information to him.”¹⁹

July 1 ended without a decisive victory for either side, but with a promise for greater death and destruction as both armies hurriedly consolidated their troops at Gettysburg. July 2 brought about a terrible day of fighting between the two armies amid the rocky confines of Devil’s Den and upon the boulder-strewn slopes of Little Round Top. The fighting would bring about a harvest of death in a farmer’s wheat field and through his peach orchard. By nightfall of the second day of fighting, the Union army still occupied the high ground. Their left flank held at Little Round Top, and General Lee was preparing for his final futile assault, which would take place the following day. This assault would become known as Pickett’s Charge and would be forever remembered for its futility and its enormous toll in human life. In the fertile farmland

on either side of Seminary Ridge and Cemetery Ridge, many men and young boys lost their lives, and upon the slopes of Little Round Top the fate of a nation was decided by a regiment from Maine whose colonel was a professor from Bowdoin College in the same state.²⁰

July 2: A Harvest of Death

The morning of July 2 found General Lee up before dawn planning his army's action for the upcoming day. A dense fog had settled over the land throughout the night and made the motions of the enemy army hard to decipher. It did not dissipate until the late morning. By noon, Lee would enjoy a "cloudless day," but the temperature would be in the mid-80s by the afternoon, which made the "heat intense" for his troops. He ordered his topographical engineer, Captain Samuel Johnston, to "reconnoiter" along the left flank of the Union lines. Johnston began his reconnaissance on a farm owned by James Warfield and continued toward the Emmitsburg Road, through a peach orchard owned by Joseph Sherfy, and along farm lanes until he reached two hills. Only after the battle did these

hills become known as Little Round Top and Big Round Top.²¹

While waiting for Johnston to return, Lee met with General Longstreet and his division commanders, Generals John Bell Hood and Lafayette McLaws, and told them they would "wheel left, and facing north and into the rear of Cemetery Hill, 'attack up the Emmitsburg Road,'" and "from there they would drive into whatever forces were guarding the left flank of the hill, and overrun the Union artillery and infantry posted there." Lee also let Longstreet know that as soon as his artillery opened fire, signaling he was about to begin his assault, General Ewell would simultaneously attack on the Union's right at Culp's Hill, providing the "anvil against which Longstreet's hammer would smash into whatever was left of the 1st and 2nd Corps." Years after that meeting, Hood remembered that Lee had appeared "full of hope, yet at times, buried deep in thought," and even though there was intense heat already by early morning, Lee was dressed as if on parade with "coat buttoned to the throat, saber-belt buckled around the waist, field glasses pending either side," as though he was "ready to accept a general's surrender." When Longstreet had protested against assaulting the Federals on the heights and argued that they should instead maneuver themselves between the Federals and Washington and let Meade attack them, Hood remembered that Lee remarked, "the enemy is here . . . and if we do not whip him, he will whip us." Longstreet clearly understood that the topography the Federals occupied was not promising for any Rebel assault and would cost countless lives. It was hardly likely to result in a Confederate victory. To Lee's "Old Warhorse," the assault on the Federal heights was suicide.²²

Between 7:00 and 8:00 a.m. Johnston returned with news of his reconnaissance to the generals. After tracing the route he took on a map Lee was holding, he reported that it was about a five-mile march "to get troops into position for the kind of attack Lee had in mind—maybe two hours at most." Lee then asked about the two "stony" hills, "did you get there?" Johnston replied he had, and not only had there been no Federal troops on either hill, he had even climbed to the top where he "had a commanding view." If Rebel troops could occupy the high ground on the extreme left of the Union flank which looked down on the entire



"Culp's Hill from East Cemetery Hill, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, ca. 1865."
Photographic print by W. H. Tipton. Collections of Maine Historical Society,
MaineMemory.Net # 5222.

Federal position, Lee could turn their flank and drive their troops from the field. Lee's plans became cemented at the news Johnston brought back to him; the back gate to the Union army was open, and he intended to enter through it.²³

Longstreet did not like Lee's plan of attack at all. He was upset that his commanding general had turned back on the promise he had given before the campaign began—that they would go on the offensive but fight battles with defensive tactics. Being the army on the offensive in a place so unfamiliar did not sit well with Longstreet; any misjudgment of the terrain could prove fatal. Moreover, Lee had ordered him to put his corps into action before his third division under Pickett had even arrived on the field. Hood remembered having a conversation with Longstreet about advancing without Pickett shortly after their conference with Lee, in which Longstreet remarked, "I never like to go into battle with one boot off."²⁴

By noon, the divisions headed by McLaws and Hood were in marching order and Longstreet's flank march on the Federal left began. While marching the men were ordered not to "display the colors as [they] were supposed to be in ambush," and overall they were "unusually silent on the march 'save the tread of thousands in motion'—not from 'any want of confidence or doubt of ultimate success,' but because 'each felt within himself that this was to be the decisive battle of the war.'" Longstreet seemed to share his men's mood. As one South Carolina officer remembered, "he had his eyes cast to the ground, as if in deep study." The Confederate line wound its way south along Herr Ridge and then snaked back to the west on the Fairfield Road. Soon after, the road turned east and the marching column came to a rise twenty or thirty feet higher than the surrounding land. Longstreet upon further investigation found that, from the rise, McLaws's division was "in full view of Round Top, from which the signal flags of the enemy were rapidly wavering." Any infantry column continuing over that rise would be instantly observed by the enemy, who could maneuver guns and troops from the heights to fire down on the advancing Confederate column. There was nothing for Longstreet to do but to turn his column around and countermarch back down the road until they could find an alternative route, which would not give away their position to the enemy. It was an ex-

tremely tedious and time-consuming countermarch, and it delayed the attack until 4:00 p.m. As such, the march took twice the time it was supposed to have taken.²⁵

After marching for some time, the Confederate column found itself along the Emmitsburg Road. Directly across was Joseph Sherfy's peach orchard, and as the Confederates looked further, the ground dipped even lower giving way to a stony farmhouse and barn. Beyond the farmhouse was a rocky ridge carpeted with trees, but looming over the ridge stood the Round Tops, which reminded one of the officers in General Anderson's division of a "volcano." General McLaws rode forward and found that Captain Johnston had made another mistake. Instead of a path clear of Federals to the Round Tops there were lines of Union infantry with their artillery in Sherfy's peach orchard filing into position along the length of the Emmitsburg Road. Along their line, the Federals had piled log rails and anything else not attached to the ground, which could assist them in creating breastworks to shield themselves from enemy bullets. As the gray officers decided what course they should take with the unexpected change of events, Federal artillery began raining shells on their position as more columns of Rebels came into sight.²⁶

According to Johnston, there should not have been Union troops anywhere near where the Confederates had taken up their position, so what happened? By every account taken by Union officers after the battle, the area south of Cemetery Hill had been a bustle of Union activity since the close of the previous day, with reinforcements pouring into the Union lines. The mistake made by Johnston seems to have been an honest one. The plain between South Mountain and the Susquehanna River is dotted with hills and other landforms, and on the morning of July 2 when Johnston was doing his reconnaissance, the whole area was covered by a "heavy fog," which "hung over the field." It is entirely possible that Johnston, not being accustomed to the land of southeastern Pennsylvania, simply climbed a hill, and thought it was one of the Round Tops, thus "completely overlooking the mass of Union troops between Cemetery Hill and the Round Tops that morning."²⁷

While Generals Lee and Longstreet were planning the assault on the Federal left, Union reinforcements were swelling the Federal lines.

Among those reinforcements were General Daniel Sickles's 3rd Corps, which marched up the Emmitsburg Road around 9:00 a.m. and turned east toward Cemetery Ridge at the peach orchard. Sickles put his corps on General Hancock's left flank, which extended the Union line to Little Round Top. Once in the position he had been ordered to take, Sickles decided he did not like it because he felt his left flank was completely unprotected, or "in the air." He looked to his front towards the Emmitsburg Road and saw the land was higher there than where he was stationed and worried that if the Confederates moved into that position around the peach orchard, they could sweep his entire position with artillery. Sickles sent a detachment of sharpshooters towards the Emmitsburg Road to see if there were any enemy infantry advancing on his position.²⁸

Around 1:00 p.m. the sharpshooters ran into the Rebels, which prompted Sickles to move his position forward. His new line ran at a thirty-degree angle from Cemetery Ridge along the eastern edge of the Emmitsburg Road. Sickles's line went along the high ground of the peach orchard and turned to the left and went down in elevation onto a farm road to a wheat field, and from there followed the Plum Run stream into Devil's Den. An assault on the Union line would be difficult as men would have to break ranks to avoid the Plum Run and meander through Devil's Den. Sickles's positioning of his troops, however, resulted in his corps being completely detached from the rest of the Federal army and left the Round Tops exposed for the Rebels to occupy. Had the Rebels secured either of the Round Tops, they would have been in a position to use their artillery to pour fire down on Sickles's troops.²⁹

Hancock observed Sickles's movement from his position on Cemetery Ridge and remarked, "Gentlemen, that is a splendid advance" and "beautiful to look at . . . those troops will be coming back again very soon." When General Meade finally rode forward to inspect Sickles's position, he was furious. Sickles responded that he now held the high ground, to which Meade replied, "General Sickles . . . this is in some respects higher ground than that to the rear; but there is still higher ground in front of you, and if you keep advancing you will find constantly higher ground all the way to the mountains." Sickles then offered to return to his original po-

sition, but it was too late; the rebels were upon him. "I wish to God you could," Meade said, "but the enemy won't let you." Soon after, Confederate artillery opened fire, and Longstreet's assault began. The Confederate force numbered 21,000 to Sickles's 8,000.³⁰

Devil's Den

The Confederate attack moved in echelon from right to left; General Hood's division marched first on the right, quickly followed by that of General McLaws, and lastly by General Anderson's division sent from A. P. Hill's corps. Hood's division was supposed to move on the Round Tops while McLaws's division would crush the 3rd Corps in the peach orchard, and Anderson was supposed take the summit of Little Round Top. At the start of the assault, Hood rose in his saddle and yelled, "Fix bayonets, my brave Texans . . . forward and take those heights." A Confederate survivor remembered after the battle that there came a cry from the line "such a wild and indescribable battle yell that no one having heard ever forgot." Colonel William C. Oats of the 15th Alabama regiment, Hood's division, remembered: "The Federals replied from their guns on and near Little Round Top, and within a few minutes our line advanced in quick time under the fire of our guns, through an open field . . . through the open valley of Plum Run, a small, muddy, meandering stream running through it near the base of the mountains." Because Sickles had changed his line so it extended from Devil's Den on the left along a ridge to the Emmitsburg Road, Sickles gave the Confederates a "very warm reception."³¹

Brigadier General J. H. Hobart Ward of Sickles's corps had five regiments in line between Devil's Den and a nearby wheat field, with an additional eight companies of sharpshooters and a battery of four guns in Devil's Den itself. Ward ordered his men to hold their fire until the Confederates were at least two hundred yards away. When the Union troops opened fire, the gray line staggered, and the men in it ran for cover. The main battle centered around a "triangular" piece of open ground east of Devil's Den, a "mountain meadow bounded by low rock walls and thick woods, which attackers and defenders alike used for cover." The Federals stubbornly

fought on against the endless waves of the Confederate onslaught. Even when the 4th Maine and 99th Pennsylvania were pushed back to Plum Run they organized a counterattack and charged back up the slope to regain control of the boulder-strewn Devil's Den. Within fifteen minutes, however, they were overwhelmed by rebel forces and forced to fall back. In a particular period of fierce fighting, two regiments from Georgia charged a gap in the Union line between Devil's Den and the Round Tops. The fighting that resulted in that small area was so ferocious it forever after became known as the "Slaughter Pen." Legend has it that one Confederate soldier, referring to the seemingly endless number of Union troops, remarked, "Great God! Have we the Universe to whip?" As the Federals gave ground, vicious hand-to-hand fighting occurred on the banks of the Plum Run causing its waters to run red. The Union troops fought valiantly but were eventually forced to withdraw, leaving the Confederates the victors of the battle at Devil's Den.³²

"Hold this ground at all costs":

Little Round Top

As the battle was raging in Devil's Den and the peach orchard, General Meade sent General Gouverneur Kemble Warren, a civil engineer in the Army of the Potomac, to inspect the defenses at Little Round Top. General Henry Slocum, a Union veteran of Gettysburg, wrote years later about his "admiration of General Warren" and his "sense of the great debt due him," stating that "his military knowledge enabled him to discover in Little Round Top the key of the field, and . . . instinct prompted him . . . to seize it." Upon arriving at the summit, Warren found no troops there whatsoever, except a small detachment of Signal Corps men who were about to leave. Warren remembered standing at the summit with one of the signal officers: "He was about to fold up his flag and withdraw, but remained at my request, and kept waving them in defiance." As Warren waited for infantry to arrive on Little Round Top, he appeared to a *New York Herald* reporter as "cool and undisturbed, watching with his glass the distant woods, and anxiously scanning the forests at our left." Finally, Colonel Strong Vincent's brigade arrived sprinting up the paths on the far side of Little

Round Top. Looking across the battlefield, Vincent saw that "Devil's Den was a smoking crater" and the ravine separating Little Round Top from Devil's Den was "a whirling maelstrom."³³

The four regiments which made up Vincent's brigade were the 44th New York; 83rd Pennsylvania; 16th Michigan; and, lastly, the 20th Maine. Vincent placed the 16th Michigan on the right; next came the 44th New York, the 83rd Pennsylvania; and, anchoring the extreme left of the entire Union line on the battlefield, Vincent placed the 20th Maine. The latter position was commanded by Colonel Chamberlain, who until the previous summer had been a professor of rhetoric at Bowdoin College in Maine. Vincent warned Chamberlain, "I place you here! This is the left of the Union line. You understand. You are to hold this ground at all costs." Chamberlain wrote in his memoirs that as his regiment neared the summit of Little Round Top, the Confederate "shot so raked the crest that [they] had to keep [their] men below it to save [their] heads, although this did not wholly avert the visits of treetops and splinters of rock and iron, while the boulders and clefts and pitfalls in [their] path made it seem like the replica of the evil 'den' across the sweetly named Plum Run."³⁴

The 20th Maine line looked towards Big Round Top, which was "frowning above [them] not a gunshot away . . . and raising grave thoughts of what might happen if the enemy should gain a foothold there," Chamberlain later wrote. Colonel Oats's 15th Alabama, which would be the Confederate regiment to duel the 20th Maine on the slopes of Little Round Top, had just been on the summit of Big Round Top where "some men fainted from heat, exhaustion, and thirst." Unfortunately for the Confederates, rather than holding Big Round Top until Confederate reinforcements or artillery arrived, Oats had been ordered to advance and secure Little Round Top to make its summit impossible to maintain by the Union Troops. Without time for rest, Oats ordered his regiment forward to capture the heights of Little Round Top. His Alabamians advanced "rapidly, without any skirmishers in front, the woods being open without undergrowth." He saw "no enemy until within forty or fifty steps of an irregular ledge of rocks—a splendid line of natural breastworks."³⁵

The 4th Alabama and the 47th Alabama from Hood's division crashed into the front line of the 20th Maine. Quickly, Chamberlain's attention was called to his left flank where "thick groups in gray were pushing up along the smooth dale between the Round Tops." To counteract the flanking movement of the 15th Alabama, Chamberlain ordered the captains to "keep the front fire at the hottest . . . and at the same time, as they found the opportunity, to take side steps to the left, coming gradually into one rank." The blue and gray lines met, broke, and engaged in hand-to-hand fighting numerous times over the next hour with the lines moving backwards and forwards as each side sought to maintain its position. Chamberlain remembered, "At times I saw around me more of the enemy than of my own men; gaps opening, swallowing, closing again with sharp convulsive energy." As the fighting wore on, the Maine men began to run short on ammunition, and at one point, after they repulsed the Alabamians, pounced on the ammunition of any "disabled friend or foe on the field."³⁶

The Alabamians organized for one more assault on the Maine lines; they "came on as if they meant to sweep everything up before them." Chamberlain's men had fired their last shots and were wondering how on earth they would be able to repulse another Confederate attack. They had asked for assistance from the other regiments of the brigade, but there was none to be had. Just when all hope was leaving the men, one of Chamberlain's lieutenants asked if he could take his company forward to retrieve some of his men wounded on the field, to which Chamberlain replied, "Yes, sir, in a moment! I am about to order a charge!" Chamberlain stepped forward to his color guard and yelled "BAYONET!" which caught like a fire up and down the Maine line. Chamberlain described how his men "took it up with a shout. . . . It was vain to order 'Forward.' No mortal could have heard it in the mighty hosanna that was winging the sky." The men rapidly attached bayonets and "quivered for the start; the edge of the left-wing rippled, swung, tossed among the rocks, straight-ended . . . down into the face of half a thousand!" Chamberlain later wrote how the line became a great right wheel: "Our left swung first. The advancing foe stopped, tried to make a stand amidst the trees and boulders, but the frenzied bayonets pressing through every space

forced a constant settling to the rear . . . it turned to full retreat—some amidst the crags of Great Round Top, but most down the smooth vale towards their own main line on Plum Run."³⁷

In ordering the charge, Chamberlain used the greater elevation of the hill his regiment had occupied to fuel the explosion of his men down the rocky slopes of Little Round Top. His Mainers overpowered the advancing Confederates whose lines were not tight and compact because of the many trees and boulders, and who were weary and exhausted. In so using the elevation of his position to speed his men forward down the hill, Chamberlain used the land to save the Union defenses at Gettysburg. Colonel Oats remarked in his memoirs, "There never were harder fighters than the Twentieth Maine men and their gallant Colonel. His skills and persistency saved Little Round Top and the Army of the Potomac from defeat." Quickly Oats's line became unmanageable and he ordered a retreat. With another "regiment [they] would have completely turned the flank and have won Little Round Top. . . . Another lost opportunity."³⁸

By 6:30 p.m., the columns of gray were pushed back from the Round Tops. Fighting continued through the wheat field for a short amount of time, but gradually it gave way to the agonizing moans and shrieks of the wounded that lay scattered across the field. The cries of those who lay dying pierced the darkness and echoed from every tree and rock, dell and hill, ravine and stream, across the field. Some cried for water, others for their mothers, and some for God to end their suffering. In that manner, the second day of fighting at Gettysburg came to a close with both sides still holding the ground they had held in the morning. Thousands of dead and wounded had given their all, and neither side had gained any ground.³⁹

Still, the day had been carried by the Union, because they had had the most to lose, especially upon the rocky hillside of Little Round Top. Had the Rebels overpowered the Federal position on Little Round Top, or had they occupied the superior heights of Big Round Top, the left flank of the Union army would have fell and General Lee could have broken through the Army of the Potomac. The Union line would have folded like dominos. The battle would have been lost and perhaps also the war. But, luckily for the Federals, their left flank had held,



"View from Little Roundtop, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, ca. 1895." Photographic print. Collections of Maine Historical Society, MaineMemory.Net # 5201.

and a regiment from Maine would be immortalized in American history by their gallant stand and heroic charge ordered by Colonel Chamberlain.

The Confederates had thrown everything they had on the Federal left, and yet they could not budge the Yankees from behind the rocks and trees that offered them shelter. The Battle of Gettysburg was lost for the Confederates on July 2 when they in vain tried to turn the Federal left flank. Though the Army of the Potomac was at its weakest point in the three-day battle, the Confederates lost because of the topography that delayed their assault through the morning and afternoon, the same topography that sheltered the Union troops and allowed them to hold on against superior numbers. Hastily constructed breastworks of stones on the summit of Little Round Top and the other natural protec-

tions given to them by the trees and boulders helped them weather a rain of fire and death.

The same natural resources that aided the Union cause contributed to the defeat of Dixie. The boulders, trees, and breastworks of loose stones caused the Confederate lines to spread apart, which weakened them and lessened the force of their assaults. The slope of Little Round Top allowed lumbermen and fishermen from Maine to engage in a rapidly paced downhill charge upon weary rebels who could not stand against the fire in their eyes and the white flames of their bayonets. The heat and lack of water, which the rebel troops encountered, made it so they could not sustain a vicious fight the likes of which was forced upon them by the 20th Maine on that famous hill.

As July 3 dawned, General Lee felt he had no other choice but to hurl thousands of his men at



"Battle of Gettysburg painting, 1884." Photographic print of original Battle of Gettysburg Cyclorama depicting "Pickett's Charge," painted by Paul Philippoteaux and displayed at the Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, National Military Park. Collections of Maine Historical Society, MaineMemory.Net # 5225.

the center of the Union line, across a quarter mile of open field and Federal artillery to a stone wall at the center of the field that sheltered the Federal defenders. Out of desperation and vanity, Lee sent those men to their deaths during Pickett's Charge. In a way, that charge meant nothing to the overall outcome of the battle other than proving to the great Confederate general that it was truly lost. Once the Union held the high ground on July 2, they were so firmly entrenched that no assault by the numerically inferior Army of Northern Virginia could possibly have removed them. Leadership played an important role in the battle, of course, but the mistakes and deficient knowledge of the terrain of southeastern Pennsylvania, combined with

the superior ground upon which the Union stood, resulted in the Union victory at the Battle of Gettysburg and marked the high tide of the Confederacy.

As the Army of Northern Virginia retreated on July 4, the leaders of Europe diverted their eyes from the American Civil War, ensuring that the Confederate States of America would receive no help from abroad. As President Lincoln said during the dedication of the national cemetery at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, the world would "never forget what they did here." His words still hold true, as 150 years later we remember Chamberlain's famous charge down Little Round Top toward the waiting Alabama troops.⁴⁰

NOTES

1. For examples of conventional scholarly analysis of the events at Gettysburg, see Harry Hansen, *The Civil War: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1961), Albert C. Guelzo, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), and Philippe Comte de Paris et al., "Gettysburg Thirty Years After," *North American Review* (February 1891).
2. Bradford Willard, "Geology and Wars: A Neglected Factor in Wars Within the Continental Limits of the United States of America," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 30, no. 4 (October 1963): 393–419.
3. James McPherson, "Secret Gettysburg Strategy: Was Lee looking for a final battle?" *Civil War Times* (2007): 29; Harry Hansen, *The Civil War*, 312 (quotation).
4. Hansen, *Civil War*, 258 (first quotation), 313; D. Scott Hartwig, *To the Crossroads of Gettysburg* (Gettysburg Commemorative Issue, 2003), 9; Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 21–23 (second–fifth quotations).
5. Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 21.
6. Jeffery D. Wert, "If Lee Had Won at Gettysburg," *Civil War Times* 42, no. 3 (August 2003): 50.
7. McPherson, *Gettysburg Strategy*, 27; Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 34 (all quotations).
8. Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 35.
9. Hartwig, *Crossroads*, 10.
10. Hansen, *Civil War*, 358–367 (first quotation, p. 361, second quotation, p. 367); Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 114 (third quotation).
11. Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 81.
12. *Ibid.*, 89.
13. *Ibid.*, 92.
14. McPherson, *Gettysburg Strategy*, 27.
15. Hansen, *Gettysburg*, 363 (first quotation); G. D. Sheffield, *The Hutchinson Atlas of Battle Plans Before and After: Civil War 1863, The High Tide of the Confederacy* (Chicago: Helicon Publishing Limited, 1998), 195 (second quotation).
16. Hartwig, *Crossroads*, 11.
17. Sheffield, *Hutchinson Atlas*, 197; Bradford Willard, "Geology and Wars," 25.
18. Hansen, *Civil War*, 369 (first quotation); Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 98, 123 (third quotation); 131 (second quotation); Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg—Culp's Hill and Cemetery Ridge* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1993), 32; Hartwig, *Crossroads*, 11 (third quotation).
19. Hansen, *Civil War*, 369–373; Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 76; Troy Harman, "The Unchanging Plan," *Civil War Times* (2003): 45 (first quotation); Philippe Comte de Paris et al., "Gettysburg Thirty Years After," *North American Review* (1891): 145 (second quotation).
20. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, "Bayonet! Forward" *My Civil War Reminiscences* (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books), 20.
21. Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 235–236.
22. *Ibid.*, 237–240.
23. *Ibid.*, 238–240.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 240–242.
26. Stephen G. Hyslop, *Eyewitness to the Civil War* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006), 236 (quotation); Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 240–242.
27. Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 243.
28. Hyslop, *Eyewitness*, 236.
29. Craig L. Symonds, *Gettysburg: A Battlefield Atlas* (Baltimore, MD: Nautical & Aviation Publishing, 1992), 45; Symonds, *Battlefield Atlas*, 45.
30. Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 251–252 (first and second quotation); Symonds, *Battlefield Atlas*, 45 (third quotation), 49.

31. Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 255–256 (first and second quotations); William C. Oats, *The War Between the Union and the Confederacy: And its Lost Opportunities: With a History of the 15th Alabama Regiment and the Forty-Eight Battles in Which it Was Engaged* (Dayton, OH: Morningside Bookshop), 207–208 (third and fourth quotations).
32. Symonds, *Battlefield Atlas*, 49 (first and second quotation); Hartwig, *Crossroads*, 13 (third quotation).
33. Glenn W. Lafantasie, “Night and Death on Little Round Top,” *American History* 39, no. 6 (February 2005); Paris et al., *Thirty Years After*, 141 (first quotation); Hansen, *Civil War*, 378 (second quotation); Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 268 (third quotation), 270 (fourth quotation).
34. Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 270–271 (first quotation); Chamberlain, “*Bayonet*,” 23 (second quotation).
35. Chamberlain, “*Bayonet*,” 25 (first quotation); Oats, *15th Alabama*, 211 (second quotation), 214 (third and fourth quotations).
36. Chamberlain, “*Bayonet*,” 26–28 (first-third quotation); Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 271 (fourth quotation).
37. Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 272 (first quotation); Chamberlain, “*Bayonet*,” 33 (second–sixth quotations).
38. Oats, *15th Alabama*, 216 (second quotation), 219 (first quotation).
39. Guelzo, *Gettysburg*, 271–274.
40. Abraham Lincoln, delivered 19 November 1863, online transcript, last accessed 9 September 2019, <https://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gettysburgaddress.htm>