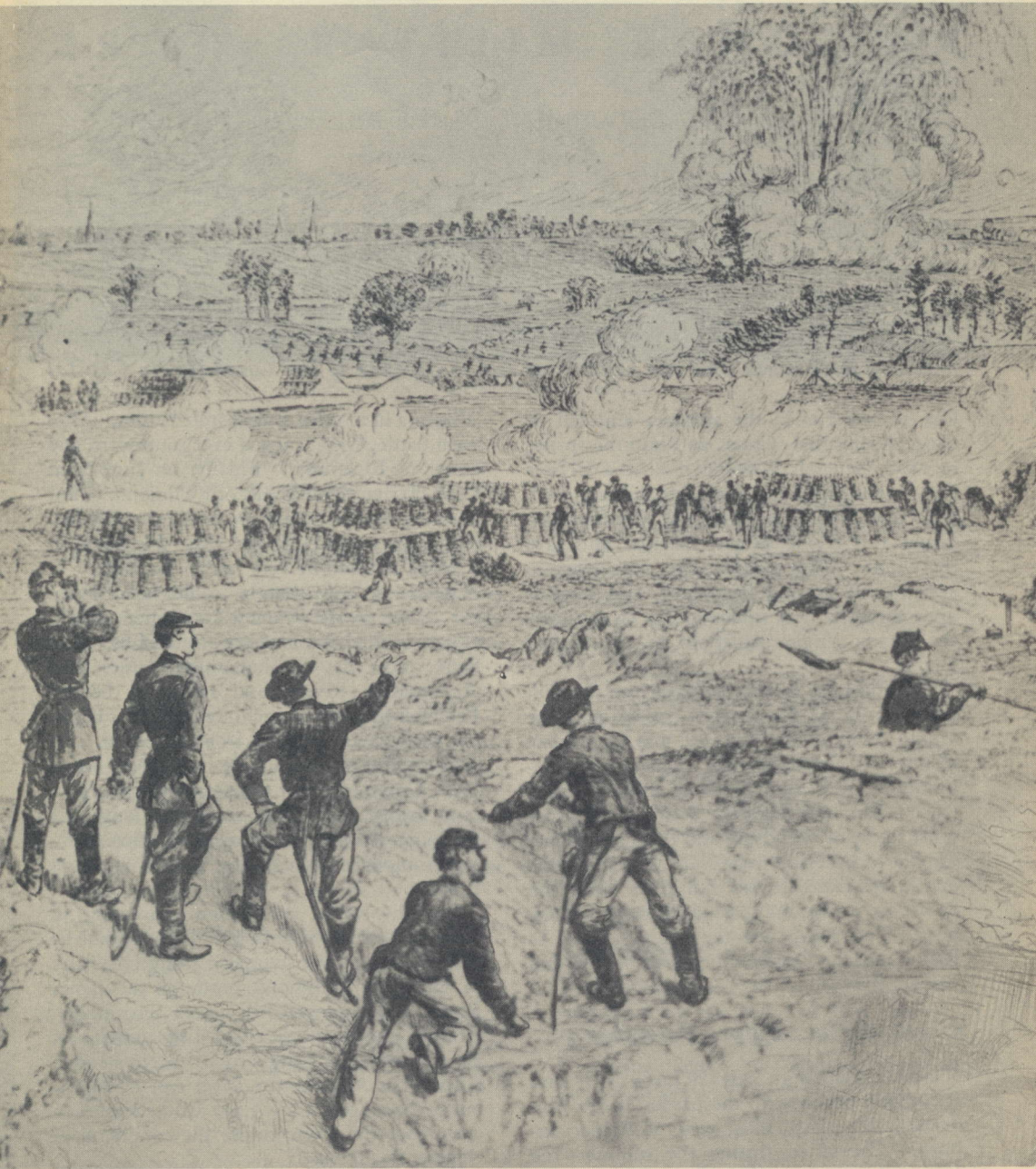


PETERSBURG



**NATIONAL MILITARY PARK
VIRGINIA**

PETERSBURG

NATIONAL MILITARY PARK



U. S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Douglas McKay, Secretary

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Conrad L. Wirth, Director



Scene of decisive military operations that cut Confederate lines of communications between Richmond and the South and led to capture of the Confederate Capital

FOR 10 MONTHS in the summer and fall of 1864, during that winter, and into the spring of 1865, Generals Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant engaged in a desperate military duel. Lee was trying to save the Confederacy. Grant was trying to end the war and save the Union. This gigantic duel took place in a semicircle around Petersburg and covered approximately 170 square miles of territory, the largest single battlefield in the United States.

This decisive contest between the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia and the Union Army of the Potomac was for control of lines of communication. Unless food, ammunition, and other kinds of supplies could reach Richmond from the South, Lee's army must starve or withdraw and the Confederate Capital of necessity must fall. Excepting the one from Danville, all rail lines from the South to Richmond passed through Petersburg. Petersburg was the supply funnel to Richmond, the Confederate Government, and Lee's army.

Grant Arrives Before Petersburg

Grant's campaign against Lee's army and Richmond began with the battles of the Wilderness, May 5-7, 1864, west of Fredericksburg. Thereafter, during the summer, the Union Army of the Potomac under the immediate command of General Meade, but in reality commanded by General Grant, engaged Lee's Confederate Army of Northern

Virginia in a series of desperate battles. After each battle, Grant moved ever southward and closer to Richmond. Finally, on June 3, at Cold Harbor, 8 miles east of Richmond, Grant tried by frontal attack to crush the Confederate Army and enter the city. He failed in a defeat marked by very heavy casualties.

Believing now that he could not capture the Confederate Capital by frontal attack, Grant decided to maneuver around Lee's right flank, cross the Chickahominy, James, and Appomattox Rivers, and swing in behind Petersburg, south of Richmond. Grant began his withdrawal from in front of Lee at Cold Harbor the night of June 12. Two nights later, Union engineer troops completed a pontoon bridge more than 2,000 feet long over the James River. The army started that night, and completed its crossing 2 days later, on June 16.

Lee discovered the Union movement in front of him the morning of June 13, but he believed Grant was swinging around his flank to move on Richmond north of the James River, and disposed his troops accordingly. Grant's maneuver deceived Lee completely. At the time the vanguard of Grant's forces crossed the Appomattox River east of Petersburg, there were only 3,500 Confederates in and about the town, under the command of General Beauregard.

Petersburg and its vital rail communications should have fallen to the Union forces on June 15. But because of a series of Union blunders by subordinate commanders, Beauregard was

able to hold a defense line at the edge of the town. By bringing in all available reinforcements and a great display of energy and good judgment, Beauregard was just able to hold the city during the next 2 days while Lee moved his army down from around Richmond. A general Union attack on June 18 failed. In these 4 days of fighting around Petersburg, the northern army suffered about 10,000 casualties. But it had cut 2 of the 4 railroads leading into the town from the south.

Beginning of the Siege

Grant decided to lay siege to Petersburg. If he could extend his left flank westward around the town far enough, he would cut off the two remaining railroads and deprive Lee of his supplies. On June 21, Grant gave the orders to invest the city and accomplish this. Lee had about 50,000 men defending Petersburg against Grant's approximately 112,000 men besieging it.

Already both sides had built many fortifications east and southeast of Petersburg. Now began the process of extending them south and west around the city. Eventually they stretched for nearly 40 miles in a great arc from east of Richmond to southwest of Petersburg. Forts and artillery batteries dominated almost every hill or rise of ground of these parallel fortified lines. Fields of fire were cleared in front of the guns. As long as men

stayed reasonably alert, it was almost suicidal for either side to attempt a frontal attack against these works. Many of these earth forts and some of the connecting trenches still stand in the park, little affected by the passing years.

Battle of the Crater

Rather than settle down to a long siege, some members of the 48th Pennsylvania Regiment, many of whom had been coal miners, proposed that they drive a mine tunnel under a Confederate battery opposite them southeast of Petersburg. When the proposal received approval, the regiment dug a main tunnel 511 feet long, and then cut lateral galleries from it. On the morning of July 30, they exploded 4 tons of powder under Elliott's salient of the Confederate line. The explosion blew up a Confederate battery, leaving a crater about 170 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet deep.

Union troops easily occupied the crater. Had the infantry attack through this breach in the Confederate line been executed as planned, Petersburg might have been captured. But the Union attack after the explosion was attended by a series of blunders and much confusion. In the early afternoon, the Confederates regained possession of the crater. Union forces at this battle lost 4,000 men killed, wounded, or captured.

The Battle of the Crater. From the painting by John A. Elder.

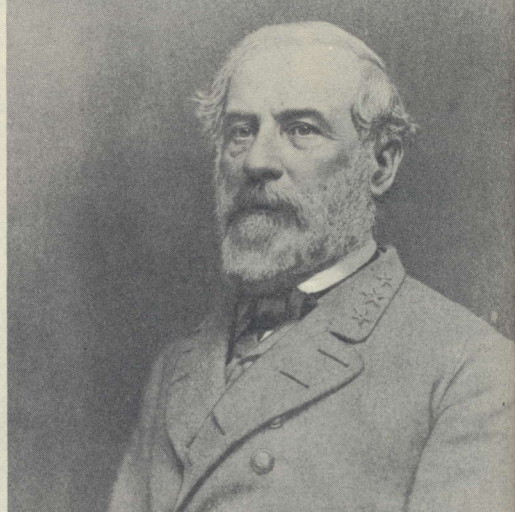
Courtesy Virginia State Chamber of Commerce.





Gen. Ulysses S. Grant.

Courtesy Signal Corps, U. S. Army.



Gen. Robert E. Lee.

Courtesy Cook Studio.

The Siege Works Extend Westward

Now began in earnest the series of maneuvers and battles for possession of the two remaining railroads running into Petersburg from the south and west. On August 18, Union troops cut the Weldon Railroad (today the Atlantic Coast Line) near Globe Tavern. Thereafter, the Confederates had to haul by wagon, from their railhead on this track, 20 miles south of Petersburg, around the Union left flank into the city. Soon, Union forces had destroyed so much of the Weldon Railroad that the Confederates abandoned it altogether.

By October 2, Union forces had won the ground where they subsequently built Fort Fisher—one of the largest earth forts ever built in North America. There the Union Army stood only 3 miles short of the all-important Southside Railroad (today the Norfolk and Western) which ran along the south bank of the Appomattox River.

By March 1865, Grant's tactics and superior manpower had forced the Confederates to extend their defensive lines for a total length of 37 miles around Petersburg. It was clear that soon Grant's forces would either get around the Confederate right flank or pierce the line at some point. Either would doom Petersburg. Grant's great worry in March was that Lee and his army would escape from Petersburg before he could deliver the final blow.

In a major diversionary effort to give himself time to withdraw from Richmond and Petersburg, Lee ordered a final attack on the Union lines at Fort Stedman. This attack on March 25 failed.

The end of the long struggle before Petersburg came suddenly in the first days of April. On April 1, Sheridan's cavalry and some infantry gained a crushing victory at Five Forks, 17 miles southwest of Petersburg. Petersburg was now all but surrounded. Many miles to the east Grant received the news. He walked over to the signal tent, and when he came back, said, "I have ordered an immediate assault all along the lines."

The next morning, Sunday, April 2, Grant's army struck from Fort Fisher in a great attack. By noon they had captured the Southside Railroad and the Confederate outer line west of Petersburg all the way to the Appomattox River, except for Forts Gregg and Baldwin. They fell in the afternoon after desperate close combat. That morning at 10 o'clock Lee had sent word to President Jefferson Davis that Richmond and Petersburg would have to be evacuated that night.

In the evening, the Confederates started crossing to the north side of the Appomattox River at Petersburg, the only way still open for retreat. By dawn the next morning, when the Union soldiers resumed their attack, Lee's army was out of Petersburg and marching west north of the river, headed for the Rich-



Earthworks at Fort Stedman.

mond and Danville Railroad. Appomattox—and final surrender—was now only a week away.

Poplar Grove National Cemetery

The graves of about 6,000 Union soldiers and 13 known Confederates are in this cemetery, which is 3 miles south of Petersburg on State Route 675.

The Park

An act of Congress, approved July 3, 1926, established Petersburg National Military Park. The park, containing 1,502.14 acres of Federal land, is rich in well-preserved remains of both Union and Confederate earth forts, field fortifications, and trench lines. Most of these points of interest are accessible by roads.

Travel Routes to the Park

The park is adjacent to the city of Petersburg on the east and south, and you may enter it at many points. It is suggested that you go first to the information station and museum at the Crater, located southeast of Petersburg on U. S. 460 and 301.

About Your Visit

Park personnel will gladly discuss any aspect of park development of special interest to you. Markers at many points in the park will help you identify specific sites of importance. It is suggested that you visit these places by following the tour route marked on the map at the back of this folder.

Those who plan to visit in a group may receive special service if advance arrangements are made with the superintendent.

There is available at the park museum, or from the Superintendent of Documents, Washington 25, D. C., at 30 cents, a 56-page booklet telling the story of the military operations around Petersburg in some detail. The booklet has 8 maps and 37 illustrations, many of them wartime photographs.

Administration

Petersburg National Military Park is administered by the National Park Service of the United States Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Petersburg, Va., is in immediate charge.

The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and enjoyment of its people.

