

THREE DAYS THAT CHANGED THE NATION

The first three days of July 1863 changed not only our nation, but the future of democracy. The Civil War began on April 12, 1861 when former U.S. soldiers- recently aligned with states which seceded to form the Confederate States of America- fired upon U.S. troops at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. The war of words had begun decades before, with rich plantation owners in the South resisting any efforts to restrict the spread of slavery and any limitations on the use, transport and ownership of slaves. Many people in the North abhorred slavery, yet many famous people- including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson- had owned slaves. Slavery was legal throughout the country, yet limitations had been placed on the extension of slavery into the new territories and new laws were being drafted to further restrict its imprint on American society.

In December 1860, South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union- less than two months after Lincoln had been elected President. Their protest was later followed by another ten Southern states, whose citizens were showing their resistance to any limitations on their rights and their way of life.

Most Southerners Didn't Own Slaves

The irony of the Southern revolt is that less than one quarter of the inhabitants in the South owned slaves- thus the overwhelming majority of Southern citizens were not fighting for their own right to own slaves (as they had never and likely would never own them). However, the South was largely an agrarian economy- thus the existence and perpetuation of slavery was considered by many to be essential to their way of life. So the war began first as a revolt against those who would restrict slavery- and secondly as a statement of states' rights. Southern citizens felt strongly that their individual states were independent entities which had the right to leave the Union and pursue their own interests. Thus, slavery and states' rights were rallying cries of those who began the bloodiest war in American history- a war which lasted four years (1861-65) and claimed casualties of over 600,000- more than all the wars from the Revolutionary War to the Korean War COMBINED. ...and the Battle of Gettysburg was the largest battle ever fought on the North American continent.



A Crossroads of History

Gettysburg, a small town in South-Central Pennsylvania just north of the border with Maryland, is a crossroads where twelve major thoroughfares converge. The area was home to the small, then-named Pennsylvania College, in addition to farmers and local merchants when two great armies numbering over 160,000 converged. In late June 1863, General Robert E. Lee, the South's greatest general, decided to make a bold attack upon the Union in a move designed to bring sentiment against the war and shock Northerners into acceptance of the Confederacy. Before July 1863, the war had raged mostly in the Southern or Border States (Virginia, Maryland, Tennessee) and Lee's move was a desperate attempt to end the war with a crushing victory by the South- or at least a stalemate, which would in effect be a victory allowing the South to simply exist as a separate entity.



The South Came from the North...the North Came from the South

The Battle of Gettysburg began on July 1, 1863 when a Confederate division led by A.P. Hill moved toward the town from the Northwest and was engaged by troops led by Union General John Buford, whose troops had been moving toward the town from the South. A story-likely apocryphal- holds that the Southern troops were in search of shoes and other basic provisions and sought out the location of a shoe factory near the town- but there is little evidence for this. Early in the day the Confederates were overwhelmed with a high ranking officer captured, but reinforcements quickly arrived and the Union troops were pushed back into the town, and then Cemetery Hill. The Confederates quickly gained control of the town, taking positions there and to the West along Seminary Ridge, not far from the Lutheran Theological Seminary, whose cupola has become famous as a landmark spot where Buford scouted out enemy lines during the early hours of the battle. Fighting raged all day along the edges of the town, well into the night...

Ten Mistakes Which Turned the Battle at Gettysburg

There were mistakes made by both sides in the Battle of Gettysburg, but most of them must be listed as missed opportunities by the South. On the first day, Lee gave orders to take the hill (Cemetery Hill) “if practicable”. Yet, his gentlemanly request was not taken too seriously as the general in command decided not to do so and missed a major opportunity to overwhelm the Northern troops before their reinforcements had arrived- as the South currently outnumbered them at that time. This may have been the most important error which eventually determined the outcome of the battle. Despite sporadic firing throughout the night from Confederate sharpshooters who took positions in the now famous Farnsworth House on Baltimore Street to pick off Union infantry, the Northern troops held their own. As the battle moved into the early morning hours of the second day, the Union line began to form the early likeness of the now recognized inverted “fishhook” ringing the town from the North and Northeast, around to the West and Southwest.





The Wheatfield, Peach Orchard, Devil's Den & Little Round Top

The second day at Gettysburg was the most bloody and brutal. Vicious hand-to-hand combat in the Wheatfield and the Peach Orchard South of town caused thousands of casualties. The treacherous sniper attacks in and around the boulder-strewn Devil's Den added to the death and destruction. In addition, Confederate attacks on Union positions around Culp's Hill and Spangler's Spring caused greater uncertainty as to the viability of the Union position. Perhaps the most famous and strategic battle of the second day occurred when Confederate troops stormed a Union position on Little Round Top, a mountain South of town overlooking Devil's Den. Troops in the 20th Maine regiment under Colonel Joshua Chamberlain repulsed several Confederate assaults, but near the end of the day, the Union troops were exhausted and nearly out of ammunition. The last Confederate assault was beginning late in the afternoon and Chamberlain implemented his now famous "swinging door" counterattack where his men charged the enemy in a brutal bayonet attack. The charge succeeded- protecting the far left of the Union line- likely helping to determine the outcome of the entire conflict. Many historians view the battle of Little Round Top as one of the most important engagements of the Battle of Gettysburg- and some contend that, in effect, it helped to frame the outcome of the Civil War, as it set the stage for a defeat of Lee and eventual retreat and capitulation.



Pickett's Charge....and Retreat

The early morning of the third day at Gettysburg began with renewed attacks around Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill....and then lapsed into an eerie silence- both sides were caring for their wounded and re-positioning for new attacks. General Lee was convinced that an attack on the Union center would overwhelm their forces and bring victory. However, General Longstreet, one of Lee's most trusted advisors, felt that a flanking attack around to the far left of the Union line would surprise the Union forces and lead to victory. Lee ignored Longstreet's repeated suggestions and moved forward with his plan- a major attack upon the center of the Union line- which Longstreet was convinced would fail. In the early afternoon on July 3, 1863, a massive artillery assault by the South began, focused on the Union troops amassed all along Cemetery Hill. For several hours, cannonballs flew through the air from both sides as the North counterattacked with their own barrage- tearing apart human targets and destroying artillery, wagons and horses.

General George Pickett, a Confederate general who had graduated last in his class at West Point, was chosen by Lee to lead the charge after the artillery attack ended around 3:00 p.m.. The Confederate troops had to march virtually without any protective cover for almost one mile toward the Union encampments along Cemetery Hill. Union forces led by General George Gordon Meade were battered from the previous onslaught- but they were ready. They could see the huge Confederate assault beginning- and they readied their rifles and cannons to tear apart

the Confederate lines. By this time, Meade had several divisions of fresh troops to defend his position and the odds were clearly in favor of the well-positioned Union forces.



The “High Water Mark” of the Confederacy...and a Slow March Back Across the Potomac

Wave after wave of Confederate troops hurled themselves against the Union positions, focusing on the now famous “copse of trees” near the middle of the Union line. The Confederates were being cut down in large numbers by cannonball, grapeshot and shrapnel fired in canisters from Union cannons...but they managed to breach the line at a place now called “The Angle” where a wedge of rocks outlining a farmer’s field lay in place. Near this spot, Confederate General Lewis Armistead, himself an old friend of Union General Hancock fighting there for the North, was killed as he and his troops nearly overwhelmed Union forces, reaching a spot now known as the “High Water Mark” of the Confederacy before being repulsed. The term is used because the South would never again enter into Northern territory and the course of the war from that point forward saw increasing Northern victories and Southern losses.

Pickett’s Charge failed miserably- and Lee soon realized the extent of the disaster, blaming himself for the catastrophe. Several thousand men had given their lives in a desperate- many say doomed- attempt to defeat a well entrenched, well fortified Union line by marching across open ground in full daylight. The attack by the South here on the third day can only be considered an extremely poor and misguided decision by an otherwise brilliant general in the final hours of a losing battle. In later years- and up to the present day- the term “Pickett’s Charge” is often used to describe a valiant and courageous effort- but one deemed almost certain to fail.

A Steady Rain on Independence Day....and a Steady Retreat

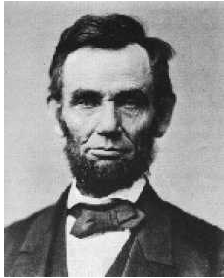
Lee’s troops were battered and overwhelmed. Pickett’s division was decimated, along with those of many other Southern generals at the scene. Lee realized his tragic error and decided to retreat as a steady rain fell on the bloody battlefield. Lee left the area and directed his troops into Maryland toward the Potomac where they would build pontoon bridges and cross the river to safety. Union General Meade was concerned that a wounded and irritated Confederate army would retaliate harshly if Meade provoked them with a rear attack and he simply allowed Lee to move away from the field of battle without any further encounters. Meade was also concerned that he only had a relatively small number of completely fresh troops and that a full attack with already tired and hungry soldiers could result in an even worse catastrophe....so he allowed Lee to escape. Upon hearing that Meade had allowed Lee to retreat without further attack, Lincoln was furious. He was convinced that a counterattack by Meade could have crippled Lee’s army and possibly ended the war...Yet Lee escaped...and the war raged on for almost two more years....



“A Few Appropriate Words...and a Final Resting Place”

After several days of leaving bodies to decompose in the fields, the citizens of the town allowed the bodies to be buried in the local cemetery. The Evergreen Cemetery in Gettysburg was chosen as the burial spot for Union soldiers and Pennsylvania governor Curtin asked

the famous orator Edward Everett of Massachusetts to speak at the dedication of the soldier's burial ground, scheduled for November 19th. Shortly before the event, the President was asked to attend and give a few brief remarks. Everett spoke for 2 ½ hours and although interesting, his words did not capture the attention of the citizens. Lincoln had spent the night riding on a train from Washington, D.C. and had written the first few lines of his speech while en route. He was asked to spend the night in Gettysburg at the home of local attorney Gary Wills, whose house sits right in the Main Square across from the Hotel Gettysburg. Lincoln finished his speech at Wills' house and rode the next day to the Cemetery. After Everett spoke, Lincoln stood up and gave his oration- which lasted for just over two minutes...but it changed the world in what has become perhaps the most famous speech in American history, the Gettysburg Address.



The Gettysburg Address

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
November 19, 1863

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth.”

