

CIVIL WAR 150TH



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Federal troops occupied a line of breastworks on the north bank of the North Anna River in 1864. During the fighting at North Anna, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee was too ill to take advantage of his last opportunity to attack.

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“Forest fires raged; ammunition-trains exploded; the dead were roasted in the conflagration; the wounded, roused by its hot breath, dragged themselves along, with their torn and mangled limbs, in the mad energy of despair, to escape the ravages of the flames; and every bush seemed hung with shreds of blood-stained clothing. It was as though Christian men had turned to fiends, and hell itself had usurped the place of earth.”

And it would get worse.

At Spotsylvania Courthouse, slaughter of Confederates at the Bloody Angle came when Lee made a rare mistake in divining the enemy’s intentions, Rhea said. Thinking that Grant was moving out, Lee pulled his artillery away from the weakest point of his line, the point where it bulged out like a muleshoe. Grant, however, was moving his troops to prepare for an attack at that very point.

Pvt. Andrew Long, a soldier in the 5th Virginia quoted in “No Turning Back,” said that “men were so close their heads were at the end of gun muzzles as they shot each other. When ammunition ran out or got wet they crushed each other’s skulls with gun butts. They stabbed each other with swords. The mud of the breastworks became a mass of torn bodies as fresh troops rushed into the mouths of cannon firing double loads of canister.”

Lee then showed himself in his best light, Rhea said. When he realized what had happened, Lee personally directed units to defend the muleshoe for 22 hours until a new defensive line could be completed.

“Grant realizes all he’s gotten is three or four acres of bloodstained Virginia soil, and the Army of Northern Virginia is in a stronger position than before,” Rhea said. “Lee has come up with a solution to a dire problem and executed it himself.”

Another end run brought Grant into Caroline County on May 21. Lee, who was so sick that he couldn’t ride his horse, still set up strong defenses at the North Anna River to protect Hanover Junction. Grant shifted again to cross the Pamunkey River into Hanover on May 26.

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Union soldiers found hope in the lack of Confederate counterattacks.

“I have the strongest hopes of ultimate success, taking into consideration the uncertainty of war,” Union Col. Theodore Lyman wrote to his wife. Even though Grant had not broken through, Lyman was encouraged by “the defensive attitude of

the enemy; an attitude which Lee never assumes unless driven to it” and “that their counter-attacks on us have been few and comparatively weak, showing that they have no large force with a ‘free foot’; but have to put all their men on their lines.”

Lee, meanwhile, had decided to construct another defensive line along a ridge at Totopotomoy Creek near historic Polegreen Church, producing a battle explored in “The Battle of Totopotomoy Creek,” a new book by Robert Bluford Jr., who’s been instrumental in preserving the site of the church.

About a mile from the church, the Shelton women refused to leave their house when Union soldiers arrived, according to an account by Union Lt. Robert Robertson. Once the battle began, Confederate guns targeted Union signal officers on the roof.

“They kept up a heavy fire on the house for more than an hour, and it was completely riddled, the women in the basement shivering and almost fainting from terror,” Robertson wrote.

“About noon as a group of us were sitting under the front of the house eating lunch, a shell came through to the wall and exploded in the room over us, blowing out the windows, and filling our lunch basket with broken glass and mortar, effectually ruining our dinner.

“As the room remained full of smoke we feared the house was on fire, and I crawled through the basement window and went upstairs to see, but found no fire. Nearly every article in the room was shattered. ... I stopped a moment in the basement to quiet the alarm of the family, and returned to the outside, where I felt safer.”

At Polegreen Church, Union sharpshooters had taken shelter inside. Assigned to dislodge them on June 2 were members of the Richmond Howitzers, including Sgt. William S. White, who was born in Hanover just a few miles from the church. Bluford was thrilled to find White’s account of the episode:

“A stream of fire rises from the roof of that old time-honored house of worship, the church of my ancestors, the church of Samuel Davies — Pole Green, perhaps the oldest Presbyterian church in Virginia — set on fire by a shot from my own gun.”

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At Cold Harbor, war returned to a crossroads that had been a battlefield in 1862. Grant had become somewhat overconfident, writing May 26 that “Lee’s army is really whipped. The prisoners we now take show it, and the action of his army shows it unmistakably. A battle with them

outside of intrenchments (sic) cannot be had.”

So Grant ordered an attack on the fortifications at Cold Harbor at dawn on June 2. When troops couldn’t get in position in time, he delayed a day, which gave Confederates an extra day to improve their defenses.

Veteran Union soldiers realized that the attempt would be deadly. The night before the battle, many wrote their names and home addresses on slips of paper they attached to their uniforms so they could be identified if killed in battle. About 6,000 Union soldiers were killed, wounded or captured that day, Rhea said. Confederates had about 1,500 casualties.

That evening, the armies slept “almost within an easy stone-throw of each other; and the separating space ploughed by cannon-shot and clotted with the dead bodies that neither side dared to bury!” Lyman wrote in a letter to his wife published in the 1922 volume, “With Grant and Meade from the Wilderness to Appomattox.”

“I think nothing can give a greater idea of deathless tenacity of purpose, than the picture of these two hosts, after a bloody and nearly continuous struggle of thirty days, thus lying down to sleep, with their heads almost on each other’s throats! Possibly it has no parallel.”

For three days the generals could not agree on a truce. By then, most of the wounded lying on the field between the armies had died.

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On June 12, Grant ordered his army to cross the James River. The Overland Campaign was over. The siege of Petersburg had begun. Grant had not defeated Lee, but he had negated him.

“This is the big campaign that changed the war,” Rhea said, “largely because of Grant, his persistence, his innovation and his ability to bring to the war a real focus that hadn’t been there yet.”

If another general had been in charge, “it could have ended at the Wilderness,” he said. “They might go back and say we just can’t break through. ... It could have gone many different ways. We could have ended up with two different countries.”

Instead, Grant pushed on to Petersburg and “Lee is stuck. His army is totally depleted. Lee launches no more campaigns.

“Grant is able to defang the Army of Northern Virginia in about 40 days. You can look at it now and say this is what sealed it.”

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Communities across U.S. commemorate battles

Three national parks and eight communities across the nation will simultaneously reflect on the “Reverberations” of Civil War battles that closed in on Richmond 150 years ago this month.

The first-time collaboration will pair Civil War parks in Fredericksburg, Richmond and Petersburg with communities that lost soldiers in the fierce fighting of Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant’s determined campaign to capture Richmond in the spring of 1864.

The three national parks along Virginia’s Interstate 95

corridor are collaborating in an unprecedented way on the Overland Campaign commemoration, said David Ruth, superintendent of Richmond National Battlefield Park.

“Reverberations” promises a contemplative look at loss as well as gain.

On May 24, Richmond’s Cold Harbor unit will set up more than 3,500 luminaries to commemorate each of the deaths in the fighting there. Visitors will be able to walk through the display from 8 to 10 p.m.

On the same day, Litchfield, Conn., will illuminate

the town green where men of the 2nd Connecticut Heavy Artillery assembled to leave for Virginia. The unit lost 141 members on June 1 while fighting for the first time as infantry at Cold Harbor.

The other site paired with Richmond — Fort Moultrie National Monument in Charleston, S.C. — will have luminaries representing each of the state’s units that fought in the Overland Campaign, many taking prominent roles at Cold Harbor.

Luminaries also will glow at Fredericksburg National Cem-

etry and at Petersburg’s Poplar Grove National Cemetery.

At 9 p.m. EDT, taps will be played simultaneously at all 11 paired sites, from the Stockbridge-Munsee Indian Reservation, in Wiconsin to Natchez, Miss., to Bangor, Maine.

“The neat thing about it is that the community itself recognizes its contribution,” Ruth said, “and that it’s not a story that belongs to a battlefield in Virginia or elsewhere.”

“These are stories that belong to Americans across the country.”

— Katherine Calos

Events for the 150th anniversary of the Overland Campaign

Fredericksburg Area

FREDERICKSBURG AND SPOTSYLVANIA NATIONAL MILITARY PARK

Today: Infantry encampment and living history at Ellwood, tactical and firing demonstrations at Saunders Field, walking tours and fireside program on eve of battle.

Monday: Real-time walking tours related to historic events at 1 and 5 p.m.

Tuesday: Real-time walking tours at 6 a.m., 9:30 a.m., 1 p.m. and 6 p.m.

Thursday: Real-time walking tours at 9 a.m., 1 p.m. and 4 p.m.

Friday: Historian talks throughout the day.

Saturday: Living history infantry camps, firing demonstrations and real-time walking tours. A Nation Remembers: Spotsylvania, 7:30 p.m.

May 11: Hidden Spotsylvania hike; Wartime Mothers program at Chatham house.

May 12: Park staff at Bloody Angle for 22 hours to mirror the combat there in 1864; real-time walking tours throughout the day, candlelight vigil at 8 p.m.

May 17: Living history commemorating first combat of United States Colored Troops against Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee’s army.

May 18: The Battle of Lee’s Last Line: real-time walking tour at 1 p.m.

SPOTSYLVANIA COURTHOUSE

Today: Living history throughout the day, author Gordon Rhea speaking at 11 a.m., Battle of the Bloody Angle reenactment at 1:30 p.m.

Richmond Area

EVENING PROGRAMS

Wednesday, 5:30 p.m., Virginia Historical Society, “The Spring of 1864: A Season of Hope for the United States and the Confederacy,” Gary W. Gallagher, professor, University of Virginia.

June 29, 8:30 p.m., American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar, “Voices from the Storm: The 1864 Overland Campaign,” outdoor multimedia program.

Anniversary Bus Tours: May 11, Battle of Yellow Tavern; **May 23**, Battle of North Anna; **May 28**, Battle of Haw’s Shop; **May 30**, Bethesda Church battlefield, Polegreen Church, Matadequin Creek and private homes; **June 14**, Grant’s Army moves from Cold Harbor to Petersburg. Cost: \$20 to \$40. Reservations: (804) 652-3411 for Yellow Tavern; (804) 355-8100 for others.

NORTH ANNA BATTLEFIELD PARK

May 24, Hanover County dedicates expansion of park with living history, tours, artillery demonstrations, HistoryMobile.

RICHMOND NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD PARK TOTOPOTOMOY CREEK BATTLEFIELD / RURAL PLAINS UNIT

May 29: Shelton House open; Meet Donald C. Pfanzer, co-author of a guide to the Overland Campaign, 2-4 p.m.; battle overview tours; evening program on “Defiant Sheltons.”

May 30: Education Day activities; Shelton House open; Meet the authors afternoon session, 3-5 p.m.; real-time tour at 6:45 p.m.

May 31: Shelton House open, real-time tour at 9 a.m.; battle overview tours in afternoon.

COLD HARBOR BATTLEFIELD UNIT

May 31: Family and children’s activities; U.S. Postal Service Cold Harbor stamp cancellation station; talk by historian Gordon Rhea at 11:30 a.m. and 7 p.m., military and popular music by Fort McHenry Guard Fife and Drum Corps, battlefield tours including candlelight tour begin at 8 p.m.

June 1: Family and children’s activities; stamp cancellation; off-site talks by historian Gordon Rhea at Beulah Church at 8 a.m. and Polegreen Church at 10 a.m.; ranger-led tours of Union Breakthrough by 18th Corps and 6th Corps, 3:30 and 6 p.m.

June 3: Morning Attack tours tracing Union 2nd and 18th Corps, 5:30 a.m. and 9 a.m.; hourly overview walking tours in afternoon; 6:30 p.m. commemorative program featuring Dr. James I. “Bud” Robertson Jr., author and professor emeritus at Virginia Tech.

June 7: Ranger-led tours of Misery in the Trenches at 1:30 p.m., Aftermath of Cold Harbor at 3:30 p.m.