

MAY 3, 1863

SECOND FREDERICKSBURG: ATTACK ON MARYE'S HEIGHTS



**Central Virginia
Battlefields Trust**

FEATURE:

Chris Kolakowski

INTRODUCTION:

Chris Mackowski

BATTLEFIELD TOUR:

CVBT Staff



INTRODUCTION

At first blush, it might seem odd that the Central Virginia Battlefield Trust would publish a piece about the battle of Second Fredericksburg. Primarily, CVBT's preservation efforts at Fredericksburg have focused on properties related to the more-infamous December 1862 battle, and overlap with the smaller May 1863 battle has been by happenstance. Our one exception was an 11.2-acre parcel we helped preserve in 2001 along what is now the city-owned Smith Run trail. Action that started on May 3 at Second Fredericksburg began to come to a close in the Smith Run area on May 4 as part the battle of Salem Church/Banks Ford.

Unfortunately, a lot of people don't even know about these battles in May 1863, overshadowed as they were by the main event at Chancellorsville, the mortal wounding of Stonewall Jackson, and the story of "Lee's Greatest Victory." For those reasons, when historian Kristopher D. White and I wrote our book about Second Fredericksburg and the follow-up actions at Salem Church and Banks Ford, we titled it Chancellorsville's Forgotten Front.

Another reason these battles were doomed to obscurity is because they literally disappeared. At Fredericksburg, what had once been 900 yards of open space at the time of the battle filled, over time, with neighborhoods that crept farther and farther west as the city slowly recovered from the war. Locals preserved the Confederate line from 1862, which eventually became the core of Fredericksburg National Battlefield, but they allowed Federal positions to vanish beneath development.

A similar vanishing act took place at Salem Church. In the fall of 1977, the National Park Service had the opportunity to purchase a portion of the Salem Church battlefield but deemed the price too high by \$25,000. So, instead, by 1981, a gas station sat on the corner opposite the old church, paving the way—literally—for more commercial development in the years that followed. Today, only 2.76 acres of the original battlefield remain, now under NPS protection. The rest has turned into parking lots, strip malls, Spotsylvania Towne Center, and Central Park.

The silver lining to the story is that the loss of the Salem Church battlefield led to the birth of the modern preservation movement. Alarmed by those events, concerned citizens banded together to create organizations that began to protect battlefields. This became an ever-more-urgent mission as development pressure amplified exponentially through the nineties and into the new century.

So, in an odd way, CVBT owes its existence to the story of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church—Chancellorsville’s “forgotten front.” We are pleased to share part of that story so people can remember it—and remember, too, the importance of battlefield preservation.

Chris Mackowski

Co-Author (with Kristopher D. White), *Chancellorsville’s Forgotten Front: The Battles of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church, May 3, 1863*



Hung Out To Dry: John Sedgwick and the VI Corps at Second Fredericksburg

By Christopher L. Kolakowski

An editor of the *National Tribune* writing some years after the war concluded, “the assault and capture of Marye’s Heights . . . was the most brilliant thing in the Chancellorsville fight.” An officer of the 93rd Pennsylvania agreed, calling the Second Battle of Fredericksburg in 1863 “a glorious victory for the Sixth Corps.” On May 3rd, 1863, Major General John Sedgwick and his Sixth Army Corps scored one of the brightest Union victories to that point in Virginia, but within 24 hours this victory would turn into defeat.

The Second Battle of Fredericksburg has long been overshadowed by the actions that occurred to the west at the Battle of Chancellorsville. Sedgwick and his men often have been neglected accounts of the campaign; several officers and historians have sought to put the blame for the Federal defeat at Chancellorsville on Sedgwick’s shoulders. A closer look at the battle reveals that Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps skillfully overcame many problems and performed admirably at Second Fredericksburg.

A Connecticut native and lifelong bachelor, John Sedgwick was already a veteran officer by 1863. Sedgwick entered the army upon graduating from West Point in 1837, and before the war served under Robert E. Lee in the U.S. cavalry. In 1862 he directed a division in the Second Corps of the Army of the Potomac during the Seven Days campaign in front of Richmond, where he was wounded. Sedgwick compiled a solid if unspectacular combat record, marred only by his performance at Antietam in September 1862, where his command lost 2,200 casualties in 40 minutes. Sedgwick sustained three wounds and convalesced for three months. He rejoined the Army of the Potomac along the Rappahannock River opposite Fredericksburg, Virginia in January 1863. Following a short stint as temporary head of the Ninth Corps, Sedgwick assumed permanent command of the Sixth Corps.



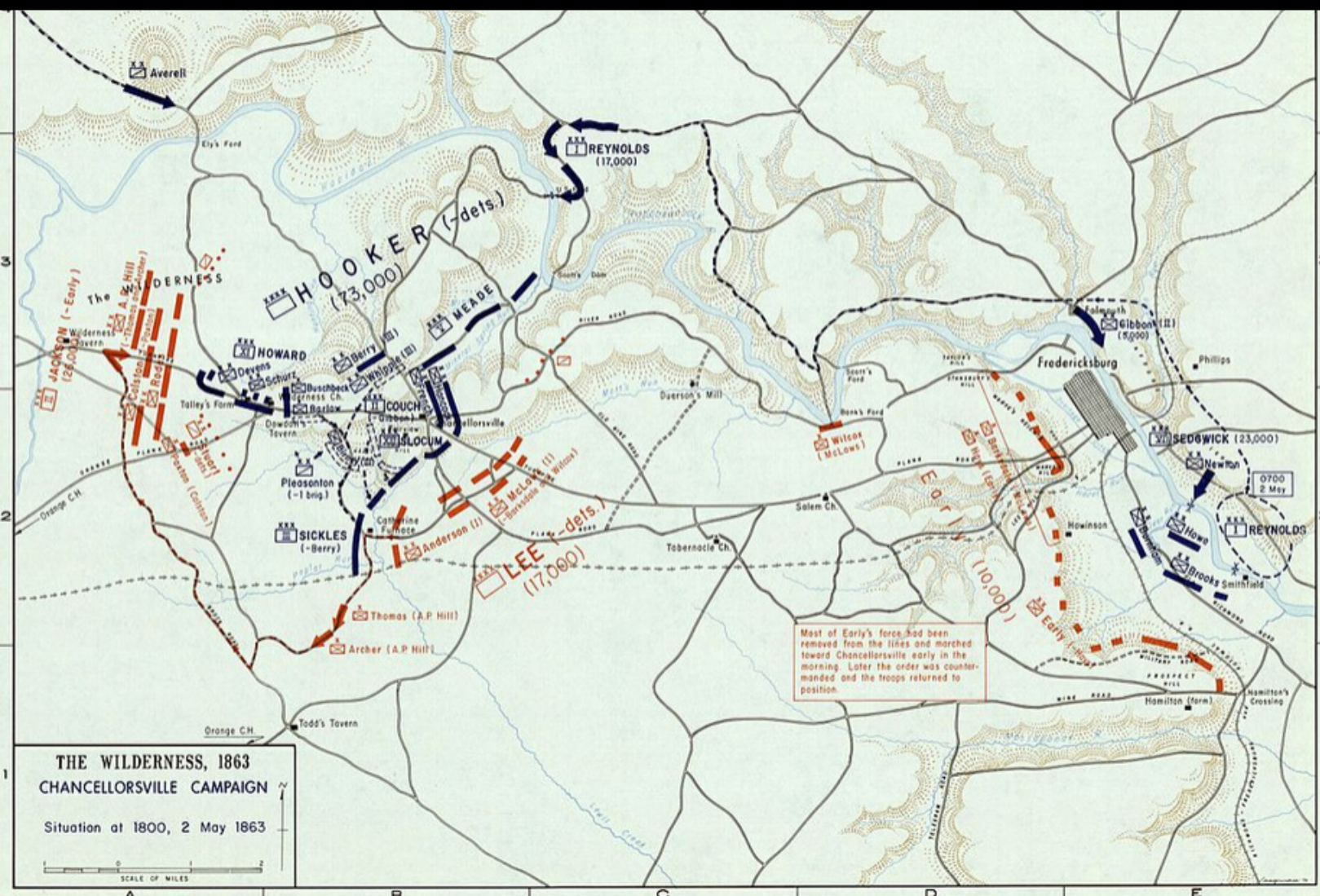
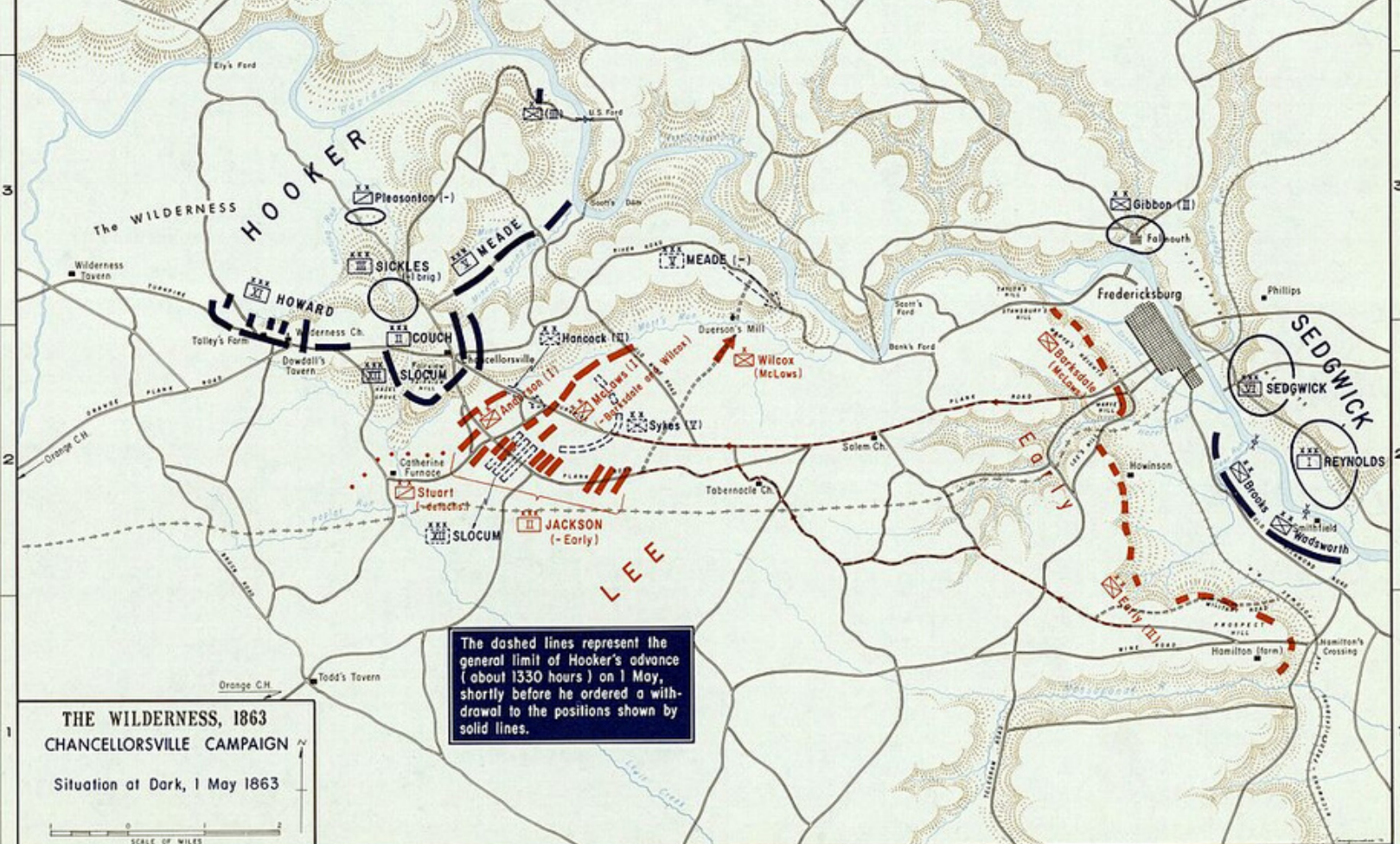
The new commander of the army, Major General Joseph Hooker, planned an important role for Sedgwick in the spring campaign. “Fighting Joe” Hooker, as he was known, planned to launch an aggressive campaign against Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, who were camped around Fredericksburg. The Army of the Potomac outnumbered Lee’s forces 125,000 to 60,000, and Hooker planned to take advantage of this fact. He decided to leave behind a wing of his army commanded by Sedgwick to make a diversion below Fredericksburg. Initially, Sedgwick retained 60,000 men in the Sixth Corps, Major General John Reynolds’ First Corps, and Major General Daniel E. Sickles’ Third Corps. Hooker would personally command 70,000 men on a march upriver from the city to get around Lee’s army and approach Fredericksburg from the west. Simultaneously 15,000 cavalry would raid Lee’s rear and cut the Confederate supply line.



This plan sought to trap Lee's army between two powerful jaws of a pincer and crush the Confederates around Fredericksburg. Hooker ordered Sedgwick to "make a demonstration in full force . . . upon the enemy's defenses . . . In the event of the enemy detaching any considerable part of his force against the troops operating at the west of Fredericksburg, [you] will attack and carry their works at all hazards." Hooker ordered the demonstration to begin on Wednesday, April 29th, 1863.

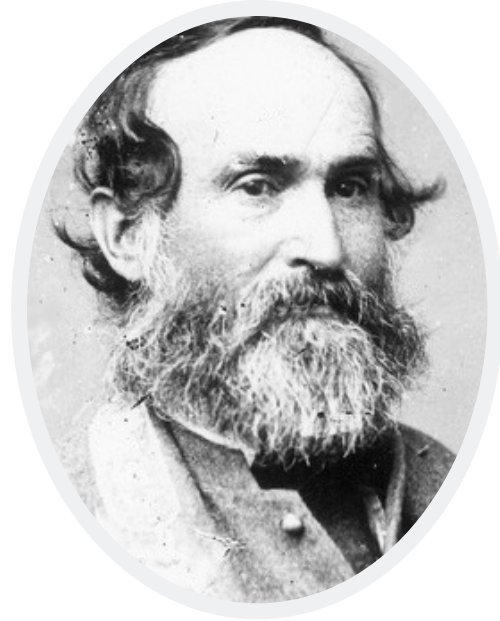
Sedgwick's own corps at this time was the largest in the army at 20,000 men. Its strength reflected the fact that the corps had done relatively little fighting since the Peninsula Campaign nearly a year earlier. Four divisions comprised the Sixth Corps: First Division, led by the mercurial Brigadier General William T. H. Brooks; Second Division, commanded by the efficient Brigadier General Albion P. Howe; Third Division, directed by the eccentric Major General John Newton; and the Light Division, led by the capable Colonel Hiram Burnham. The brigade-sized Light Division was a specially created elite unit designed for rapid movement with minimal baggage, and for use as shock troops.

Loaded down with eight days' rations and 60 pounds of gear, Sedgwick's men began the decoy role during the dawn hours of April 29th, when Brooks' division and a First Corps division under Brigadier General James Wadsworth crossed the Rappahannock River south of the city and skirmished with Lee's army. The next day passed quietly, with most operations halted due to rain. Sedgwick learned of the success of Hooker's flanking move through a congratulatory order sent out from army headquarters announcing Hooker's "heartfelt satisfaction" with the operations so far and declaring that "the enemy must either ingloriously fly, or . . . give us battle." This was the first message Sedgwick received from Hooker's wing in nearly 24 hours; he was still largely in the dark as to Hooker's plans or progress. Also on the 30th, Hooker ordered Sickles' Third Corps to join him west of Fredericksburg.



May 1st dawned clear, and before the morning was too far advanced Sedgwick began to receive reports of a Confederate movement. Scouts reported Confederate columns moving west from Fredericksburg toward Hooker. Professor Thaddeus S. C. Lowe, floating over the battlefield in a balloon, confirmed these reports about noon. However, several probing attacks revealed the heights below the city were still occupied in force. General Lee had made a gamble; he left roughly 10,000 men at Fredericksburg under Major General Jubal A. Early, and pushed west with the remainder of the Army of Northern Virginia to battle Hooker. Hooker collided with this force near Zoan Church, approximately 7 miles west of Fredericksburg, late that morning. With victory in sight, "Fighting Joe" lost his nerve and pulled back to the Chancellorsville crossroads, his bivouac of the night before.

While this withdrawal progressed, Hooker telegraphed Sedgwick to make a strong probing attack below Fredericksburg at 1 P.M. that afternoon. However, this order soon ran afoul of the communications problems that would hamper Sedgwick throughout the campaign. It had to travel a circuitous route via telegraph from Chancellorsville to a headquarters in Stafford County 20 miles away, opposite Fredericksburg. There it was received and decoded by Hooker's chief of staff, Major General Daniel Butterfield, who had been left behind to coordinate the wings' operations. Then Butterfield transmitted it to Sedgwick via telegraph, signal flag, or courier, whichever method was more expedient at that moment. This whole process took time; the average delay totaled three hours from the time Hooker sent the order until Sedgwick received it. The time could be lengthened by wire failures, message backlogs, or any number of factors. Such delays could be fatal in a battle where coordination was paramount. Hooker later accused Sedgwick of being slow in executing orders at this battle, but one must always remember that in many cases the orders themselves were delayed, not necessarily the execution of them.



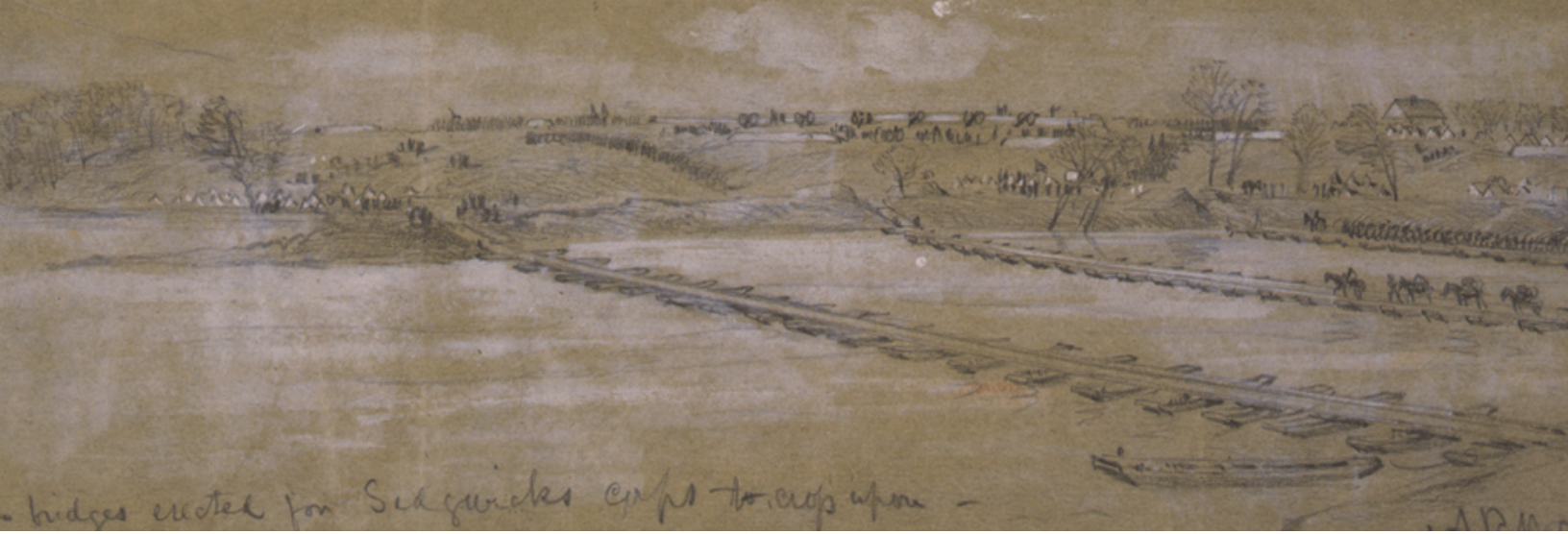
Sedgwick received Hooker's order for the demonstration about 5 P.M. Sedgwick's conundrum can be detected in this sentence from his report: "it was already some hours after the time fixed for the movement, but [I moved] to execute it without delay." Reynolds moved his corps forward in a show of force, and the bulk of the Sixth Corps crossed the river in support. Shortly thereafter Hooker countermanded the order.

Communication breakdowns harried Sedgwick again that night, as Hooker ordered Reynolds to shift his corps to Chancellorsville. Hooker also directed the Sixth Corps to take up several bridges across the Rappahannock under cover of darkness and fill in the First Corps' line as Reynolds pulled out. Sedgwick noted with frustration that "this order was received . . . after daylight [on May 2nd], and could not of course, be executed without attracting the observation of the enemy." Nonetheless the First Corps began to withdraw, and this activity attracted the attention of Early's artillery. The Confederate cannon opened an intense fire on the crossings and annoyed the Federals. The detachment of Reynolds meant that Sedgwick's strength declined to approximately 24,000 men, composed of the Sixth Corps and two brigades of Brigadier General John Gibbon's Second Division of the Second Corps. Early's command of 10,000 men showed no signs of abandoning their positions, and was firmly dug in along the line of hills behind and below the city. His men also had an advantage of a strong position with excellent defensive terrain that multiplied the Confederate strength.

Twelve miles to the west at Chancellorsville, Lee and his trusted subordinate, Lieutenant General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, decided to split the Confederate army again. Jackson led a strong column around Hooker’s army and attacked from the west. He struck that evening and routed a Federal corps two miles, but darkness stalled the offensive. Hooker quickly reorganized his army into a semicircular defensive position around Chancellorsville. He also called on Sedgwick’s 24,000 men to bail his 90,000 men out of their predicament.

Dusk fell on May 2nd as General Sedgwick deployed the Sixth Corps on the plain below Fredericksburg. At 11 P.M. he received a message from Hooker, relayed through Butterfield, directing the Sixth Corps to “cross the Rappahannock at Fredericksburg on the receipt of this order, and at once take up your line of march on the Chancellorsville road until you connect with him . . . attack and destroy any force you may fall in with . . . march to be in the vicinity of the general [Hooker] at daylight.”

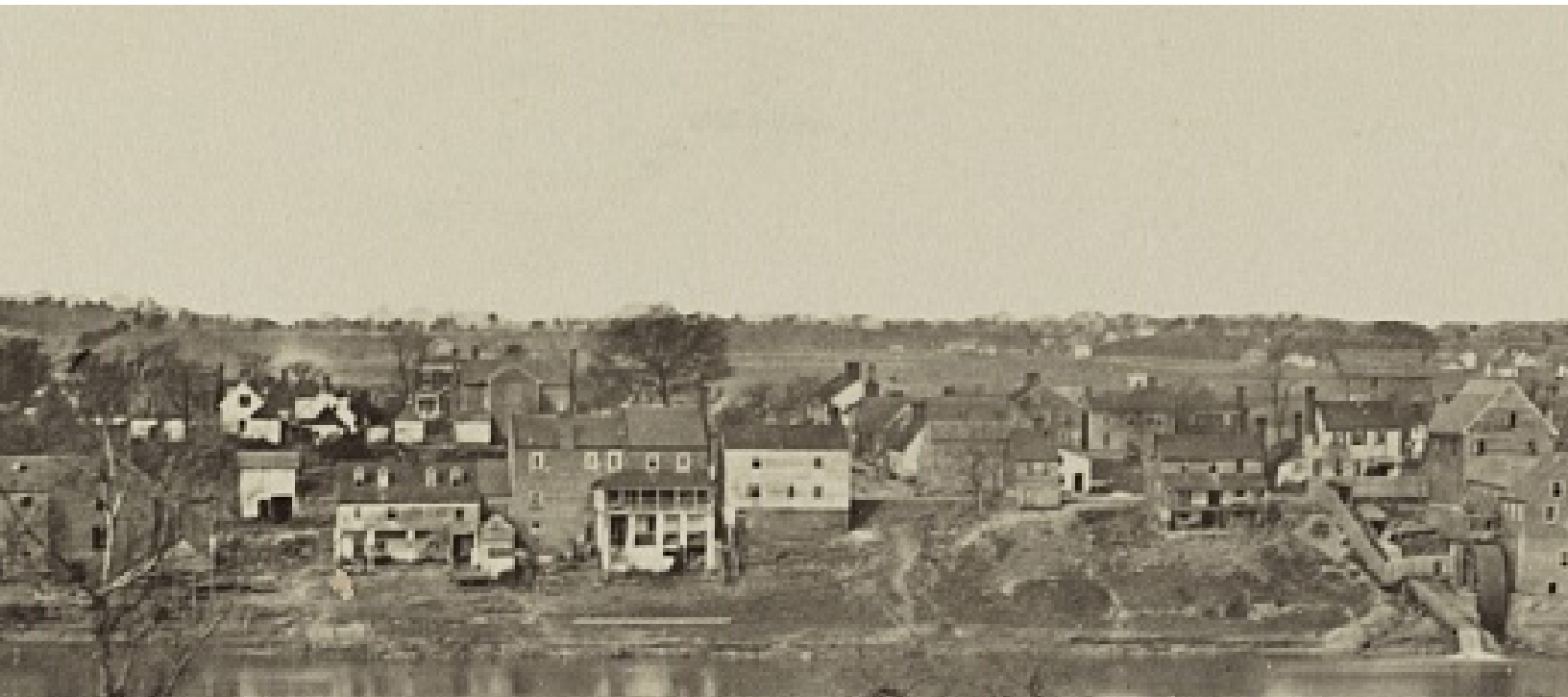




As this order shows, by this point Hooker had little if any idea of the situation in Fredericksburg. The Federals could clearly see campfires on the ridges behind the city, indicating a strong Confederate presence. (Early placed many of those campfires as part of a ruse to hide his weakness.) Sedgwick knew that much of Lee's army had moved west, but he did not know how many Confederates remained. Confusion also arose about where Hooker thought the Sixth Corps stood. Hooker knew that Sedgwick had crossed the river already; why then did he order a new crossing? To execute this order, during the night Sedgwick needed to clear out the city of its defenders, attack and overwhelm a Confederate force of undetermined strength on the same ground where the whole Army of the Potomac had failed to do just that the previous December, then immediately march 10 miles, and be prepared to fight a major battle at first light. Under the circumstances, this order was impossible to execute.

Sedgwick determined to do what he could that night. Instead of recrossing the river and attacking the city with a riverine assault, as a literal interpretation of this order called for, Sedgwick decided on his own initiative to modify Hooker's orders. Brooks' division remained behind to guard the crossings while the rest of the Sixth Corps moved into Fredericksburg from the south, led by Newton's division. Gibbon's men waited to cross when the city was cleared of defenders.

Newton gave the task of leading the assault to impetuous Brigadier General Alexander Shaler of New York. Shaler moved at midnight, followed by the rest of Newton's division, the Light Division, then Howe's troops. It was slow going for a while, until the 65th New York of Shaler's brigade surprised Confederate pickets of the 21st Mississippi at the south edge of the city. The 65th cleared the road quickly with "a shout, a bright, sudden flash, [and] a roll of musketry," according to one of Newton's staff officers. Moving house to house, Federal troops speedily cleared Fredericksburg of its defenders. Hearing the commotion, Gibbon landed his men and completed the occupation. By 4 A.M. Fredericksburg was in Federal hands. The streets were deserted, and much of the damage from the fighting in December remained.



As day broke on Sunday May 3rd John Sedgwick faced a daunting task, one that was haunted by the memory of what happened the previous December. The Confederates had retreated to Marye's Heights, a ridge that ran about 600-900 yards behind the city. In front of the heights, Confederate infantry sheltered behind a stone wall. About halfway out from the city a deep canal ditch or millrace ran across the front of the position, acting as a moat. To attack the Confederates, Federal troops had to cross an open plain nearly devoid of cover. The two best crossings of the millrace lay in front of the wall, so any attack on the position would be funneled across that killing zone. This zone was bounded to the north by the Orange Plank Road and Hanover Street and to the south by Frederick Street. In December 1862 the Army of the Potomac hurled seven separate assaults against the wall, and never got closer than 25 paces. Sedgwick had not been in the battle, but he knew all too well that his corps might suffer the same fate. However, now the Federals had one advantage: in December the Confederates occupied the position with 7,000 men and 13 guns; in May there were at most 2,000 infantry and 9 guns present. The infantry was part of Brigadier General William Barksdale's Mississippi brigade, supported by the famed Washington Artillery of New Orleans and two guns of Parker's Battery from Richmond, Virginia.

Brigadier General Frank Wheaton first probed the position by sending the 62nd New York and 102nd Pennsylvania forward in a dawn attack. Advancing under what he reported as "a heavy musketry fire," the two regiments charged to within 250 yards of the wall, then reeled back to take position behind a swale near the millrace. Undaunted, Wheaton sent in the remainder of his brigade. The additional men made no difference and the charge failed. In little more than 30 minutes Wheaton's force lost over 450 men; the fire was so intense that 30 bullets pierced the 62nd New York's flag.

Meanwhile, John Gibbon positioned his division north of the city. At 7 A.M. Sedgwick ordered Gibbon to attack, as the works opposite him appeared to be more weakly held. Gibbon's assault ran afoul of a large canal that skirted the northern end of Fredericksburg and the floodplain above it. Several efforts to construct a bridge failed in the face of Confederate artillery and infantry fire. Off in the distance Sedgwick could hear fighting as Lee and Hooker continued the battle around Chancellorsville; seeing all his other options exhausted, General Sedgwick concluded, "nothing remained but the carry the works by direct assault."

About 9 A.M., a Federal officer went forward to the stone wall under a flag of truce with the pretense of obtaining permission to clear the dead and wounded off the battlefield. Colonel Thomas M. Griffin of the 18th Mississippi, commanding the infantry behind the wall, received the flag and unwisely granted the request. For about two hours Federal soldiers ranged over the plain, collecting the dead and wounded from Wheaton's attacks. In the process they saw quite clearly the weakness of the Confederate position; only the 18th Mississippi and a portion of the 21st Mississippi garrisoned the wall with barely 1,000 men. Word was sent to headquarters, and soon Sedgwick had this information.





Feeling the time pressure and spurred by the sounds of the guns getting fainter in the distance, which indicated a Federal reverse, Sedgwick decided to commit his forces for a knockout punch. Four attacks would simultaneously go in. On the Orange Plank Road, Colonel George C. Spear would lead his 61st Pennsylvania and the 43rd New York of the Light Division in column, supported by Shaler with the 67th New York and the 82nd Pennsylvania of Newton's division. Colonel Thomas D. Johns would take his 7th Massachusetts and the 36th New York of Newton's division up Hanover Street in column. The difficult task of attacking the wall head-on across the open plain fell to Burnham's Light Division, which formed in line of battle with the 5th Wisconsin in front as skirmishers, followed by the 31st New York and 6th Maine, then Shaler's 23rd Pennsylvania volunteered to bring up the rear. South of Fredericksburg, Albion Howe grouped most of his two-brigade division into three highly flexible lines, one right behind the other. In front the 77th New York served as skirmishers, followed by a line under the solid and jovial Brigadier General Thomas H. Neill. Neill's line consisted of the 7th Maine, 33rd New York, and 21st New Jersey. Colonel Lewis A. Grant followed Neill with the 2nd and 6th Vermont and 26th New Jersey. Colonel Thomas O. Seaver commanded the rear line, composed of his own 3rd Vermont and 4th Vermont. Every unit received orders not to fire a shot, but to reach the stone wall as fast as possible. Colonel Thomas S. Allen of the 5th Wisconsin addressed his troops before they went in: "Boys, you see those heights. You have got to take them. You think you cannot do it, but you can and you will! When the signal 'Forward' is given, you will start at the double quick, you will not fire a gun, and you will not stop until you get the order to halt. You will never get that order!"

The Federals waited anxiously for the flag of truce period to end. Finally at 11 A.M. Howe's artillery opened fire and the attack began, with Generals Sedgwick and Newton watching from the outskirts of the city. As the blue lines rushed forward they were torn apart by murderous Confederate artillery and rifle fire. On the right, Spear fell dead at the head of his troops; the 61st Pennsylvania wavered, then broke, carrying the 43rd New York with it. On Hanover Street Colonel Johns fell wounded and the 7th Massachusetts found shelter in several buildings along the road. Burnham was shot from his horse; the Light Division men in the center advanced bravely toward the wall, but became pinned down along a slight dip in the ground a mere 100 yards from the Confederate position. Cries of "Retreat!" could be heard along the line.



As they watched events unfold Generals Sedgwick and Newton exchanged looks of horror. Was this charge to fail as well? Suddenly off to the left appeared Howe's men, advancing steadily. Neill placed his troops perpendicular to the wall and opened a savage enfilade fire; Grant extended his left and threatened the Confederate rear. Seaver led his men head on, striking hills further south and protecting Howe's flank. The stalled Light Division responded renewing the attack against the front of the wall. To the north, Alexander Shaler retrieved the situation by quickly diverting the 67th New York to attack the north end of the wall. Neill's men, the 67th New York, and the Light Division all crashed into the Confederate position at the same time. Savage hand-to-hand combat broke out, and Federal officers shouted at their men to capture the guns on the crest of Marye's Heights. The 6th Maine won the race to the top, followed quickly by the 5th Wisconsin, 67th, and 77th New York. The 77th men, from near the Albany area, rushed up the steep hill and grappled with Parker's Richmond gunners for possession of two artillery pieces. Men from the capitals of New York and Virginia battled intensely, but in the end the New Yorkers won and captured the position, plus the battle flag of the 18th Mississippi. Colonel Griffin and 225 men in his command suffered capture, and most of the Washington Artillery also fell into Federal hands.

The remaining Federals in Fredericksburg watched anxiously, and tried to pick out through the smoke what was happening. As soon as the Stars and Stripes appeared over the heights, "the very ground shook with the wail," according to a New York soldier. In total, the attack took no more than 40 minutes; but in that time, the Sixth Corps lost 1,100 men out of 9,500 in the attack force. In Burnham's Light Division, one out of every three men fell. Newton later contended that if the Confederates had another 100 men behind the wall the attack never would have succeeded.

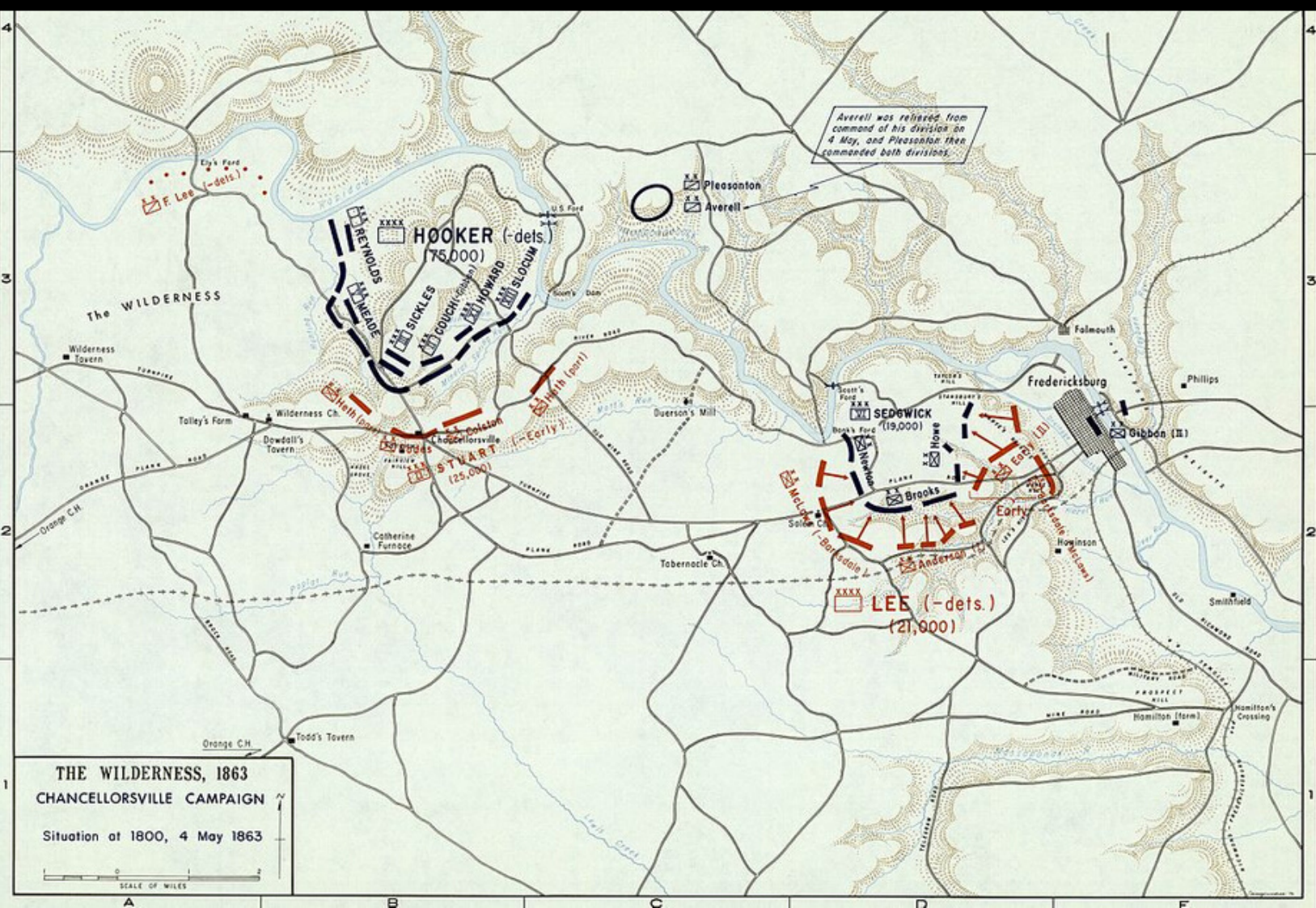
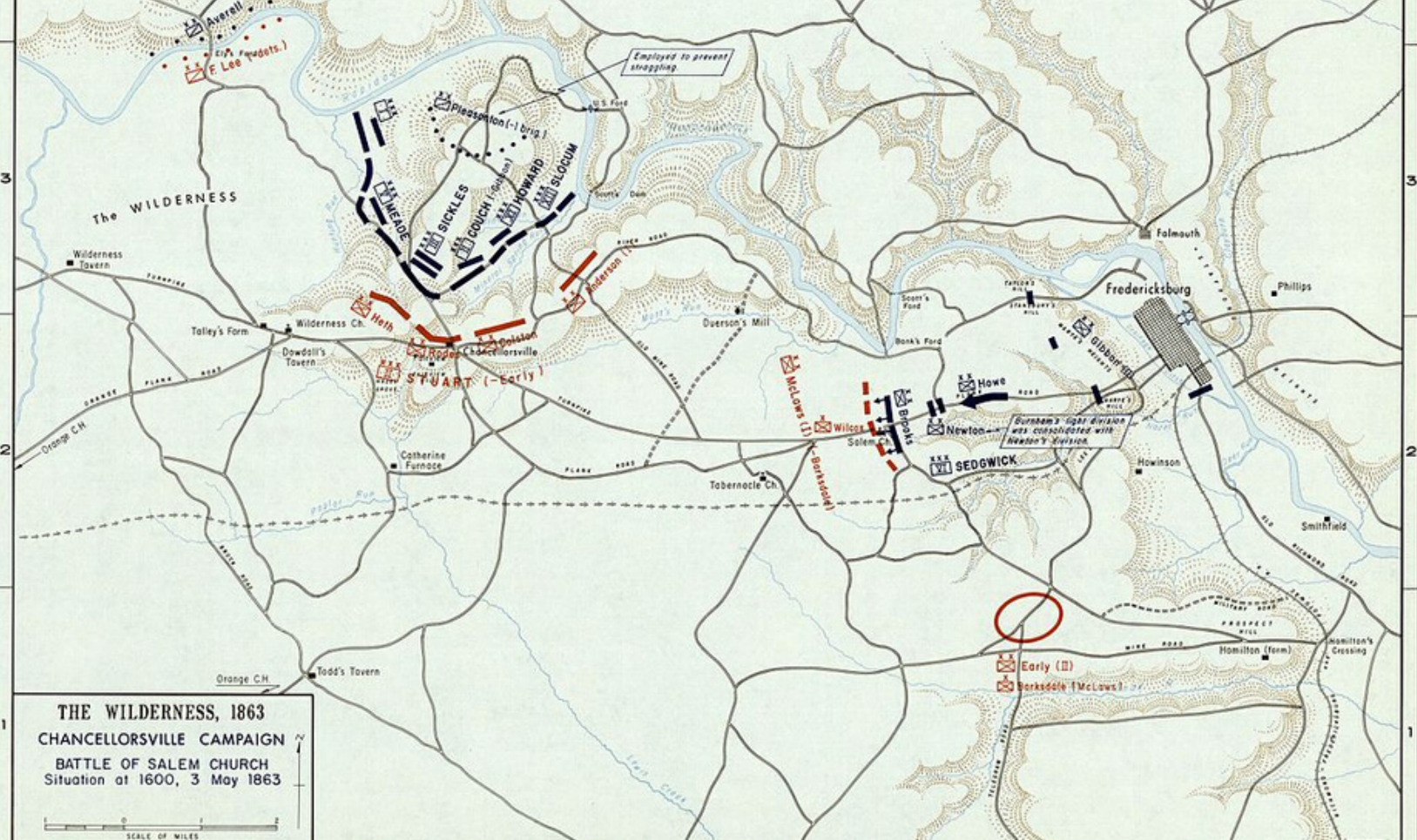


Sedgwick had pierced Early's line and opened the road to Chancellorsville; he immediately gave orders for pursuit and Brooks began to move his men forward. Meanwhile Grant and Seaver's men drove most of the Confederates southward, widening the breach. The road to Lee's rear was wide open, but at this point John Sedgwick had one of the most controversial decisions of the campaign forced upon him. With victory in his grasp and an opportunity to wreak havoc within the Confederate lines, Sedgwick ordered a halt. A staff officer suggested this would be an excellent opportunity to use cavalry to exploit the breach, but Sedgwick had no cavalry. Infantry was also at a premium; three of the four Sixth Corps divisions were exhausted by the assault on Marye's Heights, and needed rest. The only fresh troops on hand were Brooks' men, and it took time to move them to the front. General Sedgwick may have taken the opportunity to rue Hooker's decision to strip him of the First and Third Corps. If either had been present and fresh, they could have pushed ahead and this opportunity would have been exploited faster. As matters stood, there simply were not enough troops on hand for an immediate advance.

Early retreated his forces southward; Sedgwick wanted to pursue, but orders pointed him west. After losing over two hours in forming a column, the Sixth Corps pushed west along the Orange Plank Road toward Chancellorsville. Gibbon remained behind to guard Fredericksburg. This delay in movement allowed Brigadier General Cadmus M. Wilcox to shift his Alabama brigade athwart Sedgwick's path. Wilcox performed a textbook delaying action, buying critical time to warn Lee and get reinforcements from Chancellorsville. He ultimately pulled back to Salem Church, on a wooded ridge approximately 4 miles west of Fredericksburg. There the first elements of Lee's army began to arrive, in the form of four brigades under Major General Lafayette McLaws.

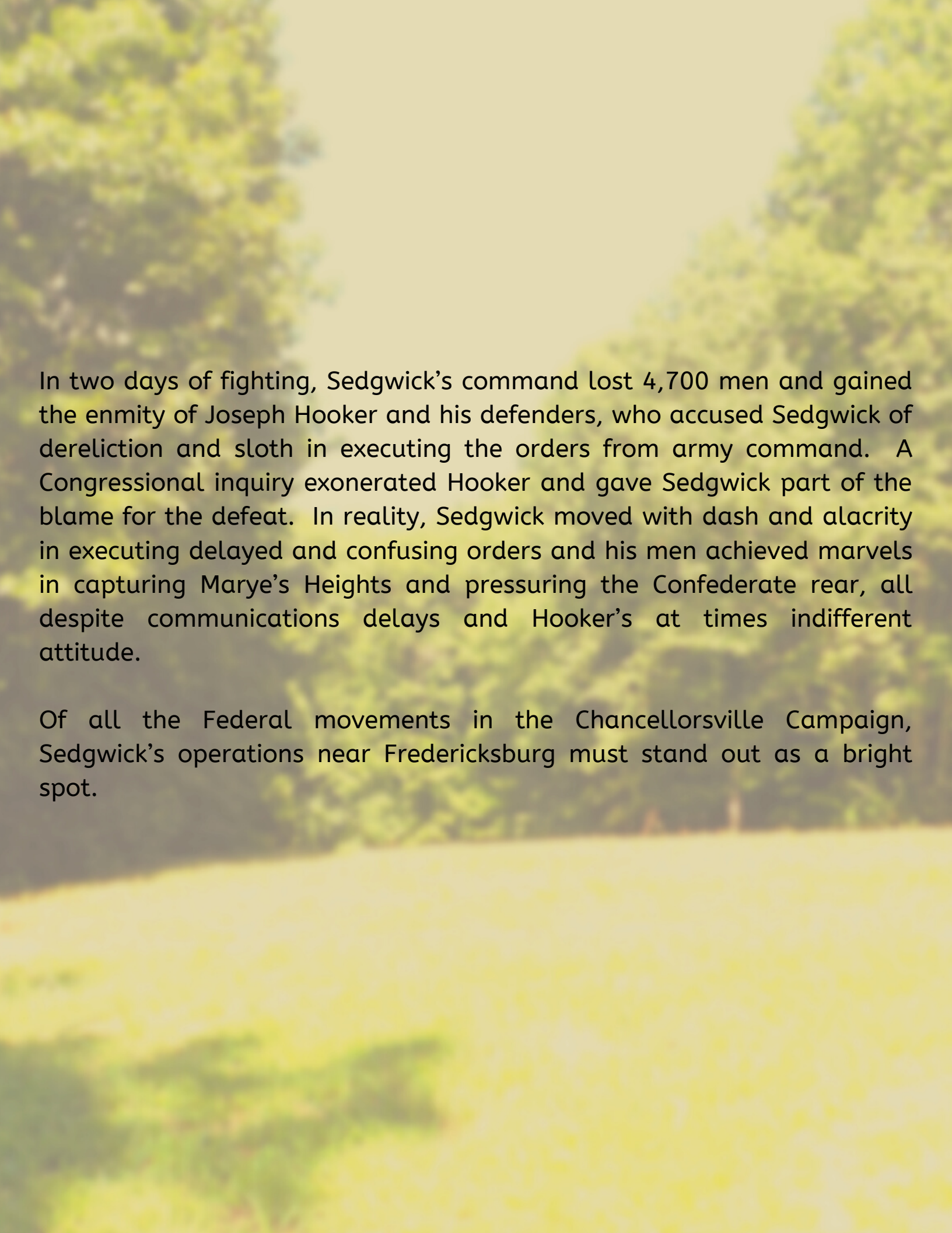
Brooks pushed aggressively down the road and attacked at 5:30 P.M. after a short artillery barrage. His division hurled itself into the woods in an impetuous attack, but after a brief success hastily assembled Confederate reserves threw the Federals back. Sedgwick arrayed his troops in a defensive stance at dusk to await developments. He had successfully distracted Lee's attention away from Chancellorsville and forced a further division of the Confederate army; now all Hooker needed to do was attack the weakened Confederates in front of him and the battle would be nearly won. That night Sedgwick sent Brigadier General Gouverneur K. Warren to Hooker to report his progress and ask for orders. Amazingly, Hooker replied that he had no instructions for the Sixth Corps. On his own initiative Warren telegraphed Sedgwick to open communications across the river via a ford, use his own discretion, and "look well to the safety of your corps."





South of Fredericksburg, Early moved his division at dawn on May 4th and reoccupied Marye's Heights soon after. The Sixth Corps quickly redeployed in a semicircular position to meet this threat from the rear. Confederates faced the Sixth Corps from the east, south, and west. The Rappahannock covered the north, making retreat difficult. Sedgwick held this precarious position all day, repulsing several probes. As dusk fell, Early's command hammered Sedgwick's lines from the south and east. With no prospect of help from Hooker, and under increasing Confederate pressure, Sedgwick ordered a withdrawal across the river at Banks' Ford. The retreat moved efficiently, covered by Howe's division. By 1 A.M. on May 5th the Sixth Corps congregated safely on the north side of the river. That day Gibbon evacuated Fredericksburg, and the Battles of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church were over.





In two days of fighting, Sedgwick's command lost 4,700 men and gained the enmity of Joseph Hooker and his defenders, who accused Sedgwick of dereliction and sloth in executing the orders from army command. A Congressional inquiry exonerated Hooker and gave Sedgwick part of the blame for the defeat. In reality, Sedgwick moved with dash and alacrity in executing delayed and confusing orders and his men achieved marvels in capturing Marye's Heights and pressuring the Confederate rear, all despite communications delays and Hooker's at times indifferent attitude.

Of all the Federal movements in the Chancellorsville Campaign, Sedgwick's operations near Fredericksburg must stand out as a bright spot.

Battlefield Tour



Most of the sites associated with the Second Battle of Fredericksburg overlap with the first battle and are traditionally interpreted with a focus on 1862. Today, we'll revisit some of these sites—including a few places preserved by Central Virginia Battlefields Trust—and look at the history through an 1863 lens.

Slaughter Pen

Begin at Slaughter Pen Farm along Route 2/Dixon Street, just south of Shannon Airport. Twenty thousand men from the I and VI Corps under Sedgewick's command crossed the Rappahannock just a little further north and massed in this area as the Chancellorsville Campaign opened at the end of April 1863. CVBT partners raised one million dollars to assist American Battlefield Trust to save this piece of land that holds history for First and Second Fredericksburg.

Through Fredericksburg

During the night of May 2-3, Union troops advanced northward and cleared the town of Fredericksburg. Now, we'll follow their route on modern roads. Head north on Dixon Street/Route 2 (left turn out of Slaughter Pen parking lot). In 2.4 miles, stay right at the fork to stay on Dixon Street. At the T, turn left on Caroline Street. Follow Caroline Street, through downtown Fredericksburg, where many buildings date back to the Civil War era. In 8 blocks, turn left on Amelia Street (one-way street). Follow Amelia Street to the Confederate Cemetery. Park in the curbside parking areas.

Confederate Cemetery and Stone Wall

On the morning of May 3, 1863, Union troops advanced from the town along William Street, which is to the left as you face the Cemetery entrance. Some units took refuge in the graveyard and returned fire from behind the stone wall on the west side. If you wish, enter the cemetery and walk to the far side of the Confederate burial grounds to view this wall.

Sunken Road and Willis Hill

Drive toward William Street and make a right. You are following the path of the Union attack column on William Street. In 2 blocks, make a left on Littlepage Street. You are now driving parallel to the Sunken Road and will cross Hanover Road, which was a historic road and an attack route for Union troops. In 7 blocks, turn right on Lafayette Blvd. Park at the National Park Visitor Center.

Confederate troops held the Sunken Road on May 3, 1863, but with fewer available troops than in the previous December. The successful Union attack pierced this defensive position near the Innis House, driving the Confederates back to the top of Marye's Heights and Willis Hill.

Walk to the top of the heights, following the path to the left of Brompton Mansion. At the top of the incline, you're on Willis Hill where artillery was captured during the Battle of Second Fredericksburg. Willis Hill was the first property preserved by CVBT and is now permanently protected by the National Park Service.

Enter the National Cemetery and walk to the southern side. Looking south, you can see Lee's Hill, which was also held by Confederates on May 3. An interpretive sign for Second Fredericksburg stands on the heights at the south end of the cemetery, and Parker's Battery monument is the only Second Fredericksburg monument within the national park.





Braehead Fields

Exit the Visitor Center parking lot and turn right on Lafayette Street. At the signaled intersection with Route 3/Blue and Gray Parkway, turn left. At the next traffic signal, make a right on Belman Road. In about a block, make a right on Tyler Street. Pull into the parking lot of the CVBT office at 1115 Tyler Street.

Across Tyler Street stands Braehead Farms. Over this ground—now an agricultural field and industrial park—Howe's division of Union troops moved swiftly to attack Lee's Hill and the southern flank of Marye's Heights. If you wish, continue down Tyler Street and turn right on Central Road. To your left, you can glimpse Lee's Hill through the buildings. You are in the attack route from May 3, 1863.

Lee's Hill

Retrace your route to via Tyler Street and Belman to Route 3/Blue and Gray Parkway. At the traffic signal, turn left. Turn left on Lafayette Blvd and followed the NPS signs to turn left on Lee Drive.

Park at the first parking lot on the right and stroll the incline to the top of Lee's Hill, if you wish. Interpretive panels for Second Fredericksburg are at the top of this hill. General Early had his headquarters here, and the Confederate line anchored at Howison's Hill, just to the south. The Confederates were forced to abandon the hills during the battle.



Salem Church

Return on Lee's Drive and make a right on Lafayette Blvd. At the next traffic light, turn left on Route 3/Blue and Gray Parkway. Continue for 3.8 miles and make a left on Salem Church Road. Follow the NPS signs to enter the historic church's parking lot.

The last major fighting between Early and Sedgwick took place here. Though modern development has erased most of the battlefield, you can still note the rises of high ground. The Battle of Salem Church forced Sedgwick back toward the Rappahannock River to the north.

(End of tour)

Salem Church is not shown on the map; it is further west on Route 3/Blue and Gray Parkway.

Additional Reading:

Chancellorsville's Forgotten Front: The Battles of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church. Chris Mackowski and Kristopher D. White, Savas Beatie, 2013.

Article Citations

Available upon request. Please send a message to
asstextdirector@cvbt.org





The mission of Central Virginia Battlefields Trust is to preserve land associated with the area's four major campaigns: Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Wilderness and Spotsylvania.

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