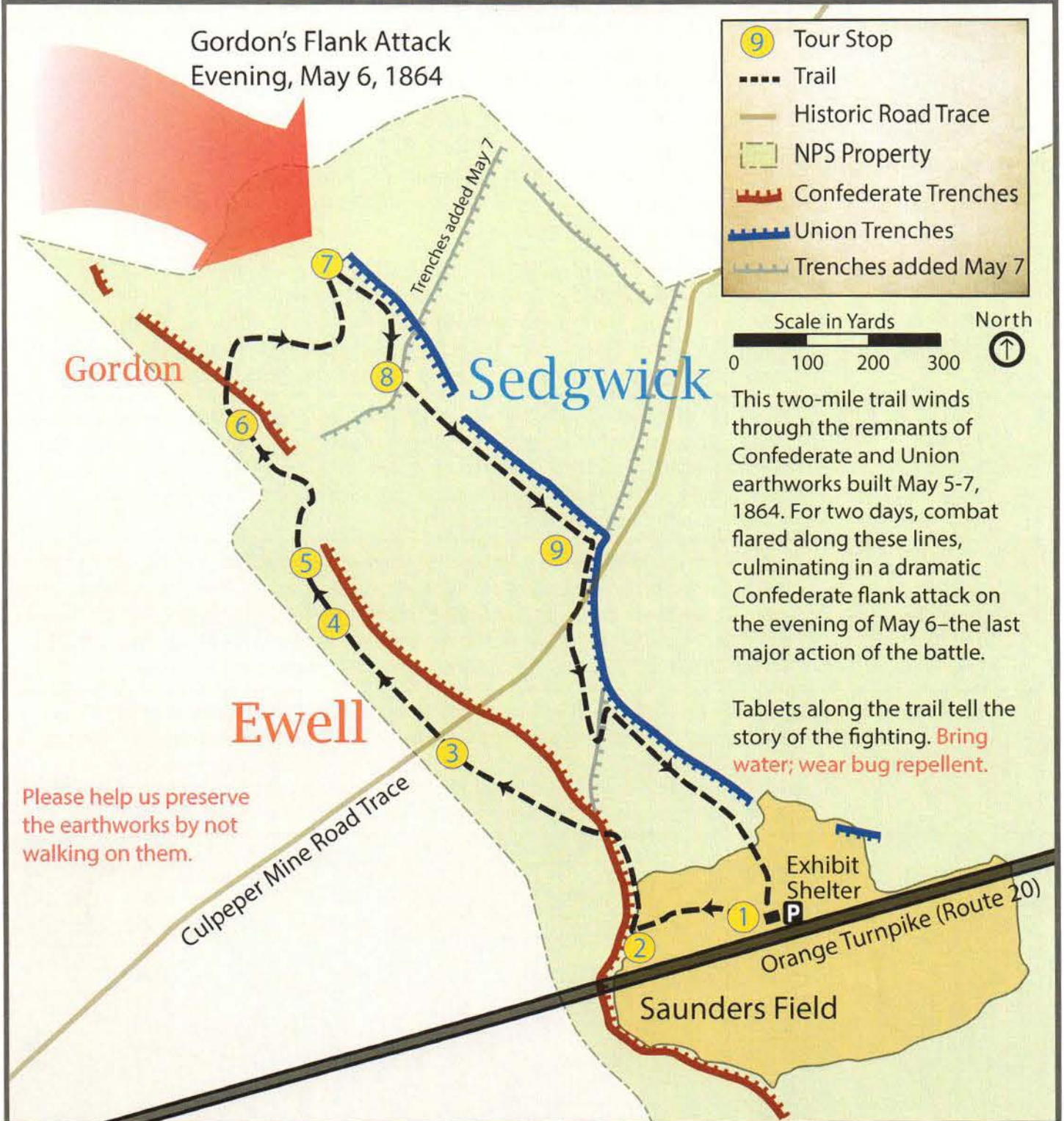


Gordon's Flank Attack Trail

Battle of the Wilderness

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania NMP



The Battle of the Wilderness

The first clash between Lee and Grant took place in the sparsely settled area long known as "The Wilderness." For two days, May 5-6, 1864, battle raged along the region's two major roads.

This trail follows the fighting along and north of the historic Orange Turnpike (Route 20). Three miles south, along the Orange Plank Road (Route 621), a parallel battle erupted.

The Visible Remnants of Battle

Along the trail you will see low mounds that are all that remain of the earth and log works (right) built by soldiers during the battle. Today those mounds remind us how, by 1864, the war had changed. Panoramic charges gave way to grinding, grueling days of constant danger.



Gordon's Flank Attack Trail



1 The Battle Begins

"Wherever Lee goes, you will go also." That admonition from Union commander Ulysses S. Grant to army commander George G. Meade prompted the first Union assault on May 5, 1864, here in Saunders Field. The assault failed, but that initial combat largely shaped the next 36 hours of fighting, as each side extended their lines north and south, seeking an advantage.

2 Confederate Defense

When the Confederates of Richard S. Ewell's Corps arrived on the edge of Saunders Field the morning of May 5, 1864, they started digging. The works here are likely the first built on the Wilderness Battlefield. The Confederates here weathered not just the initial Union assaults on May 5, but sporadic fighting through May 6, leaving Saunders Field littered with dead, wounded, and the wreckage of battle.

3 The Culpeper Mine Road

Marching from the fords of the Rapidan, thousands of Union soldiers approached the Wilderness Battlefield along this road, marching from the northeast. At first, Union commanders hoped that troops moving along this road would outflank the Confederates fighting in Saunders Field. Instead, they found the Confederate line extended north into this area, and fighting raged here as Union soldiers groped through the thick woods.

4 Evening, May 5, 1864

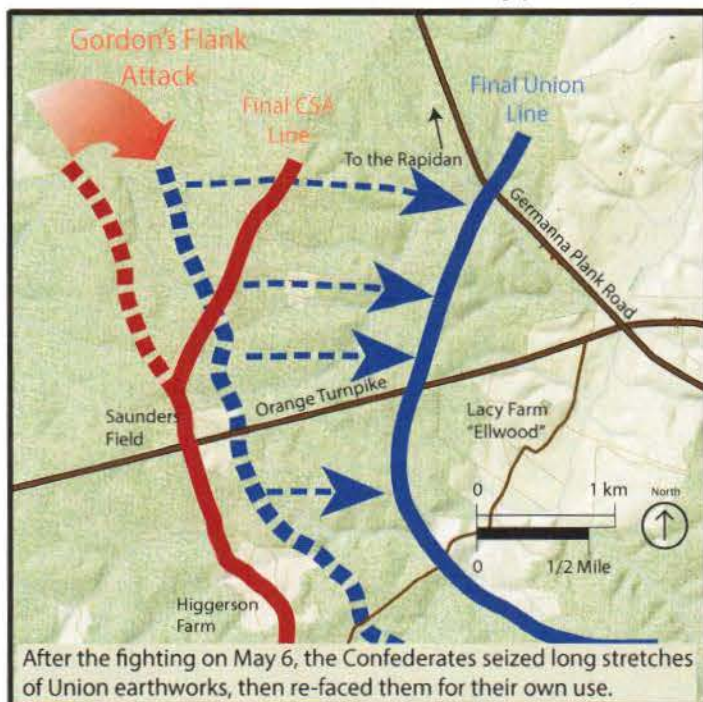
Throughout the battle, pockets of combat exploded in these woods. With visibility limited due to the forest cover, every burst of combat caused anxiety for those nearby—fearful that one side or the other had managed a breakthrough. Advancing lines often stumbled into an unseen enemy or fired blindly into the woods. "We soon began to fire by ear-sight," remembered one Union soldier.

5 Morning, May 6, 1864

On the morning of May 6, while major fighting erupted along the Orange Plank Road, three miles to the south, here, Union troops launched sporadic attacks to keep the Confederates in these earthworks occupied—to prevent them from moving south to help. The men in the ranks knew little or nothing of *why* they were being sent into battle in these woods that morning. Still, hundreds fell that day in what history has labeled a "holding action."

6 Gordon Proposes a Flank Attack

After three years of war, Confederate officers serving in the Wilderness knew that success often depended on two things: seizing the initiative and finding and exploiting the enemy's flank. On May 6, 1864, Confederate brigade commander John B. Gordon spotted an opportunity to assault the Union right flank. Throughout the day he pushed his superiors to act. He finally prevailed, but he rushed against dusk to get the attack in motion.



7 Gordon's Flank Attack

Late on May 6, Gordon's men stealthily moved north into what is today the Lake of the Woods subdivision. Then, with a rush through the forest, they descended on the Union right flank. "Their line crumbled immediately under our first volley," wrote a Confederate, "and I could see them...throwing up their hands and surrendering by scores." A Union soldier recalled, "It was an awful place, an awful moment...The woods were filled with all kinds of noise."

8 Gordon's Attack Falters

Though on a smaller scale, Gordon's flank attack shared two similarities with Jackson's famous flank attack at Chancellorsville. In both, success disordered the victors, causing confusion in Confederate lines. And gathering darkness made it more difficult to keep the attack going. Confederates fired on their own men. Lines became tangled in the woods. As darkness fell, the attack faltered, and Union troops escaped to new lines farther east.

9 A Rearranged Battlefield

The last combat of the battle reshaped the battlefield, forcing the Union army to build new lines farther to the east. That evening and the next day, the Confederates moved forward and adapted the former Union earthworks for their own use—adding to them where necessary. The result: these woods feature a jumble of intersecting works that faithfully reflect the confusion and chaos of the Wilderness.