

STOP 5

Immediately after the battle, Salem Church became a field hospital. An eyewitness reported the horrors within the building:

Hundreds upon hundreds of wounded were gathered up and brought for surgical attention After the house was filled the spacious churchyard was literally covered with wounded and dying.

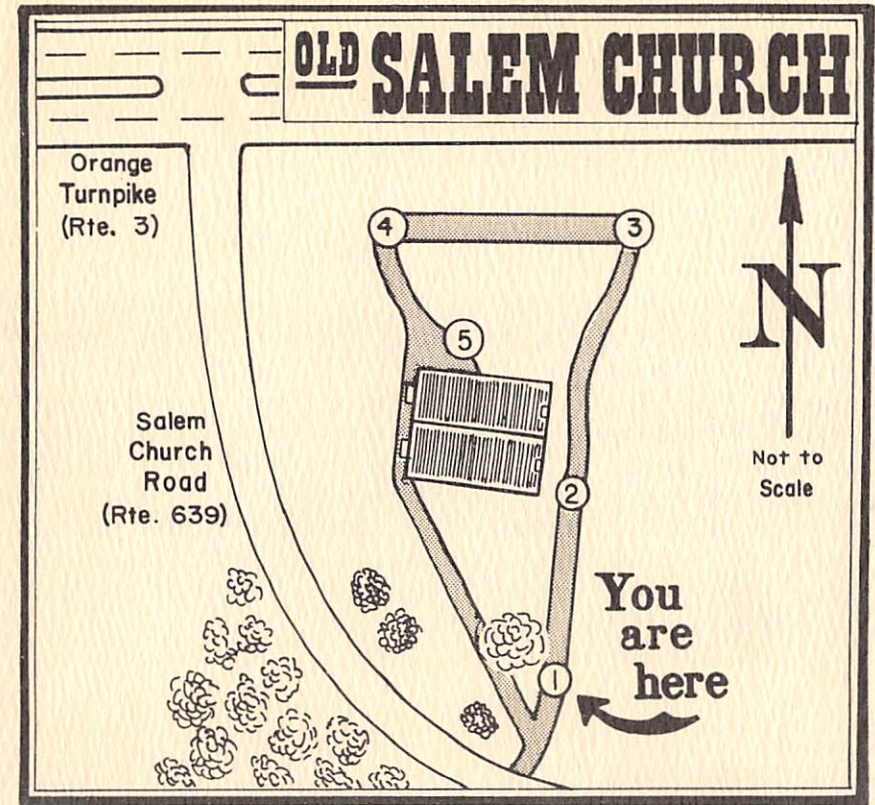
The sight inside the building, for horror, was, perhaps, never equalled within so limited a space, every available foot of space was crowded with wounded and bleeding soldiers. The floors, the benches, even the chancel and pulpit were all packed almost to suffocation with them.

The amputated limbs were piled up in every corner almost as high as a man could reach; blood flowed in streams along the aisles and out the open doors.

Until the day many years after the war when a new floor was laid, the bloodstained timbers of the original flooring bore evidence of the desperate spring of 1863.

Just after the war, when General Sherman's army marched through the area en route to Washington, D.C., the general rode out to Salem Church and noted that bodies were still visible from the battle. His report to authorities in Washington led ultimately to the establishment of the Fredericksburg National Cemetery.

The church itself, empty and ravaged, was slowly restored after the war, and was used for services until New Salem Church was built in the 1950's. In 1961, the Salem congregation voted to give the old church as a gift to the American people.



STOP 1

On May 3, 1863, Union and Confederate troops fought a bitter day-long battle on a slight ridgeline a few miles west of Fredericksburg. At the vortex of this action, called by one historian "... one of the most brilliant and important of the minor affairs of the war," was a small brick building known as Salem Church. Like many other churches in Civil War America, Salem Church, which was dedicated to the ideals of peace and love, became famed instead for the death and misery which war brought to its portals.

STOP 2

Salem Church was built by local Baptists in 1844 to serve a growing population west of Fredericksburg. The first pastor was John Billingsley, who had previously been the pastor of Salem's mother church, Massaponax Church, which still stands south of town.



FREDERICKSBURG and SPOTSYLVANIA
NATIONAL MILITARY PARK



Salem Church reflects the people who built it. Strong and functional, it served well the needs of its early congregation, without unnecessary ornamentation. Throughout the years it has withstood natural forces like lightning, and the man-made hurricane of battle.

STOP 3

With the coming of war in 1861, many of the men in the congregation donned gray uniforms. Church attendance dwindled. In the summer of 1862, Federal troops occupied Fredericksburg without incident. Then they were gone - - but not for long. When Union General Ambrose Burnside brought his army down to the banks of the Rappahannock in late November, his way was blocked by General Robert E. Lee's Southern Army. When a battle in Fredericksburg loomed imminent, the citizens were advised to leave for safer places. The exodus from town in the biting cold was a pitiful sight. One Confederate officer described the scene:

Snow was falling, and one of the most dismal scenes of war was presented to us; the road was quite filled with wagons and carts and people on foot, unhappy refugees from Fredericksburg. Old Salem Church was crowded, and around it shelters of quilts and blankets has been erected, under which the banished women and children crouched in the bitter cold.

All day long on December 11 these freezing, hungry people listened to the bombardment and watched the plumes of black smoke that billowed up from their beloved town. The worst fears of the refugees were realized when they returned to Fredericksburg after the battle. The town was in ruins from the bombardment and the subsequent looting by Federal troops. Salem Church now became a makeshift storehouse for the furniture of some of the region's homeless families.

STOP 4

In April of 1863, Union General Joseph Hooker planned to cross the Rappahannock upriver from Fredericksburg and get behind Lee, while another Union force under General John Sedgwick remained in front of the town. Lee would either be crushed between the two forces, Hooker hoped, or he would be forced to retreat southward. On May 3rd, while a big battle was raging around the Chancellorsville Inn ten miles west of town, Sedgwick drove across the Rappahannock, captured the Sunken Road and Marye's Heights, and advanced westward to join Hooker, moving on what is now Route 3. On a low ridgeline running at right angles to the road, crowned by Salem Church, a small force of Confederates determined to make a stand. It was an excellent position that commanded the approaches from the east; directly in front of them was a tangle of bushes and undergrowth.

Sharpshooters were posted in the upper gallery of the church on the north side. When the Federals began their assaults, they were met by volleys of fire. The underbrush made the going difficult, but suddenly the Federals were on the crest of the ridge, only a few yards from the church, and advancing determinedly. At thos moment Confederates posted in the road cut just behind you sprang up and counter-attacked fiercely, driving the enemy back down the slope and onto the plain below. One Federal soldier remembered the opening of the battle this way:

A tremendous roar of musketry met us from the unseen enemy, one hundred feet away, posted behind a fence and a ditch. Men tumbled from our ranks dead, and others fell helpless with wounds.

Federal soldiers aimed at the upper windows where the sharpshooters were; the pockmarks from their bullets are still visible. Other bullets ripped through the galleries. Inside, Confederate soldiers climbed over the tumble of furniture, which by this time must have been no better than fancy kindling. The next day Sedgwick was driven back across the river and the campaign was over.