

SUNKEN ROAD

A Walking Tour

The Battle of Fredericksburg, fought on December 13, 1862, marked another unsuccessful attempt by the Union army to move south against the Confederate capital at Richmond. This failure stands out among other such setbacks because of the overwhelming nature of the Federal defeat. Here, along the Sunken Road, Robert E. Lee earned his most one-sided military victory.

In addition to its strategic significance, the fighting along the Sunken Road left a legacy of steadfast bravery, tragic irony and human compassion involving soldiers, officers and civilians. This guide will lead you six blocks on a 30-minute round trip walk across hallowed ground consecrated more than 120 years ago by the blood of Americans at war against themselves.

Begin your tour behind the Visitor Center at the large battle-field painting labelled Stop 1. A map in this brochure is keyed to signs posted along the designated tour route which will direct you to several points of interest. Interpretive signs, paintings, monuments and recorded messages along the path will help you understand what happened here.

Please be aware of traffic while crossing streets and standing along Sunken Road. Use caution while walking on uneven surfaces and keep children under close control near parking lots and roadways.

STOP 1 - BATTLE PAINTING

As you face the painting, you are looking toward the city of Fredericksburg. In 1860, this quiet old town boasted a population of 5,000 inhabitants. Most of the buildings rested near the Rappahannock River, almost one mile ahead of you. Consequently, the ground between here and the town lay in open fields and pastures.

Behind you rises Marye's (pronounced "Marie's") Heights. At the base of this high ground, behind the stone wall, runs the Sunken Road. The Union army occupied Fredericksburg on December 11 and 12, 1862, and on December 13th moved to the attack. The Confederates waited for them atop Marye's Heights and behind the stone wall.

Use the crosswalk behind you and follow the brick sidewalk to the end of the parking lot. Walk toward the stone wall and Stop 2.

STOP 2 - THE SUNKEN ROAD AND THE STONE WALL

The narrow street in front of you once carried traffic between Fredericksburg and Richmond, 55 miles to the south. Known as the Telegraph Road, generations of wagons gradually wore the highway surface into the ground lending it a sunken appearance. The

citizens who built the stone retaining walls to keep the ground from collapsing into the roadway never imagined that years later their work would provide ready-made shelter for a large army.

Notice how the ground rises gently from the parking lot to the Sunken Road. This upslope begins almost one-half mile behind you terminating here at the steep base of Marye's Heights. General Lee could not have designed a better position to defend against frontal assaults.

Cross the driveway and follow the trail to Stop 3.

STOP 3 - STEVENS HOUSE AREA

The small dwelling which stood near here during the battle witnessed all the shades of savagry, sacrifice and heroism which characterized the Battle of Fredericksburg. Martha Stevens earned eternal fame for her selfless actions on December 13th. Despite her efforts and those of Confederate surgeons, General Thomas R. R. Cobb lay mortally wounded in the Stevens House. He had been directing his troops in the Sunken Road following the repulse of the first Federal attack when the fatal projectile shattered his thigh, severing several arteries.

Cobb's body now rests in his native Georgia while Mrs Stevens, who died in 1888, is buried inside the picket fence behind

her house site. The Cobb Monument across the road is one of the oldest in the park, being erected during Martha Stevens' lifetime. The United Daughters of the Confederacy installed the little granite marker beside you in 1917.

Follow the trail to Stop 4.

STOP 4 - INNIS HOUSE AND FEDERAL ATTACKS

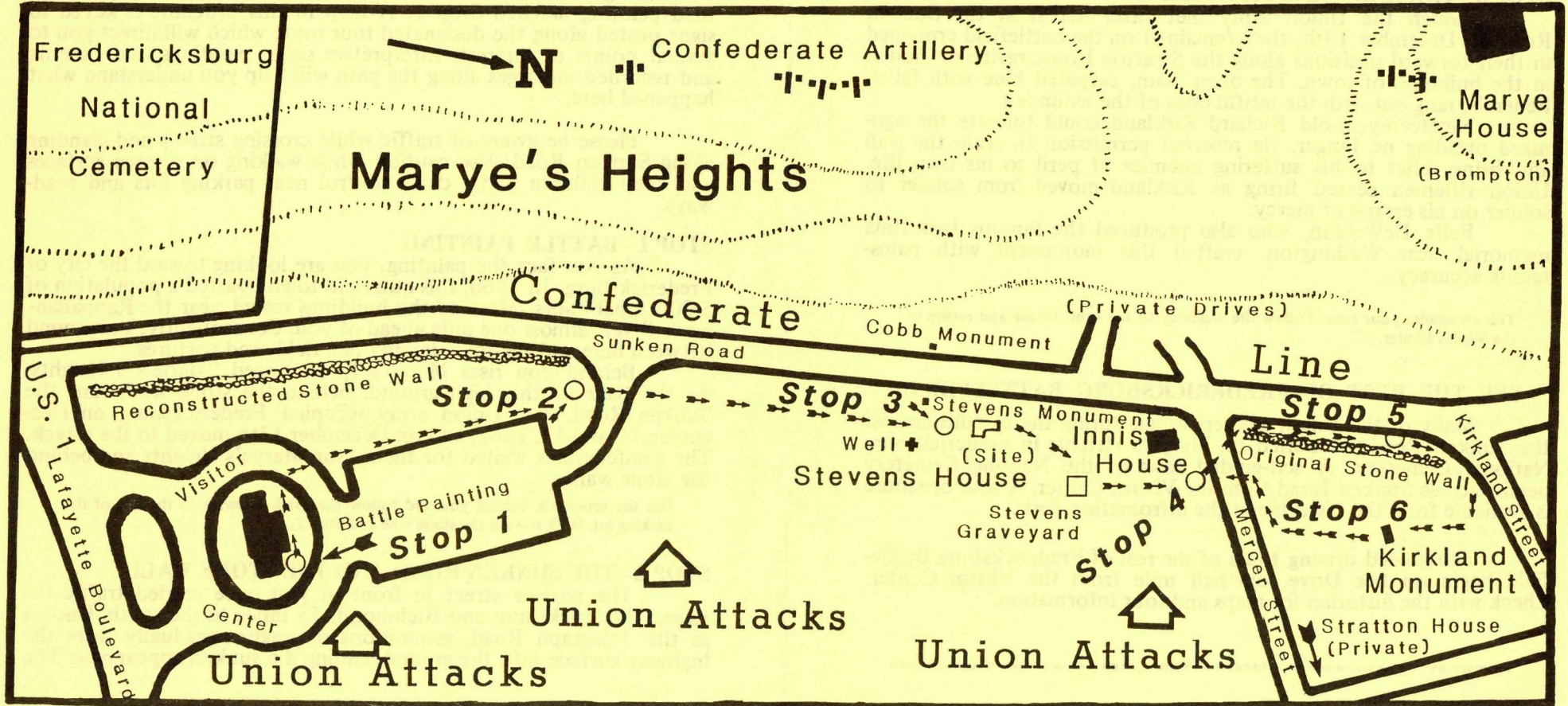
This modest country home has been accurately restored to its Civil War appearance. The interior is pockmarked with bullet holes from the fighting which swirled around it.

Another wartime structure stands two blocks behind you along modern Mercer Street. The Stratton House is the two-story brick building with dark shutters on the far side of the street. As traffic passes across Mercer Street in front of this home, notice how the vehicles are partly concealed in a shallow ravine. This same depression provided sparse but welcome protection to Northern soldiers retreating from their disastrous assaults against the Sunken Road.

Cross Mercer Street and turn left to Sunken Road. Turn right behind the stone wall and walk to the painting at Stop 5.

STOP 5 - ORIGINAL STONE WALL & CONFEDERATE POSITION

Here behind the only remaining section of the original stone



wall, it is possible to gain an appreciation for the strength of the Confederate defense. The road is still somewhat sunken in this block and you can see how Southern soldiers could use the stone wall to shield themselves from Federal view and minie balls. Lee's artillery behind you on Marye's Heights fired over the heads of the soldiers in the Sunken Road without fear of hitting their friends.

The commander of the Fredericksburg Artillery, Edward A. Marye, lived in his family's house, visible atop the hill, before the war. Ironically, his battery was posted four miles south of here during the Battle of Fredericksburg. The Marye House, known locally then and now as Brompton, currently serves as the home for the president of Mary Washington College.

Follow the stone wall around the corner and up the path to the large sculpture in front of you at Stop 6.

STOP 6 - THE KIRKLAND MONUMENT

Although the Union army met utter defeat at the Sunken Road on December 13th, they remained on the battlefield crouched in their forward positions along the Stratton House ravine or hidden in the buildings of town. The open plain, carpeted blue with fallen Federals, rang out with the pitiful cries of the wounded.

Nineteen-year-old Richard Kirkland could tolerate the agonized pleading no longer. He received permission to scale the wall and bring relief to his suffering enemies at peril to his own life. Union riflemen ceased firing as Kirkland moved from soldier to soldier on his errand of mercy.

Felix DeWeldon, who also produced the famous Iwo Jima memorial near Washington, crafted this monument with painstaking accuracy.

This concludes your tour. Follow the walkway to the Innis House and return to the Visitor Center.

SEE THE REST OF FREDERICKSBURG BATTLEFIELD

Many of the Union soldiers killed during the assaults against the Sunken Road are buried on Marye's Heights in Fredericksburg National Cemetery. A self-guided tour of the National Cemetery begins across Sunken Road from the Visitor Center. A tour brochure is available from the historian at the information desk.

Self-guided driving tours of the rest of Fredericksburg Battlefield begin on Lee Drive, one-half mile from the Visitor Center. Check with the historian for maps and tour information.