

Petersburg

NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD • VIRGINIA

ADMINISTRATION

Petersburg National Battlefield and Poplar Grove National Cemetery are administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Box 549, Petersburg, VA 23803, is in immediate charge of both areas.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



We must destroy this Army of Grant's before he gets to the James River. If he gets there it will become a siege and then it will be a mere question of time.

R. E. Lee

The key to taking Richmond is Petersburg.

U. S. Grant

In a grim 10-month struggle, Ulysses S. Grant's Union army gradually but relentlessly encircled Petersburg and cut Robert E. Lee's railroad supply lines from the south. For the Confederates it was 10 months of desperately hanging on, hoping the people of the North would tire of the war. For soldiers of both armies it was 10 months of rifle bullets, artillery, and mortar shells, relieved only by rear-area tedium: drill and more drill, salt pork and corn meal, burned beans and bad coffee.

To the individual soldier it added up to shivering in mire and steaming trenches in summer; shivering in ice, snow, and mud in winter. Somehow, most survived the coldest wartime winter they could remember.

The campaign that brought the opposing armies to Petersburg began with the battles of the Wilderness, May 5-7, 1864, west of Fredericksburg, Va. Thereafter, during the late spring and early summer, the Union army under the immediate command of Gen. George G. Meade (but in reality commanded by General Grant) engaged Lee's Confederate army in a series of hard-fought bat-

tles. After each encounter, Grant moved farther southward and closer to Richmond. Finally, on June 3, at Cold Harbor, 8 miles east of the Confederate capital, Grant tried by frontal attack to crush the Confederate army and enter the city. He failed in a defeat marked by very heavy casualties.

After Cold Harbor, Grant abandoned, at least for the time being, his plan to capture Richmond by direct assault. Instead, he moved his army to the south side of the James River and on June 15 threw his forces against Petersburg. Except for a series of Union fumbles, the city might well have fallen in that attack. Federal commanders, perhaps shaken by the Cold Harbor disaster, failed to press home their assaults, allowing the few Confederate defenders to hold on until Lee transferred his army south from Richmond.

On June 18, an all-out Union attempt to break the Confederate line also failed. In one assault, the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery, serving as infantrymen, went into battle 850 strong; it withdrew less than a half hour later with 632 casualties. Grant's abortive attempt to capture Petersburg cost him 10,000 men; but his efforts were not entirely wasted. Two of the railroads leading into the city had been cut, and several roads were in Union hands. Behind the northern troops was City Point (now Hopewell), which the Federals speedily converted into a huge supply base. Grant then settled down to a siege which lasted nearly 10 months—the longest siege in American warfare—and took the lives of 70,000 Americans.

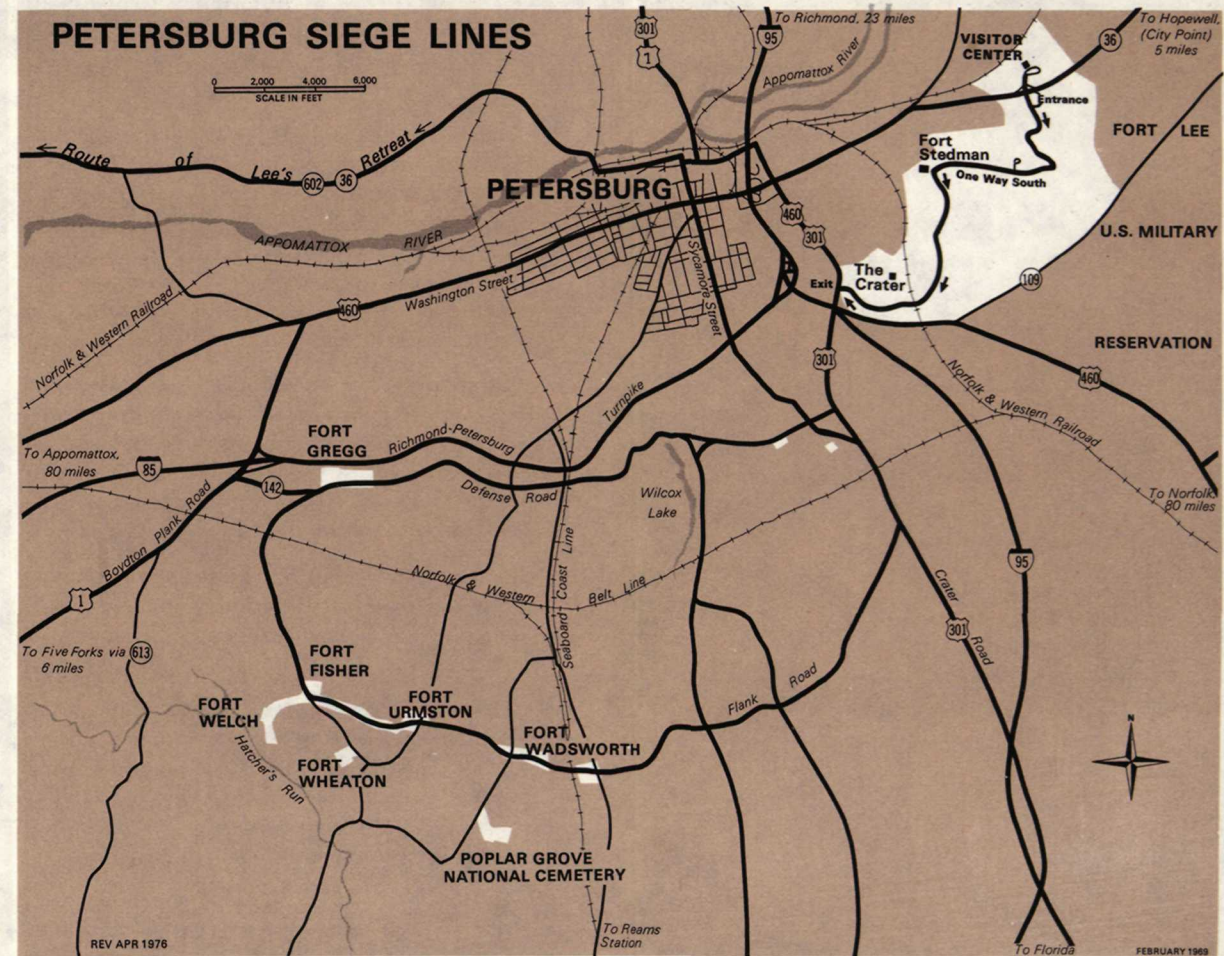
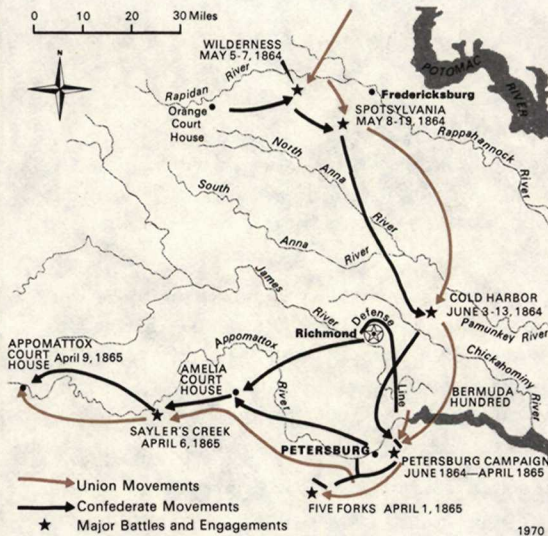
In August, Grant turned his attentions to the south and west. His target: the Weldon Railroad. After 3 days of fierce fighting in brutal heat, Federals remained abreast the steel rails near Globe Tavern. Several days later, on August 25, Confederate troops scored a minor victory at Ream's Station, 5 miles south of Globe Tavern. But the northerners were still astride the Weldon Railroad. All that Lee had left was one rickety railroad and his worn-out horses and wagons.

By October, Grant had moved 3 miles west of the Weldon Railroad and the noose around Petersburg tightened. The approach of winter brought a general halt to activities. Still there was the everyday skirmishing, sniper fire, and mortar shelling. By early February 1865, Lee had only 60,000 cold and hungry soldiers in the trenches to oppose Grant's well equipped force of 110,000. On February 5-7, Grant extended his lines westward to Hatcher's Run and forced Lee to lengthen his own thinly stretched defenses. Federal supplies rattled continuously over the newly completed U.S. Military Railroad from City Point to the front.

By mid-March it was apparent to Lee that Grant's superior force would either get around the Confederate right flank or pierce the line somewhere along its 37-mile length. The southern commander hoped to break the Union stranglehold on Petersburg by attacking Grant at Fort Stedman. Plans were to roll up the Union left and right flank and gain access to Grant's military railroad a short distance beyond. If it worked, Grant might have to relinquish positions to the west, and Lee could

shorten his own lines. On March 25, Confederates overpowered Fort Stedman only to be crushed by a Union counterattack.

With victory near, Grant unleashed Gen. Philip H. Sheridan at Five Forks on April 1. His objective: the Southside Railroad. Sheridan smashed the Confederate forces under George Pickett and gained access to the tracks beyond. On April 2, Grant ordered an all-out assault, and Lee's right flank crumbled. A Homeric defense at Confederate Fort Gregg saved Lee from possible street fighting in Petersburg. On the night of April 2, Lee evacuated Petersburg. Appomattox, the site of the final surrender, was but a week away.



A TOUR OF THE BATTLEFIELD

This battlefield auto tour is designed for use at your own pace. After leaving the visitor center, walk to Battery 5, the first stop. For the other points of interest follow the auto tour. Your visit will be more enjoyable if at each stop you park your car and walk along the short, interpretive trails.

1. Battery 5. This was the strongest fortification in the original Confederate line. Because few soldiers were available for duty here, the battery fell on the first day of the opening battle. Continue along the trail to a Dictator-class mortar. From this posi-

tion, the original "Dictator," a 17,000-pound Union mortar, lobbed 200-pound explosive shells into Petersburg, 2½ miles away.

2. Battery 8. Upon its capture by Union black forces, this Confederate battery was renamed Fort Friend after the Friend House located nearby. The house, which is no longer standing, endured the siege and became the scene of many court-martial.

3. Battery 9. The Federals, Hink's black division, captured this Confederate position on the first day of the opening battle. It is a 10-minute walk to the site of Meade Station, an important supply and

hospital depot on Grant's military railroad. President Lincoln was here on the day Lee attacked Fort Stedman.

4. Harrison Creek. After failing to hold their original line in the opening battle, Confederate forces fell back to hastily prepared positions along this small stream. Here they remained for 2 days before withdrawing to a new line closer to Petersburg, which they held until the retreat to Appomattox.

In March 1865, the main advance of Lee's last offensive was stopped along this stream by a heavy concentration of Union artillery fire.

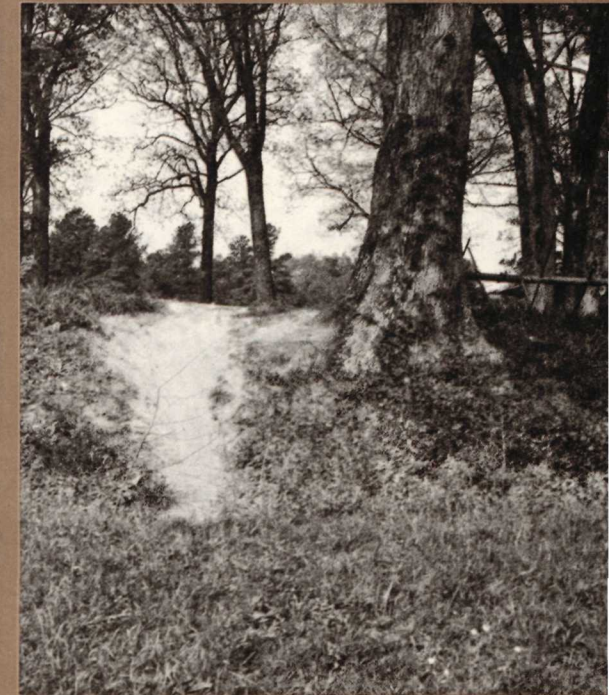
5. Fort Stedman. This Union stronghold was the central objective of Lee's final effort to relieve Petersburg in March 1865. The trail leads to Fort Stedman and to Colquitt's Salient from where the Confederates attacked. Along the way you will pass the Maine Monument, commemorating the greatest regimental loss of the war.

6. Fort Haskell. At Fort Haskell you can see one of the best preserved fortifications on the battlefield. Northern artillery and infantry stopped the Confederate advance southward during the Battle of Fort Stedman. Notice the direction the guns are pointing. Thousands of Confederate soldiers surrendered rather than face the deadly fire from this fort.

7. Spring Garden. Before you are the remains of the Taylor house, destroyed at the beginning of the siege. Thereafter it served as a convenient reference point for both armies. Along this ridge a concentration of more than 200 pieces of artillery fired during the Battle of the Crater.

8. The Crater. Park your car and follow the path to the reconstructed entrance of the Union tunnel, and then to the crater itself. Exhibits and audio stations explain one of the most incredible episodes of the Civil War.

This ends the battlefield tour. If you wish to follow the entire siege line to Poplar Grove Cemetery and return by way of the Confederate defense line, turn left at the stop sign and follow the battlefield tour markers.



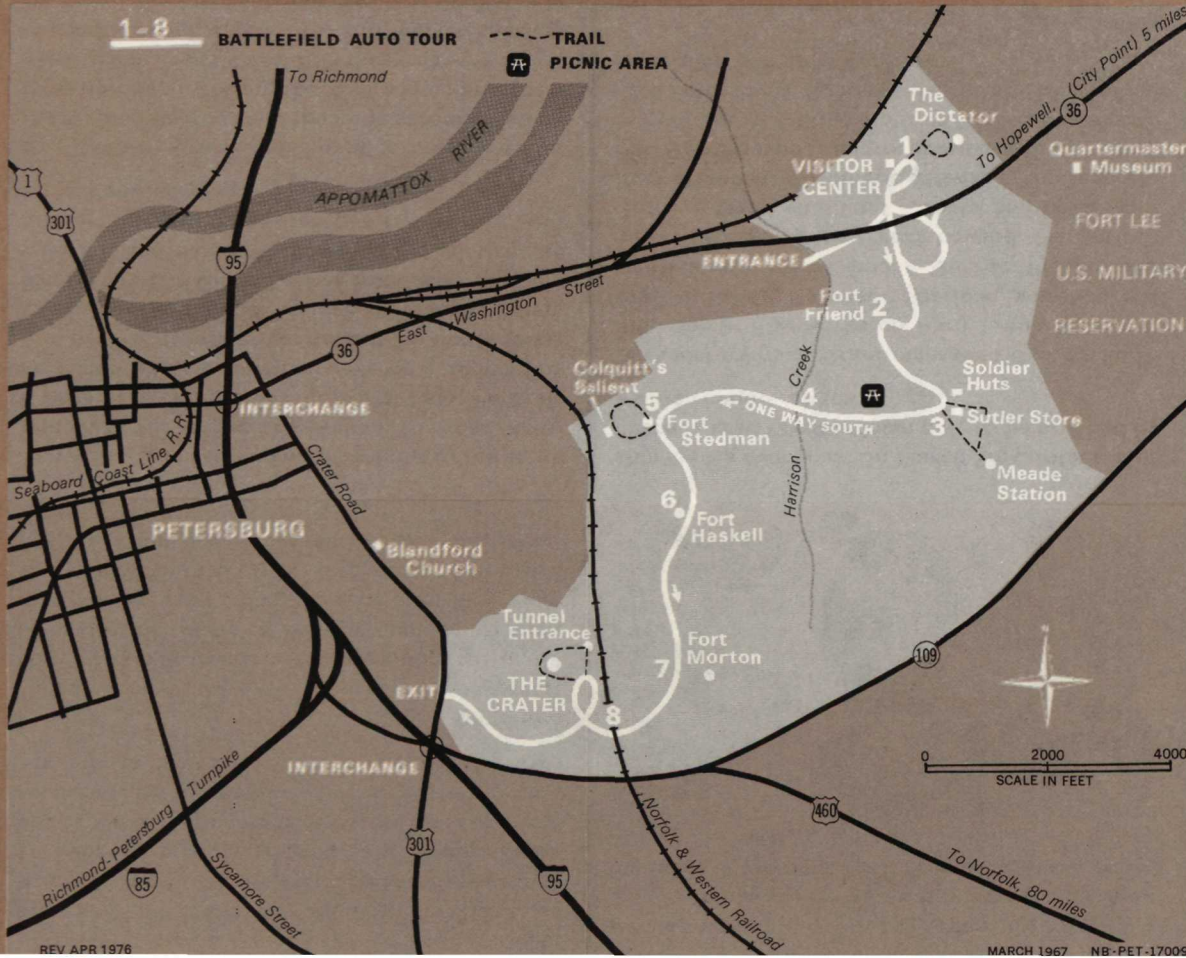
Historic earthworks are being destroyed by daily footsteps of the thousands of visitors. Please help us preserve them by staying on the designated trails.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The park visitor center is just off Va. 36, east of Petersburg. We suggest you stop here first. A 17-minute map presentation is conducted hourly in the War Room. From about mid-June to Labor Day, the park has a Living History program. Demonstrations of artillery — mortar and cannon — with actual firings, and soldier life may be seen. Poplar Grove National Cemetery, 3 miles south of Petersburg on Va. 675, contains the graves of more than 6,000 soldiers.

Hunting for relics with or without a metal detector within the park boundaries is prohibited by law. If you have a question about the location of the boundary, check with the park ranger.

The park tour roads are often congested, so please drive slowly and safely.



Battle Of The Crater

Hardly had the siege begun when coal miners of the 48th Pennsylvania Infantry began digging a tunnel under the Confederates at Pegram's Salient (also known as Elliott's Salient). The Union plan: Blast a mighty gap in the Confederate line by exploding 4 tons of gunpowder planted directly beneath their position. A Negro infantry division belonging to Burnside's IX Army Corps was selected to lead the charge after the explosion. Other troops would follow to widen the gap, capture the city, and end the war.

On the eve of the battle, however, the Union high command decided against using the black troops. They feared that if anything went wrong they would be accused of killing off black troops.

Burnside was forced to choose another untrained and weakened division to lead the assault, even though the black troops were more thoroughly trained for that important role. The result was a series of Union blunders.

On the morning of July 30, 1864, the powder was exploded underneath the salient, leaving a crater 170 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet deep. Union troops easily occupied the crater, but failed to penetrate further. Union forces, instead of going around the gap left by the explosion, plunged directly into the crater. More troops followed, crowding into the crater and creating confusion and chaos. The Confederates, led by Gen. William Mahone, counterattacked. When the fighting was over, the Union army had lost more than 4,000 casualties and the Confederate, 1,500. The Confederates had retaken the crater, but it little affected the outcome of the war. It meant only another 9 months of siege before the surrender at Appomattox Court House.

The irony of the whole story is that had the Union infantry attack been executed as planned with the trained black troops, Petersburg might have been captured in the summer of 1864.



The Battle of the Crater, from a painting by John A. Elder. Courtesy Virginia State Chamber of Commerce.