

Five Forks Unit

Petersburg National Battlefield

Dinwiddie County
Virginia



**GENERAL LEE TO PICKETT:
“HOLD FIVE FORKS AT ALL
HAZARDS . . . PREVENT UNION
FORCES FROM STRIKING THE
SOUTHSIDE RAILROAD . . .”**

Prelude

Referred to as the “Waterloo of the Confederacy” by Confederate cavalry commander Thomas Munford, the Battle of Five Forks broke the siege

At this strategic point, General Robert E. Lee would place a force under Major General George E. Pickett with emphatic instructions to “Hold Five Forks at all hazards. Protect road to Ford’s Depot and prevent Union forces from striking the Southside Railroad . . .”

This rail line was Lee’s last supply route into Petersburg and when cut, would signal the fall of the city.

The Battle of Five Forks was part of the 1865 spring offensive which

point to gain the nearby South Side Railroad.

After a day of maneuvering his forces, on March 31 Warren would strike Lee’s entrenched right flank along White Oak Road as Sheridan battled with Pickett’s force north of Dinwiddie Court House.

While Pickett got the best of Sheridan’s blue horsemen, Warren, after a setback caused by a Confederate counter-attack, was able to gain the White Oak Road and effectively cut

of Petersburg and consequently led to the fall of Richmond.

Five Forks, a country road junction which radiates somewhat like a starfish, is located about five miles north of Dinwiddie Court House and seventeen miles southwest of the once besieged "Cockade City" of Petersburg.

Began on March 25, Major General Gouverneur K. Warren's V Corps started their movement against the Boydton Plank Road, supported by Major General Philip H. Sheridan's Cavalry Corps. Successfully gaining a foothold on this roadway in the Battle of Quaker Road, the Federal infantry would now have a jump-off

on the Southern troops there from supporting Pickett four miles to the west.

General Pickett, of the famous charge at Gettysburg, would now be isolated from the rest of Lee's army and would be forced to fall back to Five Forks on the morning of April 1st.

The Battle

Throughout the morning and early afternoon of April 1, Warren, now being placed under the command of General Sheridan, trudged along with his troops to join the cavalry near Five Forks. He would not get his corps into position until around 4:00 p.m. near Gravelly Run Methodist-Episcopal Church southeast of the forks.

Finally, two hours before sundown, Sheridan's 9,000 cavalry and Warren's 12,000 infantry smashed into Pickett's command of 6,400 infantry and 4,200 cavalry under Major General Fitzhugh Lee.

Earlier in the day, after arriving from Dinwiddie, Pickett had his men entrench along the White Oak Road at Five Forks, facing south, for a distance of a mile and three quarters. Merely breastworks of pine logs and dirt, the left flank was protected with

GENERAL SHERIDAN: "I WAS EXCEEDINGLY ANXIOUS TO ATTACK AT ONCE, FOR THE SUN WAS GETTING LOW, AND WE HAD TO FIGHT OR GO BACK . . ."

a 150 yard long right "angle." While Warren's V Corps came down upon this flank, Sheridan's troopers assaulted the Confederates along their front.

The momentum of Warren's attack was overwhelming and Pickett's men began to break, many surrendering at the "angle." Eventually, some of the Federal infantry was able to swing around into the rear of the Confederate line, scattering further pockets of resistance.

With Pickett's force put out of action, the Federals had opened the door to the South Side Railroad. The

next day General Ulysses S. Grant ordered a series of assaults along the main Confederate line at Petersburg, cutting it in two and forcing Lee to abandon both Petersburg and Richmond on the morning of April 3. The surrender of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia would follow six days later at Appomattox Court House.

GENERAL HORACE PORTER, AMONG OFFICERS AT GRANT'S HEADQUARTERS THAT NIGHT: "[THE BATTLE OF FIVE FORKS] . . . MEANT THE BEGINNING OF THE END — THE REACHING OF THE 'LAST DITCH.' IT POINTED TO PEACE AND HOME."

ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY

In August, 1962, Congress enacted Public Law 87-603 which authorized a maximum of 1,200 acres at Five Forks for addition to Petersburg National Battlefield. Unfortunately, only \$90,000 was authorized for land acquisition, and none of that amount was ever appropriated.

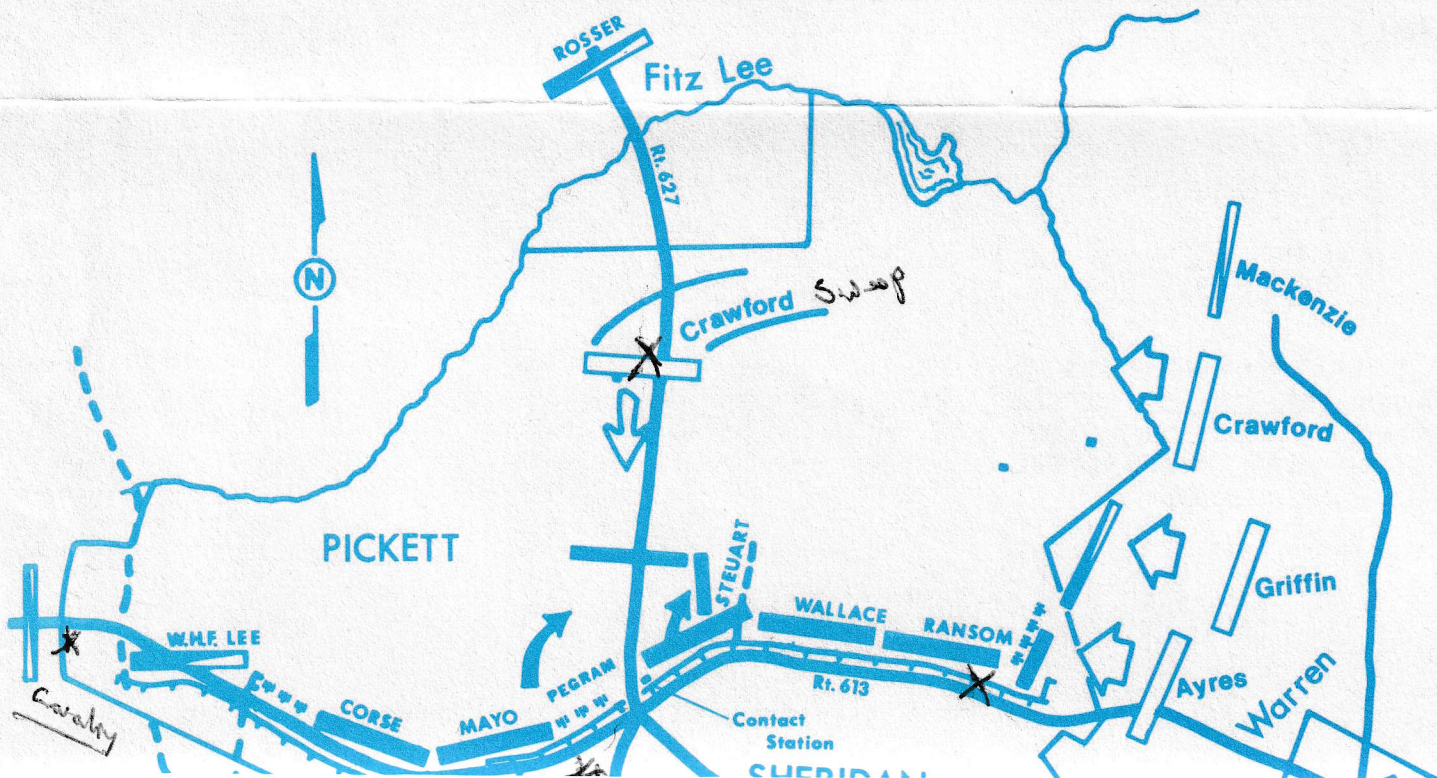
After the law was passed, the battlefield remained in private ownership for nearly three more decades.

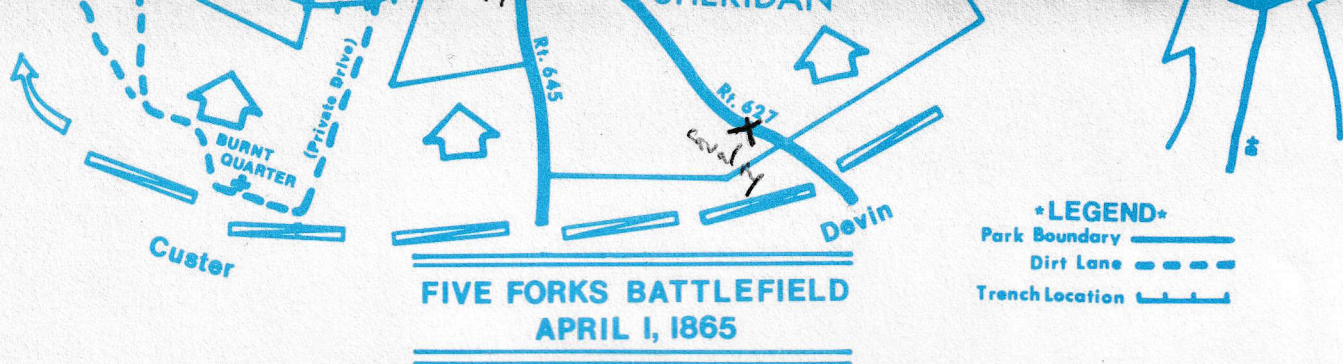
In October 1989, the Richard King Mellon Foundation of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, assisted by The Conservation Fund, purchased 930 acres of the battlefield from a major landowner in the area. Along with this acquisition came the donation by the landowner of a protective scenic easement on an additional 435 acres.

In December 1990, after leasing the property for a year, the National Park Service received the donation

of the 930 acre parcel from the Mellon Foundation. During the lease period and continuing to today, the National Park Service has pursued an active program of planning, research and development at the site.

Future plans call for returning the area to the same field and forest configuration that existed during the 1865 battle and developing outdoor wayside exhibits and parking pulloffs at key points along the road system to interpret the battle.





BECAUSE THE FIVE FORKS UNIT IS IN THE EARLY STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT AS A PARK, VIEWING SOME OF THE HISTORICAL SITES IS DIFFICULT AT THIS TIME. THE LACK OF PARKING AND TURN AROUND AREAS MAKES STOPPING ALONG THE ROADWAYS DANGEROUS. FOR YOUR INFORMATION AND ORIENTATION, KEY POINTS OF THE ACTION ARE DESCRIBED BELOW:

1. Approximately three quarters of a mile east of the forks on Route 613 (White Oak Road) is the location of the "angle" where Warren's V Corps opened the battle by attacking Pickett's left flank.

2. One mile to the west of the forks on the White Oak Road was the site of the cavalry engagement between Brevet Major General George A. Custer's Federal forces and Major General William H. F. Lee on Pickett's right flank.

3. One half mile north of the forks on Route 627 (Courthouse Road) was the scene of the attack by Brevet Major General Samuel Crawford's division on the rear of the Confederate line protected by Colonel Joseph Mayo who commanded Terry's Brigade.

4. Five miles south of the forks on Route 627 (Courthouse Road) near the intersection of Route 611 is the site of the Battle of Dinwiddie Court House fought on March 31, 1865. A mile further south on Rt. 627 is the county seat village.

5. Four miles to the east on the White Oak Road, at the intersection of Route 631 (Claiborne Road) was the site of the Battle of White Oak Road fought March 31, 1965.

PLEASE NOTE: THE LAND AROUND THE GILLIAM PLANTATION, "BURNT QUARTER," IS PRIVATE PROPERTY AND IS NOT OPEN TO THE PUBLIC. PLEASE RESPECT THE RIGHT OF THE PROPERTY OWNERS!

ADMINISTRATION

The Five Forks Unit of Petersburg National Battlefield is administered by the National Park Service, U. S. Department of Interior. A superintendent, whose address is P. O. Box 549, Petersburg, Virginia 23804, is in immediate charge of the battlefield. Comments or inquiries may be sent to this address.