

# Cold Harbor

Richmond National Battlefield Park

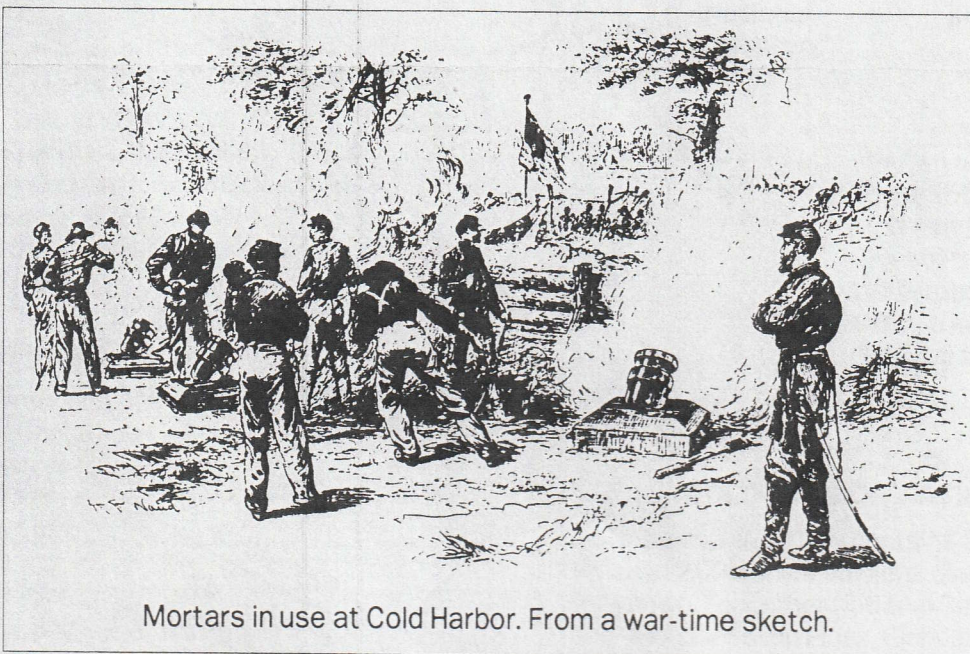
May 31 – June 12, 1864

In the overland campaign of 1864, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant with the Army of the Potomac battled General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia for six weeks across central Virginia. At the Wilderness, Spotsylvania,

North Anna and Totopotomoy Creek, Lee repeatedly stalled, but failed to stop, Grant's southward progress toward Richmond. The next logical military objective for Grant was the crossroads styled by locals Old Cold Harbor.

## MAY 31, 1864

After sparring along the Totopotomoy northeast of Richmond, Grant ordered Major General Philip Sheridan's cavalry to move south and capture the crossroads at Old Cold Harbor. Arriving near the intersection, the Union force ran into Major General Fitzhugh Lee's Confederate horsemen.



Mortars in use at Cold Harbor. From a war-time sketch.

A sharp contest ensued, soon joined by Confederate infantry under Brigadier General Thomas Clingman of Major General Robert Hoke's division. After a short battle, Union cavalry drove the Confederates beyond the crossroads. The Rebels then started digging new positions a half mile to the southwest.

## **JUNE 1**

Lee wished to retake Old Cold Harbor and sent Major General Joseph Kershaw's division to join Hoke in a morning assault. The effort was short and uncoordinated. Hoke failed to press the attack and Sheridan's troopers, armed with Spencer repeating carbines, easily repulsed the assault.

Grant, encouraged by this success, ordered up reinforcements and planned his own attack for later the same day. If the Union frontal assault broke through the Confederate defenses, it would place the Union army between Lee and Richmond. After a hot and dusty night march, Major General Horatio Wright's VI Corps arrived and relieved Sheridan's cavalry, but Grant had to delay the attack. Major General William Smith's XVIII Corps, Army of the James, marching in the wrong direction under out-of-date orders, had to retrace its route and arrived late in the afternoon.

The Union attack finally began at 5 p.m. Finding a fifty yard gap between Hoke's and Kershaw's divisions, Wright's veterans poured through, capturing part of the Confederate lines. A southern counterattack, however, sealed off the break and ended the day's fighting. Confederate infantry strengthened their lines that night and waited for the battle to begin next morning.

## **JUNE 2**

Disappointed by the failed attack, Grant planned another advance for 5 a.m. on June 2. He ordered Major General Winfield Hancock's II Corps to march to the left of the VI Corps. Exhausted by a brutal night march over narrow, dusty roads, the II Corps did not arrive until 6:30 a.m. Grant postponed the attack until 5 p.m. Later that day, he approved a postponement until 4:30 a.m. of June 3 because of the spent condition of Hancock's men.

The Union delays gave Lee precious hours, time he used to strengthen his defenses. The Confederates had built simple trenches by daybreak of June 2. Under Lee's personal supervision, these works were expanded and strengthened throughout the day. By nightfall the Confederates occupied

an interlocking series of trenches with overlapping fields of fire. Reinforcements under Major General John Breckinridge and Lieutenant General Ambrose Hill arrived and fortified the Confederate right. Lee was ready.

## **JUNE 3**

At 4:30 on the morning of June 3 almost 50,000 Federal troops in the II, VI and XVIII Corps launched a massive assault. The Confederate position, now well entrenched, proved too strong for the Union troops. In less than an hour, thousands of Federal soldiers lay dead and dying between the lines. Pinned down by a tremendous volume of Confederate infantry and artillery fire, Grant's men could neither advance nor retreat. With cups, plates, and bayonets, they dug makeshift trenches. Later, when darkness fell, these trenches were joined and improved.

## **JUNE 4 - 12**

The great attack at Cold Harbor was over. Hundreds of wounded Federal soldiers remained on the battlefield for four days as Grant and Lee negotiated a cease-fire. Few survived the ordeal.

From June 4 to June 12 both armies fortified their positions and settled into siege warfare. The days were filled with minor attacks, artillery duels and sniping. With the Union defeat at Cold Harbor, Grant changed his overall strategy and abandoned further direct moves against Richmond. On the night of June 12 Union forces withdrew and marched south towards the James River. During the two week period along the Totopotomoy and at Cold Harbor, the Federal army lost 12,000 killed, wounded, missing and captured while the Confederates suffered almost 4,000 casualties.

Grant's next target was Petersburg and the railroads that provided needed supplies to the Confederate army. Cold Harbor proved to be Lee's last major field victory and changed the course of the war from one of maneuver to one of entrenchment.

# Touring the Battlefield

## STOP 1 EXHIBIT SHELTER

Confederate troops established a defensive position near here following Sheridan's cavalry attack on May 31 and again reformed here after repulsing the Union infantry charge of June 1.

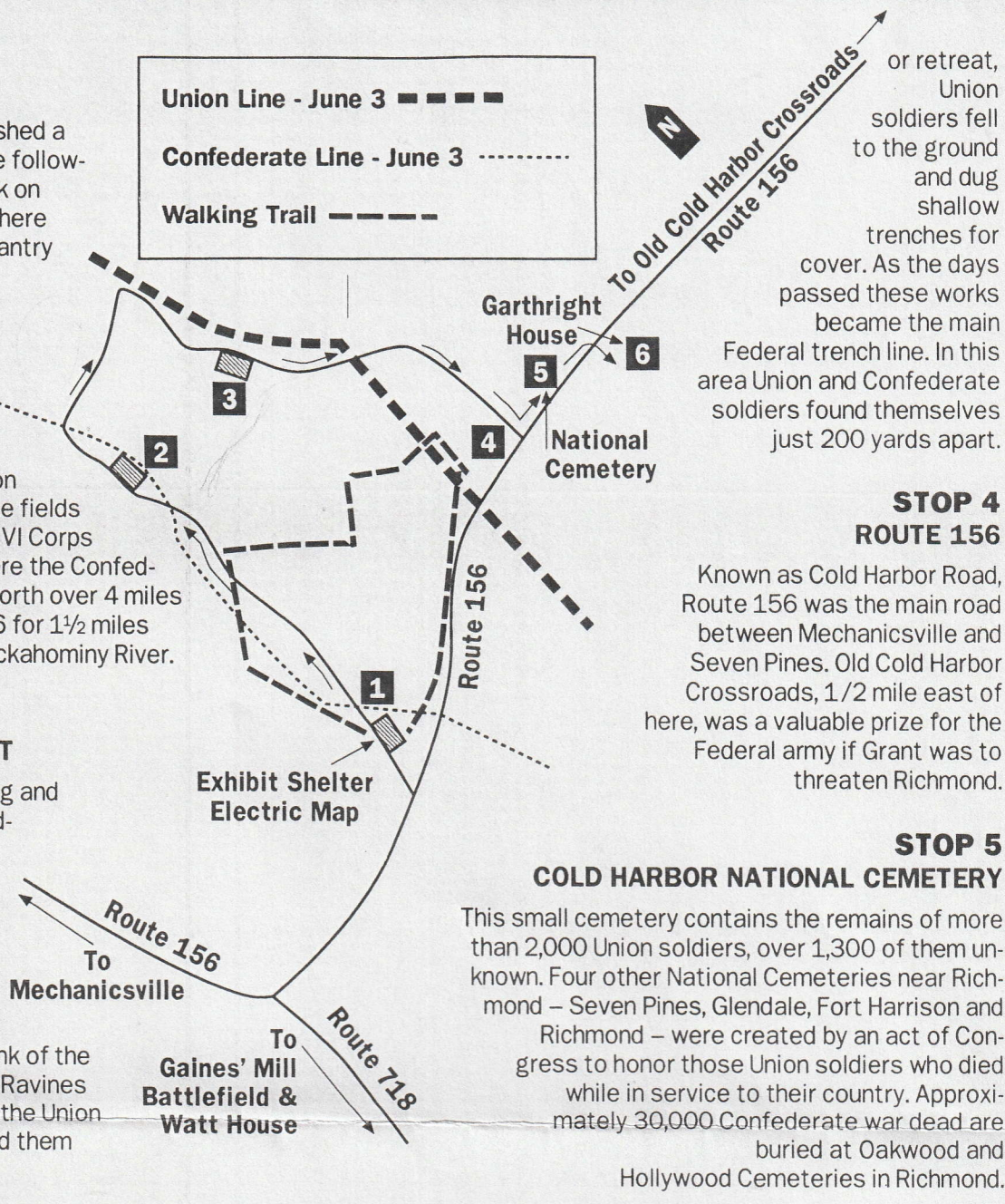
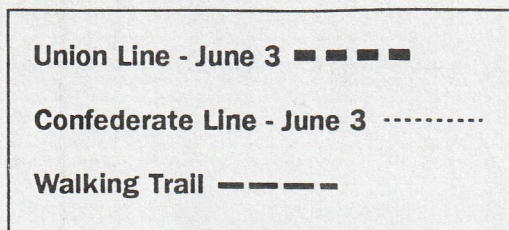
The gap between Hoke's and Kershaw's Confederate divisions was about 300 yards farther along the tour road. East of the exhibit shelter, on both sides of Rt. 156, are the fields over which Wright's Federal VI Corps attacked on June 3. From here the Confederate battle line extended north over 4 miles and south across Route 156 for 1½ miles before anchoring on the Chickahominy River.

## STOP 2 CONFEDERATE TURNOUT

These breastworks were dug and manned by troops of Confederate Lieutenant General Richard Anderson's First Corps. On the evening of June 1, Hoke's and Kershaw's men fell back to this final position. On June 3 the left flank of the Union XVIII Corps and the right flank of the VI Corps attacked this site. Ravines to the north and south split the Union attack columns and funneled them into murderous fields of Confederate crossfire.

## STOP 3 UNION TURNOUT

Between the turnouts, the battlefield resembles its 1864 appearance — battle lines separated by open pine woods. The earthworks along the wood line mark the high water mark of the June 3 attacks. Being unable to advance



or retreat, Union soldiers fell to the ground and dug shallow

trenches for cover. As the days passed these works

became the main Federal trench line. In this area Union and Confederate soldiers found themselves just 200 yards apart.

## STOP 4 ROUTE 156

Known as Cold Harbor Road, Route 156 was the main road between Mechanicsville and Seven Pines. Old Cold Harbor Crossroads, 1/2 mile east of here, was a valuable prize for the Federal army if Grant was to threaten Richmond.

## STOP 5 COLD HARBOR NATIONAL CEMETERY

This small cemetery contains the remains of more than 2,000 Union soldiers, over 1,300 of them unknown. Four other National Cemeteries near Richmond — Seven Pines, Glendale, Fort Harrison and Richmond — were created by an act of Congress to honor those Union soldiers who died while in service to their country. Approximately 30,000 Confederate war dead are buried at Oakwood and Hollywood Cemeteries in Richmond.

## STOP 6 GARTHRIGHT HOUSE

After June 3 the Garthright house was behind the line of Wright's Federal VI Corps. For ten days Union surgeons used the house as a field hospital. During the battle members of the Garthright family sought shelter in the basement.

# About Your Visit

Cold Harbor Battlefield is a unit of Richmond National Battlefield Park and is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Park headquarters is located at Chimborazo Visitor Center, 3215 E. Broad St., Richmond, VA. The Visitor Center is open daily except Christmas and New Year's Day and contains a museum, slide program, 30 minute film, maps and other literature. National Park Service Rangers are on duty to answer your questions and to help in planning a tour of the battlefields. For more information on Cold Harbor and the other nine units of the park write:

**Superintendent**  
**Richmond National Battlefield Park**  
**3215 East Broad Street**  
**Richmond, VA 23223**  
**(804) 226-1981**

To visit other National Battlefield sites follow the brown and white "Richmond Battlefield Tour" signs.

## PICNICKING

Picnicking is allowed in the designated area behind the Exhibit Shelter.

## FOR YOUR SAFETY

While every effort has been made for your safety, you must remain alert and cautious. Park roads are narrow, winding and intended for slow travel. Ticks and poison ivy can cause allergic reactions or serious illness. Spring and summer bring thunderstorms with high winds and dangerous lightning. Take refuge at the exhibit shelter or in an automobile, never beneath a tree.

## REMEMBER

Your cooperation is essential in protecting and preserving the park for your continuing enjoyment and the benefit of future generations. Please help by not disturbing or removing any historic objects or walking on earthworks within National Park Service areas.

