

Richard Ewell, Robert E. Lee, and Cemetery Hill

The Importance of Ewell's Attack on July 2 Has Been Missed

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Misunderstandings and misinterpretations relating to the attack of Lieutenant General Richard S. Ewell's Second Corp on July 2, 1863, at Gettysburg, still exist after one hundred and thirty-five years. These misunderstandings have stemmed directly from lingering questions pertaining to Ewell's role during the battle which have yet to be adequately addressed, or handled with the seriousness they deserve. Historians have occasionally asked questions pertaining to specific unit action in Ewell's Corp on July 2, but never do they attempt to show that his movements had a profound effect on the outcome of the battle. In other words, the small questions are asked, but his actions are generally excluded from discussions of the bigger picture. And, on the occasion where his July 2 role has been considered in light of the bigger picture, rarely has too much emphasis been placed on his failures or successes because -- it is understood -- the **real** story remains in the area of the Round Tops. The following questions, which will be addressed in this work, are such examples of rarely asked, bigger picture questions: Why did Ewell not move his Corp around to the right and south of town, during the evening of July 1, as General Robert E. Lee had briefly suggested? What was Ewell's purpose in attacking Culp's Hill on July 2? Why did Major General George G. Meade spend most of July 2 inspecting the Cemetery Hill to Culp's Hill part of his battle line instead of the area around the Round Tops? Why did Meade consider taking the offensive from that sector of his line, during the morning of July 2? Based on the lateness of his attack, can Ewell claim he was really striving to coordinate his attack with Lieutenant General James Longstreet on July 2? If so, why was his attack so late? Why did General Robert Rodes' Division not support the divisions of Major General Edward Johnson, and Major General Jubal Early, by attacking



Cemetery Hill on July 2? How did Rodes failure to attack on July 2 affect the outcome of the battle? How key was Cemetery Hill to holding the Union position at Gettysburg?

The core reason behind most of these questions receiving very little attention is probably rooted in the lack of interest the historian and general audience has shown in the Confederate role on that part of the battlefield. So much emphasis has been placed on movements of the Confederate right / Union left, that the Confederate left / Union right is naturally discriminated against. Moreover, since Ewell's Corp attacked so late in the evening of July 2, his Corp's results are viewed as an afterthought, if any thought is given to his attack at all. This neglect has led to the gradual capitulation of key areas of that sector of the battlefield to development.

The result of this past neglect in preservation, which has stemmed either from a lasting feeling that Ewell's attacks during the evening of July 2, 1863 were a side-show of the battle, or lack of knowledge of the events of his attack, has left the modern historian with little to work with. To conduct a seminar or tour from the perspective of Major Generals Johnson, Early, and Rodes, is seen as a study that is beneficial to the novice, but is really not necessary information. However, true Gettysburg historians must at least pay lip service to the action in those areas, so occasionally it becomes necessary to rehash old stories on that part of the field where Ewell participated. However, few historians really believe that Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill are as important as Little Round Top, Devils Den, the Wheatfield, and Peach Orchard.

Whether the Gettysburg novice realizes it or not, there are underlying reasons for the long-standing de-emphasis of Ewell's July 2 role. Indeed the reasons behind his increasingly diminished role -- through the decades -- runs even deeper than the stigma related to the lateness of his July 2 attack. One such underlying reason is that many of the original key story tellers from his sector of the field did not survive or were not inclined toward writing detailed reports, or, toward creating a wealth of correspondence. Major General Robert E. Rodes, for instance, died in 1864, while Major General Edward Johnson left very little correspondence. Brigadier General John B. Gordon was perhaps embarrassed by his lack of assistance given to the attack against Cemetery Hill on July 2 which may explain his oh-so-brief report. Furthermore, Major Joseph Latimer, who directed much of the Confederate artillery fire from Benner's Hill was mortally wounded, on July 2, and subsequently died.

As a consequence of the aforementioned misfortunes, the historian is left with scraps of evidence, as compared to the abundance of material that was produced by participants from the other flank. Generals Longstreet, Hood, McLaws, Law, and Kershaw, coupled with Colonel Alexander - just to mention a few players from the Confederate right flank - bequeathed the historian a plethora of details pertaining to battlefield tactics, decisions of the high command, along with details of personalities often laced with controversy. Likewise, their Union counterparts, directly opposite them on the Union left, were very vocal in post-war arguments about who saved Little Round Top. Union veterans debated whether credit for saving the Union left should be attributed to Chief Union Engineer Gouverneur K. Warren, Brigadier General Samuel W. Crawford, Colonel Strong Vincent, or Colonel Joshua L. Chamberlain?

The personality of General Daniel Sickles with his flamboyance and irreverence also brought attention to the Union left / Confederate right in the post-war years. His controversial decisions at Gettysburg on July 2, 1863 only seemed to gain more attention as the years passed mainly because he out-lived his adversaries. Merely examining the ripple effect of controversy surrounding his actions provides the historian a good amount to work with. More study needs to be done in this area, but it is entirely possible that future research will reveal that the post-war controversies surrounding Generals Longstreet and Sickles, drew extra attention to their story at Gettysburg, thus elevating the importance of their role over that carried out by Ewell, Howard, and Slocum. The construction of a trolley system through the southern end of the battlefield in the early 1890's also contributed to the emphasis of that part of the battlefield

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over the Confederate left / Union right. That the Union XI and XII Corps, who were defenders of Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill, were viewed as second class citizens in the Army of the Potomac, has also detracted from the importance of this area of operations. Overall, however, it is presumptuous to conclude that Little Round Top was more important than Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill, but that is what the historiography of the battle has concluded to this point.

With this stated, this work will proceed to address the key questions brought out in the opening paragraph, in the hopes of clearing up misunderstandings and misconceptions about the role of Ewell's Corp on July 2. This work, however, will not advance under any pre-conceived notion that the role played by Ewell's Corp -- along the Confederate left -- was of less importance than the one carried out by Longstreet's Corp. In no way should the attack of Ewell's Corp be considered an afterthought, and no apologies should be made for this approach. In my attempt to place the fighting there on the same par, it must be first understood exactly what Lee's tactical objective was for July 2, 1863. One must start there.

Lee's tactical objective was simple for the second day of the battle. He wanted to follow through with the unfinished business left over from the evening of July 1. This business at hand was to take Cemetery Hill. Cemetery Hill commanded the town, and was at the heart, or nerve center of the unusual amount of roads that diverged from and converged into Gettysburg. Comte de Paris summarized that, "...the position of Cemetery Hill, completed, in a tactical point of view, the strategic advantages presented by Gettysburg: it commanded the town and all the roads adjoining it."¹ Among these roads, the Baltimore Pike was perhaps the most important, because it was the central artery by which the Army of the Potomac was supplied. The pike ran north from Westminster, Maryland, which was served by the Western Maryland Railroad, the principal rail line by which supplies were forwarded to the army in Pennsylvania. Westminster also provided Meade with his main telegraph connection to the War Department in Washington. Union Chief of Staff Henry Halleck had given orders to Meade to protect the Baltimore Pike above all other roads. Along the line that the Army of the Potomac developed at Gettysburg, Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill protected this vital artery. The occupation of Cemetery Hill became the key to holding Gettysburg and its network of roads.

During the evening of July 1, when Lee met with Generals Ewell, Early, and Rodes, to consider options for the next day, their consultation revolved around how to take Cemetery Hill. The question was should Ewell's Corp attack it directly the morning of July 2, or as Lee suggested would it have been "...better [to] draw [Ewell] around towards [the] right...where...the more practicable nature of ascents [lay] on that side of the town...that the attack could be made on that side, and from [the Confederate] right flank, with better chances of success."² A member of Lee's staff, James Power Smith, concurred that "General Lee spoke of an advance by General Ewell by daylight next morning. Early and Rodes again suggested advance from the ground to their right, the more gradual slope affording opportunity for success against Cemetery Hill."³

After much discussion, Lee decided to leave Ewell's Corp in its positions north and slightly west of Cemetery Hill, because Ewell convinced Lee that once the third division of his corps, Edward A. Johnson's, arrived he could threaten Cemetery Hill from east of town. From there Early reported that "...it was determined with [Johnson's] division to get possession of a wooded hill on the left [east] of Cemetery Hill, which it commanded..."⁴ General Ewell concurred in his own report that the purpose of trying take the wooded hill (Culp's Hill) was to command Cemetery Hill.⁵ Since Early's Division would attack East Cemetery Hill, and Rodes Division would strike the western face of Cemetery Hill, and because the Confederate purpose in seizing Culp's Hill was to make Cemetery Hill untenable, then it can be deduced that Lee's intent for Ewell on July 2, was to take Cemetery Hill. Cemetery Hill was the goal.

Concerning the idea that Cemetery Hill could be more easily assailed from ground southwest of Gettysburg due to the “more gradual slope affording opportunity,” existing there, Lee decided that he could use General James Longstreet’s First Corps to exploit this “opportunity.”⁶ It is a realistic assumption that the embryonic form of Lee’s plan for Longstreet’s corps on July 2 took shape during his discussion with Ewell, Early, and Rodes the evening of July 1. That Lee tried to persuade Ewell to shift his corps to the right to the more gradual/assailable side of Cemetery Hill indicates that he entertained an attack proceeding from the south and west of town at least as early as that discussion. When Ewell, Early, and Rodes discouraged Lee from using them for such a movement, it is only logical to believe Lee substituted Longstreet into that mission.

The plan of assailing Cemetery Hill from southwest of town, which seems to have begun that evening, matured into a tactical plan of ‘double envelopment’ by the next morning. Lee’s three different corps would be used in the following way. Longstreet was to begin the attack on the Confederate right, the commencement of which would be Ewell’s signal to open his demonstration on the left, to be turned into a real attack if an opportunity arose. With Longstreet trying to drive the Union line in obliquely or indirectly, and Ewell attacking directly, Lee’s two wings (two-thirds of his army) if successful, would have naturally converged at a point of impact, in the vicinity of Cemetery Hill. Meanwhile, part of A.P. Hill’s Corp (the last third of his army) at the Confederate center was expected to participate in the attack, but that general’s principal task was to pin down the Union center.

In executing this tactical plan of convergence, Lee was merely following accepted military practices laid out in a popular book among West Pointers, Baron De Jomini’s, *The Art of War*, which was first published in 1804, and again in 1863. Within this instructional work, Jomini urged that when a General assumes the offense he:

“...should endeavor in all his combinations, whether deliberately arranged or adopted on the spur of the moment, to form a sound conclusion as to the important point of the battlefield...and not forgetting the direction in which strategy requires him to operate. He will then give his attention and efforts to this point, using a third of his force to keep the enemy in check or watch his movements, while throwing the other two-thirds upon this point the possession of which will insure him the victory. Acting thus, he will have satisfied all the conditions the science of grand tactics can impose upon him, and will have applied the principles of art in the most perfect manner.”⁷

This critical “point” at Gettysburg, by Jomini’s definition, was Cemetery Hill.⁸

A tactical plan emphasizing a single point to converge upon was not unusual for Lee to employ. At Chancellorsville, two months earlier, he had divided his two corps sending “Stonewall” Jackson corps out to drive in the Union right flank to a point of convergence, with the rest of his army, at the Chancellor house. The previous August at Second Manassas, Generals Longstreet and Jackson converged in a pincer fashion against General Pope’s Union Army. Two months before that in June of 1862, Lee characteristically divided his force in front of McClellan outside of Richmond falling with the brunt of his army against the Union Army’s right and driving it southeast toward a convergence with Magruder’s Confederates south of the Chickahominy. If matters had worked according to plan on July 2, 1863, Gettysburg would have born an uncanny resemblance to Lee’s previous battles, with the point of convergence at Cemetery Hill.

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As for the planned specifics of Longstreet's attack against the Union left on July 2, Union Chief of Artillery, General Henry Hunt, described Lee's intent most exactly when he observed that:

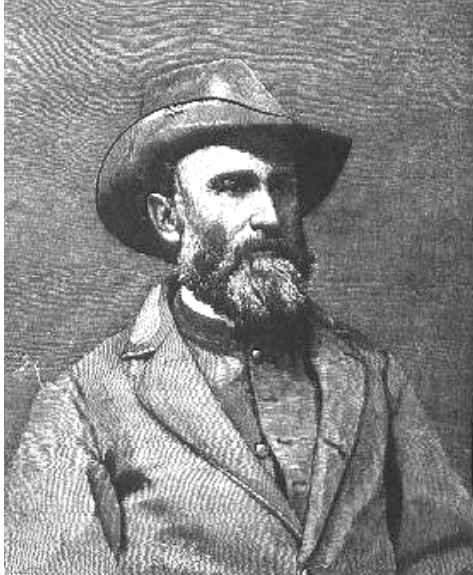
*"It would appear...that General Lee mistook the few troops on the Peach Orchard ridge in the morning for our main line, and that by taking it and sweeping up the Emmitsburg road under cover of his batteries, he expected to "roll up" our lines to Cemetery Hill. That would be an 'oblique order of battle,' in which the attacking line, formed obliquely to its opponent, marches directly forward, constantly breaking in the end of his enemy's line and gaining his rear. General Longstreet was ordered to form the divisions of Hood and McLaws on Anderson's right, so as to envelop our left and drive it in."*⁹

Consistent with this, Major General John Bell Hood, whose Confederate division played a major role in the execution of Lee's plan for his right wing, emphatically reminded Longstreet through post-war correspondence that his orders were to "attack up the Emmitsburg Road."¹⁰ Even casual students of the battle are aware that Hood did not want to carry out this order and did so only under protest. Very seldom do the same students ponder why Longstreet's attack was directed to proceed in that direction. The answer is simple. Longstreet was to converge with Ewell and not diverge from him, as the story is often mistold. The Union army had interior lines, tightly compacted with numerical strength versus their Southern counterparts whose lines were longer and thinner. In fact, Lee's line was protracted twice as far Meade's line with a Confederate Army only three quarters the size of his Union counterpart. To swing around further to the right, as Hood wanted to do, only exacerbated this problem.

The solution to Lee's problem was to bring his two wings together, thereby carrying out, "Concentric lines of operations [which] are those [where the wings] depart from widely-separated points and meet at the same point, either in advance of or behind the base."¹¹ More exactly translated, concentric means to pull together to a nerve center, which for Lee at Gettysburg was Cemetery Hill. In this process of driving his opponents flanks inward to a point of convergence, Lee could shorten the length of his line and progressively strengthen it.

The attack of Lee's two wings, which included Major General Richard Anderson's division of General A.P. Hill's Corp on the right, was to be initiated by Longstreet on the Confederate right, while Ewell's role was to listen for Longstreet's guns and, "...to make a diversion in their favor, to be converted into a real attack if an opportunity offered."¹² Lee affirmed Ewell's role for July 2 when he reported that, "General Ewell was instructed to make a simultaneous demonstration upon the enemy's right, to be converted into a real attack should the opportunity offer."¹³ The main point here is that Ewell was not ordered to begin an infantry attack with Longstreet in synchronized fashion, which is often presumed. To have done so would have been the ideal, but in reality Ewell was not ordered to do this. Ewell was to parlay off of Longstreet's success and not the other way around. To grasp this concept is to better understand what Lee envisioned for both Longstreet and Ewell. That is, if Longstreet had been able to drive in the Union line toward Ewell, then an "opportunity" should have naturally developed for the latter. It is only reasonable to assume that the greater Longstreet's success, the earlier Ewell would have entered the fight. From this, one should also see Ewell's perceived delay as one in which he was waiting for an "opportunity" rather than mysteriously wasting time.

Another factor (besides Longstreet not being able to drive the Union left in towards Ewell) which limited Ewell's "opportunity" to get involved earlier, was the appearance and demonstration of a substantial body of Union cavalry along the Hanover Road. A force of nearly 4,000 cavalry men, under Brigadier General David M. Gregg, rested on Ewell's flank and rear on July 2. Neither Longstreet nor Hill had to contend that day with such a force in



*Major General Jubal A. Early
(Battles and Leaders)*

their rear while being expected to organize an attack in their front. Under such unique circumstances, Ewell had to keep watching over his shoulder, as he tried to look for an "opportunity" to cooperate with Longstreet.

Reluctantly, Ewell was forced to parcel out part of both Early and Johnson's divisions to address this threat. Early had to forfeit Brigadier General William "Extra Billy" Smith's brigade, which could have been otherwise used against East Cemetery Hill and Johnson had to weaken his assault at Culp's Hill by loaning out Brigadier General James A. Walker's Stonewall Brigade. These two Confederate brigades moved east along Hanover Road to confront Gregg's two Union cavalry brigades at Brinkerhoff's Ridge where a fight ensued during the afternoon. Shifting Smith and Walker's brigades may have proved fatal to Ewell's efforts because "In the minds of many

veterans on both sides, had Walker's men added their weight to the attack, Ewell might have carried [Culp's] hill, dislodged the XII Corps, unraveled the Union right, and rolled up Meade's line like a giant blue carpet."¹⁴ Belatedly, Confederate cavalry commander, Major General J.E.B. Stuart, arrived on the field and was placed by Lee on Ewell's left to remedy the threat posed by Gregg, but not in time to release Walker and Smith's brigades for fighting at Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill on July 2.

Though Longstreet's Corp was not able to envelop and drive in the Union left north and "up the Emmitsburg Road" toward Ewell, and though the absence of Stuart's Cavalry through most of July 2 forced Ewell to parcel out valuable infantry numbers to protect his left and rear, an "opportunity" did finally come to convert Ewell's artillery diversion into a "real attack." That opportunity is often missed or misunderstood, but nevertheless there was a single act that triggered the forward movement of Ewell's Corp. Major-General George G. Meade identified this action in in an addendum to his official report. He wrote that, "the detachment of so large a portion of the [Union] Twelfth Corps [to aide]...the heavy assaults upon our extreme left [Sickles]...The enemy, perceiving the withdrawal of our troops, advanced and attacked General Greene..."¹⁵ Lieutenant Colonel C.O. Reddington, 60th New York Infantry, who was in command of Brigadier General John W. Geary's Divisional skirmish line at Culp's Hill, perhaps also observed that the shifting of XII Corp troops from Culp's Hill to the Union left prompted the Confederate attack. Although Reddington did not bring out this detail in his report, he may have supplied this information later (which worked its way through channels) to Meade who recorded it in an addendum to his report dated February 25, 1864. Whatever Meade's original source, he seemed convinced that the timing of Ewell's "real attack" was directly related to the evacuation of the Union XII Corp from Culp's Hill.

The specifics of this migration involved "...the First Division and Lockwood's brigade, of the Twelfth Corps, [who] were sent as reinforcement's... Two brigades of Geary's division (Second, of this corps) were also detached for this purpose..."¹⁶ Their mission was to reinforce the hard pressed Union left. Their mass exodus from Culp's Hill led to the withdrawal of at least 300 skirmishers of the 28th Pennsylvania Infantry, who were with Colonel Charles Candy's First Brigade of Geary's Second Division. The withdrawal of the skirmish line would have alerted Confederate skirmishers who reported this development to General Johnson, thus precipitating not only the assault against Culp's Hill, but announcing to all three divisions of Ewell's Corp to convert their demonstration into a "real attack."



*Major General Edward Johnson
(Miller's Photographic History)*

The beginning of Johnson's attack leads us to another misunderstanding about the role of Ewell's Corp. It is often understood that Ewell's three divisions were to stagger their attacks so that Johnson would start on the Confederate left, followed shortly by Early to his right, then Rodes. The novice of the battle may imagine that once Johnson began to move forward that Early waited until he was fully engaged before ordering his advance, and Rodes did likewise, waiting for Early to become engaged. This thought process would be consistent with the enechelon attack, a common method of attack during American Civil War battles. However, Early claimed in his post-war writings that Ewell's Corp had not planned this mode of attack. Early stated, "Ewell ordered that attack to be made by his whole corps. Rodes and myself were to be in readiness to begin the attack as soon as Johnson's muskets should be heard on the left... There was no work by "piece-meal," as far as Johnson and myself were concerned..."¹⁷ The reason Johnson's division was chosen to start the three-pronged attack according to General Early was that the former "...confronted a wooded hill, and had to feel his way through the woods with skirmishers to find the enemy, while the ground over which Rodes and myself had to move was open, and there was no need of skirmishers, but when we started we could go right on. My two brigades started promptly at the sound of Johnson's muskets..."¹⁸

Rodes agreed that he and Early were to go in together rather than piece-meal. To this effect he recorded that, "Seeing... a stir among the enemy in my immediate front... I thought that opportunity had come, and sought General Early, with a view of making an attack in concert with him."¹⁹ The stir in his immediate front may have been the movement of Colonel Samuel S. Carroll's Brigade towards East Cemetery Hill, where Early had began his assault. Movements of Union 2nd Corps regiments such as the 71st and 106th Pennsylvania Regiments, from Cemetery Ridge to Culp's Hill, may have also created the stir which Rodes referred to.

Before I investigate how and why Ewell's three divisions failed to achieve an "attack in concert," I want to step back momentarily and review the significance of the positions being assaulted by his corps. As was mentioned at the outset, the historiography of the battle has not been kind to this part of the battlefield and much of Cemetery Hill has been developed, rendering it only a shadow of its former self. To see what Rodes and Early saw during the late afternoon of July 2, the historian must squint his eyes and look through a menagerie of modern buildings, trees, roads, and parking lots, only to be reminded that he must still use his

imagination. Cemetery Hill, more than any other position along the Union battle line, has been altered beyond recognition to the view held by battle participants.

There are two reasons for this degradation, which were not formerly mentioned at the outset. First, the Confederate left / Union right rested on the southern edge of the town. It was only natural from a borough perspective, that Gettysburg extend a bit further in the direction of Cemetery Hill. That was not the fault of the town as much as it was a misfortune for preservationist that the two armies fought through, in, and on the edge of the town. A second reason for the dramatic alterations to that part of the battlefield lies with a shift of emphasis, somewhere in the past, toward stressing Cemetery Hill as strictly the Soldier's National Cemetery. Lincoln's visit to help with the dedication greatly contributed to this emphasis. The main point here is that the tactical importance of Cemetery Hill has decreased over the decades to where it has been completely over-taken by the theme of "a final resting place."

The Cemetery Hill which Johnson, Early, and Rodes all hoped to converge upon, was anything but a secondary theme during the early evening of July 2, 1863. Union Eleventh Corp General Oliver O. Howard documented that at 503 feet, "The highest point at the cemetery commanded every eminence within easy range."²⁰ Moreover, with its gradual reverse slopes, it was conducive to easy deployment of artillery, thus making it easy for Union gunners to "completely sweep" the ground, "toward the west and south."²¹ It was for this reason that Lee deemed the Peach Orchard as "desired ground" for Longstreet's Corp to gain, where "...it was thought our artillery could be used to advantage in assailing the more elevated ground beyond, and thus enable us to reach the crest of the ridge."²² One can be assured that this "more elevated ground beyond" which Lee wanted to "reach" was indeed Cemetery Hill when Lee recorded in the same report that the "crest of ridge" was "massed [with] a large amount of artillery."²³ Given the fact that Little Round Top never had more than 6 to 8 artillery pieces upon it, and given that Longstreet's attack was originally to guide upon the Emmitsburg Road toward Cemetery Hill, it can be ascertained that the Peach Orchard was selected by Lee as an artillery position to enfilade and help neutralize the commanding eminence of Cemetery Hill and its Union 11th Corps artillery.

As one continues to investigate Cemetery Hill, which Ewell's Corps and indeed Lee's entire army strived to approach that evening, one finds other dimensions to its significance. Colonel E.P. Alexander, an artillery battalion commander in Longstreet's Corps, for instance, recorded, "This salient upon Cemetery Hill offered the only hopeful point of attack upon the enemy's entire line..."²⁴ This observation is bold and beckons closer investigation. Just what did Alexander mean here? What is a salient and why should Cemetery Hill have been considered so vital for this reason?

The first step in answering these questions is to grasp both the geographical relationship and proximity between Cemetery Hill and the rest of the Union battle line on July 2. Perhaps Lieutenant Frank Haskell, serving on Union Brigadier General John Gibbon's 2nd Corps staff, explained that relationship best, noting, "The line of battle as it was established...was in the form of the letter, "U," [with] the troops facing outwards, and the 'Cemetery'...at the point of the sharpest curvature of the line..."²⁵ From this analysis, one first learns that the Union battle line assumed a configuration resembling the letter "U," which has been more commonly compared to a fishhook. Additionally, it is vital that one comprehends that the fishhook or "U" shape offered benefits that were well known by military commanders long before the battle of Gettysburg. Jomini in his instructional book of strategy, which was consulted by Civil War Generals, illuminated the importance of such a line when he stated that, "Central positions, salient towards the enemy...are the most advantageous, because they naturally lead to the adoption of interior lines and facilitate the project of taking the enemy in reverse."²⁶ Jomini also explained that, "Interior lines of operations...have such a direction that the general can

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concentrate the masses and maneuver with his whole force in a shorter period of time than it would require for the enemy to oppose to them a greater force.”²⁷

What Jomini wanted his reader to observe here was that there were genuine benefits to be gained from occupying an “interior,” “concave,” or “central,” line. First, such a line fostered the most direct and shortest routes for transporting troops, supplies, and communiqués, because all traveling would occur inside this line. Applying the same reasoning to an “exterior line,” which is the type of line Lee’s forces occupied at Gettysburg, one must realize that it is drawn out much farther and travel cannot always follow the most direct routes.

A second benefit to the “interior line” was that it aided the opportunity of “taking the enemy in reverse.”²⁸ This could be achieved by a straightening of the “U,” thus pivoting on the geometric center, thereby transforming a double-layered battle line into one single line that extends beyond and wraps around behind its enemy. One reason for Meade entertaining the idea of an offensive along the arch of his line -- between Culp’s Hill and Cemetery Hill -- during the morning of July 2, would have been to “take the enemy in reverse.” Likewise, one reason Lee agreed to leave Ewell’s Corp opposite that arc would have been to prevent such a maneuver.

To further understand the prominent position of Cemetery Hill in relation to the rest of the Union battle line on July 2, Haskell wrote that “the ‘Cemetery’ ...[was at]... the point of the sharpest curvature of the line...”²⁹ That the Cemetery was at the “sharpest curvature of the line,” is paramount to the hill’s importance on the battlefield, because upon that curve there formed a protrusion at the geometric center which carried different designations of importance. One meaningful title which could be given for the sharp curvature of the line at Cemetery Hill is an “ANGLE OF DEFENSE - [which] is that formed by the meeting of the flank and line of defense, or the face of the bastion produced.”³⁰ Another such designation is “SALIENT ANGLE,” [which is] an angle pointing outward...or in a battle line with its apex toward the enemy...”³¹ Yet another nomenclature which could be employed to depict the consanguinity of Cemetery Hill to the Union battle line was that it formed a “BASTION,” [which is] something that is considered a stronghold, bulwark, safeguard.”³²

With each of these definitions, there is illumination as to what the position of Cemetery Hill really meant in terms of achieving victory. To the Union Army Cemetery Hill became a key or vital position because it was a bastion, bulwark, or safeguard. It commanded the whole area as it lurched forward of their position like the bow of a ship. Moreover, it was the geometric center of the interior line adopted by Meade and was therefore the natural pivot should that general assume the offensive and attack-in-reverse. Judge David Wills, in the process of choosing a place for the Soldier’s Cemetery after the battle, came to this same understanding when he wrote that Cemetery Hill “was the key to the whole line of our defenses - the apex of the triangular line of battle.”³³ By referring to it as, “This salient upon Cemetery Hill...,” Colonel E. P. Alexander revealed that he also recognized its significance.

What Alexander also realized was that salient angles do have vulnerabilities, which is why he stipulated that Cemetery Hill, “offered the only hopeful point of attack upon the enemy’s entire line.” This is the other side of the story. His military peers, especially West Pointers, would have understood Alexander's point. That is, when a defensive commander adopted an interior line of battle and formed a salient, like the one at Cemetery Hill, there were advantages, but also disadvantages. Jomini warned that the chief disadvantage was that, “The sides of this salient angle become so important that every means should be taken to render them impregnable.”³⁴ What Jomini meant, and what Colonel Alexander also tried to convey was that “the sides become so important” because the curved, angular shape of the interior line creates “eccentric” or “dispersed” fire along the defender’s two sides. At any given point on either side of the “U” shaped line, the defender’s fire is only at half strength. If the attacker applies pressure upon both sides of an interior line, especially at the point of the salient, then

a converging fire or cross-fire can be achieved. If one side collapses then the rear of the other side becomes exposed. If the convergence is coordinated well enough, the result is maximum firepower for the attacker. Such a potential advantage explains why several Civil War battles featured assaults against angles, salients, muleshoes, or triangle lines of battle.

Therefore, as Ewell's three divisions deployed north, east (opposite Culp's Hill) and west of Cemetery Hill, during the evening of July 2, in actuality they were assaulting the two sides and nose of the Cemetery Hill salient which, "offered the only hopeful point of attack upon the enemy's entire line." In summary, Ewell was to bring a converging fire against that part of the Union line where the return fire was the most "eccentric" or "dispersed." This endeavor by Ewell's Corp may not have been the main attack on July 2, but its significance cannot be viewed as a secondary theme.

Ideally, the divisions of Johnson, Early, and Rodes should have moved forward in synchronicity, but that did not happen, and only Johnson and Early moved out right away. Early sent forward the brigades of Brigadier General Harry T. Hays and Colonel Isaac Avery. Brigadier General John B. Gordon's Brigade was to follow up on their success, and had Smith's Brigade not been preoccupied with Gregg's Union cavalry along the Hanover Road, he too would have been available. Early's assault was aimed at the nose or point of the salient angle, at East Cemetery Hill, which was known locally as Raffensperger Hill. In the opinion of a Union artillery officer on the receiving end of Early's assault, "both Ewell and Early made every exertion to take the Hill, which they justly considered as the key to Cemetery Hill, and consequently to our army."³⁵

As planned, elements of Hays' brigade attacked the hill's northernmost sector, and Avery's three regiments which wrapped around its eastern base, proceeded up into Union artillery redoubts at the top of the hill. One of the potentially misleading interpretations about Early's attack has been that "only a few" of these Confederates progressed to the top of East Cemetery Hill.³⁶ What number constitutes "a few?" This misconception has partly been derived from Colonel A. C. Godwin's official report where he noted that, "in this charge, the command had now become separated, and in the darkness it was found impossible to concentrate more than 40 or 50 men at any point for a farther advance."³⁷ The emphasis of this statement has mistakenly -- I believe -- been placed on "40 or 50 men" concentrating at the crest of East Cemetery Hill, which gives the impression that only a few Confederates made it to the top. Instead, the emphasis of Godwin's report should be placed on, "at any point," which is a somewhat nebulous description, but nevertheless indicates there may have been several points where "40 or 50 men" were grouped. Depending on how many points there were there might have been several hundred men of Early's Division who reached the summit of the hill.

The misconception that "only a few" reached the top of East Cemetery Hill also stems from Major Samuel M. Tate's report where he claimed that, "...75 North Carolinians of [his] Sixth Regiment and 12 Louisianians of Hays' brigade scaled the walls, and planted the colors of the Sixth North Carolina and Ninth Louisiana on the guns."³⁸ If one were to



stop reading his report there, then the conclusion could be made that only 87 Confederates reached the top. However, the following sentence of his report is most revealing, as he

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recorded, "It was now fully dark." How could he have seen the field so clearly to make such an assumption? Not only was it too dark to determine these numbers with precision, but it would have been out of his realm of responsibility to know the specifics of Hay's entire five regiment brigade. It is more reasonable to believe that since Hays and Avery possessed nearly a two-to-one advantage or a thousand additional men in numbers over their foe, that more Confederates ascended East Cemetery Hill than is normally credited. It is doubtful that Major General Carl Schurz's 11th Corps division of 1,500 men, and Colonel Samuel S. Carroll's 2nd Corps brigade of over 900 soldiers, would have been sent there to repulse an insignificant number of Confederates.

For the members of Hays' and Avery's brigade who climbed East Cemetery Hill, a defining moment occurred at the summit. It not only defined the efforts of these two brigades, but it reinforced the significance of Cemetery Hill in the Army of Northern Virginia's plans that day. Brigadier General Hays described that instant as follows:

*"A quiet of several minutes now ensued. Their heavy masses of infantry were heard and perfectly discerned through the increasing darkness, advancing in the direction of my position. Approaching within 100 yards, a line was discovered before us, from the whole length of which a simultaneous fire was delivered. I reserved my fire, from the uncertainty of this being a force of the enemy or of our men, as I had been cautioned to expect friends both in front, to the right, and to the left, Lieutenant-General Longstreet, Major-General Rodes, and Major-General Johnson, respectively, having been assigned to these relative positions; but after the delivery of a second and third volley, the flashing of the musketry disclosed the still-advancing line to be one of the enemy."*³⁹

Discerned correctly, the substance of this part of Hays' report reveals that most of Lee's Army was to converge at the salient of Cemetery Hill. As was discussed earlier, concentric lines of battle demanded Longstreet to converge with Ewell at this vital point of the battlefield. Consistent with this idea, Hays reported that General Longstreet's Corps was expected to approach Early's Divisional "front" from the south, but of course that did not happen. Longstreet was unable to converge there largely because his attack up the Emmitsburg Road became sidetracked as it unexpectedly veered east toward Little Round Top, which was not part of Lee's original plan. Longstreet remembered this shift east when he recorded, "...and Hood's line was extended to the right to protect its flank from the sweeping fire of the large bodies of troops that were posted on Round Top. These...movements of extension so drew my forces out, that I found myself attacking Cemetery Hill with a single line of battle against no less than fifty thousand troops."⁴⁰

Concerning the topic of whether Little Round Top was his objective, Longstreet added,

*"The importance of Round Top, as a point d' appui, was not appreciated until after my attack. General Meade seems to have alluded to it as a point to be occupied, 'if practicable,' but in such a slighting manner as to show that he did not deem it of great importance. So it was occupied by an inadequate force. As our battle progressed, pushing the Federals back from point to point, subordinate officers and soldiers, seeking shelter, as birds fly to cover in tempest, bound behind the large boulders of its rock-bound sides, not only protection but rallying points. These reinforcements to the troops already there, checked our advance on the right, and some superior officer, arriving just then, divined from effect the cause, and threw a force into Round Top that transformed it, as if by magic, into a Gibraltar."*⁴¹

It is very clear from Longstreet's comments that Little Round Top was not originally the "point of support" for either army, so what factors led to its ascension to importance? Hood's wounding was a major factor, because his absence largely contributed to the misdirection of Longstreet's attack. Under Lee's original plan, that officer was bound by direct orders not to veer in the direction of the Round Tops. It was in his absence that the Confederate attack strayed from its course. Additionally, the lateness of Longstreet's assault, (whether it be the fault of that general, or the fault of Lee), allowed Little Round Top to become a factor. However, the greater point is that once Little Round Top became a factor, Longstreet was not able to drive the Union left in towards Cemetery Hill "which seemed to [Lee] to be the key to all the enemy's positions."⁴²

Going back to that defining moment for Hays' division atop East Cemetery Hill, this brigadier general not only had been, "cautioned to expect...Lieutenant-General Longstreet...in front," but also to, "expect...Major-General Johnson...to the left." Johnson's three brigades had benefited from the withdrawal of most of the 12th Corps from Culp's Hill to bolster the Union left. The result was that Brigadier General George H. Steuart's Confederate Brigade flanked Brigadier General George S. Greene's brigade, (which had been left to defend the hill) and captured lower Culp's Hill. General Lee referred to this lodgment within the Union lines as one of "these partial successes [which] determined me to continue the assault the next day."⁴³ Had Walker's "Stonewall" Brigade been available there, and not tied-up with Gregg's Union cavalry in Ewell's rear (where Major General J.E.B. Stuart should have been), then the fight at Culp's Hill might have been a full Confederate success. Perhaps speaking for others, one Union captain believed that if Confederate success at Culp's Hill had been achieved then,

"Once on the [Baltimore] pike, the Confederate commander [Johnson] would have been full in rear of one-third of our [Union] army, firmly planted on the middle of the chord of the arc upon which that portion was posted...What the effect must have been it is not needful to describe. The least disaster would have sufficed to force us from the field."⁴⁴



*Maj. Gen. Robert E. Rodes
(B&L)*

As Johnson was expected to pour in "to the left" of Hays' Brigade, thereby, "...render[ing] Cemetery Hill untenable," Major General Robert Rodes was to strike Brigadier General Adolph Von Steinwehr's division of the 11th Corps, "to the right," along the western face of Cemetery Hill.⁴⁵ The attack never matured leaving the historian to ponder why this vital side of the Cemetery Hill salient was not challenged? Military commanders such as Rodes must have known that it was crucial to challenge both sides of an interior line so that the defender could not easily shift reinforcements. This was a basic geometric principle, yet Rodes did not follow through.

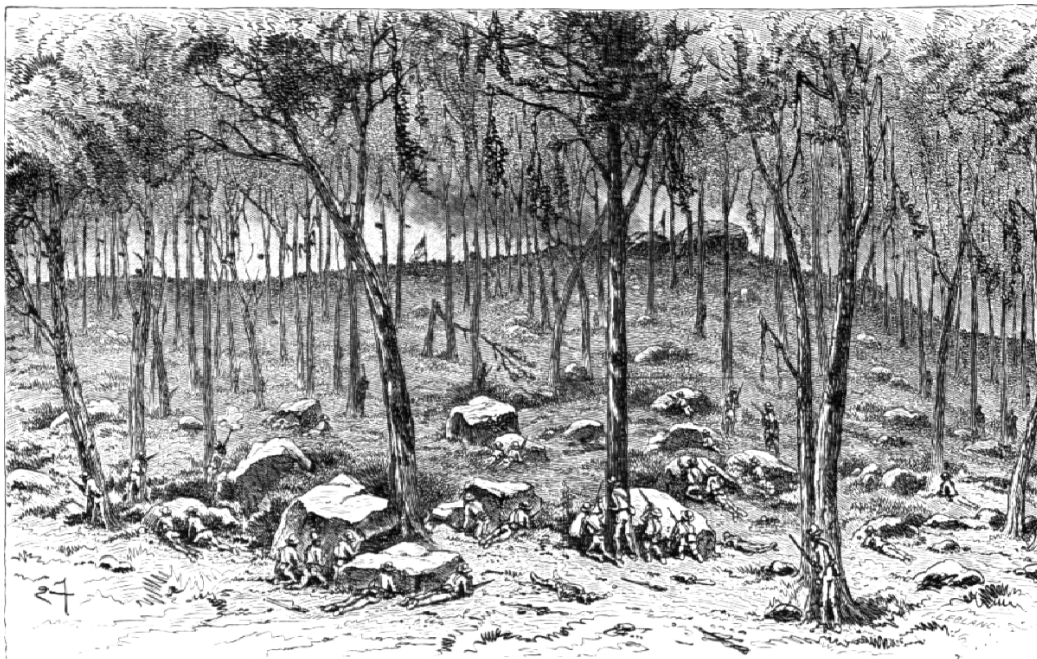
There are three basic reasons offered for why Rodes' division did not fully participate in Ewell's attack. One revolved around his time consuming movement through the southern part of town to get into position to attack. Secondly, Rodes worried about the exposure of his right flank. The third reason was the strength of the Union position. With reference to the town becoming an impediment to his movements Rodes reported:

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“I thought that opportunity had come, and immediately sought General Early, with a view of making an attack in concert with him...but having to draw my troops out of town by the flank, change the direction of the line of battle, and then traverse a distance of twelve or fourteen hundred yards, whilst General Early had to move only half that distance without change of front, the result was, that before I drove the enemy’s skirmishers in, General Early had attacked and had been compelled to withdraw.”⁴⁶

As for the second reason why Rodes seemed to lack zeal in completing Ewell’s, decided...attack along his whole line,” he feared that his right flank would be unsecured, during his movements.⁴⁷ To attend to this concern, Rodes reported that, “I hastened to inform the officer commanding the troops on my right [part of Pender’s division] that in accordance with our plan I would attack just at dark.”⁴⁸ The officer that Rodes hastened to was Brigadier General James H. Lane, who had assumed command of Major General Dorsey Pender's Division after Pender was wounded. Lane, “was prepared to give the assistance required of him, and so informed General Rodes...”⁴⁹ According to Lee, the assistance did not develop however because,

“When the time of the attack arrived, General Rodes, not having his troops in position, was unprepared to co-operate with General Early, and before he could get in readiness [Early] had been obliged to retire for want of the expected support on his right...General Lane...deemed it useless to advance after the failure of Early’s attack.”⁵⁰



Fighting on Culp's Hill. Note how open the woods are. (B&L)

If Lee was correct here, then Rodes belated participation prevented the committal of portions of Pender's division to the fight against Cemetery Hill and ridge on July 2. Likewise, the aborted attack of Rodes determined that Early would not send Brigadier General John B. Gordon's Brigade to assist at East Cemetery Hill. From this assessment, Rodes tentative actions cost the Confederate Army victory that evening at Gettysburg.

In Rodes defense, the destruction of Brigadier General Alfred Iverson's Brigade a day earlier must have naturally conditioned him to be cautious of flank fire. Furthermore, for Rodes to get into position on July 2, he had to march by his right flank south and position his troops east of and underneath (rather than overlap west of) Pender's division, so that once he restored his brigade formation and proceeded west toward Cemetery Hill, his right flank would have led Lane's left. Simply stated, Rodes would have presented his right flank to Union defenders. Therefore, it was only reasonable for him to worry about his flanks, although Johnson and Early were faced with challenges equally difficult and yet managed to attack. Early may have best explained Rodes apparent phobia with protecting his flanks when he reflected that,

*"He was new in his position of division commander at Gettysburg, but when killed at Winchester, on the 18th of September, 1864, he had learned to be less sensitive about his flanks, and would not at that day have given such an explanation of his failure to co-operate in an attack similar to that made by Johnson and myself at Gettysburg."*⁵¹

Reflecting similar sentiments in a separate letter, Early cited that, "I have always thought that, if at the time Johnson's division and my two brigades became engaged, the two divisions on my right had advanced promptly, we would have secured a lodgment on Cemetery Hill that would have ensured us the victory."⁵²

Although a special opportunity to secure the vital position of Cemetery Hill had eluded General Lee on July 2, he did not second-guess his conclusion that this hill was the key to victory, nor did he assign Ewell's Corp a subsidiary role in the endeavor to capture that hill on July 3. Instead he intended that:

*"Longstreet, re-enforced by Pickett's three brigades, which arrived near the battlefield during the afternoon of the 2d, was ordered to attack the next morning, and General Ewell was directed to assail the enemy's right at the same time. The latter [Ewell], during the night, re-enforced General Johnson with two brigades from Rodes' and one from Early's division."*⁵³

Along these lines, Lee reported that "The general plan was unchanged, excepting that one division and two brigades of Hill's Corp were ordered to support Longstreet..."⁵⁴

The key words here, which are perhaps the most misinterpreted of the battle, are "*The general plan was unchanged.*" It is generally believed that if Lee operated under any plan during the three days of battle, then it consisted of attacking the Union flanks on July 2 before assaulting that army's center on July 3. However, this general belief does not resemble Lee's own official report where Longstreet and Ewell were described as being expected again to coordinate against both sides of the Union Army. As was discussed earlier, geometric principles demanded such coordination against an interior line in order to prevent the defender from easily shifting supports.

Unfortunately, such geometric principles have not survived within the battle's historiography. Instead, the modern historian of Gettysburg has inherited a story-line which holds that Longstreet's assault was meant to be a separate entity within the framework of the

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battle, and whereby Lee, who operated under no particular long range plan, decided to smash the Union center on July 3. Ewell's reinforcement of Culp's Hill by an additional 6,000 infantry, before 4:00 A.M. on July 3, and the subsequent seven and a half hour fight there either goes unnoticed, or is viewed as an unrelated side show. Correlations are rarely made between the protracted nature of the fight at Culp's Hill on July 3, and the notion that Ewell's troops there were attempting to endure until Longstreet began his attack.

Likewise, the historiography of the battle does not make connections between the deployment of Stuart's Confederate cavalry in Ewell's rear and the release of Walker and Smith's Confederate brigades from Hanover Road to the support of Culp's Hill. That Stuart's cavalry permitted Ewell to better apply pressure against his side of the Union interior line, in conjunction with Longstreet's efforts, has seemingly been lost from the story.

To not make these logical connections, between Ewell's efforts at Culp's Hill and Longstreet's efforts against Cemetery Hill, is to overlook the basic rules at stake when assaulting an interior line. It is also to miss the obvious, which is that both of these corps commanders concentrated their greatest number of troops on July 3 against either side of Cemetery Hill. Can there be any greater example, which points toward that ground as Lee's true objective? The only way to avoid this reasoning is to downplay or ignore the participation of Ewell's Corp, which is often done. Once Ewell is dismissed, then Longstreet becomes no longer obligated to him for purposes of coordination, which is a line of thinking that Civil War historians have become comfortable with.

As to why Longstreet and Ewell did not attack at the same time on July 3, Lee explained that

*“General Longstreet's dispositions were not completed as early as was expected, but before notice could be sent to General Ewell, General Johnson had already become engaged, and it was too late to recall him. The enemy attempted to recover the works taken the preceding evening, but was repulsed, and General Johnson attacked in turn.”*⁵⁵

As it turned out, Union artillery along the Baltimore Pike drew Ewell's infantry into battle at Culp's Hill before Longstreet was prepared to attack from the other side. The delay was every bit as devastating to Confederate success as Rodes' delay had been on July 2. The end result was that the Union army was permitted to focus on one attack at a time and to buy several extra hours of preparation along Cemetery Hill and Ridge.

Should Longstreet have been ready to attack early? Yes, according to Lee who stated that “Longstreet... was ordered to attack the next morning.” Because the “general plan was unchanged” and because Lee had made a sound conclusion as early as the evening of July 1 that Cemetery Hill was the key point of the battlefield, he seemingly expected Longstreet to make every effort toward seizing that point. That Longstreet understood Cemetery Hill remained Lee's objective is confirmed in all of the former's writings including his account submitted to Battles and Leaders between 1884 and 1887, where he noted “I was disappointed when he [Lee] came to me on the morning of the 3d and directed that I should renew the attack against Cemetery Hill...”⁵⁶

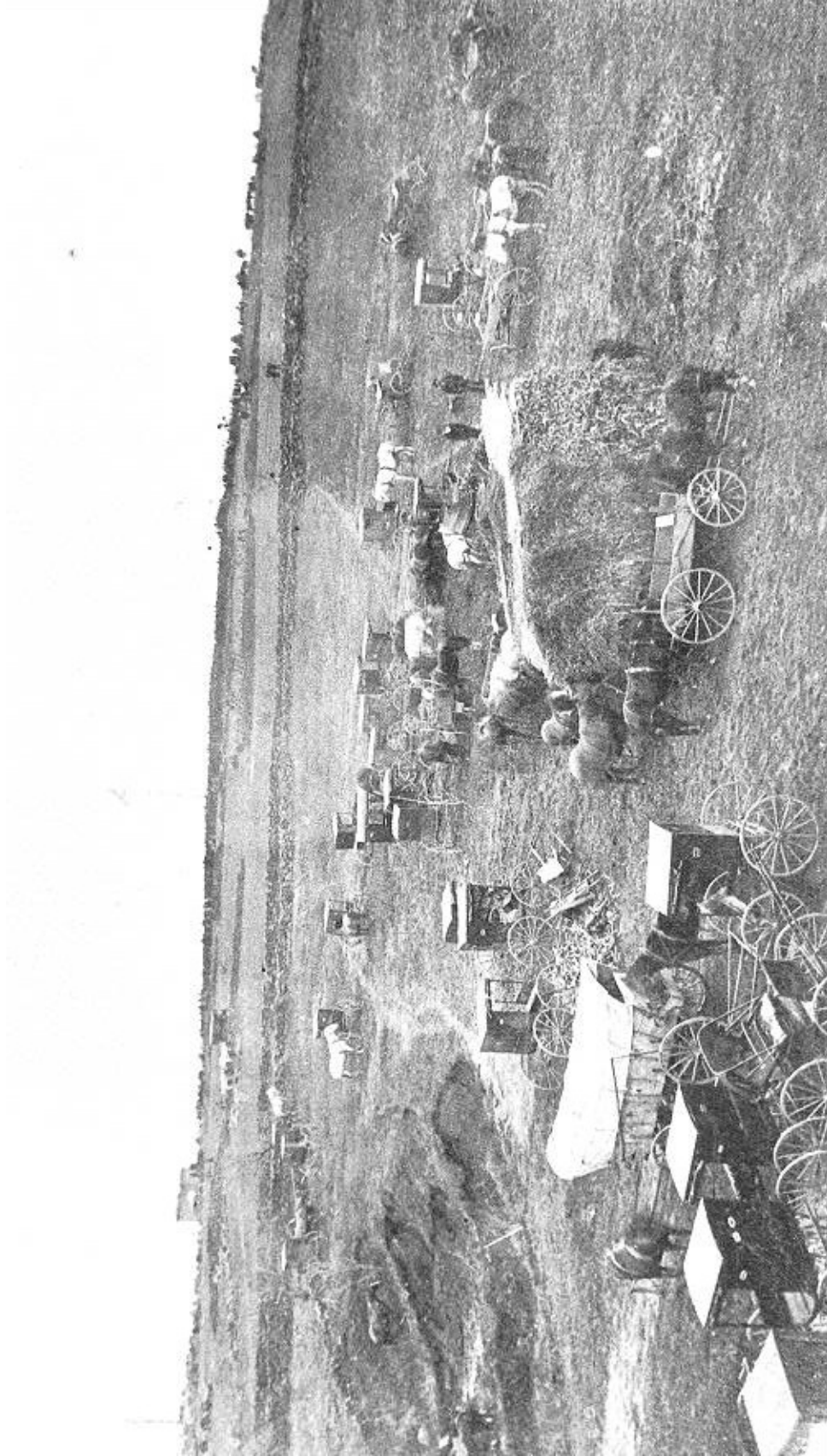
Concerning Pickett's division, Lee apparently counted upon Longstreet to bring Pickett up to the battlefield on July 2 and have him ready to go the next morning. As argued above, Pickett's Charge was not a separate action in Lee's mind, but a pre-planned movement in Longstreet's coordination with Ewell, and therefore Longstreet possessed enough knowledge of Lee's intentions to bring him up earlier to Seminary Ridge. To this effect, Colonel E.P. Alexander remembered that,

“During the evening [July 2] I found my way to General Longstreet’s bivouac, a little ways in the rear...I was told that we would renew the attack early in the morning. That Pickett’s division would arrive and would assault the enemy’s line. My impression is the exact point for it was not designated, but I was told it would be to our left of the Peach Orchard.”⁵⁷

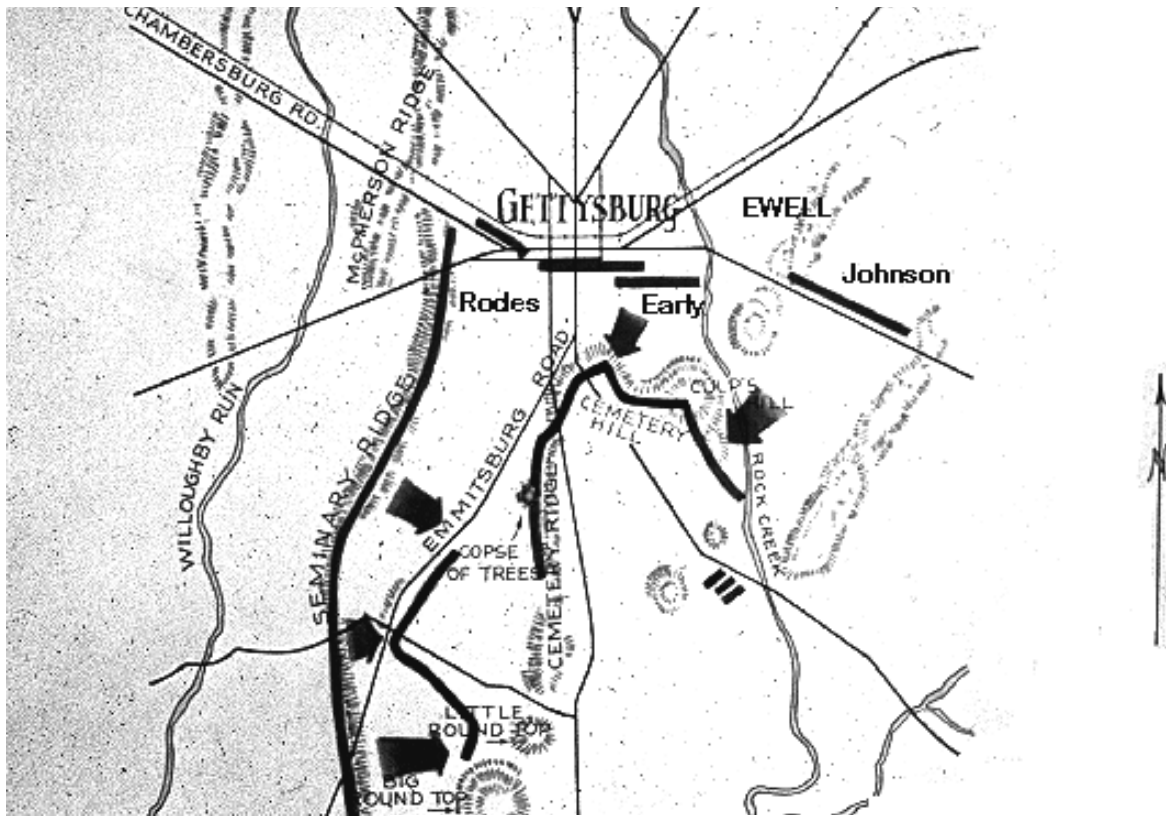
In the final analysis, Ewell’s involvement was at the heart of Lee’s plans on July 2. His participation must not be viewed as an afterthought, especially since the ground that he tried to converge upon was at the forefront of Lee’s mind. Since Ewell’s Corp was given the assignment of trying to seize Cemetery Hill on all three days of the battle, and because Longstreet’s goal was to roll the Union line up towards Ewell and to Cemetery Hill on July 2, as well as to attack that hill directly on July 3 in conjunction with Ewell, then it must be concluded that the latter’s role was not a subsidiary one. Also, once it is understood that Meade’s interior line required no less than coordinated pressure from the entire Confederate Army, then Ewell’s role can again be recognized. Once such actions as Pickett’s Charge, Ewell’s July 3 assault against Culp’s Hill, and the cavalry battle east of town are viewed in relation to each other, then the process of restoring the importance of Ewell’s role within the battle’s historiography can begin.



An 1869 view from the National Cemetery looking northwest toward Seminary Ridge. The large white structure in the middle ground is the Adams County Fairground, which was built in 1867. The Seminary building, where Rodes began his attack on July 2, can be seen directly above the far right person in the foreground. Rodes’ brigades partially crossed the fields from the Seminary before they halted. [NA]



A November 19, 1863 view of Cemetery Hill from below the Taneytown Road, which is visible in the middle ground behind the horses and carriages. The Evergreen Cemetery gatehouse is visible in the upper left of the photograph. This image underscores the formidable nature of Cemetery Hill in 1863 and the excellent fields of fire enjoyed by Union artillery posted there. (Hanover Historical Society)



The positions of Ewell's Corps on July 2. (GNMP)

Notes

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- ¹⁴ Edward G. Longacre, The Cavalry at Gettysburg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 212.
- ¹⁵ Major-General George G. Meade, "Addendum Report of February 25, 1864," O.R., Vol. 27, Part 1, pp. 120, 121.
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