



THIS IS A PREVIEW CHAPTER OF

*Robert E. Lee at War: The Mind and Method of a Great American Solider,*  
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## ≡ Chapter Five ≡

### “Gentlemen, We Must Rally These Men!”

*“War is composed of nothing but accidents ... there is but one favorable moment, the great art is to seize it.”—Napoleon, in his Military Maxims<sup>1</sup>*

Richmond was agog with stories of Mechanicsville. The Friday morning edition of the *Richmond Daily Dispatch* heralded that “the greatest and most momentous conflict of the age” was at hand. “Let us reverently hope that the God of Battles will smile propitiously upon our efforts, and crown our forces with a complete and glorious triumph over malignant and relentless enemies,” the paper added. Robert E. Lee would certainly have agreed. After the way things had gone awry for the Confederates on the 26th, Lee knew better than anyone that the events of the next day could shape the destiny of his young nation.<sup>2</sup>

Over breakfast on the warm morning of June 27, Lee dictated orders for his now-extemporized counteroffensive. He reasoned that to turn the Beaver Dam Creek line and compel the Federals to quit their defenses, the plan of the previous day needed modification. Yet the initiative must not be sacrificed. After all, conditions still favored the Confederacy. The 70-degree predawn hours and cloudless sky that promised “a bright clear day” gave every indication of hot weather without rain.

After taking the time to dutifully inform President Davis as to where his headquarters were to be located,

**WITH JOHN BELL HOOD IN THE LEAD,** THE 4TH TEXAS WAS ARGUABLY THE FIRST REGIMENT TO PIERCE THE VERY FORMIDABLE FEDERAL LINES AT GAINES’ MILL. DETAIL FROM THE PAINTING “DESPERATE VALOR” BY DALE GALLON. COURTESY OF GALLON HISTORICAL ART, GETTYSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA.

General Lee believed that the latest version of his flanking maneuver and attack plan could be carried out despite what Major Walter Taylor described as “very different conditions.” These “very different conditions” consisted of the Federals being fully alerted to the fact that the Confederates were committed to a counterattack. Yet despite losing all possible surprise, Lee did not alter his belief that the counteroffensive design was still sound. After all, it was a plan of action deeply rooted in the principles of war, and driving McClellan “out of his entrenchments” could only be achieved through audacious maneuver. As a result, Lee continued to seek to impose his will by opting for an extemporized solution. He was determined to create favorable conditions whereby he could achieve a decisive military result in order to bring politics into play whereby independence could be ultimately won.<sup>3</sup>

Lee and his staff left their quarters and rode “down the hill to the” bridges over the Chickahominy. From horseback, the commanding general and his staffers heard the “sharp fire of musketry with some artillery ... for about half-an-hour in the direction of the battle-ground of the previous evening.” The clatter was from Powell Hill’s brigades, who had slept on their arms near where the fighting had ended and were again firing across Beaver Dam Creek.

After a short ride, Lee was back among the debris of battle in and around Mechanicsville “before sunrise.” Within moments of his arrival, he started making prepara-



**WALTER TAYLOR AS A FIRST LIEUTENANT,** COMPANY F, 6TH VIRGINIA VOLUNTEER INFANTRY IN 1861 (WEARING THE UNIFORM OF THE SOUTHERN GUARD, NORFOLK MILITIA). COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR.

## Walter Taylor

General Lee's longest tenured staff member was Virginia native Walter Herron Taylor. Reared in a family prominent among Norfolk's business community, Taylor achieved solid academic records at Norfolk Academy and Virginia Military Institute. At the end of his sophomore year at VMI in 1855, Taylor ranked first in general merit among the 31 members of his class, doing especially well in mathematics, Latin, drawing and composition. During the fall of what was to be his junior year, the 17 year-old Taylor learned of the untimely death of his father and decided to forgo the completion of his schooling in order to return to Norfolk and assume the burden as head of the family household. For the next several years, he worked various jobs in the banking and railroad industries, earning a reputation as an exceedingly capable and tireless worker.

By the time the sectional crisis enveloped his native state, Taylor was also a member in Norfolk's militia company. By the end of April 1861, he held a 2nd Lieutenant's commission in Company G of the 6th Virginia Infantry. It was this same month that Robert E. Lee was named as commander of Virginia's military forces and as such required an exceedingly competent aide. Richard Lucien Page, first cousin of General Lee and naval aide to Virginia Governor John Letcher, was Taylor's uncle by marriage. It was Page who recommended Taylor to Lee. By the summer of that year, Taylor had proved his worth and received a promotion to the rank

of 1st Lieutenant. He accompanied General Lee to western Virginia in late summer of 1861 as well as to the southeastern coast several months later when Lee was assigned command of the Department of South Carolina, Georgia and East Carolina. Soon after General Lee's recall to Richmond in March of 1862 where he became President Davis' "advisor," Taylor was promoted to major of cavalry and continued service on Lee's staff as an assistant adjutant.

Possessing formidable bureaucratic gifts combined with an amiable personality and an extraordinary work ethic, Taylor very efficiently handled the flow of paperwork at Lee's headquarters. By the time of the Seven Days campaign, the 24 year-old Taylor was known for his dynamic ability to effectively and speedily perform all duties assigned to him. This is no better reflected than by the other members of Lee's staff nicknaming Walter Taylor "The Tycoon."

tions for a double-envelopment of the Federal line along Beaver Dam Creek. However, soon after Lee's appearance at the front, and before his plans could be finalized, Charles Marshall remembered, "it was reported that the enemy had retreated." Lee surmised that only a Federal rearguard stood before them, covering the withdrawal of Fitz-John Porter's command. Perhaps the Federals were retreating because Jackson was on their flank or rear? Regardless of the reason, a pursuit had to be organized, and quickly. Wasting no time, Lee started issuing the directives to that effect.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the distances involved and the critical importance of Jackson's flanking column to Lee's plan, the commanding general had to be certain that he could get Stonewall involved in the day's activities. Lee dispatched Taylor with instructions to find Jackson, who was believed to be in the vicinity of Hundley's Corner. Taylor was to advise Jackson to reach Walnut Grove Church by crossing Old Church Road and then marching southeast to the vital junction at Old Cold Harbor.

Lee also ordered the Light Division to take the Old Cold Harbor Road across Beaver Dam Creek and then loop northeast. At Doctor Curtis' place, the division would turn south toward Gaines' Mill. These orders were received and at Lee's direction, Powell Hill put Brigadier General Maxcy Gregg in the vanguard. Gregg's brigade, which had been in reserve the day before, was comprised of many privileged South Carolinians who were among the earliest volunteers after the state seceded.

A member of Gregg's inexperienced command recalled how the brigade "passed on over the dead and wounded bodies of our comrades who had fallen in the unsuccessful attack of the previous evening." General Gregg, a scholarly planter turned soldier who possessed a fervid zeal for The Cause, observed that "many Confederate soldiers, wounded or killed" in the previous day's fighting, "had to be moved aside to allow the passage of our artillery." By the time the brigade halt-

ed long enough to repair the bridge in front of Ellerson's Mill and then crossed over Beaver Dam Creek, it "was towards 8 o'clock in the morning." Moving up the slope and past abandoned Yankee entrenchments, the South Carolinians quickly passed through the hastily "deserted camps of the enemy" as they marched eastward in pursuit of Fitz-John Porter's formations.<sup>5</sup>

Other divisions needed to start moving eastward as well, and fast. Lee directed Longstreet to place his command on the Confederate right by taking his formations across the flats until he picked up the Old Cold Harbor Road, passing by Doctor William Gaines' plantation house parallel to the line of march taken by Powell Hill.

To the north of Powell Hill's route, Old Church Road led from Mechanicsville to Bethesda Church. Lee instructed Harvey Hill to take this road, and upon reaching the church, march southward to a fork two and a half miles from Old Cold Harbor. Forming the far left of the Confederate divisions, Harvey Hill would be in position to support Jackson's three divisions while at

*"Jackson, three miles off to the northeast, was already in easy reach of Porter's line of retreat, and had but to push his advance a mile or two, and Porter would have been compelled to retreat precipitately or be caught in a trap."*

— Porter Alexander

the same time leading his own division across the rolling farmland toward Beulah Church and Old Cold Harbor. Finally, assuming that the capable Major Taylor could find Jackson and direct him as planned, then the divisions under Stonewall would be *between* Harvey Hill's right and Powell Hill's left as the Confederates swept down the Chickahominy toward McClellan's line of communication—the York River Railroad.

Therefore, in Lee's initial forming of his extemporized plan for the 27th, the order of the Confederate formations placed in motion were, from right (closest to the Chickahominy) to left: Longstreet, Powell Hill, Jackson's three divisions, and Harvey Hill. By moving Harvey Hill to the far left of the Confederate order of march, Lee had added more weight to that arm of the coming attack.<sup>6</sup>

Lee anxiously waited near Mechanicsville until the last brigade of Longstreet's division was in mo-

tion. As would become his custom, Lee followed the line of march and then eased his way alongside the men so he could interact with them. The commanding general believed that he could never waste a single opportunity to bond with his army, and June 27, 1862, provided one of seemingly countless examples.

Lee was riding with Kemper's brigade when part of it briefly stopped on the bridge over Beaver Dam Creek. One soldier of the 11th Virginia remembered how "General Lee rode by on 'Traveler [*sic*],' picking his way carefully along through the ranks" and visiting with the men. Another recalled how Lee "talked with many of us as he rode by." As the column passed the burning Federal supplies and stores that had been abandoned earlier that morning, Lee received word from the returning Walter Taylor that Jackson was with the vanguard of his command on the road south from Hundley's Corner where it crossed Cold Harbor Road. Wanting to visit with Jackson as soon as possible, Lee left Longstreet's column and reined Traveler northeast along the track taken by Powell Hill's men toward Doctor Curtis' place. The commanding general was about one mile down that road when cannon fire was suddenly heard to the southeast, which could mean only one thing: Powell Hill had made contact with the Federals.

Moving to a point where he could observe what Hill was up against, Lee found out that Confederate batteries were exchanging fire with Federal artillery in the orchard of Fairfield, the home of William Gaines. Much closer, other Confederate artillery were blazing away as well—the guns were from Jackson's command! Although Lee might not have yet learned that Captain Richardson was also firing on these Federals from across the Chickahominy, or that Jackson's guns were at that time accidentally firing on Powell Hill's units as they engaged the horse artillery of Porter's rearguard, the commanding general did see the head of Jackson's column near Walnut Grove Church. Lee guided Traveller farther to the left and rode up to the church between 9:30 and 10:00 a.m. Dismounting his gray gelding, Lee found Stonewall in conversation with Powell Hill.<sup>7</sup>

The three generals talked briefly in the shady yard of the country church. A friend of Reverend J. William Jones saw these officers that day. He described Lee as resplendent in his full uniform and bearing a magnificent image as a "king of men" as he took a seat on a cedar stump. "Jackson and Hill stood around him; the staff officers of each gathered in groups hard by." Jack-

son wore a dingy uniform covered in dust, with a "faded cadet cap [of the Virginia Military Institute] tilting on his nose," looking like "a farmer who had been plowing all day." Powell Hill was "dressed in a fatigue jacket of gray flannel, his felt hat slouched over his" brow. "The three conversed in earnest undertones" before Hill suddenly departed to rejoin the Light Division. Lee must have thought it best that a division commander be present at the front once his troops had encountered the foe, especially in a situation as fluid as this day's pursuit.<sup>8</sup>

Following Powell Hill's departure, Lee and Jackson discussed matters for more than an hour. No member of their respective staffs heard what passed between the two senior officers, and Lee certainly meant it to be that way. They had last seen each other at the Dabbs House on the evening of the 23rd, and the commanding general was doubtlessly eager to discuss events with the lieutenant whom so much of the counteroffensive depended.

From Jackson's message of the 25th, Lee knew that Stonewall's formations had not reached their intended destination at Slash Church just west of the Virginia Central Railroad that evening. Although Jackson had informed Lee that he would be underway at 2:30 a.m. on the 26th, some of his command had been slightly delayed, not beginning their movement until 3:00 a.m. The pace of the march was affected by the sandy byways that contrasted poorly with the improved roads of the Valley. Also, the maps were abysmal. All this translated into Jackson's command taking five hours to move the preliminary six miles, the point where they were supposed to have *started* the day's march. After Jackson subsequently crossed the Virginia Central Railroad at 9:00 a.m. and sent word to General Branch to that effect, it took him another six hours to traverse the next four and a half miles to the headwaters of the Totopotomoy Creek. At that point Jackson found that the Federals had destroyed a bridge. After repairing it, he marched for another hour and a half, covering two more miles before his vanguard reached the headwaters of Beaver Dam Creek around Pole Green Church. Jackson then pressed on to Hundley's Corner, reaching that place about 4:30 p.m. As hard as it must have been for Lee to hear, it had taken Jackson 13½ hours to cover just 16 miles.

And that wasn't even the worst news. When Jackson's vanguard reached Hundley's Corner and with three more hours of daylight remaining (and even longer before all military light was lost), and with the sounds of



Powell Hill's battle at Mechanicsville clearly audible less than four miles away, and with his command finally within striking distance of Porter's right rear and lines of communication less than two miles away, Jackson then told Lee that instead of doing what had been ordered and what common sense demanded—"turning Beaver Dam Creek and taking direction to Cold Harbor"—Jackson decided to halt his march and told his men to bivouac! Lee's reaction can only be imagined.<sup>9</sup>

In concluding their meeting, Lee gave Jackson specific verbal orders to hurry his march to Old Cold Harbor. Then, with support from Harvey Hill's division to his left, Jackson was instructed to turn Powwhite (pronounced POW-height) Creek, the only nearby stream on Lee's map behind which he reasoned the Federals could make a stand while maintaining direct communications with the rest of the Army of the Potomac south of the Chickahominy. If Jackson's column, now augmented with Harvey Hill's division and totaling 14 of the 26 infantry brigades then north of the Chickahominy did not induce the Federals to retreat, then

Jackson and Hill would be in position to directly threaten the York River Railroad and descend on Porter's rear.

Lee's most recent extemporized version of his counteroffensive reinstated a limited version of *la manoeuvre sur les derrières*, intending to create conditions that would ensnare the enemy on the horns of a dilemma. If Porter turned to meet Jackson and Harvey Hill's flanking movement, he would be vulnerable to pressure applied frontally from Longstreet and Powell Hill. Alternatively, if Porter ignored the divisions under Jackson and that under Harvey Hill or extended his front to meet the flanking column while maintaining his front facing west against Longstreet and Powell Hill, the Confederates would be in excellent position to take advantage of opportunities as they materialized as a result of their local numerical superiority. Regardless of the scenario, Lee was seeking to impose his will and force the Federals to fight on his terms.<sup>10</sup>

When the meeting ended, Jackson "nodded his understanding and turned abruptly to his horse," mounted in a short-stirrup perch, and rode away in a gaited trot on



THE WILLIAM HOGAN ESTATE NAMED "SELWYN" WAS USED BY ROBERT E. LEE AS HIS HEADQUARTERS DURING JUNE 27-28. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR.

his horse named Little Sorrel. Lee got back on Traveller and immediately went to find the head of Powell Hill's Light Division. It wasn't long before the commanding general came upon the South Carolinians under Maxcy Gregg, who were marching toward Gaines' Mill. Gregg recalled that General Lee "gave me further directions for advancing and attacking the enemy." Shortly thereafter, Gregg received word from Longstreet, who Lee had called to meet him at Selwyn, the estate of William Hogan. Longstreet wished to discuss the route that Gregg would be taking, and it was confirmed that Longstreet's division would continue on a parallel road to Gregg's right.

As Lee turned onto the lane that led to Selwyn, he must have believed that the pieces of his extemporized plan to turn the enemy out of their defensive lines absent surprise were beginning to come together. He knew that the Federals north of the Chickahominy were on the move; he knew that all of his divisions on the north side of the Chickahominy were advancing as well; and he knew that the Federals had withdrawn east of New Bridge, thus enabling the reestablishment of communications between the attacking wing of the Army of Northern Virginia with the divisions on the south side of the river. Although the far-off Federal batteries were still able to shell the bridge, Lee ordered that the damaged span be repaired before noon under a hot Friday sun.<sup>11</sup>

Lee dismounted in a beautiful grove of trees at the William Hogan estate that overlooked the Chickahominy from a distance north of New Bridge. The commanding general then dictated a telegram for General Huger that revealed his guarded optimism and advised the division commander, who was holding some of the approaches to Richmond, that he thought "it probable that the enemy is in force behind Powhite Creek." It must have seemed reasonable to Lee that the Federals might try to shift troops to face the attacking Confederate wing by "crossing the Chickahominy" on his line to Golding's by Fair Oaks Station along Huger's front. Lee therefore instructed Huger that "you must press" the enemy should he "diminish his forces in front of you or show a disposition to abandon his works." In the event that Lee was wrong about the situation, he told Huger in no uncertain terms that he was to "hold your line at all hazards" should McClellan strike for Richmond.<sup>12</sup>

Having made clear his intentions in the wire to Huger, Lee finalized his anticipated attack plan for the day

with the expectation that the Federals would stand at Powhite Creek, the only body of water *on Lee's map* in the area behind which the Federals could make a stand. Lee also received a message from William N. Pendleton, the commander of the Army Reserve Artillery, that he "distinctly saw the enemy in very large force in battle order upon a slope, some 2 miles below Doctor Gaines' farm," which seemed to confirm Lee's own instincts. Pendleton also maintained that the "observed position and strength of the enemy" to be at that spot, which was around New Cold Harbor and Powhite Creek, almost exactly two miles below Doctor Gaines' plantation manor. Lee returned a message to Pendleton, directing "that our longest-range guns should be made, if possible, to play upon the observed position of the enemy." Pendleton executed this order and the effective fire from one 4.62-inch rifled piece continued until Lee ordered it to cease firing lest it would hit advancing Confederate infantry, an observation that Pendleton evidently did not make on his own.<sup>13</sup>

"It was ascertained that the enemy had taken position behind Powhite Creek," Lee wrote long after the battle. However, knowing what he did at the time, Lee told Powell Hill to take the direct "route towards Gaines' Mill" with Longstreet keeping his division in reserve. Meanwhile, the heavily weighted Confederate left, now consisting of four divisions—the three divisions under Jackson (Jackson's own division under the command of Brigadier General Charles S. Winder, Dick Ewell's division, and Chase Whiting's division) along with the division under Harvey Hill on the far left—was to maneuver to Old Cold Harbor and turn the creek north of the pond at Gaines' Mill, then deploy on the Federal flank.

Lee anticipated that the Federals would have to make one of two choices. The first would be to move to meet the more numerous flanking Confederate forces; the second was to not move and face the consequences of the Confederates arriving on their right flank as well as their front. As was Lee's plan the day before, Powell Hill, supported by Longstreet on the right, was not to attack until Jackson's flanking divisions had arrived.<sup>14</sup>

With Gregg's brigade leading, the Light Division marched "for perhaps two miles" until the South Carolinians reached the bridge near the four-story brick Gaines' Mill on Powhite Creek around 1:00 p.m. It was there that Gregg's skirmishers "became sharply engaged." A quick charge by the South Carolinians forced

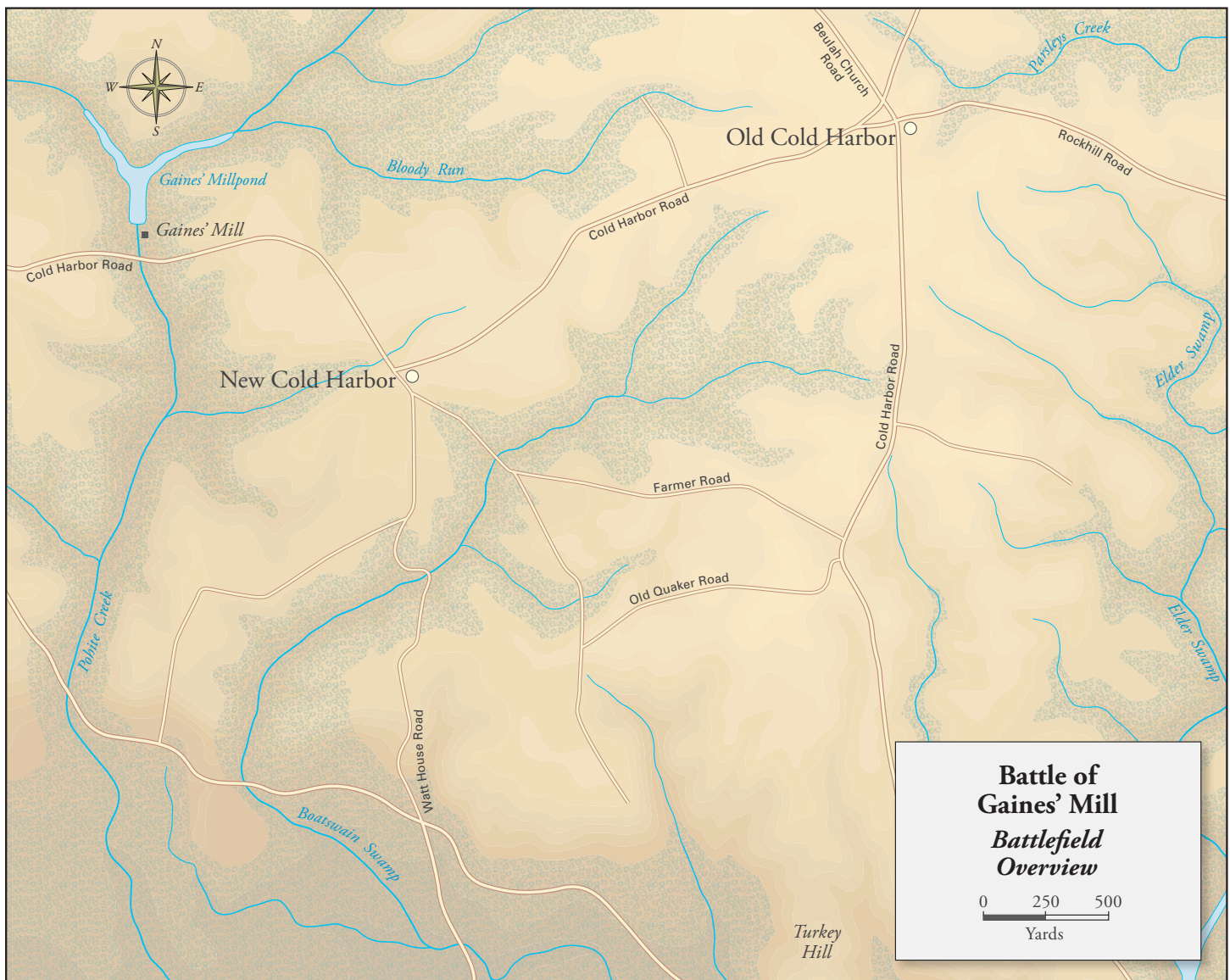


the Federal rearguard, consisting of the 9th Massachusetts, to retire. Gregg recalled how his men pursued the Bostonians, passing in the process by the enemy's deserted camps with "great quantities of accouterments and stores of abandoned or burning, [including] a large pontoon train [that] was burning in a field to our left." Soon the South Carolinians found the bulk of Porter's reinforced provisional corps beyond a swampy little stream called Boatswain's Swamp. Flush from his charge that cleared Gaines' Mill on the Powhite, Gregg was eager to send his brigade against the enemy line. Hill refused and directed Gregg "to await orders."<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, after eating lunch with Longstreet at the William Hogan place, Lee led his staff toward Old Cold Harbor, following the dusty route taken by the Light Division. From the saddle, Lee heard the sound of rapid volleys coming from that direction about 2:00 p.m. Spurring Traveller forward to observe the ground which he ex-

pected Porter to defend, Lee saw a much different sight. Instead of the Federal line running north-south along the Powhite, Lee saw a deserted position and only about 25 Yankee prisoners being taken to the rear—a few of the members of a Federal rearguard that had been swept away by Gregg's charging South Carolinians. After riding another three-quarters of a mile along an east-west running road that bent toward a left angle at a place called New Cold Harbor, Lee found Powell Hill. The division commander was in the saddle, his black felt hat pulled down and hiding his deep-set eyes. Hill was looking over the ground on which the Federals had chosen to make a stand.

General Lee peered across the shallow valley at an imposing sight. Divisions of Federals were deployed on very advantageous ground and supported by more batteries of artillery than could easily be counted. Riding closer to the enemy lines in order to get a better look, Lee's point of observation was slightly less than a half-





mile from the awaiting Federals. Lee saw how the terrain fell away to the south and southeast into the wooded, boggy bottom of “a winding stream, part swamp and part creek.” For some reason Boatswain’s Swamp, which was only six miles from Beaver Dam Creek and eight miles from Richmond, did not exist on Lee’s map.

Lee also saw how the position’s compact, natural strength resembled the shape of a drawn bow. For someone who read terrain as well as Lee, it must have become almost instantly understandable why Porter had selected this position instead of the north-south axis of Powhite Creek. A further scan of the ground revealed that after running parallel to the road from Old Cold Harbor to New Cold Harbor for a mile opposite where Lee and Hill were mounted, Boatswain’s Swamp continued for another mile to the south. The murky bottomland was perhaps best described by historian Clifford Dowdey, who was intimately familiar with the ground. The swamp “changed from a slippery high-banked creek in the center and to the right into a broad soggy ditch approached by a morass from the center toward Old Cold Harbor. At the Old Cold Harbor end, the swamp swung around as if designed by nature to protect the [right] flank of an army occupying the crest” on the southeast side of the swamp. “At the southern flank of the line, the hill above the swamp ended in a sheer bluff overlooking the boggy ground that sloped to the Chickahominy. On the bluff, [Federal] gun batteries” could sweep the field with their fire. Rising on the south of Boatswain’s Swamp was a long hill, its steep grades facing north and west while the ground behind the hill sloped southward to the Chickahominy. “It was a natural fort.”<sup>16</sup>

As might be expected, the presence of Lee and his military household attracted the attention of Federal artillerists, and his continued reconnaissance was conducted under increasingly heavy fire from Porter’s well-served artillery batteries. Describing what he saw during that reconnaissance, Lee recalled that the Federals:

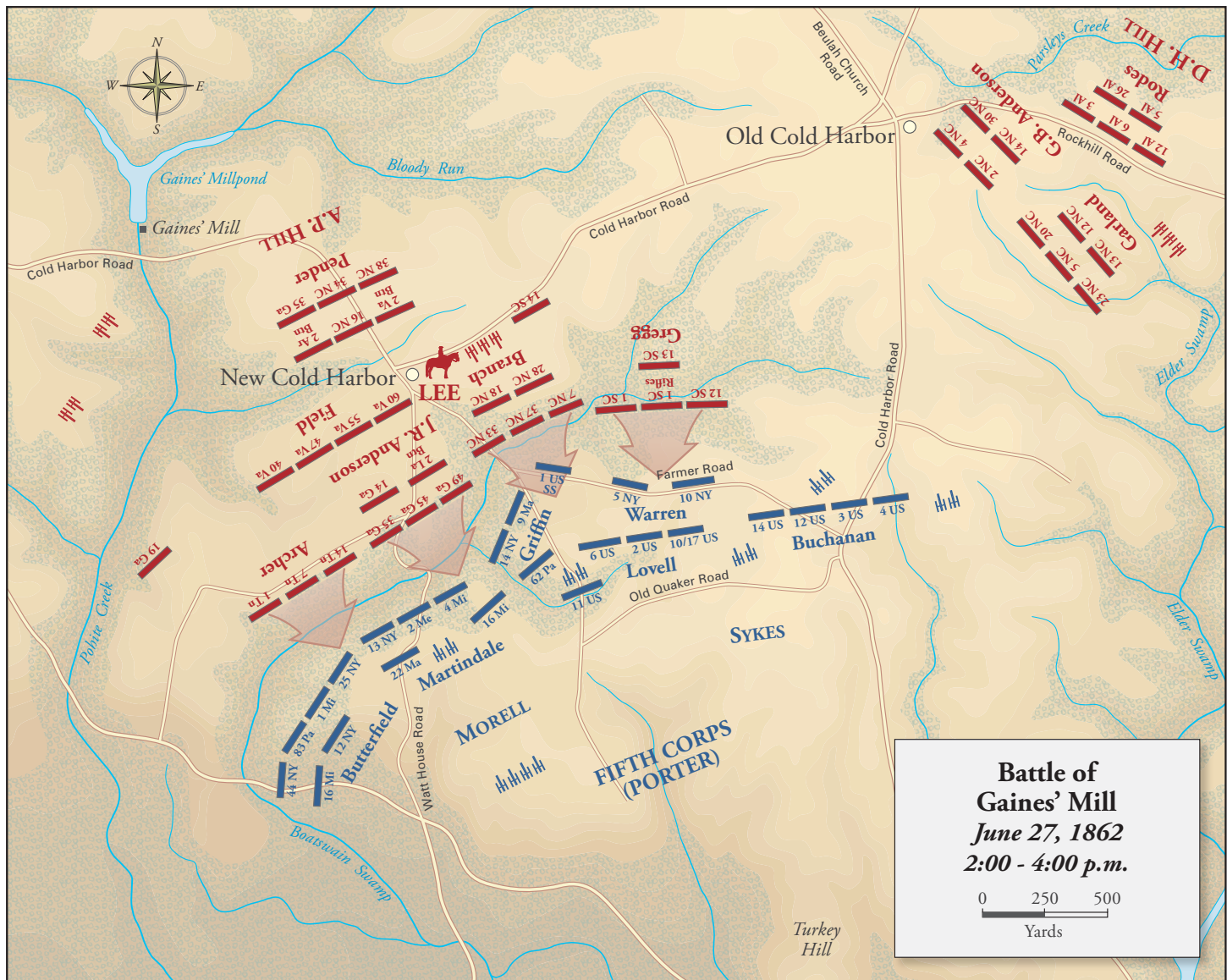
Occupied a range of hills ... which rose abruptly from a deep ravine. The ravine was filled with sharpshooters, to whom its banks gave protection. A second line of infantry was stationed on the die of the hill behind a breastwork of trees above the first; a third occupied the crest, strengthened with rifle

trenches and crowned with artillery. The approach to this position was over an open plain, about a quarter of a mile wide, commanded by this triple line of fire and swept by batteries south of the Chickahominy.<sup>17</sup>

With the Federals occupying a very strong position manned with plenty of troops—so many so that Lee thought “the principal part of the Federal Army was now on the north side of the Chickahominy”—Lee knew full well that any formations attacking headlong against the Federal front would certainly suffer heavy losses. Therefore, to give the divisions under Jackson and that under Harvey Hill time to maneuver in order bring their numbers and the effect of their flank assault into play, Lee gave Powell Hill and Longstreet additional time to carefully ready themselves before beginning the battle. Lindsay Long recalled that once “General Lee caused them to halt in order to give Jackson’s wing time to gain its position,” he waited until “the arrival of Jackson on our left was momentarily expected, and it was supposed that his approach would cause the extension of the enemy’s line in that direction.” Once everything was ready, Lee would order “Longstreet and A. P. Hill to commence the attack.”<sup>18</sup>

Powell Hill deployed his six brigades of infantry by placing five in line abreast with Pender’s brigade in reserve on the left. Three batteries of the division’s artillery compliment were initially earmarked to support the infantry’s efforts, with two positioned near Gregg’s brigade. After making those dispositions, Hill waited to hear from Longstreet, as Lee had intended both commanders to act in concert once the action began. Since Longstreet had been moving *en échelon* behind and to the right of the Light Division, it was going to take some time before the senior division commander could bring his command into the immediate vicinity of Powell Hill’s division and ready his brigades for the assault.

“Little Powell,” however, was anxious to begin the battle, and for the second day in a row he displayed his seemingly uncompromising, high-strung nature. Once he received Longstreet’s note stating that he was coming into position (not yet ready to support, but beginning to deploy), Powell Hill couldn’t stand it any longer. As he had done the day before, Hill slipped the leash on the Light Division—a formation that after Mechanicsville totaled 12,000-odd men of the ap-



proximately 56,000 Lee then had north of the Chickahominy—and rushed into action about 2:30 p.m.<sup>19</sup>

To be sure, most of Powell Hill's formations were still smarting from their rough handling of the day before. However, they were eager for redemption. Aware of his men's spirit and wanting to redeem himself as well, Hill had decided to take unilateral action yet again. Initially ordering three of his five brigades in the first line to attack *en échelon* beginning from the left, Hill opened the Battle of Gaines' Mill without advising Longstreet, his ostensible partner in the attack, nor the commanding general, who had ordered him to wait for the proper moment.

It therefore came as a surprise to Lee when he heard Maxcy Gregg's regiments rend the air with high yells and saw them move forward. The 14th South Carolina under Colonel Samuel McGown moved through Crenshaw's battery, the guns ceasing fire long enough for the men to

pass. Once McGown's battle flags crested the brow of the ridge on the west side of Boatswain's Swamp, the Federal artillery from the other side of the ravine opened with a thunderous clap. Some Federal gunners had already carefully determined the range to that point and cut their fuses so that the initial rounds of shrapnel burst with deadly effect over the Southern infantry. Nevertheless, the lines swept on as the South Carolinians descended toward the swamp and disappeared from Lee's line of sight.

Also moving forward *en échelon* was Lawrence O'Bryan Branch's brigade, followed by the brigade commanded by Joseph Reid Anderson. When the Southerners approached within 500 yards of the Federal lines, the deafening crash of volleys reverberated along the swamp and echoed against houses and hills. The sheer numbers of artillery and small arms being discharged in the face of the Confederates in such



a confined terrain created a deafening and horrendous roar that thousands of Southern veterans who would fight in many more battles would never forget.<sup>20</sup>

The Federal defensive position proved to be as strong as Lee had feared, and the leading Confederate brigades were soon stopped. Gregg's men, shielded for a while by young pine trees, struggled almost as much with the entangling underbrush of the ravine as they did with Federal bullets. Branch's North Carolinians attracted waves of fire as well. The brigade commander believed that he was about to be "driven back by overwhelming forces," when Powell Hill ordered in Dorsey Pender's reserve brigade to shore up their fellow Tarheel brigade.

It was about this time that Hill realized the futility of hurling more brigades headlong at the strong defensive line. He therefore ordered the brigades under Charles Field and James Archer to turn the Federal left. Field recalled when these brigades came "into an open field about 200 yards from the enemy's line" and charged, all hell seemed to erupt to their front. A storm of Federal bullets and canister tore into the Southern lines. Under a hail of lead, Field's men stopped "and opened fire within 100 yards of the enemy" while Archer claimed that his men "advanced at the double-quick to within 20 steps of the breastworks, when [the brigade] fell back before the irresistible fire of artillery and rifles."<sup>21</sup>

By 3:00 p.m., the full glare of the afternoon sun, coupled with the heat from the 88-degree and breezeless day, held the powder smoke low on the battlefield and drastically reduced visibility. Lee, frustrated by having to follow much of the battle by the sound of the guns, wanted to more closely observe the action so that he could better judge what actions should be taken and led his staff toward the fighting. Turning off the main road and taking two private lanes to the east and south, the commanding general came to a plateau well within Federal small arms range. Over the tops of the tall crops, Lee spotted Major R. Lindsay Walker, Powell Hill's chief of artillery, along with his adjutant, Lieutenant John Hampden Chamberlayne. The officers were alongside Marmaduke Johnson's Richmond Battery, which was limbered and seemingly awaiting orders. Suddenly two regiments of Gregg's brigade emerged from a tree line in full "panic-stricken" retreat toward them.

Looking to the south and southeast, Lee could see the tree line from which the South Carolinians were reeling.



**THE RUGGED TERRAIN** COMPRISING MUCH OF THE FEDERAL DEFENSIVE POSITIONS AT GAINES' MILL IS PARTIALLY CAPTURED IN THIS PHOTO. MANY OF THE VETERANS IN LEE'S ARMY CONSIDERED GAINES' MILL TO BE THE TOUGHEST DEFENSIVE POSITION THEY EVER FACED. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE.

No Federals were in pursuit. A member of Johnson's battery recalled how small arms bullets began falling about Lee as his staff officers urged the commanding general to retire out of range. Seemingly oblivious to the danger, Lee ordered Johnson's guns to be unlimbered and brought into battery. Then spurring Traveller forward and passing by the members of his staff as well as past Lindsay Walker and the other officers near the guns, General Lee shouted in a booming voice: "Gentlemen, we must rally these men!" Galloping into the midst of the fleeing infantry, Lee "called on the South Carolinians to stop and for the sake of their State go back to their work."

The magic was potent, the scene memorable. The sight of the army's commanding general riding into the broken regiments with bullets whizzing and artillery rounds exploding all around had the immediate effect of stopping "the panic ... and the men gallantly rallied." The surgeon of Gregg's brigade, J. F. J. Caldwell, recalled the event as well. "The great Lee seemed to be ubiquitous. [He was seen] here sending in a fresh brigade, here

dispatching couriers to various quarters of the field, here rallying and reassuring a disorderly regiment, constantly in motion, but always sublimely brave and calm.”<sup>22</sup>

By mid-afternoon, the battle that was developing was not the fight that Lee had anticipated, nor ordered. To make matters worse, the flanking divisions had not arrived to make their presence felt. Nevertheless, for more than another hour, Powell Hill’s division continued the unequal struggle and fought tenaciously against Porter’s formations, which benefited from their positioning along a naturally strong defensive line.

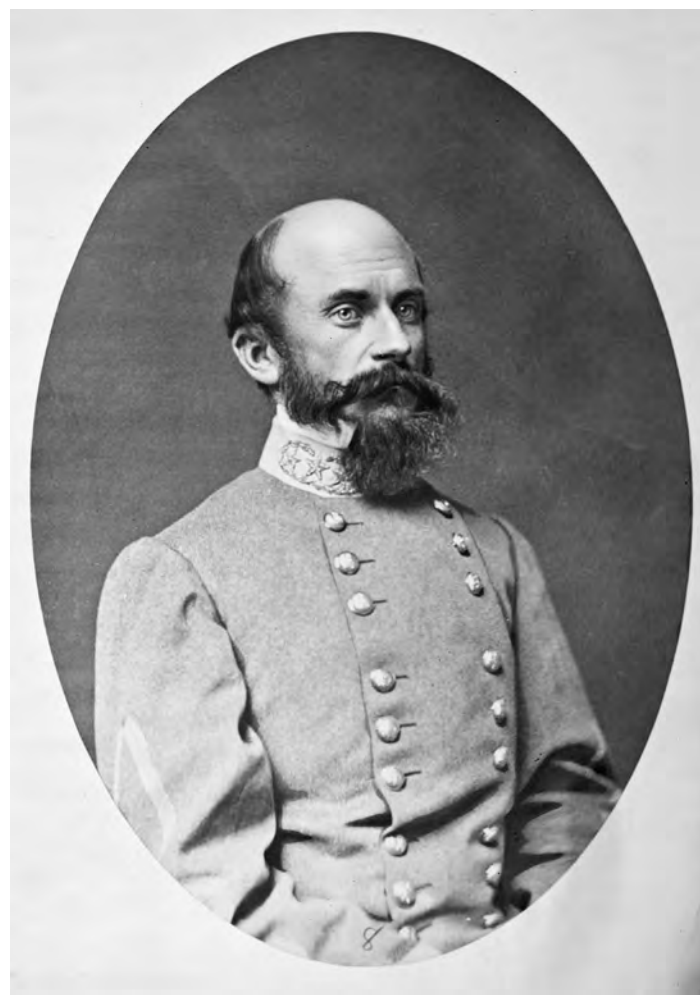
Remarkably, the Confederate infantry achieved a few localized successes as separate regiments pushed forward through the smoky thickets around the bog. Sam McGown impressed all who saw him while at the head of the 14th South Carolina and “made several daring charges.” Meanwhile, the 16th and the 22nd North Carolina from Pender’s brigade “carried the crest of the hill and were in the enemy’s camp” before being driven back. The 35th Georgia led by Colonel Edward Lloyd Thomas “also drove through the enemy’s lines like a wedge.”

Powell Hill attempted to support these dearly bought small gains by bringing up the Richmond “Purcell” Virginia Artillery, commanded by Captain Willie Pegram, the tenacious, bespectacled 21-year-old artillerist from Richmond. Pegram’s battery had suffered horrendous losses the previous day at Mechanicsville, losing four of its six guns and more than three-fifths of its men. However, Pegram displayed what Powell Hill called “indomitable energy and earnest of purpose” in getting his surviving men in shape for action on the 27th. However, the fire from Pegram’s two guns did little to help consolidate the penetrations made by certain infantry regiments. As it was, most of the Confederates became stalled out along the base of Boatswain’s Swamp, and the brigadiers began “directing their men to lie down.” From his forward point of observation, Powell Hill saw the Federals feed more and more formations into the fray until the Light Division, as he put it, “having been the attacking now became the attacked.”<sup>23</sup>

All the while, Lee kept expecting the absent Jackson to make his long-awaited appearance on the Federal right. Like the day before, Lee anxiously peered through his field glasses, looking for any signs that the enemy was weakening his front, which would indicate that the divisions marching with Harvey Hill and Jack-

son were on the field and threatening the Federal right flank. To Lee’s chagrin, the Federals were doing the opposite. More formations in blue—reinforcements sent to Porter and arriving from the south—were being fed into the fighting along Boatswain’s Creek. Lee could see the growing concern in the faces of the officers and men of Powell Hill’s division as they recoiled out of the ravine, “stumbling in shock among the stretcher-bearers and the crawling wounded.” In a nightmarish sequel to the afternoon before, the time had come for Lee to decide whether he was going to order in support before the Light Division was torn apart, even if it meant sending more men into the face of the Federal maelstrom.<sup>24</sup>

Before he gave the order to send help in Powell Hill’s direction, Lee paused to quickly analyze his next move before further extemporizing the day’s already modified plan. As things stood by 4:30 p.m., the design that Lee had hatched that morning—to flank the Federal line while hitting them in the front, thus placing the enemy



ONE OF JACKSON’S DIVISION COMMANDERS, RICHARD S. EWELL, HAD ALREADY PROVED HIMSELF TO BE A CAPABLE COMBAT OFFICER BY THE TIME OF THE SEVEN DAYS CAMPAIGN. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR.



between two fires—had to be altered. The three divisions under Jackson's command were inexplicably absent—again—and Harvey Hill's far-left division that Lee had confidently dispatched that morning at Mechanicsville had also strangely failed to materialize. With no threat coming from the Confederate left, and with no word from the flanking column as to where those divisions were, and with Powell Hill's battered division hanging on by the valor of its men, Lee had already dispatched Walter Taylor to go and find Jackson for the second time that day.

As he waited for Taylor's return, Lee ordered Longstreet to make a diversion in Hill's favor at some time approaching 5:00 p.m. Lee reasoned that by feinting against the Federal left, perhaps Longstreet could buy some additional time in the hopes that the wayward flanking wing would at least make a late appearance and give the Confederates a chance to pull out a victory from what was at that moment another tactical defeat. Taylor later described the commanding general's modified effort as to "have the effect of drawing off troops from the enemy's right, prevent any strengthening of the force in A. P. Hill's front, and by weakening the right of the Federal line [to] afford a better opportunity to generals Jackson and D. H. Hill for making a lodgment when they appeared."<sup>25</sup>

It had taken the careful and methodic Longstreet a considerable amount of time to efficiently deploy his six-brigade division, all the while keeping the men under cover. He placed his 9,000-plus combatants in two lines and out of the enemy's direct line of sight in a position that was "behind the crest of a hill, and behind a small wood, [with] three brigades in each position." The brigades of Cadmus Wilcox, Roger Pryor, and Winfield Featherston comprised the front line, with the brigades of James Kemper, Richard H. Anderson, and George Pickett forming the second line.

Soon after the campaign, Longstreet wrote that "we had not been in position long, however, before I received an urgent message from the commanding general" that ordered the diversion. Longstreet "at once ordered forward" the three brigades in the front line under the overall direction of Wilcox. They headed toward "the enemy's left flank" with Longstreet's instructions "to open fire and threaten their left from the forest edge, with orders not to cross the open." These brigades "engaged steadily, and parts of them essayed to pass the field in front as their blood grew hot, but were recalled, with orders repeated to engage steadily, only threatening assault."<sup>26</sup>

Not long after General Lee sent Longstreet instructions to make a diversion, the commanding general spotted through the drifting, grimy smoke the welcome sight of Major General Richard S. Ewell riding down the road from Old Cold Harbor. Jackson's wing of the army was finally at hand! However, rather than flanking the Federal line as Lee had ordered, the approach of Jackson's wing fronted the right-center and right of the Yankee positions. Once Ewell, who had ridden ahead of the lead brigade of infantry that was in the process

of deploying, found the commanding general, a brief summary of events was exchanged.

Ewell advised that he had met Major Taylor while the staff officer was in search of Jackson, and how the march to the sound of the guns had been a frustratingly slow one, but that Harvey Hill's division was also at hand and in the process of deploying on the far left. Ewell went on to explain that he had judiciously put the leading brigade of his division into some woods on the left to serve as a link with Hill's arriving command. Whiting's small division of Hood and Law's brigades was just behind him, as well as Lawton's large brigade of Georgians. Ewell also said that Jackson and his division, after initially taking the

*"Lee seemed to be ubiquitous,  
here sending in a fresh brigade,  
here dispatching couriers to  
various quarters of the field,  
here rallying and reassuring a  
disordered regiment, constantly  
in motion but always sublimely  
brave and calm."*

*—James F. J. Caldwell, of Maxcy  
Gregg's South Carolina Brigade,  
describing General Lee at Gaines' Mill*

wrong road, were following behind all the other divisions.

It seems strange today, as it must have to Lee that Friday afternoon, that Jackson had not bothered to send a single messenger to advise where he and his wing of the army were and when the commanding general could expect their arrival. Certainly Lee must have asked himself (if not Ewell) why had Jackson marched so slowly again. Regardless, the press of events did not permit Lee to ponder long on the tardy Jackson's uncommunicative behavior. Instead Ewell remembered how General Lee immediately ordered him "to hurry up my division as rapidly as possible, indicating where it was to take part in the action." Lee then instructed Ewell to send at least one of his officers "to bring up the divisions of Generals Jackson and Whiting, and Lawton's brigade." Ewell turned his horse and quickly rode away to carry out Lee's orders.<sup>27</sup>

General Lee also had to consider Ewell's statement about Harvey Hill coming into action on the far left along the upper waters of Boatswain's Swamp. Unless adjustments were made, there would be a yawning gap between the divisions of Harvey and Powell Hill, as the one brigade of Ewell's division then available wasn't nearly enough men to cover all that ground. Therefore, to support the two Hills so that Harvey could gain the most effect with his attack against the Federal right while also protecting Powell from a counterattack, Lee needed Jackson to hurriedly plug the hole. Lee then ordered Jackson's division, under the temporary command of Brigadier General Charles Sidney Winder, to quickly move forward from Old Cold Harbor and go into the line between Powell Hill's left and Harvey Hill's right.<sup>28</sup>

While Ewell was bringing up his other two brigades, and as Campbell Brown of Ewell's staff went "to find Whiting & Lawton & hurry them up to" the front, Harvey Hill got his division into action, supported on its left by the horse artillery from Jeb Stuart's cavalry. As Lee

later discovered, Harvey Hill might well have attacked sooner had it not been for Jackson mistakenly thinking that the Federals were about to launch an assault of their own. Once Jackson fully grasped the situation, Hill was allowed to slip the leash on his division, and his brigades crisply moved against the far right of the Federal line.

When Hill did attack, he found that the far end of the Federal position was held by the United States Regulars under Brigadier General George Sykes and were supported by some of the finest artillery batteries in the service. Sykes had deployed his regulars so that their positions were protected in part by the natural irregularities of the ground. Recalling the strength of Sykes' line, Fitz-John Porter described the area as "filled with ravines swept by our artillery and infantry, who were covered by depres-

sions in the ground ... [This terrain], with the aid of fences and ditches, [gave] concealment and cover, breast-high, to both infantry and artillery." Against this formidable defensive front, Harvey Hill's five brigades found the Federal defense "so stubborn and so troublesome."<sup>29</sup>

As the formations under Jackson came onto the field, down the same road from Old Cold Harbor that Ewell had traveled rode

*"No more credible performance can be found in the history of the Army of Northern Virginia than the capture of the Federal position near Gaines' Mill by the brigades of Longstreet's and Whiting's divisions, and better soldiers never fought."  
—Major Walter Herron Taylor,  
Lee's aide-de-camp*

Stonewall himself. He was completely covered in dust, his uniform and cap "positively scorched by the sun—had that dingy hue, the product of sun and rain." From his speech and actions that followed, it was obvious that Jackson was extremely fatigued. Pausing to suck on a lemon while sitting awkwardly astride his horse along Telegraph Road, Jackson displayed every characteristic of an officer with an apparent failed sense of urgency. To John Esten Cooke, Jackson could have, in a different setting, "passed for a nodding circuit rider." In contrast, and anxious to speak to his subordinate, Lee rode to meet him. When the two diametrically opposite-looking generals met for the second time that day, the soldiers in gray who could



see them welcomed the sight “to tumultuous cheering.”<sup>30</sup>

“Ah, General,” Lee said flatly against the background of cheers, “I am very glad to see you.” Then to make the reproach unmistakably clear in his flawless patrician style, Lee added, “I had hoped to be with you before this.”

Jackson, sapped of his energy in an exhaustion of stress fatigue, with his pale eyes staring almost lifelessly from under his dusty cap’s visor and his head strangely twitching, mumbled something unintelligible amid the near-deafening din of battle.

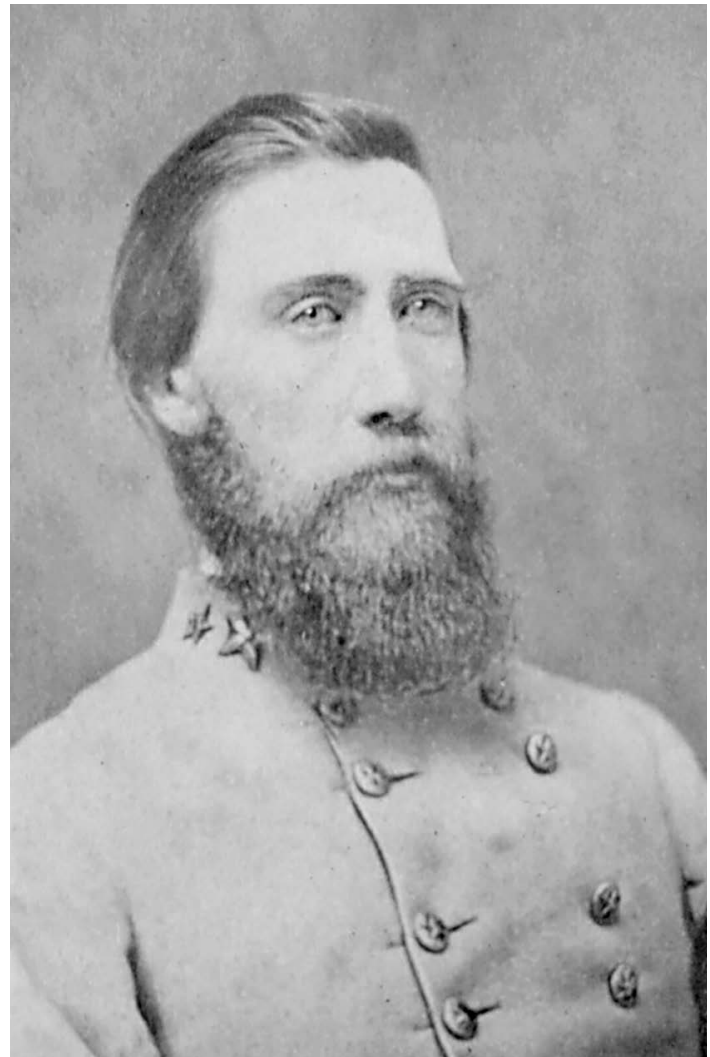
Then Lee decided to get to the matter at hand. “That fire is very heavy. Do you think your men can stand it?”

After letting Lee’s words sink in for a moment, Jackson responded bluntly and loudly: “They can stand anything! They can stand that.” Lee then gave Jackson his deployment instructions. Listening but saying little, Jackson saluted, turned his horse, and rode back toward his division under Winder’s command.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, Longstreet had quickly gained an appreciation of the strength of the Federal lines and the difficulty any troops would have on the ground in front of Boatswain’s Swamp. From his position a mile south of the General Lee’s observation point, Longstreet studied the Federal positions along the mid-to-lower swamp and how there were beautiful fields of fire in front of the Federal lines. These sweeping arcs of fire were disrupting the demonstration being carried out by the brigades under the direction of Wilcox, who noted that the Federals delivered “a well-directed and brisk fire upon our troops.”

The quarter-mile stretch from Boatswain’s Swamp extending north and west toward Confederate lines, part of it a fully exposed plain of wheat, offered no protection to advancing troops coming from the direction of Powhite Creek. Longstreet noted that the “deep scarped banks” of Boatswain’s Swamp were “dammed on its lower stretch, and covered by a belt of partially felled timber much less thick than farther upstream. Where the swamp turned from west to south, into the valley of the Chickahominy, the timber gave way to open fields. Across these fields from the hill occupied by the Federals, and from the heights of the south side of the Chickahominy, there was breaking a cross-fire of shell which no troops could endure.”

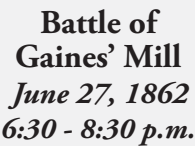
With the full strength of the Federal position now disclosed to him, Longstreet decided that a diversion would simply waste the lives of those who carried out the feint. What Powell Hill really needed,



**EARLY IN 1862**, JOHN BELL HOOD SAT FOR THIS PHOTOGRAPH IN JULIAN VANNERSON’S STUDIO IN RICHMOND. A STRIKING FIGURE, TALL WITH PIERCING BLUE EYES, SANDY BLONDE HAIR AND A BOOMING VOICE, THE 30 YEAR-OLD HOOD WAS CONSIDERED BY MANY TO BE THE MOST ELIGIBLE BACHELOR IN LEE’S ARMY. COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

thought Longstreet, was help in the form of a direct assault by fresh formations. “From the urgent nature of the message from the commanding general and my own peculiar position,” wrote Longstreet soon after the battle, “I determined to change the feint into an attack, and orders for a general advance were issued.”<sup>32</sup>

As Longstreet planned his assault, other formations began coming into line, and the fighting escalated. On the Confederate left, Harvey Hill was pressing his brigades with great intensity against George Sykes’ regulars. Although he did not know it when his attacks began that afternoon, Hill later discovered that he was facing his old West Point roommate. Stubborn, prideful, and resolute, Hill and Sykes slugged it out like two heavyweight prizefighters, with Hill “shoving



Riding over to Whiting's division, the man who had

Lee also observed that the remnants of Powell Hill's Light Division were "huddled along a rise above the last soggy dip to the swamp." From their positions along Boatswain's Swamp, Hill's used-up regiments were keeping up what amounted to no more than an irregular fire, clearly indicative of troops who were fought out. The Federals to their front might well have been at their limit as well, and though Lee might not yet have known it, some of the blue-clad reinforcements that



The battle of Gaines' Mill had been raging for hours when Chase Whiting arrived with his division of two brigades under Col. Mclvor Law and Brig. Gen. John Bell Hood. With other Confederate troops arriving late to the battle, General Lee scouts the Federal lines along the wide creek known as Boatswain's Swamp in search of a point that offers the best opportunity for a final attack. The Federal defensive line is situated on a steep rise behind the creek, fortified with abatis and offering a commanding field of fire. Lee orders Chase Whiting lead his brigades to the position Lee has pinpointed for the final assault on the Federal lines.

As Whiting's division advances, Hood directs the Hampton Legion and the 1st and 5th Texas to advance to the left of Law's brigade and orders the 4th Texas and the 18th Georgia to attack on Law's right. Never wanting for personal courage, Hood dismounts and leads his old regiment, the 4th Texas, in the assault that smashes the Federal line.

#### JACKSON'S DIVISION (Major General Jackson)

##### Fulkerson's Brigade (Colonel Fulkerson)

- J 37th Virginia
- K 23rd Virginia
- L 10th Virginia

#### WHITING'S DIVISION (Brigadier General Whiting)

##### Hood's Brigade (Brigadier General Hood)

- A 18th Georgia
- B 4th Texas
- G 1st Texas
- H 5th Texas
- I Hampton's Legion (South Carolina)

##### Law's Brigade (Colonel Law)

- C 6th North Carolina
- D 4th Alabama
- E 2nd Mississippi
- F 11th Mississippi





## 1st DIVISION/V CORPS (Brigadier General Morell)

- **1st Brigade** (Brigadier General Martindale)
  - 4 1st Michigan
  - 6 25th New York
  - 7 22nd Massachusetts
  - 8 13th New York
  - 10 2nd Maine
- **2nd Brigade** (Brigadier General Griffin)
  - 18 4th Michigan
  - 19 14th New York
- **3rd Brigade** (Brigadier General Butterfield)
  - 1 16th Michigan
  - 2 83rd Pennsylvania
  - 3 12th New York
- **1st Division Artillery**
  - 21/27 Mass. Light (5th/Batt. E)
  - 22/28 R.I. Light (Batt. C)

## 3rd DIVISION/V CORPS (Brigadier General McCall)

- **1st Brigade** (Brigadier General Reynolds)
  - 5 2nd Pennsylvania Res.
- **2nd Brigade** (Brigadier General Meade)
  - 9 7th Pennsylvania Res.
  - 11 11th Pennsylvania Res.
  - 20 3rd Pennsylvania Res.
- **3rd Division Artillery**
  - 23 1st Penn. Light (Batt. A)
  - 24 1st Penn. Light (Batt. B)
  - 25 1st Penn. Light (Batt. G)
  - 26 5th US (Batt. C)

## 1st DIVISION/VI CORPS (BG Slocum)

- **1st Brigade** (Brigadier General Taylor)
  - 12 4th New Jersey
  - 15 1st New Jersey
  - 16 3rd New Jersey
- **3rd Brigade** (Brigadier General Newton)
  - 13 31st New York
  - 14 95th Pennsylvania
  - 17 18th New York

## ARMY CAVALRY RESERVE (BG Cooke)

- ▲ **1st Cavalry Brigade** (Brigadier General Emory)
  - 29 5th US Cavalry







**THIS SILK REGIMENTAL BATTLE FLAG WAS CARRIED BY THE 4TH TEXAS DURING THE FIRST 10 MONTHS OF 1862 AND MEASURES APPROXIMATELY FOUR FEET BY FOUR FEET. THE REGIMENT CONSISTED OF 10 COMPANIES OF VOLUNTEERS FROM COUNTIES IN CENTRAL TEXAS. COURTESY OF THE TEXAS CONFEDERATE MUSEUM COLLECTION, TEXAS DIVISION UNITED DAUGHTERS OF THE CONFEDERACY, HOUSED AT THE TEXAS CIVIL WAR MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS.**

had been sent to the Federal center to thwart Powell Hill's thrusts had been drawn off to the Federal left in response to Longstreet's diversion. What Lee did see in his reconnaissance was revealed when he pointed out to Whiting the area along the Federal front where the enemy's fire had slackened the most, and this was indeed the weak link in the blue line. Following a brief conference and parting salutes, Lee and Whiting spurred their mounts and rapidly rode away from one another.<sup>34</sup>

The commanding general had not ridden far when he thought of something else he needed to say to John Bell Hood. Turning Traveller around, Lee rode in search of the man who had been one of his favorite cadets from his days as superintendent of West Point and with whom he had served in the 2nd Cavalry while stationed at Camp Cooper, Texas, in the late 1850s.

It was after 6:00 p.m. when Lee again found John Bell Hood. The brigade commander was mounted on his roan, "Jeff Davis," and in front of the almost 500-strong 4th Texas Infantry. Perhaps Lee recalled Hood's boastful claim made in the winter of 1861-62 while he was colonel of the 4th Texas. After many long weeks of instructions on the Lower Occoquan, the prideful Hood maintained that he "could

double-quick the 4th Texas to the gates of Hell and never break their line." Considering the natural strength of the defensive position that the brigade was about to assail, Hood was going to get his chance to make good on that boast. Hood would later recount how the commanding general, upon his return, told him that for the better part of the afternoon gallant Southerners had been unable to dislodge the enemy from their very strong positions to their front. "This must be done," Lee matter-of-factly declared to his companion from the Texas plains. "Can you break his line?"

"I [shall] try," replied Hood.

Then reining Traveller's head to ride away, General Lee lifted his gray felt hat and added, "May God be with you."<sup>35</sup>

As Hood was deploying the Texas Brigade, the other brigade in Whiting's division was shaking out in line of battle as well. Evander McIvor (pronounced "Ma-KEEV-er") Law positioned his four regiments as General Lee returned to his central observation point just southwest of New Cold Harbor. Once back at his observation post, Lee quickly dispatched Captain Arthur Pendleton Mason of his staff with an urgent message for Longstreet to also join in the general assault to break the enemy's line, lest "the day was lost." Longstreet, who had already recognized the need for his command to attack, readily called up his reserve brigades that had been under cover and then quickly completed his preparations for the *coup de main* (a swift, direct, and decisive assault).<sup>36</sup>

As the sun began to drop into the treetops and the shadows lengthened, the roar of battle escalated toward a new crescendo. Lee's desperate determination "to Conquer or Die" seemed to transfer to the gray and brown lines all along the Confederate front. Officers and men redoubled their efforts as if their collective instincts told them that a victory *had* to be won. Southern batteries picked up their rate of fire, some emptying their limber chests and caissons in the process. One Confederate artilleryman recalled that in the face of this storm of shot and shell the Federals did not give "one inch, but fought like true soldiers."<sup>37</sup>

Everyone seemed to sense what was at stake. Indeed, this moment of high drama would be forever emblazoned into the memory of the officers and men of the Army of Northern Virginia. Enough daylight remained for one last push. Victory hung in the balance. From the west and north came a shrill, sustained cry from the throats of thousands of Southerners. The piercing Rebel Yell cut through



**THE LARGEST BATTLE OF THE SEVEN DAYS CAMPAIGN, GAINES' MILL** FEATURED SOME OF THE WAR'S MOST INTENSE FIGHTING AND PRODUCED ROBERT E. LEE'S FIRST VICTORY. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR.

the near-deafening din of the discharges from thousands of small arms and more than a hundred artillery pieces and then thousands of fresh Confederate infantry advanced into the fray. From Jackson's newly arrived division, along with Ewell's desperately fighting brigades that added their weight, to Harvey Hill's battle-hardened regiments in the north, to Whiting and Longstreet's commands coming into line to the west to assist on the right of Powell Hill's fought-out brigades, advancing lines of gray and brown, above which fluttered red battle flags and various state colors, heralded the climax of the fierce struggle fought over Doctor Gaines' now blood-soaked swamp and hills.<sup>38</sup>

While those commands already embroiled at closer ranges redoubled their efforts, the fresh Confederate brigades swept forward to press against the slowing fire of Fitz-John Porter's tiring but still-determined Federals. On Whiting's front, Hood proved why Lee held the native Kentuckian—but Texan by declaration—in such high regard. Displaying excellent tactical instincts, Hood constantly reassessed the situation as his advanc-

ing lines moved closer to the Federals. With his brigade within 800 yards of the Federal positions, Hood spotted a broadening gap between Law's brigade on his right and Longstreet's left. This developing gap was opposite the point singled out by Lee and where Hood thought he could "make a strenuous effort to pierce the enemy's fortifications, and, if possible, put him to flight."

Having dismounted "Jeff Davis" and now leading the brigade on foot, Hood pulled the 4th Texas from its tactical reserve position. Moving it to the right, Hood slid the regiment past the 18th Georgia (which had previously formed the far right of his brigade) and past Law's brigade and into the gap just to the left flank of the brigades under Longstreet. Advancing at the double-quick, the 4th Texas with Hood leading sword in hand, pushed ahead of the rest of the infantry comprising Whiting's division.

An intense flanking fire from heavy Federal guns on the south side of the Chickahominy raked the 4th Texas lines, causing, as the nearby Law would write, men to fall "like leaves in an autumn wind." But with-





**THIS FLAG WAS CARRIED BY COMPANY B** OF THE 4TH TEXAS AND MEASURES 16-INCHES BY 34-INCHES. NAMED THE TOM GREEN RIFLES, THIS COMPANY CONSISTED OF VOLUNTEERS FROM TRAVIS COUNTY. COURTESY OF THE TEXAS CONFEDERATE MUSEUM COLLECTION, TEXAS DIVISION UNITED DAUGHTERS OF THE CONFEDERACY, HOUSED AT THE TEXAS CIVIL WAR MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS.

out breaking stride, the Texans, along with regiments of Georgians, South Carolinians, Alabamians, Mississippians, and North Carolinians, moved closer to the dug-in Yankees. Soon volley after volley from three lines of blue-clad infantry ripped Southern lines and Confederate soldiers fell by the score. The heavy fire and resulting casualties might have caused less-determined and less-disciplined formations to stop and fire back, but Hood and Law's regiments pressed on. Meanwhile, Richard Anderson's brigade from Longstreet's division advanced on their right and charged against the Federal line with what Stonewall Jackson described as "gallant style." The Southerners rushed across the creek, through the abatis and up Turkey Hill, "their bayonets flashing in the dusky light and their screams ringing over the din."<sup>39</sup>

The determination of the onrushing Confederates proved too much for the embattled Federals. With nothing to stop the Southern regiments now bearing down "within ten paces of them," the Federal formations in the first line broke. Hood reported that the men of the 4th Texas "were the first troops to pierce the strong line of breastworks occupied by the enemy, which caused great confusion in their ranks."

Abandoning their works and throwing away their rifles in order to run uphill faster, the Federals in the

first defensive line rushed precipitously into the second. Confusion quickly spread, and the second line gave way as well with the Confederates in close pursuit. Many men in blue, running pell-mell to the rear with their silhouettes lit perfectly by the western sky, presented clear targets. With a series of crashing volleys at short range, the advancing Confederates poured a fire into the Federals "with terrible effect." Blue-coated infantrymen under a "rain of lead at their backs" dropped by the hundreds. Federal regiments were soon degenerating into a confused mass of panic-stricken fugitives who almost immediately carried away the third defensive line.

Fitz-John Porter's natural fort had been breeched. Watching the assault from his vantage point, General Jackson believed that Hood's charge against the fortified Federal left-center was an "almost matchless display of daring and desperate valor."<sup>40</sup>

It was about 7:00 p.m. when Hood's shock troops and Law's regiments began to expand the breakthrough and were quickly joined by some of Longstreet's regiments notably spearheaded by Dick Anderson's brigade. The advancing Confederates gathered up in the process hundreds of prisoners and repulsed a reckless cavalry counter charge made by five companies from Lee and Hood's old cavalry regiment from the antebellum army. The South-

erners also overran several batteries of Federal guns, capturing 14 pieces of ordnance after their crews offered a gallant defense.

However, the battle was not yet over. At about the time that Hood's brigade was piercing the Federal lines, the weight of the Confederate assault on the far left finally took its toll on the rapidly depleting ranks in blue. Harvey Hill delivered a final attack that Jackson supported with several batteries of rifled pieces. Firing and advancing *en échelon*, the weight of the Confederate infantry augmented by the firepower of Southern artillery gained the upper hand on Sykes' slowly yielding regulars, who were now angled to the right of the rest of the Federal line.

Meanwhile on the other end of the field, Longstreet, "handling his brigades with the sureness that characterized the performances which built his reputation," fought hard to widen the breach initially created by Whiting's spearhead by pushing farther to the right. Longstreet hustled his men forward, sweat pouring down their faces after the long day under the hot Virginia sun, across the quarter of a mile of exposed ground. As they quickly advanced, they absorbed fire from enfilading Federal batteries south of the Chickahominy until they reached the thickets bordering Boatswain's Swamp. From there, Longstreet's regiments opened up on the Fed-

erals. Their metal flew thickly, causing more regiments in blue to give way. The Confederates continued to gain ground and speed in the right-center until the entire Federal line finally "yielded the field and fled in disorder."<sup>41</sup>

Recognizing that the hard-fought success needed to be taken advantage of, Lee wanted every brigade on the field to push hard against the enemy. Every benefit had to be reaped from what had been bought so dearly by all those who had sacrificed throughout the day. Spurring Traveller closer to the fighting, General Lee went to Powell Hill and personally delivered orders for the casualty-riddled Light Division "to advance [the] whole line and to communicate this order as far as [Hill] could to all commanders of troops." A general advance was made by the Confederates that swept up exhausted Federal survivors until all military light finally faded from the western sky. As darkness closed over the plateau rising from Boatswain's Swamp around 9:00 p.m., the retreating Federals made for the Chickahominy flats to the south and found reinforcements and safety from the Confederate pursuit. Robert E. Lee had won his first victory.<sup>42</sup>