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The Battle of Williamsburg

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THE BATTLE OF WILLIAMSBURG

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Carol Ann Kettenburg
1980
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Author

Carol Kutner

Approved, May 1980

Ludwell H. Johnson

Boyd Coe

M. Boyd Coyner

Edward M. Riley
DEDICATION

To my mother and father
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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 1862 the Confederate army under Joseph E. Johnston and the Union army under George B. McClellan assembled on Virginia's Lower Peninsula along a line below Yorktown. On Saturday night, May 3, Johnston pulled his troops back to protect the Confederate capital at Richmond, and Sunday afternoon the Federals caught up with the retreating army at a line of earthworks east of Williamsburg. The following day, May 5, Johnston's rear guard and two Federal divisions fought a battle there which ultimately allowed the Confederates to reach Richmond before McClellan.

This thesis briefly outlines the events of the Civil War leading up to the Battle of Williamsburg, offers a detailed study of the battle itself, and presents conclusions based on the broader outcome of the Peninsular Campaign.
THE BATTLE OF WILLIAMSBURG
CHAPTER I

The Sunday morning of May 4, 1862, dawned cool and gray in the Virginia tidewater town of Williamsburg, but its air was charged with the excitement of an army marching through its streets. The Confederate General Joseph Eggleston Johnston was pulling his troops out of the trenches before Yorktown twelve miles east of Williamsburg and sending them west to protect the Confederate capital at Richmond. Though the advanced guard had left Yorktown at sundown Saturday night, an unusually rainy spring had turned the Virginia roads to quagmires, slowing progress considerably. The supply wagons could barely inch forward at a mile an hour, and the foot soldiers who fell out constantly to push the embedded wagons could not move much faster. Thus the weary mud-spattered band did not begin to reach Williamsburg until sunrise Sunday, in time to awaken the startled townspeople for church.¹

The sudden appearance of gray uniforms was not in itself a cause for alarm in Williamsburg, for during the year since the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861 the

sleepy little town had been alive with soldiers. The difference on this particular morning was instead of troops marching east to join the defenses around Yorktown, they were returning west, abandoning not only Yorktown but also Williamsburg "to the mercy of the Federal troops." The last time an invading army threatened the town was in 1781, a year after the state capital was moved from Williamsburg to Richmond during the Revolutionary War. By the time the British were expelled from the town, both its population and prestige had shrunk, and it continued to decline through the next eighty years. At the opening of the Civil War, Williamsburg could declare a population of only about fifteen hundred, mostly descendants of proud colonial Virginia families seeking seclusion from the modern world by living in their glorious past. One visitor to the town described it as presenting

a long, broad street, perfectly straight, running east and west between two parallel streets that were not so long nor broad. This main street, called the Duke of Gloucester street, was shaded with trees of many varieties and lined for the most part with substantial dwellings, many faded and time-worn and separated by village yards and orchards; and it extended from the site of the obliterated ancient capitol at the east end of town to the grounds of William and Mary College at the west—a distance of three quarters of a mile.²

Across from the site of the capitol stood the Vest House, owned by the town's most prosperous merchant, W. W. Vest, who had fled along with other prominent Williamsburg citizens at the threat of Union invasion. It was a substantial brick house, three-storied and double-winged, "tastefully and richly furnished." The county courthouse was located halfway down the Duke of Gloucester street on the edge of the Market Square Green and directly across the street from the old octagonal powder magazine. Continuing west past the Palace Green, the Duke of Gloucester street passed the stately Episcopal Bruton Parish Church, and one block beyond stood the newest house in town built in 1856 by the unpopular lawyer Lemuel J. Bowden, one of the few Union sympathizers in Williamsburg. One block south of the Duke of Gloucester street ran the parallel Francis Street on which the large building complex of the Eastern Lunatic Asylum with its dominating towers housed about three hundred patients. On the western edge of town the main street forked into two roads leading to Richmond fifty miles west and Jamestown Island five miles south, and resting in the fork were the structures composing the College of William and Mary (see Map A, inset). The Wren Building, flanked by the smaller Brafferton and President's House, appeared to one Confederate soldier "more like a modern female institute than an old university for young men." Despite the best efforts of Dr. John Minson Galt II, director of
the asylum, and Benjamin Stoddard Ewell, president of the college, neither institution commanded the respect once due them in colonial days, but were like two decaying pillars straining to support an archaic way of life. Travellers who came to Williamsburg, usually on business at the college or asylum, remarked on the easy charm and hospitality of the town which clung to the old values and refused to change with the times.  

This drowsy atmosphere was enlivened by the threat of war early in 1861. On January 8, a faculty meeting at the college discussed the formation of a military company composed of those connected with the college. The next day, student Richard A. Wise wrote his father Henry, a former Virginia governor and future Confederate general, that he had joined this company. It had elected Benjamin ("Old Buck") Ewell, a graduate of the United States Military Academy, as captain, and the company sported a modest uniform of red flannel shirt, homespun pantaloons, and fatigue cap. The boys were armed with little more than bowie knives and some outdated double-barreled

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shotguns or rifles, but in March the faculty resolved to ask the governor for the loan of two brass field guns. The firing on Fort Sumter the following month transformed their play war into a real one. On the first of May, General Robert E. Lee commissioned Ewell a major and ordered him to muster six companies of Virginia volunteers from the area. Patriotic students deserted their lectures, which were suspended on May 10 (optimistically scheduled to resume in October), and the college buildings were taken over by the military as a hospital and barracks. The Fifteenth Virginia was quartered in the college library where one soldier "selected some of my favorite authors for a pillow" and made himself at home. The courthouse was also taken over as a barracks while the officers found somewhat more comfortable quarters in the private homes.4

Major Ewell did not allow these men to remain idle long, for as soon as he assumed command he began planning a defensive line. Williamsburg lay in the middle and about halfway down Virginia's Lower Peninsula, a heavily wooded finger of land about eight miles wide at midpoint, with the York River to the north and the James River to

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4Mary R.M. Goodwin, "Historical Notes on the College of William and Mary," Book IV, 575-582, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va.; Ewell Papers, Folder 20, Special Collections, Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va.; Sally M. Galt to cousin, May 30, 1861, Galt Papers, Box 11, Personal Papers, Special Collections.
the south. Richmond at the fall line of the James was fifty miles west and Hampton on the tip of the peninsula was forty miles east. The land around Williamsburg presented "a broad plateau sloping in many places abruptly into deep ravines and curious mound-like undulations shaped as if with spades, and together somewhat resembling the moats and parapets of ancient fortresses. These notable features have been formed by the steep water shedding banks of the plateau at the sources of College and Queen creeks." Tutters Neck Pond headed a tributary of College Creek which flowed into the James, while Jones Pond drained into the York River via Cub Creek and Queens Creek. These two ponds were separated by a narrow passage of land just four miles wide, and the only roads through this passage were the streets of Williamsburg. Taking advantage of this natural defense, Ewell planned a line of earthworks between the creeks and had the ground surveyed by a mathematics professor at the college, T.T.L. Snead. The main central work was to be "placed on a commanding position" near some house, which in his memoirs Ewell neglected to name. After General Lee viewed the proposed line on an inspection tour, he assigned a young engineering officer, Lieutenant Alfred M. Rives, "to locate and construct the necessary works." Rives disagreed with Ewell on where to place the central work, wanting it instead about two miles east of town where the
main roads from Hampton and Yorktown merged. Though this made the line somewhat longer than Ewell had planned, it was strategically more sound, guarding the only overland routes an invading army could follow up the peninsula to Richmond (see Map A).\(^5\)

Labor to clear the trees and dig the earthworks from the clay and sand was the next problem confronting Ewell. In mid-May he reported that 820 more men were ready to be mustered in, gathered just outside Williamsburg in Camp Page constructed to relieve the crowded conditions in town. The shovel brigade was augmented by as many local slaves as could be spared, and Ewell sent out a call for all able-bodied free negroes on the peninsula to join them. "Failure to attend," he warned, "will be visited by a severe penalty." They were directed to report to the now-Captain Rives, Mr. Snead, or Captain Richard K. Meade who had also been assigned to the surveying project. Each worker was to bring along as many wagons and drivers as he could. By the time the hot June sun beat upon Virginia, work on the line was well under way with officers as well as men pitching in to throw up the works as rapidly as possible.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) Cronin, "Vest Mansion," MS, 1; Benjamin S. Ewell, "Magruder Reminiscences," Ewell Papers, Fold. 20.

\(^6\) Benjamin S. Ewell to citizens of James City, York, and Warwick counties, undated, Ewell Papers, Fold. 20; G. A. Magruder, Jr., to Benjamin S. Ewell, June 8, 1861, Ewell Papers, Fold. 14; The War of the Rebellion: A
The need for haste was particularly apparent to the inhabitants of Williamsburg in May of 1861. Refugees from Hampton were daily straggling into town, competing with the soldiers for the scarce housing and carrying tales of Union troops landing on the peninsula. Realizing the importance of a foothold in this area, the Federals had retained the old moated Fort Monroe on an island off Hampton. In May the Massachusetts political general, Benjamin Franklin Butler, was ordered by the Union general-in-chief, Winfield Scott, to assume command of Fort Monroe, and on the 24th he arrived with volunteer regiments from Massachusetts, New York, and Vermont—an effective force of 3,375, including seven companies of regular artillery (see Map B).7

The very day that Butler was landing his troops at Fort Monroe, the new Confederate commander was steaming down the York River on his way to Yorktown. John Bankhead Magruder had been commissioned a colonel in the Confederate army just the week before and was immediately assigned to the defense of the Lower Peninsula. Ewell had met him at West Point in 1828, and since his graduation in 1830, Magruder had seen service on the frontier, the Seminole Wars in Florida, and the Mexican


War where he won two brevets. Known as "Prince John" for his courtly manner and reputation for lavish entertainment, Magruder also had a talent for theatrics which would come in handy at his new command. Even before he landed at Yorktown he was sending dramatic dispatches back to Richmond, urgently requesting more troops and arms to meet the Federal invasion at Hampton. The next day Lee sent him two twelve-pound brass pieces, two eight-inch columbiads, and orders to direct Ewell "to apply all the force he can procure to the erection of those lines" at Williamsburg. These four outdated artillery pieces, about twenty-five hundred men, and the partially surveyed works were all Magruder had against what he expected to be five or ten thousand Yankees ranging up the peninsula.8

To prepare for this increasing threat another line had to be constructed below Williamsburg. When Magruder took over Ewell's command he set up his headquarters at Yorktown where plans were already under way on earthworks starting from there and extending seven miles across the peninsula to Warwick Creek which flowed into the James (see Map C). To build these works he needed a force of eight to ten thousand soldiers, and he also requested permission to ask the surrounding counties for half of all the slaves. Eight more guns arrived the beginning of

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June to be used in the rising Williamsburg works and some were set up on Jamestown Island to keep the river clear for supplies coming down from Richmond. Another battery was constructed at Gloucester Point across the York River from Yorktown to protect that flank of the line, while troops continued to pour into Magruder's command. Nearly four thousand Confederates were on the peninsula early in June, but Magruder wanted at least four thousand more. During his visits to Williamsburg he used the Vest House as headquarters and declared with more enthusiasm than accuracy, "the defense of Richmond is here at Williamsburg and Jamestown." To make it an effective defense, he needed, as always, more troops.9

More troops brought problems in proportion, however, as the people of Williamsburg were discovering. The few accommodations available were bulging at the seams, reminiscent of public times during colonial days. Samuel E. Holt, a Confederate surgeon passing through town, stayed in a crowded hotel where he complained of being charged one dollar for the "meanest breakfast I ever beheld." Disease was another byproduct of overcrowding. The college buildings and churches in town had to be appropriated as hospitals, forcing the Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopal ministers to preach in the chapel at the asylum. That fall Dr. Galt's sister

Sally wrote that there were 750 sick soldiers in town. Outlying areas were also hit as a soldier camped on Jamestown Island wrote home in June that they were living on "nothing but two crackers and a little meat at a meal," and by August there was much sickness in camp, with measles claiming the life of one comrade. Typhoid became so bad on the island that Magruder finally ordered the troops there to withdraw temporarily. In a Zouave camp one mile from town, Dr. Holt found 150 sick with intermittent fever, diarrhea, dysentery, and "acute & Chronic Rheumatism."10

Despite the overcrowding and disease, the hospitality of Williamsburg never slackened. When the ladies of the town were not busy nursing soldiers, they were entertaining them. The season was capped by a "brilliant ball" at the Zouave camp given by the Zouave and Louisiana regimental officers in October. The camp "and ground around [were] nicely adorned in various ways," and Dr. Holt was anxious to see "the beauty assembled there." The Zouaves themselves supplied their own color to the occasion in their uniforms of "baggy red breeches, leggings, a blue jacket, and a red cap of a kind of stocking effect." The high-spirited Louisiana battalion

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10 Samuel E. Holt, Diary and Memorandum Book, Special Collections; Sally Maria Galt to cousin, Oct. 31, 1861, Galt Papers, Box 11, Personal Papers, Special Collections; William H. Phillips to Marie P. Crowder, June 15 and Aug. 20, 1861, William H. Phillips Papers, Special Collections; O.R., IV, 572.
had been keeping the peninsula hopping since it arrived in June. When a company of the Fifteenth Virginia Militia mutinied at Williamsburg, little room could be found for its men in the guardhouse which, Magruder lamented, was full of Zouaves awaiting trial.11

Such episodes of unrest were symptomatic of the rising and falling hopes in the camps. A local poet and aspiring Confederate officer, James Barron Hope, wrote to his wife in June that "a large force has been sent down to Yorktown, and I incline to the opinion, that we will be so strong there that the enemy will not advance." He confidently described the Confederate soldiers as "bronze resolute looking fellows who will give a good account of themselves when the time comes." Some of them had a chance June 10 at Big Bethel Church just thirteen miles east of Yorktown, where Daniel Harvey Hill led fourteen hundred North Carolinians to victory against a Union force of about four thousand in the first engagement since Fort Sumter. But most were still waiting for the battle. On June 21, Hope wrote about rumors "that the battle will be fought this week & that our generals are sanguine of success." On Jamestown Island the soldiers were expecting a fight any day in June, but after disease, heat, and idleness prevailed

11 Galt to cousin, Oct. 31, 1861, Galt Papers; Holt, Diary; Robert Douthat Meade, "Reminiscences of John C. Wade of Yorktown," Confederate Collection, Fold. 9, Special Collections.
in August, one wrote, "I don't see any prospect of any fighting down this way. I wish they would fight if they intend to fight. I want to whip them and be done with it and come home."  

Indeed, as the summer of 1861 wore on, the men on Virginia's Lower Peninsula were probably afraid the war was going to pass them by. On July 21 a battle took place twenty miles southwest of Washington, D.C., at a railroad junction known as Manassas and a creek called Bull Run (see Map B). Two wings of the Confederate army under Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard and Joseph E. Johnston massed to meet a half-trained Union force marching out of the Northern capital under General Irvin McDowell. At the end of the day the Yankees were in full flight back to Washington while the Rebels were celebrating a victory and toasting a premature end to the war. The defense of Richmond seemingly took place at Manassas rather than Williamsburg, but Magruder was not one to sit idly waiting for the surrender. After the battle at Manassas he ordered two thousand cavalry to reconnoiter Hampton and the neighboring town of Newport News and capture one hundred fifty negroes to work on the line at Williamsburg now that the troops were too

\[12\] James Barron Hope to wife, June 12 and 18, 1861, James Barron Hope Papers, Box 1, Folds. 58 and 63, Special Collections; Phillips to Crowder, June 15 and Aug. 20, 1861, Phillips Papers; Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command (New York, 1942), I, 17-18.
depleted by disease to be of much use. The Fifth North Carolina regiment had only four hundred out of one thousand fit for duty, and the peninsular troops were suffering a rate of two deaths per day. More troops and provisions were needed, and Magruder also requested a telegraph be installed at Williamsburg to facilitate communications between the Vest House and Richmond. 13

The Confederate capital was having its own problems since the Battle of Manassas. As Johnston commented in his memoirs, "the Confederate army was more disorganized by victory than that of the United States by defeat." Many soldiers, certain the war had been won, simply drifted home. Beauregard's report of the battle answered his critics by implying that President Jefferson Davis had prevented his capturing Washington by withholding support. While Beauregard was in Richmond receiving the hero's welcome and haggling out his political differences with Davis and Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin, Johnston was left in charge of the troops who went into camp around Centreville. Only part of the problem was alleviated when Beauregard was transferred to Kentucky, for Johnston too was nursing a grudge against Davis. After service in the United States Army dating back to his graduation from West Point in 1829,

Johnston resigned his commission with a higher rank than any other officer who switched his allegiance, so he believed he should be the top general in the South. Davis, however, placed him fourth behind generals with earlier commissions in the Confederate army, leaving a disgruntled Johnston in command of the entire Department of Northern Virginia.  

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The North was also experiencing a sudden reshuffle in command. The sad performance of the Union troops at Manassas had to be blamed on someone, and McDowell was the logical choice. His replacement was George Brinton McClellan who arrived in Washington fresh from a successful campaign in the hills of western Virginia at a time when Northern successes were rare. The 35-year-old major general had been trained as an engineer at West Point, served in the same regiment as Magruder in the Mexican War, observed the Crimean War, and was a railroad executive in Cincinnati at the outbreak of the Civil War. His outstanding organizational ability was tested in Ohio and would be proven as commander of the rapidly assembling volunteer army around Washington. When the aging General Winfield Scott retired on November 1, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln further raised the highly popular "Little Mac" to general-in-chief, but soon

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regretted the promotion. McClellan did an excellent job of organizing and training the 135,000 Northern volunteers, but he seemed reluctant to use them. Except for an unsuccessful but bloody attempt to cross the Potomac River at Ball's Bluff in October, his soldiers never ventured far beyond the outskirts of Washington, causing some friction between the president and general. Lincoln was impatient to attack Richmond but wanted to keep his army between Washington and the Confederate forces, so he preferred the direct overland route. McClellan, on the other hand, cautiously waited until his men were "ready," then planned a water transport to Urbana on the Rappahannock River to avoid the Confederate army at Centreville (see Map B). This debate continued in the Northern capital throughout a long, idle winter.  

A similar discussion was taking place between the Southern president and his general during that winter. In February 1862, Davis summoned Johnston to Richmond to plan how best to defend the city from Northern invasion. Both agreed that the position at Centreville was too exposed and the troops should be pulled back to a safer position closer to Richmond to guard several possible routes of invasion. The following month, Johnston marched the bulk of his army south to the banks of the Rapidan River, a tributary of the Rappahannock—a move

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15Johnson, Division and Reunion, 94-97; Boatner, Dictionary, 524.
that persuaded McClellan to find another base of operations. When boatloads of Union troops began landing at Fort Monroe in late March, Johnston hurried back to Richmond for another conference. This time he proposed massing the army close to Richmond, but Davis was anxious to protect the vital shipyard at Norfolk and so gave Johnston the command of the Departments of the Peninsula and Norfolk and ordered him to join Magruder at Yorktown.  

At last Magruder was to receive the reinforcements he had been begging for since he took command the previous summer. In October 1861 the excitable general estimated he needed six thousand troops to repulse an imminent Union attack and announced no leaves would be granted until January. The men had not been paid since the end of June and the First North Carolina's enlistments were to expire soon, so he desperately needed more money. Since his artillery horses were worthless, he wanted more horses, more and better artillery and ammunition, and more wagons to haul forage. He could also use two hundred wheelbarrows to aid in erecting the works. All these requests were addressed to the adjutant general in Richmond, but lacking satisfaction, Magruder went a step higher. Throughout October and November he wrote the governor of Virginia imploring him to put the

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situation to the Secretary of War. In December he made the same request to President Davis, then decided to write Benjamin directly, predicting that his eleven thousand troops would be attacked by forty thousand Federals within a week. Benjamin curtly replied he did not believe there were that many soldiers at Fort Monroe. Magruder did get the governor's permission to call out militias from New Kent, Charles City, and James City counties. By Christmas he reported 16,825 Confederate soldiers present for duty, including 227 in Williamsburg and 365 at Jamestown, with which he could now defend the peninsula, and he felt secure enough to put them in winter quarters.17

With plenty of troops for the time being, Magruder's primary concern at the start of 1862 was to complete the partly finished earthworks. He asked for and received permission to hire five hundred negroes for the peninsula and one hundred for Gloucester Point, at one hundred dollars each. A month later, Ewell, still responsible for Williamsburg and the vicinity, requested another one thousand to fifteen hundred slaves, adding that Magruder was reluctant to call any more from the local area. A renewed urgency hit in mid-February when Magruder ordered Ewell to organize and prepare arms for any citizens willing to defend

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Williamsburg. The standoff battle between the Confederate ironclad Virginia and Federal Monitor in Hampton Roads March 9 did not seem to inspire confidence, for both Magruder and Captain Rives expressed concern that the Monitor would come up the James River to attack. The ladies of Williamsburg proposed "to raise a fund, or some part of a fund, adequate to the construction of a Gun boat," by giving concerts and suppers and taking up subscriptions, hoping to do their part to "whip the Yankees." Once again Magruder requested more men, at least ten thousand, to meet the twenty thousand Federals he believed to be at Newport News. On March 19, 1862, he placed the peninsula under martial law and on the 25th it was officially declared in Williamsburg. At last the climax of a year's preparations seemed to be fast approaching.\textsuperscript{18}

Exactly what defense Williamsburg had after a year of toil was beginning to be a question in some people's minds. The earthworks were essentially finished by mid-March when Rives described them as being seriously defective. The line in its final form consisted of a main fort and fourteen redoubts, roughly rectangular earthworks constructed by digging trenches and piling the dirt up into walls behind them to form a moat.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 715, IX, 42-43, 61-64, XI, Pt. 3, 395, 386, 398; Cynthia B.T. Coleman to Hugh Blair Grigsby, Mar. 25, 1862, Special Collections.
Magazines were hollowed out to store ammunition within and barbettes cut for gun emplacements. Fort Magruder was the principal work guarding a fork where the roads from Yorktown and Hampton met about two miles southeast of Williamsburg. Shaped like an irregular, elongated pentagon, its walls rose fifteen feet out of a nine-foot flooded moat and were nine feet thick. Its interior crest measured six hundred yards around, presented a face seventy yards across, and made a platform for eight guns. A sturdy barracks was built to its left and rear. The fourteen smaller redoubts with faces averaging forty to one hundred yards across guarded the flanks of the fort as well as all key roads and bridges across the peninsula. Five of these redoubts curved along a road to the right of the fort, with Redoubt Number One commanding the dam across Tutters Neck Pond. The creek flowing out of this pond into College Creek protected the remainder of the right flank. Fanning out from the left of Fort Magruder and its companion Redoubt Number Six, redoubts Seven through Fourteen carried the line over to Queens Creek. The far left redoubts, Twelve and Thirteen, overlooked Queens Creek but were hidden from the fort's line of sight by trees. Also screened from the fort's view was Redoubt Number Fourteen which guarded a strategically important access to the left flank, the road crossing Cub Creek Dam at Jones Pond. The foliage and contour of the land were also used
for defense, as the trees around the right redoubts were felled and pointed outward to create abatis. The fingers of a ravine stretched up to these earthworks, deeply cutting the open field in front of them. Across this field from the redoubts stood a dense woods with a tangled row of felled trees in front of it. The left of the line also faced an open field which dropped into another ravine and then rose again at the forest. As a finishing touch the field in front of Fort Magruder and the area around the right earthworks were further pocked with numerous rifle pits (see Map A). Though he had planned and built these works with great care, Rives feared that if one redoubt were lost, the troops would lose confidence in the entire line. Besides, the line would become useless the moment Federal gunboats could penetrate the river defenses and bypass Williamsburg completely.\(^{19}\)

Nevertheless, Williamsburg's line was only secondary in importance to Yorktown's twelve miles in advance. Yet this line too was totally inadequate to meet McClellan's men, as Johnston discovered on his inspection tour of the Lower Peninsula in early April. Magruder had estimated that many thousands of men would be required to guard this line, even against a small

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force, if the enemy concentrated on any thin segment for attack. In desperation, Prince John put his theatrical talents to work by marching his troops at double-quick from one point on the line to another, displaying them just out of range. To the Federal observers it appeared as if a large body of Confederate soldiers was in front of them when they were only seeing the same few over and over again. No wonder that McClellan received reports of an overwhelming Rebel force on the peninsula.20

To turn this illusion into a reality required some rapid footwork, as the Department of Northern Virginia marched into the Department of the Peninsula. Johnston ordered his troops down from the Rapidan through Richmond and Williamsburg, and on April 6 they began filing into the Yorktown trenches. Among the first to arrive was a brigade from G. W. Smith's division under Cadmus Marcellus Wilcox, a West Point graduate of 1845 and veteran of the Mexican War, Seminole Wars, and the Battle of Manassas. This regular army officer with the melodic classical name was also somewhat of a soldier-scholar who wrote Rifles and Rifle Practice, translated an Austrian textbook, and taught tactics at the Academy. Within two days he was followed by a brigade under the blunt and irascible Jubal Anderson Early, an independent

20Johnston, Narrative, 111-112; Coleman, "Peninsula Campaign," MS, 1.
spirit from Lynchburg, Virginia. Also a graduate of West Point, in the class of 1837, Early was an intermittent soldier after resigning his commission in 1838, then laboring as an attorney and unsuccessful politician between serving in the Seminole and Mexican wars. He voted against secession as a member of Virginia’s convention, but volunteered his services to the state when he was outvoted. Among the three regiments Early organized in Lynchburg was the Twenty-Fourth Virginia which he had with him at Manassas and now on the peninsula.21

Early's brigade was a part of a division led by Daniel Harvey Hill. A colonel of North Carolina Volunteers when he commanded at Big Bethel, Hill had been rapidly promoted within nine months to major general and shortly thereafter had been awarded the command of a division. He was trained in the distinguished West Point class of 1842 and served through the Mexican War, but he resigned his commission to teach engineering and mathematics and write textbooks expressing his dislike for Northerners. Another of his pet interests was theology, which, combined with his already critical tongue, gave him an air of righteous Presbyterianism. Not so outspoken was a fellow division commander and

21Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, I, 159-160; Jubal Anderson Early, War Memoirs: Autobiographical Sketch and Narrative of the War Between the States (Bloomington, Ind., 1960), xxxi-2.
Academy classmate, James Longstreet, who closely followed Hill into the Yorktown trenches. This dependable, slightly deaf major general had remained in the army after the Mexican War and was entrusted with the job of paymaster at the Albuquerque, New Mexico, post. After the fall of Fort Sumter he resigned his commission in the U.S. Army to pick it up again in the C.S. Army and fight at Manassas under Beauregard. He was in charge of the army while Johnston was conferring in Richmond, ordering the divisions to the peninsula when Johnston called for them.22

The last division to filter through Richmond belonged to Gustavus Woodson Smith, a former New York street commissioner and another member of the West Point class of 1842. He left some of his men at Williamsburg where Ewell was still the post commander in charge of guiding the troops through town. They stopped there a day or two to get the horses shod, and on their way out of town they noticed at Port Magruder "that there were many large guns planted there." Before the Confederate army was fully assembled along the Yorktown line on April 16, news arrived that Congress in Richmond had passed the first conscription act in American history. This provided for the conscription of all able-bodied

white males between eighteen and thirty-five for a three-year term, and it came as a blow to men whose enlistments were up May 1. They were partly consoled with the opportunity to elect their own officers, an experiment in military democracy which could have proved disastrous had the Federals attacked during the elections. Camp discipline deteriorated when officers had to campaign on popularity, and one observer on the peninsula watched a roll call being taken as the men were still lounging in bed.25

Once the election excitement had quieted, a reorganized Confederate army settled down behind the Yorktown earthworks. The highly vulnerable center of the line was entrusted to Longstreet's division which now consisted of six brigades. The First Brigade belonged to Ambrose Powell Hill, a career soldier and aristocratic Virginian who had at one time been engaged to McClellan's wife. The Second Brigade was also under a career soldier, Richard H. Anderson, another member of the famous 1842 West Point class and a colonel of the First South Carolina Regiment during the bombardment of Fort Sumter. The commander of the Fifth Brigade had also been present at Fort Sumter, but as a spectator who declined the invitation to fire the first shot. He was Roger

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Atkinson Pryor, a valedictorian at Hampden-Sydney, a former member of the Confederate Congress, and just recently a brigadier general. At the other end of the intellectual scale was George Edward Pickett who graduated last in his 1846 class at West Point and commanded the Third Brigade. Composed entirely of Virginia regiments, the Third was nicknamed the "Gamecock Brigade" as its leader sported shoulder-length perfumed curls and the dash of a Virginia cavalier. Pickett's Academy classmate Cadmus Wilcox was transferred from G. W. Smith's division to command the Fourth Brigade, and Raleigh Edward Colston's brigade came over to the peninsula from Norfolk to round out Longstreet's division.24

Flanking Longstreet on the Yorktown line were the divisions of D. H. Hill and Magruder. Hill's occupied the left around Yorktown itself and was anchored by Early's brigade. The reorganization had added three less familiar brigades under Robert Rodes, Gabriel J. Rains, and W. S. Featherston. Holding the right of the line to Lee's Mill on Warwick Creek was Magruder's division which now consisted of six brigades. Lafayette McLaws, who had been on the peninsula since the previous July and was well acquainted with the Williamsburg line, commanded one of the brigades. G. W. Smith's five brigades remained

24Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, I, 157-159, 168; Boatner, Dictionary, 400, 14, 674, 651, 166.
behind the lines in reserve. Also behind the lines and chafing at the inactivity was the cavalry division under the flamboyant James Ewell Brown Stuart. Not yet thirty years old, this irrepressible Virginian served on the frontier after his graduation from West Point, attracting attention to his outstanding horsemanship and developing a knack for being in the right place at the right time. He was present at John Brown's surrender at Harper's Ferry and the Battle of Manassas and was now among the 55,633 Confederate soldiers who had congregated on the peninsula by April 30.  

To meet them, 100,970 Union soldiers started up the peninsula from Fort Monroe earlier that rainy month, yet they did not comprise the entire Army of the Potomac. In March, Lincoln, against McClellan's wishes, had reorganized the army into four corps and had insisted that the I Corps under McDowell remain in Northern Virginia for the protection of Washington. Though he did not have the 155,000 men he wanted, McClellan still retained the bulk of the army in the remaining three corps. The II Corps was headed by the 65-year-old Edwin Vose ("Old Bull") Sumner who had been in the army since 1819 and had seen service in the Black Hawk War, Mexican War, "Bleeding Kansas," and Indian fighting on

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25 Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, I, 170-171; Boatner, Dictionary, 812; O.K., XI, Pt. 3, 479-484. Figure reflects total effective strength of Confederate army.
the plains. He was now second to McClellan in command of the army. Another old-timer commanded the III Corps—Samuel Peter Heintzelman, who had led the Third Division at Manassas where he had been badly wounded. Erasmus Darwin Keyes, a brigade commander at Manassas, had the distinction of commanding the IV Corps from its inception to its end in August 1863, quite a phenomenon in an army where high command was continually changing.26

As was largely true in the Confederate army, the Union's best talent came from the generation of West Point officers who had been baptized in the fire of the Mexican War. Some were among the division commanders, such as Joseph Hooker, leader of the III Corps's Second Division and an Academy classmate of Jubal Early. After distinguished service in the Mexican War, where he had a dispute with General Winfield Scott, Hooker was stationed in California and there retired to try his hand at ranching. An unsavory reputation almost prevented his recommissioning when the Civil War broke out, but he quickly rose to division commander. The most recently promoted division commander in the III Corps, Philip Kearny, was born into a wealthy New York family, graduated from Columbia University, then entered

26 O.R., XI, Pt. 3, 97 (figure reflects total present for duty on Apr. 13); Bruce Catton, Mr. Lincoln's Army (New York, 1951), 118-119, 141; Boatner, Dictionary, 818, 392, 458.
the military under his uncle General Stephen Watts Kearny in the Far West. He lost his left arm in the capture of Mexico City and further added to his romantic image by fighting with the French in Italy before the American Civil War.27

The division commanders of the IV Corps lacked the color of their brothers in the III Corps, but they contributed some intellectual talent to the army. Darius Nash Couch commanding the First Division had been a naturalist for the Smithsonian Institution in Mexico between wars, and Silas Casey of the Third was the author of System of Infantry Tactics used by both the North and South. William Farrar ("Baldy") Smith led the Second Division and had taught mathematics at West Point. Among Smith's brigade commanders was a namesake of the retired general-in-chief, Winfield Scott Hancock, who, after his graduation from the Academy in 1844, served the usual tours of duty on the frontier, in Mexico, and in Florida. The outbreak of civil war found him, like Hooker, in California, where he used his oratorical skills to soothe the rebellious rumblings heard there. Now he was back in the East ready to take his place among the Union forces.28

troops rapidly assembling on the peninsula. 28

As the Federal divisions arrived at the Yorktown line they took up positions opposite the Confederate divisions, with Heintzelman's corps in front of D. H. Hill's men at Yorktown, Sumner in the center, and Keyes on the left facing Magruder across Warwick Creek (see Map C). McClellan, fearing his one hundred thousand were not enough, wrote an urgent message to William Buel Franklin, a division commander in McDowell's I Corps, and managed to have him detached. Though he had more than enough men to break through the thinly stretched Confederate line, McClellan chose a siege operation instead and set his army to work digging entrenchments and hauling heavy guns through the mud up the peninsula from Fort Monroe. 29

As the blueclad soldiers were struggling to move through the Virginia muck, those in gray were suffering the effects of having to sit in it. A Confederate engineer tried to describe the deplorable conditions:

In the whole course of the war there was little service as trying as that in the Yorktown lines. There was much rain and the country was low and flat, so that the trenches were badly drained and would frequently be flooded with water. . . . At many important points, the crowded ranks in the


trenches had to either sit or crouch behind the parapet, in water up to their knees, from daylight until darkness permitted one to rise upright or to step outside of the trench. The only rest at night was to sleep in the universal mud and water.

Their primary diversion was exchanging potshots across the lines and occasionally throwing one at Professor Lowe's observation balloon Intrepid. The only action of any consequence occurred on April 6 when an over-ambitious reconnaissance party from "Baldy" Smith's division crossed the lines on Warwick Creek and took temporary possession of a Confederate work. Though they were chased back to their own lines within an hour, the Yankees' bold conduct during this affair showed the Rebels "that the fighting we would soon have to face was to be something better than that of 1861."  

At last Johnston obtained permission to pull his army closer to Richmond, and so the order was issued. On Thursday night, May 1, the Confederate guns opened fire along the Yorktown line to lull the Federals into expecting an imminent attack. The evacuation did not actually begin until sundown Saturday night when the guns increased their rate of fire to screen the sudden movement of the gray army. Magruder's division led the way out of the trenches and up the peninsula toward Williamsburg. The road they followed originated in Hampton and crossed a bridge beyond Lee's Mill at Skiff

30 Alexander, Memoirs, 64-65.
Creek. It then continued west, past the ancient Carter's Grove within a mile of the James River shore, and angled northwest through a dense forest. Emerging from the woods about two miles southeast of Williamsburg, the Hampton road converged with another that came up the peninsula directly from Yorktown. Several cross-roads connected these two roughly parallel thorough-fares—one joining them a few miles outside of Yorktown and another about halfway to Williamsburg at the appropriately-named Halfway House on the Yorktown road. A third crossroad cut across the woods a few miles outside of Williamsburg, joining the Yorktown road at a farm known as the Whittaker House, "a rather fine, large, white double house" (see Map C). After a spring of heavy rains the condition of these roads on the night of May 3 was anything but ideal. As one Confederate recalled:

The whole soil of that section seemed to have no bottom and no supporting power. The roads were but long strings of guns, wagons, and ambulances, mixed in with infantry, artillery, and cavalry, splashing and bogging through the darkness in a river of mud, with frequent long halts when some stalled vehicle blocked the road. Then men from the nearest ranks would swarm in to help the jaded horses pull the vehicle out.

These conditions worsened as each regiment of each brigade marched over the roads. Longstreet's division labored behind Magruder's up the Hampton road, while G. W. Smith's division took the Yorktown road, closely followed by D. H. Hill's. Stuart's cavalry was assigned
the rear guard along each road.\textsuperscript{31}

Soon after midnight the Confederate artillery fell silent. The only sounds coming from the Rebel trenches were the clank of spikes being driven into the guns' touchholes and the rustle of Gabriel Rains's brigade as the men hastily decamped leaving live shells or "torpedoes" buried in the road behind them. Union pickets observed a bright glow in the sky over Yorktown at first light as the untransportable powder was instantly consumed. On the other end of the line, Stuart's Jeff Davis Legion crossed Skiff Creek and set fire to the bridge before galloping up the road to Williamsburg. Professor Lowe and General Heintzelman ascended over the lines in the \textit{Intrepid} to investigate and reported that the Rebel works appeared empty. Local contrabands—former slaves freed by the Federal invasion—wandered into Yankee camps and informed their liberators that the Confederates had indeed slipped away during the night. Before a cautious reconnaissance could be organized, a brash young cavalry lieutenant, George Armstrong Custer, rode over a dam and gallantly took possession of the deserted works. Soon curious bluecoats were poking around the abandoned camps, hunting souvenirs, and pronouncing the fortifications

"prodigiously strong." 32

When McClellan heard the news, he must have felt a pang of disappointment. After a month's labor his guns were nearly all in place and were due to begin the bombardment of the Confederate works within the next day or two. The quarry had eluded him at Centreville, and "Little Mac" was determined it should not escape again. He telegraphed Washington, "Yorktown is in our possession," and immediately ordered the cavalry into motion.

Brigadier General George Stoneman, the Union chief of cavalry, was the first in pursuit with orders to harass the Confederate rear guard and cut it off if possible along both the Yorktown and Hampton roads. His advanced guard was composed of two cavalry regiments and four batteries of flying artillery, and they moved out on the Yorktown road with assurances that Hooker's division would come up behind them and that "Baldy" Smith's would support them along the Hampton road. Around noon some six or eight miles from Yorktown, Stoneman's leading cavalry encountered Confederate pickets, and two miles further, across a deep ravine, it engaged the Fourth

32 O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 456, 526; Warren Lee Goss, "Recollections of a Private," Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, II (New York, 1956), 194. Rains was bitterly denounced by the North and reprimanded by Longstreet for his unsportsmanlike innovation which killed one and wounded six of Casey's men (O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 557; Battles and Leaders, 201; G. Moxley Sorrel, Recollections of a Confederate Staff Officer, ed. Bell Irvin Wiley [Jackson, Tenn., 1853], 60-61).
Virginia Cavalry under Lieutenant W. C. Wickham. A Federal battery under J.E.B. Stuart's father-in-law, the Virginia-born Philip St. George Cooke, was quickly brought up. After firing a few rounds at the horsemen, Cooke forced Wickham to retreat. The terrain was too densely wooded to allow much maneuvering, and pursuit over the muddy, heavily rutted roads was clumsy at best, but Cooke pushed on until he emerged from the woods at the fork of the Yorktown and Hampton roads.\footnote{0.R., XI, Pt. 3, 133, Pt. 1, 423-424, 427.}

In front of him, near the top of the last ascent into Williamsburg, stood Fort Magruder. To the eyes of a weary Union foot soldier it appeared to be a harmless, "muddy-looking heap of dirt," for at the moment neither guns nor troops were lining the parapet. The retreating Confederate army was not expecting to stop in Williamsburg so had pulled out the guns and left the line of works unoccupied at the moment Cooke's battery came upon them. Before the Federals had a chance to move in, a mass of gray began rushing from town toward the fort. Johnston, who was directing the retreat operations from the Vest House in Williamsburg, was first alerted to the peril by the shots fired between Cooke and Wickham. He immediately ordered the closest brigade at hand, Semmes's from Magruder's division, to occupy Fort Magruder with infantry and artillery. Brigadier General Paul J. Semmes
estimated in his report that his men were further from
the fort than the Federal troops emerging from the
woods, and so they found themselves in a desperate race
for the works. The crowds in Williamsburg watched
awestruck as the artillery horses "came thundering down
the street at a full gallop," then, "leaving the road,
which, in order to lessen the steepness of the grade,
makes a wide detour to the right, the battery dashed
down the hill in a straight line for the redoubt, over
obstructions of briers, bushes, stones, and gullies."
The infantry followed close behind (see Map A).34

Cooke's hesitation allowed the Confederates to
win the race, but his guns kept up a constant fire while
Rebel infantry lined the parapets. McLaws soon arrived
with another brigade and assumed command. He ordered
one gun placed in each redoubt on the right to guard
the fort, and, not knowing how strong the Yankees were
in front, he sent another brigade under J. B. Kershaw
to take up positions on the left. The two guns in
Fort Magruder and those in the adjacent redoubts
commenced a crossfire on the six pieces that Cooke had
brought up. Noticing that some redoubts on the left
of the Confederate line were still unoccupied, Cooke
ordered the Sixth U.S. Cavalry to take them. After

34Goss, "Recollections," Battles and Leaders, 196;
O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 427, 446; Archibald Gracie, "Gracie's
Battalion at Williamsburg, in 1862," Confederate Veteran,
XIX (1911), 28.
crossing the ravine the horsemen approached the redoubts so confidently that at first they were mistaken for Confederates by nearby Rebels, but the error was soon remedied with a fierce shelling and cavalry counter-attack, driving back the presumptuous Yankees. Colonel Wickham suffered a saber wound in the side during a brief encounter of hand-to-hand combat. Another officer of the Tenth Virginia Cavalry went into the fray with two "Horse pistols," a cutoff musket, and a saber "that might have been made of hook iron," and emerged with a superior "brace of Colt's Army revolvers," a sharps carbine, and a "new and handsome" English saber from the body of a fallen foe. When Stoneman arrived on the scene he ordered a withdrawal half a mile back to the woods, perceiving that if infantry did not soon come up they would have to retreat. As the Yankees were falling back, McLaws ordered a charge forcing the abandonment of a Federal six-pound gun stuck in the mud. Ten horses working for twenty minutes had not been able to extricate it.35

Meanwhile, Stoneman had detached Brigadier General William H. Emory with the cavalry and some artillery to cut off a Confederate battery supported by Stuart's cavalry on the Hampton road. Stuart was first aware of

Emory's presence at his rear when a courier he had sent to Williamsburg returned after nearly being captured. Thinking it was only "a small scouting party, from the rapidity of its movements," Stuart detached one hundred men who drove the Yankees back to the shelter of their artillery. At this point Stuart brought the rest of his men up in support, but the Union artillery and dismounted skirmishers were too much for them. Under the protection of two little mountain howitzers, the Confederates escaped to the James River beach where they were reportedly fired upon by their own gunboats mistaking them for Yankees. Free from Federal pursuit, they found their way back to Williamsburg late that night.36

The reason that Emory failed to follow Stuart became the story of the battle—no infantry support. Stoneman had ordered Emory to communicate with W. F. Smith's pickets, who should have advanced that far on the Hampton road by then, but the Union division had met some unexpected delays that morning. First, the dam at Lee's Mill had to be strengthened to allow cavalry and artillery to pass. Then the fire at the Skiff Creek bridge had to be extinguished, Lieutenant Custer burning his hands in the process, but without the bridge, the swollen creek could not be crossed. So Smith had to

\[36\textit{O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 433, 444.}\]
backtrack and find a way over to the Yorktown road, which he did, and by two or three o'clock his division was finally on its way to Williamsburg. As Smith's column was filing into the Yorktown road, however, Hooker's division, which had to be gathered from widely scattered positions and so did not start until after noon, met it at the intersection. After waiting another three or four hours, Hooker decided to cross over to the Hampton road and take position on the Union left. The end result was that neither infantry division was where it belonged and neither reached the battlefield in time to support the cavalry and artillery.\textsuperscript{37}

The sky was darkening when Smith's division finally arrived on the field, and a light rain was beginning to fall. By then Sumner had assumed command of the pursuing army by order of McClellan, who remained in Yorktown with Sumner's corps. Temporary headquarters were set up in the Whittaker House, where Sumner met with generals Heintzelman, Smith, Stoneman, Hancock, Keyes, and W.T.H. Brooks of Smith's division. When Stoneman misled them to believe that infantry could make an assault through the woods, Sumner quickly formed Smith's troops into two lines and ordered an advance. No sooner had they penetrated the woods than

\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., 464, 526.
the ranks became tangled in the dense undergrowth, stumbled into trees and each other in the dark, and eventually lost direction. Smith commanding the right wing realized the futility of the maneuver but could not find Sumner or Heintzelman to authorize a halt. When Hancock finally took the initiative and stopped the left wing which he was commanding, Smith followed suit. By then it was eight o'clock, totally dark, and pouring rain. Sumner had insisted upon reconnoitering the Confederate position personally and had become lost in the swamps where he spent the night. Hooker's division settled down to a soggy camp three miles from Williamsburg on the Hampton road; Casey's and Couch's divisions, which had followed Smith over to the Yorktown road, fell out around the Halfway House; and Kearny, last out of Yorktown, bivouacked close behind.38

When darkness fell upon the Confederate lines, Johnston pulled McLaws's men out of the fort and redoubts and sent them on toward Richmond. He then ordered Longstreet to replace them with a brigade of his own division and take command. Since his brigades were small, Longstreet ordered both Anderson and Pryor to occupy the earthworks. Learning that McClellan was sending Franklin and two divisions of Sumner's corps

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up the York River by boat to cut off the Confederates from Richmond, Johnston was anxious to push ahead as many men as possible to intercept them. Magruder marched first, but he started so late that the second division in line, G. W. Smith's, could not follow until the early morning hours. A downpour throughout the night seriously impeded any progress so that the baggage trains struggling through the mud behind Smith held up D. H. Hill's and Longstreet's divisions. Trapped between the trains and the Union army, Hill's men were obliged to camp for the night on the western edge of town around the college, while Longstreet's remained in the earthworks east of Williamsburg awaiting the dawn. 39

39 Longstreet, Memoirs, 73; Johnston, Narrative, 119.
CHAPTER II

The Monday morning of May 5, 1862, promised another bleak day in Williamsburg as the steady soaking rain of the night before continued. Though the men of Magruder's and G. W. Smith's divisions spent the night on the road, some officers had lagged behind to take advantage of the dry beds and hospitality in town. General McLaws and his staff enjoyed an early breakfast with the mother and sister of one of the staff members. An infantryman in A. P. Hill's brigade had also managed to slip out of camp to attend a young lady at breakfast, but he was suddenly recalled when "the ring of a field piece clanged close by upon the air." Dashing out in time to join his regiment east of town, the soldier noticed "the sidewalks were full of infantry at double-quick, and artillery, staff officers, and couriers were coming down the roadway at a gallop." All were contributing to the organized confusion that accompanies the opening of any engagement, and the Battle of Williamsburg was no exception.¹

The Union army also awakened early after a long wet night. Most of the high command had found dry comfortable quarters in the Whittaker House, and at first light Sumner found his way back. Soon Hooker had his First Brigade under General Cuvier Grover marching up Hampton road which was lined with dense forest for about a half mile, then with felled trees for another half mile. By 5:30 a.m. the blue soldiers were within sight of Fort Magruder and the field in front of it. "The landscape is picturesque," Hooker mused, gazing through the mist, "and not a little heightened by the large trees and venerable spires of Williamsburg, 2 miles distant." They were looking across a field partially sown in wheat, six or seven hundred yards wide from the felled trees to the fort. From their viewpoint, the redoubts were "standing near the eastern and southern verge of a slightly-elevated plain, the slopes of which were furrowed with winding ravines, with an almost boundless, gently-undulating plain reaching across the Peninsula, and extending to the north and west as far as the eye could reach." Behind the redoubts "the forest again extended its cover, opening only at the section through which Williamsburg is approached." A Northern correspondent accompanying Hooker believed the field "admirably adapted for the conventional panorama, 'such as one
in pictures sees' of a field engagement."^2

The Yankees had little time to admire the scenery, however, for they were spotted by Rebel horsemen in the field as soon as their blue uniforms emerged from the woods. Instantly the men in Fort Magruder were alerted. Anderson was where Longstreet had left him the night before, in charge of the redoubts with his and Pryor's brigades and parts of three batteries. They were mostly South Carolina men with a battalion of Louisiana Foot Rifles occupying the fort and the redoubts immediately to the left and right. The Fourth South Carolina Volunteers were sent out as skirmishers to meet the threat coming up the Hampton road. Before they were able to cross the field, Hooker swiftly deployed his regiments through the felled timber, directing the First Massachusetts Regiment to the left of the road and the Second New Hampshire to the right. They were to skirmish to the edge of the felled timber, drive back the Rebel skirmish line, then, "under cover, to turn their attention to the occupants of the rifle pits and the enemy's sharpshooters and gunners in Fort Magruder." At first the South Carolinians, reinforced by the Palmetto Sharpshooters, were successful in their efforts to press the Northerners back to the woods. But when the Massachusetts and New Hampshire regiments

fully deployed, they were overpowering, and within a half hour the Confederates were driven back into the fort (see Map D).[^3]

The opening shots of the battle were fired by muskets; next the artillery took its turn. Hooker ordered a battery to both sides of the road on the edge of the felled timber, but as the guns were unlimbered, the Palmetto Sharpshooters in the fort directed a deadly fire upon them. Four cannoneers were shot and the survivors fled to the shelter of nearby trees. Their officers' urgings could not budge them, but volunteers from other batteries agreed to man the exposed guns, supported from behind by the Massachusetts and New Hampshire infantry. They opened fire just as the South Carolina skirmishers returned to the redoubts, and Confederate guns immediately answered Federal from batteries in Fort Magruder and Redoubt Five. Rebel artillerists suffered from sharpshooters as the Yankees had, for some Palmetto Sharpshooters were forced to divert their attention from picking off Federal gunners to replacing their own fallen gunners. Another Union battery unlimbered to the right of the first battery in ground that was so soft and full of stumps only five of its six guns could be hauled into position. They opened such a tremendous fire on the redoubts, that the return

fire soon slackened and attention was once again concentrated upon the maneuverings of the infantry.  

About eight o'clock that morning it suddenly occurred to Hooker that he had almost no knowledge of the land or the whereabouts of the rest of the Union army, placing him in a position to be easily outflanked. Thus he ordered Grover to extend the First Massachusetts to the left and place the Eleventh Massachusetts and the Twenty-Sixth Pennsylvania regiments to the right of the Second New Hampshire in an effort to reach the Yorktown road. He also wanted the Pennsylvanians to communicate with Sumner's men who were supposed to be forming the center of the Union line directly in front of Fort Magruder. More concerned about the exposure of his left flank, Hooker sent an engineering officer, Lieutenant Miles D. McAlester, followed by the cavalry under Emory, to reconnoiter the ground. A drifting of gray uniforms toward the left could be discerned through the pouring rain which intermittently fell in torrents, and so Hooker brought his Third Brigade of New Jersey regiments under Brigadier General Francis E. Patterson into action. The Fifth New Jersey was held in support of the batteries on the right, while the Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth were led through the dense forest to the left. Here they quickly formed in line of battle with

\[4\]Ibid., 470, 580, 582.
the Sixth to the right of the Seventh, and the Eighth New Jersey coming up on the extreme left (see Map E). 5

No sooner had the New Jersey regiments formed than they were attacked by a rushing gray mass. This was the Nineteenth Mississippi of Wilcox's brigade. It had been ordered by Anderson to occupy the woods, so the men exited Redoubt Four and crossed the field through a ravine that protected them from enemy fire. The woods, they discovered upon entering, "were so dense that a colonel could not see his entire regiment when in line of battle." The woods were also full of New Jersey boys who offered a spirited resistance. Parts of Wilcox's Ninth and Tenth Alabama regiments had followed the Nineteenth Mississippi across the field and now joined in the fight, taking cover in the thick underbrush to the left and right of the Mississippians. Wilcox, now aware of the Federals' strength, dispatched a request to A. P. Hill for reinforcements. The message was intercepted by J. E. B. Stuart, who had no particular assigned duties for the day and was making himself useful as the ranking messenger boy. He delivered Wilcox's request to the closest brigadier at hand, General Pryor, who had most of his brigade scattered among four redoubts, but he promised to send what help he could. Pryor managed to gather the

5Ibid., 465-466, 462, 473, 490.
Fourteenth Louisiana and part of the Eighth Alabama under Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas E. Irby and led them to the right of Wilcox's brigade. Irby's men were ordered to watch the extreme right of the line for any flanking movement.⁶

Hooker had also been busy scrambling for reinforcements. With two of his three brigades already fully engaged, Hooker had only his Second, the "Excelsior" Brigade, of New York regiments under Colonel Nelson Taylor to call upon. Of these, only the Seventy-Second New York was handy, and so it was thrown in to relieve the First Massachusetts, which was almost out of ammunition, and to cover Patterson's right flank. Grover hoped that the fresh troops could silence a Confederate battery that was annoying them from Redoubt Three to their left, but with Patterson too busy to support them, they tried in vain. Hooker sent requests to Sumner on his right and Kearny still far to his rear, urging rapid reinforcement, but the ever-deepening mud denied him both the men and ammunition he so desperately needed. While the Union generals pondered their next move, the Confederate generals made the decision for them.⁷

The battle was over four hours old, yet neither

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⁶Ibid., 590-591, 571, 588.
⁷Ibid., 480, 473, 467.
army had gained a substantial advantage or had lost any ground. The bulk of the Confederate army was still trying to make its way to Richmond under the direction of Johnston who remained in Williamsburg. But the baggage trains, still stuck in the mud, continued to hinder the march, and so Longstreet decided that he could "make battle without delaying the movement of our army." He therefore ordered Anderson "to organize columns of attack upon the enemy's positions and batteries, using the brigades of Wilcox and A. P. Hill and such of his forces as could be spared from the redoubts, the attack to be supported by Pickett's brigade." Powell Hill had had his brigade waiting on the road between town and Fort Magruder since early that morning, ready to support Anderson when needed. Responding to Longstreet's order, he then formed his Virginia regiments—the Seventh, Eleventh, Seventeenth, and First—in line behind redoubts Two, Three, and Four. Pickett's Gamecock Brigade had started marching from its bivouac behind the college toward Richmond at eight that morning, but it was halted and hurriedly backtracked through town toward the battle. Anderson left Fort Magruder in the hands of Colonel Micah Jenkins of the Palmetto Sharpshooters and went to the right to direct operations personally. From there he ordered Hill into the woods to form to the right of Wilcox and at eleven o'clock gave the signal for a
general attack (see Map F). 8

The Seventh Virginia led the way into the "dense
tangle of brush, undergrowth, vines, etc.," firing
blindly "in the direction in which the balls seemed to
come." The invisible Federals returned a heavy fire
then melted into the forest before the yelling Rebels
could catch up with them. Halting behind a fence, the
Seventh Virginia was joined by the Eleventh Virginia on
its right and rear, the Seventeenth Virginia on its
left and rear, and the First Virginia, temporarily
under Wilcox's command, on their extreme left forming
behind the Ninth Alabama. Presently dark blue uniforms
were seen moving about among the trees to their left,
and when the Confederates opened fire on them they
coalesced into a line. Gazing at the scene, one
Virginia infantryman recalled "the long stretch of
glittering steel, with a head bent down at the end of
each gun-barrel, was a thrilling sight. A huge cloud
of smoke hid them from our view, and a tremendous report
rang through the forest." Another charge was ordered
and the Virginians sprang over the fence, forcing back
the Northerners step by step. As they continued to
press forward, Hill's Virginians were followed by
Pickett's. The Gamecock Brigade spread out with the
Eighth Virginia on the extreme right flank and the

Eighteenth and Nineteenth Virginia regiments on the left to relieve part of Wilcox's brigade. Pickett held the Twenty-Eighth Virginia in reserve slightly behind the Eighteenth and Nineteenth until Wilcox put it in to support his Nineteenth Mississippi.9

With this added strength the Confederates swept through the woods continuing to drive the Federals back. The forest floor was strewn with Union dead and wounded, clumped in places where they tried to stand and fight. "They lay in every direction, like a rail fence thrown down," recalled one Confederate. "In several instances body lay upon body. It was a wretched sight." When the Virginians reached the edge of the woods the fire slackened. They paused to replenish their ammunition and knapsacks from the fallen enemy and administer what comfort they could to the wounded. As they rested, they watched "the smoke of the previous combats . . . slowly drifting out of the forest and rising like a thin veil between us and the enemy. Through the haze could be seen the long line of infantry, splendidly equipped and motionless as so many statues, the sombre blue of their uniforms relieved by a shining crest of steel, the gold blazonry of the regimental colors,

This new Union regiment was the Seventieth New York under Colonel William Dwight which Hooker sent in to relieve the exhausted New Jersey brigade and Seventy-Second New York. The Eleventh Virginia on the Seventh's right was expecting more gray uniforms rather than blue to appear in that direction, and so the Virginians "loudly demanded" that the New Yorkers show their colors. "On our colors being waved a volley from the enemy passed over our heads," Colonel Dwight reported, and the Seventieth New York opened fire not over sixty yards away. The Seventeenth Virginia came up on the Seventh's left and together they charged, pushing the Yankees back to a field of felled timber. Here both sides ducked down behind the twisted limbs and blazed away for two hours. The lines fluctuated back and forth as either side gained temporary advantages, clambering over the felled timber with charge and countercharge. The men of the Seventh Virginia complained when the Union colonel "made some of his best shots crawl under the timber, and they were picking us off." Old-fashioned buck and ball cartridges were amazingly deadly at this short range of about thirty yards, but when the ammunition began to give out, Dwight reported that "this

skulking contest from opposite sides of the logs in front of my main body became in some cases hand-to-hand" (see Map G).\textsuperscript{11}

It was now after one o'clock, and in Hooker's words, "the battle had swollen to one of gigantic proportions." In desperation he had already thrown in the last of his reserves, the Seventy-Third and Seventy-Fourth New York, and pulled the Eleventh Massachusetts to the left to aid the Excelsior Brigade. The Twenty-Sixth Pennsylvania was also ordered to the left, but the aide's horse was shot while carrying the messenger, so, ignorant of the order, this regiment remained on the right of Hooker's line in front of Fort Magruder. After the withdrawal of the Eleventh Massachusetts, the South Carolina troops took advantage of the weakened line and charged out of the fort and Redoubt Six. The Union battery of four guns, unsupported by infantry and deeply stuck in the mud, was easily seized. Other Federal batteries opened and were answered by the guns in Fort Magruder. A member of the Seventy-Fourth New York declared that the Confederate artillery "made terrible havoc among forest trees much more than among our men. . . . Tree tops dropped off as though they had been heads severed from human bodies by the keenest

sword.\textsuperscript{12}

While the artillery thundered away, the Confederate infantry was faced with a sudden shortage of ammunition as the supply trains were still mired out of reach. The only way to replenish it was by bringing in fresh troops. Longstreet accordingly directed Colston's brigade to back up A. P. Hill's by filling in the vacated redoubts, and he recalled D. H. Hill's division which "had waded but a few miles through the mud and slush" toward Richmond that morning. Only two of Harvey Hill's regiments, the Second Florida and Second Mississippi Battalion, were sent to the right, the remainder being placed in reserve behind the woods to the left and rear of Fort Magruder. Johnston visited Longstreet on the field about this time, but finding the situation well in hand, declined "with his usual magnanimity" to assume command. If order prevailed behind the lines, the front lines apparently presented another scene, described by one Confederate soldier as "pandemonium broke loose. It seemed to me as if the brass pieces fairly howled, while the roll of the small arms was something indescribable. Ordinarily heavy musketry rises and falls like the sound of the sea, but here it was one deep, incessant,\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12}O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 467, 479, 471; James R. Burns, Battle of Williamsburgh, with Reminiscences of the Campaign, Hospital Experiences, Debates, Etc. (New York, 1865), 33.
prolonged, deafening roar."  

This tremendous din, along with the periodic torrential downpours which reduced visibility and left the men caked with mud, contributed to a general confusion as well as to some amusing moments. The difficulty of recognizing their own uniforms seemed to be a problem among the Confederates. While A. P. Hill's brigade was in the midst of its first charge, a colonel "rushed excitedly" up to some men of the Seventh Virginia, with hat, pistol, and sword in hand, expostulating against our firing upon his regiment, which he declared was in our front and right, and vehemently ordered us to stop firing. This occasioned momentary confusion, as we were horrified at the idea of shooting our own men; but some of our keen-sighted boys shouted back to him, "Colonel, if that's your regiment, they are facing and shooting this way," and without further ado we again opened fire and advanced.

Another Virginian thought he had solved the problem by pointing to a prisoner "dressed up in blue, as if he was going to a ball," and advised his comrades to "shoot at all such nice looking dressed men as that, for you may know they are not your friends." That advice proved unfortunate for one Confederate officer who chose a dark blue blouse as his personal uniform and so was repeatedly "captured" behind his own lines.

and released throughout the battle.  

Other incidents of mistaken identity had more serious consequences. While positioning his own regiments for the late morning attack, Pickett chanced upon Colonel Irby leading the remnants of Pryor's brigade and directed him to form to the right. As Pickett related:

He [Colonel Irby] rushed on eagerly at the head of his men, and coming close on a party of the enemy, was about firing, when they called out, "We are friends; don't fire," at the same time holding up their hands. While partially turning to caution his men not to fire the accomplished cowards poured in a deadly volley, killing the brave colonel and many of his men, and instantly, upon the fire being returned at such short range, took to their heels.

Though Pickett condemned these "dastardly subterfuges of an enemy pretending to be civilized," the Southerners could not plead innocence either. Both the Eleventh Massachusetts and Second New Hampshire reported instances of "cowardice and treachery" on the part of the "rebel barbarian." The Eleventh Massachusetts lost a private who was sent to accept a white flag, but the Confederate officer feigning surrender was shot through the heart in retaliation. A Union captain was the victim of an identical ruse pulled on the Second New Hampshire.  

Another similar incident nearly spelled disaster

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for the entire Confederate army. While participating in the general assault of Wilcox's and A. P. Hill's brigades that morning, the Tenth Alabama was approached by a man who "walked up a ravine from our right and in rear of our line, claiming to belong to the Second Louisiana Regiment, saying, 'You are firing on your friends.'" Considering that a real possibility, the Tenth Alabama ceased firing, at which moment the deceptive Yankees opened a heavy volley. "Instantly the word retreat was heard, and the line commenced retiring." Repeated orders to halt were drowned out by the noise, and the Tenth Alabama continued its retreat until Pickett stopped the fleeing men and returned them to "our dearly-bought position."

Such a break in an unreinforced line could easily provide an opportunity for the enemy to penetrate, and the event of a company or even a whole regiment giving way was not uncommon in this battle. At one point Hooker had to post the cavalry behind his line to prevent costly straggling. For many of the troops this was the first real action they had seen, and they understandably suffered weak knees and faintness. "These symptoms," a Yankee private confessed, "did not decrease when several of my comrades were hit." In such a war of nerves, anything could touch off an unauthorized retreat. Even

16 Ibid., 596-597, 585.
the veteran Seventh Virginia after seven hours of continuous fighting found that "the strain was intense. Off on the right one fellow sprang up, dropped his gun to a trail, and made off back into the woods like a quarter-horse. The panic instantly spread, and up and down the line men took to their heels." They were stopped and reformed in time to prevent an advance by the Federals, but the danger of such a lapse is always imminent when flesh is facing a storm of bullets "flying like hail through the air." Far more surprising is the endurance of men like those of the Seventieth New York who fought from the scanty protection of the felled timber until their ammunition and nearly half their number were gone. They resorted at last to bayonets to hold their position against the advancing Rebels. Such "soldierly steadiness" of an entire regiment drew high praise from friend and foe alike. 17

Individual acts of heroism amidst the din and confusion of battle were also amply recorded. The color-bearer of the Seventh Virginia attracted special attention. "Time and again," an observer noted, "the colors almost jerked out of his hands as a ball tore through the cloth. He hung on manfully, and though the

flag had twenty-seven bullet-holes through it, and was twice shot out of his hands, brought her out safe at last. The Virginia Legislature gave him a sword of honor, and he wore it until he fell." One of Longstreet's staff officers was touched by the loyalty of a personal servant who defied a shower of bullets to retrieve the body of his master, the stricken colonel of the Nineteenth Mississippi. A young Irishman from Richmond drew the admiration of a Confederate cavalry officer behind the lines. Faint from loss of blood from three wounds, he escourted three Union officers as his prisoners while holding their surrendered swords under his shattered arm. Such scenes greatly cheered the troops waiting their turn to enter the battle.18

Inspiration for the Southern soldiers did not come exclusively from the battlefield, however. They had only to look behind them at the skirts billowing from the rooftops in town to be reminded of the purpose of their sacrifices. Many Williamsburg residents braved the rain and with umbrellas and field glasses mounted the towers of the asylum and the larger rooftops to view the battle's progress. Others remained inside the houses to minister to the wounded who were pouring into town. As

the men of the Second Florida regiment marched down the Duke of Gloucester street on their way to the battlefield, they passed a house to which the wounded had been carried, when "a girl young and fair, waved before them a blood-stained cloth, calling out 'go and avenge this blood.' With a yell they passed on at a double quick, and they did avenge it, but with terrible loss to themselves, for their gallant colonel while shouting his battle-cry in defense of the women of Williamsburg was shot and fell dead from his horse." The defense of Southern womanhood may not seem so momentous as the moral, political, and economic reasons to wage a civil war, but to the romantic young soldiers in gray it was reason enough to risk life and limb.

The Northerners were not so fortunate to have this visible inspiration, being miles from their homes and sweethearts in an unfriendly country, and they suffered a relative lack of morale. The Federal foot soldier even seemed reluctant to look to his officers for encouragement, for as one green private related, "I was surprised to find that in a real battle the officer gets in the rear of his men, as is his right and duty, that is, if his ideas of duty do not carry him so far to the rear as to make his sword useless." When the heat of battle intensified, "we were none of us too

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19Chappell, "Reminiscence," MS; Coleman, "Peninsula Campaign," MS, 2.
proud, not even those who had the dignity of shoulder-straps to support, to dodge behind a tree or stump. I called out to a comrade, 'Why don't you get behind a tree?' 'Confound it,' said he, 'there ain't enough for the officers.'"20

Such a lack of leadership was excusable among the young and inexperienced lower grade officers, but it could not be so easily overlooked among the veteran high command. While Hooker's division was fighting the entire battle alone, Sumner held W. F. Smith's division in reserve less than two miles to Hooker's right. There idle troops stood behind a screen of woods, waiting for an attack Sumner expected on the center from Fort Magruder, while Hooker's repeated pleas for reinforcements went unheeded. Casey's and Couch's divisions were strung out along the muddy Yorktown road from the Halfway House to the Whittaker House, paralyzed more by conflicting orders from the high command than by the weather. Within earshot of the battle, they were willing but unable to help.21

Finally about one o'clock, John J. Peck's brigade of Couch's division managed to pass Casey's division, which had halted only one and a half miles from the

20Goss, "Recollections," Battles and Leaders, II, 197.

front lines, and arrived behind Hooker's right. Here Peck encountered the men of the Twenty-Sixth Pennsylvania who informed him that ammunition was getting low. After receiving a message from Hooker, Peck rapidly deployed his regiments on either side of the Yorktown road. The One Hundred-Second Pennsylvania regiment went to the right and the Fifty-Fifth New York to the left, with the Sixty-Second New York on the far left. Watching these fresh Union troops form, J.E.B. Stuart hastily ordered his horse artillery under the 21-year-old Captain John Pelham to unlimber in front of Fort Magruder. The battery's rapid fire of shot, shell, and cannister pushed back Peck's left center which had to be strengthened with the Ninety-Third Pennsylvania, and it belched enough smoke to screen a Rebel infantry charge. The One Hundred-Second Pennsylvania began to weaken, prompting Peck to lead his last regiment, the Ninety-Eighth Pennsylvania, to repel the attack (see Map G). Since the Confederate troops engaged with Peck's brigade were primarily the South Carolinians from Fort Magruder, no Rebels had actually been diverted from Hooker's front, and so his petitions for help continued to flow into the Whittaker House.22

If Sumner refused to send "Baldy" Smith's division to Hooker's aid, it was not because he was unaware of

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22 Ibid., 520-521, 571-574, 574.
the situation. At 11:20 that morning Hooker sent a message to Heintzelman, who had been in conference with Sumner all morning at headquarters, informing him that:

I have had a hard contest all the morning, but do not despair of success. My men are hard at work, but a good deal exhausted. It is reported to me that my communication with you by the Yorktown road is clear of the enemy. Batteries, cavalry, and infantry can take post by the side of mine to whip the enemy.

This note was read and endorsed by Sumner instead, for he had already sent Heintzelman to the left to join Hooker. But the roads were so bad that Heintzelman had to travel a roundabout route and did not arrive at Hooker's side until one o'clock. The situation having considerably worsened by then, and still no relief in sight, Heintzelman sent another note to Sumner asking for reinforcements and a demonstration on the Confederate center and left, but he received no reply. Heintzelman also sent repeated notes to his Third Division commander General Kearny to hurry his troops up as soon as possible. Since Kearny had been the last out of Yorktown and thus was the furthest from the battlefield that morning, hope seemed slim.

By mid-afternoon morale in Hooker's division had sunk to its lowest ebb. "The smoke and rain were driven by the wind into the faces of our men," Heintzelman

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23 Ibid., 467, 457-458.
lamented. "Even the elements were combined against us." Many who exhausted their ammunition simply threw down their rifles and straggled to the rear or carried the wounded to the rear and then did not bother to rejoin their regiments. "The rain, the sight of the wounded, the re-enforcements still behind, all conspired to depress everybody." In an effort to instill some cheer, Heintzelman ordered the drums to beat, but they were wet, "and did not give forth cheerful sounds." So he hunted around, found three musicians, and ordered them to play "Yankee Doodle." But they refused on the grounds that they were only part of a band. A newspaper correspondent continued, "the General then hurried around for more--found a part of another band--united them to the professional three, and electrified the worn out infantry with the 'Star-Spangled Banner,' 'Yankee Doodle,' and 'Gem of the Ocean.'" Though the music could drown out the din of battle and the shrieks of the wounded, it was unable to hold back the onrushing Rebel tide.24

After doggedly holding onto their position in the felled timber for more than two hours without relief, the men of the Seventieth New York could no longer defend themselves with bayonets against a determined Confederate charge. The added strength of Colston's

24Ibid., 458-459; Daily Trib., May 13, 1862.
brigade and the Second Florida and Second Mississippi regiments pushed the line forward in a final assault. One Virginian described it as "confusion worse confounded; now leaping from one tree trunk to another; now running along this, and then crawling under the other. But if it was hard for us to get in it was equally hard for the enemy to get out." Colonel Dwight of the Seventieth New York was wounded twice before being captured along with many of his regiment's survivors. Another spirited Virginian remembered that "we swept on entirely through this body of fallen timber up to the road, in which were unlimbered several of the enemy's cannon, and kept on until we reached the standing timber again, having apparently gobbled up everything that had been in our front." Many of the gray soldiers became separated from their regiments, and so they halted to regroup. Stuart, mistaking it for a rout, boldly led a cavalry charge across the lines where he encountered a wall of new blue uniforms emerging from the woods (see Map H). 25

At last Kearny's division had arrived. After wading to their knees through the mud and crowds of stalled troops and trains since nine o'clock that morning, Kearny's troops were within three and a half

miles of the battlefield by 1:30. They paused briefly to rest and deposit their heavy knapsacks, then continued toward the front. In another hour they were one mile from the engagement. Perceiving Hooker's desperate situation, Kearny immediately deployed his leading brigade, Hiram G. Berry's, to the left of the Hampton road, with the men of the Second Michigan straddling the road as skirmishers, the Fifth Michigan to their left, and the Thirty-Seventh New York extending further to the left into the timber. Brigadier General David B. Birney followed and placed his Thirty-Eighth and Fortieth New York regiments to the right of the road. As the fresh troops were cheered into battle by the music of Heintzelman's band, they passed remnants of Hooker's spent division stumbling back to the rear. There the Fifth New Jersey reformed, and though "terribly decimated," returned to the front. When all were in line of battle, Kearny ordered the Michiganders to charge. They promptly recaptured the lost battery and chased the Confederates out of their advanced position in the woods and back through the felled timber. The Thirty-Seventh New York held the extreme left with a continuous fire into the felled timber, while the Thirty-Eighth New York, supported by the Fortieth New York, charged down the Hampton road. As they drove through the trees and into the rifle pits, many were slashed by the dense foliage and "had their clothing torn into shreds."
Before darkness fell upon the battlefield, both armies had returned to the approximate lines they had occupied around noon.  

While this bloody tug-of-war continued in the logs throughout the afternoon, other troops were ranging on the flanks as far as the rivers. Earlier in the day Hooker had sent Emory with the cavalry and horse artillery to the left to reconnoiter and occupy the ground between the Union left and the James River. Probing around the extreme Confederate right, the Third Pennsylvania Cavalry penetrated as far as Redoubt Number One. When Heintzelman arrived in the afternoon, he ordered Emory down the Hampton road to a crossroad that led to the James River. There the cavalrymen met Lieutenant Miles D. McAlester who had been scouting the area, and he guided them up another road and across a mill dam where they halted. Emory felt he was not strong enough to continue any further up this road which led to the rear of the Confederate right, so he called for infantry support. About four o'clock three regiments that Heintzelman had detached from Kearny's division arrived, but they were too little too late. Thus the Yankees missed their opportunity to cut off the Rebel retreat at Williamsburg by penetrating the extreme

On the extreme Union right, however, events were moving toward a climax. The drama began early that morning when sixteen local contrabands wandered into the Union camps from the neighboring farms. Sumner had them questioned, and though their stories did not all agree, "they encouraged the belief that some of the enemy's works on his left were not occupied" as they had been the afternoon before. A captain of the Engineers was detailed to make a reconnaissance, and he learned from another former slave about the road over Cub Creek Dam near Redoubt Fourteen. Sumner detached Hancock from "Baldy" Smith's division and sent him with five infantry regiments and a battery to cross the dam. Smith authorized Hancock to advance as far as he thought advantageous, promising him reinforcements. The Fifth Wisconsin, Forty-Ninth Pennsylvania, Thirty-Third New York, and Sixth and Seventh Maine, along with a New York battery of six guns marched toward the York River and up to the dam within sight of the redoubt. Here they met General Keyes making his own reconnaissance of the area, and he promised to send Hancock some cavalry. Not certain that the earthworks were truly vacant, Hancock cautiously placed his battery on the crest of an overlooking hill, deployed skirmishers to

27 Ibid., 466, 433-436, 463, 492.
either side of the road, and sent the Fifth Wisconsin
and Sixth Maine regiments in column of assault over
the dam and into the redoubt. Lieutenant Custer,
instinctively searching for the most glory-soaked field,
was again the first to take possession of a deserted
enemy stronghold. 28

Leaving a few troops to protect his rear, Hancock
sent back for reinforcements and repeated the same
deployment pattern to take "quiet possession of the
next redoubt." This was Number Eleven, and from the
crest before it Hancock could plainly see a mile across
the open field to Fort Magruder and the redoubts in
between occupied by their rightful owners. He
immediately set up his artillery to either side and
threw out skirmishers and flankers to prepare for an
assault on the nearest Confederate redoubt as soon as
the promised reinforcements arrived. But instead of the
four regiments and one battery Smith had mentioned,
only four guns rumbled up, unlimbered in front of the
redoubt, and commenced firing on Fort Magruder. This
alerted Colonel Jenkins, still in command of the fort,
to the Union threat on his left. Colonel John Bratton
with the Sixth South Carolina regiment was immediately
ordered to join the companies already occupying redoubts
Nine and Ten, and the fort's guns were swung around to

28 Ibid., 512, 535-536.
support him. The short engagement that followed decided nothing, Hancock hesitating to press without reinforcements and Bratton losing his artillery support as it was diverted back to the main battle. Thus the opposing commanders sent out skirmishers to the surrounding woods and settled down to a glaring contest while sharpshooters practiced their trade and Hancock's artillery continued to throw an occasional shell into Fort Magruder. The Fifth Wisconsin formed to the right of the battery partially screened by some farm buildings, and the Sixth Maine and Forty-Ninth Pennsylvania stood to the battery's left. The Seventh Maine was designated to protect Hancock's right flank in the woods between them and Williamsburg, while the Forty-Ninth Pennsylvania was also responsible for the less threatening woods on the redoubt's left. The bulk of the Thirty-Third New York remained in the redoubt. 29

By now it was two o'clock. Hancock again sent a staff officer back to headquarters urging "in stronger terms the importance of promptly reinforcing him." In reply, Sumner ordered him to withdraw to the relative safety of Redoubt Fourteen. Lieutenant Custer stood by watching the general grow increasingly more impatient and profane. He later wrote:

29 Ibid., 536, 583; John Bratton, "Battle of Williamsburg," SHSP, VII (1879), 299.
Those who have seen Hancock when affairs with which he was connected were not conducted in conformity with his views can imagine the manner in which he received the order to retire. Never at a loss for expletives, and with feelings wrought up by the attendant circumstances, Hancock was not at all loath to express his condemnation of the policy which from his standpoint was not only plainly unnecessary, but in the end must prove disastrous.

Rather than comply, Hancock decided to send back yet another messenger and to wait until four o'clock. "If no reply reaches me from headquarters," he confided to Custer, "I will then withdraw." But when four o'clock arrived and still no reply to a fourth staff officer "despatched at a gallop," Hancock stalled another half hour, and then another. His entire staff was in the rear trying to explain the importance of the position and the need for immediate help. Well aware that disobedience of Sumner's order could ruin his military career, Hancock was confident that any minute the reinforcements would arrive. 30

It was a vain hope on Hancock's part, however. Each time one of his urgent dispatches came into headquarters at the Whittaker House, Smith would turn to Sumner for permission to send his Second Brigade under General Brooks. The first time, Sumner granted it but countermanded the order just before Brooks got

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underway on the grounds he wanted to hold him in reserve for Hooker. When Smith later renewed the petition, Sumner flatly refused, having already decided to order Hancock to retire. Smith told one of Hancock's messengers that "I have wanted and have tried to re-enforce him, but that General Sumner has positively forbidden to allow any re-enforcements to be sent to him until more troops come up from the rear." Finally Sumner changed his mind and ordered Smith to Hancock's aid, but he again revoked the order after Brooks had marched halfway to the redoubts.31

Though Smith as a subordinate officer had no choice but to accept Sumner's judgment, others more loosely connected with the army were at liberty to express their opinions. One such observer was a Frenchman serving on Hooker's staff, the Prince de Joinville, who early in the day rode to Yorktown where he reportedly told McClellan, "General, you have three old women in the advance," presumably referring to Sumner, Heintzelman, and Keyes. "Little Mac" was busy supervising the transport of Franklin's division up the York River to West Point, Virginia, where he hoped to cut off the Confederate retreat before Richmond. He had no time to come to Williamsburg to take command until the arrival of William Sprague, the governor of Rhode Island who had attached

31 _O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 527-528, 548._
himself to the army to look after his state troops. All day he had watched in disgust as Sumner refused to support his generals, so he rode to Yorktown to impress upon McClellan that "things were not going on well in front." Persuaded at last, McClellan mounted his trusty warhorse Dan Webster, ordered two divisions of Sumner's corps to follow him, and took off at a gallop for Williamsburg. The slushy road often forced them into the woods and brush, but Dan Webster, earning his nickname "That Devil Dan," covered the twelve miles in an hour, and they arrived at the Whittaker House shortly before five o'clock. There McClellan "found everything in a state of chaos and depression. . . . The troops were weary and discouraged; but my presence at once restored their confidence." With the men's cheering still ringing in his ears, "Little Mac" called a conference of his generals and ordered Smith to support Hancock at last. Accordingly, Brooks set out once again.32

Accompanying Brooks was a brigade from Casey's division led by General Henry M. Naglee who had suffered throughout the day as much from the weather as from Sumner's vacillation. He was camped all morning on the Yorktown road a few miles below the Whittaker House.

32 Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, U.S. Congress, 1 (Washington, D.C., 1863), 565, 570, 577, 430; George B. McClellan, McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union (New York, 1887), 327.
In the early afternoon Naglee received a verbal order from Sumner to bring his brigade up to the house, but then he was instructed to support Hooker. In Naglee's words:

After a march of two hours, the artillery half of the time up to the axles in the mud, the cavalry horses plunging, and the men in mud to their ankles, we arrived immediately in the rear of General Hooker at 3:30 p.m., the very moment he was driven back by the enemy. We were preparing to support him, when another order came for all to countermarch and return in haste.

They arrived back at headquarters just as McClellan was reining in, and so off they marched again, "amidst the pelting rain, with the mud to their ankles, at a double-quick step" to support Hancock. 33

The Confederates meanwhile had become more aware of the threat on their left flank. As Harvey Hill waited in a wheat field to the left of Fort Magruder with the bulk of his division, he and Jubal Early heard the intermittent rumbling of Union artillery through a screen of woods in front of them. But having recently arrived on the field, neither Hill nor Early had any idea of the battery's exact position. Anxious to get into the fight, they made a quick reconnaissance of the woods' edge, and while Hill went off to ask Longstreet's permission to attack, Early formed his line in the field. His pet regiment, the Twenty-Fourth

33 O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 558-560.
Virginia, he placed on the extreme left. To its right were two green regiments, the Thirty-Eighth Virginia and the Twenty-Third North Carolina, and the veteran Fifth North Carolina under Colonel D. K. McRae held the extreme right position. Rains formed his brigade and some artillery behind Early's to cover any possible retreat. With a vague gesture toward the woods, Early told his men they were to "assault and capture a battery 'over there'" and instructed them to load and fix bayonets. Longstreet hesitated to grant Hill permission for the assault since he believed it unnecessary so late in the battle and was afraid it might delay their movement toward Richmond. Apparently Longstreet was as ignorant of the exact location of the battery as Hill and Early. Nobody had thought to consult Colonel Bratton who had been keeping a close watch on the Union-held redoubt for the past two hours. Nevertheless, after conferring with Johnston who was then on the field, Longstreet ordered Hill to go ahead, but "to feel the enemy with caution."34

Returning to Early's brigade, Hill took his place on the right of the Fifth North Carolina while Early led his old regiment on the left. Hill gave the command to forward march, but Early could not hear it and so did

34 Ibid., 565-566, 603, 607; Richard L. Maury, The Battle of Williamsburg and the Charge of the Twenty-Fourth Virginia of Early's Brigade (Richmond, Va., 1880), 10.
not get the Virginia regiments started until after the North Carolinians were in motion. After crossing the wheat field they penetrated the woods where "miry ground, the dense and tangled undergrowth, dripping with wet, and the large fallen timber, somewhat impaired the line." But they pressed on a full half mile through the pine forest, down a hill, across a country road, and up another slope of woods. By that time the formation had become hopelessly broken and all communication between regiments lost. Each regiment was on its own. 35

Shortly after five o'clock Hancock had still received no reinforcements or further word from Sumner or "Baldy" Smith. The action on the right of Fort Magruder had nearly ceased, so he finally decided to retire with the now-drenching rain providing him cover. No sooner had he sent the order to his outlying regiments to pull back to the crest of the redoubt than he heard skirmishing to his right, and in a moment gray uniforms began pouring out of the woods. At first Hancock thought it was Confederate cavalry, so unused were Union soldiers to seeing mounted officers leading. But the attackers were Early and the Twenty-Fourth Virginia who had reached the edge of the woods first. Before them lay an open plain with Colonel Bratton's redoubts

35 O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 603, 607; Maury, Battle of Williamsburg, 11.
on their far right and Fort Magruder beyond them. To their left was Hancock's redoubt and to their immediate front stood a cluster of farm houses and the Union battery. With scarcely a pause the Twenty-Fourth charged out of the woods, over a fence, and into the field toward the battery and the Fifth Wisconsin which instantly opened fire. General Early was hit in the shoulder, forcing him to retire on his wounded horse. In the face of this determined onslaught, Hancock immediately ordered the guns and all supporting regiments to withdraw to the crest of the redoubt. The Sixth Maine, closest to the battery on its left, stopped halfway to cover the Forty-Ninth Pennsylvania, which coolly marched back to the crest at parade step, faced front, and dressed its line. The artillery limbered up and fell back as quickly as the thick mud would allow. The Fifth Wisconsin, which "had formed square to repel an assault," now slowly retreated in line of battle, turning and firing at each step (see Map I).36

Another wave of gray suddenly rose in the distance as the Fifth North Carolina debouched from the woods. Hill had halted it at a stream in the woods to reform the line, but before he could find the regiments to his left, he "heard shouting and firing immediately in our front, and a voice, which I took to be General Early's,  

36 O.R. XI, Pt. 1, 538-539, 607-608; Maury, Battle of Williamsburg, 12.
above all the uproar, crying, 'Follow me.'" He sent Colonel McRae with the Fifth North Carolina forward into the field, where instead of a Union battery they found Colonel Bratton's redoubts filled with perplexed South Carolinians. Because the Union position was out of sight behind a spur of woods, some confused companies charged into these works, much to Bratton's consternation. McRae marched his men forward until they could see the battery, when suddenly they realized they were alone. The Twenty-Third North Carolina and Thirty-Eighth Virginia, which should have been filling the field to their left between them and the Twenty-Fourth Virginia, were nowhere to be seen. McRae began to doubt he was in the right place, so he dispatched an aide to Hill asking which battery he was supposed to attack. Hill sent back word "to charge the battery which opened on us, and to do it quickly." Immediately McRae obliqued his regiment to the left and marched it several hundred yards through a soft and lumpy open field under constant artillery fire. Three color bearers fell before a fourth had the flagstaff "shivered to pieces in his hands." One of Early's aides frantically waved on the Fifth North Carolina as it struggled through the mud and withering fire, for the Twenty-Fourth Virginia was also suffering terribly, losing most of its officers and nearly a third of its men. By the time McRae reached the Virginians, he and a major of the
Twenty-Fourth were the only field officers still mounted.37

In the midst of this resolute charge, Hancock managed to gather most of his men in a second line. The guns unlimbered in the rear halfway to the dam, and as each company fought its way back to the redoubt, Hancock formed it along the rim and flank. The colonel of the Sixth Maine wrote:

The enemy were now close upon us. Seeing us fall back they fancied that we were in full retreat and their exaltation knew no bounds. They poured out from the cover of the woods and rushed on toward us, crying out, "Bull Run," "Ball's Bluff," &c. It was with difficulty that I restrained my men from facing about and taking vengeance for these taunts upon the spot. When we reached the fort my command was in perfect order, and as my men faced about I read in their faces the stern determination to suffer death in any form rather than give up an inch of ground.

All were assembled just as the Twenty-Fourth Virginia came up under the crest within thirty paces of the Union line, and the Fifth North Carolina had taken cover behind a fence to the Virginians' right within one hundred yards of the redoubt. At that moment Hill's orders to retire reached both Confederate regiments, and Hancock simultaneously ordered a charge down the slope. "A few of the leading spirits of the enemy were bayoneted," Hancock noted, and the rest of the Twenty-Fourth Virginia angled to its left and disappeared into

the nearby woods. The North Carolinians being too far from the woods were exposed to the deadly Union volleys as they retreated back across the field where they left their battleflag and nearly three-fourths of their men. Hancock, still reluctant to continue without reinforcements, halted the charge at the foot of the slope and observed that "the plunging fire from the redoubt, the direct fire from the right, and the oblique fire from the left were so destructive that after it had been ordered to cease and the smoke arose it seemed that no man had left the ground unhurt who had advanced within 500 yards of our line." The entire charge and countercharge had taken only about twenty-three minutes.  

Meanwhile, Hill had gone off through the woods in search of his lost regiments. The Thirty-Eighth Virginia he found "huddled up and in considerable confusion," and the Twenty-Third North Carolina was idly milling behind a fence. These he ordered to form to the left and sweep the woods for Yankees, some flankers of the Thirty-Third New York having penetrated the position, but they were poorly drilled and did not "execute this simple maneuver" efficiently enough to please Hill. Colonel Bratton, who had begged Early for a place in the charge, was having trouble forming his Sixth South Carolina, and Hill's best efforts could not

move it up in time to support the engaged regiments. Contrary to Hill's orders, the Thirty-Eighth Virginia emerged from the woods and joined the Sixth South Carolina on the slow march toward the battle front. The Twenty-Third North Carolina simply halted in the woods, further infuriating Hill. Both McRae and Early were certain that the assault would have been successful had they been reinforced by these regiments. Hancock, of course, had a similar complaint. No sooner had the last shot of the battle been fired than "Baldy" Smith arrived, followed by Brooks, Naglee, and two other regiments. Together they camped for the night around the saturated redoubts Eleven and Fourteen.

Nightfall also found the last of Kearny's division settling into camp before Williamsburg. Brigadier General Charles D. Jameson had arranged his brigade into line of battle behind Birney's shortly before the fighting ended. Weary from the long day's march, his men fell out for the night around the Hampton road, with the Eighty-Seventh New York followed by the Sixty-Third Pennsylvania stationed to the right of the road. On the left, the Fifty-Seventh and One Hundred-Fifth Pennsylvania regiments detailed scouts to keep an eye on the Rebel works. Berry's and Birney's brigades bivouacked on the ground they had recaptured that

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39 Ibid., 603-604, 541.
afternoon, while stretcher-bearers groped around the murky blackness picking up what wounded they could find. Unable to build warming fires in the dampness and left hungry by the delayed supply trains, the men spent what many agreed was "the most dreary and uncomfortable night I ever experienced."40

Sleep was difficult for men and officers alike, as Heintzelman, temporarily headquartered in the cavalry camp on the James River, spent an anxious night writing dispatches to McClellan. Convinced that the Rebels meant to stand and fight another day, he urgently requested a division of reinforcements and a road cut in front of the earthworks to expedite them. He also suggested a dawn attack on the Confederate left. McClellan, who had just written Washington that he was facing a "very strongly intrenched" superior force, replied to Heintzelman that he would send reinforcements but "not to renew the attack in the morning" because "he was going to make some other dispositions." Later he decided that Hancock's action had made the Confederate position untenable and the Rebels would probably withdraw that night. The two divisions of Sumner's corps that had been ordered up from Yorktown that afternoon were sent back as "Little Mac" felt "sure that

40Ibid., 496, 492; Fred C. Floyd, History of the Fortieth (Mozart) Regiment, New York Volunteers. . . . (Boston, 1909), 146.
the battle was won." This accomplished, he retired to
the Whittaker House, which was so crowded with general
officers and their staffs that "sleep or rest was
impossible."41

There was even less rest behind the Confederate
lines that stormy night. Soon after dark the weary
gray soldiers began quietly slipping out of their
redoubts, regiment by regiment, and resuming their
trek toward Richmond. Men were still separated from
supplies, making the long wet march particularly
trying. The people of Williamsburg threw open their
houses to the boys passing by, offering what food and
comfort they could—a fire to dry wet clothes and a
corner of the floor to rest upon. Harvey Hill was
again assigned the rear guard, so his division spent
an uncomfortable night near the battlefield, seeking
shelter from the storm in barns and outhouses.
Johnston, Longstreet, and their staffs found dry
quarters about eight miles west of town in a farmhouse
belonging to Lemuel Bowden's sister. While the detested
Union-sympathizer hid upstairs from the Confederate
generals, Johnston informed Bowden's son that "there
had been a pretty severe skirmish at Williamsburg,

41 O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 453-455, 448; Joint Committee,
349, 430; McClellan, Own Story, 332-333.
and he had lost probably 500 men."

About an hour and a half after midnight, Union scouts from Jameson's Fifty-Seventh Pennsylvania regiment spotted the Southerners abandoning their works, repeating their performance of two nights before. At dawn Jameson personally reconnoitered Fort Magruder, cautiously approaching with a dozen men from the One Hundred-Fifth Pennsylvania. Finding the works unoccupied, he took possession, but in the dim light he could see the rear of D. H. Hill's column moving toward Williamsburg. Jameson sent his entire brigade after it, but the Eighty-Seventh New York reached the east end of town just as the Confederate rear was leaving the west end. Yankee cavalry offered a halfhearted pursuit and gathered a few stragglers before abandoning the chase at a swamp six miles west of Williamsburg. The Confederate quarry had escaped once again.

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42 Means to _________, May 10, 1862; Coleman, "Peninsula Campaign," MS, 3; O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 605; Joint Committee, 583-584.

The Tuesday morning of May 6, 1862, broke clear and calm in Williamsburg as the storm departed to the east and the Confederate soldiers, some accompanied by wives and families, departed to the west. One woman left behind wrote in her diary, "not a soul is seen in the streets, all is quiet and still as though paralyzing had stricken the city." Yet inside the houses behind drawn shades "anxious hearts are beating in the bosoms of those who but a few hours before had been guarded from all evil by husband, brothers, lovers & sons and are now left to face an unknown foe with what resolution and tact they can command." They did not have long to wait. General Jameson immediately sent in his advanced guard, stationing at the front gate of each house a sentinel who silently heralded the entrance of the Army of the Potomac into Williamsburg. First in line came the artillery "with richly caparisoned horses," looking as fresh as though no battle had been fought the day before. They were followed by the infantry tramping up the Duke of Gloucester street "with bands of music playing Dixie, Yankee Doodle, Hail Columbia and John Brown's Body."
Soon the Market Square Green was filled with soldiers, army wagons, and horses, while the Palace Green was taken over by the Union cavalry. The town residents peeping from behind their curtains judged the army as "fairly organized and most splendidly equipped, the men robust and well uniformed, especially the officers." Yet the detestation with which they regarded "these vandals" could only be expressed by one lady as "a disgust which I would not feel for the vilest man on our Southern Soil."¹

Undaunted by this cool reception, the Yankees began to make themselves at home in their newly acquired Southern town. Jameson set up his headquarters in the college buildings, while on the other end of town McClellan took possession of the Vest House. To secure the area, a search of each building was ordered. Some houses got by with a "nominal" search by polite officers who merely glanced into each room. Others suffered the ignominy of muddy boots on their immaculate floors or oaths sworn at their genteel mistresses by profane officers who had been staunchly denied admission. Houses that had been abandoned were considered more or less

fair game to the hungry soldiers, who relieved pantries and winecellars of their contents and appropriated parlors and bedchambers as barracks. Churches that the day before had been converted into Confederate hospitals now filled to overflowing with wounded Federals, soon spilling over into the college buildings, courthouse, and magazine.²

As the day advanced, the ladies of Williamsburg, finding they were not being personally molested, began venturing out of their houses with baskets on their arms. Without so much as a nod to their uninvited guests on the greens, they headed straight for the church hospitals. There the sight that met them was for some their first encounter with the horrors of war. From narthex to chancel the dying and dead in both uniforms were crowded together awaiting attention from either the doctors or the burial parties. Those who had already been administered to by the surgeons lay without the arm or leg they had had only the morning before. Amputated limbs were piled up to the sills outside windows where the surgeons were working. One of these dedicated physicians, Dr. Milhaus, medical director to Heintzelman's corps, reportedly worked for three days and three nights without food or sleep. Dr. R. M. Garrett, one of fourteen Confederate surgeons

²Cary, Diary; Coleman, "Peninsula Campaign," MS, 6.
who stayed behind, was commended by both sides for his impartial treatment of all wounded. Before nightfall many of the less severe cases were moved into private homes to convalesce in more pleasant surroundings. Those who could tolerate the ambulance ride were taken to Queens Creek landing where they boarded hospital steamships to Fort Monroe. Most who were released from earthly pain were buried in a new cemetery on the south edge of town or were "carefully interred" in a common grave under the hospital windows, wrapped only in their coarse blankets, "on which a woman would sometime place a flower."³

The scene on the battlefield was no less ghastly than that in the hospitals. Several observers reported that "the dead were lying so thickly on the ground that, in some places, it was necessary either to pick your way or step on the body of some dead or wounded soldier half-buried in the mud." Due to lack of time and ambulances, the Confederates were forced to leave many of their dead unburied and their wounded to the mercy of the Federals, for which they were sharply criticized by the North. Eighty-two Confederate wounded were found lying on cornhusks in a tobacco barn near Hancock's position. The Union stretcher-bearers scurrying around

³Coleman, "Peninsula Campaign," MS, 5-6, 11; Coleman, Account; New-York Daily Tribune, May 10 and 13, 1862; Cronin, "Vest Mansion," MS, 14, Col. Wmsburg Research Dept.; Burns, Battle of Williamsburgh.
the field sorting the wounded from the dead found many of the latter in grotesque, almost lifelike, positions. Attesting to the occasional fierce hand-to-hand combat, "a friend and foe were found, each tightly clutching his rifle, each having the other's bayonet in his body, and both dead on the ground." Most who died in the fighting among the felled timbers were shot in the head or throat. One soldier found a kneeling comrade still aiming his rifle over the branch of a fallen tree, killed so suddenly by a bullet in the brain, "that his rigid hand grasped his musket, and he still preserved the attitude of watchfulness, literally occupying his post after death." The colonel of the Seventy-Third New York reported that "most of my men were shot while climbing over felled trees." Indeed, the majority of the Union's 2,283 casualties occurred among the fallen timbers. Every regiment of Hooker's New York and New Jersey brigades lost at least 100 men, with the Seventieth New York suffering the highest regimental loss of the battle--330 killed, wounded, and missing, including 22 of its 33 officers. The heaviest Confederate loss occurred during the climatic charge on the left, mainly while the Twenty-Fourth Virginia was advancing and the Fifth North Carolina was retreating across the muddy field under Hancock's fire. Over one third of the 1,560 total Confederate casualties fell during those few deadly minutes. On the right, after
fighting the entire day, A. P. Hill's brigade counted 326 gone from its ranks.\(^4\)

What was gained in exchange for this terrible loss of killed, wounded, and missing men? At the close of battle both armies occupied approximately the same ground they had at the opening, though the subsequent Confederate evacuation allowed a Federal advance. As the blueclad soldiers marched into Williamsburg the morning of May 6, McClellan telegraphed Washington that "the victory is complete." The Confederates, however, declared that the victory was theirs, reasoning that Richmond was the prize of this fight, not Williamsburg or the earthworks. They were doing their best to reach Richmond before the Federals, and if the Yankee cavalry had not forced them to turn and fight on Sunday afternoon, McClellan could have had Williamsburg that evening without firing a shot. Even McClellan recognized that, as he later wrote that "the battle of Williamsburg was an accident, brought about by the rapid pursuit of our troops." Though much was made in the Northern press about Magruder's alleged insistence that his beloved earthworks at Williamsburg

\(^4\)Burns, Battle of Williamsburgh, 51, 54; Daily Trib., May 10, 1862; Goss, "Recollections," Battles and Leaders, II, 199; Dutcher, "Williamsburg," SHSP, XVII (1889), 416; Q.R., XI, Pt. 1, 485, 450, 569. Of the Union loss, 468 were killed, 1,442 wounded, and 373 captured or missing; Confederates had 288 killed, 975 wounded, and 297 captured or missing (Battles and Leaders, II, 200-201). Boatner, Dictionary, 929, lists 40,765 Federals engaged with 2,239 casualties, and 31,823 Confederates with 1,603 casualties.
be defended, common sense points to the contrary. Once the York and James rivers were open to Union gunboats, the redoubts had no more strategic value to the Confederates than did the town, merely providing a convenient line from which to defend the army's rear. The Northern press also spread the rumor that the Rebels after the battle were an utterly "demoralized army in full flight from imaginary as well as real terrors," when actually the Confederate retreat was as orderly as the roads would allow. "Had the enemy beaten us on the 5th, as he claims to have done," Johnston contended, "the army would have lost most of its baggage and artillery. We should have been pursued from Williamsburg and intercepted from West Point." As it happened, Franklin's division, lacking reinforcements that had been diverted to Williamsburg, was met not far from West Point on May 7 by the head of G. W. Smith's division and was repulsed. This failure either to destroy Johnston's army or to cut it off before Richmond allowed the Confederate column to concentrate for the capital's defense. The Battle of Williamsburg, if not an outright Confederate victory, was certainly a successful rear guard action.  

When victory or defeat at Williamsburg was being

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5 O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 449, 276; McClellan, Own Story, 324; Tucker, Hancock, 79; Daily Trib., May 10, 1862; Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, I, 193-194.
discussed, however, usually battlefield honor rather than strategic significance was under consideration. Here the opinions ranged widely even within each army. Judgment was often based upon number of enemy banners and guns captured or number of the foe believed killed and captured as compared to ones own loss, and it usually varied according to the individual's personality and particular view of the battlefield. J.E.B. Stuart with his characteristic enthusiasm bubbled in his report about the battle "which terminated so gloriously to our arms." Pickett and Colonel Jenkins also saw it as a Confederate victory that encouraged the troops and redoubled "their confidence in their own ability and cause." Anderson, on the other hand, was not so sanguine, writing that "victory seemed almost within our grasp, when night came on and put an end to the conflict." Harvey Hill was typically highly critical in his report, blaming the dismal failure of Early's assault on the inadequately trained support troops. He did believe that the Confederate right deserved credit for victory, however, and admitted the mismanaged charge had some value in retarding McClellan's advance. Longstreet described the battle in his official report as "a very handsome affair" and upon reflection stated in his memoirs that "the trophies of the battle were with the Confederates, and they claim the honor to inscribe
Williamsburg upon their battle-flags."

Many on the Union side of the lines disagreed with Longstreet's conclusion, including the Thirty-Eighth and Fortieth New York regiments who petitioned Congress for permission to inscribe "Williamsburg" on their regimental flags. Kearny jubilantly announced at the end of the day's fighting that "the victory was ours," yet most of the Northern public's attention was drawn to the action on the right of the Union line. Soon after McClellan reached the Whittaker House the evening after the battle, word arrived of Hancock's so-called bayonet charge. The news so impressed Little Mac that he telegraphed Washington that Hancock's "conduct was brilliant in the extreme." Writing to his wife he called Hancock "superb." Hancock in a twenty-three minute engagement was all but given credit for the Union "victory," while poor Hooker who had fought steadily for over seven hours was practically ignored. McClellan simply stated in his preliminary report that the Union left had "lost considerably," and later he remarked that Hooker seemed "much depressed and thought he had accomplished nothing." Hooker in his report complained that without the aid of the thirty thousand men he believed to be within two miles of his division,

\[6\] O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 570, 586, 584, 581, 566; Longstreet, Memoirs, 78-79.
he had "failed to capture the rebel army on the plains of Williamsburg."\(^7\)

Hooker, of course, was not the only Union general who had been inadequately supported. Emory waited most of the afternoon on the left for reinforcements, while Hancock's unheeded pleadings on the right compelled him to take a serious risk in disobeying orders. Though he was fortunate enough to become the hero of the day, Hancock cautiously had each of his staff officers submit reports testifying to his diligence in requesting more men. Blame for withholding support immediately fell upon Sumner. Heintzelman in his official report accused the "Old Bull" of keeping three divisions idle while Hooker was barely holding his position, and Keyes wrote that if Hancock had been reinforced with fifteen hundred, "the victory would have been one of the most brilliant of the war." Sumner retorted that he had only one division, not three, in reserve, and that Keyes's report was "unworthy of notice." The Northern press also noted the ineffectiveness of the corps commanders as one correspondent wrote that throughout the day Sumner, Heintzelman, and Keyes "all seemed to have command, and some mistakes and unpleasant doings and sayings arose in consequence." Instead of ordering the division at

\(^7\)Daily Trib., May 13, 1862; O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 492, 448, 468; McClellan, Own Story, 325; Tucker, Hancock, 332, n. 46.
hand to either Hooker or Hancock, the indecisive Sumner sent Keyes out looking for bogged down regiments to urge them forward. Heintzelman had little to do on the left but gather band members to inspire his demoralized troops. The inactive division commanders Casey and Couch were also relatively useless—Casey spending the day hunting food for men who had been without sustenance for over twenty-four hours, and Couch in charge of arranging the troops for the night's bivouac. Williamsburg could not only be called a "battle fought without a plan," but on the Union side it was also a battle fought without a commander, and McClellan naturally attracted his share of criticism. An investigation conducted the following winter by the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War dwelt on his absence from the battlefield, a black mark on his already darkening record. 8

Criticism was not confined to the officers in blue, however, as the Southerners also indulged in a round of second-guessing after the battle. Again, little was said about the main action, but Early's charge on the left became the center of a lively postwar controversy among the participants. Major Richard L. Maury, one of the surviving officers of the Twenty-

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Fourth Virginia, argued that Confederate reconnaissance was poor and that after McLaws withdrew from the redoubts on Sunday night, Anderson's men should have reoccupied the far left as well as the center. Johnston and Longstreet, strangers to the area, were ignorant of the extent of the line, had neither asked for nor received information about it from Magruder, and apparently never sent out scouts to the flanks. If they had they would have known that only a handful of men and guns perched upon the high ground at Redoubt Number Fourteen overlooking Cub Creek Dam would have been sufficient to protect the vulnerable Confederate left flank. Their neglect, however, opened the door for Hancock's brigade, whose exact location seemed to be known only to Colonel Bratton and his small band of South Carolinians. "Nobody," according to Bratton's later account, "either officer or scout, had come to the front to reconnoitre, and they did not even know where the enemy were." Both Harvey Hill and Jubal Early were unfamiliar with the ground over which they proposed to blindly charge, but Longstreet, with the concurrence of Johnston, gave his consent to the fateful assault. Bratton concluded that the brigade's "splendid gallantry was thrown away and wasted by bad management, when it would have been entirely effective if properly directed." Colonel McRae of the Fifth North Carolina took Bratton's criticism personally, and in reply he bitterly implied
that Hill's order to retreat "was the signal for slaughter" which sacrificed the Fifth North Carolina to some unknown "military necessity." Hill renounced all responsibility for the charge's failure, adding "I cannot think of it, till this day, without horror." Even Longstreet and Johnston in their memoirs tried to pass the responsibility for authorizing the attack, and in the end the heaviest blame fell upon the shoulders of the "impetuous and enthusiastic" Jubal Early.9

Such mistakes could be expected among generals who were still learning their trade. In many ways the Battle of Williamsburg was a "practice battle," a proving ground for officers and men alike. It provided the first opportunity for Longstreet to demonstrate his capabilities as field commander, though as he modestly asserted, his job was "comparatively simple and easy, that of placing the troops in proper positions at proper times." Two major Confederate promotions were the direct result of conduct in the battle. On May 25, Lafayette McLaws, who on Sunday afternoon had impressed Johnston with his rapid response to the Federal cavalry before Fort Magruder, was assigned to command what had been Magruder's division. Powell Hill was also awarded the

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command of a division after his brigade drew high praise from Longstreet who reported "its organization was perfect throughout the battle, and it was marched off the field in as good order as it entered it." The Virginia aristocrat was raised to corps commander one year later and fought in every battle of the Army of Northern Virginia until his death at Petersburg the day before Richmond fell. Also lauded by Longstreet for using "his forces with great effect, ability, and his usual gallantry," George Pickett was to rise from Williamsburg to immortal fame for his charge at Gettysburg the following summer. The legendary career of the boy captain of artillery John Pelham was born at Williamsburg, only to perish heroically at Kelly's Ford in March 1863.  

Laurels earned at Williamsburg likewise catapulted to fame some of the Federal officers. Phil Kearny was hailed by the Northern press as the savior of Williamsburg for his timely arrival on the field; according to one correspondent, had he been delayed another ten minutes, the battle would have been lost, the Confederacy recognized, and the Union ruined. But his promising career ended prematurely at Chantilly less than four

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months later. Hooker was soon to acquire the sobriquet "Fighting Joe" when a careless typesetter dropped the hyphen between the adjective and name in a newspaper caption. Hooker disliked the nickname, but the reputation which began at Williamsburg carried him to commander of the Army of the Potomac within a year. This exalted rank lasted only through his failure to destroy Lee at Chancellorsville, after which he was transferred to the western theater. Winfield Hancock, forevermore "The Superb," continued as one of the outstanding Union officers throughout the war. He rose to division leader at Antietam and corps commander at Gettysburg, where he was wounded and highly acclaimed. After the war he remained in the army, serving on the plains and as governor of the Fifth Military District in New Orleans during Reconstruction, and he was the unsuccessful Democratic candidate for president in 1880. At Hancock's side during the Williamsburg charge that launched his popularity was George A. Custer, who was to make his own distinctive mark on American history at Little Big Horn fourteen years later. Found then among Custer's personal papers was an unfinished chapter of his war memoirs, interrupted in the middle of his detailed account of the Battle of Williamsburg.  

11 Catton, Mr. Lincoln's Army, 47; Daily Trib., May 10, 1862; Boatner, Dictionary, 409; Tucker, Hancock, 116-117, 92, 124, 300; Custer, Memoirs, 68.
War memoirs written by the enlisted men reveal the special significance Williamsburg had for many of them also. For a corporal in the Seventy-Fourth New York, it was his first battle, and due to a wound in his left leg and the loss of his right arm, it was also his last. He wrote of the tremendous din and confusion, but his most memorable impressions centered on the enemy himself. As he lay wounded on the field behind Confederate lines, the Yankee corporal was ministered to by three soldiers in gray. The first one gave him water; the second shared some molasses with him; and the third stole his watch. The battle provided many in both gray and blue their first opportunity to size each other up. Some of the Union soldiers seemed surprised to discover that their adversaries possessed human qualities. They watched with curiosity as Rebel prisoners were paraded in, and they commented that their "uniforms were of varying colors, and there seemed a great diversity in size, intelligence and personal appearance." The Southerners' strange accents and use of "you uns" and "we uns" were interpreted as ignorance by the Yankees, and their "reckless, defiant attitude" irritated their captors. Fingering a South Carolinian's uniform button which had a palmetto tree on the face and the motto "Animus opibusque parati," one Yank asked the prisoner what it meant. "Give the d—n Yankees fits" was the Reb's loose
translation of "Prepared in mind and resources." On the battlefield, however, the two opposing armies found more admirable traits in their foes. The heroic charge of Early's brigade made a lasting impression on Hancock's men who watched in awe as the Confederates advanced into their withering fire "with courage which has never been surpassed by the troops upon either side, . . . delivering their fire as rapidly as possible, and never ceasing to utter their inspiring battle cry." Hancock reportedly said that the Twenty-Fourth Virginia should "bear the word 'immortal' upon its banner forever." The Confederates were no less impressed by the conduct of the Union soldiers tenaciously holding onto their foothold in the felled timber where a Yankee battleflag inscribed "To hell or Richmond" was captured. An equally fierce determination was expressed by the elaborately decorated blue silk South Carolina banner found in a deserted Fort Magruder. It read:

Pickens Sentinels.

Preserve

Southern Institutions,

or

Perish with them.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{12}\)Burns, Battle of Williamsburgh; Floyd, Fortieth Regiment, 147.

\(^{13}\)Custer, Memoirs, 157; Maury, Battle of Williamsburg, 1; O.R., XI, Pt. 1, 604, 577, 500.
This uncompromising attitude of the troops was also noted by the officers, many observing their subordinates and men for the first time in battle. Most were generous with their commendations, filling their reports with the names of the brave, the gallant, and the energetic, often adding short eulogies for the heroic dead. Promising subordinate officers were frequently singled out, while General Peck diplomatically praised each of his superior officers. Some were more critical, such as General Keyes who mentioned the shame of the Fifty-Fifth New York and the Ninety-Eighth Pennsylvania regiments for betraying "a temporary unsteadiness," and of course Harvey Hill who deplored the "enormous" straggling in the retreating Confederate army. Yet these two generals were the most enthusiastic in expressing their admiration for the men who endured discomfort similar to Valley Forge (according to Hill), commending the "good temper and fortitude with which they have borne hardships—exposure to mud, rain, and hunger--during the battle, before and after it." These qualities, in Keyes's opinion, were "more essential to the character of a soldier than courage itself."\(^{14}\)

The men of both armies would have plenty of opportunity to display this determination, good temper, and fortitude throughout the coming months. On the

morning of May 6, 1862, McClellan wrote "we have other battles to fight before reaching Richmond." Little did he suspect that a string of far bloodier battles covering nearly three years stood between Williamsburg and the Confederate capital. Yet the Northern newspapers at the time saw the fall of Williamsburg as an important step toward reaching that goal, generously giving the event top headlines and half page battlefield diagrams. Southern papers were more cautious about judging Williamsburg's importance, but expressed hope that the victory "may well give us courage and confidence" and would be "the harbinger of many to come." Thus, the Battle of Williamsburg seemed to be a mutually satisfying engagement, giving both the North and South faith that their respective armies would triumph in the glorious conflict.15

The war, however, could not be won at Williamsburg, and so on May 9 the Army of the Potomac moved on toward Richmond leaving behind a single cavalry regiment, the Fifth Pennsylvania, to garrison the town. Cut off now from the outside world, the people of Williamsburg only heard rumors at the end of the month that the Yankees were repulsed at Seven Pines on the outskirts of Richmond and that Johnston was wounded in the battle. On July 1

15Ibid., 449; Daily Trib., May 8 and 13, 1862; Daily Richmond Examiner, May 8, 1862; Richmond Enquirer, May 10, 1862.
they heard the deep rumble of distant cannon as what was now Robert E. Lee's army engaged McClellan's at Malvern Hill. That battle was the climax of seven days of fighting which reduced the affair at Williamsburg to a second rate battle in comparison. The final result was McClellan's retreat to the James River and the eventual abandonment of his Peninsular Campaign. In August 1862 the Union army steamed its way down the James and back up the Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River from which it came five months before.16

Never again would Williamsburg host two such grand armies. Yet until the spring of 1864 when General Butler occupied Bermuda Hundred east of Richmond, the old colonial capital was the closest Union outpost to the Confederate capital, and Williamsburg residents had to make the best of this bad situation. They watched one provost marshal after another occupy the Vest House, each with his arbitrarily strict or benign rule. They stood by helplessly as their homes were looted of every valuable possession from libraries to pianos, and they mourned as Dr. Galt, barred from his beloved hospital, died within two weeks. They endured the backlash from raids led by their ex-governor, Henry A. Wise, who once kidnapped the provost marshal, causing the Wren Building

16 Coleman, Account; Cronin, "Vest Mansion," MS, 18; Coleman, "Peninsula Campaign," MS, 11.
to be burned in retaliation. They protested when the Yankees tried to instate the hated Lem Bowden as mayor, but they grew fond of some of the young officers, including one who eloped with a local maiden to Richmond where he exchanged his blue uniform for gray. The North used Williamsburg as a jumping-off point for spies gathering intelligence in Richmond, while the South used the town as a mail-drop for smuggling letters to the outside world. And when at last the war ended and Williamsburg resumed its quiet existence, thick forest reclaimed the battlefield, so that it, like the battle fought upon it, would be forgotten with the passing of the Civil War generation.¹⁷

¹⁷Cronin, "Vest Mansion," MS, 19-20; Coleman, "Peninsula Campaign," MS, 9; Dain, Disordered Minds, 168; Cary, Diary; Rouse, Cows on Campus, 60.
APPENDIX A

CONFEDERATE TROOPS INVOLVED AT WILLIAMSBURG

Commander: Joseph Eggleston Johnston
Field commander: James Longstreet

First Division: John Bankhead Magruder
Brigades: Lafayette McLaws
Paul J. Semmes
J. B. Kershaw

Second Division: James Longstreet
Brigades: First: Ambrose Powell Hill
First Virginia
Seventh Virginia
Eleventh Virginia
Seventeenth Virginia
Second: Richard H. Anderson
Fourth South Carolina
Fifth South Carolina
Sixth South Carolina
Palmetto Sharpshooters
Louisiana Foot Rifles
Third: George Edward Pickett
Eighth Virginia
Eighteenth Virginia
Nineteenth Virginia
Twenty-Eighth Virginia
Fourth: Cadmus Marcellus Wilcox
Ninth Alabama
Tenth Alabama
Nineteenth Mississippi
Fifth: Roger Atkinson Pryor
Eighth Alabama
Fourteenth Alabama
Fourteenth Louisiana
Raleigh Edward Colston
Third Virginia
Thirteenth North Carolina
Fourteenth North Carolina

1 Battles and Leaders, II, 200-201; O.R., XI, Pt. 3, 479-484.
Fourth Division: Daniel Harvey Hill
Brigades: Jubal Anderson Early
Twenty-Fourth Virginia
Thirty-Eighth Virginia
Fifth North Carolina
Twenty-Third North Carolina
Robert Rodes*
Gabriel J. Rains*
W. S. Featherston*
Detached regiments:
Second Florida
Second Mississippi
Cavalry Division: James Ewell Brown Stuart
First Virginia Cavalry
Third Virginia Cavalry
Fourth Virginia Cavalry
Wise Legion
Jeff Davis Legion
Stuart Horse Artillery

*Not engaged
APPENDIX B

UNION TROOPS INVOLVED AT WILLIAMSBURG

Commander: George Brinton McClellan
Second in command: Edwin Vose Sumner

III Corps: Samuel Peter Heintzelman
Second Division: Joseph Hooker
Brigades: First: Cuvier Grover
First Massachusetts
Eleventh Massachusetts
Second New Hampshire
Twenty-Sixth Pennsylvania
Second: Nelson Taylor
Seventieth New York
Seventy-Second New York
Seventy-Third New York
Seventy-Fourth New York
Third: Francis E. Patterson
Fifth New Jersey
Sixth New Jersey
Seventh New Jersey
Eighth New Jersey

Third Division: Philip Kearny
Brigades: First: Charles D. Jameson
Fifty-Seventh Pennsylvania
Sixty-Third Pennsylvania
One Hundred-Fifth Pennsylvania
Eighty-Seventh New York
Second: David B. Birney
Thirty-Eighth New York
Fortieth New York
Third Maine
Fourth Maine
Third: Hiram G. Berry
Second Michigan
Third Michigan
Fifth Michigan
Thirty-Seventh New York

*Not engaged

Battles and Leaders, II, 200-201.
IV Corps: Erasmus Darwin Keyes  
First Division: Darius Nash Couch  
   Brigades: First: Julius W. Adams*  
      Second: John J. Peck  
         Ninety-Third Pennsylvania  
         Ninety-Eighth Pennsylvania  
         One Hundred-Second Pennsylvania  
         Fifty-Fifth New York  
         Sixty-Second New York  
      Third: Charles Devens, Jr.*  

Second Division: William Farrar Smith  
   Brigades: First and Third: Winfield Scott Hancock  
      Fifth Wisconsin  
      Forty-Ninth Pennsylvania  
      Sixth Maine  
      Seventh Maine  
      Thirty-Third New York  
      Forty-Third New York*  
      Seventy-Sixth New York*  
      Second: William Thomas Harbaugh Brooks*  

Third Division: Silas Casey*  
   Brigades: First: Henry M. Naglee  
      Second: William H. Keim  
      Third: Innis N. Palmer  

Cavalry Division: George Stoneman  
   Brigades: Philip St. George Cooke  
      William H. Emory  

*Not engaged
APPENDIX C

KEY TO MAPS

Confederate troops

Union troops

Artillery

Redoubt

Fort Magruder

Structure (house or building)

Mill pond and dam

Ravine or swamp

Wooded area

Felled timber

Rifle pits
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