

Gettysburg: Day Three

As dawn broke on July 3, Union guns on the Baltimore Pike opened with a heavy cannonade on Johnson's Confederates at Spangler's Spring. The heavily wooded area about the Confederate lines prevented them from bringing guns into position to return the fire. Union skirmishers began streaming across the field toward the Confederate entrenchments. The full force of Ruger's and Geary's divisions was soon committed. Throughout the forenoon the opposing lines exchanged extremely heavy fire.

It was about 10 o'clock that Ruger, believing that a flank attack might break the resistance of Johnson's men, ordered Col. Silas Colgrove to strike the Confederate left flank near the spring. The troops of the 2d Massachusetts and the 27th Indiana regiments started across the swale from the cover of the woods on the little hill south of the spring. A withering fire slowed their pace, but they charged on, only to have their ranks decimated by the Confederates in strong positions back of a stone wall. Colonel Mudge, inspiring leader of the Massachusetts regiment, fell mortally wounded. Forced to fall back, the men soon learned their efforts had not been in vain. On Ruger's and Geary's front the Confederates were now giving way and soon had retired across Rock Creek, out of striking range. By 11 o'clock, the Union troops were again in possession of their earthworks; again they could quench their thirst in the cooling waters of the spring.



LEE PLANS A FINAL THRUST. General Lee must have learned by mid-forenoon, after the long hours of struggle at Culp's Hill and Spangler's Spring, that his troops could not hold the Union works which they had occupied with so little effort the previous evening. He had seen, also, that in the tremendous battling during the preceding afternoon no important gains had been made at Little Round Top and its vicinity. Longstreet had gained the advantageous ridge at the Peach Orchard and had brought his batteries forward from Pitzer's Woods to this high ground in preparation for a follow-up attack. Wright's brigade, the last Law, had charged across the open fields at dusk and pierced the Union center just south of the copse of trees on Cemetery Ridge. Wright's success could not be pressed to decisive advantage as the brigades on his left had not moved forward to his support, and he was forced to retire. Again, lack of coordination in attack was to count heavily against the Confederates.

The failure to make any pronounced headway on July 2 at Culp's Hill and Little Round Top, and the momentary success of Wright on Cemetery Ridge, doubtless led Lee to believe that Meade's flanks were strong and his center weak. A powerful drive at the center might pierce the enemy's lines and fold them back. The shattered units might then be destroyed or captured at will. Such a charge across open fields and in the face of frontal and flank fire would, Lee well understood, be a gamble

Time now was the important element. Whatever could be done must be done quickly. Hood's and McLaws' divisions, who had fought bravely

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once marched for Gettysburg, arriving north of the town the next day. Early on July 3 he was ordered to take position on the Confederate left. This movement usually has been interpreted as an integral part of Lee's assault plan. But battle reports leave Stuart's role vague, except for covering the Confederate left. Doubtless he would have exploited any significant success achieved by the infantry assault.

Except for the intermittent sniping of sharpshooters, an ominous silence prevailed over the fields. The orders had now been given; the objective had been pointed out. Men talked of casual things. Some munched on hard bread, others looked fearfully to the eastward, where, with the same mixed feelings, lay their adversary.

Far to the south, on another crucial front, General Pemberton was penning a letter to General Grant asking terms for the surrender of Vicksburg. In Richmond, the sick and anxious Jefferson Davis looked hopefully for heartening word from his great field commander at Gettysburg. The outcome of this bold venture would count heavily in the balance for the cause of the Confederacy.



ARTILLERY DUEL AT ONE O'CLOCK. At 1 p.m. two guns of Miller's Battery, posted near the Peach Orchard, opened fire in rapid succession. It was the signal for the entire line to let loose their terrific blast. Gunners rushed to their cannon, and in a few moments the massed batteries shook the countryside. Firing in volleys and in succession, the air was soon filled with smoke and heavy dust, which darkened the sky. Union gunners on Cemetery Ridge waited a few minutes until the positions of the Confederate batteries were located; then 80 guns, placed in close order, opened fire. For nearly 2 hours the duel continued, then the Union fire slackened. Hunt had ordered a partial cessation in order to cool the guns and conserve ammunition.

Colonel Alexander, in position on the Emmitsburg Road near the Peach Orchard, could observe the effectiveness of his fire on the Union lines and also keep the Confederate troops in view. To him, it appeared that Union artillery fire was weakening. His own supply of ammunition was running low. Believing this was the time to attack, Alexander sent a message to Pickett who in turn rode over to Longstreet. General Longstreet, who had persistently opposed Lee's plan of sending 15,000 men across the open ground, was now faced with a final decision. Longstreet merely nodded approval and Pickett saluted, saying, "I am going to move forward, sir." He rode back to his men and ordered the advance. With Kemper on the right, Garnett on the left, and Armistead a few yards to the rear, the division marched out in brigade front, first north-eastward into the open fields, then eastward toward the Union lines. As Pickett's men came into view near the woods, Pettigrew and Trimble gave the order to advance. Sons of Virginia, Alabama, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Mississippi, comprising the brigades of Mayo, Davis, Marshall, and Fry in front, followed closely by Lane and Lowrance, now moved out to attack. A gap between Pickett's left and Pettigrew's right would be closed as the advance progressed. The units were to converge as they approached the Union lines so that the final stage of the charge would present a solid front.



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CLIMAX AT GETTYSBURG. Billows of smoke lay ahead of the Union men at the stone wall, momentarily obscuring the enemy. But trained observers on Little Round Top, far to the south, could see in the rear of this curtain of smoke the waves of Confederates starting forward. Pickett, finding his brigades drifting southeastward, ordered them to bear to the left, and the men turned toward the copse of trees. Kemper was now approaching on the south of the Codori buildings; Garnett and Armistead were on the north. Halted momentarily at the Emmitsburg Road to remove fence rails, Pickett's troops, with Pettigrew on the left, renewed the advance. Pickett had anticipated frontal fire of artillery and infantry from the strong Union positions at the stone walls on the ridge, but now an unforeseen attack developed. Union guns as far south as Little Round Top, along with batteries on Cemetery Hill, relieved from Confederate fire at the Seminary buildings, opened on the right and left flanks. As Pickett's men drove toward the Union works at The Angle, Stannard's Vermont troops, executing a right turn movement from their position south of the copse, fired into the flank of the charging Confederates. The advancing lines crumbled, re-formed, and again pressed ahead under terrific fire from the Union batteries.

But valor was not enough. As the attackers neared the stone wall they lost cohesion in the fury that engulfed them. All along the wall the Union infantry opened with volley after volley into the depleted ranks of Garnett and Fry. Armistead closed in, and with Lane and Lowrance joining him, made a last concerted drive. At this close range, double canister and concentrated infantry fire cut wide gaps in the attacking front. Garnett was mortally wounded; Kemper was down, his lines falling away on the right and left. Armistead reached the low stone fence. In a final surge, he crossed the wall with 150 men and, with his cap on his sword, shouted "Follow me!" At the peak of the charge, he fell mortally wounded. From the ridge, Union troops rushed forward and Hall's Michigan regiments let loose a blast of musketry. The gray column was surrounded. The tide of the Confederacy had "swept to its crest, paused, and receded."

Two of the divisions in the charge were reduced to mere fragments. In front of the Union line, 20 fallen battle flags lay in a space of 100 yards square. Singly and in little clumps, the remnants of the gray columns that had made the magnificent charge of a few minutes earlier now sullenly retreated across the fields toward the Confederate lines. Lee, who had watched anxiously from Spangler's Woods, now rode out to meet his men. "All this has been my fault," he said to General Wilcox who had brought off his command after heavy losses. "It is I that have lost this fight, and you must help me out of it in the best way you can." And again that night, in a moment of contemplation, he remarked to a comrade, "Too bad! too bad! Oh! too bad!"



CAVALRY ACTION. As the strength of Lee's mighty effort at The Angle was ebbing and the scattered remnants of the charge were seeking shelter, action of a different kind was taking place on another field not far distant. Early in the afternoon, Stuart's cavalry was making its way

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down the valley of Cress Run, 3 miles east of Gettysburg. The brigades of Hampton and Fitzhugh Lee, at the rear of the line of march, momentarily lost the trail and came out into open ground at the north end of Rummel's Woods. Stuart, soon learning of the mistake, attempted to bring them into line and to proceed southward. But at this point, Gen. D. M. Gregg's Union cavalry, in position along the Hanover Road a mile southeast, saw the Confederates. Gregg prepared at once to attack, and Stuart had no choice but to fight on this ground. As the two forces moved closer, dismounted men opened a brisk fire, supported by the accurate shelling of artillerists.

Then came the initial cavalry charge and countercharge. The Confederate Jenkins was forced to withdraw when his small supply of ammunition became exhausted. Hampton, Fitzhugh Lee, and Chambliss charged again and again, only to be met with the equally spirited counterattack of McIntosh. Custer's Michigan regiments assailed the front of the charging Confederate troopers, and Miller's squadron of the 3d Pennsylvania, disobeying orders to hold its position, struck opportunely on the Confederate left. The thrusts of the Union horsemen, so well coordinated, stopped the onslaught of Stuart's troopers. After 3 hours of turbulent action, the Confederates left the field and retired to the north of Gettysburg. The Union horsemen, holding their ground, had successfully cut off any prospect of Confederate cavalry aid in the rear of the Union lines on Cemetery Ridge.



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