★ THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS OF THE CIVIL WAR ★

THE CHANCELLORSVILLE CAMPAIGN

JANUARY – MAY 1863

Cover: *Detail from* Victorious Advance of Genl. Sykes (regulars) May 1st (Library of Congress)

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The Chancellorsville Campaign

January – May 1863

by
Bradford A. Wineman

Center of Military History
United States Army
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Introduction

Although over one hundred fifty years have passed since the start of the American Civil War, that titanic conflict continues to matter. The forces unleashed by that war were immensely destructive because of the significant issues involved: the existence of the Union, the end of slavery, and the very future of the nation. The war remains our most contentious, and our bloodiest, with over six hundred thousand killed in the course of the four-year struggle.

Most civil wars do not spring up overnight, and the American Civil War was no exception. The seeds of the conflict were sown in the earliest days of the republic's founding, primarily over the existence of slavery and the slave trade. Although no conflict can begin without the conscious decisions of those engaged in the debates at that moment, in the end, there was simply no way to paper over the division of the country into two camps: one that was dominated by slavery and the other that sought first to limit its spread and then to abolish it. Our nation was indeed "half slave and half free," and that could not stand.

Regardless of the factors tearing the nation asunder, the soldiers on each side of the struggle went to war for personal reasons: looking for adventure, being caught up in the passions and emotions of their peers, believing in the Union, favoring states' rights, or even justifying the simple schoolyard dynamic of being convinced that they were "worth" three of the soldiers on the other side. Nor can we overlook the factor that some went to war to prove their manhood. This has been, and continues to be, a key dynamic in understanding combat and the profession of arms. Soldiers join for many reasons but often stay in the fight because of their comrades and because they do not want to seem like cowards. Sometimes issues of national impact shrink to nothing in the intensely personal world of cannon shell and minié ball.

Whatever the reasons, the struggle was long and costly and only culminated with the conquest of the rebellious Confederacy,

the preservation of the Union, and the end of slavery. These campaign pamphlets on the American Civil War, prepared in commemoration of our national sacrifices, seek to remember that war and honor those in the United States Army who died to preserve the Union and free the slaves as well as to tell the story of those American soldiers who fought for the Confederacy despite the inherently flawed nature of their cause. The Civil War was our greatest struggle and continues to deserve our deep study and contemplation.

RICHARD W. STEWART
Chief Historian

The Chancellorsville Campaign
Janaury–May 1863

The battle of Chancellorsville, fought in the spring of 1863 in Virginia's Piedmont region, pitted a powerful Union Army under its newly appointed commander, Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker, against a significantly smaller but well-led Confederate force under General Robert E. Lee. Hooker had refit and reorganized his 130,000 men into a potent fighting force over the winter following the Union Army of the Potomac's bloody defeat at Fredericksburg, Virginia, in December 1862, under Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside. After Hooker had replaced Burnside, he developed a plan to hold Lee's 60,000 ill-supplied Confederates at Fredericksburg with a small part of the Army of the Potomac, and march most of his troops in a wide flanking maneuver to the west to attack Lee's flank and rear. Hooker hoped this daring move would either crush Lee's Army of Northern Virginia or force it to retreat toward Richmond, Virginia. Either way, he anticipated a glorious victory for his Federals over the fabled Confederate commander.

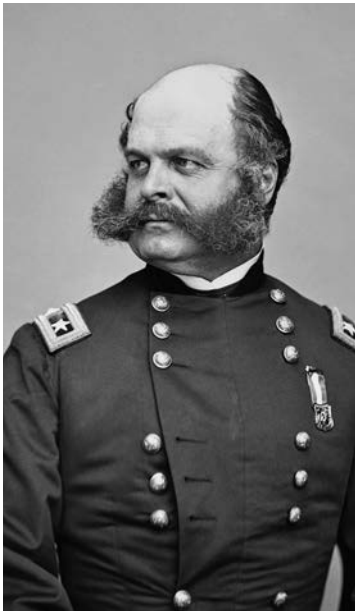
In the end, it was Lee and his chief subordinate, Maj. Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, who achieved what many historians have called the South's greatest victory during the American Civil War. Once Hooker got the bulk of his bluecoats over the river and in a position to move against Lee's lines at Fredericksburg, the Union commander hesitated, gathered his forces into a defensive position at Chancellorsville, and waited for Lee to attack. Lee

seized the initiative, made several risky tactical moves, and drove the Federals from the field after three days of intense fighting. The armies of Lee and Hooker suffered more than 30,000 casualties, including the "Mighty Stonewall," the loss of whom tarnished Lee's crowning victory.

Strategic Setting

The Union Army sat at Falmouth, Virginia, on the north bank of the Rappahannock River on 26 January 1863, forlorn and demoralized. In early December 1862, the army's commander, General Burnside, had marched the Army of the Potomac from its position outside of Warrenton, Virginia, southward to Fredericksburg to threaten the Confederate capital of Richmond. Upon reaching the river opposite the town, Burnside discovered that the pontoon boats he had expected to use to cross the Rappahannock had not yet arrived, forcing him to wait two precious weeks. During this delay, the Confederates fortified their side of the river and waited for the Federals to make their way across. Burnside had obliged them on 11–12 December, sending his forces over the Rappahannock on three pontoon bridges under heavy fire from Southern sharpshooters. The next day, he had nearly broken through Lt. Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's corps, but could not exploit the initial breakthroughs. Burnside had then ordered a series of large infantry assaults across an open plain west of Fredericksburg to take a position manned by Southern riflemen behind a chest-high stone wall on a ridge known as Marye's Heights. These unsuccessful frontal attacks had resulted in staggeringly high casualties among the blue-coated rank and file.

General Burnside
(Library of Congress)



Finally, a frustrated and embarrassed Burnside had withdrawn back across the Rappahannock on the night of 15 December, ending a disastrous campaign for the Army of the Potomac.

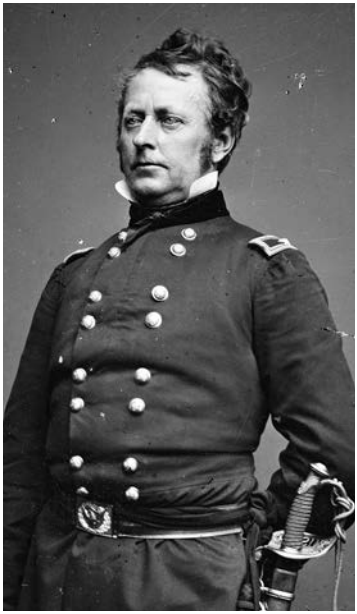
The debacle at Fredericksburg sent reverberations throughout the ranks of the Army of the Potomac and the Northern home front. Officers, politicians, and citizens alike lambasted Burnside. Eager to redeem his reputation, on 20 January 1863, Burnside initiated a new campaign against the Confederates to dislodge them from their positions around Fredericksburg. He attempted to move west along the north bank of the Rappahannock, cross the river, and get behind the Southerners. The operation met with adversity almost immediately. On the first night, a heavy winter rain poured down on the marching soldiers turning the roads into rivers of mud. The soggy conditions paralyzed the army as soldiers, horses, artillery pieces, and wagons became mired in the muck, all the while being taunted by amused Confederates observing the fiasco from the opposite side of the river. Burnside called off the operation and returned his frustrated brigades to their camps. The infamous "Mud March" lowered Federal morale even further, creating great discontent within the officer corps against its commander.

Infuriated by this operation's lack of success and the subsequent criticism of his leadership, Burnside drafted general orders condemning ten of his subordinate officers and calling for their dismissal from the army. The troubled general traveled to Washington and demanded that President Abraham Lincoln either approve the order or accept his resignation. To avoid a revolt among the officer corps, Lincoln removed Burnside from command and placed him in charge of the Department of the Ohio. He also reassigned two of the army's Grand Division commanders, sending Maj. Gens. William B. Franklin and Edwin V. Sumner to Louisiana and Missouri, respectively. On 26 January 1863, Lincoln designated the remaining Grand Division commander (and the chief target of Burnside's ire), Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker, as Burnside's replacement to lead the Army of the Potomac.

Hooker was a 49-year-old, hard-drinking soldier from Massachusetts. He had graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1836 in the middle of his class and had served with distinction in the Mexican War. In 1853 he had resigned his commission to make money in post-gold rush California.

From his days as a cadet, Hooker had earned a reputation as being irascible, obstinate, and egomaniacal. Having failed in his California ventures, he had found new prospects for advancement with the onset of the Civil War. After some initial difficulties securing a commission due to his prewar conflicts with the Army's commanding general, Winfield Scott, Hooker had eventually convinced Lincoln to appoint him a brigadier general of U.S. Volunteers in May 1861. He soon had earned a reputation as an aggressive combat leader, rising through the ranks to command one of the Army of the Potomac's Grand Divisions in 1862. It was at this last post during the battle of Fredericksburg that Hooker had run afoul of Burnside, openly condemning his commanding officer for his costly attacks against Lee's entrenchments. Hooker had not stopped there, criticizing all of the nation's senior military and civilian leadership and suggesting that the "Army and Government needed a dictator" to bring order and direction to the war effort. Although wary of this declaration, Lincoln nevertheless gave Hooker command of the Army of the Potomac. Lincoln remarked to Hooker that "only those generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship."

General Hooker
(Library of Congress)



Fortunately for both Lincoln and the Army of the Potomac, Hooker counterbalanced his already infamous reputation for self-serving bravado and stubbornness with empathy and pragmatism. After taking command he spent the remainder of the winter reinvigorating the Army of the Potomac. He immediately improved morale by addressing the poor living conditions in camp and by ensuring that the soldiers received several months of back pay. He instituted more rigorous sanitation measures,

improved the quality of food, and enforced these initiatives by regularly inspecting the camp himself.

As for the structure of the army, General Hooker dismantled Burnside's Grand Divisions and reconfigured the Army of the Potomac into seven infantry corps, each led by a major general: John F. Reynolds (I Corps), Darius N. Couch (II Corps), Daniel E. Sickles (III Corps), George G. Meade (V Corps), John Sedgwick (VI Corps), Oliver O. Howard (XI Corps), and Henry W. Slocum (XII Corps). Additionally, Hooker created a single cavalry corps under Brig. Gen. George Stoneman. The newly reformed corps, totaling just over 130,000 men, would also wear new corps badges, giving each corps its own symbol and each division its own color. The distinctive emblems helped instill a sense of unit pride and facilitated the identification of units on the battlefield and of stragglers and deserters in the rear. General Hooker also redistributed most of the artillery battalions among the subordinate units to give frontline commanders more control over the guns, of which he had over seventy batteries. Lastly, he enhanced his intelligence gathering capabilities by creating a Bureau of Military Information under his deputy provost marshal, Col. George H. Sharpe. Sharpe's mission was to discern the enemy's intentions through secret agents and the interrogation of prisoners. By spring, morale had improved markedly, with one corps commander noting that Hooker had "infused new life and discipline into the Army."

On 8 April the army put its new spirit on full display during a grand review for President Abraham Lincoln and his family near Falmouth. Lincoln always enjoyed parades and lauded the refreshed look of the army, but his primary purpose for visiting the cantonment was to urge General Hooker to begin a new offensive against the enemy. After the debacles of the past year, the president wanted an aggressive operation that would reinvigorate the nation's flagging political support for the war. He reinforced this point eleven days later when he returned to Falmouth in the company of the General in Chief of the U.S. Army, Henry W. Halleck. Halleck enjoined Hooker that the destruction of Lee's Confederate army, and not the capture of Richmond, should be the object of the upcoming campaign.

General Hooker needed no prompting, for he had already set matters in motion. On 13 April, just a few days after the president's first visit, he had dispatched Stoneman's cavalry corps on a circuitous march intended to bring it behind Lee's position. Hooker had

explained to Stoneman, "throw your command between him [Lee] and Richmond, and inflicting on him every possible injury which will tend to his discomfiture and defeat." Cutting Lee's supply line back to Richmond had to be done with speed and boldness, with Hooker telling his cavalry commander, "Let your watchword be fight, and let all your orders be fight, fight, fight."

Next, Hooker planned to have part of his army, I Corps under Reynolds and VI Corps under Sedgwick, cross the Rappahannock directly in front of Fredericksburg to fix the Confederates in place. With Lee cut off to his rear by Stoneman and distracted by the demonstration to his front, Hooker would personally lead the main body of his army on a long, westward flanking march. Once the main army was in position, he would hammer Lee's army against Sedgwick's anvil outside of Fredericksburg. Lee would be trapped, he explained, and "must either ingloriously fly, or come out from behind his defenses and give us battle on our own ground, where certain destruction awaits him." In either case, the Confederates would be defeated and forced to retreat southward toward Richmond where they would run into Stoneman's cavalry waiting to strike the final blow. In short, Hooker's plan was an improved version of the operation that Burnside had attempted during the Mud March in January. This time, however, the Union would prevail. Brimming with confidence, Hooker boasted, "My plans are perfect, and when I start to carry them out, may God have mercy on General Lee, for I will have none."

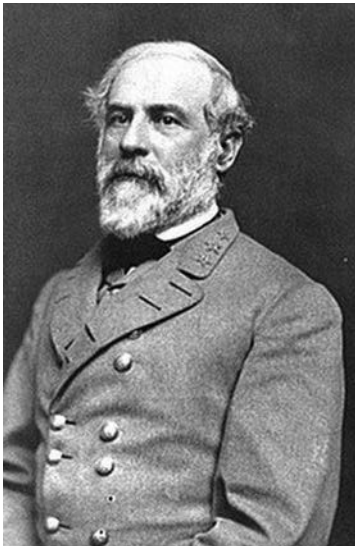
More than just strategy motivated the timing of Hooker's offensive. The enlistments of over 35,000 Union soldiers would expire in April, May, and June. Army officials expected some of these men to reenlist, but only after they had returned to their homes for several weeks and reaped the benefits of recruiting bonuses. The earlier the Army of the Potomac could take the field, the stronger it would be and the less internal disruption it would face.

Across the river from the Federal camp at Falmouth, General Lee had cause for concern. If the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia had performed brilliantly in 1862, the winter of 1862–1863 had not been kind. The army suffered from shortages of food, forage, firewood, and other vital supplies. By the spring, Lee faced a logistical crisis. The extended encampment in and around Fredericksburg had stripped the area of provisions, and his army could not sustain itself for much longer if it

remained in place. As conditions worsened, desertions had risen as well, particularly among the conscripts. To ease his burdens, Lee had dispatched one of his two corps commanders, Lt. Gen. James Longstreet, with two of his divisions to the southern part of Virginia to forage for supplies. This left him with just one infantry corps, that of General Jackson, as well as the two remaining divisions of Longstreet's corps—those of Maj. Gen. Lafayette McLaws and Maj. Gen. Richard H. Anderson—to man the fortifications at Fredericksburg. Maj. Gen. J. E. B. Stuart augmented Lee's infantry with two brigades of cavalry. At best, Lee could muster only about 60,000 troops at Fredericksburg to face Hooker's 130,000 men.

The Army of Northern Virginia had to move to obtain fresh supplies—but where? Ideally, Lee wanted to invade the North again, but he dared not initiate such a campaign with Longstreet and his two divisions away from the main army. He contemplated relocating to the Shenandoah Valley where he could re-provision his troops and hope that Hooker would give chase, but that would leave Richmond dangerously exposed. He could also pursue the more prudent course of action, given his vast numerical disadvantage, and fall back to a new line of defense closer to Richmond. This, however, would surrender the territorial and psychological advantages the Confederates had gained over the previous year. Lastly, he could maintain his solid defensive position at Fredericksburg and hope to lure the Yankee forces into attacking as they had in December. Supply problems notwithstanding, this plan would forfeit the initiative to the enemy, a concept that contradicted the essence of Lee's aggressive nature. But at the time, it seemed he had little choice than to wait and react to the Union Army's next move.

General Lee
(Library of Congress)



Fate did not treat the opening moves of the Union offensive kindly. No sooner had Stoneman reached Kelly's Ford on the Rappahannock River twenty miles upriver from Falmouth than a torrential rain flooded the river, forcing him to pull back about a dozen miles and wait for better weather. The storms continued for nearly two weeks and it was not until 28 April that the bedraggled Union cavalry could finally cross the Rappahannock. Hooker's intent to cut Lee's communications with Richmond prior to the start of the main offensive was now no longer possible. In fact, mired roads and sick horses so delayed General Stoneman on the rest of his journey that he would not strike his first blow against Lee's communications until the campaign was virtually over. The first element of Hooker's grand design would go for naught.

The weather likewise interfered with the rest of Hooker's plan. Not wanting to repeat the blunders of the Mud March, he postponed the flank march by the main body of the army until the skies had cleared and the roads had begun to dry. The army finally began to move on 27 April. The movement was a masterpiece of efficiency and deception. Hooker took great care to shroud the operation in secrecy, even keeping the details from his own corps commanders. Knowing that Confederate observers would be fixated on the forces directly across the Rappahannock River from Fredericksburg, he ordered the units farthest from the enemy's line of sight to move first, while those at Falmouth remained in place, thereby shielding the movement of the army from Confederate pickets opposite the river. The V, XI and XII Corps, encamped several miles northeast of Falmouth, moved first without detection. The troops departed camp in light marching order, traveling with minimal baggage and logistical train, so as to facilitate the advance. While on the march, they left guards at local houses to sequester the inhabitants to prevent them from warning the Confederates on the Union Army's movements.

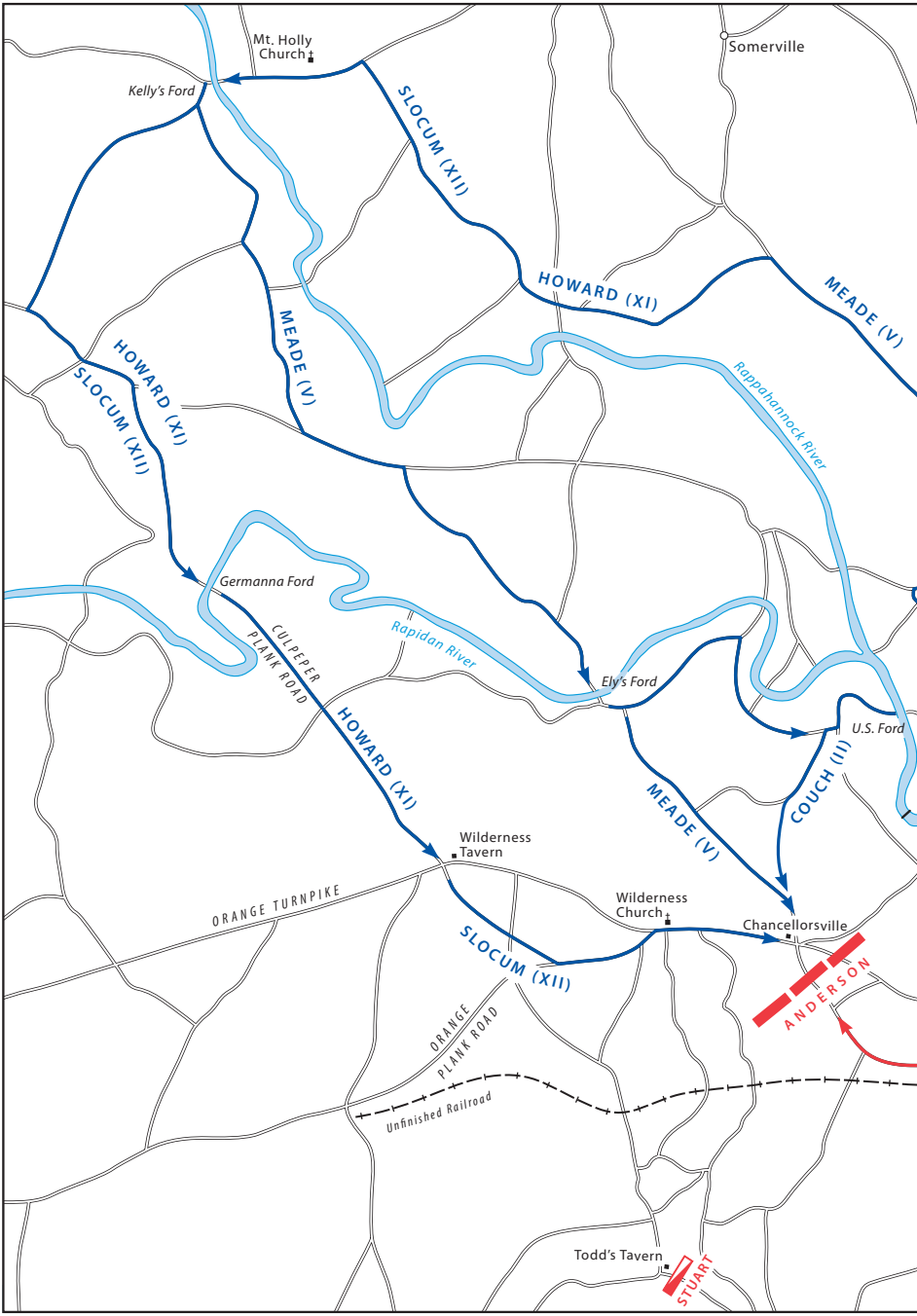
The secrecy seemed to have an effect. Lee was uncharacteristically confused and nervous about his enemy's actions. He knew the Union Army was stirring but had no indication of Hooker's intent. It took Lee nearly twenty-four hours to learn that the Federals were on the move, when he received reports from his cavalry commander, Stuart, of enemy activity several miles upstream from Falmouth. Even then, Lee had no idea of Hooker's

final destination. He received piecemeal reports of sizable Union forces crossing upstream, yet he also received word that the enemy was preparing to cross the Rappahannock River immediately to his front at Fredericksburg. Where would the main blow fall?

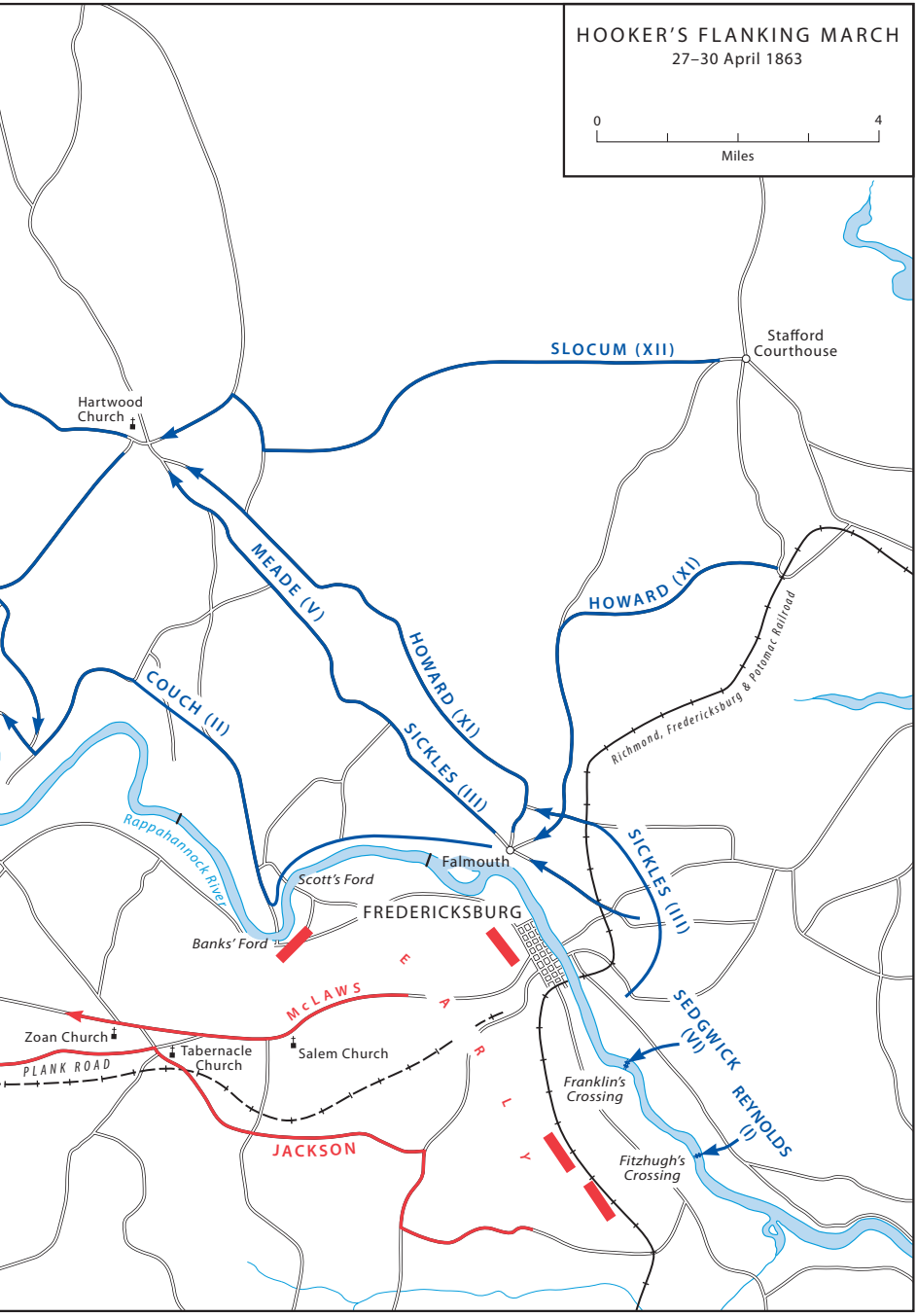
As Lee studied the situation, Hooker continued to execute his plan (*Map 1*). On the night of 28 April the three infantry corps that had been the first to march crossed over the Rappahannock River at Kelly's Ford using pontoon bridges prepared by the engineers. The next day, XI and XII Corps crossed the Rapidan River at Germanna Ford while V Corps made its crossing at Ely's Ford a few miles to the east, catching the handful of Rebel pickets at the crossings by surprise. Likewise, I Corps crossed the Rappahannock at Fitzhugh's Crossing and VI Corps crossed at Franklin's Crossing early on 29 April. Farther east, both Reynolds' and Sedgwick's corps, with III Corps under General Sickles on the north bank in support, gained a foothold on the Fredericksburg side of the river. The distraction of this crossing allowed II Corps to begin marching toward the United States Ford to join the other flanking corps.

By 29 April Lee had gathered enough information to inform Confederate President Jefferson Davis that the Federals' "intention, I presume, is to turn our left, and probably to get into our rear," and he asked Davis for reinforcements. In the meantime, he sent General Anderson's division to investigate reports that enemy troops were behind and to the west of his position on the Orange Turnpike, the primary route connecting Fredericksburg to Confederate supply depots at Culpeper, Virginia. Anderson responded by sending the infantry brigades of Brig. Gens. Carnot Posey, William Mahone, and Ambrose Ransom Wright to positions west of Chancellorsville to block the roads that led from

General Jackson
(Library of Congress)


Mt. Holly Church
Somerville
Kelly's Ford
SLOCUM (XII)
HOWARD (XI)
MEADE (V)
HOWARD (XI)
SLOCUM (XII)
MEADE (V)
Rappahannock River
Germanna Ford
CULPEPER PLANK ROAD
Rapidan River
Ely's Ford
U.S. Ford
HOWARD (XI)
MEADE (V)
COUCH (II)
Wilderness Tavern
ORANGE TURNPIKE
Wilderness Church
Chancellorsville
SLOCUM (XII)
ANDERSON
ORANGE PLANK ROAD
Unfinished Railroad
Todd's Tavern
STUART

Map 1


HOOKER'S FLANKING MARCH
27–30 April 1863
0
4
Miles
SLOCUM (XII)
Stafford Courthouse
Hartwood Church
MEADE (V)
HOWARD (XI)
HOWARD (XI)
COUCH (II)
SICKLES (III)
Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad
Rappahannock River
Falmouth
Scott's Ford
FREDERICKSBURG
SICKLES (III)
Banks' Ford
F A R L Y
McLAWS
SEDGWICK (VI)
Zoan Church
Tabernacle Church
Salem Church
PLANK ROAD
Franklin's Crossing
REYNOLDS (I)
JACKSON
Fitzhugh's Crossing

the river fords to the Orange Turnpike. On the morning of 30 April, Anderson reassessed the situation and decided that his dispositions were vulnerable, particularly in the dense thickets of the Wilderness where rebel artillery could provide only limited support to his infantry. He therefore pulled his troops back to open ground near the Zoan Church on the Orange Turnpike, three miles east of Chancellorsville, where his men dug in and waited for the Federal advance.

Lee also reassessed his position on the morning of 30 April. Seeing that the two Federal corps that had crossed the river below Fredericksburg were making no effort to move beyond their bridgehead, he decided that the real threat was to his west and conferred with his trusted subordinate, "Stonewall" Jackson, about their options. After their conference, Lee made the first of several audacious decisions that he would make during the campaign. He chose to leave only a small force of approximately 9,000 troops under Maj. Gen. Jubal A. Early to hold the defenses at Fredericksburg and ordered Jackson to march the remainder of his corps westward to reinforce Anderson. As he would throughout the campaign, Lee divided his force in the face of Hooker's superior numbers in order to seize the initiative.

General Slocum
(Library of Congress)

While Lee was making this fateful decision, Union troops were converging on Chancellorsville, a solitary manor house in a crossroads clearing along the Orange Turnpike that had served as an inn for travelers for decades. General Meade and his V Corps arrived at Chancellorsville in the late morning of 30 April and deployed east of the property. Howard's XI Corps arrived shortly after and spread along the turnpike west of the house. Slocum placed his troops just southwest of the home by midafternoon, in a clearing known as Hazel Grove.

Here Meade met Slocum in excitement, reporting how they had successfully compromised Lee's flank and expressing his enthusiasm to continue to press forward. Slocum awkwardly informed his colleague that he was supplanting Meade as the ranking officer on the field and that their revised orders from Hooker were to form defensive positions around Chancellorsville until the rest of the army had consolidated there. Hooker arrived about 1800 and made the Chancellor house his headquarters. He reiterated to his subordinates the necessity of their pause as II Corps was still making its way across the Rappahannock at United States Ford and Sickles' III Corps was only beginning its march from Falmouth to reinforce the main army. Although frustrated by the halt, the U.S. Army commanders still had confidence in Hooker's plan.

Hooker awoke early on the morning of 1 May emboldened with the same confidence he had been exuding since leaving Falmouth three days beforehand. He issued orders to continue the push eastward toward Fredericksburg. Union forces moved in three separate columns from Chancellorsville. Maj. Gen. George Sykes' division of Meade's V Corps marched east on the Orange Turnpike, supported by a division from Couch's II Corps and one from III Corps which stayed in reserve at Chancellorsville. Meade and the remainder of V Corps proceeded along the River Road north of the turnpike to secure Banks' Ford. South of the turnpike Slocum's XII Corps, followed by Howard's XI Corps, marched east along the Orange Plank Road toward the Tabernacle Church where Hooker planned to establish his new headquarters. Two divisions of II Corps would be in reserve at Chancellorsville, and the remaining division would move to Todd's Tavern to secure the southern flank. Hooker appreciated the defensive advantages Chancellorsville offered, but wanted to get his long columns out of the difficult terrain of the Wilderness where he could maneuver and destroy Lee in open ground.

Meanwhile, on the western outskirts of Fredericksburg, General Anderson's Confederate division awoke early and began fortifying their position against the Union force they anticipated would approach them from the west. All through the previous night, units from McLaws' division had arrived to reinforce them. As Anderson surveyed his troops constructing hasty breastworks, he was met by General "Stonewall" Jackson. Jackson chose not to wait for a Federal attack. Emboldened by Lee's guidance to "make arrangements to repulse the enemy," he ordered Anderson and

McLaws to stop digging and to advance westward to engage the oncoming Union Army.

The opposing forces made initial contact about 1100 on the Orange Turnpike just west of the Zoan Church. Skirmishers from the 12th Virginia deployed in front of Mahone's brigade and engaged with dismounted troopers from the 8th Pennsylvania Cavalry who were screening General Sykes' advancing Federal division. The Virginians quickly scattered the Federals but soon found themselves confronted by Col. Sidney Burbank's brigade of U.S. regulars from V Corps on the turnpike about a mile west of the Zoan Church. Mahone quickly dispatched the rest of his brigade into the fight as another brigade of V Corps regulars under Brig. Gen. Romeyn B. Ayers fell in on Burbank's left flank north of the turnpike. The Battle of Chancellorsville had begun. (*See Map 2.*)

As his troops clashed with U.S. Army forces on the turnpike, McLaws sent word back to Jackson of the surprisingly large number of enemy troops to his front. In response, Jackson ordered McLaws to hold his ground while he took the rest of his corps and the divisions of General Anderson and Brig. Gen. Robert E. Rodes west along the Orange Plank Road in an attempt to get around the Union right flank. They pushed about a mile and half forward of McLaws' position before they encountered the pickets of Slocum's XII Corps near the Aldrich farm. Not taking any chances, Slocum deployed all six of his brigades, 13,000 men in total from the divisions of Brig. Gens. John W. Geary and Alpheus S. Williams, in a line of battle extending on both sides of the Plank Road. The rough underbrush impeded the progress of men and field artillery alike.

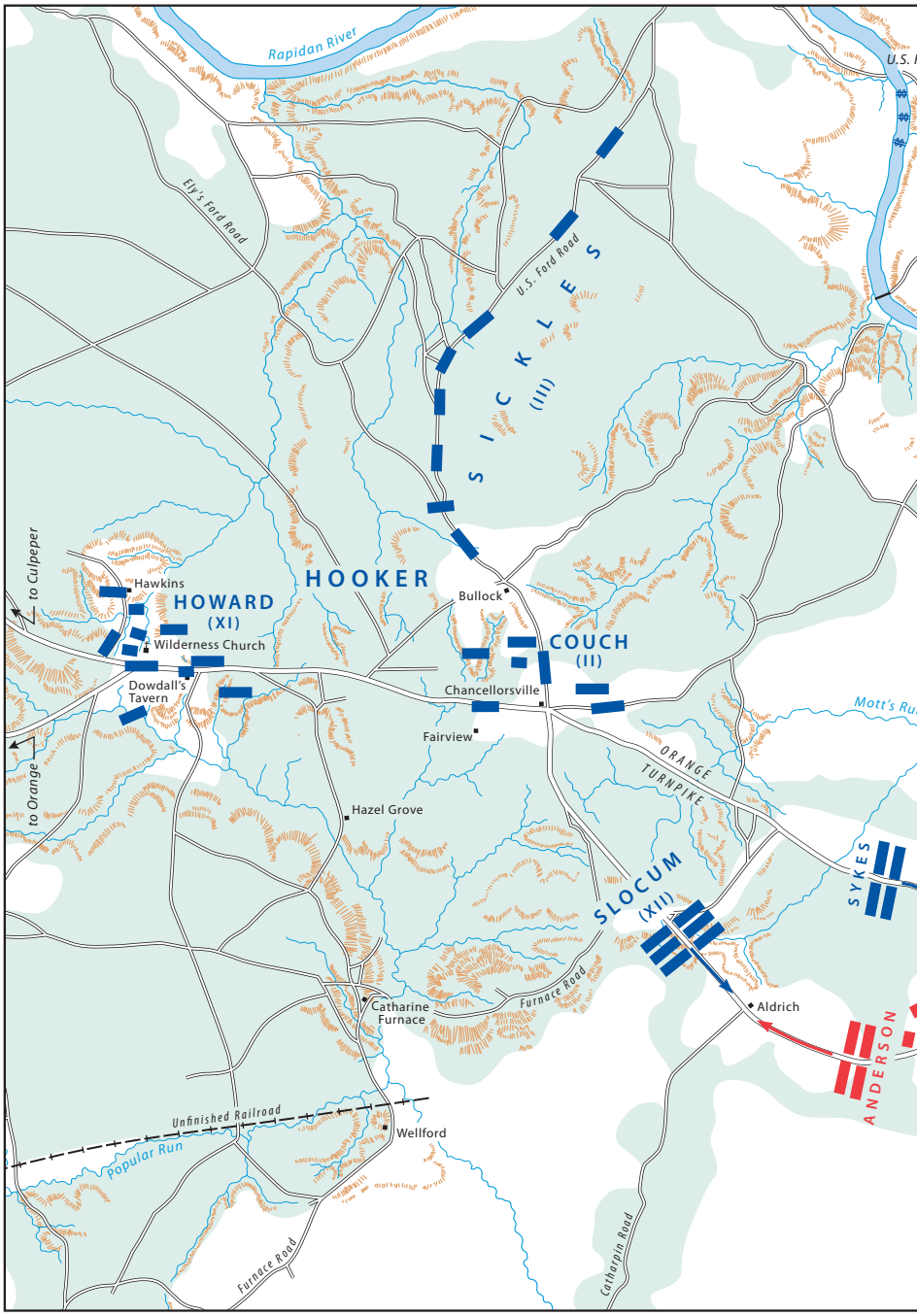
The fighting along the Orange Turnpike, meanwhile, became more intense. After Sykes' two brigades successfully repulsed the Confederate skirmishers, they found themselves in a perilous position as they battled rebel reinforcements from the rest of McLaws' division around the Lewis farm. With the brigades of Brig. Gens. Paul J. Semmes and Joseph B. Kershaw on Mahone's left south of the turnpike, and then those of Brig. Gens. William T. Wofford and Edward A. Perry deployed to the north of the road on his right, the Confederates enjoyed a rare advantage in numbers and soon threatened both flanks of the isolated U.S. regulars. Sykes sent a message to inform the commanding general of his increasingly precarious situation, assuming that Hooker would send reinforcements. Instead, Hooker ordered him to withdraw.

Meanwhile, General Meade with the rest of V Corps had been marching all morning along the River Road about two miles north and parallel to the turnpike. Although the terrain was nearly impassable, they met surprisingly little Confederate resistance, coming across only small bands of pickets and abandoned enemy positions from the previous day. By early afternoon, Meade was less than a mile from the crucial river crossing at Banks' Ford over the Rappahannock. If the Union Army could control this ford, he thought it could further hem in the enemy by pushing them eastward. No sooner had he considered this prospect than he received an unexpected order from General Hooker to fall back to the Chancellor house, where Meade had begun his march earlier that morning. Confused and frustrated, Meade reportedly muttered to an aide, "If we can't hold the top of the hill, we certainly can't hold the bottom of it."

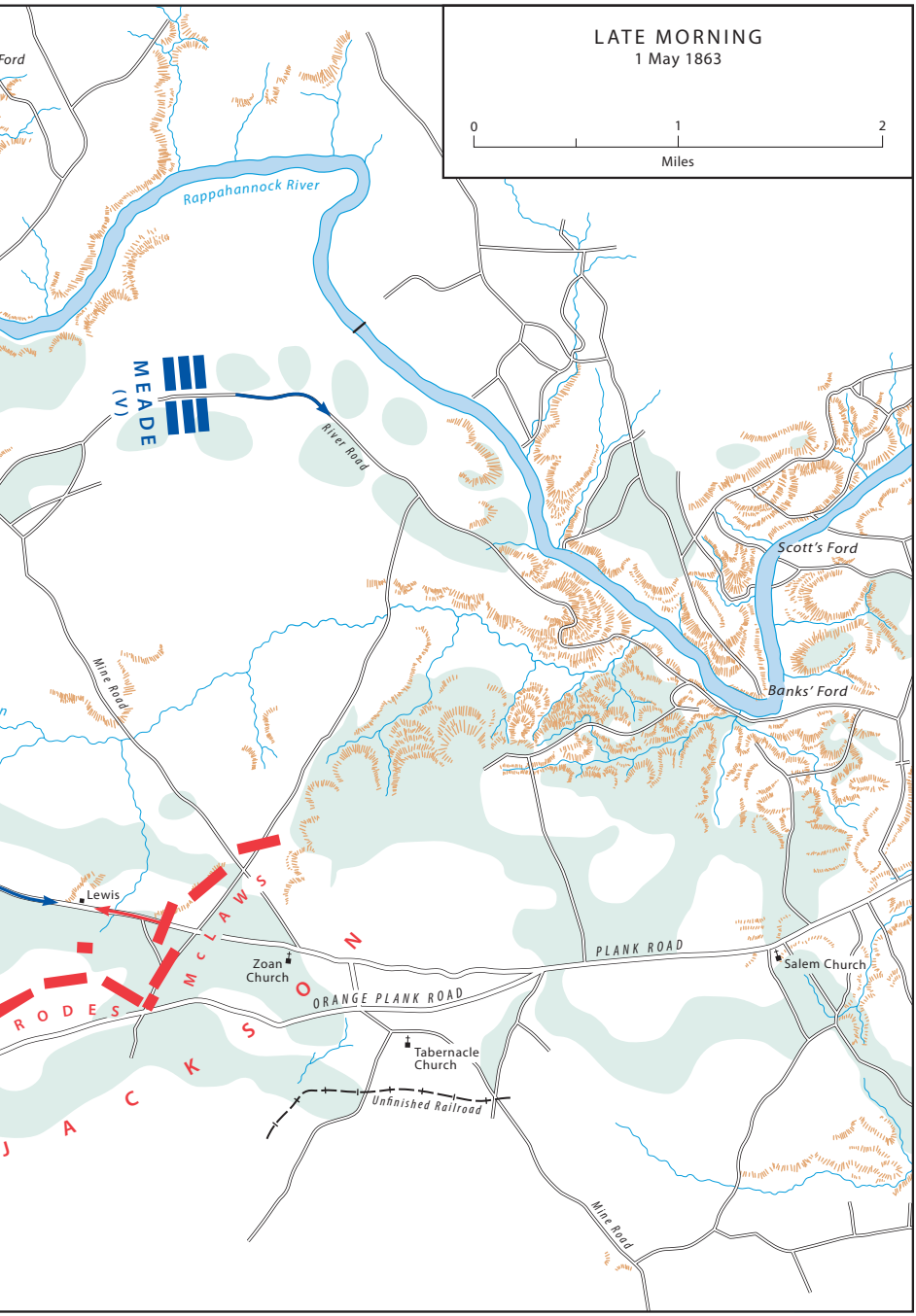
Little did Meade know that this order was part of a larger directive from Hooker to all of the army's three advanced elements to pull back to their original positions and assume a defensive posture. Each of the three corps commanders received the message to "at once have their commands established on the lines assigned them last night, and have them put in condition of defense without moment's delay. The major-general commanding trusts that a suspension in the attack to-day will embolden the enemy to attack him." Meade was not the only one bewildered by the decision. Both Slocum and Couch personally confronted Hooker, but to no avail. Couch would later recall, "I retired from his presence with the belief that my commanding general was a whipped man."

General Meade
(Library of Congress)

Historians have identified Hooker's action as the most crucial decision of the battle, for by withdrawing he forfeited the


Rapidan River
Ely's Ford Road
U.S. Ford Road
SICKLES
(III)
HOOKER
HOWARD
(XI)
Hawkins
Wilderness Church
Dowdall's Tavern
to Culpeper
to Orange
Bullock
COUCH
(II)
Chancellorsville
Fairview
Hazel Grove
Mott's Run
ORANGE TURNPIKE
SLOCUM
(XII)
SYKES
ANDERSON
Aldrich
Furnace Road
Catharine Furnace
Wellford
Unfinished Railroad
Popular Run
Furnace Road
Catharpin Road

Map 2


LATE MORNING
1 May 1863
0
1
2
Miles
Ford
Rappahannock River
MEADE
(V)
River Road
Scott's Ford
Banks' Ford
Mine Road
Lewis
McLAWS
Zoan
Church
PLANK ROAD
Salem Church
ORANGE PLANK ROAD
RODES
JACKSON
Tabernacle
Church
Unfinished Railroad
Mine Road

initiative to the enemy. These assertions often refer to a comment Hooker allegedly made after the battle, in which he said that he had "lost confidence in Hooker." General Hooker, however, had a rationale for his decision. Having witnessed the U.S. Army's bloody and fruitless assault against well-defended Southern positions on Marye's Heights six months earlier, he hoped to turn the tables by luring Lee into making the same mistake as General Burnside. Messages that Hooker sent to his corps commanders and his chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Daniel Butterfield, that afternoon reveal that he anticipated, and even welcomed, a Confederate attack on his position at Chancellorsville. As he explained, "the enemy will be emboldened to attack me. I . . . feel certain of success. If his communications are cut, he must attack me. I have a strong position." Hooker also began to receive the reports from Colonel Sharpe's interrogations of Confederate prisoners that Longstreet's two divisions were marching to reinforce Lee. Hooker's decision to pull his forward troops back to their original defensive positions was thus partly a reaction to the changing conditions and his assumption that Lee would suffer a grave reverse if he attacked the entrenched Federals.

Regardless of Hooker's rationale, Confederate forces took full advantage of the Union army's pause. Jackson pressed forward along the Orange Turnpike and the Plank Road toward Chancellorsville. By 1800 his lead columns had pushed within less than a mile of the Chancellor house, contending only with the fighting retreat of Slocum's and Couch's forces. Around the house they met the main line of the Union defenses and halted their advance. Jackson made one last effort to pressure the Union flank by sending Wright's Georgia brigade to penetrate the Federal position at Hazel Grove, just over a mile southwest of the house. Wright encountered stiff resistance from Williams' division of XII Corps that was dug in north of the grove, and he suspended the assault.

As night fell, General Lee rode to the intersection of the Plank and Furnace roads, in woods just south of the Orange Turnpike. There he met Jackson, who had spent the evening gathering information on Union dispositions from staff members and cavalry reports. The two discussed their options for the next day. Jackson posited that the hasty Federal withdrawal that afternoon indicated that Hooker would retreat across the river by morning. Lee disagreed, arguing that the Union force was too large and its movement too deliberate to be a feint or a probe. Both agreed

to maintain the initiative they had gained that day. Noting that Hooker had firmly anchored the left of his line on the Rapidan River and had heavily fortified his center around the Chancellor house, Lee believed that attacking Hooker's right flank was the only viable option for the morning.

Reports received from Brig. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee, whose rebel cavalry was operating unfettered on the battlefield due to the absence of Stoneman's horsemen, confirmed that the Union left flank was indeed vulnerable, or, as the cavalryman put it, "hanging in the air." The Federals of XI Corps were spread thinly westward along the turnpike with their flank unsecured. Jackson's chaplain, Reverend Beverly Tucker Lacy, had relatives in the immediate area and knew of a local resident who could suggest a way to get to the Union flank. Lacy and Jackson's cartographer, Maj. Jedediah Hotchkiss, recruited the services of Charles Wellford, the owner of Catharine Furnace, a little more than a mile south of Chancellorsville. Wellford knew the paths and trails through this part of the Wilderness and presented Lacy and Hotchkiss with a route around the Federal lines that would allow Jackson's troops to move undetected as they approached Hooker's exposed flank. The two officers relayed this suggestion to Lee and Jackson that evening.

Armed with this local intelligence, Generals Lee and Jackson met in the early hours of 2 May to finalize their plans. Accounts of this informal conference are imprecise, but the most reliable source, Major Hotchkiss, dramatically recounted the famous exchange. Lee asked Jackson, "What do you propose to do?" Jackson responded, "I propose to go right around there," tracing the route on the map with his finger, around the Union right. When Lee asked how many troops Jackson planned to use for this maneuver, his subordinate replied, "My whole command." Lee then asked him, "What will you leave me here to hold the Federal Army with?" With a bold plan in mind, Jackson answered, "the divisions of Anderson and McLaws." After a pause, Lee said, "Well, go ahead." Jackson's column would number 33,000 men, leaving Lee with about 15,000 men to face Hooker's army east of Chancellorsville.

The flank march that would bring General Jackson immortality began inauspiciously. Jackson had not informed his subordinates of his intentions, so that when dawn broke on 2 May many of his soldiers were cooking their breakfasts and not ready to march. Jackson's lead unit, Brig. Gen. Alfred H. Colquitt's Georgia brigade, did not start moving until 0700. Once the entire corps was on the

road, the column stretched for over ten miles, men marching three or four abreast on dusty, backwoods tracks. The procession was to move to Catharine Furnace, then southwestward on the Furnace Road, until it reached the Brock Road. Here Jackson would turn north to strike the westernmost flank of the Federal line arrayed along the Orange Plank Road. (*See Map 3.*)

The daring march of Jackson's corps that morning was never a secret to the Union Army. As early as 0800, scouts from Brig. Gen. David B. Birney's division of III Corps reported that a large Confederate force was moving to the west. Indeed, Jackson's entire column exposed itself to enemy observation as it passed near the clearing of Hazel Grove, just south of the Chancellor house. The question was, how to interpret the movement—was it a feint, a retreat, a repositioning, or an attack? Having fought Lee and Jackson before, General Hooker instinctively assessed the march as a flanking maneuver against his right. At 0930, he dispatched warnings to Howard and Slocum, the two corps commanders on his right, to prepare for the enemy to "throw" themselves against their flank. Feeling that he had done enough to protect the right of his line, he chose to take no further action until he had a better understanding of Lee's intentions.

General Howard
(Library of Congress)

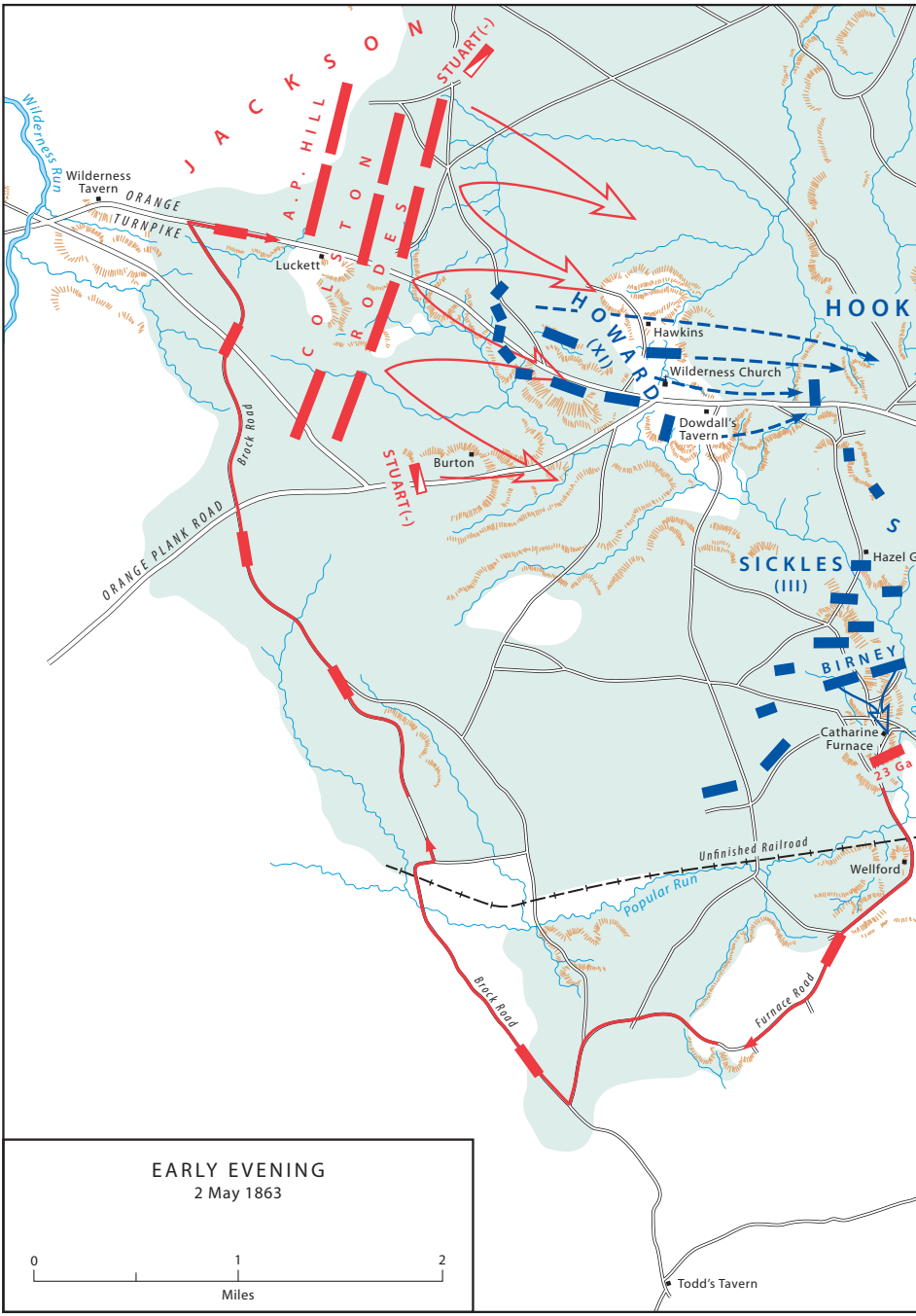
The III Corps commander, General Sickles, found Hooker's relatively passive response intolerable. He pleaded with the army commander to allow him to harass Jackson's column as it moved across his front. Hooker wavered, questioning his own initial appraisal. Perhaps, he mused, the Confederates were not bent on attacking his right, but were withdrawing westward toward their depots at Orange and Gordonsville, Virginia. Or perhaps the movement was a maneuver meant to draw Union reserves away before the rebels launched a real attack on the Union left. After wrestling with

these possibilities, Hooker finally capitulated to Sickles' cajoling and allowed him to attack the Confederate column by pushing south from Hazel Grove.

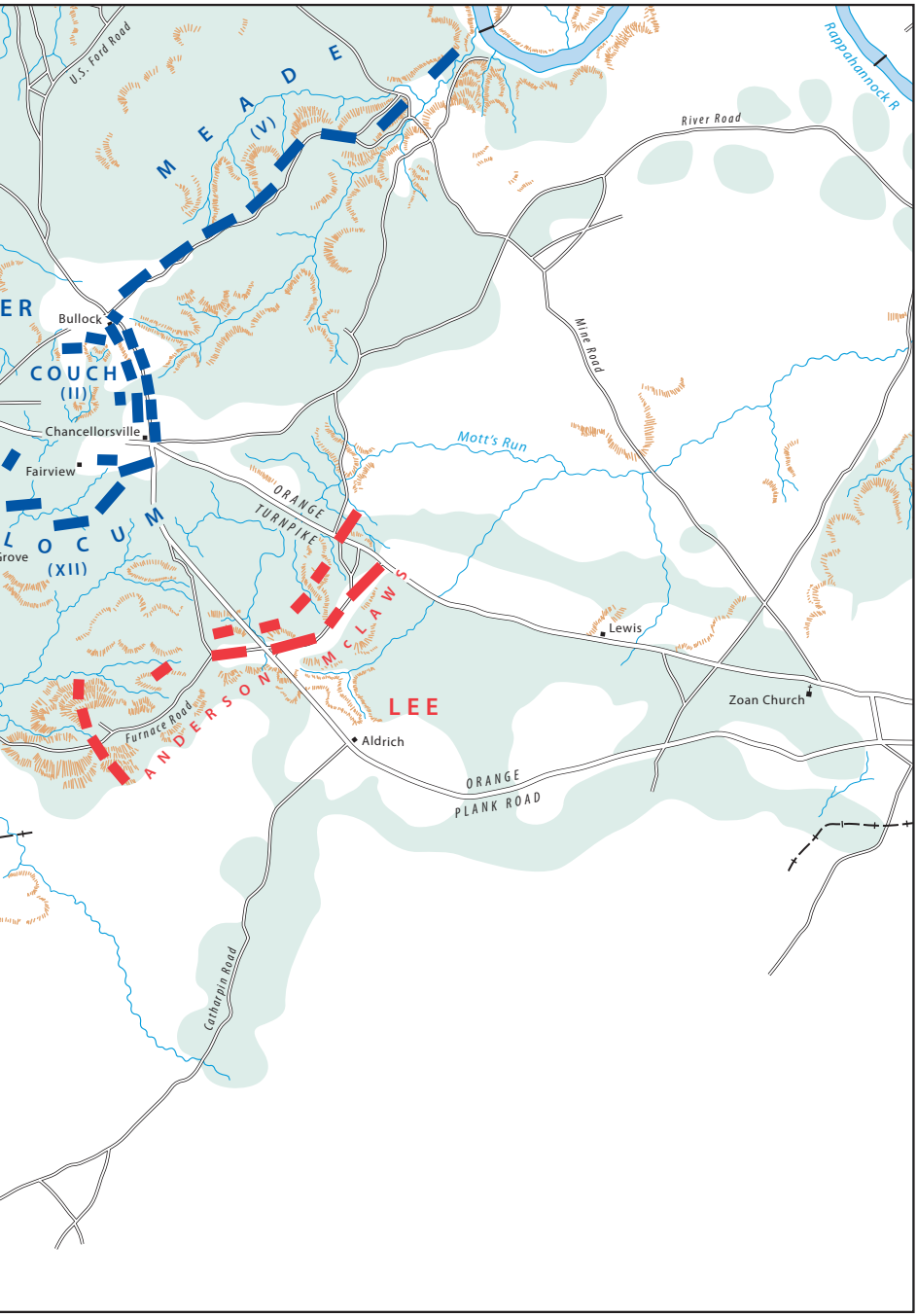
Sickles deployed Birney's division for the assault and readied the rest of his corps to follow in support. U.S. Army artillery at Hazel Grove opened fire on the exposed enemy column just before it disappeared into the woods and out of range—Hooker's indecisiveness had meant that the Federal attack would be launched at what was now the rear of Jackson's column. Jackson had left behind the 23d Georgia near Catharine Furnace to deter such an action, but the advancing Federals quickly overwhelmed the Georgians. Over 250 rebels surrendered, an embarrassment that would lead a Confederate court-martial to convict the regimental commander, Col. Emory Best, for cowardice later in the war.

Sickles followed up his initial success by pursuing Jackson's column down the Furnace Road, calling for more reinforcements. His aggressive action that afternoon would have two crucial effects on the fight to come later that day. First, Hooker's decision to shift brigades from the II, XI, and XII Corps to reinforce Sickles left a noticeable gap between Howard's XI Corps on the far Union right and the main body around the Chancellor house. Secondly, as Sickles watched the rear of Jackson's column disappear back into the woods beyond the Hazel Grove clearing, he noted the distinctly southern turn in the direction of march. This observation convinced him that the enemy's intention was indeed to retreat south and west, most likely to the Confederate supply depots in Orange or Gordonsville, rather than to attack the Union right. Sickles passed this news to Hooker's headquarters in midafternoon.

Meanwhile, Jackson continued his lengthy march, closing in on the intended stopping point at the intersection of the Brock and Orange Plank roads. Near here, Jackson and his staff reached a hill on Burton's farm where he could see the XI Corps stretched out along the turnpike but could not discern exactly where the line ended. The force in front of them, while unsuspecting, was dug in with no assailable flank within view. Jackson would have to move his attack farther west. This would take time, which he could ill afford, as it was already midafternoon and his troops had been marching since morning. Frustrated, Jackson continued his column along the Brock Road until it arrived at the Orange Turnpike some two miles west of the Union right


EARLY EVENING
2 May 1863
0
1
2
Miles
Wilderness Run
Wilderness Tavern
ORANGE TURNPIKE
Luckett
JACKSON
A.P. HILL
COLSTON
RODES
STUART(-)
STUART(-)
Burton
HOWARD
(XI)
Hawkins
Wilderness Church
Dowdall's Tavern
HOOK
SICKLES
(III)
Hazel G
BIRNEY
Catharine Furnace
23 Ga
Brock Road
ORANGE PLANK ROAD
Unfinished Railroad
Popular Run
Wellford
Furnace Road
Brock Road
Todd's Tavern

Map 3


U.S. Ford Road
MEADE
(V)
Rappahannock R
River Road
ER
Bullock
COUCH
(II)
Mine Road
Chancellorsville
Mott's Run
Fairview
ORANGE
TURNPIKE
LOCUM
Grove
(XII)
Lewis
ANDERSON
MCLAWS
LEE
Zoan Church
Furnace Road
Aldrich
ORANGE
PLANK ROAD
Catharpin Road

flank. The lead division, under the command of General Rodes, reached the turnpike about 1500 and began deploying in the woods for the attack. Arranging the corps for the assault proved just as challenging as the flank march itself. Commanders had to displace a column of fifteen brigades that was nearly two miles long and four men abreast into a line of battle perpendicular to the Orange Turnpike in heavily thicketed terrain. The dispositions had to be done quietly to avoid alerting the nearby Federal troops. It took nearly two and half hours for Jackson's men to deploy in three echelons spanning over a mile just west of the Luckett farm. There were still a few brigades that had not yet arrived, but Jackson could no longer wait. Daylight and opportunity were diminishing rapidly.

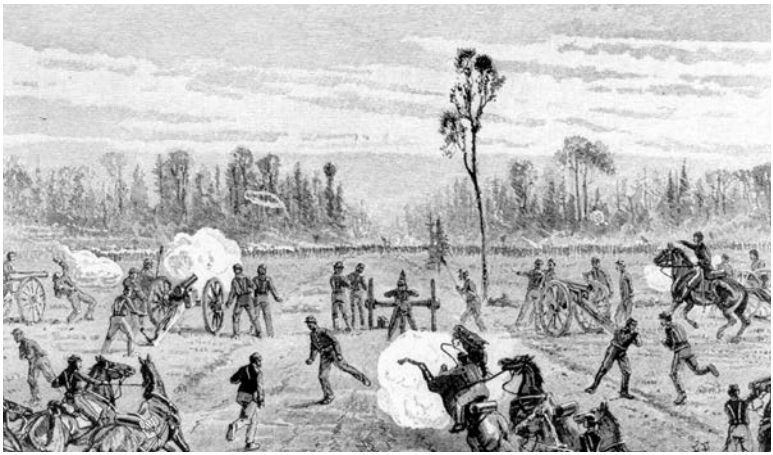
Fortunately for the rebels, the men of the Federal XI Corps had done little to ready themselves for a potential attack on their position. Blame for the unpreparedness of Howard's men still remains a matter of debate. There is clear evidence that Hooker sent Howard orders to prepare for an attack on his flank, but sources differ on exactly how the commanding general's intent was conveyed to his corps commander. Regardless, that afternoon Howard made only cursory efforts to adjust his line, perhaps because he considered the dense Wilderness itself as a deterrent to an attack. He faced two of his regiments to the west, but the rest remained positioned on the turnpike facing south. He also deployed a detachment of signalmen to give warning. In the end, Howard never seriously heeded Hooker's order or the warnings delivered by his scouts. Preoccupied by the action around Catharine Furnace, Hooker never personally rode out to the XI Corps position to insure the troops were properly deployed. Reports that Lee's army was withdrawing westward, capped by a circular letter issued by Hooker that afternoon that instructed the army to prepare to pursue the enemy at first light the next day, only further reinforced Howard's complacency.

At 1730, Jackson ordered Rodes to attack. After stumbling through several hundred yards of underbrush and thickets, the Confederates smashed into the unsuspecting Federals. The only two U.S. Army regiments facing westward—the 54th New York and 153d Pennsylvania—had little time to react and fled their positions having fired one volley. Many other Federal soldiers joined them. Union Army staff officer Washington Roebling described the scene as "all the world like a stampede of cattle, a multitude

of yelling, struggling men who had thrown away their muskets, panting for breath, their faces distorted by fear, filled the road as far as the eye could reach."

The next ninety minutes proved most desperate for the XI Corps and eventually the entire Union Army. Jackson's attack pushed too relentlessly for the Federals to mount a coherent defense. Any resistance that did occur was sporadic and uncoordinated. Only a handful of infantry units such as those in Maj. Gen. Carl Schurz's 3d Division around the Hawkins farm held their ground to stem the tide of the enemy advance before retreating in good order. Shortly afterward, Howard's frightened stragglers rallied around the brigade of Col. Adolphus Buschbeck, who had thrown up a hasty defensive position at Dowdall's Tavern, to become known as the "Buschbeck line." Here Federal units slowed the enemy assault, at least for a few moments. These daring but futile actions were mostly the inspiration of small-unit commanders as the leadership on the brigade, division, and corps level struggled to bring order to the mob that an hour before had been the right flank of the Union Army. General Howard, who had just returned from escorting one of his brigades to the fighting at Catharine Furnace, attempted his own heroic efforts to halt the rout. The one-armed general grabbed a unit standard and galloped

Staying Jackson's advance, Saturday evening, 2 May, with artillery placed across the Plank Road, 1863
(Library of Congress)



down the Orange Turnpike, encouraging his men to rally. Other bold but reckless efforts, such as the 8th Pennsylvania Cavalry's impromptu charge into the heart of Rodes' line, bought time for the reeling Union soldiers to reconstitute their defenses and to redirect the artillery at Hazel Grove toward the advancing wave of gray-clad soldiers.

General Hooker was initially unaware of the collapse of his right flank. Due to an atmospheric irregularity, he could not hear the sound of the cannon and musket volleys that were only a mile from his position at the Chancellorsville crossroads. He first became aware of the calamity when men from Howard's broken units came streaming past his headquarters at the Chancellor house. Startled into action, he set to work organizing a new defensive line just west of the crossroads, pulling in reinforcements from different units and rallying the panicked soldiers. For all of his carelessness in permitting the conditions for his left flank to falter, he partially redeemed his mistake by restoring order. By sunset, the Confederate attack had lost momentum due to its rapid advance, the chaos of the fighting, the brokenness of the terrain, and the steadiness of Hooker's new line. As darkness fell over the battlefield, Jackson's attack ground to a halt.

As the firing died down, General Jackson rode up and down the Orange Turnpike urging his men to press forward. Many of the brigades from Rodes' and Brig. Gen. Raleigh E. Colston's divisions had become so disorganized that they pulled back to Dowdall's Tavern to regroup. Jackson seethed while observing this withdrawal, as the two miles he had gained that evening shrank to only half a mile. From the rear he called up Brig. Gen. James H. Lane's brigade of North Carolinians from Maj. Gen. A. P. Hill's division and ordered them to continue the drive against the Federals. Lane obediently deployed his troops both north and south of the turnpike but then hesitated, barely inching forward. It was now past 2000 and completely dark. Neither side had any idea of where their enemy was or the size of his force just yards from their respective fronts. Fearful that the advantages gained that evening would be gone by the next morning if they halted, Jackson impatiently rode out in front of the Confederate picket line with his staff to observe the disposition of the Union line. The edgy men of the 18th North Carolina had not been informed of Jackson's reconnaissance, and when then heard horses to their front, they fired two volleys in the dark, assuming they were shooting at Federal

cavalry. Jackson was hit in three places, and several members of his staff were killed or wounded, before the shooters understood that they were firing into their own troops. Jackson's most severe wound was in his upper left arm, which required amputation. His medical staff removed him from the battlefield and transported him to a field hospital at Wilderness Tavern, and then to a more permanent recuperation location at Guinea Station, after a twenty-seven mile ambulance ride from Chancellorsville. Many in the ranks of both armies would not learn of his wounding until well into the next day.

The result of the day's battle was bittersweet for the Confederates. By their daring gamble they had smashed an entire U.S. Army Corps and rolled up the Federal right flank to the doorstep of Hooker's headquarters. Yet these successes had come at a terrible price. The attack cost Lee's army nearly 1,000 casualties, but it was the loss of "Stonewall" Jackson which proved the costliest. When Lee learned of the wounding, he wrote Jackson, "I should have chosen for the good of the country to be disabled in your stead." In spite of his concern, Lee still had to press on to finish the job of defeating the enemy that his wounded subordinate had started that evening.

With Jackson's wounding, corps command fell to Hill, who was soon thereafter wounded by Union artillery fire, then to Rodes, who thought it inadvisable to continue the attack at night. Hill, remaining on the battlefield, sent for General Stuart to assume command.

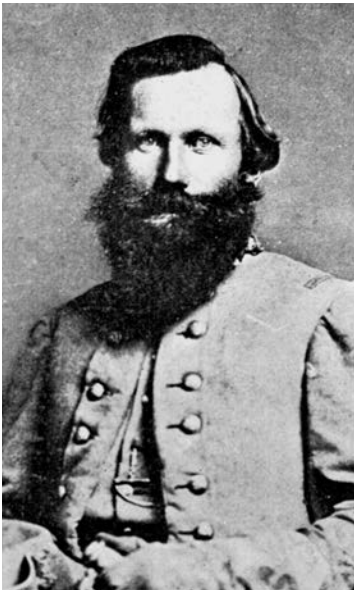
In fact, the rebels were in a precarious position. As a result of the flanking maneuver, Jackson's corps was now separated from the rest of Lee's army southeast of Chancellorsville by almost an entire day's march with the Union army between them. To remedy the situation, Lee appointed General Stuart to assume command of Jackson's corps and ordered him to resume the offensive at dawn the next day with the daunting objective of linking the two parts of the divided army. Lee's instructions were clear: "keep the troops well together, and press on, on the general plan, which is to work by the right wing, turning the positions of the enemy, so as to drive him from Chancellorsville, which will again unite us."

While Stuart re-formed his new command wearied and disorganized by the day's events, the Federals labored feverishly through the night to reinforce their position. They built breast-

work defenses, three lines deep, to the west of Chancellorsville and shifted fresh units to these positions to repel the assault that they assumed would begin the next day. Maj. Gen. John Reynolds' I Corps also arrived late that night to reinforce Hooker, giving the Union Army an 80,000 to 40,000 advantage in manpower on the field. The Federal defense now comprised a large "U" consisting of I, V, and XI Corps from west to east stretching on either side of United States Ford. Federal troops erected a smaller, more circular formation around the Chancellor house with about a mile diameter, III Corps facing west, XII facing south and II Corps oriented eastward. The only imperfection to this circular arrangement was a portion of Sickles' III Corps that jutted out to the southwest to cover the high ground at Hazel Grove.

Given the Union's advantage in numbers, the separation of the Confederate forces, and the Federals' surprising resilience, the situation demanded that Hooker counterattack. The Union commander, however, remained cautious. His only aggressive action entailed having Sedgwick's VI Corps, which had crossed the Rappahannock in front of Fredericksburg on 29 April to tie

General Stuart
(Library of Congress)

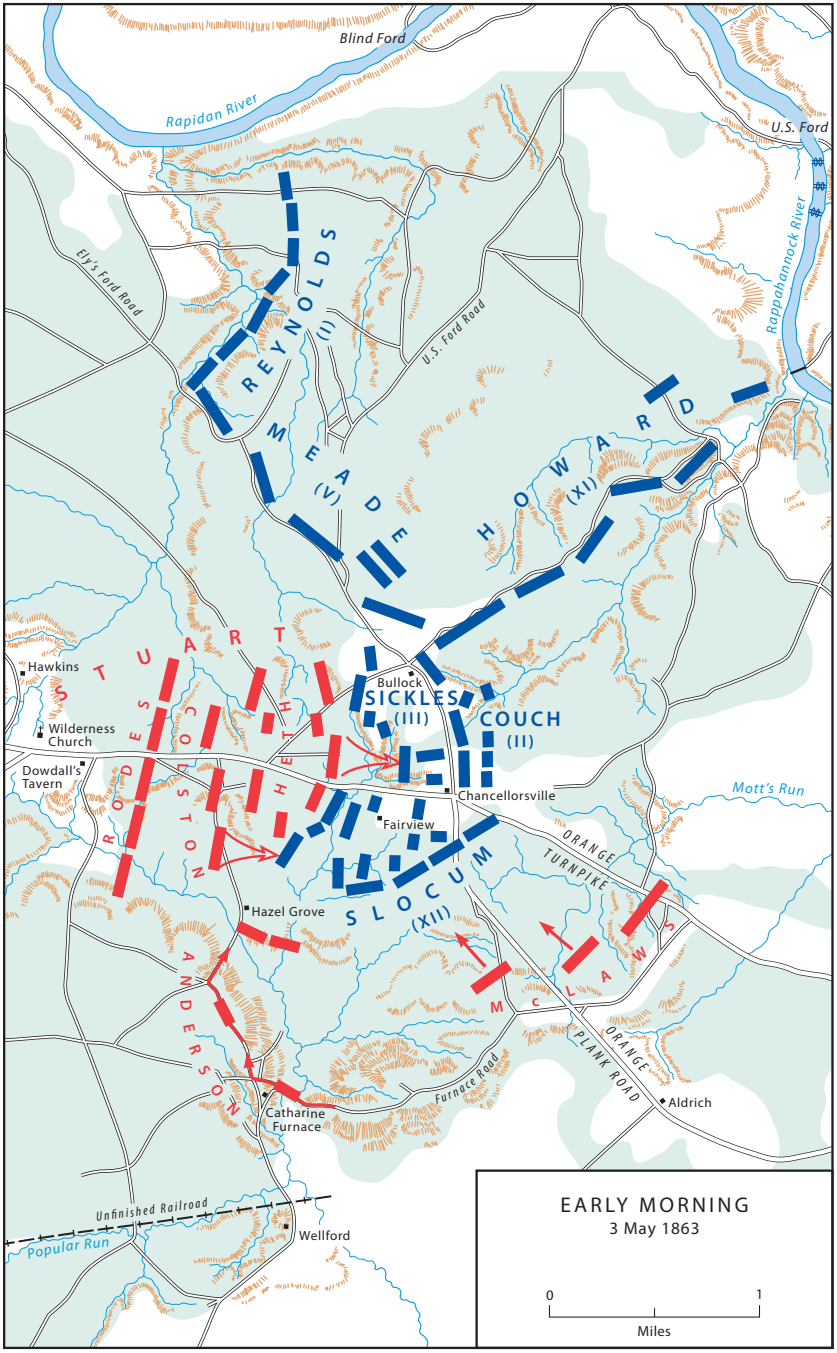


General Sickles
(Library of Congress)

down its defenders, advance to threaten Lee's rear. As for the main army, Hooker's caution led him to order Sickles to abandon his salient at Hazel Grove, one of the few clear, elevated locations on the battlefield that offered advantageous fields of fire for artillery. Sickles protested but eventually obeyed the command and pulled his troops back at 0600. Confederate artillery officer Col. E. Porter Alexander would later comment on the abandonment of Hazel Grove: "There has rarely been a more gratuitous gift of a battlefield."

At 0700 on 3 May, as Sickles was completing his withdrawal from Hazel Grove, Confederate Brig. Gen. Henry Heth (who replaced division commander General Hill, wounded the previous night) attacked. Confederate Brig. Gen. James J. Archer moved his brigade to the base of Hazel Grove, where his men met stout resistance from Brig. Gen. Charles K. Graham's brigade of Pennsylvanians. Archer did not know at the time that he was actually engaging Sickles' rear guard as it covered III Corps' withdrawal to Fairview. To the left of Archer, the Southern brigades of Brig. Gen. Samuel McGowan and Lane drove the Union defenders back to the edge of Fairview but had pushed forward unsupported and with their flanks exposed. The Federals regrouped and repelled both enemy brigades in fierce fighting. North of the turnpike, Brig. Gen. Dorsey Pender's troops assaulted the Union position held by Maj. Gen. Hiram G. Berry. After several bloody charges, Pender's North Carolinian's overran the Federal earthworks, killing Berry and capturing Brig. Gen. William Hays in the fighting. The U.S. Army position might have been compromised were it not for a bold counterattack by Maj. Gen. William H. French's division of II Corps, which hurled Pender's units back to their original positions. South of the road, Union General Williams pressed forward against Lane's shattered regiments. McGowan's South Carolina brigade arrived and did its best to stem the tide of the counterattack, but the Confederate line wavered (*Map 4*).

Overall, General Heth's troops had succeeded in pushing through two of the Federals' three defensive lines both north and south of the Orange Turnpike, but the attack was falling apart. Stuart sent Colston's division forward along the turnpike in support of the struggling Confederate offensive, but Colston's forces stalled, with several of his regiments refusing to move forward, either from fear or from the heavy casualties suffered heretofore. The casualties in the

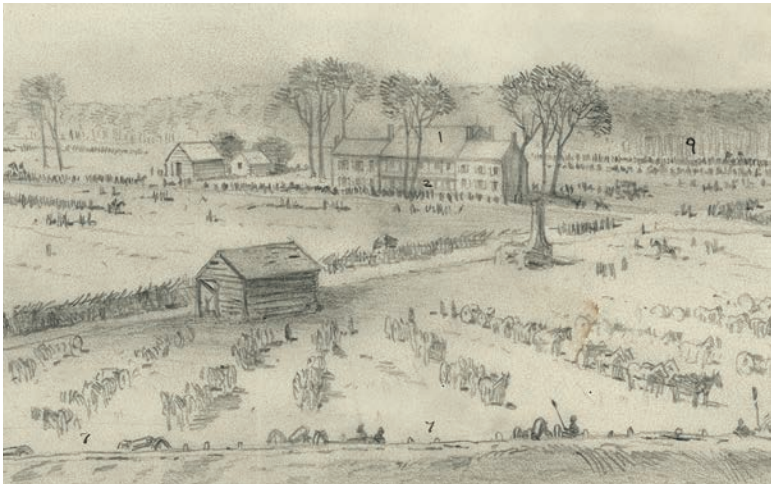

Blind Ford
Rapidan River
U.S. Ford
Rappahannock River
Ely's Ford Road
U.S. Ford Road
REYNOLDS
(I)
MEADE
(V)
HOWARD
(XI)
STUART
ROBERTS
COLSTON
HETH
ANDERSON
MCLAWS
Hawkins
Wilderness Church
Dowdall's Tavern
Bullock
SICKLES
(III)
COUCH
(II)
Chancellorsville
Fairview
Mott's Run
ORANGE TURNPIKE
SLOCUM
(XII)
Hazel Grove
ORANGE PLANK ROAD
Furnace Road
Catharine Furnace
Aldrich
Unfinished Railroad
Popular Run
Wellford
EARLY MORNING
3 May 1863
0
1
Miles

Map 4

back and forth struggle were horrific, with the "Stonewall" Brigade, led by Brig. Gen. Elisha F. Paxton, losing over half its men in a matter of minutes. Fearing that the entire assault would falter, Stuart called forward Rodes' weary division, his last available reserve. Led by the bold Brig. Gen. Stephen D. Ramseur, Rodes' men threw themselves into the Union breastworks. Union soldiers repulsed Ramseur twice, but eventually the rebels breached the Federal defenses, fracturing the Union line.

The Federal position was now in crisis. U.S. Army artillery batteries at Fairview were running critically low on ammunition, as Confederate brigades moved to surround them. Several guns limbered up and moved to the rear to avoid being captured. Sickles sent his aide to army headquarters to plead with Hooker for reinforcements. As Hooker stood on the porch of the Chancellor house to receive Sickles' message, a Confederate cannonball struck the pillar next to him, knocking the commanding general senseless to the ground. His staff gathered around his body, for a time believing him dead. He soon regained consciousness, and in an effort to show his troops that he had not been harmed, he mounted his horse and rode toward the front lines. Hooker, most likely suffering from a concussion, proceeded only a few paces before

Gen. Hooker's headquarters at the Chancellorsville house*, by Edwin Forbes*
(Library of Congress)



the effects of the blow took their toll. He dismounted and lay down on a blanket where he sipped brandy to aid his recovery.

The Federal position at Fairview could no longer hold as more infantry and artillery units pulled back to the clearing around the Chancellor house. Attacking Confederates pushed within 500 yards of the Union headquarters. Still dazed from his head injury, Hooker handed control of the army to General Couch, instructing him to retreat to a new position north of Chancellorsville. Couch did his best to coordinate the withdrawal. He placed Maj. Gen. Winfield S. Hancock's division from II Corps in charge of holding off the Confederates as the remnants of III and XII Corps withdrew to the Bullock house. Although Hancock's men endured heavy artillery fire from several directions, they successfully allowed the rest of the army to regroup.

As Stuart's Confederates pressed forward toward Fairview and Chancellorsville, Lee moved the 18,000 men under his direct command against the Federal positions from the east and southeast. After bitter fighting against the U.S. Army's XII Corps through the early morning, Lee's leftmost brigade under Brig. Gen. Edward Perry linked with Archer's right flank on Hazel Grove. By 1000, both wings of the Confederate army had united and Lee ordered all of his subordinates to continue to press the attack. When he learned that his forces had taken the Chancellorsville crossroads area, Lee rode down the turnpike from Hazel Grove to the Chancellor house, now ablaze from artillery fire, his troops cheering him along the way. In what was perhaps the greatest moment in his career, Lee had smashed a Union army twice the size of his own and driven it from its headquarters. His aide, Maj. Charles Marshall, described the scene as Lee, "sat in the full realization of all that soldiers dream of—triumph; and I looked upon him, in the complete fruition of the success which his genius, courage, and confidence in his army had won, I thought that it must have been from such a scene that men in ancient times rose to the dignity of gods." The elation of the success lasted for only a few moments. A courier met Lee with disheartening news: Sedgwick had taken the Confederate positions at Fredericksburg and was moving toward Chancellorsville.

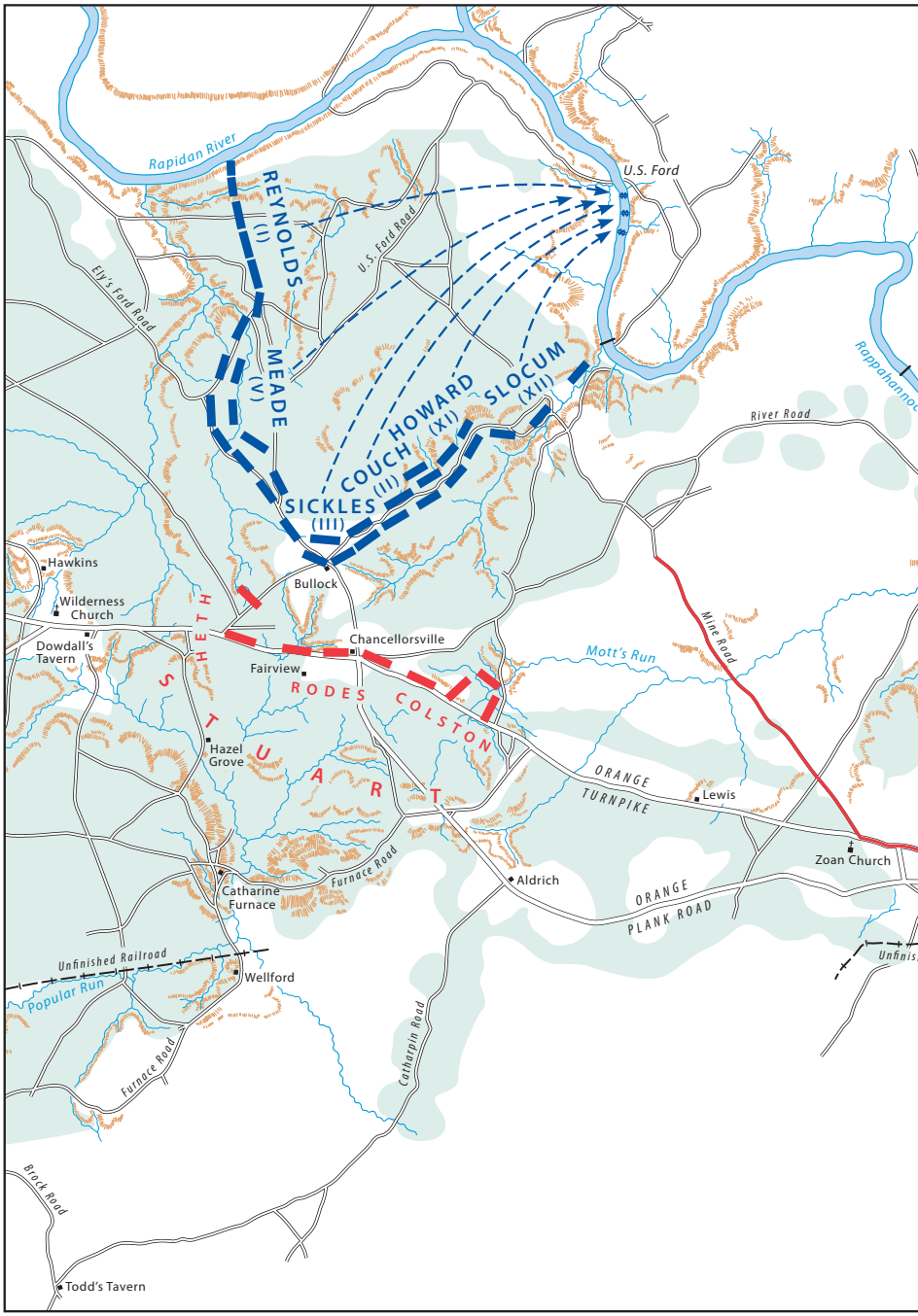
Sedgwick's operation had begun inauspiciously. After I and VI Corps had crossed the Rappahannock River on 29 April they had done little over the next three days against the Confederates, in part because they had received vague and conflicting guidance

from Hooker. After Reynolds' I Corps left to join Hooker on 2 May, Sedgwick had been left with his own VI Corps and Brig. Gen. John Gibbon's division, about 24,000 men. On the morning of 3 May, he arrayed his four divisions extending north and south in front of the town and prepared to advance. The opposing force, under Early, counted 12,000 troops over a five mile front from Taylor's Hill to Hamilton's Crossing. Sedgwick advanced against the very same stone wall on Marye's Heights that had been the scene of the Union disaster five months earlier.

After repulsing two Union assaults, the Confederates permitted a temporary truce to allow Union soldiers to remove their wounded from in front of the stone wall. While doing so, Union officers astutely observed how few enemy soldiers actually defended Marye's Heights. The Northern units regrouped and attacked the position again, stacking ten regiments in column formation to overwhelm the thin line of defenders on the heights. General Early hastily withdrew his forces south on the Telegraph Road, away from the fighting. The road to Chancellorsville was now open, but for reasons that still remain unclear, Sedgwick was slow to press his advantage. He methodically regrouped his forces creating a delay that gave Lee time to react. The Confederate commander sent McLaws' division east on the turnpike to halt Sedgwick's advance. About four miles west of Fredericksburg at Salem Church, Brig. Gen. Cadmus M. Wilcox's brigade of Alabamans joined McLaws, giving the Confederates about 10,000 men to oppose the oncoming Federals. The lead elements of VI Corps reached Salem Church about 1600 on 3 May. The rebel line held, as Sedgwick sent only one of his divisions under General William Brooks into the fray. As darkness fell, the opposing forces camped on the battlefield.

General Lee then made his next daring gamble of the campaign. He removed Anderson's division from its position facing Hooker's left flank and deployed it eastward to join McLaws' troops at Salem Church. He also ordered Early's division to assist McLaws. This would leave the Confederates with only 25,000 men in front of Hooker's 75,000 troops. Lee based his bold decision on the assumption that Hooker would be unable to shake free from the defensive mindedness he had exhibited during the battle so far (*Map 5*).

Rather than stay at Chancellorsville, Lee left the main army to take command of the force at Salem Church. He arrived on the


Rapidan River
U.S. Ford
REYNOLDS
(I)
U.S. Ford Road
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MEADE
(V)
HOWARD
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SLOCUM
(XII)
COUCH
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SICKLES
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Rappahannock
River Road
Hawkins
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Bullock
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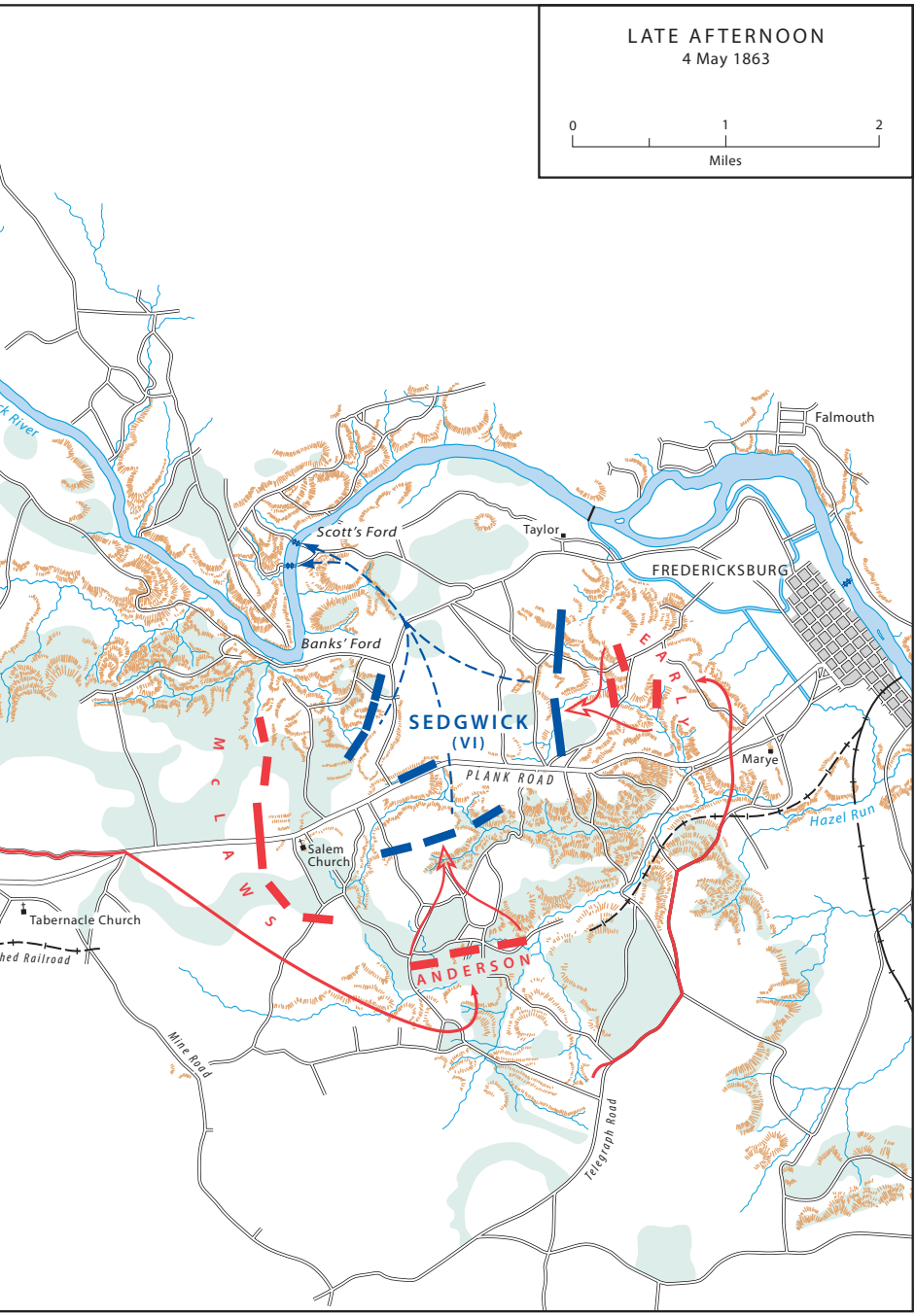
Fairview
Mott's Run
Mine Road
SETH
RODES
COLSTON
TUART
Hazel Grove
ORANGE TURNPIKE
Lewis
Zoan Church
Furnace Road
Catharine Furnace
Aldrich
ORANGE PLANK ROAD
Unfinished Railroad
Popular Run
Wellford
Catharpin Road
Furnace Road
Brock Road
Todd's Tavern

Map 5


LATE AFTERNOON
4 May 1863
0
1
2
Miles
Falmouth
Scott's Ford
Taylor
FREDERICKSBURG
Banks' Ford
EARLY
SEDGWICK
(VI)
PLANK ROAD
Marye
Hazel Run
Salem
Church
WRIGHT
Tabernacle Church
ANDERSON
Mine Road
Telegraph Road

battlefield at 0900 on 4 May. The 20,000 men he had gathered there matched Sedgwick's command, which the Union commander had aligned in a defensive, U-shaped formation anchored on the west by Banks' Ford and on the east by Taylor's Hill. Lee deployed around the Union position with McLaws to the west, Anderson to the south, and Early to the east. Getting the three divisions in position for an attack took most of the day, and not until 1700 did Early launch two of his brigades, those of Brig. Gens. Robert Hoke and Harry Hays, against the Federal left. Early's troops gained some ground after fierce fighting, but Anderson's and McLaws' assaults never achieved any momentum due to difficult terrain, poor communications, and the fading sunlight. Lee fumed over the failure to crush the isolated VI Corps. He intended to finish the job on 5 May, but Sedgwick withdrew across the Rappahannock under cover of darkness.

General Hooker spent 4 May awaiting news of Sedgwick's progress. He had heard little from VI Corps since learning of its breakthrough at Marye's Heights and the initial contact with the enemy at Salem Church. Uncertain as to the situation, he opted to do nothing. When word finally arrived at 2300 that Sedgwick had been stymied at Salem Church and had decided to withdraw across Scott's Ford to the north side of the Rappahannock, Hooker's heart sank. He had placed all of his hopes on VI Corps advancing to catch Lee in a vise, and now that possibility had vanished. At 2400, he called his five corps commanders to his tent outside of the Bullock house, although Slocum did not reach the meeting until after it had adjourned. He asked them whether the Army of the Potomac should attack the next morning or withdraw across the river and conclude the campaign. He then left, allowing the generals to discuss the matter among themselves. Three—Meade, Reynolds, and Howard—voted to attack Lee, while only two—Couch and Sickles—supported a withdrawal. When Hooker returned to the meeting, he announced his decision to move the army back across the Rappahannock and return to Falmouth. The Union Army would concede victory to the Confederates. The decision bewildered Hooker's commanders. Reynolds commented afterwards, "What was the use of calling us together at this time of night when he intended to retreat anyhow?"

On the morning of 5 May, U.S. Army forces began withdrawing over the pontoon bridges at United States Ford. By evening a heavy rain drenched the long columns of tired Union

soldiers as they tramped northward. Lee attempted to exploit the withdrawal by attacking the Union rear guard, but the exhaustion of his men and the rough underbrush impeded the effort. By the time Lee had deployed his men, Hooker and his army were gone.

Analysis

The Chancellorsville Campaign took a heavy toll on both armies, with over 30,764 men killed, wounded, or missing during three days of fighting. The Confederates lost fewer men, 1,724 killed, 9,233 wounded, and 2,503 missing and captured, compared to the Union Army's 1,694 killed, 9,672 wounded and 5,958 missing and captured, but suffered a higher percentage of casualties than Hooker's command: 22 percent to 13 percent of total force. At this point in the war, the South could not easily make up losses of that magnitude. It would be even more difficult to replace the key leaders lost in the battle. Jackson survived the amputation but succumbed to pneumonia a week later. The Army of Northern Virginia also lost seven brigade commanders and over forty regimental commanders on the morning of 3 May alone. Federal losses were not evenly distributed throughout the army. Units such as I, II, and V Corps had hardly engaged in the battle, leaving the remaining four corps to do the majority of the fighting and thus to absorb the larger percentage of the losses. The III, VI, XI, and XII Corps each lost about 20 percent of their men at Chancellorsville.

Although touted as Lee's greatest victory, the immediate results of the campaign were ambiguous at best. Lee had thwarted Hooker's grand plan, successfully fought off two separate portions of the Union Army while being outnumbered nearly two to one, and forced them both back across the river. The morale of the Federal army, however, was relatively unshaken by the defeat, as its troops were more confused by the retreat than demoralized. Moreover, Lee had very little to show for his "masterpiece" at Chancellorsville. As the Union forces returned to Falmouth where they began their campaign, the Confederates also moved to their original positions around Fredericksburg. Lee lamented, "At Chancellorsville we gained another victory; our people were wild with delight—I, on the contrary, was more depressed than after Fredericksburg; our loss was severe, and again we had gained not an inch of ground and the enemy could not be pursued."

Across the Rappahannock, disaffection within the officer corps of the Army of the Potomac rose to new heights. Some officers lambasted Hooker's foolish bravado; others hinted that his drinking had contributed to the failure. When Lincoln visited the army after the battle, he was cornered by a pair of corps commanders, Couch and Reynolds, who pleaded with the president to remove Hooker. For his part, Hooker kept a positive tone in his public pronouncements. He praised the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac for their performance and made vague promises about starting a new offensive against the Confederates. In his opinion, the debacle was the result of the shortcomings of others rather than his own. He blamed three people in particular for the defeat—Stoneman, for not cutting Lee's line of communication; Howard, for not properly protecting the army's flank on 2 May; and Sedgwick, for his abortive effort to attack Lee in the rear. Hooker summed up his view thusly: "The trust I had reposed in commanders was not executed in a manner satisfactory to myself, and in a way that it would have been done could I have given the operations of these commanders my personal supervision."

General Hooker survived his critics, as Lincoln opted to keep him in command. More trouble, however, was coming their way. If Lee was frustrated by not having crushed the Union Army at Chancellorsville, the victory had at least opened the door for him to pursue his strategic goal of invading the North. On 14 May he ordered his troops forward into Maryland and then Pennsylvania. In early July, the Army of Northern Virginia would once again meet the Army of the Potomac in battle, this time at the sleepy town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Here, one of the most decisive battles of the American Civil War would be fought. Chancellorsville's greatest legacy, therefore, was that it set the stage for this most dramatic event. But while Chancellorsville's fate was to be overshadowed by the battle that was to come, it still has a lot to teach us about generalship, strategy, tactics, courage, and the challenging conditions under which the men of both sides fought the epic struggle that was the American Civil War.

The Author

Bradford A. Wineman is an associate professor of military history at the United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College. He earned his doctorate in history at Texas A&M University and has published several essays on the Civil War in Virginia. His current research focuses on military education in the antebellum and Civil War South.

Further Readings

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For more information on the U.S. Army in the Civil War, please read other titles in the U.S. Army Campaigns of the Civil War series published by the U.S. Army Center of Military History.

Map Symbols

Military Symbols

Confederate	Union	
		Units of various strength
		Cavalry Units of various strength
		Axis of Advance
		Axis of Retreat
		Unit Movement
		Pontoons

Vegetation

Woods

General Symbols

Buildings

Church

Major Road

Minor Road

PIN : 103167–000