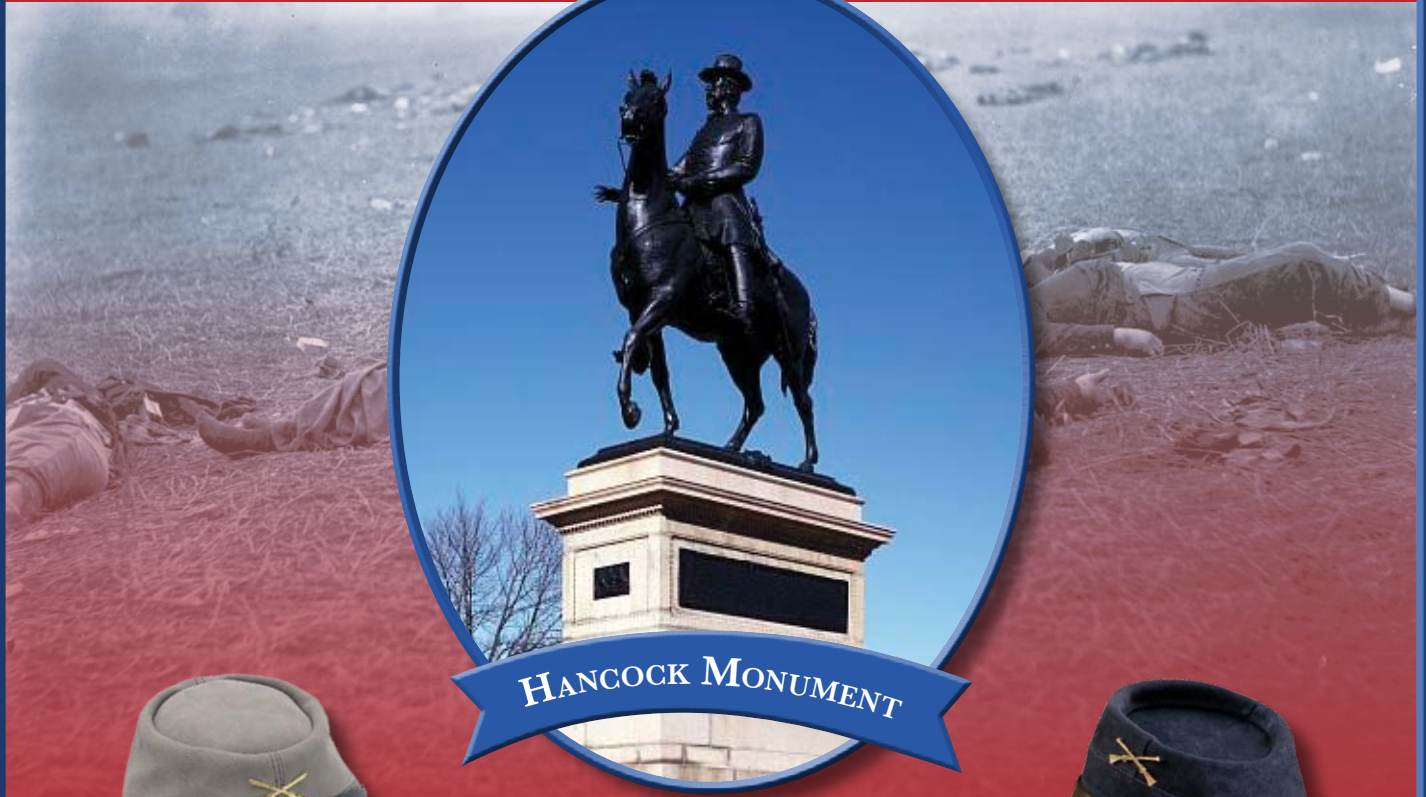


Slaughter on Cemetery Ridge

DURING THE FIRST THREE DAYS OF JULY, 1863, GETTYSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA WAS THE SITE OF ONE OF THE BLOODIEST BATTLES OF THE CIVIL WAR.



HANCOCK MONUMENT



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Slaughter on Cemetery Ridge

ARTICLE

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<http://www.americanheritage.com/content/slaughter-cemetery-ridge-0>

BY STEVEN SEARS

Stephen W. Sears, three-time winner of the Fletcher Pratt Award for Gettysburg (Mariner Books 2004), Chancellorsville (Houghton Mifflin 1996), and Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam (Houghton Mifflin 1983), is a former editor of American Heritage magazine.

Not until 2:30 p.m. on July 3, 1863, did the ear-splitting bombardment finally slacken on the rolling farmland of southern Pennsylvania. Nothing like it had ever been experienced before in America, or would be again. “The very ground shook and trembled,” wrote a witness, “and the smoke of the guns rolled out of the valley as tho there were thousands of acres of timber on fire.” For close to 90 minutes, 163 Confederate cannon had blanketed the Union battleline in a bedlam thick with smoke and deadly iron fragments. The Union guns replied at a more measured pace, saving ammunition for what was to come, but still added their measure to the unendurable din.

Then, as the thunder died away, it appeared that a god of battles was stage-managing the scene: a breeze sprang up to part the thick curtains of smoke and reveal ordered lines of Confederate troops in their thousands striding out of the woods across the open fields toward Cemetery Ridge. Up on the ridgeline the ranked Union soldiers took in the sight and involuntarily cried out, “Here they come! Here comes the infantry!”

“None on that crest now need be told that **the enemy is advancing**,” wrote Union Lt. Frank Haskell. “Every eye could see his legions, an overwhelming resistless tide of an ocean of armed men sweeping upon us!” What history records as Pickett’s Charge would climax the great three-day struggle ominously north of Washington and make or break Robert E. Lee’s attempt to gain a decisive victory on northern soil. On the first day Lee had won the initial round of fighting; on the second day his attacks on both Union flanks only narrowly failed; now, after an

unprecedented bombardment intended to pulverize the defenses, he thrust 13,000 infantrymen against the Union center.

But the management and direction of the bombardment had been faulty—even the ammunition was deficient—leaving the defenders’ lines largely intact. Union Gen. George G. Meade, only days in command of the Army of the Potomac, had prepared well to meet the charge, especially with his own massed artillery. Meade and his artillery chief, Henry J. Hunt, ordered their guns to cease fire to lull the Confederates into thinking that the way was clear for their infantry. And then Hunt’s guns—more than 100 of them—did open, slaughtering the stunned infantry: “They were at once enveloped in a dense cloud of smoke and dust. Arms, heads, blankets, guns and knapsacks were thrown and tossed into the clear air...A moan went up from the field, distinctly to be heard amid the storm of battle.”

Soon both the attackers’ flanks had been savagely beaten in by the Union batteries, wrecking Pickett’s Charge beyond recall even before the Union infantry finished the fight. The 20th Massachusetts, for example, took careful aim at the Confederate regiment advancing upon it “& then bowled them over like nine pins, picking out the colors first,” wrote Maj. Henry Livermore Abbott. “In two minutes there were only groups of two or three men running round wildly, like chickens with their heads off. We were cheering like mad.” In a final desperate lunge a few hundred attackers breached the Union center, only to be crushed by a counterattack. Abruptly it was over. Those attackers who had survived the terrible cannon and rifle fire drifted back toward the sheltering woods. What General Lee termed “the grand charge” was a grand failure,

dashing his—and his new country’s—hopes for victory in Pennsylvania.

That same July 3, indeed that same midafternoon, almost a thousand miles south by southwest of Gettysburg, Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant met with Confederate Gen. John C. Pemberton to arrange for the surrender of the latter’s besieged army in Vicksburg, Mississippi. The next day—four score and seven after the signing of the Declaration—bore witness to the two great Union victories. Pemberton officially surrendered Vicksburg, and Robert E. Lee started his beaten Army of Northern Virginia back to whence it had so recently set off with such high hopes. The Civil War would rage on for two more bloody years, but July 3, 1863, marked out at last the path to eventual Union triumph. ★

ADDITIONAL AMERICAN HERITAGE RESOURCES:

“Lincoln the Orator”
by Harold Holzer

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“What They did There”
by Bruce Catton

[www.americanheritage.com/content/
what-they-did-there](http://www.americanheritage.com/content/what-they-did-there)

“Why the Civil War
Still Matters”

by James McPherson

[www.americanheritage.com/content/
why-civil-war-still-matters](http://www.americanheritage.com/content/why-civil-war-still-matters)

“The Day the Civil War Ended”
by Bruce Catton

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day-civil-war-ended](http://www.americanheritage.com/content/day-civil-war-ended)

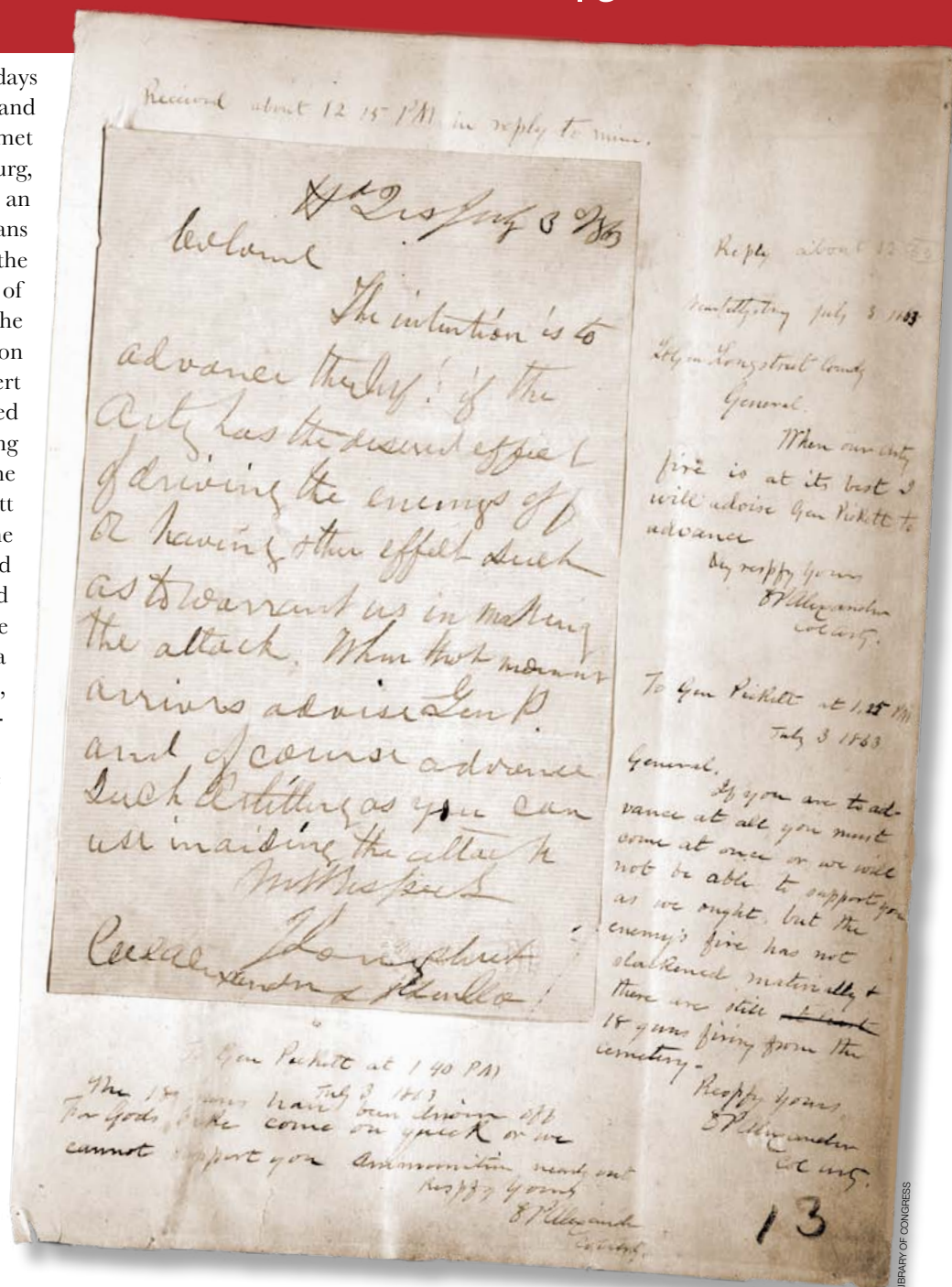
Slaughter on Cemetery Ridge

BATTLEFIELD DISPATCHES GETTYSBURG | JULY 3, 1863

During the first three days of July 1863, Union and Confederate forces met in battle at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, an encounter that many historians consider the turning point in the Civil War. The culminating event of the battle was Pickett's Charge, the unsuccessful assault on the Union center ordered by Gen. Robert E. Lee (1807-1870) and executed by numerous troops, including an infantry division under the command of Gen. George E. Pickett (1825-1875). Preparations for the famous charge, which occurred on the battle's third day, included the traditional artillery barrage described in these documents. In a letter written on the field of battle, Gen. James Longstreet (1821-1904) informed Col. Edward P. Alexander (1835-1910), reserve artillery commander, of the intended Confederate advance, which he said would be dependent on Alexander's battery providing the necessary artillery support. Longstreet also ordered Alexander to advise General Pickett when to initiate the charge.

Having retained Longstreet's order, Alexander later mounted the item on a larger backing sheet and added to it copies of his battlefield dispatches to both Longstreet and Pickett, which depict the increasing urgency of the Confederate position. At 1:25 p.m., Alexander wrote to Pickett, "If you are to advance at all, you must come at once or we will not be able to support you as we ought . . ." Fifteen minutes later, the artillery commander wrote again to Pickett, "For God's sake come on quick or we cannot support you. Ammunition nearly out."

Although Pickett's name is associated with the failed charge, he did not command the attack, and his troops comprised only a portion of



Letter, Gen. James Longstreet to Col. Edward P. Alexander; and copies of Alexander's battlefield dispatches to Longstreet and Gen. George E. Pickett during the battle of Gettysburg, 3 July 1863.

—Edward P. Alexander Papers

the advancing columns. He was responsible for forming the brigades involved in the charge and conducted himself honorably throughout the engagement. Still, history has treated him unfairly, and he will forever bear the onus of defeat. ★

—Janice E. Ruth and John R. Sellers, Manuscript Division

Slaughter on Cemetery Ridge

Transcripts

Received about 12:15 PM in reply to mine 12 hrs July 3, 1863

Colonel

The intention is to advance today: if the Arty has the desired effect of driving the enemy off or having the other effect such as to warrant us in making the attack. When the morning arrives advise Gen P. [General Pickett] and of course advance such artillery as you can use in aiding the attack.

With Respect
J Longstreet
Col. Alexander

To Gen Pickett at 1:40 PM
July 3 1863

The 18 guns have been ??? off For gods sake come on quick or we cannot support you Ammunition nearly out

Respectfully Yours
EP Alexander
Col Arty.

Reply at about 12:30 Near
Gettysburg July 3 1863
Gen Longstreet Comd.

General,

When our arty fire is at its best I will advise Gen Pickett to advance

Respectfully Yours,
EP Alexander
Col Arty.

To Gen Pickett at 1:25 PM
July 3 1863

General,

If you are to ad-vance at all you must come at once or we will Not be able to support you as we ought, but the enemy's fire has not Slackened materially + there are still at least 18 guns firing from the cemetery-

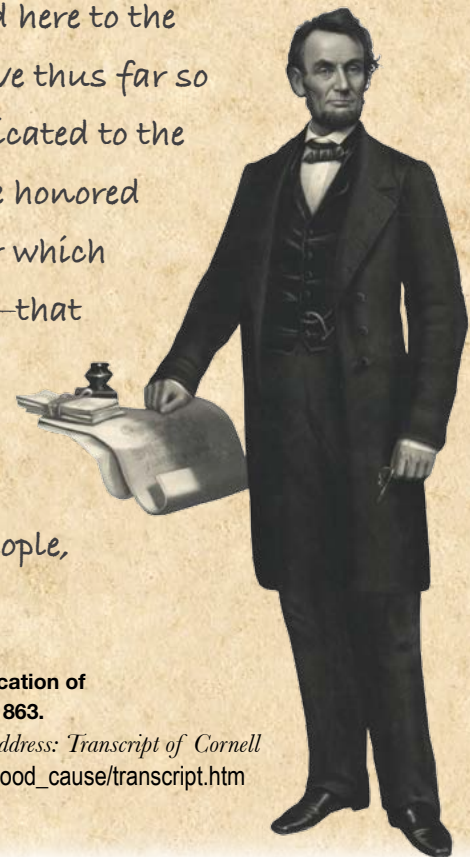
Respectfully Yours,
EP Alexander
Col Arty.

Slaughter on Cemetery Ridge

THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

DURING THE FIRST THREE DAYS OF JULY, 1863, GETTYSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA
 WAS THE SITE OF ONE OF THE BLOODIEST BATTLES OF THE CIVIL WAR.

“Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives, that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”



**President Lincoln delivered his famous speech at the dedication of
 the Gettysburg Civil War Cemetery on November 19, 1863.**

Lincoln, Abraham. “The Gettysburg Address.” November 1863. The Gettysburg Address: Transcript of Cornell University’s Copy. 25 February 2013. http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/gettysburg/good_cause/transcript.htm

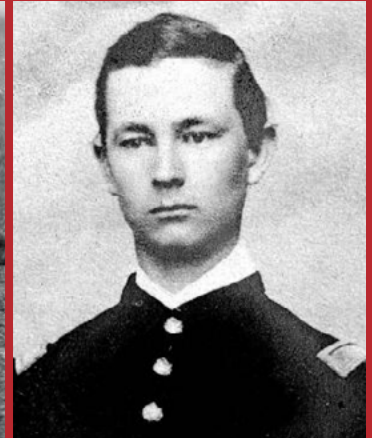
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Slaughter on Cemetery Ridge

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www.army.mil/gettysburg/statistics/statistics.html



Dead soldiers on battlefield at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, above left.

William J. Fisher, 10th U.S. Infantry was killed on July 2, 1863. He was 19 years old, above right.

The Battle of Gettysburg was costly on a scale that is hard to imagine today. A soldier in the civil war had about a 1 in 4 chance surviving. Below are some comparisons to other conflicts and events in American History.

Information About Soldiers

Conflict	Number Serving	Total Deaths	Battle Deaths	Other Deaths	Wounded
Revolutionary War	N/A	4,435	4,435		6,188
War of 1812	286,730	2,260	2,260		4,505
Mexican War	708,718	13,283	1,733	11,550	4,152
Civil War		624,511		514,411	475,881
Confederate Army		260,000	94,000	166,000	194,000
Union Army	2,213,363	364,511	140,414	224,097	281,881
Battle of Gettysburg	157,289		7,058		33,264
Confederate Army	75,000	28,063			
Union Army	82,289	23,049			
Spanish-American War	306,760	2,446	385	2,061	1,662
World War I	4,734,991	116,516	53,402	63,114	204,002
World War II	16,112,566	405,399	291,557	113,842	671,846
Korean War	5,720,000	36,574	33,747	2,833	103,284
Vietnam Conflict	8,744,000	58,209	47,424	10,785	153,303
Persian Gulf War	2,225,000	382	147	235	467
September 11, 2001	N/A	2,992			6,379