



*Nobody Can Truly Understand
the Battle of Gettysburg
Without a Solid Understanding of
the Battle of Chancellorsville*

by Eric J. Wittenberg

*Originally published as a blog post on Emerging Civil War
June 17 & 19, 2015*

Although I am best known as a “Gettysburg guy,” I have long been absolutely fascinated by the battle of Chancellorsville. In May 2015, I spent two and a half days leading a tour of the sites associated with the Chancellorsville campaign for several fellows who hired me. The preparation re-focused me on the battle, and my primary theme for the tour was “in order to truly understand Gettysburg, you have to have a very solid understanding of Chancellorsville.” It was one of our major focuses, and after finishing the tour, I am more convinced than ever that this is a true statement. I’ve written

OPPOSITE: GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN—Confederates struck north in early June 1863, and Federals, in two wings, gave cautious pursuit. In doing so, though, Federals cut off Confederate cavalry under Jeb Stuart from the main body of Lee’s army, leading to complications for the Army of Northern Virginia. The Army of the Potomac faced complications of its own when Lincoln switched commanders on June 28.

about this topic previously on my own blog, but I have come to additional conclusions that only further validate my thoughts on the subject.

The most obvious implication for Gettysburg is the mortal wounding of Stonewall Jackson. When his own men inflicted a mortal wound on Jackson, it meant that there would be tremendous changes ahead for the Army of Northern Virginia. At the time of the battle, the Army of Northern Virginia consisted of two extremely large corps, commanded by Jackson and James Longstreet. Most of Longstreet's command was not at Chancellorsville; all but McLaws's and Anderson's divisions were besieging Suffolk. It appears that Robert E. Lee had already decided to restructure the army into three corps even before Jackson's wounding, but doing so would have required identifying only one new corps commander.

After Jackson's mortal wounding, Lee now had to identify two new corps commanders, not just one. He restructured the army by transferring some units from Lt. Gen. James Longstreet's First Corps and units from Jackson's command to create the brand-new Third Corps. Other units from the defenses of North Carolina were added to the Second and Third Corps as well. Only Longstreet—Lee's "warhorse," as he called Longstreet—had any experience commanding such a large body of men. The other two—newly promoted lieutenant generals Richard S. Ewell and A. P. Hill—were both returning from wounds (Hill was wounded with Jackson by friendly fire) and both were in questionable states of health. Hill was the likely candidate for promotion since he had excelled at division command, but he proved to be nearly a non-factor at Gettysburg due to his delicate health. Ewell, who had lost a leg to a combat wound, was understandably not the same man after his wound. High strung and nervous under the best of circumstances, Ewell eventually proved incapable of handling the stress of corps command and was unceremoniously relieved of command after a near nervous breakdown during the 1864 battle of Spotsylvania Court House.

I have never been a fan of "what if's," and the question about what Jackson might have done at Gettysburg drives me nuts. My normal response is "Had Jackson been at Gettysburg, he would have been in an advanced state of decomposition." However, one point about this bears making. Lee was used to giving Jackson vague, discretionary orders with a high degree of confidence that Jackson would make the right decisions. Rather than adjusting his style to reflect the personalities of Ewell and Hill, Lee

continued the same practice with Ewell, in particular. At Gettysburg on July 1, Lee gave Ewell a vague, discretionary order to take Culp's [Cemetery?] Hill "if practicable." That undoubtedly had a different meaning to Ewell than it would have had to Jackson.

Others argue that with the passing of Jackson the Army of Northern Virginia lost its offensive punch. While I don't necessarily agree, there is no disputing the fact that the army would never again be the same. The restructuring of the army and its being broken out into three corps meant that it took the field for its most important battle with two untested and inexperienced corps commanders instead of one. There is no way to determine just how critical that was, but there is no doubt that it had a significant impact on the outcome of the battle.

I also believe that a deep understanding of Chancellorsville adds insight into what Lee was trying to do at Gettysburg. Even after the great tactical success of Jackson's flank attack, the Federals still had a decent chance to fight Chancellorsville to a tactical draw if Hooker had not panicked, ordered some questionable reactive moves, and eventually retreated from the field. Confederate forces again achieved a major tactical victory on the first day at Gettysburg and Lee followed up on the second day with his divided forces attacking at several points involving both of Meade's flanks. In my opinion, Lee's victory at Chancellorsville involved a collapse of the morale and moral fiber of the Union high command more so than a collapse of the Union fighting men. An attempt by Lee to do something similar to Chancellorsville failed at Gettysburg because Maj. Gen. George G. Meade—Hooker's successor as commander of the Army of the Potomac—and his lieutenants were far more resolute and confident in their ability to shift forces to blunt Lee's thrusts than was Joe Hooker, who admittedly lost his nerve.

At the same time, the lopsided Confederate victory had one very real and unforeseen consequence. The combination of the two stunning victories at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville made both Robert E. Lee and the men who followed him into battle believe that they were invincible. Lee's plan at Chancellorsville violated virtually every conventional rule of war: he was outnumbered more than two to one, he divided his army in the face of the enemy, and he took the offensive against the accepted odds. Incredibly, those risky gambles paid off, and his army thrashed Hooker at Chancellorsville, even if it came at a frightful toll. Such success inevitably



Chancellorsville marked the “high tide” of the Confederacy—Robert E. Lee’s last major offensive battlefield victory. It was all downhill after that, starting with Gettysburg. *ECW*

made both Lee and his troops believe that they were invincible, and those men paid the price for that arrogance eight weeks later at Gettysburg, especially those who took part in the Pickett-Pettigrew-Trimble charge on July 3, 1863.

When both Jackson and Hill were wounded at Chancellorsville, the next ranking officer in the corps, Maj. Gen. Robert E. Rodes, had just been promoted to divisional command and was in no way prepared to assume command of a large corps. Rodes recognized his shortcomings and deferred command to Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart, Lee’s cavalry chief. To Stuart’s undying credit, he performed magnificently in that role, leading Jackson’s battered men in a hard day of brutal, bloody fighting on May 3. Stuart wanted permanent command of the corps and felt he had earned it by virtue of his fine performance at Chancellorsville. Lee, however, evidently felt the army was better served by having Stuart remain as the eyes and ears of the army and returned the cavalier to his regular command after the battle. Some armchair psychologists have speculated that Stuart’s disappointment over not being given permanent command of Jackson’s corps caused him to become determined to do something spectacular in order to prove that Lee was wrong. Personally,

I don't buy this theory for a moment, but it's persistent and worthy of attention.

Just as important, the heavy losses among the Army of Northern Virginia's brigade commanders changed the army's complexion at Gettysburg. As just one example, Brig. Gen. Frank "Bull" Paxton, Jackson's successor in command of the legendary Stonewall Brigade, was killed on May 3 during the heavy fighting for the Chancellorsville intersection. Brigadier General James Walker took command of the Stonewall Brigade, which took part in various actions at the battle of Gettysburg.

Lee took twenty-eight brigades into Chancellorsville. Nine of those brigades lost their commanders during the battle, and of those nine, three brigades lost multiple commanders. Lee also lost 64 of 130 regimental commanders at Chancellorsville. As a result of those losses, many of Lee's brigades went into battle at Gettysburg with inexperienced unit commanders.

The Army of Northern Virginia went into the fight at Chancellorsville with approximately 61,000 men. It took nearly 13,000 casualties there, or nearly twenty-two percent of the army's total strength. Thus, in turn, even with the return of the rest of Longstreet's command and the addition of some reinforcements, the Army of Northern Virginia's combat strength was significantly reduced by the time that the battle of Gettysburg opened on July 1. It meant that Lee's army, which was clearly the aggressor at Gettysburg, had a significant numeric disadvantage.

By contrast, the Army of the Potomac numbered nearly 134,000 at the outset of the Chancellorsville campaign. Hooker sustained 17,000 casualties at Chancellorsville, or just under thirteen percent of his army's total strength (although a significant number of two-year regiments saw their enlistments expire immediately after the battle, thereby greatly reducing the strength of Hooker's army). Even with the mustering out of the two-year regiments and the Chancellorsville losses, the Army of the Potomac took the field at Gettysburg with a significant numeric advantage. Further, the Union army did not take the heavy losses in its command structure that Lee's army suffered, even though Hooker's army suffered two division commanders killed (Hiram G. Berry and Amiel Whipple) and another one wounded (Charles Devens).

Lee's audacity in defying every accepted rule of warfare at Chancellorsville caused the unlikely Confederate victory there. Lee divided

his much smaller army in the face of the enemy and took the offensive even though it was outnumbered more than two to one. He left only 13,000 men in place to hold the body of the Army of the Potomac while sending the bulk of his army off on a daring and perilous flank march. The success of this audacious plan set the stage for the debacle that befell the Army of Northern Virginia on July 3, 1863. The victory at Chancellorsville apparently persuaded Lee that his army could not be beaten and that his men could do the impossible, as they were asked to do during the Pickett-Pettigrew-Trimble charge on July 3.

By losing his nerve at Chancellorsville, Hooker did Lee a great favor and service by not standing in place and holding his line as his subordinates urged. Had Hooker done so, the Army of Northern Virginia would have suffered even greater losses dashing itself against the rocks of Hooker's line at Chancellorsville. Those lighter losses made it possible for Lee's army to invade Pennsylvania. But for Hooker losing his nerve, there would have been no invasion of Pennsylvania at all, and hundreds of books would never have been written about that one battle—including several of mine.

Fighting Joe Hooker had two full infantry corps that were not heavily engaged at Chancellorsville. Major General John F. Reynolds's I Corps was one, and Maj. Gen. George G. Meade's V Corps was the other. Reynolds was very aggressive by nature, and it had to have driven him crazy to be held out of a large fight such as the one at Chancellorsville. Is it any wonder, therefore, that Reynolds pitched into the fray so eagerly at Gettysburg on July 1? His aggressiveness cost him his life that morning, but not before validating John Buford's decision to stand and fight at Gettysburg.

It also bears noting that Reynolds was reportedly offered command of the Army of the Potomac in May 1863, after the battle of Chancellorsville. Supposedly, Reynolds demurred because he would not be given a free hand and the ability to incorporate the Union garrisons at Harpers Ferry and Frederick, Maryland into the Army of the Potomac. It requires, of course, pure speculation in trying to ascertain what sort of army commander Reynolds might have made, but we do know one thing: at Gettysburg, he lost his life as a result of being somewhere he should not have been. A wing commander such as Reynolds had no business placing individual regiments in line—that's a brigade commander's job—and Reynolds's insistence in doing so exposed him to the bullet that claimed his life. This suggests

that Reynolds might have micromanaged the army. But he made what was probably the single most important decision of the battle of Gettysburg when he validated John Buford's choice to hold and defend the high ground and ordered the I Corps to come up and deploy.

Similarly, George Meade's V Corps also didn't do much fighting at Chancellorsville after the first day. Meade's advance had gained crucial high ground east of Chancellorsville on May 1. However, Hooker later withdrew from the commanding high ground—leaving it to Lee's army—and instead took up a position on much lower ground at the Chancellorsville intersection. Ultimately, his army was clobbered after Hooker ceded the initiative to Lee. Again, is it any wonder that George Meade was so determined to hold the good high ground at Gettysburg?

Major General O. O. Howard's performance at Chancellorsville was atrocious. Howard, the commander of the XI Corps, ignored reports of a large enemy force operating on his flank and did nothing to prepare his men for an onslaught. Consequently, the XI Corps was overwhelmed and driven from the field. It never had a chance. Even though elements of the XI Corps stood and fought hard, its poor leadership set it up for failure and unfairly exposed it to becoming the laughingstock of the army. Incredibly, the same thing happened again at Gettysburg. Howard deployed two divisions of the XI Corps on an exposed plain sitting immediately below high ground held by Confederate artillery. There was a huge gap between the left of the XI Corps line and Brig. Gen. John Robinson's I Corps division on Oak Hill, and both flanks of the XI Corps's position were in the air. When Maj. Gen. Jubal A. Early's Second Corps division crashed into the flank of the XI Corps at Barlow's Knoll, it rolled up the XI Corps line and sent it flying in the face of an attack it never really had a chance to stop. The common fighting men of the XI Corps fought well in both instances but became the scapegoats of the army because they happened to be the command that broke and ran on both occasions. Those men deserved better.

Major General Darius N. Couch, commander of the II Corps at Chancellorsville, was the senior subordinate officer in the Army of the Potomac. When Hooker was relieved of command of the Army of the Potomac at his own request on June 28, 1863, Couch would have been next in line for command of the army. However, Couch, who was utterly disgusted by Hooker's terrible performance at Chancellorsville, refused to serve under

Hooker's command any longer and requested a transfer. He was sent to assume command of the Department of the Susquehanna at Harrisburg. How Couch would have done in command of the army—instead of George Gordon Meade—is one of those daunting “what if’s” that we will never be able to answer. Couch's transfer made it possible for Meade to end up in command of the army a scant three days before the beginning of the battle of Gettysburg, and, fortunately for the Union, Meade was the right man in the right place at the right time.

Further, Couch's request to be relieved from the Army of the Potomac made it possible for Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock to assume command of the II Corps, rather than commanding a division as he did at Chancellorsville. Hancock's performance at Gettysburg was nothing short of magnificent on all three days of the battle. Had Couch not been transferred out of the Army of the Potomac, there is no guarantee that he would have been appointed to command the army. As such, he would have remained in command of the II Corps, thereby blocking Hancock from playing such a critical role in the Union victory at Gettysburg.

At Chancellorsville Hooker had sent his entire Cavalry Corps, save for one brigade, off on a terribly ill-advised and extended raid behind enemy lines, thereby leaving his army blind and without any sort of an effective screen. That, in turn, meant that the XI Corps flank was uncovered and in the air, setting it up to take the brunt of Jackson's flank attack. Hooker then used the Cavalry Corps commander, Maj. Gen. George Stoneman, and its senior division commander, Brig. Gen. William W. Averell, as his whipping boys for the humiliating defeat that he suffered at Chancellorsville. Stoneman left the army on May 15 to seek treatment for a horrific case of hemorrhoids (as an aside, can one imagine how horrible hemorrhoids must be for someone who spent his days in the saddle? It's no wonder that Stoneman has been described as crusty and dyspeptic) and never returned to the Army of the Potomac. He blamed Averell in particular for the fact that his command met heavy resistance at the beginning of his raid and turned back. Hooker fired Averell and shipped him off to the backwater of West Virginia where Averell proved himself to be the most successful raider of the war.

Separate and apart from the strategic blunder of leaving his army without eyes and ears, Hooker's choice of scapegoats had far-reaching implications for the mounted arm of the Army of the Potomac. Removing

its two senior officers from the equation left Brig. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton as the next ranking officer in the Cavalry Corps. Pleasonton was a xenophobic toady, a schemer, a prevaricator, and a “lead from the rear” sort of fellow. However, Pleasonton also had a keen eye for talent and he made the controversial choice to promote three young captains to brigadier general on June 28, 1863: George Armstrong Custer, Wesley Merritt, and Elon J. Farnsworth. Custer and Merritt both played major roles in the Union’s victory in the Civil War, and Farnsworth died a hero’s death at Gettysburg. Pleasonton’s assumption of corps command



No one can truly understand the Peach Orchard at Gettysburg without a solid understanding of what happened to Dan Sickles at Hazel Grove at Chancellorsville. *LOC*

also meant that his senior brigade commander, Brig. Gen. John Buford, became the commander of Pleasonton’s old division, the First Cavalry Division. Buford’s contributions to the battle of Gettysburg are well-documented. But for the scapegoating of Stoneman and Averell by Hooker, Buford probably never would have had the opportunity to choose the battlefield at Gettysburg or to make the magnificent stand that he and his troopers made on July 1, 1863. Further, the Army of the Potomac’s Cavalry Corps might not have accomplished the feats that it achieved during the second half of 1863.

I’ve saved the most important implication for the Army of the Potomac’s performance at Gettysburg for last. Tammany Hall politician Maj. Gen. Daniel E. Sickles commanded the Army of the Potomac’s III Corps at both Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. Sickles, an amateur soldier, was nothing if not aggressive. Early on the morning of May 3, Sickles was ordered to give up some very commanding high ground called Hazel Grove over his objections. Immediately after Sickles withdrew his men from Hazel Grove,

more than thirty pieces of Confederate artillery occupied the plateau and used it as a firing platform, pounding Sickles's men from that high ground.

As a result, Sickles was determined not to give up high ground where Confederate artillery could then be employed to hammer his men again. At Gettysburg on July 2, Sickles was ordered to hold the southern end of the Union line. Portions of the Cemetery Ridge line were considerably lower than a plateau along the Emmitsburg Road near the Joseph Sherfy peach orchard. Determined not to find himself in another Hazel Grove situation, Sickles disobeyed orders and moved his entire corps forward to that high ground along the Emmitsburg Road, creating a large salient. When Longstreet's sledgehammer attack came that afternoon, before Meade could order Sickles to pull back, Sickles's III Corps was nearly destroyed, and only a cannonball that took off Sickles's leg prevented the general from being court-martialed by George Meade. There can be no doubt that the die for Sickles's move forward at Gettysburg was cast at Chancellorsville, and that his move forward nearly cost the Army of the Potomac the opportunity to win the battle of Gettysburg.

Once all of these factors are analyzed, it seems fairly obvious that one cannot truly understand the battle of Gettysburg without a solid understanding of the battle of Chancellorsville and its far-reaching consequences for both the Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac. Hopefully, this brief discussion will help you to see this linkage and that it will encourage you to explore these parallels on your own.