

Grant vs. Lee

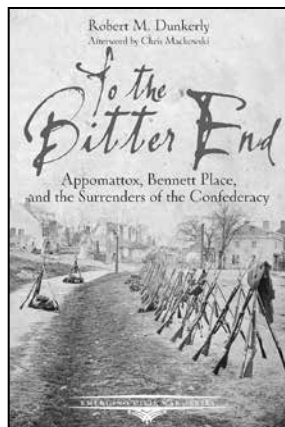
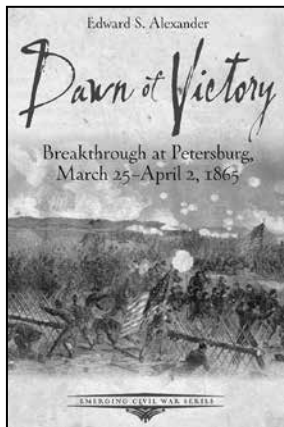
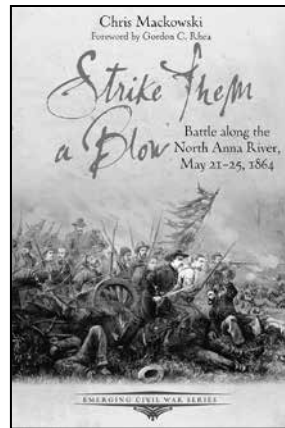
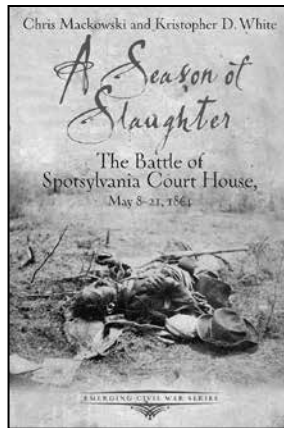
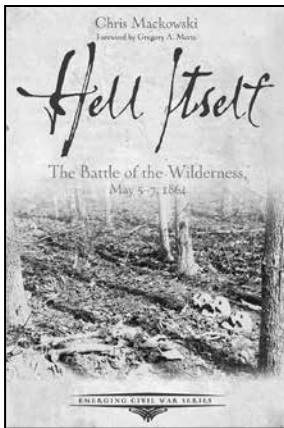
Favorite Stories and Fresh Perspectives
from the Historians at Emerging Civil War

Edited by
Chris Mackowski & Dan Welch

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Savas Beatie
California

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DAN:

Dedicated to the men and women who served in our two “forever wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan. “Thank you” does not begin to cover the debt of gratitude our country owes each and every one of you.

May future generations that know us not
always and forever remember your sacrifice.

CHRIS:

To Edward Alexander and his wife, Alison,
and their newborn daughter, Madison Grace,
who “emerged” into the world as this book was heading to press.

We jointly dedicate this book
to ECW’s friends Gordon Rhea and A. Wilson Greene
for their years of support, mentorship, and good example.



Chris Heisey

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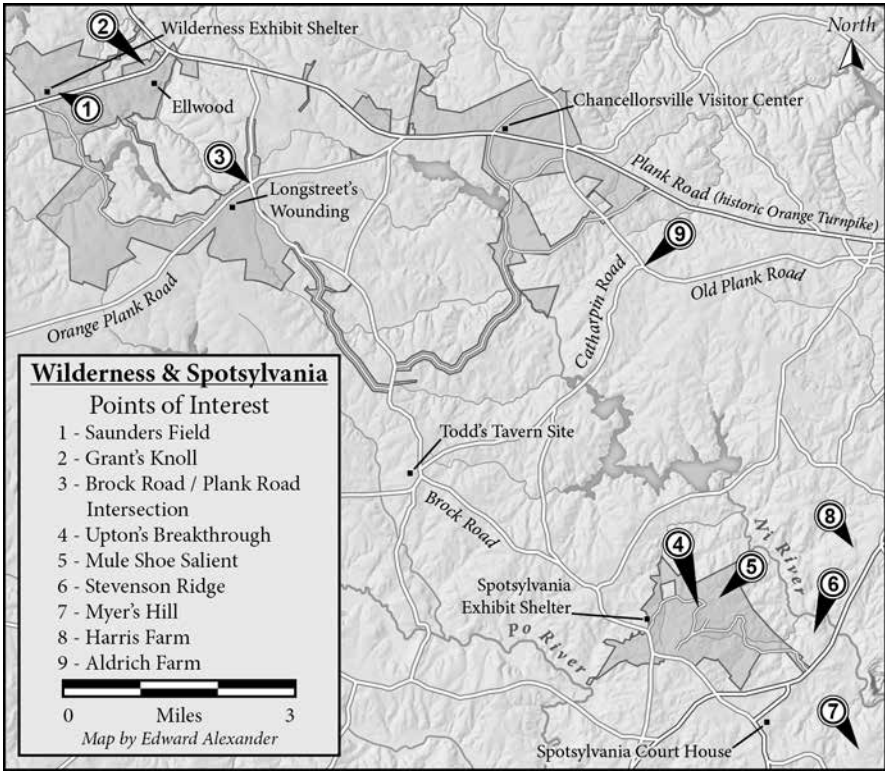
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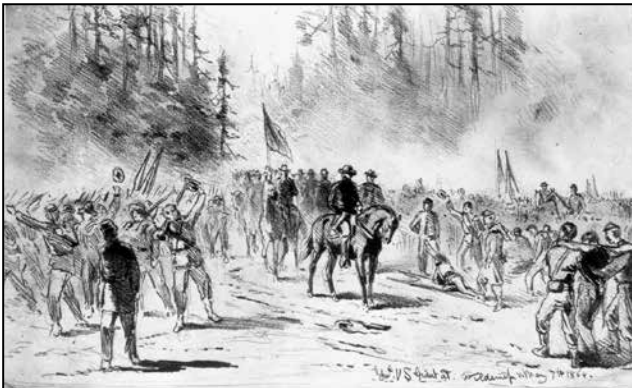
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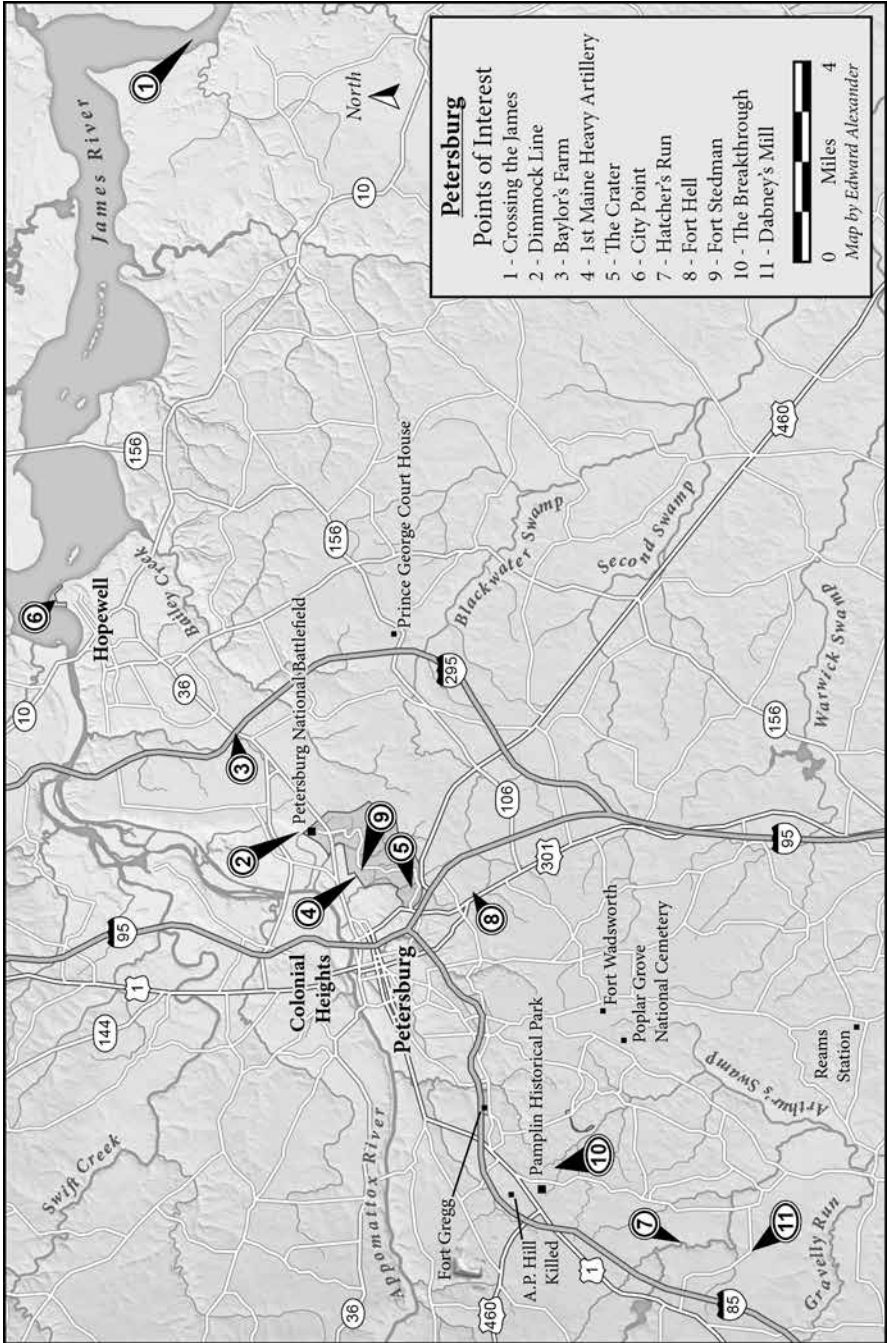


WILDERNESS & SPOTSYLVANIA (ABOVE) AND PETERSBURG (OPPOSITE)—Particular points of interest discussed in some of the essays are marked on these maps for easy reference. The shaded areas represent property owned by the National Park Service; however, a number of other preservation groups and private entities also own and protect land, historical structures, and other properties associated with the Overland Campaign, the Siege of Petersburg, and the Appomattox Campaign.



From “Point of Interest” 3 (above): Union troops cheer Ulysses S. Grant at the Brock Road/Plank Road intersection. Grant’s decision to march south out of the Wilderness, rather than retreat, changed the fundamental dynamics of the war. The fight between Grant and Robert E. Lee would be unlike anything the war had yet seen.

Library of Congress





Editors' Note

Emerging Civil War serves as a public history-oriented platform for sharing original scholarship related to the American Civil War. The scholarship we present reflects the eclectic background, expertise, interests, and writing styles of our cadre of historians. We've shared that scholarship not only on the Emerging Civil War blog, but also in the pages of the Emerging Civil War Series published by Savas Beatie, in other general-audience and academic publications, at our annual Emerging Civil War Symposium at Stevenson Ridge, on our monthly podcasts, and even through social media.

Our Emerging Civil War 10th Anniversary Series captures and commemorates some of the highlights from our first ten years.

This compendium includes pieces originally published on our blog; podcast transcripts; and transcripts of talks given at the ECW Symposium. It also includes an assortment of original material. Previously published pieces have been updated and, in most cases, expanded and footnoted. Our attempt is to offer value-added rather than just reprint material available for free elsewhere.

Between the covers of this series, readers will find military, social, political, and economic history; memory studies; travelogues; personal narratives; essays; and photography. This broad range of scholarship and creative work is meant to provide readers with a diversity of perspectives. The combined collection of material is *not* intended to serve as a complete narrative of events or comprehensive overview. Rather, these are the stories and events our historians happened to be interested in writing about at any given time. In that way, the collection represents the sort of eclectic ongoing conversation you'll find on our blog.

As a collective, the individuals who comprise ECW are encouraged to share their own unique interests and approaches. The resulting work—and the respectful discussions that surround it—forward ECW’s overall effort to promote a general awareness of the Civil War as America’s defining event.

Another of ECW’s organizational priorities is our ongoing work to identify and spotlight the next generation of “emerging” Civil War historians and the fresh ideas they bring to the historical conversation. (Some of us were “emerging” when ECW started up ten years ago and have perhaps since “emerged,” but the quest to spotlight new voices continues!)

Most importantly, it is the common thread of public history and the ideals of interpretation that so strongly tie our seemingly disparate bodies of work together. America’s defining event should not be consigned to forgotten footnotes and dusty shelves. As public historians, we understand the resonance and importance history’s lessons can have in our modern world and in our daily lives, so we always seek to connect people with those great stories and invaluable lessons. Emerging Civil War remains committed to making our history something available for all of us—writers, readers, historians, hobbyists, men, women, young, old, and people of all races and ethnicities—and by doing so, making it something we can engage, question, challenge, and enjoy.

Please join us online at www.emergingcivilwar.com.

A Note About This Volume:

Grant vs. Lee covers a tremendous amount of ground, but that means there’s also a lot of ground we couldn’t cover. Many great stories go untold. This collection is intended not as a comprehensive chronicle of the last eleven months of the war but as a sampler of some of our favorite stories from that time period. For reasons of space, we also chose to stick to the main event, as it were, and avoid related side actions like Bermuda Hundred, Yellow Tavern, New Market, Wilson’s Wharf, Trevilian Station, Monocacy, or the 1864 Valley Campaign. That’s not to diminish the importance of any of those events or the value of the wider context they offer. For more information, we have several relevant titles in the Emerging Civil War Series (see pg. ii).



Acknowledgments

First and foremost, as editors, we'd like to thank our colleagues at Emerging Civil War, past and present. ECW has always been and remains a team effort. We've worked with some wonderful historians, writers, and "emerging voices" over the past decade, and we're proud to show off some of that work here. We are deeply appreciative of the folks who contributed content to this series and to this specific volume.

Thanks, too, to Theodore Savas and his entire team at Savas Beatie, with a special thanks to our editorial liaison, Sarah Keeney. Ted took a chance on us when we were still a young blog, accepting Kris White's pitch for the Emerging Civil War Series. That proved to be a game-changer for us. Together, ECW and Savas Beatie have produced some great work, and we're thankful to Ted for agreeing to help us celebrate ECW's tenth anniversary by allowing us to produce more great work. We thank everyone at Savas Beatie for all they do to support the work of Emerging Civil War.

One of ECW's prime directives is to help our contributors make opportunities for themselves. Edward Alexander's development as a cartographer over the past few years has been a perfect illustration of that guiding principle. We're proud of his work, and we're grateful for the maps he's contributed to this volume. Visit him for cartography services at www.makemeamapllc.com. (And, yes, Edward's "Make me a map" is a reference to Stonewall Jackson's directive to Jed Hotchkiss in March 1862.)

That said, we've been extremely lucky to work so long with cartographer Hal Jespersen, whose maps have been a distinctive part of the Emerging Civil War Series; we're pleased to include some of his maps in this volume, as well.

Sarah Kay Bierle, as ECW's managing editor, manages the content on the blog on a daily basis. Her work made it a lot easier for us to collect the material we've assembled in this volume. Our official un-official archivist, Jon-Erik Gilot, has helped us make it easier to access our past work.

Christopher Kolakowski, as our chief historian, provides overall quality control for our work, offering a soft but firm guiding hand. Dan Davis previously served in that role, and Kris White, as one of our co-founders,

originated that role. Our thanks to all three of them for ensuring a high bar for our writers in service to our readers.

Thanks to John Foskett and Patrick McCormick, who both reviewed the text and made valuable suggestions and observations.

And a big thank-you to Chris Heisey for always being willing to contribute *one more* photograph as the design of this book continued to evolve.

Finally, a special thanks to co-founders Chris Mackowski, Jake Struhelka, and Kristopher D. White, whose brainstorming over beers, cigars, and history led to ECW's creation. To quote Kris's wife, "Not too bad for three idiots sitting on a porch."

* * *

Chris: My thanks to Dan Welch for his heavy-lifting on this volume. He's been an apt pupil and fun partner to work with as he learned the editorial ropes. My best of luck to him as he flies out of the nest!

Thanks to Aaron Chimbel, dean of the Jandoli School of Communication, for his ongoing strong support of my work. Thanks, too, to former deans Pauline Hoffmann and Lee Coppola for the similarly strong support they showed during their tenures.

Finally, as always, my thanks to my family, especially my kids, Stephanie, Thomas, and Sophie Marie (my first grandchild!); Jackson; and Maxwell James. Most of all, thanks to my wife and partner, Jenny Ann, who's been by my side through most of this and still hasn't left me on a battlefield yet.

* * *

Dan: As always, I'd like to send my continued thanks to Chris Mackowski and Ted Savas for the opportunity to serve as an editor for this series. Their excellent tutelage continues to be a blessing in my own writing and editing.

To all of the contributors to this work, thank you. It has been a true delight to learn from your "emerging voices" and your vast array of knowledge on this period of the war.

Lastly, to my great friends in the field: Billy, Kevin, Mark, Matt, Phill, and Rob. I have learned, and continue to learn, so much from each of you about every facet of public history, the American Civil War, and the Revolutionary War—but perhaps more importantly, the finer points on cigars, beer, and classic outlaw country music.



Foreword

by Christopher Kolakowski

On April 9, 1864, Lt. Gen. U. S. Grant, commander of all United States Armies, issued his orders for the upcoming Virginia campaign to his principal field force, the Army of the Potomac. Instead of aiming to capture the Confederate capital of Richmond as in so many previous campaigns, hunting and destroying Gen. Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia would be army's objective. One year later, Lee's force capitulated to Grant a week after Richmond's fall.

The 1864 battles in Virginia pitted both sides' two great commanders, Grant and Lee, against each other for the first time. Through years of campaigns and victories, both men emerged as exemplars of their respective causes. Their backgrounds presented a considerable dissimilarity: Lee the deep-rooted Virginian versus Grant with his many homes in the Midwest. Lee's long service in the United States Army contrasted with Grant's resignation of his commission in the 1850s. Even in personal appearance, the dapper Lee stood opposite the modest and rumpled Grant. Yet despite their differences, both men compiled admirable combat records in the 24-27 months prior to May 1864.

In the spring of 1864, each side cloaked their champion in the aura of George Washington. In the Confederacy, Lee's army was in a position analogous to General Washington's Continental Army of the War for Independence. Although Confederate arms had sustained many defeats in other theaters, as long as the Army of Northern Virginia stayed in the field there was a hope of Confederate victory and independence. The fact that

General Lee was related to Washington by marriage, and was the son of one of Washington's senior leaders, didn't hurt either.

In Washington, D.C., U. S. President Abraham Lincoln persuaded Congress to recreate the grade of lieutenant general and promoted Grant to that rank. He was only the third officer to hold it, joining George Washington and Winfield Scott (the latter by brevet). This promotion elevated Grant into the pantheon of great American field generals, including General Washington, and doubled down on the idea that Grant was the man to win the war.

The battles in Virginia in 1864 and 1865 involved some of the highest stakes in American military history. In the fighting's background loomed the 1864 U. S. presidential election—the first of its kind in history ever held in the midst of a civil war. Virginia was politically the most important theater of war; battlefield victories by Lee would ruin Lincoln's reelection and give the Confederacy arguably its best chance for negotiated independence. On the other hand, a Lincoln reelection meant prosecution of the war to U. S. victory, followed by a reconstruction involving the abolition of slavery. In short, the very existence and future of the United States rested on the outcome of Grant's operations against Lee.

These outside factors added an edge to the fighting, as both sides strained every sinew toward victory. The 1864-65 Virginia campaigns occurred with a scale and sustained violence unmatched in American military history until World War II and seldom seen since. When Grant's and Lee's forces first met in the Wilderness on May 5, 1864, they did not break contact until Lee's surrender at Appomattox 11 months and 4 days later. In that time, they fought several intense battles, including two of the war's bloodiest; contested numerous skirmishes and other smaller actions; and grappled through nine months of siege that foreshadowed the horrors of World War I fifty years in the future. The intensity and duration of these operations burned into the psyche of the U. S. Army, and Grant's campaigns have since been called the birth of an American Way of War.

Such an eventful period of American military history offers much to teach and inspire. Naturally, it has been a focus of Emerging Civil War's authors, and much of that scholarship is included here. Even at the space of sixteen decades, these stories continue to have power long after the guns have fallen silent.







Photographing Grant vs. Lee

by Chris Heisey

For more than 30 years, I have been photographing our nation's sacred Civil War battlefields. While I live close to Gettysburg and Antietam and find them endlessly enchanting to photograph, my favorite hallowed fields to explore are the great battlefields of the 1864 Overland Campaign. Monuments sparsely dot the landscape, and suburban sprawl continuously threatens the sanctity of places whose names are seared into all our collective Civil War minds. Immense carnage happened between Fredericksburg and Richmond in that wicked spring and early summer of the war's last year. Whether it be the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna River, or the environs of Cold Harbor, these fields are remarkably beautiful and peaceful today, yet if you still yourself long enough there is a foreboding sense of dread that still lives here in in the heart of Virginia.

Some time ago, I got a voicemail message that changed my life in a good manner. "The call," as my family called it, came from Gordon Rhea, who inarguably remains the preeminent historian of the Overland Campaign. Gordon has authored five full book studies on the fighting between the war's two great generals: Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee.

After a few days of touring the battlefields with Gordon and a few veteran National Park Service historians, I went from an almost novice student of these pivotal battles to having a more modest grasp of what happened over this roughly 50-mile stretch of Central Virginia. "Have at it, Chris," Gordon told me. Shoot what you want and when you want over the next year, he said, and we will assemble a book called *In the Footsteps of Grant and Lee*.



Page vi: The 15th New Jersey monument at Spotsylvania. *Chris Heisey*

Page xiii: From the ground up at Cold Harbor. *Chris Heisey*

Pages xxii-xxiii: The Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania. *Chris Heisey*

Page xxv: Tudor Hall at Pamplin Historical Park. *Chris Heisey*

Page xxvi: Ellwood on the Wilderness Battlefield. *Chris Heisey*

Page xxvii: Fortifications at Petersburg National Battlefield. *Chris Heisey*

Pages xxviii-xxix: The Crater at Petersburg. *Chris Heisey*

Pages xxx-xxxii: A Reflection of the McLean House at Appomattox Court House. *Chris Heisey*

Grant's relentless flanking maneuvers and Lee's masterful defensive retreats make this campaign fascinating to study as a chess match. But in my year of visiting nearly every square mile of this campaign, what struck me most about this ultimate turning point of the war is the uncanny endurance and fortitude of the common soldier in the ranks for both the blue and the gray. Many of these soldiers were hardy veterans of many other great battles, but even more were raw recruits drafted to replace the dwindling ranks of both the Union Army of the Potomac and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. For many, these battles would be their first and last fighting.

Whether I shot battlefields on frosty mornings when the temperature was



two degrees on a December morning at Saunders Field in the Wilderness or on a day that exceeded one hundred degrees at Cold Harbor's Garthright House, I was always reminded of the conditions these mostly still boys fought in. There is no escaping the eeriness of the Mule Shoe at Spotsylvania in the mist of dawn in May where the fighting raged all day long. There are places in the Confederate works where men died stacked five deep, so deadly was the carnage in the mud-filled trenches.

It was one of the best years of my life shooting these battlefields, rivers, and swamps. I found a sort of peace at Widow Tapp Farm that awed me as autumn's splendor surrounded me in a spectrum of color. Whenever I return to these moving sites, I remember the privileged project that changed me as a photographer. Never do I take beauty for granted any more, nor do I fail to appreciate our hallowed grounds that so many preservationists have fought to save so that we all can better recall and ponder the immensely important issues that the 1864 Overland Campaign ultimately decided.

But most importantly, through the camera's lens I learned the importance of not forgetting the day-after-day horror that the blue and the gray who fought for Grant and Lee endured those many years ago.

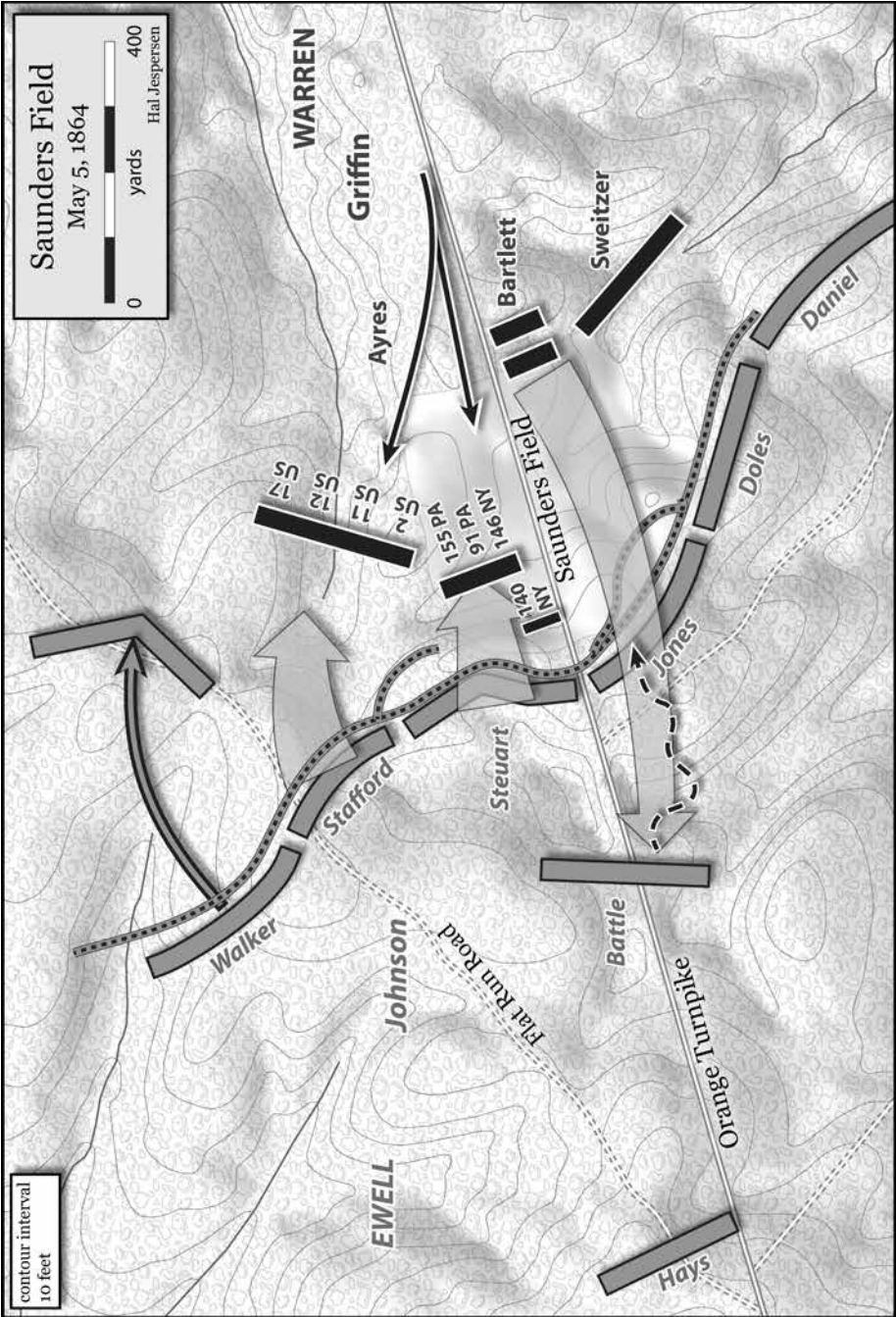














"Goodbye from Your Soggy Boy": One Last Letter Before the Wilderness

by Sarah Kay Bierle

Point of Interest #1 on the map on pg. xiv.

*Originally published as a blog post
on Emerging Civil War on May 1, 2019*

Sometimes he signed his letters “with affection” or “good-night” or “good-bye.” Sometimes he wrote his full name, other times just initials, sometimes with the familiar name to his family and friends: “Will.” Most of his correspondence went to his younger sister “Jennie” and was addressed to the family home in Sebec, Maine. Will had left home in August 1862 when he was eighteen, enlisting in the 20th Maine Regiment, Company B.¹ He had already survived long months of campaigning and camp life, had fought at Gettysburg, and had been one of the fortunate ones to recover from dysentery and a lengthy hospital stay.

On May 3, 1864, twenty-year-old Private William P. Lamson wrote his

¹ William P. Lamson, edited by Roderick M. Engert, *Maine To The Wilderness: The Civil War Letters of Pvt. William Lamson, 20th Maine Infantry* (Orange, VA: Publisher’s Press, 1993), 9.

OPPOSITE: SAUNDERS FIELD—On the north side of Saunders Field, Ayres’ brigade split when faced with Confederate fire from multiple angles, diluting the power of its attack. On the south side of the field, Bartlett’s brigade broke through the Confederate line, but regiments became isolated from each other in the thick foliage and had to either retreat or fight their way out. Sweitzer’s brigade could offer little support because it, too, was tangled in the foliage.

sister a brief letter, just another in the series of correspondence that had traveled between Virginia and Maine in the past two years. If he had premonitions about his fate in the coming battle, he did not tell sixteen-year-old Jennie.

Camp Near Culpeper, Va.

May 3rd, 1864, evening

Dear Sister,

I expect that before you receive this we will be across the Rapidan and no knowing how much farther. We came about 4 miles on Sunday and today 5 or 6.

I know Wm. C. Brown as well as anyone else in this Co. He is a drummer now. I should advise you not to answer that advertisement in the Observer for letters, or any other. The one you speak of was from one of the teamsters who don't amount to much anyway. When you answer advertisement you needn't write to me – They only want letters for sport or they can't get anybody to write that knows them.

I came by that "Miss Terius" honestly, but don't understand how it ever came on our doorstep at home.

It's late and I must close. Give love to all.

We'll soon be in business.

Good bye from your soger boy,

Will²

Parts of Will's letters are cryptic to modern readers, though they would have made perfect sense to Jennie. She seems to have asked for advice about writing to other soldiers, and here her older brother advises her to be wary of the guys who just wanted entertainment by writing to impressionable girls. He takes a protective stance even though he is hundreds of miles away.

Will mentions a mystery letter that had been delivered to home instead of him, but either did not know the details of its origins or did not feel it necessary to explain to his sister. Throughout the previous months, Will had repeatedly asked for information about "the girls" back home, but did not

seem to single out one particular lady, casting doubt that this is a reference to a beginning romance.

Militarily, Will does not reveal much. Common soldiers did not attend war councils and were not informed of the campaign plans. Like his comrades, he knew battles were ahead, but certainly not the details or order of march beyond his brigade. Will correctly surmises that they would cross the Rapidan River.

On the night of May 3, 1864—probably just hours after he signed and sealed the letter for Jennie—the 20th Maine marched to the riverbank and, the following morning, crossed at Germanna Ford. Part of General Joseph Bartlett’s brigade, General Charles Griffin’s division, V Corps, Army of the Potomac, the regiment headed into the Wilderness.

On May 5, Confederates noticed Union pickets near Saunders Field, and Lt. Gen. Richard S. Ewell’s Rebels hastily constructed trenches (some can still be seen today) and barricades from tree branches. While the soldiers skirmished, the generals decided. Major General George G. Meade ordered Maj. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren’s V Corps to attack at Saunders Field, but Warren took a long time to get the troops into position.

Private Will Lamson and his comrades in the 20th Maine found themselves in the second line of battle.³ Pressured by Grant and Meade, the V Corps commander ordered an assault by General Griffin’s division without waiting for support to arrive via the traffic jammed Wilderness roads. By the time the 20th Maine soldiers reached the edge of the open field, the first line of battle ahead of them was already about halfway across.

Plunging forward, the regiment ran through a firestorm of bullets, but forced the Confederates to abandon their position. Enthused, the Union men pressed forward through the trees to another clearing—only to halt in horror. The 20th Maine got flanked and suffered from intense Confederate fire. Captain Walter Morrill, commander of Company B, rallied his men and other broken units, managing to briefly halt the Confederate counterattack, giving others time to retreat.⁴ This Union attack ultimately failed, though, and the battered regiments fell back, ending one short chapter in the Wilderness’s bloody and intense history.

3 John J. Pullen, *The Twentieth Maine* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1957), 184.

4 *Ibid.*, 187.

Will made this charge with the 20th Maine. But it is unclear how far he went or if he fought in Company B's defense. At least 85 men were killed, wounded, or missing from the regiment after this charge and retreat.⁵ Will Lamson was one of the fallen.

According to family records and stories, Will died on May 5, 1864—the same day as the attack on Saunders Field. Regimental records suggest he was badly wounded, captured by Confederates, and died shortly after. One comrade later informed the family that he had last seen Will lying under a tree, wounded.⁶ Will's body was never identified or recovered; perhaps he is buried in the Wilderness or in an unmarked grave in Fredericksburg National Cemetery. In the family plot in Maine, a memorial gravestone has been added.

Will Lamson's last letter to his sister is a reminder of young soldiers far from home. He did not detail a campaign or tell her about boiling coffee. He tried to give brotherly advice. Will knew that "business" (battle) loomed, but he addressed it casually to avoid worrying Jennie. He usually downplayed dangers and battles to her, always trying to shield or protect her from his experiences.

Will's final moments or hours went unrecorded. The day Jennie received news of her brother's death also went unrecorded. However, based on evidence through years of letters, it does not seem wrong to suppose that if he was conscious, Will thought about home and about Jennie. He may have hoped Jennie would never know the details about the ending of his life; let her remember him as the soldier brother who wasn't afraid and who had marched off to war in '62. Pain, danger from blazing flames, and a deep consciousness of being alone without comrades likely marked the end of his life.

It was late. He had to go. Loving thoughts struggled to hold him longer, for more moments of living. But "business" was over. Somewhere, not far from Saunders Field in the dense Virginian Wilderness, Will Lamson—the "soger boy"—had to say a final goodbye to all that he loved and held dear.

5 Ibid., 191.

6 Lamson, 98.