

Episode 143: Gettysburg and Vicksburg

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This week provided some of the greatest action of the entire Civil War and in many ways represented the moment when the tide finally turned against the Confederacy. From this point on, the Confederacy would be largely on the defensive as Union forces began to close in from all sides.

In Pennsylvania, Confederate forces under Robert E. Lee were wreaking havoc across the state but Lee was uneasy because the eyes of his army, the cavalry under J.E.B. Stuart, were still far from where Lee wanted them. Lee sent orders requesting his scattered troops to come together at a small town called Gettysburg.

As Lee's men moved toward the town on July 1, skirmishers under Confederate general A.P. Hill encountered Union troops west of town that they believed to be Pennsylvania militia. They were surprised when they could not dislodge them, not knowing that these were dismounted Union cavalry under John Buford, some of the best in the entire army. Buford's men were able to hold off the Confederates long enough for troops under the command of John Reynolds to reach the town and join in the fighting. Chaotic fighting ensued north and west of Gettysburg. By the end of the day, the Union troops had withdrawn to high ground behind the town on Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill.

Lee was very disappointed that his men had not pursued the enemy more aggressively and had allowed them to secure the heights. There was an underlying sentiment among the Confederates that had Stonewall Jackson, who had recently died from his Chancellorsville wounds, been there that the Union would have been pushed off the heights. During the night,

more troops arrived for both sides and the Union extended their line southward two miles along Cemetery ridge to Little Round Top. Lee's plan on the second day of battle was to maneuver to Little Round Top and attack the Union flank, rolling up George Meade's army like a carpet. Due to Stuart's continued absence, Lee did not realize how far the Union line extended and the Confederates under James Longstreet were beaten back by a heroic charge of the 20th Maine under Joshua Chamberlain.

Having failed to take either end of the Union line, on July 3 Lee attacked its center. The Confederate attack that day has become known as Pickett's charge and in many ways the moment that charge was repulsed represents the time that the Confederacy began to recede into history. On the evening of July 4, Lee began to retreat towards Virginia and his armies would never again invade the north.

To compound the bitter disappointment for the Confederates, on this same day the Confederate forces under John Pemberton at Vicksburg surrendered to Ulysses Grant. With the surrender, the Confederacy was effectively cut in half. The fighting men and civilians at Vicksburg had suffered through a horrendous siege, resorting to eating dogs and rats toward the end. With the Mississippi River port town now under Union control, vital supplies from the western part of the Confederacy could no longer make it to the east and traffic up and down the river would be completely under Union control. The vise was beginning to tighten on Jefferson Davis's fledgling nation.