

The Road to Cold Harbor and Fighting Around Dallas

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During the last week of May, 1864, the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia maneuvered from their positions near the North Anna River closer towards the Confederate capital, while in north Georgia there was fighting along the lines near Dallas and New Hope Church.

In Virginia, minor fighting erupted along the Confederate defensive lines near the North Anna. Determining that the rebel positions were too strong for a major assault, Ulysses Grant on the evening of May 26 instead began yet another swing to his left, this time to Hanover town, some eighteen miles to the southeast. In writing about the combat that had occurred along the North Anna, historian E.B. Long has written that “Once more Lee had halted Grant, but Grant continued the strategic offensive.” By the following day, Union cavalry reached Hanover town, after engaging in a number of skirmishes with southern horsemen, but the Federal infantry was still enroute. Robert E. Lee quickly moved his army from the North Anna to meet the threat and to defend Richmond.

On May 29 the Federals were south of the Pamunkey River and moving closer to Richmond, but Lee organized defenses north of the Chickahominy—not far from where George McClellan’s Peninsula Campaign had stalled two years before. On May 30, Lee launched an attack at Bethesda Church in an effort to slow the Federals, but it had little impact. During this period Grant received reinforcements to bolster his depleted ranks in the form of the Eighteenth and part of the Tenth Corps, thus increasing his numerical advantage over Lee. By May 31, Grant directed his cavalry under Philip Sheridan to occupy the important crossroads of Cold Harbor, located just ten miles from Richmond. A small rebel cavalry force under Fitzhugh Lee

held the position, but was quickly driven off. Both armies then established defensive positions in the area that stretched for miles. Over the next week the Federals would launch a series of attacks along the Cold Harbor lines that would fail miserably—marking a low point for Grant and the Army of the Potomac.

While the two opposing armies battled in Virginia, William T. Sherman continued his advance in north Georgia. After evacuating Cassville and Kingston, Confederate General Joseph Johnston had set his Army of Tennessee in positions at Allatoona Pass, before moving towards a position near Dallas and New Hope Church in response to a swing by the Federals to the west. On May 25, Union troops under Joseph Hooker attacked John Bell Hood's portion of the line but were repulsed. The following day Sherman pushed forward additional elements of his three armies. There was heavy skirmishing but little significant movement as both sides built strong entrenchments. Sherman planned to attack Johnston's right flank at Pickett's Mill on May 27, but Johnston anticipated the maneuver and sent reinforcements to that location. The result was a defeat of the attack by Oliver Howard's Twentieth Corps with heavy losses. Johnston then briefly took the offensive, but the attack by William Bates' Division was not well supported and quickly ground to a halt. The major fighting around Dallas had ended by the close of the month, and Sherman moved his armies eastward to resume his advance along the line of the Western and Atlantic Railroad.

By the end of a month of perhaps the bloodiest fighting of the entire war, Ulysses Grant and William Sherman had advanced close to both Richmond and Atlanta, but Robert E. Lee and Joseph Johnston had kept their armies intact and still represented dangerous threats. The fighting would only continue as the weary nation faced a summer of continuous conflict.

