

Episode 192: Grant Crosses the James

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Early on the morning of June 12, 1864, two of Ulysses Grant's aides returned to camp after conducting a reconnaissance to the James River. Following the disastrous Battle of Cold Harbor, Grant had been sitting tight and planning his next move. His aides provided information that helped Grant decide to sneak away from his opponent Robert E. Lee during the night. Before Lee knew he was gone, he would move south, cross the James on a pontoon bridge and head toward capturing Petersburg. Grant hoped he might be there before Lee even knew he was gone.

After dark on June 12, with bands playing to mask the noise of troop movements, Grant got his forces underway. Cavalry under Major General Gouverneur Warren stayed on the western edge of the troops to shield them from any Confederate prying eyes. By early morning on June 13, the Confederates finally figured out that the opposing trenches were empty. By this time, the Union army had a healthy head start.

Grant still needed to get his men across the James. His scouts had chosen Weyanoke Point as the best place to get the troops over the river, but it was going to be a challenge. At this point the river was 2,100 feet wide and the currents in the middle were quite strong. The river was over 100 feet deep in the middle and the level went up and down more than four feet with the change in tides. Grant's engineers were faced with the task of designing and building what would be the war's longest pontoon bridge. A pontoon bridge is a temporary bridge made by placing the bridge decking material on top of a series of flat boats called pontoons.

Beginning on June 14, Grant's engineers constructed the bridge in only eight hours. One hundred and one pontoons were used and a number of larger boats were used to anchor the

center of the bridge against the heavy currents. The engineers even made the center of the bridge removable in case naval traffic needed to go up or down the river.

Over the next several days, Grant got his army across the bridge while Lee was still trying to pin down his plans and whereabouts. Warren's cavalry kept up the ruse that Grant might still be planning on attacking Richmond. The line of men and wagons stretched fifty miles in length as the entire army filed across the bridge. By June 18, the troop movement was completed and the amazing bridge was dismantled.

By the time the last Union soldier was across, Lee had figured out Grant's intention to take Petersburg and was racing men across his interior lines to try to head him off. The resulting siege of that city would bring what Lee knew was the inevitable end of the war. The Overland Campaign that concluded with Grant's crossing of the James River was one of the most intense periods of violence in the Civil War. Between May 22 and the crossing of the James, the Confederates had suffered 7,000 casualties while the Union's devastating losses totaled 18,000. But in Grant, Lee had finally met an opponent who would not back down. Grant knew that every Confederate casualty was irreplaceable and he was quite willing to pound at Lee's army until he submitted. The end was only about nine months away.