

The Hampton Roads Conference and More Fighting at Petersburg

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By early February 1865, it was clear to most in both the north and south that the Confederacy was near defeat. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia defended the siege lines around Petersburg and Richmond, while William Sherman's forces, having earned fame in the North and infamy in the South for his actions in capturing Atlanta and undertaking the March to the Sea, had now moved into South Carolina. Sherman moved northward from Savannah, overcoming obstacles such as felled trees, burned bridges, and flooded rivers, and facing only scattered rebel opposition. Against this backdrop several important military and political events would take place.

As mentioned last week, discussions had been underway for some time about a meeting to be held between the two sides to discuss an end to the war, and Confederate President Jefferson Davis had appointed three commissioners—Vice President Alexander Stephens, Assistant Secretary of War Robert Hunter, and former Supreme Court Justice John Campbell, to meet with President Lincoln and Secretary of State William Seward. The two groups met on February 3, 1865, at Hampton Roads, Virginia, aboard the vessel *River Queen*. After initial conversations between old acquaintances Lincoln and Stephens, the two sides came to the main reason for the meeting. Lincoln informed the southerners that the minimum requirement for a cease fire would be that the full authority of the Union be recognized and that the South give up its claims of independence and return to the Union. Under no circumstances would the United States recognize an independent Confederacy. There was some discussion about the possibility of a joint operation against the French in Mexico, but Lincoln insisted that such a proposal could not be entertained until the

Confederates had returned to the Union. There followed a discussion about future of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, with the Confederate participants later recalling that Lincoln and Seward thought of both documents as war measures that would eventually be adjudicated by the courts, and that the president favored gradual, compensated emancipation. After four hours the meeting adjourned with no agreement, concluding the only serious negotiations between the two sides about an ending to the war.

Other significant political news of week occurred in Richmond with the appointment of John C. Breckinridge as Confederate Secretary of War. He replaced the largely ineffective James Seddon, who had served in the position since 1862, but who had proven unable to adopt policies or strategies to reverse the decline in the South's military fortunes. A former U.S. Congressman, Senator, and Vice-President, and a Confederate general with a strong combat record, Breckinridge seemed a good choice to work with newly-appointed general-in-chief Robert E. Lee, but by this stage in the war he could make few meaningful changes.

Around the siege lines of Petersburg, Grant prepared to launch an attack on Lee's lines that would become known as his Seventh Offensive. On February 5, the Federal Second and Fifth Corps, along with cavalry, launched an attack towards Hatcher's Run. Their target was the Boydton Plank Road which supplied Lee's army from the south. In fighting over three days, the Federals were able to briefly gain control of the road, before being driven back by a Confederate counterattack. At the conclusion of the operation the Federals had still managed to extend their siege lines, forcing Lee to now cover approximately 37 miles of fortifications along the Richmond-Petersburg lines. Also, one of

Lee's fine young generals, John Pegram was killed in the fighting. Grant would make no further efforts to extend his lines prior to the attacks of late March and early April, which led to the capture of Richmond and Petersburg and, one week later, Appomattox.