

## **Episode 234: Richmond Falls**

**Week of March 29-April 4, 1865**

Since the early days of the war, taking the Confederate capital at Richmond had been perhaps the Union's highest military priority. As general after general failed in the attempt, it turned out to be the one general who pursued another goal that ended up taking the city. Ulysses S. Grant made it his mission to defeat the army of Robert E. Lee and his pursuit of Lee would lead to the fall of Richmond during the first week of April 1865.

On March 29, a Union force under Major General Phil Sheridan headed westward from Petersburg with the aim of turning Lee's left flank. Two days later infantry under Confederate Major General George Pickett and cavalry under Major General Rooney Lee intercepted the Union force at Dinwiddie Court House and temporarily drove them back. Pickett had his men withdraw back to what he deemed to be a more defensible position at a road intersection known locally as Five Forks, about twenty five miles west of Petersburg.

If his left flank was turned by Sheridan's men, Lee knew that his entire position around Petersburg and Richmond would collapse. For almost a year his thinning lines had held off Grant along an increasingly longer perimeter. If the position was penetrated it would disintegrate. In addition, Five Forks was along the Southside Railroad and losing control of those rails would effectively leave Richmond and Petersburg without supplies. Accordingly, Lee ordered Pickett to "hold Five Forks at all hazards." The life of the Confederacy literally depended on Pickett following these orders.

At this point in the war, even the generals were feeling the effects of dwindling food supplies. So perhaps it is understandable that Pickett accepted an invitation from Major General

Thomas Rosser to join him in a shad bake about two miles behind the front lines on the afternoon of April 1. In his absence Sheridan attacked. Due to an acoustic shadow, Rosser and Pickett were unaware that a battle had started until Union troops came into view at their camp. They narrowly escaped capture, but the leaderless Confederates were routed.

On the next day, April 2, Lee notified Confederate President Jefferson Davis that Five Forks had fallen and that Richmond and Petersburg must be evacuated. On this same day, an emboldened Grant ordered the final assault on Petersburg and the thin Confederate lines were overrun. During the assault one of the greatest Confederate heroes, Lt. General A.P. Hill was killed.

By the next day, April 3, Union troops were entering Richmond. Lee and his men had headed westward in an attempt to reach Danville and supplies and eventually to meet up with the remaining Confederate forces under Joseph Johnston in North Carolina. David had boarded a train for Danville late on the night of April 2. Richmond turned to chaos as the remaining government officials burned documents in the streets and kegs of alcohol were poured out to prevent Union soldiers from becoming drunk and destroying the city. Citizens, who had been driven to the point of starvation, were furious when they tore open the warehouses of speculators and found them filled with food and supplies. The city caught fire and much of the downtown was destroyed.

On April 4, President Abraham Lincoln entered the city. He toured the city and sat in the vacated chair in Davis's office. Since the war began in the spring of 1861 Lincoln had dreamed of taking Richmond and he was finally able to see the dream fulfilled.