

BATTLE OF BURGESS' MILL

By: Raleigh C. Taylor, Oct. 8, 1938

PETE-047

CRBIB# 402178

325/132537

---

Petersburg NMP

Property of  
National Park Service  
Southeast Regional Office

LIBRARY, PLANNING AND NATIONAL PRESERVATION MARO

UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
PETERSBURG NATIONAL MILITARY PARK  
PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA

*M. G. [Signature]*

N P S Reg 1
OCT 10 1938
Reg. Div. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Ch. Clk.
Personnel
Pl. & Devel.
Field Adm.
Fisc & Acc.

LIBRARY, PLANNING AND NATIONAL PRESERVATION MARO

October 8, 1938.

Property of  
National Park Service  
Southeast Regional Office

Memorandum for the Director.

The Petersburg Progress-Index has requested that, if possible, the Park Staff here write an article on the Battle of Burgess' Mill, October 27, 1864, for publication on the seventy-fourth anniversary of the battle.

The Progress-Index has been most cooperative in matters of publicity for this Park, and the enclosed article was accordingly prepared by Junior Research Technician Taylor. This work required very little time, approximately one day, for its production. It is believed that the publication of such articles encourages interest in the park. We, therefore, submit this article for your approval.

O. F. Northington, Jr.,  
Superintendent.

By  
(SGT) RALEIGH G. TAYLOR  
Junior Research Technician.

Atch.--5.

cc-Regional Director, R. 1, with article. ✓  
Fredericksburg office, with article.

BGT:R

THE BATTLE OF BURGESS' MILL.

OCTOBER 27, 1864.

Seventy-four years ago today the Battle of Burgess' Mill was fought. It was the last important engagement of the year, and almost the last successful attempt by the Confederates to halt the slow but steady extension of the Federal lines around Petersburg.

Grant, in the spring of '64, had moved toward Richmond from the north, but war is a topsy-turvy business, and perhaps it is not altogether surprising that autumn found him to the southwest of Petersburg, moving on the present U. S. Route 1 from the direction of Florida.

October 27 was a dark, cloudy day, but not a day for sleeping in either army. The Federal cavalry moved at 3:30 a.m., crossed Rowanty Creek, and met Hampton's pickets. Farther up stream, on the Vaughn road, the infantry of the Second Corps crossed soon after daylight, despite felled trees which blocked the ford, and the fire of a few Confederate pickets, which dropped some fifty men of the leading brigade. Each side lost an officer: Colonel Spalter, of Ohio, and Major Farley, of Georgia.

Two miles to the northwest, the Boydton Plank Road (now U.S. # 1) leading into Petersburg, crosses Hatcher's Run at Burgess' Mill, the present Beck's Beach. General Hampton, commanding the Confederate cavalry, devoted himself to making it an uncomfortable two miles for Hancock's and Gregg's men. It was already difficult country, with tangled undergrowth and blind woods roads. Fighting

from road to road, the two cavalry divisions, with Hart's Battery of horse artillery, held back the Federal advance. Major Hart, camped on the Plank Road near Gravelly Run that morning, had rushed his battery toward the sound of firing, placed two guns on Gravelly Run at the Quaker Road and sent the others to Hampton at Armstrong's Mill. With the aid of Major Barker, of Butler's South Carolina Cavalry, he found 125 men as support for his guns, and held up Gregg's advance until nearly noon. Young's Brigade arrived to protect Hart's withdrawal, but just as the movement was about to start, Major Hart was shot (he lost a leg from the wound). The blue cavalry streamed on toward Boydton road, where they arrived shortly after Hancock, whose infantry had made good progress, coming straight up the west side of Hatcher's Run after their encounter at the first crossing.

Near Burgess' Mill the battle began to take shape about noon. Confederate resistance stiffened as infantry came up along Hatcher's Run and the cavalry formed line across the White Oak Road. The Artillery, Hart, MacGregor, Graham, and two batteries under Colonel Pegram, fourteen guns, opened from two sides, at half mile range, upon the Federal infantry formation. They were answered efficiently by six guns of Beck's Battery.

Grant and Meade arrived while this was going on, and remained on horseback, watching the proceedings with interest and taking the danger with apparent indifference. Grant insisted on riding up close, accompanied only by Colonel Babcock. A shell exploded just under the neck of the general's horse, but did no damage. The telegraph wire

had just been cut and was lying on the ground. The horse stepped into a loop of this and was caught. Babcock dismounted and released the hoof, and presently, to the relief of the bystanders, the general completed his observations.

Meade also remained on horseback, in the open, and some of his staff, whatever their personal wishes, stayed out too, particularly since they were in the presence of Hancock and his staff, who had a reputation for gallantry and sarcasm as well. Several civilians who accompanied the party had no worries of this sort, and sheltered themselves behind large trees.

The cavalry, fighting dismounted, blazed away along the White Oak Road in a nip-and-tuck battle. General Hampton had two sons serving on his staff, and as his line started an advance, one of them, Preston, was shot from his horse and died a few minutes later. The other, Wade, going to his brother, was shot through the spine. General Hampton, after seeing his sons cared for, went on with his work, and took personal charge of one of the batteries. Major Barker, who had assisted Hart earlier in the day, was severely wounded at about the same time.

Hancock advanced two brigades along the Plank Road toward the Run. The Confederates had formed a barricade at a toll gate, but as General Egan remarked, "The Virginia highway regulations were not observed" and the Federals pushed through. They seized the bridge, and some skirmishers advanced over the stream. A caisson was captured and a Richmond-made Parrott gun destroyed by them. It seemed that the Confederates would be pushed back to

the Petersburg forts, for once across Hatcher's Run there were few natural obstacles in the way. It was now about 4 O' clock.

Firing had been heard farther down stream, but was attributed to the advance of the Fifth Corps. The Second Corps skirmishers had failed to connect with it however, and now a heavy volley from the woods made it clear that this was no Union force. Pierce's brigade was overwhelmed, two guns seized, and a Confederate line formed between Egan's division and the rest of the Corps. As might have been expected, this was General Mahone in action again. Luck was not with him this day however. Instead of breaking Hancock in pieces, the troops were caught between the Federal lines and driven out again, losing some prisoners. Nevertheless, the Confederate move stopped Egan's attack at the Run, and at the same time the grey lines pressed forward on all sides.

Hancock's ammunition was running low, it was almost dark, and a heavy rain had set in. The Fifth Corps troops, caught in the thick woods downstream, had succeeded in joining him, and retreat was now necessary, since morning would bring a stronger force. The roads were difficult enough to make necessary the abandonment of some of the wounded, who were left in neighboring houses. By a mistake some seventy men, under a Captain Farwell, of Minnesota, were left behind, and did not start back until after daylight, but made a successful escape though charged once or twice by cavalry.

The battle was another might-have-been, with no terribly heavy loss on either side. The Confederates had turned back one more attack: the Federals had gained the slight advantage of first hand knowledge of the ground. In fact, but for General Hampton's personal tragedy, which can still touch us across the years, it might seem at this distance to have been a comparatively pleasant excursion. It must be remembered however that but for the alertness of the defenders, Hancock's 10,000 infantry might well have completed the investment of Petersburg, and on the other hand, but for the bitter experience of a campaign which had pounded home the necessity of discipline and coolness, the sudden attack of Mahone could have made as bitter a day for the Second Corps as Hearn's station had been two months before. As it was, the battle appears as a fair valedictory for both a Confederate and a Federal commander: Hampton was soon to leave Virginia for battlefields nearer home, and Hancock left active service, was not to lead his beloved Second Corps in the victorious spring campaign. The year ended somewhat as it began. Grant was much closer to his goal, but still a long way from possession of the two cities, and Confederate counterstrokes continued to make every advance costly and difficult.

Property of  
National Park Service  
Southeastern Region Office