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THE BATTLE OF PEBBLES' FARM

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Petersburg National Military Park

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Many homely names--Bull Run, White Oak Swamp, Gaines' Mill, Pea Ridge, Bryce's Crossroads, Hamilton's Crossing--have played their part in American history. Very seldom, however, have two farms, twenty miles apart, given their names to battles on successive days. This happened in September, 1864.

On the 29th of that month-Grant himself watched the Army of the James storm Fort Harrison, on Chaffin's Farm, a mile north of the James River. Next morning the Army of the Potomac, southwest of Petersburg, was charging the half-completed trenches of the Confederates near Peebles' House, and the affair went down on the casualty lists as "Poplar Spring Church (or Wyatt's, Peebles', and Pegram's Farms, Chappel House and Vaughan Road)". The Confederates called it Jones' Farm. Apparently there was a certain amount of confusion as to just where the fighting had taken place. There was no doubt, however, that there had been fighting--there were 187 known Union dead, in addition to those lying unnoted in the thickets, and, no doubt, a comparable number of Confederates.

Admittedly, it was an unimportant battle--that is, it has failed to take any large place in history. Even the generals concerned ^{did not} ~~failed~~ to write their names very heavily on the page. Warren is remembered by some because a brash cavalry officer relieved him of command on the field of battle in April, 1865, so that while the Fifth Corps troops

were panting hot on the trail of Lee toward Appomattox, their erstwhile general took charge of the defenses of City Point--a place hardly needing defense against anything more violent than the tides of the James River.

Heth's portrait hangs in the Commonwealth Club in Richmond, and he was a fellow soldier with Grant in Mexico, but the Confederate division commander is hardly in the first rank of fame. The same applies to Parke, the Pennsylvanian who twice cured himself of malaria by accidentally taking fatal overdoses, but whose work as corps chief-of-staff and commander remains hidden in the same file with his soldiers'. Wade Hampton's political achievements after the war have made him better known, but few remember him as Jeb Stuart's successor in the cavalry command. These four--Warren, Parke, Heth, and Hampton--appear after three quarters of a century as the dramatis personae of our battle, although at least a word should be said for the supers, the gruff chorus of those who personally chaperoned muskets through the open fields and dark thickets of Dinwiddie County.

A manifold experience of war had fallen on the shoulders of most of these in the past few months, and certainly the armies were altogether different from what they had been in '61. Despite newer elements of weakness, due to lack of food and supplies on the Confederate side, and to the large number of recruits in the ranks on the Federal, both armies had learned most of the tricks of their trade, and neither side was likely to be caught napping. It was a contest of champions, much battered perhaps, and with no energy to use on superfluties, but

ring-wise, wary, and workmanlike.

Forty days had passed since the last major battle, a time insufficient for the Confederate force entirely to complete a new line laid out along the Squirrel Level Road southwest of Petersburg. However, the new Union push started on the other flank, in front of Richmond, where Grant, on the 29th, was able to write dispatches from a newly captured fort--the first time since June that such a thing had been possible.

Thereupon, despite an intentional show of movements behind the Federal works south of the Appomattox, Lee sent all the troops he could spare from Petersburg to meet the Army of the James. (An interesting comment on the shifts to which the Confederate general was resorting came two days later, when Grant discovered that prisoners from the same division had been taken at both Petersburg and Richmond, and so it was no longer possible to judge by this means the relative strength on either end of the line.)

A. P. Hill was left facing Meade at Petersburg. Meade, at midnight on the 29th, wired Parke and Warren to be ready to move at 5:30. Fifteen minutes later a second wire postponed the reconnaissance to 8 a. m. The final order to march came at ten minutes to nine, and 16,000 men, Griffin's division in the lead, crunched away on the road to Poplar Spring Church. Reconnaissances by cavalry and a brigade of infantry the afternoon before had told them what to expect in the first stages. Two hours later Confederate guns up ahead had started the Federal deployment, six hundred yards from a line of fresh earth visible in the open field,

from behind which came puffs of smoke.

Two of Griffin's brigades moved deliberately into line, and when all was ready trotted forward. Confederate shot spattered, but the blue lines kept on, leaving a few men behind, and swept across the parapet. A gun and seventy men of Dearing's Confederate Cavalry were taken. By three o'clock Griffin and Ayres, holding the line of captured works, connected by picket-line with the forts on the Weldon Railroad. The first round belonged to Warren's Corps.

Meanwhile, Parke, after difficulties with woods and swamp, was moving up on the extreme left. His right brigade did not connect with Warren, however, due to rapid advance and a call for support on the left. About 4:30 the Confederates, who must have watched the parade most intently, quickly drove a wedge into this gap, so effectively, despite their small force (a division each of cavalry and infantry), that the whole of Parke's two divisions reeled back half a mile, leaving 1,496 prisoners in the hands of Heth and Hampton, most of them from Potter's division, which had been caught too far forward. There were 514 Federal killed and wounded.

With all the skill and speed of the blow, Heth and Hampton, whose troops had struck it, did not have sufficient force to push it farther in the face of a rapid organization by the Federals of a new line supported by artillery. This line they proceeded to fortify, and it remained the most northerly position west of Petersburg until April, 1865.

~~The net result of the battle of Peebles' Farm was a Federal gain of two miles of ground at a cost of about 3,000 men of both sides, thus~~

~~bringing the value of Dinwiddie County land to a record high which has
endured to this date.~~

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