An Integrated Curriculum For The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

War Nears the Capital

- Student Activity: A Personal Side of the American Civil War
- Resource: Civil War Diaries, Letters and Manuscripts
- Post Reprint: “The day ‘Old Jube’ nearly took Washington”
- Map Study: Civil War Defenses of Washington
- Map Study: Fort Stevens and Battleground National Cemetery
- Post Reprint: “On a hot July day, Bethesda became a battleground”
- Post Reprint: “At Battle of the Crater, black troops prove their courage”

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As the District of Columbia was transforming into a capital city, it was a city targeted for attack by Confederate generals. To the north was Maryland, a slave-owning state. To the south across the Potomac River, Virginia was home to the Southern capital city of Richmond.

Only Fort Washington, built in 1808 south on the Potomac River to control river access, protected the vulnerable city. In order to better secure D.C., the Union army constructed 68 forts in a defensive ring. Former slaves assisted troops to build and maintain the fortifications.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

In the hot July of 1864, General Robert E. Lee ordered General Jubal Early, with around 20,000 troops, to strike D.C. from the north. Encamped at Rockville, Md., on July 10, Early was ready to attack Fort Stevens — and from here the Federal capital.

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A Personal Side of the American Civil War

Archivists work to preserve manuscripts. Historians carefully read diaries that have survived. Scholars enjoy the personal nature of letters. All look for clues to troop movement, time and place of activity, and mundane events and schemes to survive another day.

You too can understand how Americans dealt with friendly and enemy troops, disease and daily chores, changing seasons and disparate fortunes. Read the diaries, letters and manuscripts that are available online.

TWEET

Based on information gained from diary entries and letters, write tweets as if you were living then. Give a sense of war-time activities, impact on citizens and changes imposed on daily life.

WRITE A LETTER

After reading diary entries and letters from a particular state or region, write a letter to relate the impact of war upon people living there and soldiers from the area. You may use information in *The Washington Post*'s Civil War 150 articles and timelines to add insight.

BLOG

Read diaries, letters and memoirs of military leaders, foot soldiers and women who lived during the Civil War. Write a series of blog entries from the perspective of different individuals to give insight into the effects of a particular battle or skirmish.

Civil War Diaries, Letters and Manuscripts

http://www.vmi.edu/archives.aspx?id=3945
Civil War Letters, Diaries, Manuscripts
Annotated entries from the Virginia Military Institute Archives

http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cwd/
Civil War Diaries and Letters
A University of Iowa Libraries project

http://americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/exhibitions/nursing_1.html
The Diary of a Civil War Nurse
Smithsonian document file includes an interactive map of D.C. in 1863

http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mogenweb/cwdiary.htm
Diary of Mrs. Rachel Young King Anderson (1818-1898)
Written in Greene County, Missouri, the diary begins Aug. 26, 1861, and ends April 15, 1865.

http://www.rarebooks.nd.edu/digital/civil_war/letters/index.shtml
Manuscripts of the American Civil War
Letters and correspondence from the manuscript holdings in the Department of Special Collections, University of Notre Dame. Each is annotated to give a sense of person, time period, place and engagements covered.

http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war/article.html
Teaching with Documents: The Fight for Equal Rights: Black Soldiers in the Civil War
This lesson includes letters, photographs and military service records.

http://www.loc.gov/collection/diary-of-horatio-taft/about-this-collection/
Washington During the Civil War: The Diary of Horatio Nelson Taft, 1861-1865
Three volumes that document daily life in D.C. and events surrounding the assassination of Abraham Lincoln

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The day 'Old Jube' nearly took Washington

With Lincoln watching, the last rebel invasion of the North ended at Fort Stevens in the District

By Steve Vogel

• Originally Published April 24

Forty-one white headstones form two concentric circles around an American flag in the tiny graveyard that is tucked into the middle of a block on Georgia Avenue in Northwest Washington.

The two six-pound smoothbore guns guarding the entrance of Battleground National Cemetery seem out of place amid the surrounding apartment buildings. The immaculate one-acre plot, one of the country's smallest national cemeteries, draws scant attention from cars whizzing by, perhaps fitting for a little-remembered Civil War episode.

Yet 150 years ago, the fate of the capital, and, some feared, the Union, hung on the men defending Washington during the third and final Confederate invasion of the North. The soldiers laid to rest there died protecting the northernmost of Washington's fortifications, Fort Stevens (from the cemetery, go six blocks south on Georgia and take a right at the Wonder Chicken.)

That fight was the culmination of a series of battles and engagements along a Confederate line of advance that cut through towns and neighborhoods that today are at or near the heart of the Washington region, including Frederick, Gaithersburg, Rockville, Bethesda, Takoma Park, Silver Spring, and, most critically, Monocacy Junction.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The center of the cemetery is marked by a central flagpole surrounded by 41 regulation marble headstones marking the remains of the honored dead of Fort Stevens. Behind these headstones and to the east, stands a marble rostrum used to conduct yearly Memorial Day services. The four granite pillars are in memory of the four volunteer companies who fought at Fort Stevens.

Twice before, Gen. Robert E. Lee had sent the Army of Northern Virginia on invasions of the North, and twice he had been forced to retreat. Lee's first invasion, in September 1862, led to the single bloodiest day in American history, at Antietam, where the Confederates were turned back but escaped to Virginia. Less than a year later, Lee crossed the Potomac River again, culminating in the fateful Confederate defeat at Gettysburg in July 1863.

Lee was a risk-taker, and in the summer of 1864, he was ready to gamble again. Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's relentless Army of the Potomac had backed the Confederates into battle lines protecting Richmond and Petersburg, and it appeared poised for a drive to capture the Southern capital.

On June 12, Lee entrusted Lt. Gen. Jubal A. Early, one of his most aggressive and experienced commanders, with a bold mission intended to relieve pressure on the Confederate defenders. Lee would send his 2nd Corps under Early — a major portion of his army — to clear out a Union force that had taken possession of much of the Shenandoah Valley. If he saw an opening, Early was to invade Maryland, disrupt Union rail and communication lines, and threaten Washington.

Lee was fond of Early — "my

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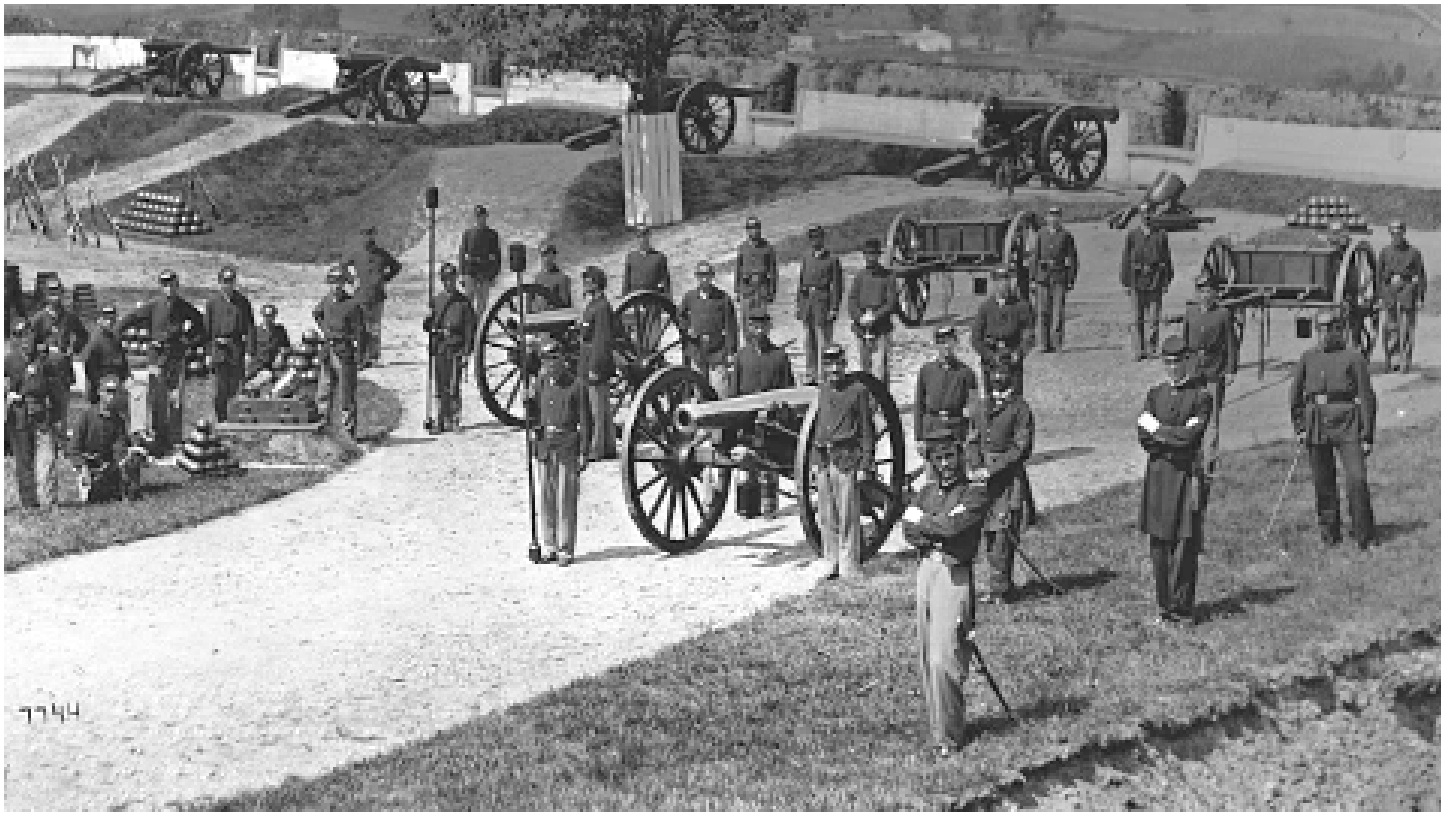

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Members of Company F, 3rd Regiment, Massachusetts Heavy Artillery at Fort Stevens, where Confederate Gen. Jubal Early asserted, "we scared Abe Lincoln like hell."

bad old man," as he called the cantankerous and blunt commander. Early, a West Point graduate who practiced law in Rocky Mount, Va., had vigorously opposed secession but took up arms when war was declared. Lee had grown to rely on "Old Jube," particularly with the death of Maj. Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson at Chancellorsville the previous year.

Early and his men — many of them tough veterans of Jackson's 1862 Shenandoah campaign — took to the mission with verve. Little more than the sight of the Confederate force at Lynchburg on June 18 was enough to send Union Maj. Gen. David Hunter and his larger force skedaddling to Charleston, W.Va.

Compounding Hunter's wretched performance was his failure to alert the Union high command that he would be unable to cut off Early's advance. Grant — who believed Early's corps was still at Petersburg — was left blind to a great and sudden danger.

"Nothing blue stood between Early and the Potomac," historian Shelby Foote wrote.

The rebels moved northeast at a rapid clip beginning June 23, passing through Lexington, where the men marched past Jackson's grave, baring their heads in silent salute. They reached New Market on June 30, and Winchester July 2. Bolstered by reinforcements, their numbers reached 16,000.

On July 4, the nation's 88th birthday, Early's army reached the Potomac, celebrating with raucous feasts on Yankee provisions captured at Martinsburg and Harpers Ferry, including sardines, oysters and plenty of liquor. The third invasion of the North was underway.

The idea of Washington falling to an enemy army may seem almost impossible today, but it did not seem at all implausible to residents in 1864. Just fifty years earlier, within the lifetime of old-timers, a bold British force had captured the capital, burning the White House and the Capitol.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Officers of Companies A and B, 3rd Massachusetts Heavy Artillery, and crew of 100-pounder. Parrot gun, on iron barbette carriage at Fort Totten, provided long-range support to Fort Stevens during Confederate General Jubal A. Early's attack on that fort on July 11 and 12, 1864.

After the overwhelming Confederate victory at First Manassas in 1861, Washington had panicked when it seemed the rebels might take the capital.

In the three years since, the Union had constructed an elaborate network of defenses around the capital, including a 37-mile-long circle of 68 forts, connected by miles of rifle pits and trenches. But the best troops manning the fortifications had been stripped away to bolster Grant's force, leaving the capital vulnerable.

By July 5, Union commanders belatedly recognized that Early posed a formidable threat. Grant reluctantly agreed to send one Sixth Corps division north, but no more, still believing that Hunter could protect the capital.

The task of slowing the Confederates would fall to Maj. Gen. Lew Wallace, a Union commander in semi-disgrace since Grant blamed him for arriving late with his forces at the bloody Battle of Shiloh in Tennessee in April 1862. Wallace had been assigned in 1864 to command the Middle Atlantic Department in Baltimore, something of a backwater.

But Wallace did not lack for confidence. Warned by Baltimore and Ohio Railroad President John Garrett that the Confederates were moving into Maryland in force, Wallace acted to fill the Union vacuum.

He concluded that Monocacy Junction south of Frederick — where roads from Baltimore and Washington as well as the B&O railroad converged — would be key to his defense. Without orders, Wallace left Baltimore and assembled a force of 3,200 men from his command, the majority of them ill-trained "100-Days Men" who had been recruited for rear-guard duty.

The pace of Early's advance had slowed, in part because of undisciplined Confederate looting. But from Frederick on the afternoon of July 8, Wallace could see three long Confederate columns of infantry and artillery "crawling serpent-like" toward the city.

Wallace abandoned Frederick to make his stand along the banks of the Monocacy River. Early was in the city by 8 a.m., negotiating a $200,000 payment to Confederate coffers from city fathers to spare Frederick from the torch.

The morning of July 9 "dawned with a halo on sunshine and beauty," a soldier from Ohio recalled. In the nick of time, Wallace was bolstered by the arrival of 3,400 veteran troops sent by Grant from Richmond via steamer and train, doubling the Union force.

Early hoped to avoid a major battle, preferring to preserve his force for a move on the capital.

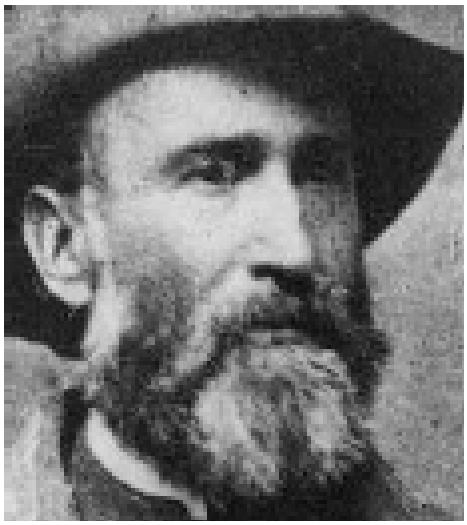
But the Confederates advancing from Frederick along Georgetown Pike — today Route 355 — were soon drawn into a fight, apparently unaware that a road leading to Buckeystown would have skirted Wallace's defenses.

Seeking to avoid a frontal attack, Confederate cavalry dismounted and crossed the river downstream near the Worthington Farm. But Union soldiers positioned along a fence at the adjoining Thomas Farm fired what Wallace described as a "pitiless rain" of bullets at the invaders, knocking them back.

A second Confederate attack succeeded in taking the Thomas Farm, but a determined federal counterattack pushed the rebels back to the Worthington Farm.

Late that afternoon, Confederate Maj. Gen John Brown Gordon launched a third assault with a division of Georgians, Louisianans and Virginians backed by artillery. The attack — across land today within Monocacy National Battlefield but split by Interstate 270 — was as fierce as any seen by many of the men, among them veterans of Gettysburg and Antietam. With his force on the verge of annihilation, Wallace retreated.

It was a decisive rebel victory — a rout, even, by some Confederate descriptions — but it had come with a heavy price, and not only the 900 Confederate casualties. The Union troops, at the cost of 1,300 casualties, had delayed Early's attack on Washington by an entire day — critical time, it would turn out.



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Forces led by Lt. Gen. Jubal Early, Gen. Robert E. Lee's "bad old man," recaptured the Shenandoah Valley.

(Following the defeat, Wallace was relieved of command, but after learning details of the brave Union stand at Monocacy, Grant had him reinstated. Wallace would achieve lasting fame for his novel *Ben-Hur,* published in 1880.)

After camping on the battlefield, the exhausted Confederates resumed their march to Washington on Sunday morning, July 10, but they made limited progress in beastly heat. That night they camped spread out between Gaithersburg and Rockville.

At Lee's behest, Early dispatched cavalry dashing across the state to free thousands of Confederate prisoners held at Point Lookout, where the Potomac empties into the Chesapeake Bay. The mission was ultimately aborted, but not before cavalry wreaked havoc between Baltimore and Washington, looting and cutting communications.

In Washington, worries were growing about the city's defenses, manned primarily by 100-Days Men, recuperating wounded soldiers, and even — as the Confederates advanced — government clerks. "We have five times as many generals here as we want but are greatly in need of privates," complained Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck, Grant's chief of staff.

Within hours of the Union defeat at Monocacy, Grant ordered two more Sixth Corps divisions to board transports and sail immediately for Washington.

From Rockville on Monday morning, Early's army took what is now Veirs Mill Road into Wheaton — then called Leesborough — and turned south onto the Seventh Street Pike, now known as Georgia Avenue, according to histories by B.F. Cooling and Marc Leepson. Some cavalry took a different route, down what is now Old Georgetown Road and Wisconsin Avenue toward Fort Reno near Tenleytown.

By noon, Early was in the District within sight of Fort Stevens. Many of the Confederates were eager to take revenge on the "vile miscreants living there," Pvt. William Stringfellows of North Carolina wrote in his diary. But Early decided that his bedraggled force, spread out for miles behind him, was in no condition yet to attack.

The Confederates probed the defenses, moving through a landscape then consisting of farms and orchards, and skirmished sharply with federal troops. From Fort Stevens and Fort DeRussy

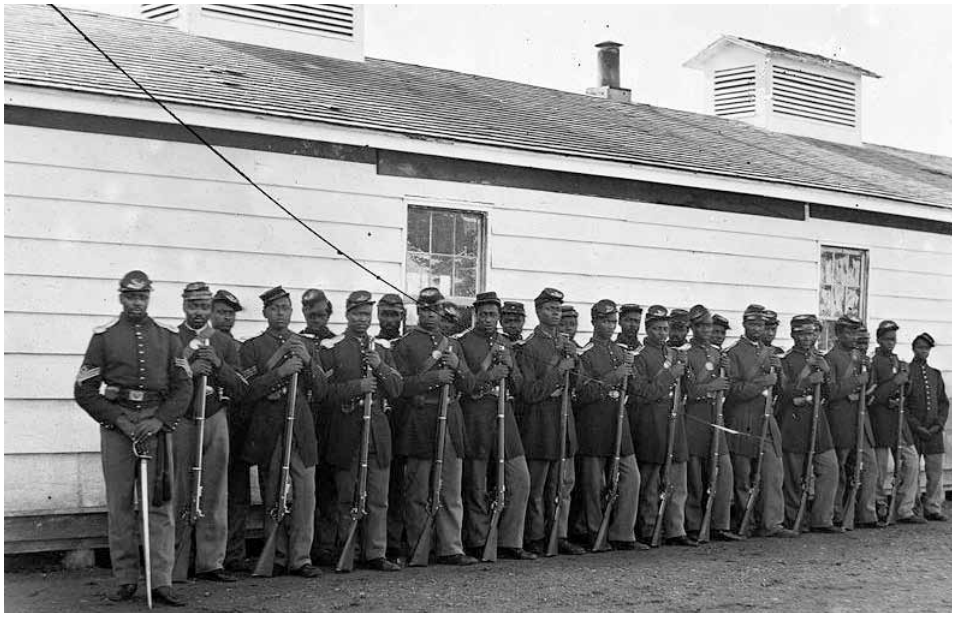
— where joggers now run past remaining earthworks in the wooded hills of Rock Creek Park — Union batteries hammered at the invaders.

Even as more Confederates moved down Seventh Street, more Sixth Corps troops had arrived by steamboat at the Washington wharf and were marching up the same road from the opposite direction, cheered by jubilant crowds.

The unmistakable long and lanky figure of Lincoln appeared on the Fort Stevens parapet at least once during the fighting, and when fire from Confederate sharpshooters zeroed in, Union officers — but probably not, despite the oft-repeated claim, Capt. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., the future Supreme Court Justice — called in strong language for the president to get down.

Early made his headquarters that evening in Maryland near the District line at Silver Spring, in the long-since-demolished mansion belonging to the Blair family that would give the surrounding community its name. Over cigars and wine from the Blair cellar, Old Jube and his commanders contemplated their next step.

The next morning, July 12, Early reconnoitered the lines and concluded that with the arrival of Union reinforcements, an attack would be foolhardy. The Confederates waited until nightfall to retreat, leading to a brief but violent fight when a Union brigade surged toward Confederate lines.



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The 4th Colored Infantry at Fort Lincoln.

"We haven't taken Washington, but we scared Abe Lincoln like hell," Early told an aide.

Lincoln may not have been scared, but Early and Lee had accomplished a great deal. They had recovered the Shenandoah Valley in time for the harvest and captured thousands of horses and cattle in Maryland. Most importantly, they had forced Grant to shift two corps north, relieving pressure on the Confederate capital and delaying Union hopes of victory.

Early had come closer than Grant to capturing the enemy capital.

Early's retreating army passed through Rockville and continued west through Poolesville, well ahead of a half-hearted federal pursuit. On the morning of July 14, the rebels crossed the Potomac at White's Ford to Leesburg and headed west to the Shenandoah Valley, ending the last Confederate invasion.

Today, just upriver, at White's Ferry, a barge by the name of Jubal Early carries commuters across the dark waters of the Potomac, time and time again.

Steve Vogel is the author of *Through the Perilous Fight: From the Burning of Washington to the Star-Spangled Banner, the Six Weeks That Saved the Nation*.

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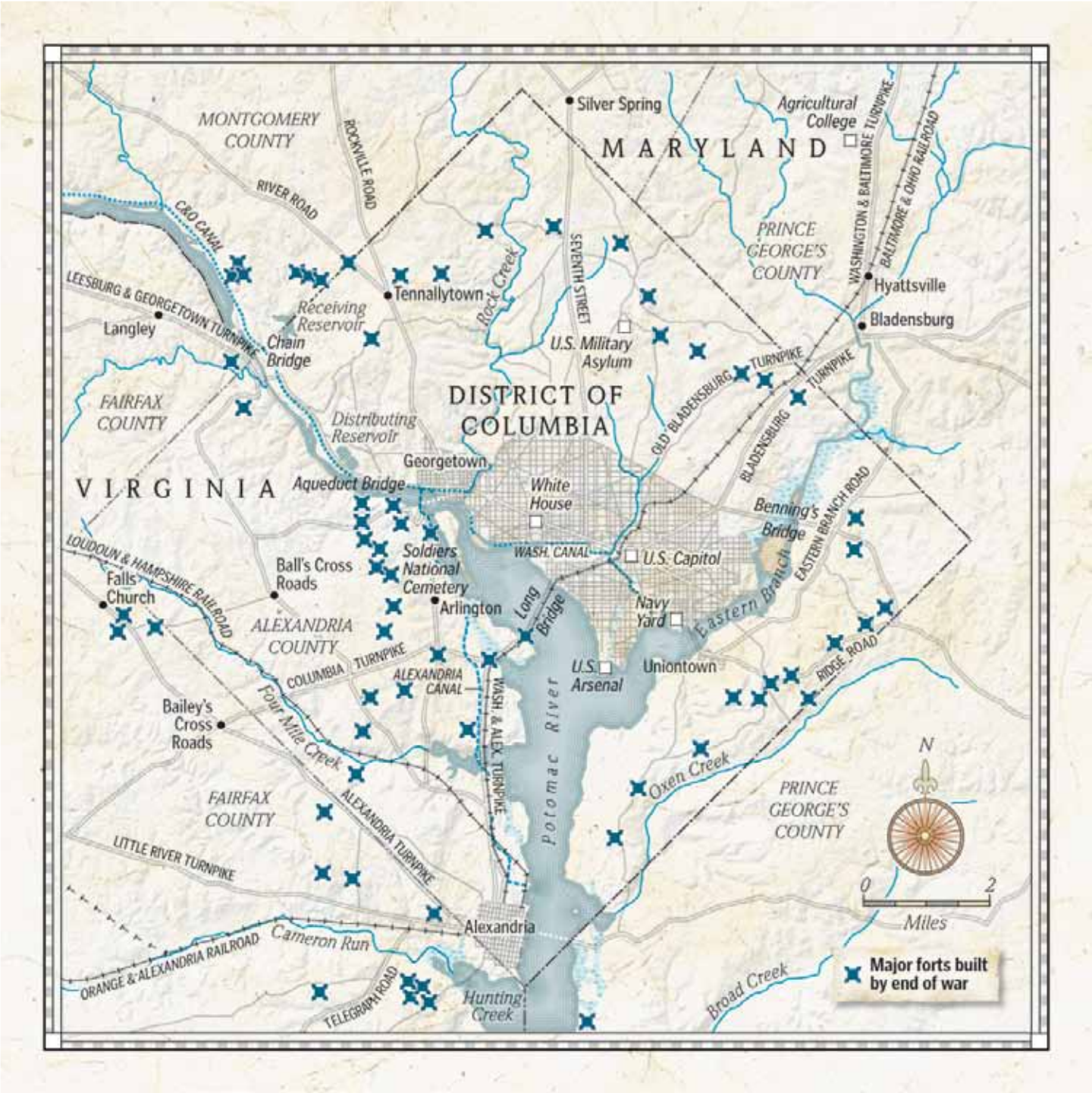

GENE THORP/THE WASHINGTON POST

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Fort Stevens and Battleground National Cemetery

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Entrance to Battleground National Cemetery in northwest Washington, D.C.

Forty-one white headstones form two concentric circles around an American flag in the tiny graveyard that is tucked into the middle of a block on Georgia Avenue in Northwest Washington.

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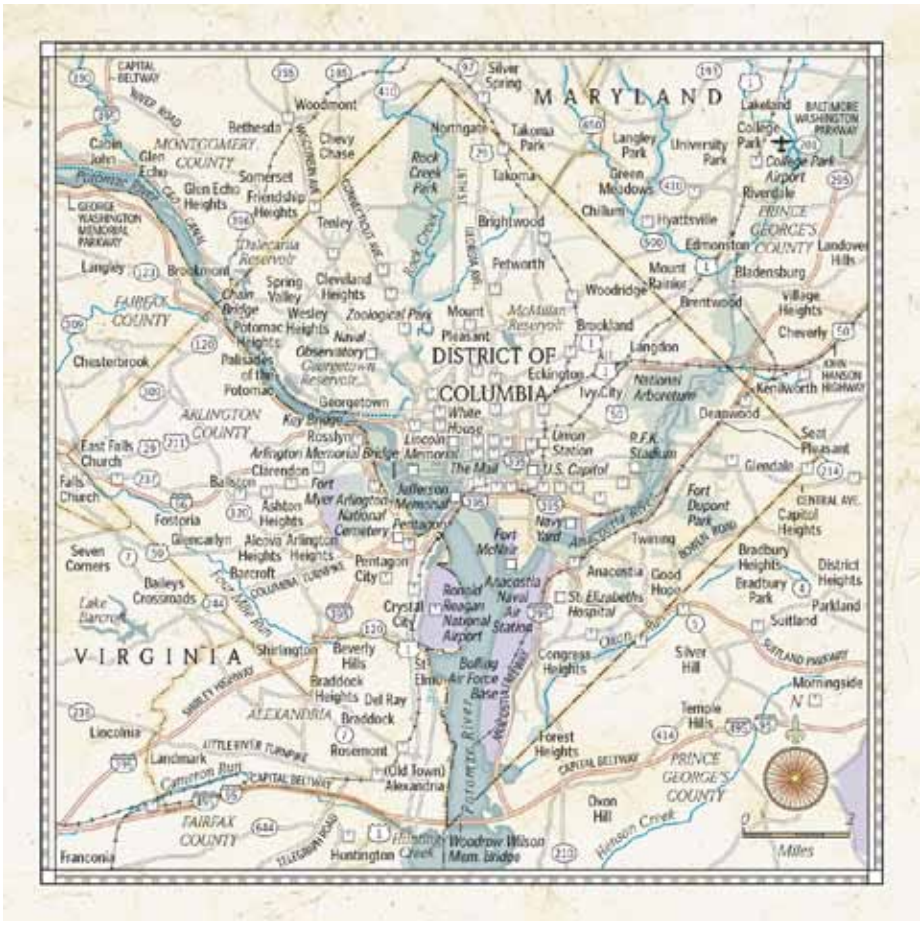
— From *"The day 'Old Jube' nearly took Washington,"* Steve Vogel



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On a hot July day, Bethesda became a battleground

By John H. Walsh

• *Originally Published April 24, 2014*

The Confederate general and his men rode south on Rockville Pike, past the sites of White Flint Mall, Strathmore Music Center and the Beltway, none of which was there at the time. Instead, the horses trotted by woods, rolling fields and farmland on that hot July day 150 years ago.

The Union colonel and his men rode north up the same road to confront the rebels, out of the Union fortifications at Tenleytown, and then past the places where Mazza Gallerie and Saks Fifth Avenue stand today.

The Battle of Bethesda was a small skirmish, part of Lt. Gen. Jubal Early's assault on Washington. Until recently, with the publication of several battlefield diaries, its exact location was unknown. Now we know that it took place at the Old Stone Tavern, where Robert A. Pumphrey Funeral Home stands today, near the Bethesda Metro station.

The officers who fought there — Confederate Gen. John McCausland and Union Col. Charles Russell Lowell — are known for other operations, and this engagement has been largely forgotten. But

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Extract of military map of N.E. Virginia showing forts and roads

guns blazed from early morning to mid-afternoon before the Union troops pulled back under orders at 3 p.m.

The residents and shoppers who crowd Bethesda today may not realize that it sits on a broad hill, since office and apartment buildings dwarf the natural rise of the land. Col. Lowell rode up that hill on his way to battle. To the north, Gen. McCausland rode up the hill from the other side. The battleground would have been the shallow swale on top.

Lowell, in his dispatches to headquarters, said he was near the Old Stone Tavern and in "a good position to remain." That would be at the intersection of Wisconsin Avenue and Old Georgetown Road, in the heart of what is now downtown Bethesda.

But a subordinate officer, Maj. William Fry, who had been independently skirmishing with the Confederates closer to Rockville before joining Lowell, wrote: "In the vicinity of the Old Tavern the enemy were again found to be advancing in force. We fell back, skirmishing constantly, until, within 2 miles of [the city's fortifications], a dismounted skirmish line was formed and held, the enemy never succeeding in driving us away."

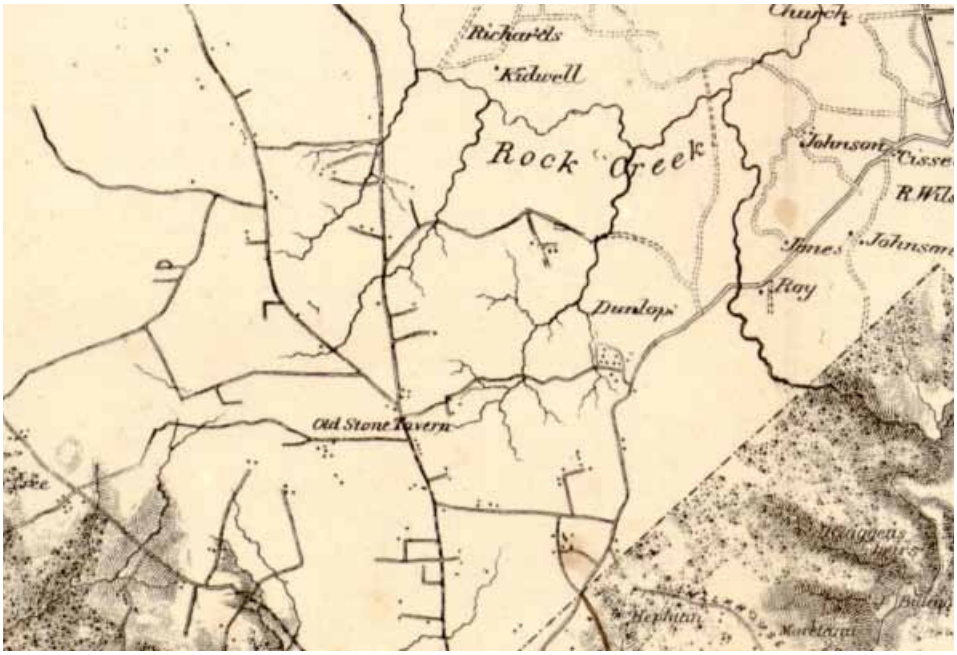
His description left some ambiguity about whether the Union had "fallen back" closer to the city of Washington.

Lowell's command, the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry Regiment, contained one of the most famous cavalry units of the war: the California Hundred. They were Union men who had volunteered in California and traveled east to join the fight. One of them, Cpl. Valorus Dearborn of San Francisco, kept a diary that appears to clarify the situation. It says that on July 11, the Union cavalry moved some distance from Washington's fortifications and then fell back to the Old Stone Tavern, where they held their position "for the day."

The battle probably consisted of exchanges of fire between dismounted Confederates along the northern edge of the swale and dismounted Yankees along the southern. Another Californian, Cpl. George Buhrer, recorded that the Union cavalry "took positions behind fences, bushes, stumps, rocks, etc." He described the fire as "quite sharp," while Dearborn called it "hot." A military observer listening from Washington called it "rapid."

Union records show that Lowell had about 800 troops, and he estimated he was facing six squadrons of rebels, or about 600 men. The Confederates also had a cannon, positioned near Wisconsin Avenue, while some local civilians came out with their guns "to get a shot at a Reb," according to Pvt. George Towle, in his memoirs of the war.

As the day wore on, reinforcements arrived for the Union position but proved to be of little assistance. "They came marching up the road in close order with arms at right shoulder shift like militia on parade," Towle wrote. "They were very soldierly appearing until they reached the brow of the rise in front of us where they were first exposed to the Confederate fire. None of them were hit, but the immediate result was that the command as a command, officers and all disappeared; and I have often wondered when, if ever, some of them stopped running."



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A military map shows the Old Stone Tavern in Bethesda where Confederate and Union cavalry troops clashed at a site now occupied by Robert A. Pumphrey Funeral Home.

William Offutt, a historian of Bethesda, cautions that this was only a skirmish. If any of the cavalry troopers later gave accounts of having fought in a full-scale battle, they shouldn't be trusted: "No one did at the time." Nonetheless, he says, this new history "adds to our store of knowledge."

By dark, the guns had fallen silent, with slight casualties from the day of fighting. Despite all the fury, little damage had been done to either side. Of course, as Offutt notes, at the time, Bethesda was a simple country crossroads, with the Old Stone Tavern, a blacksmith's shop and a few rural buildings. There wasn't much for the fighting to destroy. Bethesda remained in Union hands, safe for the upscale restaurants, bagel shops and yoga studios that occupy it today.

John Walsh is a Washington lawyer and a historical researcher with a PhD in history from Boston College.

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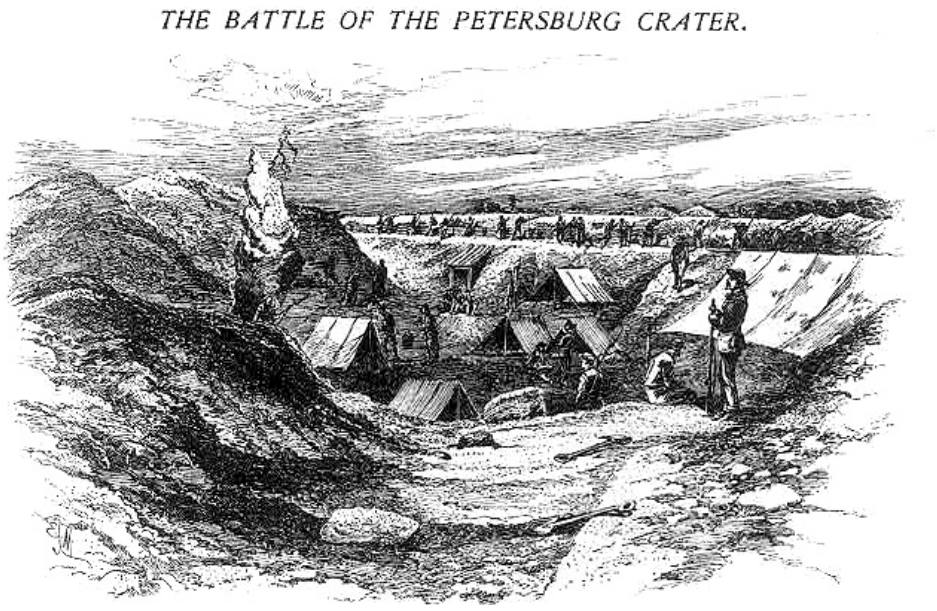
At Battle of the Crater, black troops prove their courage

By William Forstchen and Newt Gingrich

• *Originally Published April 24, 2014*

Spring 1864. Our nation, divided into warring halves, was entering the fourth year of bloody civil war. Nearly half a million had given the last full measure of devotion in battles such as Shiloh, Second Manassas, Antietam and Gettysburg, or in the fever-ridden hospitals that were more dangerous than any battlefield.

It is nearly impossible to put a modern perspective on the level of suffering and loss in a conflict that is too often romanticized, or play-acted before cheering audiences at "reenactments" on sunlit weekends. But here is one statistic to contemplate: America was a nation of approximately 30 million souls when the conflict started. Today we number over 310 million. Imagine us trapped in a conflict, entering its fourth year, with over 5 million dead, 5 million maimed and in hospitals, another million languishing in the squalor of prison camps, a million addicted to drugs and far more suffering from post-traumatic stress, not to mention property damage into the trillions. And no end in sight.



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The Battle of the Petersburg Crater: The Confederate line as reconstructed at the crater. From a drawing made by Lieutenant Henderson after the battle.

This was the harsh face of our Civil War in the spring of 1864. By June of that fateful summer, the newspapers were reporting more than 2,000 casualties a day, a loss rate higher than that of the Battle of the Bulge 80 years later.

The Northern offensive to take Richmond stalled in the fetid trenches in front of Petersburg, Va., where the hard-bitten veterans of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee had fought Union Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's Army of the Potomac to a standstill. Union troops refused to try yet more futile frontal assaults after debacles such as Cold Harbor, where nearly 7,000 men fell in a single charge lasting little more than 20 minutes on June 3, 1864. Morale was shot — except for one group of recruits who were now putting on the Union blue.

A year earlier, as recruitments to "fill the vacant ranks" all but dried up in the face of the daily casualty rolls, one group cried out to step forward, claiming that this was indeed their war as well. A spokesman declared that once such men held a musket in hand, wore the Union blue and had on their hips a cartridge box stamped "U.S.," he defied any power on earth to deny

their right to full citizenship. Men of African descent, free-born or escaped slave in the North and slave in the South, came forward to pick up the tottering banner of the Union cause. Nearly 200,000 would serve by war's end.

With the Army of the Potomac locked in siege warfare in front of Richmond and Petersburg, one of the few generals eager to accept the men designated as the U.S. Colored Troops was the eccentric Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside, who commanded the XI Corps. New black troops became his fourth division. Stuck on the toughest part of the siege lines, some of Burnside's men had conceived a daring plan that Burnside believed would not just win a battle but perhaps even end the war in one gallant rush.

The plan was ingenious. Three bitter years of experience had taught the veterans of both sides that to storm trench works and fortifications was a bloody exercise in futility. This plan offered a forlorn hope. A 500-foot tunnel would be dug under the Rebel lines that blocked the Union advance into Petersburg. The tunnel would be packed with explosives. Detonation would blow a gap in the enemy line 200 yards wide and sow panic for hundreds of yards more in either direction. Timing in the minutes after the explosion would be everything. A lead division of 4,000 men would sprint forward even before the debris had rained down, storm around the giant crater left by the blast, seize the heights behind the shattered enemy line, then push straight into downtown Petersburg, taking the railroad yards.

If they could accomplish that within the first hour, Burnside's troops would cut General Lee's army in half, pinning them to the banks of the Appomattox River, seizing their supplies and cutting off Richmond, the Confederate capital, from nearly all rail connection to the South. The plan required dash, bold leadership and troops with the nerve to face the challenge.

Tragically, only the last element was in place, and even that disappeared in the opening minutes of the battle.

History records the event as the Battle of the Crater. It is not an action recalled alongside Gettysburg, Antietam and Shiloh — battles that, grim and terrible as they were, carry with them a memory of honor and, for some, even a dash of glory. Read about the Battle of the Crater and you soon sense that you are looking into a darker realm of warfare.

When Burnside accepted the division of African American troops into his formation, he tasked them with leading the assault, which was planned to take place within a month. To a man, white officers and black enlisted troops embraced the challenge and — unique in Civil War battles — trained extensively for this one mission. They saw it as a chance to prove their mettle to the world, and many speculated that

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Unidentified African American soldier in Union uniform with wife and two daughters.

perhaps here they would win the war and a glorious place in history.

And then, less than a day before the action, Burnside's superior, Maj. Gen. George Meade, ordered a complete shake-up of the order of attack, pulling the "colored" division out of the front ranks and placing it in a reserve position. He stated that he did not want to be blamed for a "massacre" of colored troops. A weak argument, indeed, when nearly any assault during the Civil War, by modern definitions, was little better than a massacre. Many speculate that Meade made this fateful decision so that if the assault did succeed it would be white troops who gained the glory. Some historians go so far as to argue that the politics of the Army of the Potomac were so poisonous that Meade made the fateful decision because he did not want the acclaim to go to Burnside, a hated rival.

The decision doomed the attack before it was launched. By analogy, imagine if, on the evening of June 5, 1944, Eisenhower had thrown a tirade at Omar Bradley, denounced the plan of battle and ordered the lead assault waves destined for Normandy's Omaha Beach to be replaced with troops who had not been trained and were clueless about their mission.

Beyond the rearranging of the order of attack, no proper orders were given to the units sent in as replacements, equipment was not issued, and the wrong types of fuses and only half the powder requested was sent forward for the tunnel.

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Dutch Gap, Virginia. Picket station of Colored troops near Dutch Gap canal.

At least two generals in command would later be found drunk in rear-line bunkers while their men were slaughtered.

What ensued on July 30, 1864, at the Battle of the Crater was one of the most mismanaged tragedies of the war. The assault waves that did go in, leaderless and without orders, sought safety in the massive crater left by the explosion rather than pushing forward, thus giving Lee precious time to organize a defense and seal the breach. The brave men of the colored division watched with helpless rage and frustration as the chance to win an overwhelming victory was tossed away. In a final suicidal bid, they were ordered in anyway. Never in American military history have men gone forward into an attack that was so preordained to bloody failure. Yet they did go forward, and more than half were killed, wounded or captured in that last useless gesture.

Perhaps the darker horror of it all was what transpired behind the lines. Meade and Burnside turned on each other with bitter recriminations and

accusations even while the battle still raged, any hope of rational command collapsed. In the weeks after the tragedy, a court inquiry was convened. Even the most unbiased readers today would find its conclusions a coverup full of blame-shifting — something that reads more like current events than we might expect.

The months ahead mark the 150th anniversary of some of the most bitterly fought battles of that tragic war — the Wilderness, Cold Harbor, Peachtree Creek and the Crater. Memory of the Crater should stand at the forefront for a number of reasons. While it was an unmitigated tragedy of a fight and a lost opportunity to end the war perhaps nine months earlier than it finally concluded, there is something worthy in that action. The men of the 4th Division, IX Corps, 4,000 strong, who went forward that day were but months earlier either slaves or "freemen," who in nearly every state held no true rights of citizenship. Yet they rose to the cause. They believed the promise of Frederick Douglass that with rifle in hand and in Army blue, they would forever win full citizenship for themselves and their descendants. For each, it was an act of noble idealism to believe this, to believe the words of a solemn man who at Gettysburg declared that this war was a struggle for that most fundamental declaration that "all men are created equal." Few recall these men now, and even fewer know their names.

But in remembering them, and honoring all those who gave the last full measure of devotion on July 30, 1864, we can see today, 150 years later, that they did not die in vain.

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Portion of Federal Line of Works showing bombproof tents occupied by U.S. Colored Troops in front of Petersburg, Va., Aug. 7, 1864.

William R. Forstchen, a faculty fellow in history at Montreat College in North Carolina, wrote his Ph.D. dissertation about the 28th U.S. Colored Troops, one of the regiments decimated at the Battle of the Crater. Newt Gingrich is the former speaker of the House of Representatives and a co-host of CNN's "Crossfire." They are co-authors of "To Make Men Free," a novel about the Battle of the Crater.