

Petersburg National Battlefield VirtualCache Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Site 9: First Maine Heavy Artillery Monument

N 37° 14'38.866
W 77° 21'26.185



In 1860, the farmland that comprised the Hare Farm, just a mile east of Petersburg, Virginia, was peaceful and quite. It was being farmed, with most area planted in corn. In the coming years, that peace would be lost, and in 1864 and 1865, a single acre of that farm would become the scene of horror and death on a scale impossible to imagine.

On June 18th, 1864 the First Maine Heavy Artillery was ordered to advance and capture the fortified Confederate positions just beyond the Hare farmhouse. The reasoning behind the order has been considered elsewhere, as has a substantial discussion of why the order was followed. The point here is that the order was followed, with disastrous consequences.

In the words of Captain Horace Shaw in his autobiography:

"The 1st Maine were in their assigned position in the dug out road 500 yards from the enemy's strong new line of breast works. These breast works were now full of General Lee's veterans, and artillery was posted all along the line. To the right across the Appomattox, a dozen batteries of 50 guns could concentrate their fire into the open field they must cross. The troops on the right and left of the 1st Maine were to charge at the same time keeping up a hot fire at the Confederate Lines, to keep them from concentrating their fire on the charging lines of the storming column.

At the appointed moment word was given. The ranks of the 1st Maine rushed from their shelter into the open field in their front, and the enemy's guns began their deadly fire. From thousands of rifles, and from hundreds of pieces of artillery, belched flames of fire and tons of iron and shrieking shell, tearing men and earth! The field over which they were passing became a furnace of hissing Hell, of bursting shrieking shell, of fallen dying men, of torn, mangled, bleeding flesh, and groans and shrieks of death. Earth and stones were mingled with the flame. No flesh in life could long endure it!

Men fell as they ran! From the 850 men who led that forlorn hope, 614 had fallen within *ten minutes.*"

Once again, the words of Captain Shaw:

"They were not aware, however, that this move had been provided for. They suddenly found themselves facing veteran troops ready to receive them. Moreover, every way of retreat had been suddenly barred behind them. They were enclosed in a triangle of Union troops. To go forward meant destruction - to attempt to go back meant death or captivity. That portion of the corps that had not passed over the lines in attempting to do so, met with terrific losses. Struggling rearward, they passed over the same field where the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery had made their famous charge of the June before.

[I] reached Ft. Steadman in time to see the closing acts of Gordon's disaster. For a second time [I] saw men enough dead and dying on that five acres of land so that [I] could have walked from the Union to the Confederate line, stepping only on the bodies of fallen men. This time it was Confederates only."

On October 13th, 1893, Horace H. Shaw of Portland, Maine, purchased a 5-acre tract of land in Petersburg which was then owned by Francis Lathrop and which included much of the old Hare farm. That tract was then transferred to a trust for the First Maine Heavy Artillery Association. At the same time donations from the Association members for the purchase, transportation, and erection of a monument honoring the fallen which was to be placed in the center of the southwestern one acre parcel of the property. The center of that single acre where more than 600 Maine men and some 500 Confederate men had perished. On September 30th, 1895 the acreage and the monument, which had been completed and erected, were deeded as a gift to the State of Maine, to be held as a cemetery.

In Legislative Document 730, of the Eighty-Sixth Legislature of the State of Maine, the 5 acre parcel of land, with the monument as erected, was conveyed to the Petersburg National Park Commission of the United States. This document transferred the property to the Government in a fee simple manner, and includes an agreement by the Government for perpetual care and maintenance as a park.

The monument marks the furthest the 1st Maine advanced across an old cornfield under withering Confederate fire. The placement of the memorial rests upon the memories of those veterans over twenty years after the charge. The spot's accuracy is not as important as the bravery and horror it keeps us from forgetting.

Visit Instructions: List the names of three soldiers from the monument or make a rubbing of the names. Be careful not to get pencil or crayon on the monument.