

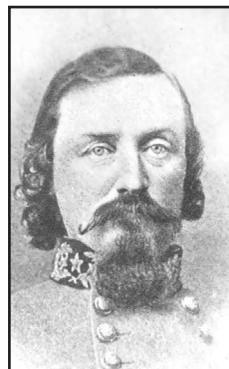
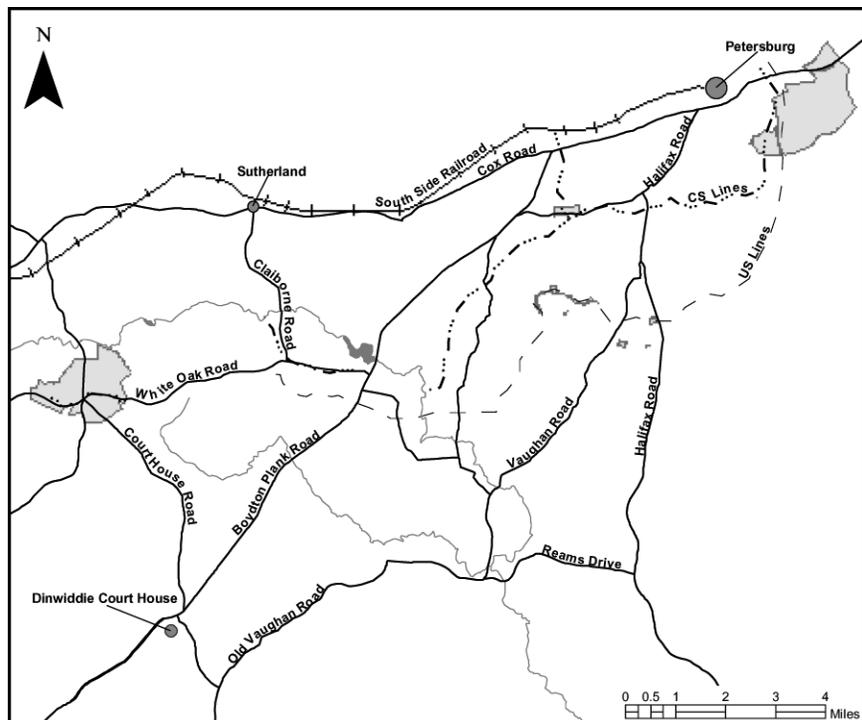
# Five Forks Battlefield

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Petersburg National Battlefield  
9840 Courthouse Road  
Dinwiddie, Virginia



## “Waterloo of the Confederacy” Brig. Gen. Thomas Munford



General George Pickett



Maj. General Philip Sheridan

“Hold Five Forks at all hazards.”

On April 1, 1865 General Robert E. Lee would issue Major General George Pickett the following order: **“Hold Five Forks at all hazards. Protect road to Ford’s Depot and prevent Union forces from striking the Southside Railroad....”** The salvation of Petersburg was in the hands of a man who finished near the bottom of his class at the United States Military Academy at West Point and had led his Division in its fateful assault at Gettysburg in 1863. Grant’s “caged tiger”, Major General Philip H. Sheridan was in overall command of the Federal troops which doubled the number of their opponents. The battle at this star shaped intersection known as Five Forks would later be called the “Waterloo of the Confederacy”.

### Why Five Forks?

What made Five Forks so important? The answer lay almost three miles North, the South Side Railroad. That rail line was Lee’s last supply artery bringing life to the beleaguered troops around

Petersburg. It had been the focus of Union offensives since September 1864 and the Confederate earthworks west of the city paralleled its course. If the rail line use was disrupted Petersburg would fall.

### Prelude to Attack

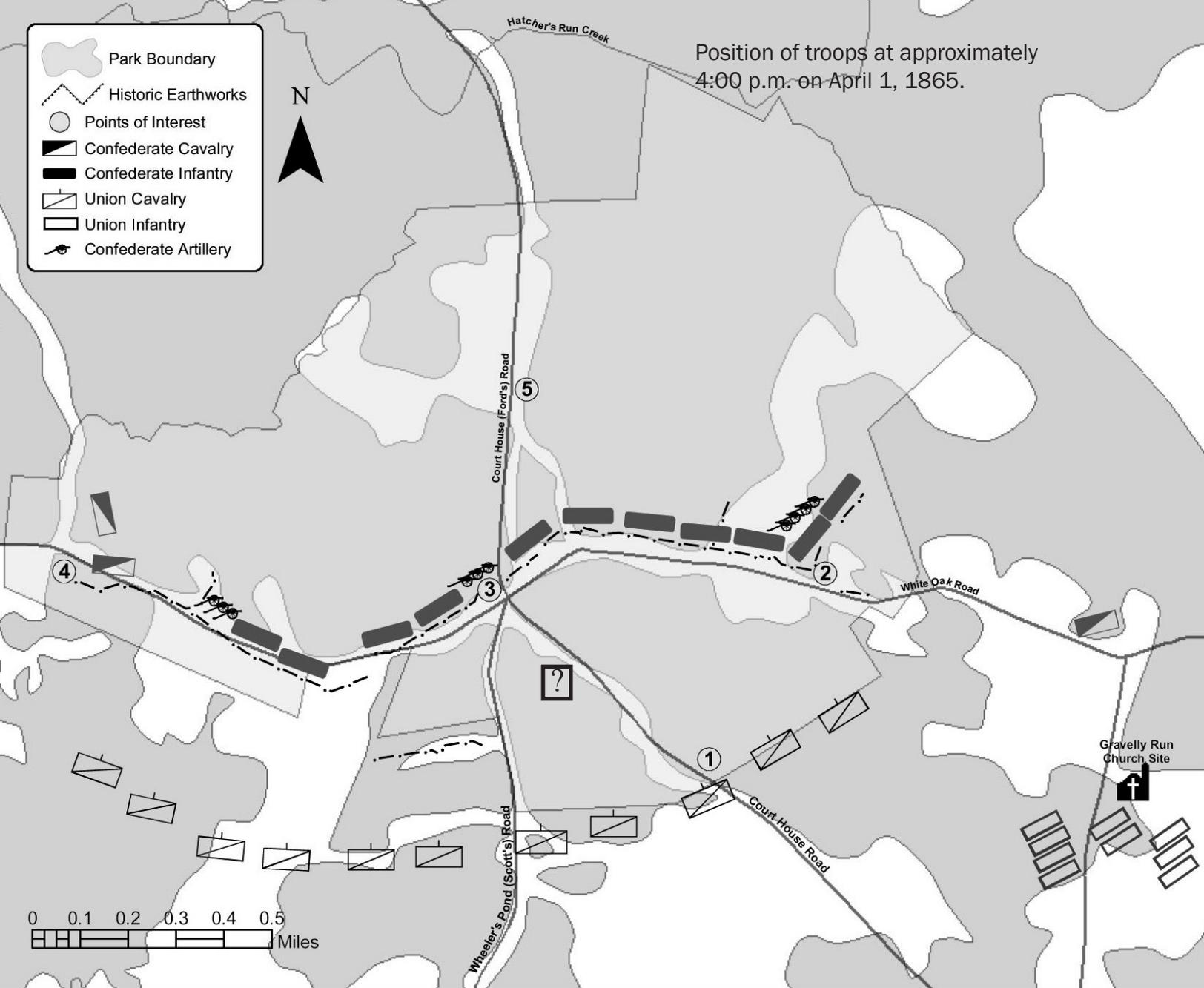
The armies arrived in the vicinity of Five Forks on March 30<sup>th</sup> and the Confederates lashed out against the Union troopers. Pickett’s forces bested Sheridan and the Federal cavalry south of Five Forks. At the same time Major General Warren’s Union infantry cut off any support that Pickett may have received. Pickett, now isolated, was forced to fall back to the Five Forks intersection early on April 1. There Confederate soldiers prepared their defenses, breastworks of pine logs with dirt thrown up in front, along White Oak Road facing South.

April 1 saw the Union infantry link up with Sheridan at Gravelly Run Church and an impatient Sheridan explained his battle plan while the Federal foot soldiers formed their battle lines. Sheridan later said, **“I was exceedingly anxious to attack at once, for the sun was getting low, and we had to fight or go back....”** The Union cavalry had been dismounted and placed along the front of Pickett’s men to hold them in place.

### The Attack Begins

At 4:15 p.m. the attack began and Union forces hit the Confederates from all directions almost simultaneously. The southern line melted away in the wake of the Federal onslaught, losing along the way almost a third of Pickett’s forces. Five Forks was completely overrun and the southerners retreated northward toward the coveted railroad. An overwhelming Union victory opened the way to the South Side Railroad and turned the right flank of Petersburg’s defenses.

Upon hearing news of the victory at Five Forks, General Grant ordered a series of assaults to take place the next morning along the Petersburg lines. That Sunday, April 2, 1865, the Confederate lines which had held for 292 days were severed and the South Side Railroad ultimately captured. Only the shifting of troops from the Richmond defenses and the heroic actions at Forts Gregg and Whitworth gave Lee the opportunity to organize his retreat from Petersburg that night. Grant pursued Lee over the next week, and the following Sunday, April 9, 1865, they met at Appomattox Court House where Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia.



Position of troops at approximately 4:00 p.m. on April 1, 1865.

**TOURING THE BATTLEFIELD**

At key points around the battlefield are driving tour stops with information about the action of April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1865. Please use extreme caution in driving to the various stops.

**Stop #1  
Union Cavalry Attacks**

Courthouse Road was the avenue Federal troopers would try to use to reach the South Side Railroad from Dinwiddie Court House. After fighting south of here on March 31<sup>st</sup> the Federals advanced to this

area before dismounting and attacking the Confederates dug in along White Oak Road.

**Stop #2  
The Angle**

The southerners built their breastworks here at a 90-degree angle to protect their left flank. The line extended 150 yards north from White Oak Road. Four cannons, under Captain William McGregor, and Brigadier General Matthew Ransom's North Carolina infantry were placed in the trenches to hold this critical position. After forming their lines near Gravelly Run Methodist Episcopal Church, the

Union V Corps under Major General Gouverneur Warren moved against this Confederate position with an overwhelming force. Brigadier General Frederick Winthrop, the highest-ranking officer to fall during the battle, was mortally wounded near the angle while leading the charge.

**Stop #3  
The Five Forks Intersection**

This key intersection was the objective for the Federal attackers. The road leading north, the Ford's Road, was the closest route to the South Side Railroad, Petersburg's last supply line.

Colonel William Pegram was instructed to position three of his cannons at this wooded crossroads. As the attack began the mounted Pegram was fatally wounded while urging his men to, **"Fire your canister low!"**

**Stop #4  
The Final Stand**

Confederate cavalry under Robert E. Lee's son Rooney were to protect the infantry's flank on the west end of the line. Major General George A. Custer led several charges against the southerners

to break the line but the Confederate horsemen held. The remainder of the Five Forks defenders would withdraw from the battlefield that evening under their cover.

**Stop #5  
Crawford's Sweep**

Major General Samuel Crawford's division of the V Corps missed the Confederate line at the angle and moved to Hatcher's Run before realizing the mistake. They turned at that point and came out

on the Ford's Road, the Union objective. Turning south they moved against the Five Forks intersection from the north completing a near encirclement of the southern defenders.