

Petersburg National Battlefield VirtualCache Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Site 16: Crater

N 37° 13'6.618"
W 77° 22'4.968"



One of the most well-known chapters of the Siege of Petersburg, its popularity saved itself from destruction.

The plan for the Battle of the Crater called for the mine to be detonated between 3:30 and 3:45am, shortly before dawn, on the morning of July 30. Pleasants lit the fuse accordingly, but as with the rest of the mine's provisions, they had been given poor quality fuse, which his men had had to splice themselves. After more and more time passed and no explosion occurred (the growing light presenting an escalating threat to the men at the staging points, who were in view of the Confederate lines), two volunteers from the 48th Regiment (Lt. Jacob Douty and Sgt. Harry Reese) crawled into the tunnel. After discovering the fuse had burned out at a splice, they spliced on a length of new fuse and relit it. Finally, at 4:44 a.m., the charges exploded in a massive shower of earth, men, and guns. A crater (still visible today) was created, 170 feet (52 m) long, 60 to 80 feet (24 m) wide, and 30 feet (9.1 m) deep. Between 250 and 350 Confederate soldiers were instantly killed in the blast.

Ledlie's untrained white division was not prepared for the explosion, and reports indicate they waited ten minutes before leaving their own entrenchments. Footbridges were supposed to have been placed to allow them to quickly cross their own trenches, but these were missing, meaning the men had to climb in and out of their own trenches just to reach no-man's land. Once they had wandered to the crater, instead of moving around it as the black troops had been trained to do, they thought it would make an excellent rifle pit and it would be well to take cover. Therefore, they moved down into the crater itself, wasting valuable time while the Confederates, under Maj. Gen. William Mahone, gathered as many troops together as they could for a counterattack. In about an hour's time, they had formed up around the crater and began firing rifles and artillery down into it, in what Mahone later described as a "turkey shoot". The plan had failed, but Burnside, instead of cutting his losses, sent in Ferrero's men. Now faced with considerable flanking fire, they also went down into the crater, and for the next few hours, Mahone's soldiers, along with those of Maj. Gen. Bushrod Johnson and artillery, slaughtered the IX Corps as it attempted to escape from the crater. Some Union troops eventually advanced and flanked to the right beyond the Crater to the earthworks and assaulted the Confederate lines, driving the Confederates back for several hours in hand-to-hand combat. Mahone's Confederates conducted a sweep out of a sunken gully area about 200 yards (180 m) from the right side of the Union advance. This charge reclaimed the earthworks and drove the Union force back towards the east.

The Confederates reported losses of 1,032 men in the battle, while Union losses were estimated at 5,300, about half of which were from Ferrero's division. Five hundred Union prisoners were taken, and 150 of these prisoners were USCT. Both the black and white wounded prisoners were taken to the Confederate hospital at Poplar Lawn in Petersburg. Burnside was relieved of command. Although he was as responsible for the defeat as Burnside, Meade escaped censure. As for Mahone, the victory, won largely due to his efforts in supporting Johnson's stunned men, earned him a lasting reputation as one of the best young generals of Lee's army in the war's last year.

Grant wrote to Chief of Staff Henry W. Halleck, "It was the saddest affair I have witnessed in this war." He also stated to Halleck that "Such an opportunity for carrying fortifications I have never seen and do not expect again to have."

Pleasants, who had no role in the battle itself, received praise for his idea and the execution thereof. When he was brevetted a brigadier general on March 13, 1865, the citation made explicit mention of his role.

Grant subsequently gave in his evidence before the Committee on the Conduct of the War:

General Burnside wanted to put his colored division in front, and I believe if he had done so it would have been a success. Still I agreed with General Meade as to his objections to that plan. General Meade said that if we put the colored troops in front (we had only one division) and it should prove a failure, it would then be said and very properly, that we were shoving these people ahead to get killed because we did not care anything about them. But that could not be said if we put white troops in front."

Despite the battle being a tactical Confederate victory, the strategic situation in the Eastern Theater remained unchanged. Both sides remained in their trenches and the siege continued. This may have been Grant's best chance to end the Siege of Petersburg. Instead, the soldiers settled in for another eight months of trench warfare. Burnside was relieved of command for his role in the debacle.

After the war, the original landowner, hoping to capitalize on the famous ground, Griffin charge .25 cents for viewing (veterans were admitted free of charge). In 1868 a visitor wrote, "There is still a vast hollow in the earth, though the look of the place has changed in consequence of the falling in of the sides. Human bones were still lying about; shreds of uniform and cartridge-pouches and bayonet scabbards, some of them scorched and curled up as with fire."

In 1926, Crater Battlefield Association acquired the land, established their own visitor center next to the Crater, and began constructing a golf course on the surrounding grounds. The Association opened a section of the tunnel in 1928 but the tunnel collapsed in 1930. By 1934, the organization went bankrupt and the golf course was closed. The federal government purchased this land in 1936 and the park used the existing visitor center until 1966 when the present day Eastern Front Visitor center was built.

Visitor Instructions: What Confederate battalion was blown up to create the crater?