

# *On The* FRONT LINE

Summer 2021

CENTRAL VIRGINIA BATTLEFIELDS TRUST

[www.CVBT.org](http://www.CVBT.org)



Looking Back: CVBT's 25 Years Saving Places where History Happened





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The CVBT is chartered as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization preserving land associated with the four major Civil War campaigns of Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, The Wilderness, and Spotsylvania Court House.

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Welcome to another issue of CVBT's *On The Front Line*. This is an incredibly special issue. Normally, we focus on the battlefields just preserved and the stories surrounding them. This issue is a little different. This year, the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust is celebrating 25 years of saving America's endangered history on the Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, The Wilderness, and Spotsylvania Court House Battlefields.

Having begun as a small group of concerned citizens back in 1996, we have saved nearly 1,400 important acres of Civil War battlefields where so many gave so much.

So, since we are ostensibly a history-based organization, we thought it would be only proper, and enlightening — not to mention a little fun — to review our own past 25 years.

CVBT started out as a "Grass Roots" organization, and our growth has been paced to what we needed as time and success progressed. Our goal is to remain that type of preservation organization, and I am glad to state we have stayed true to that goal.

To say that preserving endangered historic battlefield land in central Virginia is a daunting task — dead set in the region between Washington, DC, and Richmond, where growth and sprawl are rampant — is a great understatement. Yet, we have had great success by working hard and never giving up. The locations we find ourselves working to save carry the same attraction now as they did for the armies during the war: proximity to the capitals. This is why four battles were fought here on overlapping fields, resulting in more than 100,000 casualties in 18 months.

Over this quarter decade, CVBT has been blessed with tremendous leadership, those whose resolve was constantly tested but never broken. The members of our Board of Directors who have served through the years have all worked diligently and continue to do so to this day, devoting much time, toil, and treasure to the cause.

I will reiterate the fact that our foundation — the thing that allows us here on the front line to do what we do — is, of course, you, our Partners in Preservation. Never has any organization been so fortunate to have partners with such enthusiasm



Tom Van Winkle

and loyalty as you. Remember, we are not funded in any other way except by you. You save the battlefields, as well as keep the lights on at CVBT.

Identifying, researching, negotiating, and closing these deals for the land we need to preserve has become a long process over the years. In the past, it seemed as if we could do this very quickly. What many consider a "dry spell" between saves is never really that; it is the period during which all the hard work is being done. Properties seem to average half a million dollars lately as well, many with houses we do not want and that need to be removed to return the land to its historical appearance.

Applying for federal and state grants also has become a year-long process over what was once half that time. Through it all, the list of battlefield land CVBT, with your help, has preserved is impressive. And we are not done. CVBT moves ahead with an aggressive, yet win-win philosophy to acquire new properties.

So, grab a cocktail, settle yourself in your comfy chair, and share some of the history of CVBT, much I am sure you have had a part in. Enjoy as we take a look back.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Van Winkle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the top of the first letter.

Tom Van Winkle  
President, Central Virginia Battlefields Trust



## Executive Director Letter

As we quickly approach our 25 anniversary, I want to thank you for your support saving endangered battlefields, and I want to take a moment to look ahead.

We continue working behind the scenes on lands projects. Each and every one of them



**Terry Rensel**

is a unique opportunity, and each one comes with challenges as well. Several possible projects are in progress, and I hope to be able to share more about them in the near future.

We are making plans, and doing the preliminary work, to create public

access to the lands you have saved. This will provide the opportunity to walk the land and learn the stories of what happened at these sites, why it matters, and how the events of the Civil War continue to shape the American story.

This year started out much as 2020 ended, and we made the decision to postpone the annual meeting until October; there is news about that elsewhere in the magazine. We felt that it was important that we still gather as a group this year, to celebrate all that we have done together and to look forward to all we are going to do in the future. I look forward to finally getting the chance to meet many of you in person this autumn as Covid-19 restrictions lift in Virginia.

I would also like to take a moment to thank you for your support in preserving the 36 acres of General Battle's Counterattack in The Wilderness. We were able to fulfill our fundraising commitment to the American Battlefield Trust (ABT) in April. Please look to ABT for more information on how that effort is proceeding.

I hope that you have a safe and enjoyable summer and get to visit more battlefields soon.



The old trace of the Culpeper Mine Road runs across General Battle's Counterattack Tract on The Wilderness Battlefield. *Sarah Bierle*

## Celebrating Successful Fundraising for 36 Acres at The Wilderness Battlefield

Central Virginia Battlefields Trust announced the successful completion of fundraising \$24,500 at the end of April 2021 to support the American Battlefield Trust (ABT) in the preservation of 36 acres of The Wilderness Battlefield at the site of General Battle's Counterattack! Earlier this year, ABT president David Duncan called to see if CVBT could help with the final fundraising for this piece of battleground. Confident in the support of our Preservation Partners, CVBT's president, Tom Van Winkle, said "Yes."

At the time of the completed fundraising, Tom Van Winkle stated, "Again, our Partners in Preservation have stepped up and pledged their support for saving our nation's history. If it is solely a CVBT project, or a multiorganizational project, it matters not, as we need to all work in harmony. What does matter is the battlefield is preserved. My thanks to all."

The American Battlefield Trust is handling the details of closing the purchase for preservation and will announce further details at a later date. At this time, we thank you for making a difference and ensuring that local and national preservation groups could work together in this exciting project.

Read more about this historic battleground on page 4, Delving Deeper.



## \$8,000 Grant for Myer's Hill

In the spring of 2021, CVBT gratefully received an \$8,000 grant from the Roy A. Hunt Foundation, awarded for preservation and interpretation at Myer's Hill battlefield.

The Roy A. Hunt Foundation's mission is "to support organizations that strive to improve the quality of life." The foundation values "the quality work of its partner organizations, strives to make an impact in many facets of the community — from building stronger networks for healthy, thriving neighborhoods to working toward a greener, cleaner environment — and believes in the importance of strong leadership, community-driven partnerships, and innovative ideas."

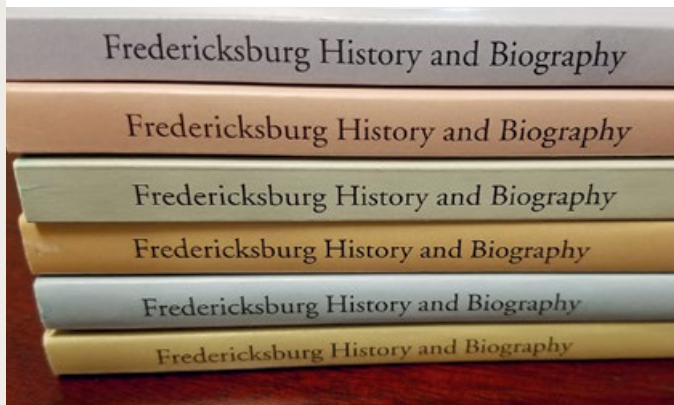
This support makes a difference for the future of Myer's Hill as a historic site and piece of community greenspace near Spotsylvania Court House.



A springtime daffodil at Myer's Hill Terry Rensel

## Journals on Sale – 50% Off

It's a great time to complete or add to your collection... Volumes 2–16 of *Fredericksburg: History & Biography* are still in stock and available for purchase. To learn more, view contents list, or place an order, please visit: [www.cvbt.org/buyjournals](http://www.cvbt.org/buyjournals)



## Leaving a Legacy

Central Virginia Battlefields Trust's long-term stability is based on solid planning, ensuring we are here in the future to continue the preservation of these battlefields. A thoughtful choice to include CVBT in estate plans goes a long way toward making future preservation a reality.

Through the years, Central Virginia Battlefields Trust has been supported by preservation partners making saving battlefields part of their legacy. One of the most satisfying things you will be able to do by taking time to plan your estate is to make decisions to benefit some of the worthy institutions and organizations you have supported. In fact, many of the most significant gifts that nonprofits receive come from the estates of regular contributors who decide to share a portion of their accumulated assets later on, after taking care of family and friends.

If you choose to remember us in your plans, we welcome you letting us know so we may say "Thank You!" If you prefer, we will keep your bequest intention confidential. We understand fully if you prefer not to share specific amounts or if you have no way of knowing what might remain for your charitable gifts.

If you are looking for more information about estate planning and supporting Central Virginia Battlefields Trust through legacy giving, Executive Director Terry Rensel has prepared some helpful literature that answers many questions and has relevant information to use when consulting with your advisers. If you would like to receive a packet with this information, please contact Terry by email ([executivedirector@cvbt.org](mailto:executivedirector@cvbt.org)), or call the CVBT office at 540-674-0900

## General Battle's Counterattack & Preservation Collaboration

BY SARAH KAY BIERLE

Cooperation and coordination can lead to great successes. This principle, repeated during Civil War battles in the 1860s, is a core concept of the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust's 25 years of saving hallowed ground. Both the historical and modern elements are illustrated in the stories embedded in the newest piece of The Wilderness Battlefield that CVBT Preservation Partners were directly involved in preserving.

First, the historical moment and lesson. On May 5, 1864 — the first day of heavy fighting in The Wilderness of central Virginia — Union and Confederate divisions lined up perpendicular to the Orange Turnpike. The Rebels were on the defensive and rushing into position after the march from the vicinity of Orange Court House. The Yankees, trying to move quickly through the dense terrain on the limited roads, pushed the offensive, desiring to clear their way and the turnpike. General John M. Jones had placed his brigade of Virginians from the Confederate Second Corps on the high ground overlooking Saunders Field and watched the soldiers in blue approach his position.

Modern Route 20 (historical Orange Turnpike) borders one side of General Battle's Counterattack Tract.  
*Sarah Bierle*



Confederate General Cullen A. Battle led the counterattack that halted the Union breakthrough at Saunders Field on May 5, 1864.

*Public Domain*



Union General Joseph Bartlett's brigade secured a brief success before encountering the Alabama counterattack. Bartlett narrowly escaped in the retreat across Saunders Field.

*Public Domain*

One of three brigades of the Union's V Corps to make an early advance, Gen. Joseph Bartlett's brigade consisted of the 20th Maine, 18th Massachusetts, 1st Michigan, 44th New York, 83rd Pennsylvania, and 118th Pennsylvania on that day. They advanced "on the double-quick with a yell, driving the enemy in confusion back upon his reserves," Samuel L. Miller of the 20th Maine would later remember. Bartlett's brigade crashed through Jones's Virginian regiments, and the Confederate general was killed in the confused fighting. The Union soldiers had little time to congratulate themselves or press their advantage, however. The yells of the Confederate reserve brigade already heralded that the fight for Saunders Field would not be easily finished.

General Cullen A. Battle had commanded his brigade of gray-clad Alabamians since the summer of 1863, when he was promoted from the officer ranks of the 3rd Alabama Regiment. He had positioned the 12th, 61st, 6th, 3rd, and 5th Alabama Regiments (left to right) in an agile line of battle. Here, they waited and prepared to "hold it at all hazards in case Jones gave way." With Bartlett's Union boys breaking Jones's line, Gen. Battle ordered his men forward at the double-quick. An Alabamian in the ranks later wrote: "About that time, the 6th and 61st Alabama swung around from the left of the road, struck the enemy on the







flank, drove him handsomely and inflicted heavy loss. The 12th Alabama, being on the extreme left, did not come into contact with the enemy. While driving the Yankees, the 6th and 61st captured two pieces of artillery and a large number of prisoners.”

Swinging like a door in their military maneuver, the men of the Alabama Brigade slammed closed the gap in the Confederate lines, pushing Bartlett’s Brigade back and into a precarious position. Other Confederate units rallied, trying to block the escape of Union companies that had been separated. One 15-man company of the 20th Maine screeched “Surrender” to their enemies and charged back through the earthworks to reach their side of the field and fighting lines. General Bartlett himself was nearly killed when he tried to jump his horse over the Confederate earthworks during his retreat; enemy bullets felled the horse, but the general survived and staggered back toward his regiments in the field.

General Battle’s timely arrival prevented further success of the Union breakthrough and made it untenable for Bartlett’s troops to hold the briefly captured high ground near the turnpike. The fighting over and around Saunders Field continued to rage through the rest of May 5 and into the 6th before both armies started maneuvering south for the next chapter of the Overland Campaign.

The land where Gen. Battle lined up his Alabama regiments and launched his counterattack is part of the 36 acres the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust has successfully fundraised to preserve. In the early weeks of 2021, CVBT President Tom Van Winkle received a phone call from David Duncan, president of the American Battlefield Trust (ABT). Land was ready for preservation, but there was a gap in the fundraising. Would CVBT help close the gap to ensure this battlefield land could be preserved? The answer came quickly: “Yes.”

Through the swift response of CVBT’s Preservation Partners, the \$24,500 pledge to assist ABT was quickly raised. As CVBT President Tom Van Winkle stated, “Again, our Partners in Preservation have stepped up and pledged their support for saving our nation’s history. If it is solely a CVBT project, or a multiorganizational project, it matters not, as we need

**Photographed on a late winter’s day, this is part of the 36-acre slope and flatter ground where Battle’s Alabamian Brigade waited and started its decisive charge across the Orange Turnpike. Sarah Bierle**

to all work in harmony. What does matter is the battlefield is preserved. My thanks to all.” In April 2021, CVBT announced the fundraising victory toward preserving the site of General Battle’s Counterattack in The Wilderness, successfully fulfilling the request for assistance. ABT is handling closing this purchase for preservation and will announce further details at a later date.

CVBT’s cooperation with ABT and response to the communication of a fundraising need continue a tradition that has been part of previous preservation successes in central Virginia. For example, in 2004, CVBT Preservation Partners fundraised \$250,000 toward ABT’s efforts for the preservation of land at the First Day Chancellorsville Site. Two years later, in 2006, CVBT pledged and successfully raised \$1,000,000 to support the preservation of Slaughter Pen Farm, spearheaded by ABT, at Fredericksburg Battlefield.

Reflecting on the recent project in The Wilderness and past collaborations, Mary Koik (Director of Communications for ABT) said, “The battlefields around Fredericksburg are privileged to be served by among the finest regional groups in the history of the battlefield preservation movement. The enthusiasm and professionalism of the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust are second to none, and the organization has created a legacy that will last in perpetuity. The relationship that CVBT and the American Battlefield Trust have forged is powerful and multiplies the impact that each organization might have on its own. For decades, our groups have been comrades in arms, working in lockstep to protect critical properties and fighting insensitive developments. If only this lightning in a bottle could be harnessed and replicated elsewhere where historic battlefields are under threat!”

Whether illustrated by the swift counterattack on a battlefield or by the collaboration of historic battlefield preservation groups to save more acres where history happened, cooperation and coordination often win the day... and certainly at these 36 acres of The Wilderness.





CVBT



CVBT

Annual  
Meeting

May 3 - 4

2008



CVBT  
Annual  
Meeting

April 24-25

2010

Land saves, conferences, journals, dvds,  
oh my! It's been a busy 25 years at CVBT,  
and we look forward to many more  
historic moments ahead... Terry Rensel



# THE First Four

## Looking back at CVBT's First "Saves" at Each Battlefield and the History that Happened at These Locations

BY CHRIS MACKOWSKI

*"When you live in a special place,  
you have a special responsibility."*

That message sat at the heart of an address delivered in June 1997 by then-Fredericksburg Mayor William Greenup. Greenup was speaking at a ceremony commemorating the acquisition of Willis Hill, the heart of Marye's Heights, by the National Park Service — a vital acquisition supported by a newly formed local preservation group, the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust.

In the 25 years since, CVBT has been guided by the sentiment at the heart of Greenup's words, rising to the special responsibility that our special landscape demands.

For more than 18 months, and at a cost of more than 100,000 casualties, Civil War armies lived on and fought over the ground around Fredericksburg, Spotsylvania, and Stafford. The area became the crossroads of the Civil War as four major campaigns crisscrossed the landscape: Fredericksburg (December 1862), Chancellorsville (May 1863), Mine Run (November 1863), and the Overland Campaign, including The Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House (May 1864). Additionally, the armies wintered in the area in 1862–63 and just to the west, in Orange and Culpeper, in 1863–64.

It's no exaggeration to say the story of these men is written in blood on the landscape; it's no exaggeration to call this "hallowed ground."

In the two and a half decades since its founding, CVBT has saved more than 1,350 acres of critically important battlefield, making these landscapes available as learning tools, historical resources, green spaces, and places of memorialization. To commemorate the 25-year milestone, we offer a quick look at the importance of the first piece of ground we saved at each of the area's four major battlefields.

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Chris Mackowski, Ph.D., is the editor in chief and cofounder of Emerging Civil War. He is a writing professor in the Jandoli School of Communication at St. Bonaventure University in Allegany, NY, and also historian-in-residence at Stevenson Ridge, a historic property on the Spotsylvania Battlefield in central Virginia. He has also worked as a historian for the National Park Service at Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park and has authored or coauthored a dozen books on the Civil War, and his articles have appeared in all the major Civil War magazines. Mackowski serves on the Board of Directors for the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust.



# Willis Hill

FREDERICKSBURG • December 13, 1862

The Confederate position on the hills west of Fredericksburg proved one of the most daunting positions the Army of Northern Virginia would ever hold during the Civil War. The hills closest to the city, Marye's Hill and Willis Hill, were collectively known as Marye's Heights. Lieutenant General James Longstreet, whose First Corps held the heights, described the position:

"In front ... is a plateau, and immediately at the base of the hill there is a sunken road known as Telegraph road. On the side of the road next to the town was a stone-wall, shoulder-high, against which the earth was banked, forming an almost unapproachable defense."

That landscape has since become iconic.

Crowning the hill: more than 40 artillery pieces commanded by Edward Porter Alexander. "General," Alexander said to Longstreet, indicating the open plateau in front of Willis Hill, "we cover that ground now so well that we will comb it as with a fine-tooth comb. A chicken could not live on that field when we open on it."

At least that's how Longstreet later told the story. "Gen. Longstreet says that I reported to him that a chicken could not find room to scratch where I could not rake the ground," Alexander later wrote. "I don't recall it, but very possibly I said something of the sort. It was exaggeration, but the ground was so thoroughly covered that I never thought Burnside would choose that point for attack."

In case the Union commander did, Alexander positioned his guns as close to the front edge of the hill as possible.

"I persuaded the engineers always to advance the guns to the brows of the hills so as to be able to sweep the approaches to the hills if it became necessary," he explained. Positioned farther back, the cannons would only be able to fire long distance, toward the town or beyond, but Alexander wanted gunners to "see all this canister & short range ground this side of the town." Lunettes for the guns are still visible on the hilltop.

On the morning of December 13, "Burnside's most powerful effort was made at that exact point," Alexander recalled with a hint of disbelief. The guns on Willis Hill "never fired a shot at their distant view," he said, "but thousands of rounds into infantry swarming over the canister & short range ground, [which] contributed greatly to the enemy's bloody repulse."

The Army of the Potomac suffered its most lopsided loss of the Civil War, suffering more than 13,000 casualties, compared to fewer than 5,000 Confederate losses. The bulk of those casualties came at the foot of Marye's Heights, anchored by the Confederate artillery atop Willis Hill.



In this Civil War-era photograph, structures and Confederate fortifications are visible on Willis Hill.  
*Library of Congress*







Today, Willis Hill has been incorporated into the national park and is a frequently visited site for learning about the 1862 and 1863 Battles of Fredericksburg. Sarah Bierle

*“As early as January [1997], funds began to come in from supporters in Florida, Michigan, New York, and other far flung outposts.”*

— Newsletter *On The Skirmish Line*, July 1997

# 1997

Adjacent to Fredericksburg National Cemetery, the 9.5 acres atop Willis Hill once belonged to the private Montfort Academy, which decided in 1996 to sell the property for \$1.65 million. “That’s almost sacred ground,” John Hennessy, then-assistant superintendent of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, told the *Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star*. “It’s some of the most historic ground in the country.”

However, the park was unable to cover the cost on its own. It needed help, and that sparked the creation of a local battlefield preservation organization — CVBT — to cover the shortfall. CVBT helped close the deal in 1997 by adding \$20,000, and the land was incorporated into the battlefield park, serving as a centerpiece of the walking tour around the Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center.

## FROM THE ARCHIVES



Enos Richardson and Jim Pates from CVBT stand on Willis Hill  
Tom Price, *Civil War Issue 61*,  
CVBT Archives



# McLaws Wedge

CHANCELLORSVILLE • May 1–3, 1863

"My God," growled Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade, "if we can't hold the top of a hill, we certainly cannot hold the bottom of it!"

The Army of the Potomac, moving toward the rear of the Army of Northern Virginia on May 1, 1863, found itself facing an unexpected attack on two of its three avenues of advance. Shaken, Federal commander Maj. Gen. "Fighting Joe" Hooker lost all his fight and ordered his army to pull back into a tight defensive position around a small intersection known as Chancellorsville in the heart of the Virginia wilderness.

The bottom of the hill Meade referred to lay on the back side of a commanding position one of his own divisions had occupied earlier in the day. Falling west across Nine Mile Branch, the army hunkered down on a much lower ridge while Confederates took possession of the high ground.

Lee's army extended its line along a ridge parallel to the Federal position. Today, that ridge is known as McLaws Drive.

Confederates placed artillery on the high ground and began firing away throughout the night of May 1 and into May 2. "It seemed as if the little knoll above us was literally crowded with batteries, and all of them seemed to be vigorously at work," wrote one Pennsylvanian.

The ground between the two armies was a tumult of ridges, valleys, knolls, and swales that could swallow up whole regiments, which would be lost from sight and sent off course. Lafayette McLaws's division fronted the terrain from the Confederate side, uphill; Winfield Scott Hancock's II Corps division fronted it from the Union side, downhill.

Throughout May 2, McLaws launched sorties from the ridge, down across the field, as Lee tried to fix Hooker's attention there even as Stonewall Jackson prepared to strike the main Confederate blow elsewhere. On May 3, Lee exerted pressure all along the line in an effort to break the Federal army once and for all. "Hancock's front, especially, was assailed with great impetuosity," wrote newspaper correspondent William Swinton, "but the attacking column was held in check in the most intrepid manner by Hancock's skirmish line, under Colonel [Nelson] Miles."

"In several spirited dashes, colors and prisoners had been taken by the men of either side ..." wrote a Pennsylvanian. "Again and again attempts were made ... to carry the line of defense in our front, which Colonel Miles was charged to hold at all hazards." Miles would earn a Medal of Honor for his actions on the field that day, but even his luck could not hold out: He would take a bullet and be carried from the field (he would survive).

Confederates made a final push, advancing "from right to left all along the line with their blood-curdling yells, [and] some of the troops, who had nothing but the bayonet to resist them, fell back." By midmorning, May 3, Confederates finally swept the field, although the Federals did generally withdraw in good order. The bottom of the hill, as Meade predicted, had ultimately proved indefensible.

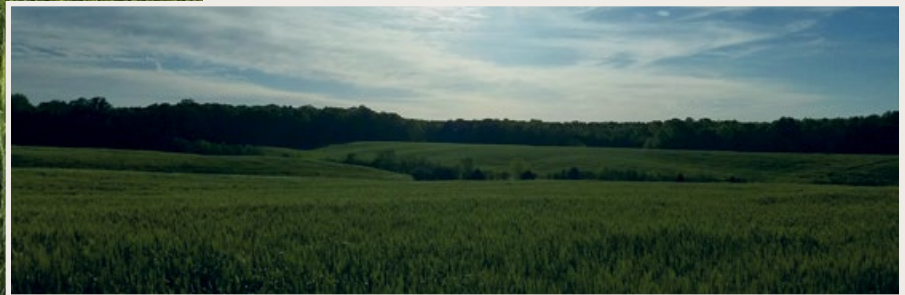


Confederate General Robert E. Lee watched part of the Battle of Chancellorsville from a rise of ground at McLaws Wedge.  
*Library of Congress*



*“This is the first time in memory any group has attempted to duplicate the Flank March, one of the most amazing events in military history.”*

— John Hennessy (Newspaper excerpt, article about the Flank March Fundraiser to support preservation at McLaws Wedge)



McLaws Wedge is a prime place to study topography and learn how the features of the land could shape soldiers' movements.  
Sarah Bierle

# 1998

The property now known as McLaws Wedge is the only portion of the Chancellorsville Battlefield that saw fighting on all three days of the battle. “This is the heart of the Chancellorsville Battlefield,” said CVBT’s then-treasurer, Dr. Michael Stevens, when CVBT purchased the 99-acre property in 1998. The price tag was \$450,000. The property has since been incorporated into the National Park Service’s holdings. A 1.1-mile walking trail lets visitors explore the tumultuous ground.

## FROM THE ARCHIVES



A sketch from Fredericksburg’s *Free Lance Star* in September 1997 as CVBT rallied to purchase and save McLaws Wedge.  
CVBT Archives



# Grant's Knoll

THE WILDERNESS • May 6, 1864

Grant whittled while The Wilderness burned.

On the morning of May 5, 1864, word reached Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant that a portion of his forces had come into contact with Confederates. "If any opportunity presents itself of pitching into a part of Lee's army," he ordered, "do so without giving time for disposition." With that decisive directive, the Battle of The Wilderness — indeed, the entire slugging match of the 1864 Overland Campaign — began.

Grant made his headquarters on a small knoll on the north side of the Orange Turnpike. Initially, he intended to let Army of the Potomac commander George Gordon Meade direct the battle and Grant, as general in chief of all Union armies, would merely advise while he also attended to other army business across the national map. But Grant was too much of a hands-on commander for that, and the roar of nearby battle distracted him from his staff work. Instead, he passed the time with his back to a tree, smoking one cigar after another and whittling. In fact, he whittled so much he shaved through the fingertips of a pair of gloves.

This was the first time men of the Army of the Potomac had seen the new general in chief in action, and he showed an imperturbable face.

On May 6, after a day and a half of battle, worried staffers began to fret about a Confederate counterattack that could erase Federal gains and send the army reeling. Only then did Grant's demeanor crack. "I am heartily tired of hearing what Lee is going to do," Grant snapped. "Some of you always seem to think he is suddenly going to turn a double somersault, and land on our rear and on both our flanks at the same time. Go back to your command, and try to think what we are going to do ourselves, instead of what Lee is going to do."

Later, when Confederate artillery began to sweep the woods around the knoll, a staff officer suggested relocation. "General, wouldn't it be prudent to move headquarters ..." the man asked, "until the result of the present attack is known?"

"It strikes me," Grant replied, puffing a cigar, "that it would be better to order up some artillery and defend the present location."

That night, the crushing weight of two days of fighting pressed on Grant's shoulders as he sat by the fire. Casualties had been heavy. Forest fires had broken out across the battlefield, adding to the

horror. At one point, said Chief of Staff John Rawlins, Grant excused himself for private time in his tent, where he "gave vent to his feelings in a way which left no room to doubt that he was deeply moved." Grant wept, and everyone could hear him.

When he emerged, he returned to the fire, quiet but with renewed resolve. "On that memorable night in The Wilderness it was much more than personal danger which confronted him," Rawlins said. "No one knew better than he that he was face to face with destiny, and there was no doubt that he realized it fully and understood perfectly that retreat from that field meant a great calamity to his country as well as to himself." There would be no turning back.

Grant's Knoll is visible in this photograph, which captures its elevation from a distance. *Sarah Bierle*





Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant penned dispatches, whittled, and waited while The Battle of The Wilderness unfolded. It was testing time to see how the bonds of leadership and followership would play out as he accompanied the Army of the Potomac during the Overland Campaign. *Library of Congress*



*“By expanding the preserved ground around what is called Grant’s Knoll.... Mr. Silver’s gift enhances this historic site by effectively preventing development from encroaching into this dramatic setting.”*

— Newsletter *On The Skirmish Line*, Fall 2001

# 2001

In July 2001, CVBT saved Grant’s Knoll, thanks to a generous arrangement with the Silver Companies, which donated six acres from an 18-acre lot it purchased at the corner of Routes 3 and 20. In 2007, the Silver Companies donated an additional six acres. “This is a generous donation at a time when so much is developing so rapidly,” said CVBT’s then-president, Dr. Michael Stevens.

Both properties have since been turned over to the National Park Service, and Grant’s Knoll is now Tour Stop 1 on The Wilderness driving tour.

## FROM THE ARCHIVES



Headline from a newspaper announcement  
*CVBT Archives*



# Po River

SPOTSYLVANIA COURT HOUSE • May 9–10, 1864

Good cavalry support would have helped, but Ulysses S. Grant had allowed the Federal cavalry commander, Maj. Gen. Phil Sheridan, to ride south with the Army of the Potomac's horsemen. As a result, army commander George Gordon Meade was forced to grope blindly across the Spotsylvania countryside with his infantry, looking for some way to break the deadlock with Confederates who barred the road.

The Confederate left flank was anchored securely on the Po River, but the Federals discovered an opportunity in that sector: a "U" in the river that would let them get around the secure flank and into the Confederate rear — if they could move fast enough.

On May 9, Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock moved his II Corps across the river once, but "it was dark by the time we got up," wrote Lt. Josiah Favill, "and the rebels held the crossing in front." Major General William "Little Billy" Mahone's Confederate division blocked the second crossing at Block House Bridge. Hancock thus found himself pinned inside the "U," cut off from ready support,

and what had looked like an opportunity for the Federals quickly turned into a potential trap. Grant ordered the force to withdraw before trouble befell them.

By midafternoon on May 10, two divisions had evacuated safely, with a third — Maj. Gen. Francis Barlow's — covering the retreat. "It was not long before the rebels advanced in skirmishing order and opened fire," Favill recounted. "We could see their lines advancing, and as soon as they came within range, gave them a warm reception and expected to easily dispose of them, but the skirmish line was quickly followed by a line of battle, and it soon became clear we were in for a pitched fight."

And it indeed turned out to be. "I had to throw away my knapsack to get out alive it was so dreadful warm & smoky," wrote a member of the 111th New York. "The rebs set fire to the woods & like to burned us all up, our dead & wounded were burned..."

Only cover from a "murderous artillery fire" from the far side of the Po allowed the final Federals to slip back to safety. "[T]he infantry recrossed the river in good order," Favill said, "quite elated with their exploit."

The sharp fight required Hancock himself to cross the river to direct action. That, in turn, left V Corps commander Maj. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren in command of the Laurel Hill sector of the battlefield on the Federal right. Warren saw an opportunity to do some showboating and launched a scheduled attack earlier than he was supposed to — an attack intended to support an assault by Col. Emory Upton against the Confederate position elsewhere. The result of that string of dominoes meant Upton's men went in unsupported and unable to exploit a breakthrough. The fight at the Po had huge ripples elsewhere on the battlefield.

A fine set of earthworks crosses the preserved land near the Po River, dating back to the days of the Union attacks on this flank during the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House. Sarah Bierle







One of Robert Knox Sneden's maps from the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House gave a veteran's observations on troop positions. Library of Congress

*“The year 2001 has been marked by steady progress in preserving battlefield land.... Time is critical as we confront rapid area growth. This is a good fight, though, and we are glad you are part of it.”*

— Newsletter *On The Skirmish Line*, Winter 2002

# 2001

CVBT now owns two parcels along the Po River, totaling 40.1 acres. The first parcel, purchased for \$80,000 in October 2001, secured about one-fifth of the May 10 battlefield. “It’s wilderness there now,” said CVBT’s then-president, John D. Mitchell, “but at one time, 99 percent of Spotsylvania was wilderness. There’s no telling what it will look like 50 years from now.”

## FROM THE ARCHIVES



Newspaper headline announcing CVBT’s first land save at Po River and Spotsylvania Battlefield. CVBT Archives



## You Are the Preservation Heroes

BY TOM VAN WINKLE

**P**reservation Profile has historically been written to feature individuals who have gone far and above in their mission to assist in the preservation of Civil War history. We have featured some truly remarkable people and have many more to come.

This issue of *On The Front Line* is special, as we remember the past 25 years of CVBT's mission to preserve land associated with the four major campaigns: Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, The Wilderness, and Spotsylvania Court House.

In reviewing this past quarter century of CVBT's history, one thing immediately occurs to me when it comes to truly outstanding preservationists, and that is all of you. One of the first things I changed when I was bestowed the presidency of the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust was to recognize that our foundation of members was really partners, Partners in Preservation.

Why the change? Simply put, preserving Civil War battlefields and the accompanying history is a team effort. That team, in this case, is CVBT taking the lead and handling the functions of identifying, researching, negotiating, and acquiring the properties. Then, the grant process begins, as well as the appeals for assistance to pay for this historic land.

The appeals are meant to fill that gap between what we may receive in state or federal grants, if anything, and allow CVBT to close the deals. I view this as much more than simply the decision to send us some money because we asked. It is a decision on your part to become a partner with CVBT to make sure this goal — which is important to both of us — is realized.

Understand that each time you support CVBT's purchase on another battlefield, you are becoming a part of that ongoing history. You are demonstrating that it is important to you to preserve history and allow the stories of those who fought and fell there to be told and not be forgotten. To me, this makes all CVBT supporters Partners in Preservation, and I want to recognize each of you for going above and beyond in your support for what we do.

When we all are able to get together at a CVBT annual event, I and the CVBT Board listen intently to your suggestions and critiques regarding the mission and execution. Yes, your input matters as a team member, and we welcome it. We also receive many emails, and they are appreciated as well.

In the past 25 years, CVBT has been able to preserve nearly 1,400 acres of significant battlefield land in one of the most challenging areas in the country — that would have certainly been lost to development — had not been for you, our partners.

For this reason, I felt it only proper to use this Preservation Profile to shine the light on everyone who has worked alongside CVBT, allowing us to accomplish what we have done and what we will do.

Today, more than ever, it is critical that we all work hard ensure our nation's history is preserved and not lost. There are those who would erase it or rewrite it. Neither of these options will allow anyone to learn from it.

On behalf of the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, and myself, thank you for being our Partners in Preservation.



CVBT Preservation Partners touring Myer's Hill in 2019. CVBT Archives



This memorial marker was placed in 1901 by Civil War veterans, remembering their fight and sacrifices during the Battle of Harris Farm.  
*Sarah Bierle*

## Harris Farm

BY TERRY RENSEL

Private Joseph W. Gardner of Company K, 1st Massachusetts Heavy Artillery described May 19, 1864 as “beautiful almost beyond description... The stillness and splendor of all nature was to me ominous and the thought struck me forcibly that any change in the surroundings and situation could not be for the better, but must be for the worse.”

General Ulysses S. Grant had decided to once again move around Gen. Robert E. Lee’s right in another flanking maneuver in the Overland Campaign. In the night, the Union’s Army of the Potomac started shifting away from Spotsylvania Court House. At the same time, Lee sent Gen. Richard Ewell and his Second Corps to perform a reconnaissance-in-force to find the Union army’s right, not knowing that the Union VI Corps had already pulled out, as Grant’s movement started toward the North Anna River.

When Ewell’s two divisions were within three-quarters of a mile from the Fredericksburg Road, they discovered skirmishers from the Fourth Division of the Federal II Corps. This Union division, comprised of heavy artillery units converted to infantry, had no previous battle experience. Ramseur’s brigade attacked these “green regiments” in the late afternoon, striking the 4th New York Heavy Artillery. The 1st Massachusetts Heavy Artillery, followed by the 2nd New York Heavy Artillery, rushed to support. As more troops on both sides arrived, the Battle of Harris Farm continued until dark, when Ewell withdrew to his previous position.

The 1st Massachusetts Heavy Artillery suffered 394 casualties, almost 25 percent of its strength. Corporal J.W.



This photograph from 1864 was taken when survivors of the 1st Massachusetts Heavy Artillery buried their fallen comrades after the Battle of Harris Farm. *Library of Congress*

Whipple, Company L, wrote that “the ground was strewn with dead and wounded, and it was a sad sight that greeted us with the dawn of the next day...” He continued, “Many a brave fellow we laid away that day.” In 1901, surviving regimental members placed a monument on the ground that they had held during the battle, a small knoll near the Harris farmhouse.

In 1989, landowner Agnes McGee deeded the monument and 1.5 acres to the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites (APCWS). In 1995, Sagan & Co., Inc., donated a conservation easement on 3.128 acres, protecting the viewshed facing the monument, and in 2003 the company donated .237 acres, allowing direct access from a new subdivision road. The Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT), the successor organization to APCWS, transferred ownership and conservation easement for the Harris Farm Tract to CVBT.

Today, the property has parking off Harris Farm Road. There are two rows of cedar trees, framing the monument in the distance. Civil War Trails interpretive signs provide an overview of the battle and the history of the 1st Massachusetts Heavy Artillery.

Now, on a nice spring or summer day, when you pull up to the Harris Farm site and look down the rows of trees, you can see the splendor of nature and feel the stillness that Joseph Gardner felt that day in 1864, just before the whirlwind of battle exploded around him.





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