

This Day in History... July 3, 1863

Union Wins the Battle of Gettysburg

On July 3, 1863, Union forces turned the tide of the Civil War with their victory at the Battle of Gettysburg.

During the summer of 1863, General Robert E. Lee led his Army of Northern Virginia across the border of the Confederacy into Pennsylvania. He hoped to relieve the war-torn citizens of Virginia and knew his men could get food and supplies from the fertile farmlands of the North. Lee's main objectives were to destroy the Union Army, reduce some of the pressure on Vicksburg caused by the Northern siege, and approach Harrisburg or Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The general hoped victories on Union soil would convince Northern politicians to end the war with the Confederacy.

On June 30, Confederate forces under Lieutenant General A.P. Hill spotted Union troops in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Hill decided to send a large scouting party the following morning to get more information on the size of the Northern army.

The Union's Army of the Potomac had a change in leadership just three days before the battle began. Major General George Meade took charge after Major General Joseph Hooker resigned. Most of Meade's army was assembling to the south of Gettysburg along a section of hills and ridges that made strong defensive positions.

Hill's troops met the Union's advance forces west of the town where the Northern cavalry was guarding ridges and buying time for the rest of the army to arrive. Confederate troops attacked from the north and northwest. Though the Union held for a while, they were forced to retreat through the streets of Gettysburg.

Later that evening and into the next morning, reinforcements arrived for both armies. The Union took advantage of the landscape and formed a defensive line in the shape of a fishhook along the hills and ridges. Confederate forces aligned themselves parallel to their opponents in a line that stretched nearly five miles to the west and northeast. Both sides were now prepared for the intense warfare to come.

Union Major General Daniel Sickles was assigned a position on the south of Cemetery Ridge. However, he felt higher ground, about a half mile away, would be a better spot for his artillery. Sickles's decision proved costly because his line had no protection on the flanks.

Lee ordered Lieutenant General James Longstreet to attack early in the morning on July 2. After multiple delays, his First Corps began their maneuvers after 4:00 p.m. In spite of the postponements, they overwhelmed Sickles's forces at the Peach Orchard.



This stamp was created by the Post Office's first nationwide contest to design a US postage stamp.



From the 1995 Civil War sheet

This Day in History... July 3, 1863 continued

Pennsylvania reserves reinforced the Union line and stopped the advance. Sickles's Third Corps was destroyed in the attack.

To the north, Confederate units began their assault of Culp's Hill at about 7:00 p.m. Many of the Union troops had been sent south to help fight against Longstreet, but strong defenses had been built. The remaining forces were able to hold off the Confederate advance, but the Southern Army took control of a small portion of land at the base of the hill.

Fighting resumed in the morning of July 3. Union troops at Culp's Hill bombarded the Confederates to regain their lost land. By 11:00 a.m., fighting ceased on the hill when the Southerners abandoned the base.

General Lee decided it was time to attack the Union's center. At 1:00 p.m., Confederate artillery began bombarding the Union position on Cemetery Ridge. In order to save ammunition, the Northern forces did not return fire for the first fifteen minutes, and then joined in the barrage. Around 3:00, the shelling stopped. Out from the smoke appeared 12,500 Confederate soldiers. As they crossed open fields for three-quarters of a mile, they were fired upon by Northern troops and artillery. A small break in the Union line allowed the Southerners to reach a point later known as the "High-water mark of the Confederacy" (the closest the Confederacy ever came to victory over the North), but they were driven back. Almost half of the attacking force did not return to their lines.

That night and the next morning, Lee strengthened his defensive position along Seminary Ridge and waited for Meade to attack. By nightfall on July 4, it became apparent the cautious Northern commander was not going to launch an assault, and the Army of Northern Virginia began their retreat to the South.

The Battle of Gettysburg produced the greatest number of casualties in the Civil War. In all, between 46,000 and 51,000 men were killed, wounded, captured, or missing by the time it ended.

The Northern victory raised the morale of the Army and the public. President Lincoln wrote, "Now, if General Meade can complete his work so gloriously prosecuted thus far, by the literal or substantial destruction of Lee's army, the rebellion will be over." Meade did not aggressively pursue the Confederates, and they crossed safely over the border into Virginia. The war dragged on for almost two more years.

The Battle at Gettysburg ended just one day before the fall of Vicksburg. These two events have been called the turning points in the Civil War. The Confederacy lost all hope of European recognition and Lee's army never again went on an offensive campaign.



Stamp pictures an 1887 chromolithograph by Thure de Thulstrup.

This Day in History... July 3, 1863

Union Wins the Battle of Gettysburg

On July 3, 1863, Union forces turned the tide of the Civil War with their victory at the Battle of Gettysburg.

During the summer of 1863, General Robert E. Lee led his Army of Northern Virginia across the border of the Confederacy into Pennsylvania. He hoped to relieve the war-torn citizens of Virginia and knew his men could get food and supplies from the fertile farmlands of the North. Lee's main objectives were to destroy the Union Army, reduce some of the pressure on Vicksburg caused by the Northern siege, and approach Harrisburg or Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The general hoped victories on Union soil would convince Northern politicians to end the war with the Confederacy.

On June 30, Confederate forces under Lieutenant General A.P. Hill spotted Union troops in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Hill decided to send a large scouting party the following morning to get more information on the size of the Northern army.

The Union's Army of the Potomac had a change in leadership just three days before the battle began. Major General George Meade took charge after Major General Joseph Hooker resigned. Most of Meade's army was assembling to the south of Gettysburg along a section of hills and ridges that made strong defensive positions.

Hill's troops met the Union's advance forces west of the town where the Northern cavalry was guarding ridges and buying time for the rest of the army to arrive. Confederate troops attacked from the north and northwest. Though the Union held for a while, they were forced to retreat through the streets of Gettysburg.

Later that evening and into the next morning, reinforcements arrived for both armies. The Union took advantage of the landscape and formed a defensive line in the shape of a fishhook along the hills and ridges. Confederate forces aligned themselves parallel to their opponents in a line that stretched nearly five miles to the west and northeast. Both sides were now prepared for the intense warfare to come.

Union Major General Daniel Sickles was assigned a position on the south of Cemetery Ridge. However, he felt higher ground, about a half mile away, would be a better spot for his artillery. Sickles's decision proved costly because his line had no protection on the flanks.

Lee ordered Lieutenant General James Longstreet to attack early in the morning on July 2. After multiple delays, his First Corps began their maneuvers after 4:00 p.m. In spite of the postponements, they overwhelmed Sickles's forces at the Peach Orchard.



This stamp was created by the Post Office's first nationwide contest to design a US postage stamp.



From the 1995 Civil War sheet

This Day in History... July 3, 1863 continued

Pennsylvania reserves reinforced the Union line and stopped the advance. Sickles's Third Corps was destroyed in the attack.

To the north, Confederate units began their assault of Culp's Hill at about 7:00 p.m. Many of the Union troops had been sent south to help fight against Longstreet, but strong defenses had been built. The remaining forces were able to hold off the Confederate advance, but the Southern Army took control of a small portion of land at the base of the hill.

Fighting resumed in the morning of July 3. Union troops at Culp's Hill bombarded the Confederates to regain their lost land. By 11:00 a.m., fighting ceased on the hill when the Southerners abandoned the base.

General Lee decided it was time to attack the Union's center. At 1:00 p.m., Confederate artillery began bombarding the Union position on Cemetery Ridge. In order to save ammunition, the Northern forces did not return fire for the first fifteen minutes, and then joined in the barrage. Around 3:00, the shelling stopped. Out from the smoke appeared 12,500 Confederate soldiers. As they crossed open fields for three-quarters of a mile, they were fired upon by Northern troops and artillery. A small break in the Union line allowed the Southerners to reach a point later known as the "High-water mark of the Confederacy" (the closest the Confederacy ever came to victory over the North), but they were driven back. Almost half of the attacking force did not return to their lines.

That night and the next morning, Lee strengthened his defensive position along Seminary Ridge and waited for Meade to attack. By nightfall on July 4, it became apparent the cautious Northern commander was not going to launch an assault, and the Army of Northern Virginia began their retreat to the South.

The Battle of Gettysburg produced the greatest number of casualties in the Civil War. In all, between 46,000 and 51,000 men were killed, wounded, captured, or missing by the time it ended.

The Northern victory raised the morale of the Army and the public. President Lincoln wrote, "Now, if General Meade can complete his work so gloriously prosecuted thus far, by the literal or substantial destruction of Lee's army, the rebellion will be over." Meade did not aggressively pursue the Confederates, and they crossed safely over the border into Virginia. The war dragged on for almost two more years.

The Battle at Gettysburg ended just one day before the fall of Vicksburg. These two events have been called the turning points in the Civil War. The Confederacy lost all hope of European recognition and Lee's army never again went on an offensive campaign.



Stamp pictures an 1887 chromolithograph by Thure de Thulstrup.