

Gettysburg, July 3, 1863

James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6, chronicles the ill-fated Pickett's charge, which set the "high-water mark" of the Confederacy.



One hundred and fifty years ago, 12,000 Confederate soldiers advanced across a wide open field to attack Union forces a mile away on Cemetery Ridge. In the course of one hour, more than half would be wounded or killed. This gallant but futile effort would be immortalized by the name "Pickett's Charge."

George E. Pickett had graduated last in his West Point class of 1846. He wore his long hair in ringlets. With his face adorned by a drooping mustache and goatee, Pickett looked like a cross between a Cavalier dandy and a riverboat gambler. He had seen little action, and was eager to win

everlasting glory at Gettysburg.

Pickett was assigned the task of assaulting the Union positions on Cemetery Ridge. The Union lines resembled an upside-down fish-hook, with its barbed end curving from Culp's Hill through Cemetery Hill, and the shank running south along Cemetery Ridge to the eye of the hook on the rocky prominence of Little Round Top.

By bending back on itself, the Federal position gave Meade the tactical advantage of shorter interior lines. Holding a convex shape, the Federals forced the Confederates to spread themselves along the whole front. And while Lee had to maneuver around a wider



General George E. Pickett

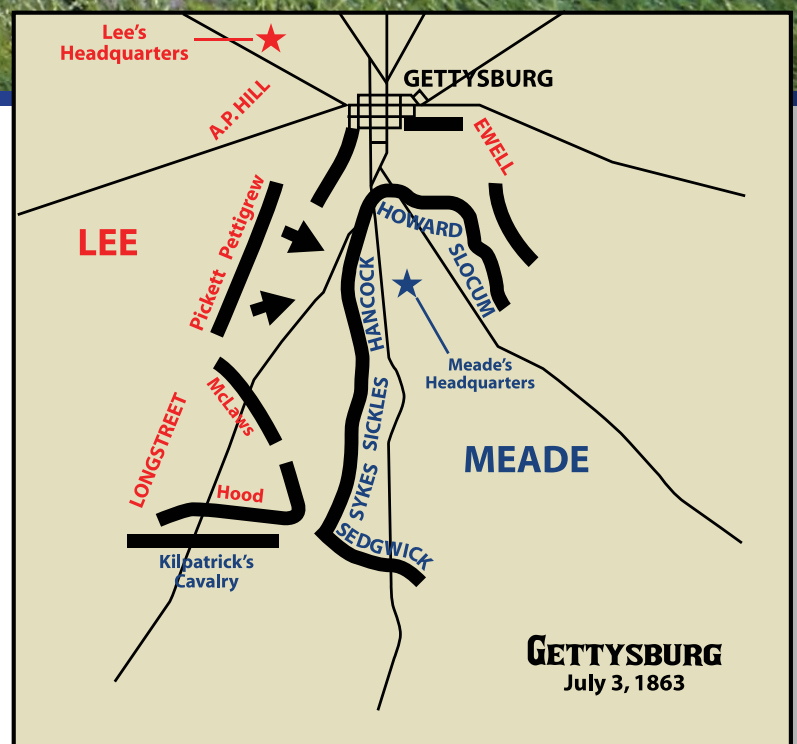
LEFT
Confederate General George Pickett, No31047



orbit, Meade directed from the core. His headquarters on the Leister Farm was three times closer than Lee's headquarters to every major point of engagement on the battlefield.

As for the battlefield, Pickett's troops would have to advance more than one mile without any cover or protection. There would be no element of surprise, and the men would be exposed to unrelenting artillery fire.

When they reached the Emmitsburg Road, the advancing troops would encounter strongly-built lumber fences. Too sturdy to pull down in a reasonable amount of



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George Gordon Meade, 1815-1872

Once referred to by his men as "a damned goggle-eyed old snapping turtle," Meade was made commander of the Army of the Potomac on June 28, 1863, less than one week before the battle of Gettysburg.

He was born in Cadiz, Spain, and was therefore ineligible to be President of the United States. It was said that this was a factor in his being named as commander of the army over other candidates who harbored political aspirations.

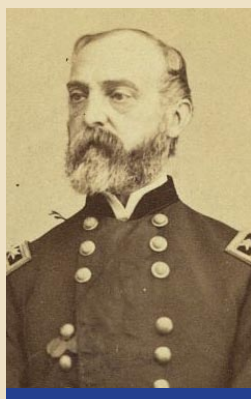
When Meade arrived at Gettysburg on July 1, he set up headquarters in a small whitewashed farmhouse just off the Taneytown Road. The building was owned by the widow Lydia Leister and stood a few hundred yards east of the crest of Cemetery Ridge in the center of the Union line. (The house is still there, about three hundred yards east of the equestrian monument to Meade.)

On the evening of July 2, Meade summoned his corps commanders to his headquarters at the Leister House to review the day's events and discuss plans for the next day. Crammed into a ten-by-twelve foot room were Meade, two staff officers, and nine commanding generals.

After much discussion and voting, the group agreed on a strategy of waiting in a defensive posture until Lee either attacked or moved on.

It is worth noting that on the day of Pickett's charge, Meade stayed in close contact with the front lines, and was often seen on horseback along Cemetery Ridge. In contrast, Lee sat on a tree stump far behind the lines, sending and receiving exactly one dispatch during the whole afternoon.

Given that a number of key Confederate generals



were new to their commands, and given that the corps commander Longstreet was unenthusiastic about the battle plan, Lee would have been well-advised to take a hands-on role in the Confederate assault.

As for George Meade, he disappointed Lincoln by not following up on his victory at Gettysburg -- and letting Lee escape to Virginia. As a consequence, Ulysses S. Grant was subsequently placed in command of all Union forces.



ABOVE
"Hold this Ground, " Planning the Defense
Meade, Doubleday & Howard, No.31192

ABOVE FAR LEFT:
General George Meade

ABOVE CENTER
Union General George Meade, No.31067

ABOVE RIGHT:
Vintage Cigar Box Label, courtesy of The Toy
Soldier Museum



ABOVE
Union General Meade's Headquarters
(The Leister Farmhouse), No.51026



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time, the fencing forced gear-toting soldiers to squeeze through or climb over the rails -- presenting easy targets to the Union defenders.

The final dash was up a slight rise, to where the Union troops awaited them, some three or four deep, protected by a stone wall. Confederate artilleryman E. Porter Alexander commented, "It seemed like madness to undertake such an attack."

Union artillery was silent when Pickett's lines emerged from the woods on Seminary Ridge. But when they crossed the Emmitsburg Road, all hell broke loose. First solid shot, then canister and finally, at point-blank range, double canister tore into the advancing Confederates. Federal artillery to the north and south

ABOVE
"Hell for Glory"
Art of War Series,
Gettysburg Third
Day Commemorative
Set, Pickett's Charge,
No.31199

ABOVE RIGHT
Diorama of Pickett's
Charge 24 inches
by 48 inches, now
on display at the
National Civil War
Museum, Harrisburg,
Pennsylvania

opened a murderous fire into their flanks, tearing at them from every angle.

Under the savage attack, the Confederate flanks melted away like butter on a hot summer day. In the center, all was chaos. Two hundred men, led by General Lewis Armistead, broke through the Union line at the stone wall -- only to be shot or captured by Union reserves, who counterattacked to close the breach. This, the farthest point of the Confederate advance, would later be known as the high-water mark of the Confederacy.

Of the twelve thousand men who participated in Pickett's charge, 6,640 were killed or wounded -- more than one out of every two. Pickett lost all three of his brigade commanders and

every one of his thirteen colonels was either wounded or killed in the charge.

Some years after the battle, Pickett was asked why the Confederates were defeated at Gettysburg. His laconic response: "I always thought the Yankees had something to do with it."

Jim Hillestad is a frequent contributor to The Standard and is proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum. His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him at 570 629-7227 or visit his website: www.the-toy-soldier.com