

Gettysburg: The Second Day

PRELIMINARY MOVEMENTS AND PLANS. The small college town of Gettysburg, with 2,400 residents at the time of the battle, lay in the heart of a fertile country, surrounded by broad acres of crops and pastures. Substantial houses of industrious Pennsylvania farmers dotted the countryside. South of the town and hardly more than a musket shot from the houses on its outer edge, Cemetery Hill rose somewhat abruptly from the lower ground. Extending southward from the hill for nearly 2 miles was a long roll of land called Cemetery Ridge. At its southern extremity a sharp incline terminated in the wooded crest of Little Round Top and a half mile beyond was the sugar-loaf peak of Big Round Top, the highest point in the vicinity of Gettysburg. Paralleling Cemetery Ridge, at an average distance of two-thirds of a mile to the west, lay Seminary Ridge, which derived its name from the Lutheran Seminary that stood upon its crest a half mile west of Gettysburg. In 1863, 10 roads radiated from Gettysburg, the one leading to Emmitsburg extending diagonally across the valley between Seminary and Cemetery Ridges.

By noon of July 2, the powerful forces of Meade and Lee were at hand, and battle on a tremendous scale was imminent. That part of the Union line extending from Cemetery Hill to Little Round Top was strongly



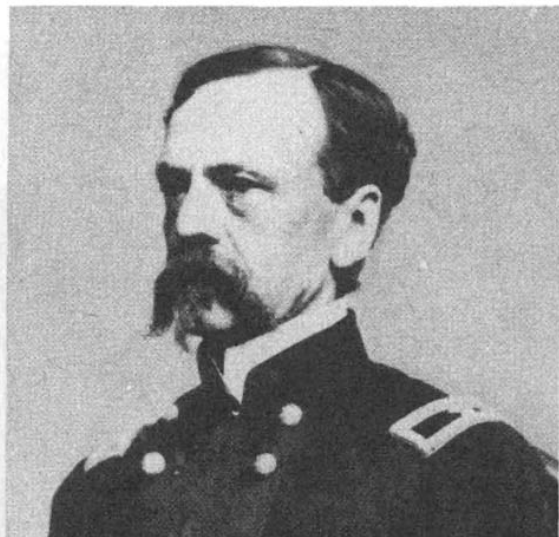
Lunettes, or artillery defense works, on the crest of East Cemetery Hill. The entrance gateway to the public cemetery, which is still in use, appears in the background on the Baltimore Pike. Brady photograph.

held. Late in the forenoon, Sickles, commanding the Third Corps which lay north of Little Round Top, sent Berdan's sharpshooters and some of the men of the 3rd Maine Regiment forward from the Emmitsburg Road to Pitzer's Woods, a half mile to the west. As they reached the woods, a strong Confederate force fired upon them, and they hurriedly retired to inform their commander. To Sickles, the extension of the Confederate line southward meant that his left flank was endangered. He at once began moving forward to the advantageous high ground at the Peach Orchard, and by 3:30 p. m. his battle front extended from Devil's Den northwestward to the Orchard and northward on the Emmitsburg Road. In this forward movement, the strong position on the crest of Little Round Top was left unoccupied. This was the situation when Meade finally turned his attention from his right flank at Culp's Hill and Spangler's Spring—the cause of his great concern throughout the forenoon—to review Sickles' line.

Lee planned to attack, despite the advice of Longstreet who continually urged defensive battle. On July 2, Longstreet recommended that Lee swing around the Union left at Little Round Top, select a good position, and await attack. Lee observed that while the Union position was strong if held in sufficient numbers to utilize the advantage of interior lines, it presented grave difficulties to a weak defending force. A secure lodgment on the shank of the hook might render it possible to sever the Union Army and to deal with each unit separately. Not all of Meade's force had reached the field, and Lee thought he had the opportunity of destroying his adversary in the process of concentration. He resolved to send Longstreet against the Federal left flank which he believed was then on

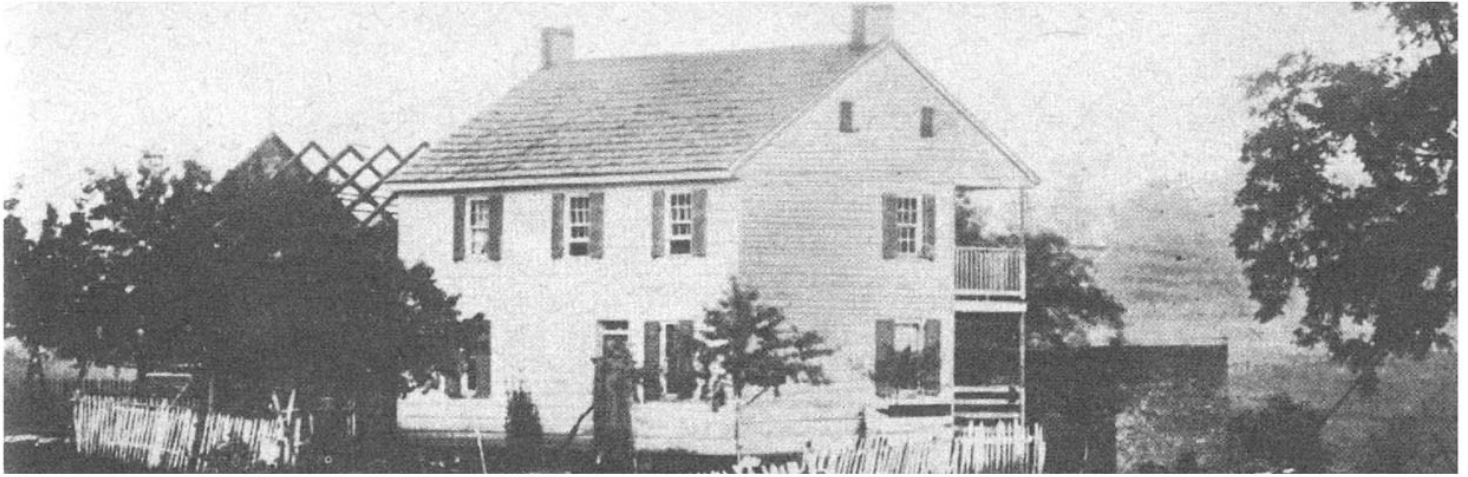


Maj. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren.
Courtesy National Archives.



Maj. Gen. Daniel E. Sickles.
Courtesy National Archives.

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Trostle farmhouse. Here the 9th Massachusetts battery, taking position in the yard, lost 80 out of 88 horses during the battle of July 2. Brady photograph.

lower Cemetery Ridge, while Ewell was to storm Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill.

LONGSTREET ATTACKS ON THE RIGHT. In the execution of this plan, Longstreet was ordered to take position across the Emmitsburg Road and to attack what was thought to be the left flank of the Union line on Cemetery Ridge. From his encampment on the Chambersburg Road, 3 miles west of Gettysburg, he started toward his objective, using Herr Ridge to conceal the movement from Union signalmen on Little Round Top. After marching to Black Horse Tavern on the Fairfield Road, he realized that his troops were in sight of the signal unit and at once began retracing his course. Employing the trees on Seminary Ridge as a screen, he marched southward again in Willoughby Run Valley, arriving in position on the Emmitsburg Road about 3:30 p.m. Immediately in front, and only 700 yards away, Longstreet saw Sickles' batteries lined up in the Peach Orchard and on the Emmitsburg Road. Col. E. P. Alexander, commanding Longstreet's artillery battalions, opened with full force against the Union guns. A moment later, Law's Alabama brigade stepped off, with Robertson's Texans on the left. They advanced east, then swung toward the north, with Devil's Den and the Round Tops in their path.

WARREN SAVES LITTLE ROUND TOP. Gen. G. K. Warren, Meade's Chief of Engineers, after reviewing Sickles' line with Meade, rode to the crest of Little Round Top and found the hill, "the key to the Union position," unoccupied except by a signal station. Warren was informed by

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Little Round Top from the northwest. Brady photograph.

the signalmen that they believed Confederate troops lay concealed on the wooded ridge a mile to the west. Smith's New York battery, emplaced at Devil's Den, immediately was ordered to fire a shot into these woods. The missile, crashing through the trees, caused a sudden stir of the Confederates "which by the gleam of the reflected sunlight on their bayonets, revealed their long lines outflanking the position." Warren realized Longstreet would strike first at Little Round Top and he observed, too, the difficulty of shifting Sickles' position from Devil's Den to the hill.

At this very moment, Sykes' Fifth Corps, marching from its reserve position, began streaming across Cemetery Ridge toward the front. Warren sought aid from this corps. In answer to his plea for troops, the brigades of Vincent and Weed sprinted to Little Round Top. Law's Alabama troops were starting to scale the south slope of the hill when Vincent's men rushed to the attack. Weed's brigade, following closely, drove over the crest and engaged Robertson's Texans on the west slope. The arrival of Hazlett's battery on the summit of the hill is thus described by an eyewitness: "The passage of the six guns through the roadless woods and amongst the rocks was marvelous. Under ordinary circumstances it would have been considered an impossible feat, but the eagerness of the men . . . brought them without delay to the very summit, where they went immediately into battle." A desperate hand-

to-hand struggle ensued. Weed and Hazlett were killed, and Vincent was mortally wounded—all young soldiers of great promise.

While Law and Robertson fought on Little Round Top, their comrades struggled in the fields below. The Confederate drive was taken up in turn by the brigades of Benning, Anderson, Kershaw, Semmes, Barksdale, Wofford, Wilcox, Perry, and Wright against the divisions of three Federal corps in the Wheatfield, the Peach Orchard, and along the Emmitsburg Road. Four hours of desperate fighting broke the Peach Orchard salient, an angle in the Union line which was struck from the south and the west. It left the Wheatfield strewn with dead and wounded, and the base of Little Round Top a shambles. Sickles' men had been driven back, and Longstreet was now in possession of the west slope of Big Round Top, of Devil's Den, and the Peach Orchard. Little Round Top, that commanding landmark which, in Confederate hands would have unhinged the Union line on Cemetery Ridge, still remained in Union possession.

CULP'S HILL. In the Confederate plan, Ewell on the left was directed to attack Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill in conjunction with Longstreet's drive. At the appointed time, the guns of Latimer's battalion on Benner's Hill, east of Gettysburg, opened a well-directed fire against the Union positions on East Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill, but the return fire soon shattered many of Latimer's batteries and forced the remnants to retire out of range. In the final moments of this action the youthful Major Latimer was mortally wounded.

About dusk, long after the artillery fire had ceased, Johnson's division charged the Union works on Culp's Hill. Although his right failed to make headway because of the steep incline and the strength of the Union positions, Steuart's brigade on the left had better luck. Here, on the southern slope of the hill, the Union works were thinly manned. An hour earlier, the divisions of Geary and Ruger had been called from these works to reinforce the Union center. Johnson, finding the works weakly defended, took possession of them but did not press the attack further. Only a few hundred yards away on the Baltimore Pike lay the Union supply trains. Failure of Confederate reconnaissance here again was critically important. Thus passed another opportunity to strike a hard blow at the Union Army.

Closely timed with Johnson's assault, Early's infantry started a charge toward East Cemetery Hill. Seldom if ever surpassed in its dash and desperation, Early's assault reached the crest of the hill where the defenders, as a last resort in the hand-to-hand encounter, used clubbed muskets, stones, and rammers. Long after dark, Early's Louisiana and North Carolina troops fought to hold the crest of the hill and their captured guns. But the failure of Rodes to move out of the streets of Gettysburg and attack the hill from the west enabled Hancock to shift some of his men to aid in repelling Early's attack. Faced by these Union reserves, Early's men finally gave way about 10 o'clock and sullenly retired to their lines. The Union troops stood firm.