

Notes about the Final Days

Shade Seniors, April 14, 2015

Note about the notes. I was privileged to talk with the Senior Citizens of the Shade/Lodi Twp area. I did not want to give a speech *per se* but did want to organize my thoughts so as not to appear incoherent. I used these notes mostly as an outline and ignored much of the text that follows section headings. As often happens with such talks, the q & c session that followed went in several directions that are not necessarily reflected in these notes.

In addition to the sources reflected in the endnotes, I have made used the following as sources: Bowman, John S., Editor. *The Civil War: Day by Day* (1989) Greenwich: Brompton Books; Wheelan, Joseph. *Their Last Full Measure: The Final Days of the Civil War* (2015) Boston: DaCapo; Winik, Jay. *April 1865: The Month that Saved America* (2001) New York: HarperCollins.

Tout:

my website

Mary Surratt trial May 13 @ 7:00 pm

Athens Public Library

Free and Open to the Public

Prior events on April 14

1861 -- Lincoln issues a call for 75,000 volunteers

1865 -- Lincoln is assassinated

Five precursors:

*** Crossing the James -- During the night of June 14-15** -- After nightfall on the evening of June 12 – coincidentally the same day when Lee was deploying Early's 2nd Corps toward the Shenandoah Valley -- the Army of the Potomac resumed shifting to the south. Before starting to move the entire army, Grant cleverly disguised his principle objective. Specifically he sent Warren's corps, accompanied by Wilson's cavalry division, toward Richmond; Baldy Smith's 18th Corps retraced its steps back to White House Landing to board

riverboats before circling around the end of the Peninsula to start back up the James River to land at Bermuda Hundred.¹

After Lee – who could ill afford to allow Federal access to Richmond -- fell for Warren's feint, and once Smith's corps cleared the roads, the rest of the Union army, including three infantry corps and the army's baggage trains, carefully withdrew from its Cold Harbor trenches to begin a 55 mile march to Charles City C.H. near the James. During the night of June 14-15 they started traversing a 2,100 foot bridge laid across 110 pontoons.

Lost opportunity -- Blame it on Baldy who flinched at the sound of locomotives that he assumed were bringing in defenders.

*** Sheridan's victories in the Shenandoah Valley**

Third Winchester – September 19

Fisher's Hill– September 22

Cedar Creek – October 19

*** Thomas' defeat of Hood's army – December 1864**

*** Sherman's movement through the Carolinas --** After Atlanta fell Mary Chestnut wrote: "Since Atlanta I have felt as if all were dead within me, forever. We are going to be wiped off the face of the earth."

Was causing Confederate soldiers to fear for their families' safety and welfare. These concerns, coupled with the nearly insufferable deprivations from living in the trenches, was causing many Rebels to desert, perhaps at a rate of forty desertions per each forty-eight hour period. As the lines kept extending counterclockwise to the southwest, and as the Confederate numbers kept shrinking because of desertion and other forms of attrition the net effect was that fewer Confederate soldiers were available to defend more territory.

*** Capture of Fort Fisher -- January 13 -15, 1865.** Commanded the entrance to the Cape Fear River that led to Wilmington, the Confederacy's last open port along the Atlantic.

~ **Relative condition of soldiers in the trenches** – The Union lines managed to inch forward while lurching counterclockwise to Lee’s right flank. As a practical matter, Lee’s soldiers in the trenches were getting the worse of the situation. The Federal logistics were in high gear with tons of supplies being delivered daily to City Point -- then the busiest port in the world -- from which supplies were re-distributed via a twenty-one mile rail line extending from City Point along the Federal positions.

The losses of the various supply sources had tangible consequences in the trenches where men and animals were seriously undernourished. Replacement clothing and shoes were difficult to find with many Confederate soldiers trying to cope as best they could without complete uniforms or footwear. Elizabeth Varon, a Professor of History at the University of Virginia, has noted, “The last year of the war had been a prolonged nightmare for the Army of Northern Virginia.”ⁱⁱ

Saturday, March 25 -- Lincoln arrives at Fort Monroe to confer with Grant. Afterwards Lincoln will remain in the theater until after Richmond has fallen

~ **Fort Stedman -- Also on March 25, 1865**, Rebel forces attempted a pre-dawn breakout by attacking Fort Stedman located on the left of the Union lines.ⁱⁱⁱ The plan’s objective was predicated upon a faulty intelligence that three more Federal outposts were located behind Fort Stedman; Although their stratagem breached Union lines to capture the fort, as described by Joseph Glatthaar the Federals “were too numerous, too well equipped, and too responsive for the [Rebel] plan to work.”^{iv} Hundreds of Confederates surrendered to the Federals rather than to try to run the gauntlet of murderous fire across the fields to the original Rebel lines.^v Accordingly Meade ordered a series of counterattacks that seized sections of the Confederate picket lines. Confederates lost 4,000 casualties, or approximately 7% of Lee’s army. Union casualties were half of the Confederates.^{vi}

Lee fully appreciated the consequences of losing the Fort Stedman gamble when he advised Jeff Davis the next day, “I fear now it will be impossible to prevent a juncture between Grant and Sherman nor do I deem it prudent that this army should maintain its position until [Sherman] shall approach too near.” Fort Stedman would be the last offense ever launched by Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia.

~ **Five Forks -- April 1, 1865** -- Douglas Southall Freeman observed that, “The week beginning March 27, 1865, was one on which the survivors of the Army of Northern Virginia were loath to dwell, because it was to them, in memory, the first stage of a gruesome nightmare; ...”^{vii} Five Forks was the critical junction of the road from Danville. And Lee could ill afford to allow the Federals to occupy this intersection.^{viii}

Realizing the Federals were preparing to attack his right flank, thereby threatening the collapse of his entire line as well as cutting off his remaining supply lines, Lee tried to reinforce his defenses by sending George Pickett’s division to the area of the Five Forks, ordering Pickett to hold Five Forks “at all hazards.”^{ix} Unfortunately for Pickett his division was isolated at least four miles from the rest of the Rebel lines. During the late afternoon on **April 1, 1865**, Pickett and Fitz Lee, the cavalry commander, assuming it was too late in the afternoon for an attack, went to the rear to partake in a shad bake. To the complete surprise of these Confederate commanders, Sheridan’s cavalry reinforced with infantry, attacked and collapsed Pickett’s detached division, resulting in most one-sided Union victory for over a year. Not only did the Union attack demolish a Confederate infantry division but by the end of the day Sheridan’s group was within an easy march of taking the Southside R.R. Moreover, capture of the Five Forks intersection meant the Federals could use the Boydton Plank Road to roll up the remainder of the Confederate’s defense lines.

The Federals captured another 5,000-6,000 prisoners^x all of whom were offered their release and passes to return to their homes if they would merely swear allegiance to the United States government. However, fewer than 100 of the Rebels opted to take the necessary oath, the rest of the prisoners staying loyal to the Confederacy (or perhaps not anxious to undertake a long difficult trek back to their homes).

Sunday, April 2, 1865 -- Coincidentally the same day when Harry Wilson was crushing Nathan Forrest’s cavalry at Selma, Alabama -- Grant ordered an assault all along Confederate lines crippled by the loss of one-fifth of its strength during the Fort Stedman and Five Forks attacks. A.P. Hill was killed this day when he rode forward to check his lines and ran into a couple of Yankee soldiers.^{xi} By the end of the day not only had the Federals driven the Confederates from their

trenches but perhaps more importantly the Federals had secured control of the Southside R.R., which until then had been Lee's remaining lifeline for supplies.

~ **Evacuation of Richmond** -- As the Confederates defenses began to collapse, Lee had no alternative except to order at 3:00 pm the evacuations of Petersburg as well as of Richmond.^{xii} Mad melees ensued as governmental officials as well as other civilians tried to find ways to flee the cities. Fires set to tobacco warehouses turned into uncontrolled conflagrations sweeping through much of Richmond. Repeated explosions of ammunition ships in the harbor were adding to the distress of those civilians remaining in the city.

April 3 -- Godfrey Weitzel accepts the formal surrender of Richmond. Federal troops immediately begin to help put out the fires have been devastating Richmond.

General Retreat Route – Confederates were intending to stay generally north of the Appomattox River.

~ **Amelia Court House - Tuesday, April 4** -- Lee began his retreat by moving his main column parallel to the north bank of the Appomattox.^{xiii} His first planned stop was the redbrick town of Amelia Court House --where sustenance supposedly was waiting in boxcars on the railroad. But unfortunately for Lee his original plan immediately was unraveling. A logistics mistake was about to dearly cost Lee who had previously ordered food, forage, and ammunition to be pre-staged at Amelia Court House. But without food or forage since leaving Petersburg Lee's men and animals were in bad need for something to eat. Unfortunately the train commander had taken the food to Richmond where the food was destroyed as part of the evacuation.^{xiv} When the Confederates arrived at Amelia C.H. on they found only ordinance,^{xv} something the Rebels not only did not need but weight their starving animals could hardly haul.

~ **Sailor's Creek -- April 6** -- Miscues separated the column into three groups at Sailor's Creek resulting in disastrous havoc as the Federals struck two of the separated segments from all directions. The battle of Sailor's Creek – essentially

three individual battles -- turned into an unmitigated disaster for the Rebels almost as soon as the Union cavalry discovered the vulnerabilities of the detached segments. Sheridan's entrenched cavalry, with its repeating carbines, blocked lead brigades from advancing while Wright's 6th Corps, complete with artillery as well as infantry, crossed Little Sailor's Creek to batter the rear of Ewell's small unsupported force. Ewell frantically tried to coordinate his defense with Anderson's but his group was soon outflanked before also crumbling. The survivors of this "bloody slaughter" had no recourse except to surrender.^{xvi}

Further ahead Anderson attempted a frontal assault trying to catch up with Longstreet's rear but his soldiers exerted only half-hearted efforts against a numerically superior entrenched force, many of Anderson's soldiers quickly dropping their arms before surrendering. In addition to attacking supply wagons, at one point on April 6^{xvii} Custer, leading, leading his 3rd Cavalry Division, captured about 800 horses and mules, 300 wagons plus 15 artillery pieces, including the battalion's commander.^{xviii} Observing helplessly from a distant hilltop as Anderson's corps melted away, the normally stoic Lee could only bemoan "My God! Has the army been dissolved?"^{xix}

Two miles to the north the Yankees' 2nd Corps led in Hancock's absence by Andrew Humphreys -- whom Thomas Buell characterized as a wolfhound^{xx} -- pummeled the wagon train while forcing Gordon's corps into utter disarray. Gordon later wrote of the experience that the Federals "struck my command while we were endeavoring to push the ponderous wagon trains through the bog, out of which the starved teams were unable to drag them."^{xxi} Humphreys later wrote the Rebels' route of retreat was "literally lined with their tents, baggage, and cooking utensils," cast away in the Johnnies' desperate efforts to stay ahead of the pursuit.^{xxii} The Northern 2nd Corps captured 20 percent of the wagon trains, 1,700 Rebel soldiers, 70 ambulances plus 11 battle flags.^{xxiii}

The devastating outcomes of these battles, resulting in another 8,000 Rebel casualties, including eight generals taken prisoner, would greatly influence Lee's eventual decision to surrender. Richard Ewell, once Stonewall Jackson's top subordinate but more recently responsible for the defense of Richmond, Joseph Kershaw who had served with Early in the Shenandoah Valley, and who was considered one of Lee's hardest fighting generals,^{xxiv} and Custis Lee, Robert E. Lee

oldest son who was leading field troops for the first time, were among the eight captured Confederate generals. Additionally Lee soon relieved Anderson and two other generals, Pickett and Bushrod Johnson, from the army thereby reducing Lee's inner circle of infantry generals to Longstreet, Gordon, and Mahone.^{xxv}

~ **April 9, 1865 Appomattox** -- At Appomattox Court House, as planned on Palm Sunday, Gordon's infantry and Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry formed a line of battle in a last ditch, desperate effort to break out along the Lynchburg Road. This force enjoyed initial success against the Union's cavalry pickets. However this early success was not only short-lived, but was illusionary as Gibbon's 24th Corps, reinforced by two infantry brigades of the U.S.C.T., together with Griffin's 5th Corps, arrived just in time to emerge from the woods to attack Gordon from three sides. At this point the Army of Northern Virginia was surrounded by Union cavalry reinforced by infantry to the front, to the rear by Meade's 2nd and 6th Corps, and to the south. Three regiments of black regiments after rapidly marching twenty miles to take their positions along a stage coach road blocked the Confederates intended escape route.^{xxvi} Within an hour Gordon reluctantly reported back to Lee "Tell General Lee I have fought my corps to a frazzle, and I fear I can do nothing unless I am heavily supported by Longstreet."^{xxvii} Upon learning of the failure of Gordon's attack, and after eschewing Porter Alexander's advice to disperse his army to become guerrillas in the woods and mountains rather than surrendering, Lee decided he had no choice but to meet Grant to discuss terms of surrender. And so Lee sent word to Grant asking to meet at a convenient location.^{xxviii}

By mutual agreement the respective representatives arranged that their commanding generals would meet at McLean's House in Appomattox C.H. McLean had formerly lived in the Manassas, Virginia, area but moved westward hoping to avoid additional collateral dangers of warfare. Much to Lee's surprise he was not taken prisoner. At Lee's request, his men were allowed to keep their own horses and sidearms,^{xxix} furthermore, after Lee mentioned his army had not been fed for several days, Grant also ordered that three days rations be distributed to the former Rebels.^{xxx}

April 10 -- Lee's Farewell and Being Overwhelmed. Lee's Farewell Address, especially the phrase about being "compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers,"

or a common variant that “the odds against us were too great,” quickly was reiterated by countless Southern speakers and commentators to the point that it became part of Southern creed for decades, becoming an integral part of the Myth of the Lost Cause. On the other hand, other historians have concluded the North won because the government in Washington, D.C. was much more unified than was its counterpart in Richmond. This point has been made by David J. Eicher in *Dixie Betrayed – How the South Really Lost the Civil War* (2006) New York Boston: Little, Brown and Company and by David Williams in *Bitterly Divided – The South’s Inner Civil War* (2008) New York London: The New Press. Several other reasons for the South’s defeat are discussed in Berimger, Robert E.; Hattaway, Herman; Jones, Archer; & Still, William N, Jr. *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (1986) Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press. Lee’s lament also ignored other factors such as the lack of food because planters grew too much cotton and tobacco. Closer to Lee’s complaint, he also ignored problems of desertion and draft dodging as well as the half million Southerners, Blacks and Whites, who served in the Union military.

Lost Cause Myth: Confederates were beaten; they did not simply quit fighting.

Overlooked Napoleon's observation that "God usually favors the side with the heaviest battalions."

Lee also conveniently overlooked all the losses from frontal assaults.

--- When urged to retreat with his cavalry into the Trans-Mississippi, Forest replied, "Any man who is in favor of further prosecution of his war is a fit subject for a lunatic asylum."

April 12 -- The formal surrender at Appomattox, although neither Grant nor Lee were present.

April 15 -- The day that Lincoln died; Lee arrived to his home in Richmond. The Federals distributed 86,555 rations to Richmond residents during the week of Lee's arrival.

April 26 -- John Wilkes Booth was shot.

After a false start, Sherman and Joe Johnston agree to surrender terms similar to those previously agreed by Grant and Lee.

May 10 -- Jefferson Davis was finally captured but some of his group, including Breckinridge and Benjamin, had managed to escape.

June 23 -- At Doaksville, in the Oklahoma Territory, a Confederate battalion of Indian tribes under the command of Cherokee leader Stand Watie (a.k.a. "De-gata-ga") finally surrendered, the last Rebels to do so. In addition to Cherokees, the battalion was comprised of Creeks, Seminoles, and Osages and had participated in almost two dozen major battles and a hundred smaller skirmishes. Two of the battalion's most stunning victories were the capture of a Federal steamboat and the bold seizure of a Federal supply train carrying \$1.5 million worth of supplies at the second battle of Cabin Creek in September 1864.

1877 -- The last four Confederate states, Virginia, Georgia, Mississippi, and Texas rejoined the Union.

There had been 76 battles with 6,000 skirmishes and engagements. With a population of one-tenth of today's population there were an estimated 750,000 deaths, two thirds caused by disease

What was accomplished?

13th Amendment

4,000 pieces of legislation

Homestead Act

Land Grant Colleges

Transcontinental railroads

Endnotes

ⁱ This is the same Baldy Smith who had defied Jeb Stuart at the Carlisle Barracks and who gained Grant's friendship for planning the Cracker Line operation that helped break the Confederate siege at Chattanooga. Trudeau, Noah Andre. *Bloody Roads South – The Wilderness to Cold Harbor: May – June 1864* (2000) Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, pg 313.

ⁱⁱ Varon, Elizabeth R. *Appomattox – Victory, Defeat. And Freedom at the End of the Civil War* (2014) Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, pg 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, pg 17.

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- iv Glatthaar, Joseph T., *General Lee's Army – From Victory to Collapse* (2008) New York: Free Press, pg 458.
- v *Ibid*, pg 18.
- vi Catton, Bruce – *A Stillness at Appomattox* (1953) New York: Anchor Books, pg 337.
- vii Freeman, Douglas Southall, *R. E. Lee, A Biography Vol IV* (1935, 1936) New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, pg 22.
- viii Catton, *supra* pg 346.
- ix Eicher, David J., *The Longest Night: A Military History of the Civil War* (2001) New York: Simon & Schuster, pg 808.
- x Castel, Albert with Brooks D. Simpson. *Victors in Blue – How Union Generals Fought the Confederates, Battled Each Other, and Won the Civil War* (2011) Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, *supra*, pg 303.
- xi Glatthaar, *supra* pg 459; Freeman, *supra*, p 46-47.
- xii Alexander, Bevin. *Robert E. Lee's Civil War* (1998) Holbrook: Adams Media Corporation, pg 301; Freeman, *supra*, pp 49-50.
- xiii Varon, *supra*, pg 9.
- xiv Alexander, Bevin, *supra*, pg 301.
- xv Freeman, *supra*, pg 66.
- xvi Varon, *supra*, pg 14.
- xvii Freeman, *supra*, pg 80 called this a “dreadful day in the history of the Army of Northern Virginia.”
- xviii Walsh, George, “*Those Damn Horse Soldiers*” – *True Tales of the Civil War Cavalry* (2006) New York: Forge,, pg 425; Varon, *supra*, pg 13.
- xix Freeman, *supra*, pg 84.
- xx Buell, Thomas B., *The Warrior Generals – Combat Leadership in the Civil War* (1997) New York: Three Rivers Press, pg 417.
- xxi Gallagher, *supra* pg 56.
- xxii Varon, *supra*, pg 15.
- xxiii Wittenberg, Eric J., *Little Phil — A Reassessment of the Civil War Leadership of Gen. Philip H. Sheridan* (2002) Washington, DC: Brassey's Inc., pg 153.
- xxiv Walsh, *supra*. pg 427.
- xxv Freeman, *supra*, pg 111; Varon, *supra*, pg 24.
- xxvi Varon, *supra*, pg 94.
- xxvii Alexander, Bevin, *supra* pg 311.
- xxviii Freeman, *supra*, pg 124.
- xxix *Ibid*, pg 139.
- xxx *Ibid*, pg 140. Actually these rations were those confiscated from the Rebel train carrying Confederate rations that Union cavalry had recently captured.