

## Robert E. Lee In Orange County

### Part 2 and Companion to **The Rapidan Line**

A summary of local Civil War action from Historian Frank Walker's book, *Remembering*:

In **1861** in the beginning of the first year of the Civil War, there was not much action in Orange County and people and property were not in much danger since Orange was not a primary target of Union action. "Near the end of the first winter of war, the Confederacy signaled its decision to pull back to the Rapidan. In late February the just-built Samuel P. Moore Military Hospital in Manassas was dismantled, and it and its patients were moved to Gordonsville. Next came the 'retrograde movement' of Confederate General Joe Johnston and his army to the Rapidan. Johnston tarried briefly at Culpeper, but his ultimate destination lay elsewhere. The recently-built Camp Henry at Culpeper was abandoned and dismantled. For practical purposes, the northern border of the Confederacy in our area had become the Rapidan. The folks north of the river were not told that in so many words. They learned about it the hard way.

"Local diarist Fanny Page Hume saw great peril in this turn of events. She wrote on March 8, **1862**: 'Jackson is said to have evacuated Winchester, and part of the Manassas army has fallen back to "Rappahannock Bridge" [Remington]. Cannon and all kinds of supplies have been sent back to Gordonsville. It is thought all places will be burnt, if they fall back. God help us all if the enemy should get this far.'<sup>1</sup>

"But Miss Fanny's alarms were premature. In the spring of 1862, 'Stonewall' Jackson conducted his brilliant Valley Campaign and turned himself into an international legend in the process. At about the same time, Federal General George McClellan began an attempt to take Richmond from the east. Both actions drew the combatants away from the Rapidan until mid-summer. The Federals during this time did occupy Fredericksburg and conduct raids and 'scouts' into this area, but Culpeper and Spotsylvania counties bore the brunt of that activity. Orange County remained comparatively quiet.<sup>2</sup>

"From **mid-July to mid-August 1862**, things became serious in the Orange area, but then Jackson defeated Federal General John Pope at Cedar Mountain. Following that victory, Jackson pulled back across the Rapidan, camped in the meadow adjacent to Woodley, south of Orange, and awaited orders from General Lee. Lee brought the rest of his now-named 'Army of Northern Virginia' to Orange County and then took it to Manassas once again. He followed up on his victory there with an invasion of the North.

Returning from Maryland in **late September 1862**, Lee soon learned that Federal forces were concentrating on the Rappahannock River just across from Fredericksburg. Moving to Fredericksburg, Lee developed a defensive position very similar to the Rapidan Line. Marye's

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<sup>1</sup> Frank S. Walker, Jr., *Remembering: A History of Orange County* (Orange, Virginia: Orange County Historical Society, 2004), 149. (Dates have been highlighted to emphasize chronology. They were not written that way in Mr. Walker's original text.)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-150.

Heights took the place of the Southwest Mountain ridge. Telegraph Hill substituted for Clark Mountain. The Richmond, Fredericksburg, & Potomac railroad substituted for the Orange & Alexandria. Possibly not quite as formidable as the Rapidan Line, but good enough. On December 13, 1862 Federal attacks against the Rappahannock Line were repulsed with heavy losses.

“In the **spring of 1863**, the Federals tried to turn Lee out of his Rappahannock defenses in what became known as the Chancellorsville Campaign. The resulting Federal defeat was followed by Lee’s second invasion of the North. Calm reigned along the Rapidan, but that was about to change.

“On **July 3, 1863**, Confederate Generals George Pickett, James Pettigrew, and Isaac Trimble sent their troops up Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg, and the result was a ‘Fredericksburg in reverse.’ Supplies were about gone, the army’s ranks depleted and exhausted—it was time to go home.

“On **August 1**, General Lee telegraphed Confederate President Jefferson Davis from Culpeper: ‘I SHALL NOT FIGHT A BATTLE NORTH OF THE RAPIDAN, BUT WILL ENDEAVOR TO CONCENTRATE EVERYTHING BEHIND IT. IT WOULD BE WELL TO SEND ALL REINFORCEMENTS IN RICHMOND TO ORANGE COURT HOUSE.’ Get ready, Orange County, here they come!<sup>3</sup>

“On **August 4**, General Lee offered a bit more detail to General Samuel Cooper, Adjutant and Inspector General of the Confederate Army: ‘I could find no field in Culpeper offering advantages for battle, and any taken could be so easily avoided should the enemy wish to reach the south bank of the Rapidan, that I thought it advisable to retire at once to that bank’.”<sup>4</sup> Lead elements of the Army of Northern Virginia were behind the Rapidan Line by August 1. Within a few days, all of its divisions were assembled along the Rapidan to re-equip, resupply, and retrain. The strength of that position was obvious, and with the usual exceptions for raids, scouts, skirmishes, ambushes, etc., the Federal army kept its distance.<sup>5</sup>

“With little happening along the Rapidan, Lee agreed to Longstreet’s corps being detached to duty in Tennessee. That was **mid-September**, and Lee was not feeling well. By **early October**, the General was in better health, and he decided to take his remaining two corps and see if he could run the Federals out of Virginia, while at the same time capturing some desperately needed supplies.”<sup>6</sup> That action was called the Bristoe Station Campaign south of Manassas (**October-November 1863**) and was followed by a defeat at Rappahannock Station after failing to secure a river crossing at Kelly’s Ford (November 7). Bristoe Station Campaign was the last time Culpeper would be rejoined with the Confederacy. The Federals, who had occupied

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 150. Mr. Walker citing Dowdey/Manarin, Eds, *Wartime Papers*, p. 566.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Mr. Walker citing Dowdey/Manarin, Eds, *Wartime Papers*, 568.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-151.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

Culpeper off and on since mid-1862, would occupy Culpeper continuously from the winter of **1863-64**.

“Upon his return to Orange County after the Bristoe Station Campaign, Lee established his headquarters beside the Orange Turnpike and a little over a mile east of the town of Orange. He had A.P. Hill’s third corps holding the Rapidan Line from Liberty Mills to a little north of Rapidan Station, General Ewell’s second corps extended the line downstream from there. Hill established his headquarters at Mayhurst and Ewell at Morton Hall. Mayhurst still stands in the town of Orange, but Morton Hall’s ruins are fast disappearing. Lee’s headquarters was about where the two corps joined, making him equally accessible to both. The army’s Quartermaster and Provost Marshall maintained offices in the town, but Lee proposed to join his men for another winter in the field.<sup>7</sup>

“Not surprisingly General Lee’s headquarters was a field tent. It was his practice of long standing, and it would continue well after he left Orange. The previous winter, Lee had written his wife Mary: ‘The weather has been wretched. More unpleasant than any other part of the winter. The earth has been almost fluid & my tent even muddy.’ Mud or not, he didn’t move. In a letter to Mary the following winter, he offered an explanation/excuse for his tenting practice: ‘The people are very kind in giving me invitations to take a room in their house, but they do not know what they ask. I cannot of course go alone or be alone, as a crowd is always around me.’<sup>8</sup>

“There was something different about the winter in Orange County, however. General Lee had not been a well man for the entire war. He suffered from what he called ‘rheumatism’ and which most doctors studying the sketchy medical record today think was probably angina. There was periodic chest pain, usually triggered by cold weather, and which in its severe stages was accompanied by arm numbness. At Fredericksburg in the spring of 1863, Lee had also experienced what may have been a full-blown heart attack. As the **winter of 1863-64** approached, he wrote Mary: ‘I do not know what I shall do when the winter really comes, I have suffered so much from the cold already. I hope I shall get used to it. But I have felt very differently since my attack of last spring, from which I have never recovered.’<sup>9</sup>

“General Lee’s transition into winter was also not without some outside disturbances. The Federal army undertook what is known as the Mine Run Campaign, coming into eastern Orange County on **November 26, 1863**, and after some maneuvering in weather that anyone would call ‘wretched,’ left the county on December 2. Lee had moved his headquarters tent to the yard of the Rhodes’ house at New Verdierville (the intersection of Routes 20 and 621) during that campaign, but with the Federals gone, it was time to settle into winter quarters for real.<sup>10</sup>

“Lee’s officers and men took as good a care of their chief as they could. By the time winter really got going, his tent featured a wood floor and a brick fireplace with a chimney. He reported

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-152.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 152-153.

to his wife that actually he was pretty comfortable. Also there is reason to believe that in spells of very severe weather, the General was prevailed upon to spend a night or two in a nearby home, his reluctance to do so notwithstanding.<sup>11</sup>

“When spring came, the armies began preparations to move. At midnight, **May 3, 1864**, the entire Federal army began marching out of Culpeper County into the Wilderness, just east of the Rapidan Line. Spotswood’s old Germanna Ford was, as usual, one of the major crossing points. Some time the next day, General Lee’s tent was struck and taken away, leaving the floor, fireplace and chimney. Lee spent one more night in Orange County, again in the Rhodes’ yard at New Verdierville, and then it was down the Plank Road--and into an eleven-month death struggle with Grant, Meade, and the Army of the Potomac.”<sup>12</sup> Lee was gone and would never reside in Orange County again.

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### **Into the Wilderness One Last Time:**

“While Lee and the third corps of his army left Orange County via the plank road (Route 621) on **May 5, 1864**, his second corps remained in the county, traveling east on the Orange Turnpike. Early on the morning of May 5, that second corps, commanded by Richard S. Ewell, arrived at Saunders’ Field, not much over two miles from Wilderness Run and the Spotsylvania County line. Saunders’ Field is now a part of the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. Where today’s Route 20 runs through it, the highway is on the roadbed of the old Swift Run Gap Turnpike, locally called the ‘Orange Turnpike,’ the western end of which underlies today’s Main Street in Orange. The Park has now cleared Saunders’ Field on the south side of the road to its wartime dimensions.<sup>13</sup>

“Under orders to wait and allow A.P. Hill’s third corps to come up on the plank road (about 2.5 miles to the south) to a position approximately parallel to theirs, the second corps units used the time to dig in along the western edge of the field. Lee’s plan generally was to tie the Union army down in the Wilderness with his second and third corps, and when General Longstreet and his first corps arrived, see what opportunities presented themselves. Longstreet, recently back from a winter campaign in Tennessee, had been camped south of Gordonsville. His corps was roughly a day’s march farther away from the Wilderness than the other two. Even after Longstreet arrived, Lee’s army would still be outnumbered almost two to one, but Lee intended to use the Wilderness vegetation and terrain to eliminate the increasingly effective Union cavalry and artillery from the coming battle and to disrupt Federal attempts at massed infantry assaults.

“Near midday May 5, 1864, Union troops launched an attack across the dry overgrowth of Saunders’ Field, initiating the Battle of the Wilderness. After some early success, the Federals were repulsed, but only back to their own defensive lines. Subsequent attacks by both sides

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<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.* 153.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 154.

only succeeded in strewing Saunders' Field and the adjacent Wilderness with dead and wounded, whereupon the portion of the field south of the turnpike caught fire. The shrieks and screams of wounded trapped in the flames and the sound of their cartridge boxes exploding shook even hardened soldiers.<sup>14</sup>

"Later in the afternoon, two soldiers from opposing sides who had been trapped together in a ditch running through the field, grew sufficiently displeased with each other's company to step out in the turnpike and engage in a fist fight. Combat generally ceased while this spectacle held the attention of Yank and Reb alike. Following that personal war, the general war started up again.

"General Ewell was able to conduct a successful defense of his position on the turnpike during the fighting on both **May 5 and 6**. A.P. Hill on the Plank Road (at that point in Spotsylvania County) did not fare nearly as well. By nightfall on May 5, his third corps was 'fought out,' and Longstreet was going to have to relieve it. On the **morning of May 6**, before Longstreet arrived, the Federals attacked and began to rout Hill's men. When Longstreet appeared, he was able to check the Federal attack and launch one of his own.

"Longstreet's attack met with considerable initial success, but then the general was severely wounded by friendly fire. The pause while new leadership assumed command and the attack reorganized was enough to allow the Federals to regroup and hold their ground. When Longstreet's condition was stable enough to permit moving him, he was taken back to Meadowfarm in Orange County, where he stayed briefly before taking a train out of Orange to a more secure place of recuperation.

"On a comparatively quiet **May 7**, the leadership of the opposing armies came to the same conclusion: the enemy held too strong a position to attack successfully. By nightfall, both armies were heading to Spotsylvania Court House. The Rapidan Line stood abandoned, and the Army of Northern Virginia was gone, marching on roads that would ultimately lead to Appomattox."<sup>15</sup>

#### From a newspaper article:

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

“The Wilderness was a nasty battle even by Civil War standards. The woods were so thick, the clearings so few, that artillery played a most minor of roles. This was an infantryman’s fight. Men waged two days of carnage in which battle line rarely existed, hand-to-hand fighting was commonplace, and underbrush set afire by musketry cremated untold numbers of soldiers too badly wounded to crawl to safety. The two armies suffered combined losses of more than 25,000.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Robertson, James. “New Study Chronicles Battle of the Wilderness”, *Richmond Times Dispatch*, September 4, 1994.