



Gettysburg and Vicksburg: The Civil War Turning Points of 1863

Charles River Editors

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Without question, the most famous battle of the American Civil War took place outside of the small town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, which happened to be a transportation hub, serving as the center of a wheel with several roads leading out to other Pennsylvanian towns. From July 1-3, Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia tried everything in its power to decisively defeat George Meade's Union Army of the Potomac, unleashing ferocious assaults that inflicted nearly 50,000 casualties in all.

Day 1 of the battle would have been one of the 25 biggest battles of the Civil War itself, and it ended with a tactical Confederate victory. But over the next two days, Lee would try and fail to dislodge the Union army with attacks on both of its flanks during the second day and Pickett's Charge on the third and final day. Meade's stout defense held, barely, repulsing each attempted assault, handing the Union a desperately needed victory that ended up being one of the Civil War's turning points.

After the South had lost the war, the importance of Gettysburg as one of the "high tide" marks of the Confederacy became apparent to everyone, making the battle all the more important in the years after it had been fought. While former Confederate generals cast about for scapegoats, with various officers pointing fingers at Robert E. Lee, James Longstreet, and James Stuart, historians and avid Civil War fans became obsessed with studying and analyzing all the command decisions and army movements during the entire campaign. Despite the saturation of coverage, Americans refuse to grow tired of visiting the battlefield and reliving the biggest battle fought in North America.

At the start of 1863, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia had been frustrating the Union in the Eastern theater for several months, but the situation in the West was completely different. The Confederates had lost control of several important states throughout 1862, and after New Orleans was taken by the Union, the North controlled almost all of the Mississippi River, which Confederate general James Longstreet called "the lungs of the Confederacy". By taking control of that vital river, the North would virtually cut the Confederacy in two, putting the South in a dire situation.

The only domino left to fall was the stronghold of Vicksburg, and both sides knew it. The Union Army of the Tennessee, led by Ulysses S. Grant, would spend months trying to encircle the army and eventually force John Pemberton's Confederate army to surrender. Grant eventually succeeded on July 4, 1863, but since it came a day after the climactic finish of the Battle of Gettysburg, Vicksburg was (and still is) frequently overlooked as one of the turning points of the Civil War. In fact, had the Confederate's military leadership listened to Longstreet, who advocated detaching soldiers from Lee's army to head west and help the Confederates deal with Grant or Rosecrans in that theater, the Battle of Gettysburg might never have happened.

While many read about the siege of Vicksburg in the summer of 1863, as well as the desperate straits the Confederate soldiers and Vicksburg residents found themselves in, Grant's initial attempts to advance

towards Vicksburg met with several miserable failures, and it took several months just to get to the point where the Union forces could start a siege. First, Grant's supply base at Holly Springs was captured, and then an assault launched by Union General Sherman at Chickasaw Bayou was easily repulsed by Confederate forces, with serious Union casualties resulting. Grant then attempted to have his men build canals north and west of the city to facilitate transportation, which included grueling work and disease in the bayous.

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