

VIRGINIA'S WILDERNESS: INVESTIGATING THE
LANDSCAPE OF WAR

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ABSTRACT

This work reconsiders the myth surrounding the Wilderness, a forest in Virginia, which played host to three Civil War campaigns. This Wilderness myth has several components. First, the Wilderness was a battlefield unlike any other and created unique battle conditions. Second, these conditions favored the Confederates who tried to trap the Federals in the Wilderness. Third, there was a mystique surrounding the Wilderness, which associated it with woe, gloom, death, destruction, hell, fire, and the supernatural among other things. While evocative, this traditional interpretation reflects a distorted understanding of the forest as well as what actually took place within its bounds. This dissertation argues that the Wilderness myth was the product of hindsight and of a desire to explain away Union failures and highlight Robert E. Lee's generalship. While the Wilderness truly was a very difficult battlefield that created trying combat conditions, many of the claims of Wilderness exceptionalism are unfounded, and consequently, the Wilderness did not give the Confederates a special advantage, nor did they try to trap the Union army there. The Wilderness's threatening mystique, however, did set it apart from any other battlefield of the war.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my dear wife Morgan, who has always helped me find my way in the wilderness.

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INTRODUCTION

The Wilderness of Spotsylvania was a forested region lying about halfway between Washington D. C. and Richmond, Virginia, and to the west of Fredericksburg, Virginia. It was, and remains, notorious for being a difficult battleground. From the spring of 1863 to the spring of 1864, the Federal Army of the Potomac and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia conducted three campaigns either wholly or in part within the Wilderness.

The first, Chancellorsville, took place in late April and early May of 1863. It is easily the most complex of the three Wilderness campaigns. Joseph Hooker, commanding the Army of the Potomac sought to bring Robert E. Lee's Army of the Northern Virginia to battle. Lee's army, however, was ensconced in its fortifications along the Fredericksburg heights, so Hooker devised a strategy whereby he could engage Lee's army away from his entrenchments. Part of his army remained in front of Fredericksburg and crossed the Rappahannock River there while the other part moved upstream and crossed in the vicinity of Chancellorsville. This force gathered near the tavern there on April 30, 1863 and on May 1 sought to advance eastward towards Fredericksburg and Lee's army. Things did not go as planned though, as Lee's army had advanced to meet Hooker's head on. Hooker recoiled at the challenge and withdrew his forces into the Wilderness around Chancellorsville where they entrenched and awaited a Confederate attack. Lee, seeing no clear point of attack on Hooker's line, had Stonewall Jackson march part of the Rebel army around to the right flank of the Union army where in the early evening on May 2 his troops broke the excitable Union XI Corps and pushed the Federals back to the outskirts of the clearing

around Chancellorsville. Fierce fighting continued into the night, as combatants fired away at each other in the dark.

The next morning, May 3, Lee sought to reunite the two wings of his army and advanced on the Union position around Chancellorsville from several directions. The Confederate artillery was able to gain control of the strategic heights at Hazel Grove from where they could bombard the Union position while their infantry attacked in wave after wave of frantic assaults. Only part of Hooker's army was ever engaged, and that portion soon found itself short on ammunition, caught in a crossfire, and ultimately recalled to a new line north of Chancellorsville. Lee's army then advanced to take the old Federal lines while Chancellorsville and the surrounding woods burned. Over the next two days Hooker and his men hunkered down in their entrenchments while Lee's army turned to deal with the other part of the Federal army, under John Sedgwick, still operating in the vicinity of Fredericksburg. Having dealt with Sedgwick's force, Lee then turned to again assault Hooker's army, but on May 6 found to his disappointment that the Union force had withdrawn under the cover of a torrential downpour.

The second campaign in the Wilderness was the Mine Run campaign that took place in late November and early December 1863. George Meade now commanded the Army of the Potomac while Lee still directed the Army of Northern Virginia. Lee's force lay behind the Rapidan in the vicinity of Orange Courthouse protecting a line of entrenchments that followed the river and terminated at Mine Run. Meade moved his army on November 26 and proceeded to cross the Rapidan and enter the Wilderness. The next day the two armies encountered each other in the Wilderness, where portions of each fought a small but sharp action at Payne's Farm. The fighting on November 27 was indecisive and Lee withdrew his forces during the night. He then arrayed them along the heights on the west side of Mine Run—the western edge of the

Wilderness—where they proceeded to entrench themselves, turning a formidable position into an impregnable one. Meade’s army cautiously followed Lee’s, but never found a good place to attack the Rebel line. After a failed attempt at maneuvering and a called-off assault, Meade scrapped the movement and on the night of December 1, 1863 retired across the Rapidan.

Roughly a year after the armies had first encountered each other in the Wilderness at Chancellorsville, they set out again in what became known as the Overland campaign. Lee still commanded the Army of Northern Virginia, but now his opponent was Ulysses S. Grant. The new Union strategy was designed to bring Lee’s army to battle and destroy it if possible, all the while pushing closer to Richmond. At the same time other Union armies in Virginia and Georgia would simultaneously advance, preventing Confederate forces from concentrating. The battle of the Wilderness, which was the first engagement in the Overland campaign, took place in the heart of the Wilderness. Many of the initial movements followed the pattern of the Mine Run campaign. Lee’s army was still lingering around Orange Courthouse and manning its Rapidan entrenchments, while Meade’s army lay north of the river. Again, the Union army moved south and crossed the Rapidan moving into the Wilderness. The Confederates again shifted to intercept them.

On May 5, the two armies made contact along the Turnpike and Plank Road and a heated battle ensued. The initial Union attacks in the Turnpike sector failed and the focus of the battle soon shifted to the Plank Road. The Union army took control of the strategic Plank and Brock road intersection just in time, and then once enough force had been gathered, they proceeded to attack the Confederates. It was a back and forth affair at close range, deadly and indecisive. Nightfall closed the action, but Lee’s lines along the Plank Road lay in shambles. Each army expected to receive reinforcements, with James Longstreet’s corps arriving to support Lee and

Ambrose Burnside's corps to do the same for Grant and Meade. The next day, May 6, the Union forces on the Plank Road broke through the weak Confederate line, but the Federal formations were disorganized by the advance through the woods and had to regroup. Now, Longstreet's men arrived to halt the Union advance and attack the Union force on the flank, driving it back to the Brock Road where the Federals had previously constructed a line of entrenchments. Late in the afternoon, Lee's men attacked the line, finding momentary success, aided by the Union entrenchments catching fire, but ultimately being repulsed. The day concluded with another Confederate assault, this time on the Union right flank. Led by General John B. Gordon, this attack enjoyed momentary success but faltered amid the dark woods. On May 7 the armies scowled at each other, entrenched, and made plans to leave the Wilderness, which they did that night amidst forest fires that propelled them on to Spotsylvania and more killing.

Historians have hardly neglected these three Wilderness campaigns. There are several valuable studies of the Chancellorsville campaign, including those by William Allan and Jedediah Hotchkiss, Theodore A. Dodge, John Bigelow Jr., and Stephen W. Sears.¹ The battle of the Wilderness has also received its fair share of attention, including lengthy works by Morris Schaff, Edward Steere, and Gordon C. Rhea as well as many books that treat it as part of the

¹ William Allan and Jedediah Hotchkiss. *The Battlefields of Virginia: Chancellorsville, Embracing the Operations of the Army of Northern Virginia, from the First Battle of Fredericksburg to the Death of Lieutenant General Jackson* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1867); Theodore A. Dodge *The Campaign of Chancellorsville* (Boston: J.R. Osgood and Company, 1881); John Bigelow, Jr. *The Campaign of Chancellorsville* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1910); Stephen W. Sears, *Chancellorsville* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996). Also see *Chancellorsville: The Battle and Its Aftermath*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

larger Overland campaign.² Mine Run has been comparatively neglected, but perhaps only by the standards of Civil War historians. Martin F. Graham and George F. Skoch wrote the only full-length study of the campaign, while Jay Luvaas and Wilbur S. Nye authored an article and Andrew A. Humphreys devoted a portion of a book to the campaign.³

Despite the attention lavished on these campaigns, the Wilderness itself has yet to merit a single major work. The various campaign studies have usually included an obligatory paragraph describing the Wilderness and its origins, as well as the havoc it could wreak. In addition, various geographical tidbits that shed some light on tactical issues often peppered these works. Beyond this commentary, however, these campaign accounts have given little sustained attention to the Wilderness. A few works have provided more focused analysis on certain narrow aspects of the Wilderness. Kathryn S. Meier's essay, "Fighting in 'Dante's Inferno,'" addresses the

² Morris Schaff, *The Battle of the Wilderness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910); Edward Steere, *The Wilderness Campaign: The Meeting of Grant and Lee* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1960); Gordon C. Rhea, *The Battle of the Wilderness May 5–6, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994). For examples of treating the battle of the Wilderness as a piece of the larger Overland campaign see Andrew A. Humphreys, *The Virginia Campaign of '64 and '65* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885) and Mark Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On: The Virginia Campaign, May–June 1864* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002). Also see *The Wilderness Campaign*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

³ Martin F. Graham and George F. Skoch, *Mine Run: A Campaign of Lost Opportunities October 21, 1863–May 1, 1864* (Lynchburg, Virginia: H.E. Howard, Inc., 1987); Jay Luvaas and Wilbur S. Nye, "The Campaign that History Forgot," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 8 (November 1969):11–37; Andrew A. Humphreys, *From Gettysburg to the Rapidan: The Army of the Potomac July, 1863 to April, 1864* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883). See also Adam H. Petty, "Wilderness, Weather, and Waging War in the Mine Run Campaign," *Civil War History* 63 (March 2017): 7-35.

changing experience of the soldiers in the Wilderness, arguing that they found their Wilderness experience more noteworthy and distressing in 1864 than in 1863.⁴ Earl Hess provides some important, if brief, commentary on how the Wilderness affected battle and strategy in two of his works on field fortifications in the eastern theater.⁵ Sean Patrick Adams' history of the Catharine Furnace provides an important reconsideration of the Wilderness's origins.⁶ Aaron Sachs' short essay ties the Wilderness region to the changing meaning of "wilderness" for Americans, the destruction of forests, and the postwar conservation movement.⁷ J. Harrison Powell's paper "Seven Year Locusts" explores deforestation in Spotsylvania County during the war.⁸ Finally,

⁴ Meier argues that this change in attitude came from the destructive and relentless nature of the Overland campaign combined with increased temperatures and the previously scarred landscape. Kathryn S. Meier "Fighting in 'Dante's Inferno': Changing Perceptions of Civil War Combat in the Spotsylvania Wilderness from 1863 to 1864," in *Militarized Landscapes: From Gettysburg to Salisbury Plain*, ed. Chris Pearson, Peter Coates, and Tim Cole (London: Continuum, 2010), 39–56.

⁵ See Earl J. Hess, *Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns, 1861–1864* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 175, 197 and Earl J. Hess, *Trench Warfare under Grant & Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 39-43.

⁶ Sean Patrick Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness: The History of Virginia's Catharine Furnace* (National Park Service, 2011).

⁷ Aaron Sachs, "Stumps in the Wilderness" in *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War*, ed. Brian Allen Drake, ed. Brian Allen Drake (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 96-108.

⁸ James Harrison Powell, "'Seven Year Locusts': The Deforestation of Spotsylvania County during the American Civil War," *Essays in History*, <http://www.essaysinhistory.com/articles/2011/4> (accessed June 28, 2017).

Stephen Cushman's *Bloody Promenade* provides a much broader series of reflections on the battle of the Wilderness and the Civil War as a whole.⁹

The study I have undertaken is a work of military history, which concentrates on a specific landscape. When I began this project, I intended it to be a contribution to the nascent field of Civil War environmental history, but what resulted was thoroughly military history, even old-fashioned. Its foundation was not in the new environmental literature, but in the very old literature surrounding the Wilderness campaigns, as my notes will bear out. While there are certainly environmental elements involved in this study and certain works of agricultural and environmental history inform its arguments, the questions that drove it were those of a military historian.¹⁰ That being said, chapters 1 and 5 address issues that environmental historians would

⁹ Stephen Cushman, *Bloody Promenade: Reflections on a Civil War Battle* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999).

¹⁰ For a general look at how war, weather, and terrain interact, see Harold A. Winters, *Battling the Elements: Weather and Terrain in the Conduct of War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). Some of the more notable works of Civil War environmental history include Lisa M. Brady, *War Upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes During the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Kathryn Shively Meier, *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); and Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012). Some of the works of environmental/agricultural history that proved important to this project include Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) and Avery O. Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1925). Albert E. Cowdery's book on the environmental history of the South as a whole proved peripheral to this project, but it is useful for putting the Wilderness within the larger context of Southern agricultural practices. Albert E. Cowdery, *This Land, This South: An Environmental History* (Louisville: University of Kentucky, 1996).

recognize as familiar terrain, namely how human actions contributed to the creation of the Wilderness and how ideas about wilderness landscapes and soldiers' experiences combined to shape the Wilderness's image.¹¹

Despite its foundation in traditional military history, this dissertation differs from preceding works on the Wilderness in two very important ways. First, instead of focusing on a single battle or campaign, its scope includes all three of the aforementioned Wilderness campaigns. This gives an opportunity to observe change over time—especially regarding the attitudes and actions of generals and soldiers towards the Wilderness. That being said, the battle of the Wilderness is the key event in the region's history because the myth that came to dominate the historical interpretation of the Wilderness formed in its aftermath. As a result, the battle of the Wilderness receives more attention than the other campaigns.

Second, this work is not a narrative history of the campaigns, but rather a reconsideration of the traditional interpretations surrounding the nature of the Wilderness, especially how it affected strategy and combat. There are four basic traditions that together form a larger

For two useful introductions to the concerns of environmental historians see Donald Worster, "Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History," *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (Mar., 1990): 1087-1106 and William Cronon, "Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History," *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (Mar., 1990): 1122-1131.

¹¹ Donald Worster lays out three types of environmental history. My dissertation, to an extent, deals with two of them. First, "analyzing the various ways people have tried to make nature over into a system," which is more or less a materialist approach. Second, a "purely mental type of encounter in which perceptions, ideologies, ethics, laws, and myths have become part of an individual's or group's dialogue with nature." See Worster, "Transformations of the Earth," 1090-1091.

Wilderness myth. First, the Wilderness was a distinctive and nearly unbroken forest made up of thick, second-growth trees and underbrush. This unique vegetation resulted from the local iron industry, which had cut down the original forest to provide fuel for furnaces, leaving the scrubby, thick Wilderness to grow up in its place. Second, the Wilderness's extraordinary characteristics imposed certain conditions on combat, namely the inability to see for any distance, properly maneuver or maintain a battle line, and use artillery and cavalry profitably. These limitations in turn created a unique and unprecedented combat experience in the battle of the Wilderness. Third, because of the Confederates' superior knowledge of the region and the forest's ability to even the playing field by neutralizing superior Federal numbers and artillery, the Rebels held an edge over the Federals in the battle of the Wilderness and for this reason had trapped the Federals in its tangled thickets. Fourth, the Wilderness was a wild, gloomy, dark, weird, woeful, and mournful region associated with death and destruction, fire and hell, and even the supernatural.

This Wilderness myth began to take shape during the war, but truly blossomed in the postwar years. The reach of this myth cannot be overestimated, as elements of it can be found in many accounts of the battle of the Wilderness as well as in general histories of the war. Take for example James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*, one of the most widely read modern accounts of the Civil War. McPherson paints the Wilderness as a "gloomy expanse of scrub oaks and pines," a place where Union "superiority in numbers . . . would count for less than in the open." For these reasons, Lee "hit the bluecoats in the flank as they marched through the Wilderness" while Grant had hoped to engage the Rebels "somewhere south of the Wilderness." Once the battle began, McPherson judged that the Confederates held the edge. They "knew the terrain and the Yankees' preponderance of troops produced only immobility in these dense,

smoke-filled woods where soldiers could rarely see the enemy, units blundered the wrong way in the directionless jungle, friendly troops fired on each other by mistake, gaps in the opposing line went unexploited because unseen, while muzzle flashes and exploding shells set the underbrush on fire to threaten wounded men with a fiery death.”¹² While McPherson’s short sketch of the battle of the Wilderness does not include every component of the Wilderness myth, it does include many of the most important elements. Each account of the battle provides its own mixture, but parts of the myth in one form or another are almost always present.

Like all myths, the Wilderness myth serves a purpose and its various components contain some partial truths. The intention of this work is to sift through these venerable interpretations in the hopes of sorting out truth from error and history from tradition. This conventional wisdom—as John Hennessey has called it—has in some cases, skewed our perception of what the Wilderness was like, the nature of combat in the Wilderness, and the influence the Wilderness had on strategy.¹³

The first chapter reconsiders the nature and origin of the Wilderness. It argues that contrary to the traditional and more familiar descriptions, the Wilderness was not a monolithic forest of stunted trees and underbrush, but had a patchwork character. Some of the Wilderness was the extra-thick forest of lore. Other parts had thinner woods and even substantial openings. This first chapter also argues that the Wilderness’s characteristic forest was not primarily the result of the local iron industry, although this economic activity certainly contributed to it. Other

¹² James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 724-725.

¹³ John Hennessey to the author, April 5, 2016.

pursuits, namely the cultivation of tobacco and the building of plank roads were also important and in some respects decisive in shaping the landscape. Finally, this chapter contends that the Wilderness was not a unique landscape, but simply one example of a Virginia phenomenon, as there were Wilderness-like forests in other parts of Virginia where exhausted and abandoned land was found.

The second chapter questions the oft-repeated notion that the battle of the Wilderness was a unique engagement because of the environment in which it was fought. Comparing this battle to Chancellorsville, which was fought in the Wilderness, and Chickamauga, which was fought outside the Wilderness (in Georgia), reveals several things about the nature of combat in the Wilderness. First, the battles of the Wilderness and Chancellorsville are not the twins that many historians often imply them to be. Second, Chickamauga shared many of the characteristics of the battle of the Wilderness, in spite of being fought hundreds of miles from Virginia in a different type of forest. These findings suggest that the battle of the Wilderness lay at one end of a spectrum of forest fights, having fewer open spaces, using less artillery and more infantry, while having the lowest combat visibility. On the other end of this spectrum lay Chancellorsville where larger open spaces allowed artillery to operate in a way that was unusual in a wooded battlefield. Somewhere in between these engagements was Chickamauga. In the end, the battle of the Wilderness was not so much a unique battle as just one manifestation of the tactical problems that Civil War armies faced when operating in a forested region.

Chapter three attacks the myth that the Federals sought to avoid fighting in the Wilderness at the outset of the Overland campaign while Lee sought to trap the Union army there. It tracks the strategies pursued by both sides in all three Wilderness campaigns and by doing so provides a very different understanding of how the Wilderness figured into Confederate

and Union thinking. Whatever reservations the Union commanders felt about the Wilderness at the time, they were not strong enough to override other concerns such as entrenchments, logistics, and safe river crossings. The commanders' reports, moreover, revealed little in the way of anxiety about the forest interfering with their plans. Lee, in contrast, showed a marked awareness of the Wilderness and the problems it caused his army, which suggests that he would not intentionally fight there unless there were other compelling circumstances, as was the case at the opening of the Overland campaign.

Chapter four undermines the tradition that the Confederates held an edge in the Wilderness. In fact, as Earl Hess has argued, the Wilderness hampered both sides. Although many postwar writers claimed the Confederates knew the Wilderness better, in reality, the two armies were more or less equally familiar with the Wilderness. The Wilderness also caused similar problems for each army, except for the fact that the Confederates had access to a better road network that made it easier for them to deploy their forces initially. While the Wilderness disrupted the Confederates' flank attacks and limited their ultimate success, these flank attacks made the best use of the difficult landscape. Moreover, they show that the Confederates—through their initiative rather than any other factor—could turn the Wilderness to their advantage. In the end, the Wilderness in and of itself did not prove innately beneficial to one side or the other. If it was a good place for the Confederates to fight, it was because they made it so by aggressively taking advantage of the admittedly limited opportunities the Wilderness afforded.

Chapter five analyzes the mystique that surrounds the Wilderness. The name "Wilderness" traditionally had negative connotations, indicating a forest beyond man's control that was inhabited by savages. With time, the region's name came to set it apart as it fulfilled all

the expectations that such a name might bring. Many soldiers who campaigned in the Wilderness in May of 1863 showed no awareness that they were in a peculiar region, but by the time of the Overland campaign, one year later, soldiers recognized it as a distinct place with certain characteristics. With the passage of time, the Wilderness became notorious as a malevolent landscape associated with death, destruction, fire, hell, and the supernatural. This mystique, in the end, constitutes the one thing that truly set the Wilderness apart from any other battlefield.

Ultimately, the Wilderness myth was the product of hindsight and of a desire for a scapegoat to explain away Union failures and highlight Lee's generalship. As is the case with scapegoats, the Wilderness was blamed for that which it was blameless, and has since come down in history as a sprawling, malevolent, stumbling block of a battlefield, stupidly selected by Hooker at Chancellorsville and craftily chosen by Lee during the battle of the Wilderness. Here the Confederates could run rough shod over their Federal opponents in the dreadful and gloomy woods of the Wilderness. In reality, the Wilderness was a battlefield that created very difficult combat conditions, but many of the claims of Wilderness exceptionalism are unfounded, despite their wide-ranging influence in the annals of the war.

A Note on Terminology

In this dissertation, the term "the Wilderness" refers to the entire forested region of Virginia, while "the Wilderness battlefield" refers to portion of this region on which the battle of the Wilderness took place. "The Chancellorsville battlefield" is another portion of the Wilderness. To avoid confusion, I have referred to the clash on May 5-6, 1864 as "the battle of the Wilderness," rather than simply "the Wilderness."

CHAPTER 1: THE NATURE AND ORIGINS OF THE WILDERNESS

Most accounts of the various battles in the Wilderness include an obligatory paragraph or perhaps just a quick aside describing the region and its origins. Generally, they paint a picture of one vast forest full of thick vegetation that had resulted from the activity of the local iron industry. Armistead Long, a veteran of Lee's army, explained that the Wilderness "had been an extensive mining district, from which the timber had been cut to supply fuel for feeding the smelting-furnaces, and since then the young growth had sprung up ten times thicker than the primeval forest."¹ Modern historians sound a similar note. Take Edward Steere's description of the region. He portrayed it as "a dreary wasteland" in which "the primeval forest of stately pine and sturdy oak was felled . . . to provide fuel for smelting the iron ore torn from shallow pits," and in whose place "a second growth of scrub trees, interlaced with dense underbrush and thorny vines, rudely covered the ugly scars left by robbery of the subsoil."²

Often paired with this origin story is the idea that the Wilderness was a distinct, unusual, or even unique environment. William Swinton—a Civil War journalist turned historian—argued that "the woods of the Wilderness have not the ordinary features of a forest."³ Likewise, Adam Badeau, a member of Grant's staff, wrote about "the extraordinary character of the

¹ Armistead Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee* (New York: J. M. Stoddart & Company, 1886), 328.

² Edward Steere, *The Wilderness Campaign: The Meeting of Grant and Lee* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1960), 1.

³ William Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles B. Richardson, 1866), 428.

region.”⁴ Andrew Humphreys, Meade’s chief of staff, claimed that although certain features of the Wilderness “were found in other of the battle-grounds of the two armies,” to his knowledge, “no great battle ever took place before on such ground.”⁵ Benson Lossing, in his 1912 history of the war called the Wilderness battleground “one of the most remarkable battlefields ever known.”⁶ Even modern historians repeat this notion. Stephen Sears called the Wilderness a “distinctive tract of Virginia woodland” and also noted “its distinctive character.”⁷

This enduring origin story, with its accompanying notions about the nature of the Wilderness, constitutes one of the central and foundational myths surrounding the Wilderness. Upon it are based other myths—such as the Wilderness playing a part in shaping Union and Confederate strategy, the Wilderness favoring the Confederates, the battle of the Wilderness being a unique battle, and the mystique which came to surround the Wilderness—myths that will be addressed in subsequent chapters. Only recently have historians begun to challenge the long-held ideas surrounding the nature and origin of the Wilderness. The best work on this topic has been done by Sean Adams, Noel Harrison, and John Hennessy, who have collectively undermined the traditional interpretation of a monolithic Wilderness created by iron

⁴ Adam Badeau, *Military History of Ulysses S. Grant from April, 1861, to April, 1865*. 3 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881), 2:108.

⁵ Andrew A. Humphreys, *The Virginia Campaign of '64 and '65* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1885), 55. For another example of the Wilderness as an exceptional region see John C. Ropes, “Grant’s Campaign in Virginia in 1864,” in *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts*, 14 vols. (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1881–1918), 4:378.

⁶ Benson J. Lossing, *A History of the Civil War* (New York: The War Memorial Association, 1912), 374.

⁷ Stephen W. Sears, *Chancellorsville*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 193.

manufacturing.⁸ This chapter will follow their lead, laying out the nature of the Wilderness and explaining its origins while asking the additional and crucial question of whether the Wilderness was the unique landscape that has so often been described.

The Wilderness was not a wooded monolith. Rather it was a patchwork of open areas and forest of varying density that reflected a long collaboration between man and nature. Its topography was not uniform: some areas being flat and some hilly, with runs and swamps thrown in for good measure. It was also a changing wilderness, although it might well appear timeless to anyone first encountering it. The Wilderness was a poor, sparsely populated region in which nearly everything—from the soil, to the vegetation, to the buildings, to the roads—was in decay. Its origins were also more complex than the traditional interpretation suggests. While mining enterprises and iron works certainly caused some deforestation, they were not the only culprits. Tobacco cultivation deforested the region early on and sapped the soil’s fertility. The planters then abandoned the exhausted fields, allowing the forest to reclaim the land. Abandoned fields

⁸ In particular, these authors argue that the Wilderness landscape was already present in the eighteenth century, probably due to tobacco cultivation, as the iron manufacturing at the two local furnaces did not use enough wood to materially alter the face of the region. In addition, Hennessy argues that the various waves of clear cutting would have created a patchwork of woods of varying density, a fact suggested by the various visibility ranges reported by soldiers. Hennessy also suggests that if the later clear cutting to build the plank roads was done near the road ways, then this thick, new vegetation along the road ways might have materially altered the soldier’s perception of the Wilderness as a whole. Sean Patrick Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness: The History of Virginia’s Catharine Furnace*, (National Park Service, 2011); Noel Harrison memo quoted in John Hennessy, “The Origins of the Wilderness: Part I–The Soil,” <https://npsfrsp.wordpress.com/2010/07/15/the-origins-of-the-wilderness-part-i-the-soil/>, (accessed on Sept. 26, 2016) and John Hennessy, “Wilderness Origins Part II: clear-cutting (or not),” <https://npsfrsp.wordpress.com/2010/07/16/wilderness-origins-part-ii-clear-cutting-or-not/>, (accessed Sept. 26, 2016).

covered in stunted trees, like those in the Wilderness, were hardly unique, although they might seem so to the uninitiated. In fact, they were present in various parts of Virginia, even on other battlefields. With the tobacco fields exhausted, enterprising men then turned to mining and iron works to squeeze a profit from the worn-out land, producing further deforestation. The construction of several plank roads during the 1850s resulted in another smaller measure of deforestation and subsequent second-growth forest. This last round of deforestation probably gave the Plank Road corridor the extra-thick covering of saplings which veterans of the battle of the Wilderness recounted. The combination of these activities—tobacco cultivation, mining, and road building—left the land forested on the whole, with thickets in various stages of maturity and density.

* * * * *

To have a proper understanding of the events that took place in the Wilderness, as well as the soldiers' reactions to them, it is necessary to have a clear picture of what this region was actually like. The Wilderness's topography ranged considerably, including hilly areas, flat areas, creeks, usually called runs, and swamps. The various runs—including Mine Run, Wilderness Run, Flat Run, Mott's Run, and Scott's Run—to name but a few—cut the Wilderness's landscape and gave much of it a rolling topography. On the Chancellorsville battlefield, one Union soldier described the area held by the Federal army as "densely wooded hills."⁹ Daniel Holt, a Union surgeon with the VI Corps described the area occupied by his unit at the battle of

⁹ "The Movements of Hooker's Army," *Mohawk Valley Register* (Fort Plain, NY), May 14, 1863.

the Wilderness as “hilly.”¹⁰ Likewise, at the battle of the Wilderness, Milton Myers, a soldier in the 110th Ohio, found “the surface here is quite hilly, or uneven.”¹¹ Jacob Raymer, a Confederate soldier, observed during the same battle that “the face of the country is broken into gentle hills, interspersed with many swamps and marshes.”¹² There was also a watershed that separated the runs feeding the Rapidan, from those that fed rivers such as the Ny and Po that lay farther to the south. The Plank Road followed this watershed and consequently those stationed in that part of the Wilderness often portrayed the region as level. Philip Powers, a Confederate, described the part of the Wilderness he saw during the Overland campaign as “perfectly flat.”¹³ Others depicted the Plank Road corridor as a series of gentle hills. Chaplain A. M. Stewart noted how the land was “undulating with occasional swamps, . . . through which, if a man attempts to walk, he sinks leg deep.”¹⁴

No doubt, the Wilderness’s most distinctive feature was its vegetation, though it too varied. The general impression was of dense or thick woods with underbrush and trees, often diminutive in size. On the Chancellorsville battlefield, Jacob Raymer, a soldier in the 4th North Carolina described the woods through which his unit charged on May 3, 1863 as “thickly set

¹⁰ Daniel M. Holt, *A Surgeon’s Civil War: The Letters and Diary of Daniel M. Holt, M. D.*, ed. James M. Greiner, Janet L. Coryell, and James R. Smither (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994), 182.

¹¹ Milton Myers, *Diary*, May 6, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 153.

¹² Jacob Nathaniel Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent: The Civil War Reports of Jacob Nathaniel Raymer, Fourth North Carolina*, ed. E. B. Munson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008), 127.

¹³ Philip H. Powers to his wife, May 5 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 245.

¹⁴ “Chaplain Stewarts Letter,” *American Presbyterian* (Philadelphia, Pa.), May 19, 1864.

with trees of ordinary size, saplings and underbrush.”¹⁵ Alpheus Williams, a general in the XII Corps found “the densest kind of pine thickets and underbrush,” along with “thick woods, mostly of stunted pines.”¹⁶ John Garibaldi’s Confederate unit was stationed in “very thick bushes and small timber,” while another Rebel unit was “in a dense oak forest.”¹⁷ Oscar Hinrichs, a Confederate staff officer, compared the portion of the Wilderness occupied by the Confederates during the Mine Run campaign with Chancellorsville, observing that it “is thinly settled, and heavily wooded; [its] undergrowth [is] very much on the style of the Chancell[or]s ville woods.”¹⁸ At the battle of the Wilderness, Hugh C. Perkins of the 7th Wisconsin judged that his unit “drove the Rebels about three miles through the thickest woods you ever saw.”¹⁹

The Wilderness battlefield is a good example of the variety found within the Wilderness as a whole. Distinct conditions prevailed along the turnpike and Plank Road sectors. The accounts of men fighting in the hilly terrain near the Turnpike certainly mentioned thick trees but pointed to other obstacles as well, such as underbrush, bushes, vines, and logs. John R. Adams, a chaplain for the 5th Maine, described the Wilderness north of the turnpike as being “filled with

¹⁵ Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent*, 68.

¹⁶ Alpheus S. Williams, *From the Cannon’s Mouth: The Civil War Letters of General Alpheus S. Williams*, ed. Milo M. Quaipe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), 186, 189.

¹⁷ John Garibaldi to his wife Sarah May 11, 1863 Virginia Military Institute Archives, Lexington, Virginia; “Gen. Doles’ Brigade in the Chancellorsville Battle,” *Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle and Sentinel*, June 6, 1863.

¹⁸ Oscar Hinrichs, *Stonewall’s Prussian Mapmaker: The Journals of Captain Oscar Hinrichs*, ed. Richard Brady Williams, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 98.

¹⁹ Hugh C. Perkins to a friend, May 17, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 229.

low bushes” and “covered with thick underbrush.”²⁰ Washington Roebling, a staff officer in the Federal V Corps recalled seeing “an exceedingly thick growth of small pines and underbrush.”²¹ Similarly, Jacob Raymer, a soldier with the 4th North Carolina, found that “large timber is scarce, . . . the underbrush, brambles and such like, are so dense as to be almost impenetrable.”²² Another North Carolinian complained it was “almost impossible for a man to walk, as the woods are thick with an underbrush growth and all kinds of shrubbery, old logs, grapevines, and goodness knows what.”²³ Milton Myers of the 110th Ohio was stationed north of the turnpike and found similar conditions there. Myers described it as “thickly overgrown with trees of all sizes” with “small trees and shoots” and bushes along with “larger ones” such as “oaks 3 feet in diameter, some hickory, and plenty of little dogwoods trees.”²⁴ “Swampy, hilly, bushes thick as dog’s hair, grape vines, rotten logs and fallen trees, make up this pretty picture,” recalled Daniel Holt, a surgeon in the Federal VI Corps.²⁵

²⁰ John R. Adams, *Memorial and Letters of Rev. John R. Adams, D.D., Chaplain of the Fifth Maine and One Hundred and Twenty-First New York Regiments During the War of the Rebellion, Serving from the Beginning to its Close* (Cambridge, MA: University Press, Privately Printed, 1890), 149, 151.

²¹ Report of the Operations of the 5th Corps, A. P. in Genl. Grant’s Campaign from Culpeper to Petersburg as Seen by W. A. Roebling, Maj. & A.D.C. 1864, May 5, 1864, box 24, volume 7B, Warren Papers (SC 10668), New York State Library, Albany.

²² Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent*, 127.

²³ Lewis Leon, *Diary of A Tar Heel Confederate Soldier* (Charlotte, N.C.: Stone Publishing Company, 1913), 60.

²⁴ Milton Myers, *Diary*, May 6, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 153.

²⁵ Holt, *A Surgeon’s Civil War*, 182-183.

In contrast, along the Wilderness battlefield's flat, Plank Road corridor, the dominant feature was a dense growth of small trees, or saplings. A soldier in the 5th New Jersey found a very dense "growth of young saplings."²⁶ A chaplain with the 10th Massachusetts observed "a thick growth of small oak trees from one to three inches in diameter and with the branches so interlaced as to render passage through them extremely difficult and to render any but the most limited view impossible."²⁷ A. M. Stewart, a Federal chaplain, spotted "some large trees, but generally [beheld] a thick growth of pine, cedar, oak, and hickory."²⁸ Wilbur Fisk, a Vermont soldier, entered "a dense thicket of small trees about the size of hop poles, and they stood three times as numerous as they are usually set in a hop yard."²⁹ Theodore Lyman saw "mostly a low, continuous, thick growth of small saplings, fifteen to thirty feet high and seldom larger than one's arm."³⁰ Daniel Handy simply stated "it is all young woods."³¹ Peter Alexander, a Confederate soldier, complained of the "dense and almost impenetrable growth of stunted bushes, pines, and black jacks."³²

²⁶ "The 5th Regiment—One Month's Record," *Newark (NJ) Daily Advertiser*, June 17, 1864.

²⁷ "Letter from Chaplain Perkins," *Boston (Ma.) Recorder*, May 27, 1864.

²⁸ "Chaplain Stewarts Letter," *American Presbyterian* (Philadelphia, Pa.), May 19, 1864.

²⁹ Wilbur Fisk, *Hard Marching Every Day: The Civil War Letters of Private Wilbur Fisk, 1861–1865*, ed. Emil and Ruth Rosenblatt, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1983), 215.

³⁰ Theodore Lyman, *Meade's Headquarters 1863-1865: Letters of Colonel Theodore Lyman from the Wilderness to Appomattox*, ed. George R. Agassiz (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1922), 89.

³¹ Daniel Handy to his wife, May 13, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 119.

³² "From General Lee's Army," *Daily South Carolinian* (Columbia, SC), May 28, 1864.

The Wilderness was not all forest though and had open areas which housed farms of varying size and productivity. These included places like Saunder's field, the Widow Tapp farm, Chewning farm, Higgeson's field, Payne's farm, and Ellwood. Most of these local farms were not particularly large or productive. Wilbur Fisk, observed during the Mine Run campaign that "once in a while, a small clearing with a log house in the center, and a high fence all around it, and with some signs of the land having been cultivated in modern times," was visible, but decided that "these places have strayed away so far from all civilization that it will be hardly worth while to take them into account."³³ Alexander Boteler, a Confederate member of J. E. B. Stuart's staff during the Wilderness campaign, referred to the Widow Tapp farm as "an old field, scantily covered with sedge grass and a scattered growth of stunted pines."³⁴ Ellwood, in contrast, was a substantial estate and apparently well-maintained. Alpheus Williams, during the Chancellorsville campaign found himself "near Old Wilderness," not far from Ellwood, and concluded that it was "no wilderness but the best-cultivated part of Virginia I have seen outside the valley."³⁵

Other open spaces housed decaying taverns, stores, churches, and homes. Numerous taverns dotted the area including Wilderness Tavern, Robertson's Tavern, Todd's Tavern, and most famously Chancellorsville. One traveler passing through the Wilderness in 1846 observed that before the railroads opened up in Virginia "all the traveling was done either in stage coaches or in private conveyances," and these taverns benefitted from this traffic. For instance,

³³ Fisk, *Hard Marching Every Day*, 166.

³⁴ Alexander Boteler, Diary, May 5, 1864, William Elizabeth Brooks Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

³⁵ Alpheus S. Williams, *From the Cannon's Mouth*, 184.

Chancellorsville, which opened for business by 1816, was but 10 miles from Fredericksburg and consequently received the stagecoaches for breakfast “which was a source of great profit to the Inn keeper.”³⁶ However, by the time the traveler was writing, the railroads had “entirely broken up all the Taverns which formerly did a great business but which do nothing now,” a fact of which “the Inn keepers complain bitterly.”³⁷ By the time of the Civil War, the stores had likewise seen better days.³⁸ Maps of the Wilderness showed several places of worship, including the Wilderness Church, New Hope Church, and Piney Branch Church. Private dwellings, with some exceptions, were modest. Charles Brewster, a Massachusetts soldier, remarked during the Mine Run campaign that “the houses were mostly mere huts in the woods.”³⁹ Compared to Chancellorsville, which was “an old fashioned brick house,” or Ellwood, most of the residences in the Wilderness were indeed humble.⁴⁰

There was also a network of roads that crisscrossed the Wilderness. These varied in quality, but constituted the only other open areas of note in the region. Most of them were primitive, being little more than trails through the forest. Theodore Lyman referred to them as “narrow roads” that were “mere farmers’ or woodcutters’ thoroughfares” connecting the various

³⁶ Jerome N Bonaparte Jr, “Journey to the Springs, 1846,” ed. William D. Hoyt, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 54, no. 2 (Apr., 1946): 121; Ralph Happel, “The Chancellors of Chancellorsville,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 71, no. 3 (Jul., 1963): 259.

³⁷ Bonaparte, “Journey to the Springs, 1846,” 121.

³⁸ Alpheus S. Williams, *From the Cannon’s Mouth*, 184.

³⁹ Charles Harvey Brewster, *When This Cruel War Is Over: The Civil War Letters of Charles Harvey Brewster*, ed. David W. Blight, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 269.

⁴⁰ Lemuel Jeffries, “‘The Excitement Had Begun!’ The Civil War Diary of Lemuel Jeffries, 1862-1863,” ed. Jason H. Silverman, *Manuscripts* 30 (Fall 1978): 272.

openings in the Wilderness.⁴¹ There were also more substantial roads connecting Fredericksburg with Orange Court House that happened to cut through the Wilderness. The two main east-west routes were the Orange Turnpike and the Orange Plank Road. The former, incorporated by the Virginia legislature in 1810, was originally a macadamized road made up of crushed stone, but by the time of the Civil War had become a plain dirt road and was in disrepair.⁴² The Orange Plank Road was of more recent construction and lay to the south of the turnpike. Completed sometime in the 1850s, only “the right-hand side coming eastward”—which is where “the more heavily loaded wagons” would travel—was actually planked.⁴³ At Wilderness Church, the two roads became one until they reached Chancellorsville, where they split again. Another plank road made its way from Culpeper, to Germanna Ford, and then eventually merged with the Orange Plank Road.⁴⁴ Often called the Germanna Plank Road, it too was in bad shape by the time of the

⁴¹ Lyman, *Meade's Headquarters*, 53.

⁴² Happel, “The Chancellors of Chancellorsville,” 261. Also see 261 n5.

⁴³ Happel, “The Chancellors of Chancellorsville,” 261. A plank road, as its name indicates, was built of wooden planks “about eight feet long and three or four inches thick.” They rested, “usually secured only by their own weight,” on two parallel lines of “stringers,” which were made of timber and lay about “four or five feet apart.” The plank roads’ undoing was their lack of durability. Plank road promoters touted “that the wooden plank would last from seven to twelve years.” Companies found this was not the case in practice, and many “planks became rotten and worn within three or four years.” This proved dangerous as horses’ legs and wagon wheels could “slip through the planking, with ruinous results.” The expense of replacing the planks caused many a plank road to fail financially, and by the end of the Civil War, “the vast majority of plank roads that had been constructed had been either abandoned or connected to turnpikes of earth and gravel.” See Daniel B. Klein and John Majewski, “Plank Road Fever in Antebellum America: New York State Origins,” *New York History* 75, no. 1 (January 1994): 42, 45, 62-63.

⁴⁴ “Battle of the Wilderness,” *Daily Constitutionalist* (Augusta, Ga.), May 31, 1864.

Wilderness campaign as testified to by Milton Myers of the 110th Ohio who found it “much out of repair.”⁴⁵ The final major addition to the Wilderness’s transportation network was a railroad, which lay to the south of the Plank Road and remained unfinished at the time of the Civil War. Thomas Mann, a Massachusetts soldier, writing about his experience during the Mine Run campaign saw the “old RR there that had been graded,” but found that “the track [was] never laid.”⁴⁶

Contemporary witnesses reported that clearings in the Wilderness were few and far between and usually small in size with some exceptions, notably around Chancellorsville and Ellwood. For these observers, the Wilderness seemed to be one vast, interminable forest, a notion reinforced by the fact that they only saw a small slice of a large region. “We are in a dense wilderness nothing but woods all round,” explained Albert Reid, and “Sins we have crossed the river I think we have marched fifteen miles in woods without coming a clearing.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Milton Myers, Diary, May 6, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 153.

⁴⁶ Thomas H. Mann, *Fighting with the Eighteenth Massachusetts: The Civil War Memoir of Thomas H. Mann*, ed. John J. Hennessy (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 247. In 1853, the Virginia legislature incorporated the Fredericksburg and Gordonsville Railroad Company, right about the time that people began to realize the inadequacies of plank roads. In the meantime, more-enterprising areas of the state completed railroads that largely undercut the trade along the Wilderness’s decaying plank roads. The result was that the trade between the Fredericksburg and the western part of the state diminished substantially, further hurting the already lackluster local economy. See Happel, “The Chancellors of Chancellorsville,” 261-262, also 261 n5 and Klein and Majewski, “Plank Road Fever in Antebellum America,” 39-41.

⁴⁷ Albert J. Reid, Diary, December 1, 1863, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 284.

A. M. Stewart, a Federal chaplain, saw “scarce a field or house.”⁴⁸ Jacob Raymer, a Confederate, found “few farms or habitations.”⁴⁹ One Union soldier during the Wilderness campaign concluded that it “is one continuation of forest, with occasional small islands of clearing.”⁵⁰ William Randall of the 1st Michigan Sharpshooters called it “a Wilderness of Pines extending for many miles.”⁵¹ Edwin Groff of the 143rd Pennsylvania told his parents he could not “give [them] any idea of the country through here,” but advised them to “just think of woods. Nothing but woods of scrub oak, stunted pines, and vines with here and there a small farm and a cleared field with ravines and hollows and a stream of water here and there.”⁵² A Confederate soldier described the Wilderness as “a very continuously and densely wooded poverty stricken section” and as “densely wooded and grown up with underbrush.”⁵³ Another Confederate found it to have “very few ‘clearings,’” as it “consists almost wholly of a forest of dense undergrowth.”⁵⁴ Alexander Boteler, claimed that “for miles along the road the forests are unbroken by a single clearing and the traveller may journey on for hours without seeing a sign of . . . habitations.”

⁴⁸ “Chaplain Stewarts Letter,” *American Presbyterian* (Philadelphia, Pa.), May 19, 1864.

⁴⁹ Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent*, 127.

⁵⁰ “From the Army,” *Brockport Republic* (Brockport, NY), June 16, 1864.

⁵¹ William H. Randall, *Reminiscences*, May 7, 1864, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

⁵² Edwin Groff to parents, May 20, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, bound volume 362.

⁵³ Charles Trueheart and Henry Trueheart, *Rebel Brothers: The Civil War Letters of the Truehearts*, ed. Edward B. Williams (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 90, 94.

⁵⁴ “Battle of the Wilderness,” *Daily Constitutionalist* (Augusta, Ga.), May 31, 1864.

Moreover, “there is . . . on both sides a tangled mass of undergrowth apparently interminable” and “densely intricate.”⁵⁵

This image of a vast Wilderness persisted in the postwar literature. William Swinton found that “the whole face of the country is thickly wooded, with only an occasional opening, and intersected by a few narrow wood-roads.”⁵⁶ The historian of the 1st Massachusetts explained that the region was “covered with a dense growth of bushes, stunted pines, cedars, and scrub-oaks, interspersed with prostrate trees which had rotted and fallen to the ground, and pools of stagnant water; and in wet weather was one vast morass.”⁵⁷ Adam Badeau, Grant’s aide and biographer, depicted the Wilderness as “a wild and rugged area . . . with hardly a wood-road passing through; here and there is a ravine or a brook, and one or two houses are visible, with a bit of open land around them; all the rest is one tangled mass of stunted evergreen, dwarf chestnut, oak, and hazel, with an undergrowth of low-limbed bristling shrubs, making the forest almost impenetrable.”⁵⁸

While the image of a largely unbroken forest was a common portrayal of the Wilderness, it was certainly not the only one. An alternative—as well as more accurate—depiction of the

⁵⁵ Alexander Boteler, Diary, May 4, 1864, William Elizabeth Brooks Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁵⁶ Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, 428.

⁵⁷ Warren H. Cudworth, *History of the First Regiment (Massachusetts Infantry)* (Boston: Walker, Fuller, and Company, 1866), 458.

⁵⁸ Badeau, *Military History of Ulysses S. Grant*, 2:105.

Wilderness would be a patchwork.⁵⁹ This term suggests that the Wilderness, rather than being one mass of thick trees with a few small openings, was a more varied landscape, with patches of vegetation of varying density, open areas, swamps, and a shifting topography. Although to Wilbur Fisk “it [appeared] to be one uninterrupted wilderness,” his description during the Mine Run campaign included small clearings, land “covered with small second-growth pine” which “looks as if it had been under cultivation once, but probably worn out and abandoned,” and other parts “grown up to oak and other solid timber of all sizes,” that “has probably been forest from time immemorial.”⁶⁰ During the Overland campaign, Jacob Raymer of the 4th North Carolina too offered a more complex characterization, finding the landscape “broken into gentle hills, interspersed with many swamps and marshes; the soil sterile, few farms or habitations are to be seen—large timber is scarce, but the underbrush, brambles and such like, are so dense as to be almost impenetrable.”⁶¹ Charles Wainwright, a Union artillery officer in the V Corps, hunting for places to post his guns, found a position south of the turnpike where “the wood was comparatively thin” and made more so by the soldiers felling trees for breastworks.⁶² Of special interest is Theodore Lyman’s account. As an aide for General Meade, he traveled to various parts of the Wilderness battlefield and probably saw far more of it than most soldiers. He claimed that the Wilderness was “a more or less dense growth of pine or of oak,” implying that the vegetation

⁵⁹ I adopted this term from John Hennessy. See John Hennessy, “Wilderness Origins Part II: clear-cutting (or not),” <https://npsfrsp.wordpress.com/2010/07/16/wilderness-origins-part-ii-clear-cutting-or-not/>, (accessed Sept. 26, 2016).

⁶⁰ Fisk, *Hard Marching Every Day*, 166.

⁶¹ Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent*, 126-127.

⁶² Charles S. Wainwright, *A Diary of Battle: The Personal Journals of Colonel Charles S. Wainwright 1861-1865*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 353.

was not consistent. He then specified that “the very worst of it is parallel [the] Orange plank and upper part of the Brock road,” where it was “mostly a low, continuous, thick growth of small saplings, fifteen to thirty feet high and seldom larger than one’s arm.”⁶³

Some postwar writers also offered patchwork depictions of the Wilderness. Morris Schaff, a historian and Union veteran, described the Wilderness as “a vast sea . . . of dense forest . . . a second growth” in which “the trees are noticeably stunted, and so close together, and their lower limbs so intermingled with a thick underbrush, that it is very difficult indeed to make one’s way through them.” Mixed in with these small trees were more substantial ones, along with swamps, dead trees, worn out roads, winding paths, dilapidated buildings, “old fields preempted by briars, sassafras, dwarf young pines, and broom,” along with larger openings. He also recognized the area’s varying topography, noting the “southern half . . . may be designated as low or gently rolling” while the “northern half, along the rivers, is marked by irregularly swelling ridges.”⁶⁴ Federal veteran George T. Stevens’ memoir also noted the woods’ varying density. During the Wilderness campaign, he watched his line moving through “a thick growth of oak and walnut, densely filled with a smaller growth of pines and other brushwood; and in many places so thickly was this undergrowth interwoven among the large trees, that one could not see five yards in front of the line.” As the line continued to advance, however, he noticed that, “the thick tangle in a measure disappeared, and the woods were more open.” Even there, however, the

⁶³ Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 89.

⁶⁴ Morris Schaff, *The Battle of the Wilderness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910), 57-62. Of all the postwar descriptions of the Wilderness by a veteran, Schaff’s is the most nuanced and provides the best picture of what the Wilderness battlefield would have looked like.

“infantry found great difficulty in advancing, and at length,” they found themselves “again in the midst of the thick undergrowth.”⁶⁵

Both of these depictions have something to offer. The interminable forest portrayal reveals the Wilderness’s ability to awe those who entered it with its vastness and monotony. It is easy to see how a soldier could come away with such an impression. Marching along a narrow road seeing nothing but trees and maybe a small clearing or two for miles could be memorable, if not exciting, scenery. The fact that most of those who fought or traveled through the Wilderness did so along a narrow slice of what was a large forest would have limited their vision and might have encouraged such a monolithic interpretation. This portrayal also demonstrates how a dominant characteristic of an environment can crowd out the finer details. For a soldier, explaining the terrain to the folks back home, it was much easier to write a simple depiction of the central features rather than delve into smaller details. This goes a way towards explaining why the soldiers found the Wilderness so noteworthy and so menacing. During the Civil War, soldiers marched and fought through many different woodlands. Moreover, some of these woods had characteristics very similar to those in the Wilderness, but the scale of the Wilderness, or at least the soldiers’ perception of it, was unprecedented and intimidating. Added to all this was the harrowing nature of combat in the Wilderness—which left one blind and feeling vulnerable against an unseen enemy—along with the sheer number of dead and wounded that soon littered the forest floor.⁶⁶ Such additions to the scenery surely played some role in how soldiers recalled

⁶⁵ George T. Stevens, *Three Years in the Sixth Corps* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1870), 308.

⁶⁶ This description of combat is representative of the battle of the Wilderness (May 5-6, 1864) and not the fighting at Chancellorsville (May 1-3, 1863) or Mine Run (Nov. 27, 1863).

their physical environment, and, no doubt, made the seemingly endless Wilderness all the more menacing.

On the other hand, the patchwork interpretation is a more accurate portrayal of the Wilderness than the simpler depiction given by many veterans as well as modern historians. Although to some degree it robs the Wilderness of its most menacing quality, what it takes away in feeling it returns in information, providing a much more detailed look of what the Wilderness was like, and showing how the various ingredients combined to create the whole. This model emphasizes the differences in the Wilderness, which helps explain why familiarity with the Wilderness was not as helpful as one might suspect and why soldiers might experience the Wilderness differently, depending on what part of it they were campaigning in.

The third depiction that Union veterans championed after the war was a variation of the patchwork portrayal. It described the Wilderness as possessing a core or heart of very thick woods and an outer ring of common woods. Francis Walker, the historian of the Federal II Corps, talked about the area around Robertson's tavern, near where the armies fought the Mine Run campaign as being "vastly better than the Wilderness, in which our troops had been smothered the previous May, and were to be smothered again this May," despite not being "altogether paradisiacal in character."⁶⁷ In this instance, the Wilderness, included both the Wilderness and the Chancellorsville fields, while the Mine Run area was not considered part of the Wilderness proper, but instead part of a thinner periphery. General Andrew Humphreys' history of the Overland Campaign suggested that the 1864 Wilderness battlefield formed the

⁶⁷ Francis A. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887), 409.

thick core. He found the Mine Run battlefield to be “more open and better ground,” and pointed out “still more open country” in the area around Lee’s Mine Run line.⁶⁸ Moreover, “the ground occupied by the Army of the Potomac in the vicinity of Chancellorsville in the Spring of 1863 was either open or in woods chiefly of ordinary character with but little undergrowth,” observed Humphreys.⁶⁹ Sartell Prentice depicted the Wilderness battlefield as the core of the Wilderness, observing that the “densest part, its heart of hearts, was about eight by six miles, with the Wilderness Tavern for its centre.”⁷⁰ Likewise, Morris Schaff affirmed that the Wilderness battlefield “is at about the heart of the Wilderness.”⁷¹

While the veterans all agreed that the Wilderness was a large forested region, they were less sure about where exactly it began and ended, and consequently there is some disagreement about its limits. The general consensus, however, was that the Wilderness’s boundaries were the Rapidan on the north and Spotsylvania on the south. During the Overland campaign, Theodore Lyman observed that the Wilderness constituted “a very larger part of this region, extending east

⁶⁸ Humphreys, *Virginia Campaign*, 56.

⁶⁹ Humphreys, *Virginia Campaign*, 55n.

⁷⁰ Sartell Prentice, “The Opening Hours in the Wilderness in 1864,” in *Military Essays and Recollections, Papers Read Before the Commandery of the State of Illinois, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States*. 3 vols. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1894), 2:102.

⁷¹ Schaff, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 58. Also see Cecil Battine, *The Crisis of the Confederacy: A History of Gettysburg and the Wilderness* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), 362. “. . . the thick woods which clothed the ground and especially the dense thickets on the western edge of the forest; the two small streams between whose ravines was contained the densest jungle of the Wilderness; the Wilderness Run and seven miles west of it the Mine Run, which formed the western boundary of the forest.”

and west along the plank and pike, and the south, nearly to Spotsylvania.”⁷² The western border was generally placed at Mine Run by postwar authors. William Swinton explained that the “region known as the Wilderness . . . extends a considerable distance southward from the river, and westward as far as Mine Run.”⁷³ The eastern limit was less definite. Theodore Lyman, one of Meade’s staff officers, included “the field of Chancellorsville” within the Wilderness’s bounds, but did not pin down an exact line.⁷⁴ Gouverneur K. Warren, who served as the Chief of Topographical Engineers in the Army of the Potomac during the Chancellorsville campaign, provides a good description of the hazily defined eastern boundary, explaining that “between Chancellorsville and Fredericksburg the country becomes more open and clear as you approach the latter place,” but giving no definite line.⁷⁵

⁷² Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 89. For other examples of the Wilderness’s southern border being in the vicinity of Spotsylvania see Alexander S. Patten, Diary, May 8, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 284 and George S. Young, Diary, May 9, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park.

⁷³ Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, 417. Swinton also considered the Chancellorsville battlefield as part of the Wilderness, as “it was along its gloomy margin that the bloody battle . . . had been fought a twelvemonth before.” For other examples of post war accounts placing the western edge of the Wilderness at Mine Run see Edwin C. Mason, “Recollections of the Mine Run Campaign,” in *Glimpses of the Nation’s Struggle: A Series of Papers Read Before the Minnesota Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States*. 4 vols. (St. Paul: St. Paul Book and Stationary Company, 1897), 1:322 and Thomas W. Hyde, *Following the Greek Cross; or, Memories of the Sixth Army Corps* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1894), 175.

⁷⁴ Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 53.

⁷⁵ U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 127 vols., index, and atlas (Washington: GPO, 1880–1901), ser. 1, 25 (1): 197. (Hereafter cited as OR)

Contemporary estimates of how many square miles the Wilderness covered could vary considerably. Jacob Raymer, a soldier in the 4th North Carolina, described the Wilderness's boundaries during the Overland campaign, saying that the "name is applied to a scope of country some ten miles square, [or 100 square miles] extending from Chancellorsville upward on the plank road, and averaging some twenty to thirty miles from Orange Court House."⁷⁶ In contrast, Milton Myers, a member of the 110th Ohio, reported that the Wilderness "is said to be some thirty miles long, by ten wide," which would put it at 300 square miles.⁷⁷

Postwar writers also tried to compute its area, but their conclusions were just as inconsistent. G. N. Galloway, A Union veteran, explained that "the Wilderness is a tract of land about seven miles wide and thirteen long, [or 91 square miles] situated in Spottsylvania county, Va., about sixteen miles west of Fredericksburg."⁷⁸ Edward Porter Alexander, an artillery officer in the Army of Northern Virginia, explained that "Chancellorsville was situated about a mile within the limits of a tract called the Wilderness . . . [which] stretched some 12 or 14 miles westward along the Rapidan and was some 8 or 10 miles in breadth," making it some 96-140 square miles in size.⁷⁹ Holman Melcher asserted that the Wilderness was "about fifteen miles square, [or 225 square miles] extending from the Rapidan River toward Spottsylvania court-house and equidistant from Fredericksburg on the east and Orange court-house on the west; or, to

⁷⁶ Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent*, 127.

⁷⁷ Milton Myers, *Diary*, May 6, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spottsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 153.

⁷⁸ "Getty's Hard Fight," *Philadelphia Weekly Times* (Philadelphia, Pa.), October 15, 1881.

⁷⁹ Edward Porter Alexander, *Military Memoirs of a Confederate* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 325.

be more specific, from Chancellorsville on the east to Mine Run on the west.”⁸⁰ Sartell Prentice, judged that it was “marked on its north and east by the Rapidan and Rappahannock rivers, and reaching south almost to Spottsylvania, and west to Mine Run, it covered a tract about twenty miles by twelve,” making for a Wilderness of 240 square miles.⁸¹ More recently, Stephen Sears and Daniel Sutherland in their works on Chancellorsville have put the area of the Wilderness at a mere seventy square miles, a much more conservative estimate.⁸²

* * * * *

Having a correct understanding of the Wilderness’s nature is certainly important for studying the campaigns that took place there. It is equally vital, however, to have a proper understanding of the Wilderness’s origin. Many postwar writers claimed that the Wilderness’s thick vegetation was a distinct, if not a unique, landscape because of the deforestation caused by iron mining and smelting. This in turn allowed them to claim that the Wilderness was a battlefield where the Confederates had an advantage, leading them to trap the Union army there, and resulting in a battle in May 1864 (soon named the “Wilderness”) unlike any other. In short, the Wilderness’s origin story is a key piece of the Wilderness myth. In reality, the area’s thick vegetation was not caused solely by the iron industry. Rather, a variety of economic activities, including tobacco cultivation, iron and gold mining, and road building all contributed to the

⁸⁰ Holman S. Melcher, “An Experience in the Battle of the Wilderness,” in *War Papers, Read Before the Commandery of the State of Maine, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States*. 4 vols. (Portland, ME: The Thurston Print, 1898), 1:73.

⁸¹ Prentice, “The Opening Hours in the Wilderness in 1864,” 2:102.

⁸² Sears, *Chancellorsville*, 193; Daniel Sutherland, *Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville: The Dare Mark Campaign* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 141.

creation of the Wilderness's dense vegetation. Tobacco cultivation was the prime culprit, sapping the land's fertility and causing erosion, leading to the abandonment of the land and its reclamation by the stunted vegetation so typical of the Wilderness. Not surprisingly, there were other areas of Virginia that could boast of thick, Wilderness-like vegetation. The Wilderness then, was just one notorious example of a Virginia phenomenon. While the character of the region as a whole probably originated from the effects of tobacco cultivation, the construction of the Orange Plank Road in the 1850s probably accounts for the especially dense thickets that Theodore Lyman encountered on that part of the Wilderness battlefield.

The economic activities that shaped the landscape included various waves of farming and mining as well as road construction. Tobacco cultivation was the first economic activity that affected the Wilderness, and is primarily responsible for creating the Wilderness's thick vegetation. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of tobacco to colonial Virginia's economy. Despite efforts to diversify, tobacco remained a force to be reckoned with, and as historian Avery Craven has noted, "the very conditions which made it the dominant crop, determined that its production should be at the expense of the soil."⁸³ At one point, over ninety percent of Virginians who paid taxes were growing tobacco. This reliance on a single crop was clearly visible in Spotsylvania County, the home of the Wilderness.⁸⁴ Here, a 1726 census revealed that during a two-year span the amount of tobacco raised in the county had increased roughly two fold.⁸⁵ Producing tobacco meant clearing the land of its virgin forest. The

⁸³ Avery O. Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1925), 30.

⁸⁴ The Wilderness extended into Orange County as well.

⁸⁵ Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 8.

Wilderness's soil originally supported a mixture of hickories and oaks, and by the 1720s predominantly oaks due to planned burns by American Indians.⁸⁶ These oaks were in turn cleared by farmers through girdling, a practice which "strips a layer of bark around a tree, leaving it to die and making it easier to chop down." Tobacco could then be planted among the remaining stumps.⁸⁷

It was at this point that the tobacco plant and Virginia's notoriously hard rains combined to sap the soil's vitality.⁸⁸ Planters needed virgin land to produce the best tobacco, and with each successive crop, soil quality declined. After a few crops, the land was given over to growing corn and wheat, and finally left for the forest to reclaim.⁸⁹ Moreover, the intensive care that the tobacco plants required meant that planters had little time or labor for rehabilitating or sustaining the land's fertility.⁹⁰ The way in which tobacco was cultivated also damaged the soil, as the cleared fields with their loose soil were very susceptible to erosion. After the lands were abandoned, or planted instead with corn and wheat, things only got worse. The land could quickly become scarred with "deep gullies" and the shallow furrows made by Virginian plows when planting corn "ran straight up and down the hillsides to become veritable watercourses in time of rainfall," carrying away the loose soil, and its nutrients.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 8.

⁸⁷ Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 8.

⁸⁸ For another discussion on the tobacco economy and how it affected Virginia's soil, see Albert E. Cowdrey, *This Land, This South: An Environmental History* (Louisville: University of Kentucky, 1996), 30-33.

⁸⁹ Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor*, 32.

⁹⁰ Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor*, 33.

⁹¹ Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor*, 34-36.

In 1732, William Byrd wrote about the fruits of Virginia's agricultural practices in what became the Wilderness. Looking to "either side," Byrd saw "continual poisoned fields, with nothing but saplings growing on them." In addition, Byrd noted that "a great deal of land," owned by the proprietor of a local iron mine, was "exceedingly barren, and the growth of trees upon it is hardly big enough for coaling."⁹² Writing in the 1850s, Frederick Law Olmstead observed a similar pattern throughout eastern Virginia. "Not more than a third of the country, visible," he noted, "is cleared; the rest is mainly a pine forest." Of the land that had been previously cleared, "not more than one-quarter seems to have been lately in cultivation," while the remainder "is grown over with briars and bushes, and a long, coarse grass of no value." The only crops grown by the 1850s, Olmstead reported, were corn and wheat.⁹³ Near Petersburg, where farmers had more recently grown tobacco on their land and then abandoned it some years before, Olmstead came upon "old fields" full of "pine trees and broom-sedge" in which "for acres, the pines would not be above five feet high" while in other parts "there were patches of every age" with trees at times reaching a hundred feet in height.⁹⁴

⁹² William Byrd, "A Progress to the Mines in the Year 1732" in *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing the History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina; A Journey to the Land of Eden, A. D. 1733; and A Progress to the Mines. Written from 1728 to 1736, and Now First Published*, (Petersburg: Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841), Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/byrd/byrd.html>, (accessed on 10/19/2016), 132, 137.

⁹³ Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States in the Years 1853-1854 With Remarks on Their Economy*, 2 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904) 2:18.

⁹⁴ Olmstead, *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States in the Years 1853-1854*, 2:72.

Even after the Civil War, a similar pattern held true. John Trowbridge, who visited Virginia in the immediate aftermath of the war, found the “striking feature of the country” to be its “old fields,” which he implied were the consequence of growing tobacco, “the devouring enemy of the country.” Initially, these old fields were “covered with briars, weeds, and broom-sedge,” but these soon gave way to a “thick growth” of pines. “In two or three years,” explained Trowbridge, these pines could be five to six feet in height, and with the passage of a decade one might expect to see a fledgling forest. Moreover, “in some of the oldest of the old fields, now heavily timbered, the ridges of the ancient tobacco lands are traceable among the trees.”⁹⁵ Robert Somers, traveled from the Potomac to Richmond in the early 1870s and his observations reinforced Trowbridge’s conclusions. Somers found that “the soil has . . . at one time been nearly all cultivated,” and noticed that “the marks of the plough are everywhere seen.” Nevertheless, Somers noticed how “thousands of acres are rapidly returning to a state of nature, and little forests of young pines are springing where Indian corn and even wheat may have recently grown.”⁹⁶ He concluded that “when the soil has been exhausted by bad cultivation, and is left to take its own way, it is prolific of pines,” and he witnessed this “in many fields, over which the furrows were still traceable, covered with little pine-shoots, thick as if planted in a nursery.”⁹⁷ While Union observers would have found the Wilderness’s characteristics to be unusual and

⁹⁵ J. T. Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of its Battle-Fields and Ruined Cities, A Journey Through the Desolated States, and Talks with the People*, (Hartford, CT: L. Stebbins, 1866), 225. Trowbridge commented that “much of the land devastated by the war lies in this condition,” meaning abandoned and overgrown, suggesting that the war made a wilderness of Virginia.

⁹⁶ Robert Somers, *The Southern States Since the War, 1870-1871* (London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1871), 11.

⁹⁷ Somers, *The Southern States Since the War*, 11.

even unique, the Wilderness landscape was, in truth, just the most famous example of a long-standing and widespread Virginia phenomenon.

That being the case, it should come as no surprise that Union soldiers found Wilderness-like woods in other parts of Virginia. Gouverneur K. Warren, a Union General, described Stafford County, which lay north of Spotsylvania County, as having “a lack of fertility in the soil” with “dense woods and thickets of black-jack oak and pine [covering] most of the ground.” Little wonder then that he concluded “the general character of the country is that of a wilderness, and it forms part of that distinguishing belt of country which continues through Orange and Spotsylvania Counties and southwesterly in a general direction parallel with the Blue Ridge,” of which the Wilderness was a part.⁹⁸ A Confederate in the Texas brigade described the terrain around Spotsylvania as “a forest of heavy timber and small growth, a dark and dangerous *terra incognita*.”⁹⁹ Charles A. Dana, the Assistant Secretary of War, reported later during the North

⁹⁸ OR 25 (1): 196. Warren noted that the main trait from the James to the Potomac and the Chesapeake to the Blue Ridge, “is a dense forest of oak or pine, with occasional clearings, rarely extensive enough to prevent the riflemen concealed in one border from shooting across to the other side.” See OR 25 (1): 193. At the time he wrote this, he was serving as the Chief of Topographical Engineers in the Army of the Potomac.

⁹⁹ J. B. Polley, *A Soldier's Letters to Charming Nellie* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1908), 237. While there were Wilderness-like woods at Spotsylvania, soldiers usually reported finding it more satisfactory than the Wilderness battlefield. For example, one Confederate remarked that it was “a better place to fight than the Wilderness.” Anonymous Confederate diary (1st or 6th South Carolina), Ms BB-38, Massachusetts Military History Society Collection, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, MA. Isaac O. Best of the 16th New York wrote in his postwar memoir that “the country is here a little more open but still very woody,” but argued that the army “had left the Wilderness proper behind” during its march towards Spotsylvania. ??? The soldiers were truly pleased though when they left Spotsylvania and headed towards the North Anna. A letter written

Anna phase of the Overland campaign that the Union army passed through a region “densely wooded with pine, much like the Wilderness region.”¹⁰⁰ Still later during the same campaign in the area between the Pamunkey and Chickahominy rivers, Dana found “the country . . . thickly wooded with pines, with few good openings,” a description that was certainly reminiscent of the Wilderness.¹⁰¹ Near Petersburg, Theodore Lyman, a member of Meade’s staff, found a battlefield that “beggars description” as “it is a wood, with a tangled thick undergrowth that almost stops the passage of a man.”¹⁰² Ulysses S. Grant likewise remarked in his memoirs that “most of the country” over which the Overland campaign was fought was “covered with a dense forest, in places, like the Wilderness and along the Chickahominy, almost impenetrable even for infantry except along the roads.”¹⁰³

by a Union soldier reflects this sentiment nicely. “It is quite refreshing to get where civilization can be seen, after being hemmed in by woods for so long a time, seeing and hearing nothing save the screaming shell or whistling bullet.” This same soldier lumped the Wilderness and Spotsylvania together, calling it “the meanest part of Virginia, properly called the Wilderness.” AEOF to ?, May 15, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 325. (Note: the letter is dated May 15, but it is obvious from the content that the author continued to add to it after that date.) All this tends to suggest that the scope of the Wilderness and not just the character of the woods were an important part of what made the Wilderness the Wilderness.

¹⁰⁰ OR 36 (1): 77.

¹⁰¹ OR 36 (1): 83.

¹⁰² Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 252.

¹⁰³ Ulysses S. Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1886), 2: 178.

During the war, some soldiers noted the ties between the Wilderness and Virginia agricultural practices.¹⁰⁴ Wilbur Fisk, writing during the Mine Run campaign, described the area as “covered with small second-growth pine, and looks as if it had been under cultivation once, but probably worn out and abandoned for more fertile regions.” Furthermore, he claimed that the Wilderness “has the appearance of being good soil, and . . . should call it just such land as would tempt the eyes of almost any practical farmer, if it was up in our Northern States, instead of being here in decayed Virginia.”¹⁰⁵ During the Overland campaign, an Ohio soldier contrasted “the primitive forests of Virginia” which “are truly beautiful; the different kinds of oak predominating, with hickory and pine,” with the “thickets of shrub pine and cedar,” that “cover the original farms of the old Commonwealth.” For these blights, he blamed “the effects of slavery in old Virginia.”¹⁰⁶ Peter Alexander, a Confederate soldier writing during the Overland campaign, similarly observed some of the effects of tobacco cultivation. “Producing little for the subsistence of either man or beast,” Alexander called it “a blasted region, adjoining the district known as the ‘poisoned fields of Orange.’” He found “the soil destitute of fertility, the supply of

¹⁰⁴ Reid Mitchell, in his study of Civil War soldiers, noted how Union soldiers tended to be critical of the southern landscape because of its ties to slavery and bad agricultural practices. Mitchell found that “Tidewater Virginia, where land exhausted by tobacco had been reclaimed by the forest after the planters had moved west, presented a particularly dreary spectacle to Northern soldiers.” There “they could see cleared land and old plantations grown over with twenty-year-old pine; the countryside full of wasteland, ‘rendered useless by poor cultivation.’” Likewise, Mitchell quoted one Federal who remarked that “‘Old tobacco fields with the last ridges of the plow still visible grown up with pine fifty feet high were good representations of the wastefulness and wickedness of slavery.’” Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers* (New York, 1988), 95, 102.

¹⁰⁵ Fisk, *Hard Marching Every Day*, 166.

¹⁰⁶ “Notes from the Battle-Field . . .,” *Xenia Torchlight* (Xenia, Oh.), June 1, 1864.

water scant, [and] the ground broken and covered with a dense and almost impenetrable growth of stunted bushes, pines, and black jacks.”¹⁰⁷

In the postwar years, some writers still pointed to soil exhaustion as a factor in the creation of the Wilderness, often coupled with the traditional iron mining explanation. Edwin C. Mason, a former Federal soldier, combined the tobacco and mining explanations. While he mentioned the region’s mining ventures, he explained that “the soil in places had also been found adapted to the cultivation of tobacco.” Yet in time “the mines became unproductive and the soil unfit for the profitable raising of the tobacco-plant,” and consequently “the territory was abandoned to nature,” becoming “so thickly overgrown with pine and scrub-oak, interlaced with brambles and trailing vines, that a dog could scarce force his way through.”¹⁰⁸ Sartell Prentice, a Union veteran, explained that the region was “once a garden-spot . . . one of [Virginia’s] most fertile, productive, and choice of highly cultivated and valued sections” that was also the site of gold and silver mining, until it “had been in process of time exhausted, both as to soil and mines, and finally abandoned.” Prentice concluded that with the passage of time “Nature had picked up this exhausted and abandoned land, and planted it with lavish hand to a growth, that in time became immense, of tree and vine.”¹⁰⁹ Another Union veteran claimed that the Wilderness “was in years past a flourishing section of the country, but the soil becoming exhausted it was abandoned and allowed to become what it really is—a wilderness.”¹¹⁰ Likewise, Norton C. Shepard, formerly of the 146th New York, found that “in the South, however, most especially in

¹⁰⁷ “From General Lee’s Army,” *Daily South Carolinian* (Columbia, SC), May 28, 1864.

¹⁰⁸ Mason, “Recollections of the Mine Run Campaign,” 1:321.

¹⁰⁹ Prentice, “The Opening Hours in the Wilderness in 1864,” 2:102.

¹¹⁰ “Getty’s Hard Fight,” *Philadelphia Weekly Times* (Philadelphia, Pa.), October 15, 1881.

Virginia, most of the land has been cleared off and cultivated,” and “after many years of cultivation it has become worn out and has been abandoned as useless.” In place of the original forest, “grows up . . . pine and scrub oak to become a wilderness,” with trees that “are usually about six inches in diameter with branches growing thick from the ground to the top.”¹¹¹ Other writers took note of the Wilderness’s poor soil, but made no connection between the infertility and tobacco cultivation, instead they seemed to suggest that it was sterile by nature. The historian for the 7th Rhode Island Infantry simply noted that “the clayey soil is so barren as to have attracted but few settlers.”¹¹²

Although Virginia’s agricultural practices substantially changed the state’s landscape, in the Wilderness there were additional factors at work, including the traditionally cited mining and ironmaking. Iron deposits lay scattered across the Wilderness and the region’s forests provided the fuel to transform the raw ore into pig iron. Alexander Spotswood, while not the first to note the area’s potential, was certainly the first to act. He gained title to vast tracts of land throughout Spotsylvania County in 1716, 1719, and 1722 totaling more than 60,000 acres, among which was the Wilderness Tract, from which the Wilderness possibly derives its name. Meanwhile his Tubal Furnace had become operational and by 1723 he had already shipped tons of iron back to Britain.¹¹³ When William Byrd visited the area in 1732 he found Alexander Spotswood still

¹¹¹ Norton C. Shepard, *Out of the Wilderness: The Civil War Memoir of Cpl. Norton C. Shepard, 146th New York Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Raymond W. Smith (Hamilton, NY: Edmonston Publishing, 1998), 2.

¹¹² William P. Hopkins, *The Seventh Regiment Rhode Island Volunteers in the Civil War, 1862-1865* (Providence, Rhode Island: Snow & Farnham, 1903), 166.

¹¹³ Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 9-11.

engaged in mining iron and refining the ore.¹¹⁴ After Spotswood's death in 1740, his ironworks declined and by the time that the Revolution swept the colonies, "Tubal Furnace lay in ruins."¹¹⁵ Later, the iron industry would revive at the Catharine Furnace, which was built by John Wellford.¹¹⁶ This furnace operated from 1837-1847 and from 1862-1865 but never thrived, surviving on contracts from the Federal and Confederate governments.¹¹⁷

During the war, some soldiers pointed to this iron industry as the source of the Wilderness's distinctive characteristics. A Union army chaplain commented that "a dozen or more years since, the timber had all been cut off this section for the supply of an iron furnace in the neighborhood," and noted that "a thick young growth of oak and hickory has sprung up."¹¹⁸ Later, this origin story made its way into the flood of soldier memoirs and war histories. William Swinton asserted that "the woods of the Wilderness have not the ordinary features of a forest," because "the region rests on a belt of mineral rocks, and, for above a hundred years, extensive mining has here been carried on. To feed the mines the timber of the country for many miles around had been cut down, and in its place there had arisen a dense undergrowth of low-limbed and scraggy pines, stiff and bristling chinkapins, scrub-oaks, and hazel."¹¹⁹ Writing after the turn

¹¹⁴ Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 3; William Byrd, "A Progress to the Mines in the Year 1732," 132-133.

¹¹⁵ Adam, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 13-14.

¹¹⁶ Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 1.

¹¹⁷ Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 1, 46. Mining iron in the Wilderness was more akin to quarrying as the iron ore was located near the surface and the miners would dig pits to get at the iron. See, Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 52.

¹¹⁸ "Chaplain Stewarts Letter," *American Presbyterian* (Philadelphia, Pa.), May 19, 1864.

¹¹⁹ Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, 428-429.

of the century, Morris Schaff repeated more or less the same story, but emphasized that the local iron furnaces were primarily responsible for shaping the landscape. He noted that “this whole mystery-wrapped country is a mineral region, holding pockets of iron ore and streaked with . . . veins of gold-bearing quartz.” Schaff, like Swinton, located the origins of the Wilderness in the 18th century. In his telling, Alexander Spotswood, for whom Spotsylvania County was named, “uncovered the ore-beds, built iron furnaces, and converted the primeval forest into charcoal to feed them.” Schaff blamed this activity for the Wilderness’s thick vegetation, noting that “the present timber aspect is due entirely to the iron furnaces and their complete destruction of the first noble growth.”¹²⁰

This traditional interpretation has seeped into modern accounts as well. Stephen Sears, in his book on the Chancellorsville campaign, called the Wilderness a “distinctive tract of Virginia woodland” which “since colonial times . . . had been the site of a nascent iron industry.” Sears explained that “it was this iron industry that gave the Wilderness its distinctive character.”¹²¹ Similarly, Gordon Rhea, in his campaign history described the Wilderness as “a broad stretch of impenetrable thickets and dense growth that had replaced forests cut down to fuel local iron and gold furnaces.”¹²² More recently, Aaron Sachs repeated this same interpretation, noting that Alexander Spotswood “needed a vast supply of wood . . . to fuel his blast furnaces.” Later, when

¹²⁰ Schaff, *The Battle of the Wilderness*, 62. For other examples of this explanation see Alexander, *Military Memoirs of a Confederate*, 325; Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 328; and Melcher, “An Experience in the Battle of the Wilderness,” 1:73.

¹²¹ Sears, *Chancellorsville*, 193.

¹²² Gordon C. Rhea, *The Battle of the Wilderness May 5–6, 1864*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 51.

the iron industry declined, the forest rebounded “because Virginians found the local soil to be too acidic and too poorly drained for extensive farming.” In the place of the first forest, “a second-growth ‘Wilderness’ developed, dominated by tangles of scrub and brush amid stunted trees that struggled to soak up enough nutrients from the ground.”¹²³ Suffice it to say that this venerable theory is alive and well.

While these historians argued that the local iron industry explained the Wilderness’s thick vegetation, Sean Adams, Noel Harrison, and John Hennessy have recently suggested that the iron industry did not consume enough wood to create the Wilderness.¹²⁴ Adams, in his study of the Catharine Furnace, explained that “a steady flow of charcoal from the surrounding forests was required to keep the operation going.”¹²⁵ But how much wood was consumed? While Adams admits that historians have offered a variety of estimates, he suggests that Catharine Furnace would need “roughly between 300 and 400 acres per year for charcoal.”¹²⁶ This estimate means that “the impact of Catharine Furnace’s charcoaling operation would have clear-cut less than a square mile per year of operation,” for a total of perhaps “at the most, nine or ten of Spotsylvania

¹²³ Aaron Sachs, “Stumps in the Wilderness,” in *The Blue, the Gray, and the Green: Toward an Environmental History of the Civil War*, ed. Brian Allen Drake (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 100-101.

¹²⁴ Hennessy, “The Origins of the Wilderness: Part I—The Soil,” <https://npsfrsp.wordpress.com/2010/07/15/the-origins-of-the-wilderness-part-i-the-soil/>, (accessed on Sept. 26, 2016) and Hennessy, “Wilderness Origins Part II: clear-cutting (or not),” <https://npsfrsp.wordpress.com/2010/07/16/wilderness-origins-part-ii-clear-cutting-or-not/>, (accessed Sept. 26, 2016).

¹²⁵ Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 40. Charcoal was created through “a process of distilling wood under a slow heat in order to remove impurities, burn off water, and reduce it to contain as much carbon as possible.”

¹²⁶ Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 46.

County's more than 400 square miles of territory."¹²⁷ Adams concludes that although the iron mining and manufacturing, among other things, "certainly contributed to the environmental conditions that created the Wilderness by 1863-1864, . . . it was by no means solely responsible for it."¹²⁸

In addition to the iron operations, gold mining took place in the Wilderness at several different points. Nearer Chancellorsville was the United States Gold Mine.¹²⁹ Closer to the Wilderness battlefield lay the Culpepper Gold Mine.¹³⁰ By the time war came, the mines, like most things in the Wilderness, were idle. One Union soldier claimed "these gold mines were worked up to within about twelve months since," and saw that "on the river bank there is quite an extensive establishment for washing, &c., with all the washers and other mining implements scattered around."¹³¹ Another Union soldier, however, concluded that the war had ground the "pretty extensive mining operations" to a halt.¹³² Though one Union soldier thought that the mines "have long since ceased to be worked," another suggested that the war was to blame as "Conscription Acts and Emancipation Proclamations have exhausted manual mining

¹²⁷ Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 46-47.

¹²⁸ Adams, *Iron from the Wilderness*, 47.

¹²⁹ Happel, "The Chancellors of Chancellorsville," 263.

¹³⁰ Edward Perkins Preble, *Diary*, December 1, 1863, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, bound volume 34. Preble seems to suggest that there is more than one mine, calling them the Culpepper Gold Mines.

¹³¹ William D. Landon, "Fourteenth Indiana Regiment, Letters to the Vincennes Western Sun," *Indiana Magazine of History* 34 (March 1938): 77.

¹³² Mann, *Fighting with the Eighteenth Massachusetts*, 247.

material.”¹³³ While some “five hundred men were employed in digging for the precious metal” before the shooting started, now “no work is performed.”¹³⁴ How much these mines contributed to deforestation in the Wilderness is unclear. It does, however, seem safe to assume that, while they probably used some timber in their operations, they were not the major culprits behind the creation of the Wilderness’s second-growth landscape.

The construction of the Wilderness’s transportation network, particularly the Orange and Germanna plank roads also altered the region’s landscape significantly. John Hennessy has provided estimates of how much timber both the Orange Plank Road and the connecting Germanna or Culpeper Plank Road would require. He suggested that one “mile of road required about 147 cords” while an acre of woods provided “between 15 and 20 cords.” The result was that “each acre could plank between 540 and 720 linear feet of road,” and “each mile required between 7.33 and 9.8 acres of timber.” By Hennessy’s estimates then, assuming that there were “22 miles of plank roads through the Wilderness,” the plank roads would need from “160-215 acres of timber,” or less than one square mile.¹³⁵ This is a significantly smaller amount of deforestation than that caused by iron mining and manufacturing (est. 9-10 square miles), which in turn is much smaller than that probably caused by growing tobacco. Yet, this relatively small amount of newer deforestation might have had a disproportionate influence on how Civil War soldiers experienced the Wilderness, because it probably would have occurred along the area’s

¹³³ “Army of the Potomac,” *Mohawk Valley Register* (Fort Plain, NY), December 17, 1863; “The 13th Regiment on the March,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 4, 1864.

¹³⁴ “The 13th Regiment on the March,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 4, 1864.

¹³⁵ Hennessy, “Wilderness Origins Part II: clear-cutting (or not),” <https://npsfrsp.wordpress.com/2010/07/16/wilderness-origins-part-ii-clear-cutting-or-not/>, (accessed Sept. 26, 2016).

road network, especially the Orange Plank Road where many soldiers would fight during the Wilderness campaign. This might account for Theodore Lyman's observation that the areas along the Plank Road and Brock Road were the very thickest part of the Wilderness.¹³⁶

Contemporary witnesses did not connect the construction of plank roads with the Wilderness's vegetation, though McHenry Howard, a Confederate veteran, made an oblique reference to the possibility. "In many places," observed Howard, "the large trees had been cut down in years past,—whether for the construction of plank roads or for furnaces I do not know,—and a jungle of switch had sprung up ten or twenty feet high, more impenetrable, if possible than the pine."¹³⁷

Taken as a whole, these activities created the Wilderness's characteristic vegetation. Early on, tobacco cultivation deforested the greatest portion of the region, sapped the soil's fertility, and gave the Wilderness its stunted, second-growth character. With time, this second-growth forest should have matured to present a more or less typical Virginia forest. Meanwhile,

¹³⁶ John Hennessy and Noel Harrison argue for an exterior layer of very thick vegetation along the roadways with a more open interior away from them. The construction of the plank roads in the 1850s, caused the builders to cut down nearby trees. This being the case, the trees along the outer rim of the roads, would have been smaller and thicker than those farther away from the roads, as they had been more recently cut. Thus, most of the soldiers described the thick vegetation that they marched by or fought in near the roads, not the more-open centers. See Hennessy, "Wilderness Origins Part II: clear-cutting (or not)," <https://npsfrsp.wordpress.com/2010/07/16/wilderness-origins-part-ii-clear-cutting-or-not/>, (accessed Sept. 26, 2016).

¹³⁷ McHenry Howard, "Notes and Recollections of Opening of the Campaign of 1864," in *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts*, 14 vols. (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1881–1918), 4:97.

the iron industry, gold mining, and plank roads would have each contributed to deforestation on a smaller scale and created newer patches of stunted, second-growth forest. These too should have matured with the passage of time. A proper understanding of the Wilderness's origins in turn helps to understand why the Wilderness's vegetation would have had the patchwork character that it did.

* * * * *

The myths surrounding the character and the origin of the Wilderness have had a long life, spanning from the war itself up to the present day. Nevertheless, these myths obscure the Wilderness's true nature. The Wilderness was not one vast, thick forest, although it might seem that way to those who entered it, but a patchwork of open areas and vegetation of varying density. Given that the Wilderness's nature is more complex than what postwar writers presented, it should come as no surprise that its origins are also more complex than the traditional telling suggests. The Wilderness was a creation of tobacco cultivation, iron mining, and road building. Considering that the activities that created the Wilderness were not unique to the region, it should startle no one to find that other Wilderness-like areas in Virginia existed, even on other battlefields where the armies fought. Taken together this reinterpretation of the Wilderness's nature and origins not only gives us a better picture of what this region was actually like and why it was like that, but it will help unravel other myths about the Wilderness that are as tangled as the forest they describe.

CHAPTER 2: A UNIQUE BATTLE

Postwar writers often claimed that the battle of the Wilderness was an exceptional battle. In his 1866 history of the Army of the Potomac, William Swinton warned his readers that “the battle of the Wilderness is scarcely to be judged as an ordinary battle.”¹ During the 1880s and 1890s, others repeated this interpretation. Regis de Trobriand, a general in the Union II Corps, thought it important to “bear in mind that it was in no respect like any other battle.”² Horace Porter, a member of Grant’s staff agreed that “there were features of the battle which have never been matched in the annals of warfare.”³ An important corollary that accompanied this claim—often implicitly and at times explicitly—was that the special environment in which the battle took place caused these distinct characteristics. Fitzhugh Lee contended that “it was like a huge Indian fight, and different from any other battle,” and that the “contest on this unique ground can be compared to nothing in military records, ancient or modern.”⁴ Andrew A. Humphreys, Meade’s chief of staff, complained about the many tactical problems stemming from “the character of the field on which it took place,” and argued that “some of its features were found in other of the battle-grounds of the two armies; but so far as [he knew], no great battle ever took

¹ William Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, (New York: Charles B. Richardson, 1866), 438.

² Regis de Trobriand, *Four Years with the Army of the Potomac* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1889), 571.

³ Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant* (New York: The Century Co., 1897), 72.

⁴ Fitzhugh Lee, *General Lee* (New York: Appleton & Company, 1894), 333.

place before on such ground.”⁵ The historian of the Federal V Corps in like manner concluded that “the peculiar nature of the ground fought over made this a weird uncanny contest.”⁶ This sense of the Wilderness being an exceptional battle because of the extraordinary place in which it was fought has even continued in more modern works, the most striking example being Bruce Catton’s *A Stillness at Appomattox*.⁷

Two important questions arise. First, what type of battle conditions did the Wilderness create? In order to answer this, it is necessary to look at combat conditions at both the battle of the Wilderness and the battle of Chancellorsville.⁸ On the surface, these battles look like twins, and often historians treat them as such. They were fought about a year apart in May 1863 and 1864. Both battles took place in the Wilderness.⁹ The Confederates in both instances used the Wilderness to screen successful flanking maneuvers. In each battle a triumphant Confederate

⁵ Andrew A. Humphreys, *The Virginia Campaign of '64 and '65* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1885), 55.

⁶ William H. Powell, *The Fifth Army Corps* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1896), 610. For another example of the battle of the Wilderness being portrayed as exceptional, see Augustus C. Buell, “*The Cannoneer*”: *Recollections of Service in the Army of the Potomac* (Washington, D.C.: The National Tribune, 1890), 167-168. Buell quotes a Confederate soldier who compares the battle of the Wilderness to Chickamauga and finds the former to be the worst of the two.

⁷ Bruce Catton, *A Stillness at Appomattox* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1953), 55-92.

⁸ While part of the Mine Run campaign took place in the Wilderness, the campaign’s limited amount of combat (the sharp but small fight at Payne’s Farm Nov. 27, 1863 being the only notable clash) makes it unsuitable for use in this chapter.

⁹ This is excluding the portions of the Chancellorsville campaign that took place at Fredericksburg and Salem church.

flank attack was seemingly robbed of its momentum by the accidental shooting of one of Lee's most important lieutenants—Jackson and Longstreet respectively. In both campaigns forest fires raged, burning alive many of the wounded.

A closer look at how the Wilderness affected the combat conditions in both battles, however, reveals that these battles were not the twins they are often purported to be. While there are certain similarities and some shared tactical problems, on the whole, they were two very different engagements because of the distinct fields of battle. The telling differences between the two battles suggest that combat in the Wilderness did not follow a set formula. They also serve as a warning to historians who might be tempted to lump these two battlefields together—as if they were the same place—and assume that the same tactical problems would result, something often implied with Chancellorsville and the battle of the Wilderness.

Second, were the fighting conditions at the battle of the Wilderness unique or could they be found in other battles in heavily wooded areas? Obviously, combat in the Wilderness was vastly different from fighting in a more open field such as Antietam or Gettysburg.¹⁰ A more apt comparison would be between the battle of the Wilderness and another engagement fought in wooded terrain. After all, thick and tangled Wilderness-like woods could be found on other battlefields. Earl Hess, in his work on Civil War infantry tactics observed that “thick woods . . . often filled half the ground of any given battlefield of the Civil War,” while “in some engagements, such as Chancellorsville and the Wilderness, tangled vegetation dominated the

¹⁰ Francis Walker, the historian of the Federal II Corps, put the battlefields on a scale with the Wilderness and Chancellorsville being the least open, Mine Run and Spotsylvania being more open, and Antietam and Gettysburg being examples of open country. Francis A. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887), 418.

landscape.”¹¹ One such battlefield where vegetation dominated the landscape was Chickamauga. Although located in northern Georgia, Chickamauga’s landscape was in some ways similar to that of the Wilderness, and provides a good point of comparison. Comparing the battle of the Wilderness with Chickamauga demonstrates that many of the battle conditions created by the Wilderness battlefield were not unique, but instead were common to other engagements fought in forests.

* * * * *

While postwar commentators employed many colorful phrases to explain what made the fighting at the battle of the Wilderness so distinct, the challenges the armies faced can be broken down into two key factors.¹² First, there was a lack of open space within the Wilderness, which prevented the armies from using much artillery and made maneuvering a challenge. William Swinton, the historian of the Army of the Potomac, explained that “it is impossible to conceive a field worse adapted to the movements of a grand army” as “artillery was wholly ruled out of use” and “manoeuvring here was necessarily out of the question.”¹³ Andrew A. Humphreys, Meade’s chief of staff, in turn noted that “it was very difficult for even small bodies of men to move in” the Wilderness’s thick vegetation. “To handle large bodies of troops in battle in such a field was

¹¹ Earl J. Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 89.

¹² There are other tactical problems which might have been included in this analysis, such as how the Wilderness made it difficult to employ cavalry, or how it was an especially hard fought battle, but I have chosen to bypass these issues. The first, because it is peripheral, and the second, because it is very difficult to judge how hard fought any one battle is in comparison to another.

¹³ Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, 428-429.

exceedingly difficult,” and except in a few places “artillery would be of little use.”¹⁴ Other writers agreed with these conclusions. Robert Stiles, a Confederate gunner, described the battle of the Wilderness as “almost exclusively, an infantry fight, and we of the artillery saw, in fact, next to nothing of it, but hovered around its edge.”¹⁵

Troop formations were disrupted—or at times disintegrated altogether—making it necessary to stop and reform units. The historian of McGowan’s South Carolina Brigade noted that his unit “was greatly impeded by the matted growth of saplings and bushes,” and claimed that in the Wilderness “it is impossible to keep even a regiment well dressed.”¹⁶ Moxley Sorrel, a member of Longstreet’s staff, explained how after Longstreet’s May 6 flank attack the Confederates “were then so disorganized by the chase through the woods that a halt was necessary to reform.”¹⁷ Hancock’s May 6 attack was plagued by similar problems. “The Union columns had become terribly mixed and disordered in their forward movement,” explained Francis Walker the II Corps’ historian. “Under the excitement and bewilderment of battle, through woods so dense that at the best no body of troops could possibly preserve their alignment” the Union troops “in some cases. . . were heaped up in unnecessary strength” while

¹⁴ Humphreys, *The Virginia Campaign*, 10-11.

¹⁵ Robert Stiles, *Four Years Under Marse Robert* (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1904), 244.

¹⁶ J. F. J. Caldwell, *The History of a Brigade of South Carolinians, First Known as Gregg’s, and Subsequently as McGowan’s Brigade* (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1866), 128, 131.

¹⁷ G. Moxley Sorrel, *Recollections of a Confederate Staff Officer* (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1905), 233.

“elsewhere great gaps appeared” even as “men, and even officers, had lost their regiments in the jungle.”¹⁸

Second, the forest limited visibility and the men in the ranks often could not see friend or foe. The historian of the Federal V Corps described how “the peculiar nature of the ground fought over made this a weird uncanny contest—a battle of invisibles with invisibles.” While admitting that “there had been wood-fights before,” he thought there had been “none in which the contestants were so completely concealed as in this.” In the Wilderness, “nothing could be seen of the enemy or his doings but the white smoke that belched out of the bushes.”¹⁹ Soldiers had to direct their fire by sound or the direction of enemy fire. Horace Porter, a member of Grant’s staff, explained how “it was the sense of sound and of touch rather than the sense of sight which guided the movements. It was a battle fought with the ear, and not with the eyes.”²⁰ The opposing forces often stumbled into each other, resulting in heavy and continuous musketry fire at close range. Veterans of the battle also noted the dangerous close range fire that resulted. Regis de Trobriand, a Union general in the II Corps, commented on how “the adversaries came upon each other twenty or thirty paces apart, . . . and on both sides they fired desperately until they saw no one in front of them.”²¹ Hazard Stevens of the VI Corps explained it this way: “Usually when infantry meets infantry the clash of arms is brief,” as “one side or the other speedily gives way.” In the Wilderness though “neither side would give way, and the steady firing rolled and crackled from end to end of the contending lines, as if it would never cease.”

¹⁸ Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps*, 422.

¹⁹ Powell, *Fifth Army Corps*, 610.

²⁰ Porter, *Campaigning with Grant*, 72.

²¹ Trobriand, *Four Years with the Army of the Potomac*, 571.

These close quarter infantry fights then degenerated into a “heavy pounding match between masses of brave and determined men” where “the lines did not move much” and “both sides hugged the ground, or whenever possible sought the partial shelter of a ridge, and kept up a steady fire.”²²

In addition, the commanders had difficulty directing their troops, knew little about their own position or the enemy’s, and found it difficult to judge the course of battle. Hazard Stevens of the VI Corps observed that the commanders were “unable to see but a hundred yards” and “unable to fix or direct the movement of troops but through this narrow range of vision.” As a result, they “could only form and deploy properly and make the right connections on the flank at the outset, and then start them forward with the certainty that the lines would soon become crooked and disordered.”²³ Andrew A. Humphreys, agreed, observing that “but little of the combatants could be seen,” and the battle’s “progress was known to the senses chiefly by the rising and falling sounds of a vast musketry fire that continually swept along the lines of battle.”²⁴ Evander Law similarly recalled that “officers could not see the whole length of their commands, and could tell whether the troops on their right and left were driving or being driven only by the sound of the firing.”²⁵

²² Hazard Stevens, “The Sixth Corps in the Wilderness,” in *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts*, 14 vols. (Boston: Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1881–1918), 4:192.

²³ Stevens, “The Sixth Corps in the Wilderness,” 4:188.

²⁴ Humphreys, *Virginia Campaign*, 55.

²⁵ E. M. Law, “From the Wilderness to Cold Harbor,” in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York: Century Company, 1884), 4:122.

Besides these tactical challenges, there were several other factors that influenced the nature of combat in the battle of the Wilderness. First, there were high casualties. While the nature of the Overland campaign made it difficult to compile accurate statistics, it is estimated that the Confederate casualties numbered between 7,750 to 11,000 men, while the Union tally reached 17,666.²⁶ Second, the intense combat ripped through the trees and set fire to the forest. Frank Wilkeson, a private in the Federal II Corps, “noticed that small limbs of trees were falling in a feeble shower in advance of me . . . as though an army of squirrels were at work.”²⁷ Another Union soldier asserted that “on every side, [he] could see the effects of the previous day’s severe fighting.” On many saplings “the bark was so much peeled, that they had the appearance of being painted,” while “broken branches and stout little trees had been completely cut off by the bullets.”²⁸ Andrew McBride of the 10th Georgia likewise found that “the woods (a perfect wilderness) is riddled with bullets . . . and is tonight thickly strewn with dead and wound Yankees,” while “the woods took fire . . . and many of the poor fellows burned to death.”²⁹ Isaac O. Best of the 16th New York also witnessed one of the Wilderness fires and thought that “many

²⁶ Gordon C. Rhea, *The Battle of the Wilderness: May 5-6, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 435, 440.

²⁷ Frank Wilkeson, *Recollections of a Private* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1887), 60-61.

²⁸ Wilson W. Fay to Mrs. Griswold, January 20, 1866, in Anna Griswold, *Col. Griswold* (Boston: np, 1867), 23.

²⁹ Andrew J. McBride to ?, May 6, 1864, Andrew J. McBride Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

wounded were burned to death.” The next day “corpses were found with the clothing burned off them, and their flesh horribly charred.”³⁰

Third, many soldiers constructed makeshift field fortifications to protect themselves. A Confederate soldier noticed that the Wilderness battlefield was “filled with fallen trees of moderate size, which formed admirable material for the rapid construction of breastworks.” He thought, “it was surprising to see how rapid the fellows would erect a good protection against minnies with the fallen timbre and dirt thrown up with tin plates, shingles, by hand, etc.’ the earth having been first loosened with the bayonett or knives.”³¹ A II Corps signal officer “found the 6th Corps throwing up temporary breastworks of timber and rails and the plank of the road,” and once the II Corps had joined them “there were three or four miles of these works,” in what he deemed “an incredible short time.”³² Similarly, a Union correspondent observed how soldiers “with instinctive haste . . . commenced throwing up entrenchments, using for the purpose, old logs, planks from the road, in fact anything that would stop a bullet.”³³ One Union soldier even

³⁰ Isaac O. Best, “Through the Wilderness with Grant,” *Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park*, Bound Volume 38. Best claimed that he would “never forget the sensation experienced on the morning of the day after upon finding that the soldier lying next . . . and upon whom I could have laid my hand, at any time during the night was just such a crisped corpse.”

³¹ Charles Trueheart and Henry Trueheart, *Rebel Brothers: The Civil War Letters of the Truehearts*, ed. Edward B. Williams (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 94.

³² “From the Army,” *Brockport Republic* (Brockport, New York), June 16, 1864.

³³ “Grant’s Virginia Campaign,” *Columbia Democrat* (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania), June 18, 1864.

reported the Confederates employing “several of [their] dead . . . in their rifle pits,” with the corpses “thrown in among the logs and only partly covered.”³⁴

* * * * *

Since both the battles of the Wilderness and Chancellorsville were fought in the same forested region, one might be tempted to assume that similar tactical limitations affected the armies in these engagements. A closer look reveals, however, that this was not necessarily the case because of environmental differences between the two battlefields.³⁵ Too often historians

³⁴ Frederic Swift, Diary, May 7, 1864, Coco Collection, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle Barracks, PA. It was not until the conclusion of the fighting on May 7 that the armies constructed a continuous, substantial line of entrenchments. See Earl J. Hess, *Trench Warfare under Grant & Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 42. By the battle’s end, “there lay both armies,” mused Theodore Lyman, “each behind its breastworks, panting and exhausted, and scowling at each other.” Theodore Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters 1863–1865: Letters of Colonel Theodore Lyman from The Wilderness to Appomattox*, ed. George R. Agassiz (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1922), 101-102. For other descriptions of entrenchments at the battle of the Wilderness, see Wilbur Fisk, *Hard Marching Every Day: The Civil War Letters of Private Wilbur Fisk, 1861–1865*, ed. Emil and Ruth Rosenblatt, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1983), 216; “The 5th Regiment—One Month’s Record,” *Newark Daily Advertiser* (Newark, New Jersey), June 17, 1864; “Battle of the Wilderness,” *Daily Constitutionalist* (Augusta, Ga.), May 31, 1864; Cyrenus Stevens, Diary, May 7, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 36.

³⁵ The armies played different roles at Chancellorsville, and, as a result, the officers and soldiers came away from each campaign with very different experiences. During the battle, the Confederates were mostly on the offensive and the Union forces usually were on the defensive. As a result, the Wilderness affected the two armies’ operations in very different ways. For example, the Confederates complained about how the woods disrupted their formations. Instances of lines becoming merged or formations broken apart are common among the officers’ reports.

lump the two fights together as if they took place on the same battlefield, when in reality the two locations were distinct. Not only were they miles apart from one another, but they were different in terms of topography and vegetation. These differences, while seemingly small, made for two very different engagements.

The Chancellorsville battlefield had the thick woods and underbrush so characteristic of the Wilderness, but also had an unusually large open space around the Chancellor house along with notable elevations, such as Hazel Grove and Fairview. These features allowed artillery to dominate the battle on May 3 in a way it could never do at the battle of the Wilderness, although cannon admittedly played a limited role on May 2 during Jackson's flank attack. The infantry also played an important part at Chancellorsville. May 2 saw Jackson's legions hit the unprepared XI Corps, sending them scurrying through the woods, just as Longstreet's and Gordon's attacks would do during the battle of the Wilderness. While there was little sustained combat, like at the battle of the Wilderness, the thick woods and underbrush disrupted Confederate formations during the advance. On May 3, the style of fighting was very different from that at the battle of the Wilderness. Instead of static firefights at close range with a seemingly never-ending stream of musketry, the fighting was dominated by repeated Confederate assaults on entrenched federal positions with each side benefitting from artillery support.³⁶ Again, Confederate formations were disordered and broke apart, but visibility was

The Union officers on the other hand had little to say about the woods disrupting their formations because they were largely stationary. They did, however, complain that the woods screened the Confederate flank attack on May 2.

³⁶ There are certainly instances of Union and Confederates attacking fortified positions at the battle of the Wilderness, such as the Confederate attack on May 6 against the Brock Road entrenchments, but these attacks were not made in repeated waves over open ground with artillery support for both sides.

apparently not an issue and the type of combat that ensued was distinct from the kind associated with the battle of the Wilderness.

In contrast, the Wilderness battlefield's terrain was flatter along the Plank Road corridor, where much of the heaviest fighting took place. The few openings in the Wilderness battlefield, such as Saunder's Field or the Widow Tapp's Farm, were also much smaller than the opening around Chancellorsville, and it should come as no surprise that the use of artillery was limited and that musketry dominated the battle. It is also crucial to understand that the Plank Road corridor was in what was considered by some to be the thickest part of the Wilderness, while the Chancellorsville battlefield was seen as comparatively thinner, with less dense vegetation and more open spaces. This goes a long way towards explaining why veterans of the battle of the Wilderness complained about visibility more frequently than did those writing about Chancellorsville. The Wilderness's complex nature helps explain these differences in the soldiers' experiences.³⁷

The fighting on May 2 was in some ways similar to what took place in the battle of the Wilderness. While soldiers at Chancellorsville did not usually complain about visibility, some Union commanders grumbled about the woods screening Confederate movements.³⁸ Carl Schurz,

³⁷ These environmental factors also point to why soldiers looking back at the battle of the Wilderness would set it apart as a unique battle in way they never did Chancellorsville. They also suggest why soldiers might have little to say about the Wilderness at Chancellorsville, while they might have a great deal to say about it a year later.

³⁸ A minority of soldiers complained of limited visibility at Chancellorsville. Typical of this sentiment was Isaac McQueen Auld's description. Auld, a captain in the 5th Florida explained: "We charged the enemy out of one piece of woods without seeing them or firing a shot; the woods were so thick. Then we advanced into another wood

a general in the star-crossed XI Corps, reported that the Wilderness's woods were "thick enough not to permit any view to the front, flank, or rear, but not thick enough to prevent the approach of the enemy's troops."³⁹ In a similar vein O. O. Howard, the commander of the XI Corps, listed the blindingly thick woods as one of the causes for the calamity that befell his command. "Though constantly threatened and apprised of the moving of the enemy," stated Howard, "the woods was so dense that he was able to mass a large force, whose exact whereabouts neither patrols, reconnaissances, nor scouts ascertained."⁴⁰

The artillery's role on May 2 affords another good example of similarities between Chancellorsville and the battle of the Wilderness, as few Confederate guns was able to come into play during Jackson's flank attack through the woods.⁴¹ Edward Porter Alexander, a Confederate

and after a while we came upon them and went to work in earnest. They were about 100 yards from us but the woods were so thick we could only get glimpses of them, but could see the smoke of their guns and fired at that." Isaac McQueen Auld to his mother, brothers, and sisters, May 8, 1863, Civil War Documents Collection, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA. Interestingly enough, Alexander McNeil, a soldier in the 2nd South Carolina, wrote home on April 30, 1864 that the "vegetation is just beginning to put forth, the trees are budding and in a few weeks everything will be clothed in green." He added that "last year at this season the woods were much greener than now." This suggests that at Chancellorsville the foliage might have been more mature than at the battle of the Wilderness, which does not seem to match the fact that visibility was worse at the latter. Alexander McNeil to his wife, April 30, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 242.

³⁹ U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 127 vols., index, and atlas (Washington: GPO, 1880–1901), ser. 1, 25 (1): 651.

⁴⁰ OR 25 (1): 630.

⁴¹ There were three distinct phases of combat during the portion of the battle of Chancellorsville that took place within the Wilderness: the Confederate flank attack on the afternoon and evening of May 2, the confused engagements that night, and the Confederate assaults on the Union lines near Chancellorsville on the morning of

artillery officer attached to Jackson's flanking column, found that during the initial flank attack there was "no opportunity to use artillery."⁴² Similarly, the commander of a Rebel artillery battalion concluded that the thick forest "afforded no ground for artillery" until the Confederates found an opening nearer Chancellorsville where only a few cannon could be placed.⁴³ The Federals used artillery to defend fixed positions at close range, a role their guns would play again in the battle of the Wilderness. A member of the 44th Georgia described how after the initial success of the Confederate flank attack on May 2 the men kept advancing through field and forest until they come upon an opening in the forest where "a battery open[ed] upon" them, unleashing "a perfect storm of grape, canister, shot, and shell."⁴⁴ The limited use of artillery and the ways in which they used the few guns they could get into the fight on May 2 are strikingly similar to how they were used in the battle of the Wilderness.

The infantry fighting at Chancellorsville on May 2 also shared certain similarities with the combat at the battle of the Wilderness. Jackson's flank attack was just as successful as those made by Longstreet or Gordon on May 6, 1864 but suffered from the same shortcomings. Using the woods to screen their movements, the Confederates surprised their opponents and drove them for some distance. General Robert Rodes, who commanded a Confederate division at Chancellorsville, summarized Jackson's triumph. "So complete was the success of the whole

May 3. This analysis will focus only on the Confederate's May 2 flank attack as well as their May 3 assaults because the night fighting was affected more by the darkness than the dense forest.

⁴² OR 25 (1): 821

⁴³ OR 25 (1): 998-999.

⁴⁴ "Gen. Doles' Brigade in the Chancellorsville Battle." *Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle and Sentinel*, June 6, 1863.

maneuver, and such was the surprise of the enemy, that scarcely any organized resistance was met with after the first volley was fired,” and the enemy “fled in the wildest confusion.”⁴⁵ Like at the battle of the Wilderness though, woods, darkness, and the accidental shooting of their leader limited what the Confederates could achieve with Jackson’s flank attack. The Colonel of the 40th Virginia gave a sense of this when he reported that “the rapid flight of the enemy, the eagerness of our pursuit, the tangled wilderness through which we had marched, and the darkness of the night, created much confusion in our ranks.”⁴⁶

Despite these impediments, the victorious Confederates surged forward during the attack. R. E. Colston, a Confederate division commander, remarked that “notwithstanding the tangled and very difficult character of the woods and the resistance of the enemy, our troops advanced with great rapidity, driving the enemy like chaff before them.” The Confederates’ speed and the thick woods, however, disordered their ranks. “Owing to the very difficult and tangled nature of the ground over which the troops had advanced, and the mingling of the first and second lines of battle,” Colston recognized that “the formation of the troops had become very much confused, and different regiments, brigades, and divisions were mixed up together.”⁴⁷ There were also problems with units being torn apart. In one case, the 5th North Carolina became “separated from the brigade in the tangled wilderness,” a problem aggravated by the inability “to see any portion of the brigade over 50 yards” away.⁴⁸ Just like at the battle of the Wilderness, commanders took the opportunity to reform their lines when given a chance. Robert Rodes, a

⁴⁵ OR 25 (1): 941.

⁴⁶ OR 25 (1): 894.

⁴⁷ OR 25 (1): 1004-1005.

⁴⁸ OR 25 (1): 986, 990.

Confederate division commander, recalled taking advantage of an open space to bring some order to his mixed up troops.⁴⁹

While the Confederate flank attack at Chancellorsville showed many of the same characteristics as the battle of the Wilderness, the bloody combat on May 3 was very different from the blind, close-range, musketry exchanges that were so typical of that battle. Robert E. Lee's report reveals a series of assaults on the Union entrenchments. "Three times were these works carried, and as often were the brave assailants compelled to abandon them," noted Lee. It was not until the Confederate artillery combined with the several converging infantry assaults that the Federals finally broke.⁵⁰ These Rebel attacks were made against positions they could see. D. H. Hamilton, who commanded a brigade at Chancellorsville, noted that as his men "cleared the woods the fire of the enemy was opened upon us," and "with a shout of defiance we rushed forward, cleared the Yankee breastworks at a bound, and, pushing 100 yards or so to the front, engaged the enemy" stationed behind entrenchments.⁵¹ Carnot Posey, a Confederate brigade commander, noted his attack was "made in fine order, under heavy fire of shell and grape as each regiment attained its position," while the Rebels "pushed forward gallantly and irresistibly through a dense wood and over a wide abatis and into the trenches of the enemy, driving him off with much slaughter and capturing many prisoners." This was a far cry from the indecisive but equally deadly musketry affairs at the battle of the Wilderness, but even at Chancellorsville

⁴⁹ OR 25 (1): 942.

⁵⁰ OR 25 (1): 799-800.

⁵¹ OR 25 (1): 902.

Posey found his troops “somewhat scattered on account of the dense woods and vigorous pursuit,” forcing him to repair his line.⁵²

During their May 3 assaults, the Confederate lines not only tended to merge, but they also became disjointed or broke apart. J. M. Hall, who commanded a brigade during the battle, explained how his brigade’s line had split in two with one part moving in one direction and another part moving in a different direction, a fact which, “owing to the dense forest,” was not initially discovered.⁵³ The havoc the Wilderness played on the Rebel lines is readily apparent in the frequent descriptions of the unusual depth of Confederate formations. This depth was accidental, as successive lines became merged in the advance as one line caught up with another, giving the appearance of unusually deep lines or columns. For instance, one Union sharpshooter saw the Confederates “six ranks deep,” while a New Jersey soldier observed the Rebels advancing four deep.⁵⁴ Jedediah Hotchkiss, a Confederate staff officer, similarly witnessed how the Confederate “forces had become massed [in the roads] by the dense growth on either side and the swampy nature of the ground.”⁵⁵ It was difficult for the Confederates to control their forces on the Chancellorsville battlefield. Robert Rodes, who commanded a Confederate division, admitted that “on account of the dense forest, the undulating character of the ground, and the

⁵² OR 25 (1): 871-872. J. J. Archer, another Confederate brigade commander had a similar experience, noting the need to “halt to reform our line, which had become somewhat broken by its rapid advance through the woods.” OR 25 (1): 925.

⁵³ OR 25 (1): 954.

⁵⁴ C. W. Baker, Letter to his sister-in-law in *Union News* (Union, New York), June 4, 1863; “From the Eleventh Regiment,” *Centinel of Freedom* (Newark, New Jersey), May 26, 1863.

⁵⁵ Jedediah Hotchkiss, *Make Me a Map of the Valley: The Civil War Journal of Stonewall Jackson’s Topographer*, ed. Archie P. McDonald (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1973), 138.

want of an adequate staff, it was not in [his] power during the subsequent movements, to give a great deal of personal attention to the actions of any of my command” with the exception of a few brigades with easy access to a road.⁵⁶

Both armies’ artillery in many ways dominated these assaults. Union artillery took a terrible toll on the repeated and determined Confederate assaults. A New Yorker observed that “the Rebels made the most desperate attempts to capture our entrenched batteries, but were driven back repeatedly with great slaughter.”⁵⁷ An artilleryman from Rhode Island agreed, noting that “the enemy brought forward large masses of troops,” and although “the concentrated fire of our artillery and infantry was terrific, yet he hurled brigade after brigade against our line with a prodigality of lives I have never seen equaled.”⁵⁸ A soldier from the 48th Georgia described his unit’s attack on the Federal works when they “came under the fire of heavy batteries of the enemy posted around Chancellorsville, which were pouring a storm of iron missiles in every direction.” The Rebels found the going was tough, as “a murderous fire was opened on us from the rifle pits, and commanded as they were by their batteries which swept every approach to them—and poured through the woods through which our advance was to be made, shot, shell and shrapnel in one continuous storm.”⁵⁹ A soldier from the 4th North Carolina told a similar tale. His unit “advanced in solid column,” through the woods and to the enemy’s entrenchments all the while enduring “the shower of shells, grape, canister, solid shot and minnie balls” which

⁵⁶ OR 25 (1): 943.

⁵⁷ “Correspondence of the Register,” *Mohawk Valley Register* (Fort Plains, New York), May 21, 1863.

⁵⁸ “Letter from Battery E.,” *Providence (RI) Evening Press*, May 16, 1863.

⁵⁹ “A Full and Complete Description of the Battle of the Wilderness, Chancellorsville, Va.,” *Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle and Sentinel*, May 26, 1863.

“was trully appalling” with “men . . . falling on all sides—sometimes whole ranks were swept away, around them.”⁶⁰ This artillery fire ripped through the woods and further hindered the Confederate advance. Noah Collins, a Confederate soldier, recalled that the movement forward was “greatly retarded or hindered by the trees and tree tops that were cut off by the shells, grape and cannister shot,” and recoiled at the “limbs and chunks” that the artillery fire “knocked off the green trees,” which were “constantly falling” on him. This “so intensely alarmed” him that he fled as best he could.⁶¹ There was nothing at the battle of the Wilderness approaching the intensity and scale of this Federal artillery fire at Chancellorsville.

It is also important to note that the Confederates used large numbers of cannon offensively at Chancellorsville, which played a crucial role in the Confederate attacks on May 3. This was a situation unheard of in the battle of the Wilderness.⁶² Stationing their artillery on the Plank Road and at Hazel Grove and later at Fairview, the Rebels pounded the Union positions and made staying put very uncomfortable for the Yankees. Edward Porter Alexander, the Rebel artillery officer in charge of the bombardment, explained that his guns had “a fine field of fire” and observed that “the magnificent fire of our guns . . . and the steady advance of our infantry . .

⁶⁰ Jacob Nathaniel Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent: The Civil War Reports of Jacob Nathaniel Raymer, Fourth North Carolina*, ed. E.B. Munson (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 68.

⁶¹ Diary of Noah Collins of Union County, N. C. in the War between the States, 1861-1865, May 3, 1863, Isaac S. London Collection, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh.

⁶² There are of course instances of a gun or two acting on the offensive during the battle of the Wilderness, but nothing to compare with what the Confederate artillery did at Chancellorsville. For instance, a small amount of Federal artillery was used at Saunder’s field on May 5, but the Union attack failed and the guns had to be abandoned.

. proved too much for the enemy's nerve."⁶³ Robert McAllister, an officer in the Union III Corps, recalled that "the enemy's shells were bursting by hundreds around us," claiming at the time that "this was the hottest artillery fire [he had] ever been under."⁶⁴ Similarly, another Union soldier remembered that "during all this time our Left, and Left Center were under a galling cross Fire from the Rebble Artillery."⁶⁵ Alpheus Williams, a general in the Federal XII Corps, marveled "that anything could live on that slope and hill-brow in front of Fairview," where the Union lines were stationed at the time, for "shot and shell and musketry swept it from end to end and side to side, and the columns of destructive missiles seemed to increase every moment."⁶⁶ It is not surprising then that the unsupported Federals, pounded and hounded as they were by this artillery fire and repeated infantry assaults, felt compelled to withdraw to a new position.

Although the fighting on May 3 was in many ways distinct from later combat at the battle of the Wilderness, some of its features paralleled this later clash. Like the battle of the Wilderness, Chancellorsville was an engagement with a remarkably high butcher's bill. The Federal forces engaged in the fighting around Chancellorsville had casualties totaling 12,294, while the Confederates suffered 10,705.⁶⁷ The battle also saw the forest shot to pieces, just as it

⁶³ OR 25 (1): 823.

⁶⁴ Robert McAllister, *The Civil War Letters of General Robert McAllister*. ed. James I Robertson, Jr. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1965), 307.

⁶⁵ Thomas W. Smith, *We Have It Damn Hard Out Here: The Civil War Letters of Sergeant Thomas W. Smith, 6th Pennsylvania Cavalry*, ed. Eric J. Wittenberg (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1999), 86.

⁶⁶ Alpheus S. Williams, *From the Cannon's Mouth: The Civil War Letters of General Alpheus S. Williams*, ed. Milo M. Quaife (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), 198.

⁶⁷ Stephen W. Sears, *Chancellorsville* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 475-501. These figures exclude the units that only participated at the fighting at Fredericksburg, although for units that fought in the

was during the battle of the Wilderness. “The iron hail,” remembered Robert McAllister, was such that “trees fall before the terrible storm.”⁶⁸ Another Confederate, Jacob Raymer, explained how “the woods through which they had charged was torn up with shot and shell most frightfully.” He reckoned “a hurricane could not have slashed down the timber worse,” with “scarce a shrub or sapling . . . left standing, all . . . shot away.”⁶⁹ The intense artillery and musketry not only ripped through the forest, but also, as at the battle of the Wilderness, set it aflame. Jedediah Hotchkiss, a member of Stonewall Jackson’s staff, recorded that “the woods were on fire in many places and some of the wounded must have been burnt up.”⁷⁰ Aaron DeArmond of the 30th North Carolina likewise saw that “the woods got on fire and it burnt the leaves of the ground and it burnt up a many a man.”⁷¹ While the timber provided fuel for the fires, it also supplied the material for making field fortifications, just as it did at the battle of the Wilderness. Charles T. Bowen of the 12th US recalled that his unit “fell to work & formed a

Wilderness around Chancellorsville on May 1-3 and at Salem Church on May 3-4 it was impossible to distinguish how many casualties were suffered at any particular stage of the fighting and no attempt was made to do so.

⁶⁸ McAllister, *The Civil War Letters of General Robert McAllister*, 302.

⁶⁹ Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent*, 67. For an example of small arms destroying vegetation see John Piney Oden, “The End of Oden’s War: A Confederate Captain’s Diary,” ed. Michael Barton, *The Alabama Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 84.

⁷⁰ Hotchkiss, *Make Me a Map of the Valley*, 140.

⁷¹ Aaron L. DeArmond to his wife, May 7, 1863, Civil War Documents Collection, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

breastwork of logs & earth along our line, & in front we slashed the woods & are now ready for the rebels in any number.”⁷²

Although Chancellorsville shared some traits with the battle of the Wilderness, they are not the twins that they are often taken to be, a fact explained by the differences in the two battlefields. At Chancellorsville, artillery played a commanding role and visibility never seemed to cause the problems that it did at the subsequent battle of the Wilderness, which suggests that the lack of uniformity in the Wilderness’s landscape could create a variety of combat conditions. If the battle of the Wilderness had been fought farther to the east, which included the open areas around Ellwood, then conditions similar to Chancellorsville might have easily prevailed. Similarly, if the Confederate flank attack at Chancellorsville had failed to drive the Union forces towards the more open areas, then it seems likely that it might have degenerated into the inconclusive musketry fighting so typical of the battle of the Wilderness. In short, the Wilderness did not always produce the unique type of combat that postwar writers attributed to it.

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⁷² Charles T. Bowen, *Dear Friends at Home: The Civil War Letters and Diaries of Sergeant Charles T. Bowen*, ed. Edward K. Cassedy (Baltimore: Butternut & Blue, 2001), 257. After the successful Confederate assaults of May 3, the Union army pulled out all the stops and built a “fortified bridgehead” which historian Earl Hess has argued was the strongest line of entrenchments built by either army up to that point. See Earl J. Hess, *Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns, 1861–1864*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 190. For comments on the strength of these works, see “A Full and Complete Description of the Battle of the Wilderness, Chancellorsville, Va.,” *Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle and Sentinel*, May 26, 1863; Oden, “The End of Oden’s War,” 84; and Thomas F. Wood to his father, May 11, 1863, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 293.

While the Wilderness could create a variety of combat conditions, other battlefields could pose tactical challenges like those the armies faced at the battle of the Wilderness. An excellent example of this is the battle of Chickamauga (September 18-20, 1863). Here the Union Army of the Cumberland commanded by William S. Rosecrans and the Confederate Army of Tennessee led by Braxton Bragg, along with units on loan from Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, engaged in an epic battle in the forests and hills of northern Georgia. The Chickamauga battlefield, rather like the Wilderness, was a patchwork of thick forest with underbrush, open woods, and cleared fields. The historian of the 38th Indiana noted that "for a mile east of the La Fayette and Chattanooga road the woods were almost entirely free from underbrush, but nearer the Chickamauga river the growth was quite dense."⁷³ Likewise, George Thomas, in his after battle report, explained that "the surface of the country is undulating and covered with original forest timber, interspersed with undergrowth, in many places so dense that it is difficult to see 50 paces ahead."⁷⁴ Alpheus Williams, a Union general who had fought at Chancellorsville, looked over the Chickamauga battlefield after his unit was transferred to Georgia. He "was surprised to find the battleground so level and almost wholly covered by dense forests."⁷⁵ In a similar vein, a Confederate veteran described the Chickamauga battlefield as "rather flat country, not rough or even rolling till you approach the spurs of the low mountains, thickly wooded, with here and there a field of Indian corn, then just ripe, and occasionally an opening of gladelike, treeless land

⁷³ Henry Fales, *History of the Thirty-Eighth Regiment Indiana Volunteer Infantry* (Palo Alto, CA: F. A. Stuart, 1906), 90-91.

⁷⁴ OR 30 (1): 249.

⁷⁵ Williams, *From the Cannon's Mouth*, 305.

not under any crop.” For this former Rebel, “the impression is of almost unbroken forest, of a rather flat, thinly peopled, poorly tilled, wooded region.”⁷⁶

Although, its forests were generally more mature than the thick, scrubby trees so characteristic of the Wilderness battlefield, many of the same tactical limitations prevailed at Chickamauga. Limited visibility presented many obstacles to the commanders, officers, and soldiers—obstacles that would have seemed only too familiar to veterans of the battle of the Wilderness. Smoke and thick woods combined to hide the enemy and screen his movements, although visibility was better in the open areas. Like at the battle of the Wilderness, commanders could not see their own soldiers, had a difficult time controlling their men, and relied on sound rather than sight to guide their actions and comprehend the course of the battle. As a result, Chickamauga was a disorienting battle, not unlike the battle of the Wilderness. Chickamauga’s thick woods also hampered soldiers’ movements and formations. The role of artillery in the battle was also limited by the forest, and, in a similar manner to the battle of the Wilderness, the artillery at Chickamauga often acted on the defensive in the open areas where it found itself at a disadvantage. Sudden encounters were common at Chickamauga, just as they were at the battle of the Wilderness, and, in some ways, the fighting at Chickamauga was reminiscent of that contest. Like at the Wilderness and Chancellorsville, makeshift entrenchments were present during the battle, as some of the Federals constructed primitive breastworks to protect themselves. Fires were also present at Chickamauga, as they had been in these battles, and the death toll was equally staggering. In short, many of the supposedly unique characteristics of the

⁷⁶ Archer Anderson, *The Campaign and Battle of Chickamauga, An Address delivered before the Virginia Division of the Army of Northern Virginia Association, as their Annual Meeting, in the Capitol at Richmond, Va., October 25, 1881* (Richmond: William Ellis Jones Steam Book and Job Printer, 1881), 22.

battle of the Wilderness, which were supposedly caused by the unique Wilderness landscape, could be found at Chickamauga in ordinary woods.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Historians of Chickamauga have recognized the less-than-ideal battle conditions that prevailed at the battle, but have never claimed that these were unique like historians of the Wilderness have done. Their comments focus on the confusing nature of the battle, lack of visibility, and inability to control the armies. John Turchin, a Union veteran who turned his hand to history, described Chickamauga as “a made, irregular battle, very much resembling guerilla warfare on a vast scale, in which one army was bushwhacking the other, and wherein all the science and the art of war went for nothing.” John B. Turchin, *Chickamauga* (Chicago: Fergus Printing Company 1888), 95. Glenn Tucker, in his account of the battle, took note of the wooded battlefield with its few clearings and argued that Chickamauga was “a soldier’s battle,” and this “because it was more a series of desperate struggles between groups in the thickets than grand sweeps over which generals or corps or divisions had control.” He conceded though, that this type of battle was not unique to Chickamauga, but could be found “in few other instances in the war” as “bands of men fought other bands until one group or both were killed or exhausted, with higher ranking generals having no view of the field and little control over the fighting. Glenn Tucker, *Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West* (Dayton, OH: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1961), 8, 123-124. Steven Woodworth seemed to agree with Tucker’s conclusions, observing that Chickamauga was “a strange battle in several ways, first of which was the terrain on which it was fought” being “almost completely wooded” and concluded that “in these woods no officer above brigadier could see all his command at once, and even the brigadiers often could see nobody’s troops but their own and perhaps the enemy’s.” In short, for Woodworth, “Chickamauga would be a classic ‘soldier’s battle,’” as it had been for Tucker. See Steven E. Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee: The Chickamauga and Chattanooga Campaigns* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 86-87. Earl Hess draws similar conclusions about how the Chickamauga battlefield affected the engagement. See Earl J. Hess, *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2012), 190-191. For another description of the Chickamauga battlefield, see Peter Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 90-91.

Like at the battle of the Wilderness, Chickamauga's forests and underbrush combined with smoke from forest fires, musketry, and artillery fire to produce very reduced visibility. Many witnesses testified to this effect. "The nature of the country," explained Archer Anderson, a Confederate veteran, was "a tangled forest, through which you could not see the enemy a hundred yards off, and with no elevated points from which even his distant movements could be observed."⁷⁸ The thick battle smoke aggravated this tactical challenge. N. J. Hampton, a Confederate who fought at Chickamauga, recalled that "there was such a volume of smoke that we could not distinguish the enemy from our own men ten steps away," a fact that his regiment proved when his regiment fired into fellow Confederates, "killing and wounding thirty or forty."⁷⁹ Likewise, Confederate general John C. Brown reported running into "the enemy in an unbroken forest, rendered the more difficult of passage by the dense undergrowth which for more than 200 yards extended along my entire line; and the difficulties were still further enhanced by the smoke of battle and the burning of the woods, rendering it impossible to distinguish objects 20 paces in advance."⁸⁰ J. B. Polley, the historian of Hood's Texas brigade, recalled that at one point it took the Confederates "almost a minute" to find the enemy's line, and then "discovered they were lying down, and shooting from behind trees, fallen logs and other cover, and we commenced firing as we advanced rapidly toward them."⁸¹

⁷⁸ Anderson, *The Campaign and Battle of Chickamauga*, 27.

⁷⁹ N. J. Hampton, *An Eyewitness to the Dark Days of 1861-65* (Nashville: np., 1898), 31.

⁸⁰ OR 30 (2): 370.

⁸¹ J. B. Polley, *Hood's Texas Brigade: Its Marches, Its Battles, Its Achievements* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1910), 209.

Union observers voiced similar complaints. The veterans of the 38th Indiana observed that “the thick underbrush obscured the movements of the rebels until they were close upon us.”⁸² Richard Johnson, a Union veteran, noted that “if the divisions on my right failed to hold their places, I could not know it until the enemy was upon me.”⁸³ “Beneath the cover of the thick woods and dense underbrush,” explained one Union veteran, “the Rebel lines advanced often within a few feet of the Federal troops ere they could be seen. Woe to the troops who occupied the few open spaces! Upon them was concentrated a crossfire from the woods on either side, from batteries whose positions enabled them to see the location only of the forces in these intervals, as well as the direct fire of the regiments there mutually opposed.”⁸⁴ “Owing to the thick woods, neither could descry the lines or position of the other.”⁸⁵ James Negley, who commanded a division in Thomas’s XIV Corps, recalled that at one point “the smoke was so dense and the firing so heavy that I failed to see the enemy on the crest until I confronted his line within 100 feet of him.”⁸⁶ Charles G. Harker, the colonel of the 65th Ohio, reported that “the ground on [his] immediate front was slightly rising, and covered with a dense thicket and undergrowth. The enemy, therefore, had every advantage over us, as he could perceive our own

⁸² Fales, *History of the Thirty-Eighth Regiment Indiana*, 88.

⁸³ Richard W. Johnson, *A Soldier’s Reminiscences in Peace and War* (Philadelphia: J.R. Lippincott, 1886), 231.

⁸⁴ Arba N. Waterman, “The Battle of Chickamauga,” in *Military Essays and Recollections: Papers Read Before the Commandery of the State of Illinois, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States*. 3 vols. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1891), 1:236.

⁸⁵ Waterman, “The Battle of Chickamauga,” 238.

⁸⁶ OR 30 (1): 335.

movements, though his were concealed from us.”⁸⁷ Like at the battle of the Wilderness, there were open areas at Chickamauga where visibility was much better, and “on the borders of these glades the contending forces were in plain view of each other except when obscured by the thick smoke of battle.”⁸⁸

In addition to the limited combat visibility for soldiers, the commanding generals and the many officers in the armies struggled to see what was happening and direct their armies, a situation reminiscent of the battle of the Wilderness. The historian of Hood’s Texas Brigade explained that “it was difficult for an officer on horseback to get an extended view in any direction, and to footmen it was simply impossible,” a point made clear by the fact that as “short as was the line occupied by the Texas Brigade, neither flank of it could be seen from the other.”⁸⁹ Archer Anderson, a Confederate veteran of Chickamauga, argued that there were “extraordinary difficulties surrounding the commander on that obscure and tangled field,” for “he could see nothing with his own eyes” and “very little through the eyes of others.”⁹⁰ Richard W. Johnson, a Union veteran of Chickamauga, found that “the field of battle was a vast forest, whose dense foliage prevented us from seeing fifty yards distant,” and believed that on such a field, “no one commander could see the flanks of his regiment even, and so division commanders could only learn how the battle progressed through their orderlies, staff officers, and occasional wounded men brought from the various parts of the line.”⁹¹ James Longstreet, who commanded half the

⁸⁷ OR 30 (1): 691.

⁸⁸ Fales, *History of the Thirty-Eighth Regiment Indiana*, 90.

⁸⁹ Polley, *Hood’s Texas Brigade*, 205.

⁹⁰ Anderson, *The Campaign and Battle of Chickamauga*, 27-28.

⁹¹ Johnson, *A Soldier’s Reminiscences in Peace and War*, 230.

Confederate army on September 20, remarked that “on the most open parts of the Confederate side of the field one’s vision could not reach farther than the length of a brigade.”⁹² Charles G. Harker, the colonel of the 65th Ohio, complained that “from the denseness of the wood I could not have a direct supervision over my entire line.”⁹³ Like Hancock at the battle of the Wilderness on May 6, the Confederates at Chickamauga on September 20, had difficulty recognizing the scope of their victory. The fact that the Union forces “were not overwhelmed or at once vigorously pursued by the victorious enemy,” observed Arba Waterman, a Union veteran, “was due to the fact that in the broken and heavily timbered country the Rebels did not fully understand what they had accomplished, and hence proceeded with more hesitation and caution than the real facts demanded.”⁹⁴

Like the battle of the Wilderness, Chickamauga was a battle whose course was tracked by sound rather than by sight. The historian of the 36th Illinois commented on this feature of the engagement. “The army lines extended over nearly three miles of ground, and only by the smoke that rose above the heights, the dust that ascended above the forest trees in the valley, or as the cannon’s roar and the rattling discharges of musketry were heard upon surrounding hills, could

⁹² James Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1896), 449.

⁹³ OR 30 (1): 692.

⁹⁴ Waterman, “The Battle of Chickamauga,” 241. Waterman also found that “The entire country, with the exception of a few small fields, was broken and covered with heavy timber. Movements of larger forces could therefore be made without observation; indeed, it was many times impossible for a brigade commander to see the formation of brigades adjacent to him.” See Waterman, “The Battle of Chickamauga,” 234.

the observer note the ebb and flow of the tide of battle.”⁹⁵ In a similar vein, Charles A. Dana, an observer for the war department, wrote to Washington that “the battle is fought altogether in a thick forest, and is invisible to outsiders.”⁹⁶ Commanders resorted to using sound to judge where to station their troops. Richard Johnson, a Union veteran, noted how at one point “the firing was very heavy to our right and rear,” and that was used to determine where to send the unit’s reserve brigades.⁹⁷ Charles G. Harker, the colonel of the 65th Ohio, also had to use sound to direct his troops. He explained that “there was very great confusion among the troops which had been engaged, and no one seemed to have any definite idea of our own lines or the position of the enemy. I was compelled therefore, to resort to my own judgment alone and be guided by the general direction of the firing.”⁹⁸

Given the limited visibility and the difficulties the commanders faced in understanding what was taking place, and where friend and foe were located, it is no surprise that Chickamauga was a confusing and disorienting fight. “There was very little system about the fighting,” recalled the chronicler of the 38th Indiana. “There was no general alignment of the forces on either side, and detachments of brigades and divisions seemed to strike each other by accident.”⁹⁹ The historian of the 36th Illinois explained that “besides the beginning of the conflict, being on the part of both Generals rather accidental than intentional, the lines had a great deal of an

⁹⁵ Lyman G. Bennett and William M. Haigh, *History of the Thirty-sixth Regiment Illinois Volunteers* (Aurora, IL: Knickerbocker & Hodder, 1876), 459.

⁹⁶ OR 30 (1): 191.

⁹⁷ Johnson, *A Soldier’s Reminiscences in Peace and War*, 231.

⁹⁸ OR 30 (1): 691.

⁹⁹ Fales, *History of the Thirty-Eighth Regiment Indiana*, 89.

extempore character, and on our side the different divisions were arranged without any reference to their place in the corps, each being thrown in where it was most needed.”¹⁰⁰ Absalom Baird, a Union general in the XIV Corps, recalled the disorientation that could afflict the troops at Chickamauga. “We had, during the day, been fired into from every point of the compass, and when we fell back, no other portions of our troops being in sight, it was impossible to tell where they could be found or when we would encounter the enemy.”¹⁰¹ Alpheus Williams, a Union general who later looked over the battlefield deemed “it was a poor spot for a great battle” and was “not astonished that the reports show a series of defenses and isolated combats of which the rest of the army seem to have been in ignorance.”¹⁰²

As at Chancellorsville and the battle of the Wilderness, the vegetation at Chickamauga hampered troop formations and limited the ability to maneuver. One Union veteran called the Chickamauga battlefield “the worst possible region in which to maneuver an army, being without landmarks or regular slopes, and so thickly wooded that it was impossible to preserve any alignment.” He concluded that “even companies became broken in the thickets, and taking different directions were lost to each other.”¹⁰³ R. T. Coles, a soldier in the 4th Alabama, recalled similar problems maintaining a formation. Hood’s Texas brigade was on the left of Coles’ brigade, but was forced to change their front when a large Federal force suddenly appeared on the brigade’s left flank. This movement split the Confederate line, creating a potentially dangerous gap. Even brigades could not keep together, as Coles’ own showed during a “rapid

¹⁰⁰ Bennett and Haigh, *History of the Thirty-sixth Regiment Illinois Volunteers*, 459.

¹⁰¹ OR 30 (1): 279.

¹⁰² Williams, *From the Cannon’s Mouth*, 305.

¹⁰³ Albion Winegar Tourgée, *The Story of a Thousand* (Buffalo: S. McGerald & Son, 1896), 218-219.

rush through the timber” when the other regiments lost their connection with the 44th Alabama.¹⁰⁴

Like at the battle of the Wilderness, the armies at Chickamauga could only employ artillery as open spaces in the forest permitted. The rugged forests and small fields of northern Georgia, according to several observers were hardly the ideal setting for these big guns. James Longstreet stated that “the field, so far as it could be surveyed . . . was not a field, proper, but a heavy woodland, not adapted to the practice of artillery.”¹⁰⁵ His Federal opponents arrived at this same conclusion. Charles G. Harker, the colonel of the 65th Ohio, claimed to have “at once perceived that we would be compelled to fight in a perfect jungle, and that artillery could not be used to advantage; but, on the contrary, would be subject to capture should our troops meet with a sudden reverse.”¹⁰⁶ Experience in battle confirmed his initial impression. “In many instances batteries . . . were placed in positions where artillery could not be effectively used, and, from the nature of the country, could not easily be extricated.” Harker concluded that “it was in this way that most of our artillery was lost in the late engagement,” while in some cases the Union artillery struck its own men “from a want of judgment and knowledge of our lines.”¹⁰⁷ James Negley, commanding a division in Thomas’ XIV Corps, reported that “the character of the

¹⁰⁴ R. T. Coles, *From Huntsville to Appomattox: R. T. Coles’s History of 4th Regiment, Alabama Volunteer Infantry, C.S.A., Army of Northern Virginia*, ed. Jeffrey D. Stocker (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 135.

¹⁰⁵ Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox*, 440.

¹⁰⁶ OR 30 (1): 693.

¹⁰⁷ OR 30 (1): 696.

ground” where his men were operating on September 20 “prevented the effective use of all the batteries.”¹⁰⁸

Officers often complained about the inability of the artillery to penetrate Chickamauga’s thickets. Absalom Baird, a Union general in the XIV Corps, recalled that “we were then in a thick wood interspersed with thickets and openings” and “the artillery could not advance in line with the infantry, nor, indeed, could it have been used except at rare intervals. It could not, at the same time, be left behind for want of protection, and it was directed to follow closely the brigades, making its way through the trees.”¹⁰⁹ Marco B. Gary, a Lieutenant in the First Ohio Light Artillery, found “the ground on which” his battery “maneuvered on the 19th . . . so densely covered with timber and underbrush as to render rapid movements of artillery exceedingly difficult and uncertain.”¹¹⁰ The colonel of the 8th Kentucky likewise recounted that, “the artillery moved along the road until within the vicinity of the enemy, when it became necessary to move the brigade to the right of the road over rough ground and into thick timber.” When “a suitable position for the battery” could not be located, the guns were “not moved into the timber, but halted in rear, near the road,” instead.¹¹¹

The style of fighting at Chickamauga resembled combat at the battle of the Wilderness. Musketry tended to dominate the fighting at Chickamauga. Glover Perin, the Medical Director, for the Army of the Cumberland, gave evidence to this effect. While “the wounds received were

¹⁰⁸ OR 30 (1): 330.

¹⁰⁹ OR 30 (1): 275.

¹¹⁰ OR 30 (1): 426.

¹¹¹ OR 30 (1): 839. For other examples of artillery being unable to penetrate the woods to aid the infantry fighting see OR 30 (1): 419 and Anderson, *The Campaign and Battle of Chickamauga*, 22.

inflicted by a variety of missiles,” he believed that “those from the rifled-musket were perhaps more numerous in proportion than usual for so great a battle.” Given that “the ground on which the battle was fought” was “undulating and thickly timbered,” and “therefore unfavorable for the use of artillery,” it is hardly surprising that musketry accounted for more than its fair share of casualties.¹¹² To the men of the 101st Ohio, “the roar of musketry seemed to be almost constant, sometimes rolling off further to the left, then surging back toward us until it seemed to be on our very elbows, while frequently the crash of cannon by single piece, section, or entire battery, hammered and pounded and shook the very earth.”¹¹³ John Palmer, commanding a division in the Union XXI Corps also concluded that “few positions could be found for the effective use of artillery,” and “the work was confined mainly to the musketry.”¹¹⁴

Like their counterparts at the battle of the Wilderness, soldiers at Chickamauga, reported sudden and deadly encounters with the enemy. R. T. Coles of the 4th Alabama remembered “advancing blindly and rapidly through a dense undergrowth,” when his unit “ran unexpectedly right into a column of infantry, which poured a deadly fire into our ranks.”¹¹⁵ He recalled that “for a moment the regiment was stunned and dazed from the suddenness of the fire,” but then the Confederates charge the Federals and drove them from their position. Their movement, however, left them “too much in advance of our right and left flanks” while exposed to the Federal fire

¹¹² OR 30 (1): 227.

¹¹³ L. W. Day, *Story of the One Hundred and First Ohio Infantry: A Memorial Volume* (Cleveland, OH: The W. M. Bayne Printing Co., 1894), 160.

¹¹⁴ OR 30 (1): 713. For another example of limited positions for artillery see OR 30 (2): 370.

¹¹⁵ Coles, *From Huntsville to Appomattox*, 135.

from artillery and muskets.”¹¹⁶ Likewise, the 101st Ohio moved “cautiously, but steadily, through the dense woods” and “soon struck a strong rebel force advancing obliquely across our front toward our left. Instantly the two lines became engaged in a most desperate conflict,” where “but little artillery could be used on account of the density of the woods.”¹¹⁷ There were repeated, furious attacks on entrenched positions reminiscent of Chancellorsville. Richard Johnson, a Union veteran of the battle, remembered that “our men held their fire until the front line was within a hundred yards, and then opened up with a volley which staggered the enemy.” The Confederates reformed their lines and attacked again and again, resulting in a “heavy [loss] on the part of the enemy, while ours was insignificant.”¹¹⁸ Overall, casualties at Chickamauga were very heavy, as they had been at the Wilderness and Chancellorsville, with Confederate losses estimated at between 14,328 and 20,950, while the Union forces reported 16,179 casualties.¹¹⁹

Makeshift breastworks played a prominent role in the fighting at Chickamauga as they had during Chancellorsville and the battle of the Wilderness. Several Union divisions at Chickamauga constructed “rough barricades of logs, rails, stumps and stones along their front,” although there “were no rifle pits, nor any defensive works on any other part of the line.”¹²⁰ The soldiers in the 38th Indiana “found the whole line busy in throwing up temporary works of logs,

¹¹⁶ Coles, *From Huntsville to Appomattox*, 135.

¹¹⁷ Day, *Story of the One Hundred and First Ohio Infantry*, 160.

¹¹⁸ Johnson, *A Soldier's Reminiscences in Peace and War*, 230.

¹¹⁹ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 534.

¹²⁰ Isaac Henry Clay Royse, *History of the 115th Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Terre Haute, IN: np., 1900), 113, 115.

sticks and stones.”¹²¹ Charles G. Harker, the colonel of the 65th Ohio, noted that “temporary breastworks of wood, rock, &c., had been erected by our troops, affording fair protection against infantry.”¹²² William G. G. Shanks, a newspaper correspondent, described the Federal fortifications as “rude works about breast-high . . . using rails and logs for the purpose. The logs and rails ran at right angles to each other, the logs keeping parallel to the proposed line of battle and lying upon the rails until the proper height was reached. The spaces between these logs were filled with rails, which served to add to their security and strength.” Unlike other campaigns, in which earthworks were conspicuous, at Chickamauga, “the spade had not been used.”¹²³ Instead, the troops tended turned to the materials at hand—especially logs and rails—to provide themselves with sufficient cover.

The intense fighting at Chickamauga proved as destructive to trees as had the struggles in Virginia’s Wilderness.¹²⁴ One Union soldier commented on how “the Trees in some places are cut down so much by the artillery that it looks as if a tornado had swept over the field.”¹²⁵ In a similar vein, the historian of the 38th Indiana noted how the “tree-tops, limbs and twigs were

¹²¹ Fales, *History of the Thirty-Eighth Regiment Indiana*, 92.

¹²² OR 30 (1): 694.

¹²³ Daniel H. Hill, “Chickamauga—The Great Battle of the West,” in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York: The Century Co., 1884), 3:654n.

¹²⁴ Spotsylvania also saw the destruction of vegetation due to combat. John Shannon of the 15th Georgia witnessed “the timber . . . torn all to pieces,” and “numbers of saplings as large as [his] thigh . . . shot down by Minnie balls.” Shannon concluded that “it would be impossible for anyone to live in such a place.” John H. Shannon to his wife, May 10, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 378.

¹²⁵ Quoted in Earl J. Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 49.

clipped off over our heads and fell all around us.”¹²⁶ Like in the Wilderness, the trees remained scarred for some time. Alpheus Williams, a Union general who visited the Chickamauga battlefield months after the battle had taken place, still found “torn trees” that marked “the scenes of the heaviest fighting.”¹²⁷

Fires broke out during the battle of Chickamauga, as they had during the contests in the Wilderness. Some of the fires started in open fields. David W. Magee’s 86th Illinois had to cross a field that “had been fired by . . . shells” earlier the same day, and “a more desolate sight never met the eye,” as “the entire country seemed to be one smoking, burning sea of ruin.”¹²⁸ Fires also plagued the 36th Illinois, which was stationed “in an old field where the ground was covered with dry grass and old logs,” which proved ready fuel for the fire ignited by “the bursting shells.”¹²⁹ Other fires broke out in Chickamauga’s woods. N. J. Hampton, a Confederate veteran of the battle, saw how “the woods caught fire, burning our wounded men before we could take them up.” Like at the battle of the Wilderness and Chancellorsville, men would try to save themselves, but to no avail. Hampton recalled seeing “numbers of wounded soldiers who in some way would get a stick or dead limb, and in an attempt to save their lives would rake the ground around them perfectly clean so that the fire could not reach them.” Despite “their hard struggles, many of them were scorched to death with the sticks in their hands.” As did many of the witnesses of such scenes at the battles in the Wilderness, Hampton concluded that “this was one

¹²⁶ Fales, *History of the Thirty-Eighth Regiment Indiana*, 90.

¹²⁷ Williams, *From the Cannon’s Mouth*, 305.

¹²⁸ OR 30 (1): 876.

¹²⁹ Bennett and Haigh, *History of the Thirty-sixth Regiment Illinois Volunteers*, 469.

of the most terrible sights man ever witnessed.”¹³⁰ In a similar vein, William Preston, a Confederate general who commanded a division at Chickamauga, reported that “the musketry from the low breastworks of the enemy . . . had set fire to the dry foliage, and scorched and blackened corpses gave fearful proof of the heroism and suffering of the brave men who had stormed the hill.”¹³¹ Union witnesses also reported fires. Like at the battle of the Wilderness, the Union breastworks at Chickamauga sometimes caught fire. The historian of the 38th Indiana recalled such a scene, and how the men “who had only a few drops of water in their canteens, passed them up until the fire was extinguished.”¹³²

* * * * *

While many postwar writers claimed that the battle of the Wilderness had unique characteristics because of where it was fought, in reality, the battle of the Wilderness shared certain similarities with both Chancellorsville and Chickamauga. All three engagements featured high casualties, forest fires, trees torn by bullets and shells, and the use of makeshift field fortifications. The three battles also furnished numerous examples of how trees and underbrush can hamper movement, disorient troops, and disrupt troop formations. These problems seem to have been common to all battles fought in the woods. Theodore Lyman, one of George Meade’s aides in the Army of the Potomac, observed as much during the Overland campaign. He explained that “there are several chronic troubles” that the armies encountered when fighting in

¹³⁰ Hampton, *An Eyewitness to the Dark Days of 1861-65*, 34.

¹³¹ OR 30 (2): 418.

¹³² Fales, *History of the Thirty-Eighth Regiment Indiana*, 93. For another example of fire at Chickamauga, see “Civil War Diary of William Kerns,” Civil War Documents Collection, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA.

the woods: “The divisions have lost connection; they cannot cover the ground designated, their wing is in the air, their skirmish line has lost its direction, etc.”¹³³

These clashes differed from each other, however, in battlefield visibility. There were two types of visibility challenges that a wooded battlefield produced in the Civil War. First, it screened movements. Second, it can make it difficult if not impossible to see the enemy in the middle of combat. All three wooded battlefields in this study provided excellent screens for troop movements, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the battle of the Wilderness had the worst combat visibility, followed by Chickamauga, and then Chancellorsville. Much of this had to do initially with the thickness of the woods, although the introduction of smoke from the musketry, artillery fire, and burning woods would have certainly aggravated this problem.

The battles in question also were distinct in the use of artillery and infantry. Chancellorsville had the largest open space of the three fights, and naturally, artillery was able to shape that battle in a way that was simply not possible at Chickamauga or the battle of the Wilderness. At Chancellorsville cannon in fairly large numbers was used offensively, while at the other two battles it was largely confined to the defensive in the small open areas available on those battlefields. In contrast, at Chickamauga and especially at the battle of the Wilderness, infantry tended to dominate the fighting.

These findings suggest that the battle of the Wilderness lay at one end of a spectrum of forest fights, having less open spaces, using less artillery and more infantry, while having the lowest combat visibility. On the other end of this spectrum lay Chancellorsville where larger open spaces allowed artillery to dominate in a way that was unusual in a wooded battlefield.

¹³³ Lyman, *Meade's Headquarters*, 173.

Somewhere in between these engagements was Chickamauga. Although fought in a different type of forest hundreds of miles from the Wilderness, it displayed many of the same tactical challenges that supposedly made the battle of the Wilderness an engagement unlike any other. In the end, the battle of the Wilderness was not so much a unique battle as just one manifestation of the tactical problems that Civil War armies faced when operating in a forested region.

CHAPTER 3: THE WILDERNESS AND STRATEGY

Military historians from the Civil War to the present have drawn conclusions about how the Wilderness affected, or should have affected, Union and Confederate strategy.¹ For Chancellorsville, three interpretations have appeared. The first was propagated after the war by Union writers, such as William Swinton, Theodore A. Dodge, and Darius Coach, who were critics of Joseph Hooker. Basing their argument on testimony given before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, these men argued that Hooker should have extricated his army from the Wilderness on May 1 and blamed the Army of the Potomac's defeat, in large part, on his decision to turn back and station his army around Chancellorsville instead of boldly pushing out of the Wilderness to attack Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Samuel P. Bates

¹ Lisa Brady's work approaches the issue of how Union military strategy and the southern landscape interacted from an environmental historian's perspective. She is interested in how "notions of improvement, control, and wilderness evolved during the war" and she assumes that "nineteenth-century ideas about nature influenced strategic planning," particularly that "human being had the power to manipulate nature to suit their own ends." In some cases, the Union forces were trying to impose their will on nature, while in other cases they were trying to undercut Confederate control of the southern landscape through attacking agriculture. This chapter, however, is interested in how a given landscape—the Wilderness—affected Union and Confederate military decisions. The focus is not on how ideas about nature affected strategy, but in how generals planned around the physical realities of campaigning in the Wilderness. In this sense, this chapter follows in the footsteps of the older military history rather than the newer environmental approach. See Lisa M. Brady, *War Upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes During the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 5, 8-9.

championed an alternative interpretation based on Hooker's testimony before the Joint Committee, which justified the general's actions arguing that he could not safely extricate his army because of the Wilderness's narrow roads, and under the circumstances his best option was to move the army back to Chancellorsville as he did. William Allan and Jedediah Hotchkiss, two veterans of the Army of Northern Virginia, offered a third alternative based on contemporary Confederate reports. They argued that the Wilderness was actually an advantageous position for the Union army and recounted how it hampered Confederate efforts. Ultimately, the Swinton-Dodge-Couch interpretation won out over its rivals and became a standard part of the Chancellorsville narrative. As a result, the Wilderness went down in history as a stumbling block to the Union army that Hooker could have avoided had he persevered and pressed forward.

While postwar writers ignored the interaction between the Wilderness and strategy during the Mine Run campaign, they did have a great deal to say about this subject for the Overland campaign. Here, many Union and Confederate writers argued that Lee had intentionally sought to bring on a fight in the Wilderness to trap the Union army once more in an environment where the Confederates held the advantage. Likewise, some Union officers hostile to Grant, such as Andrew A. Humphreys and Francis Walker, later contended that the Army of the Potomac had tried to escape fighting in the Wilderness and lamented its halt on May 4. In contrast, Adam Badeau, a former member of Grant's staff, dissented from the traditional interpretation, denying that Grant had tried to avoid a fight in the Wilderness, but rather that he had sought to attack wherever an opportunity presented itself. Gordon Rhea later gave a new twist to the traditional interpretation, arguing that Lee did not intentionally trap the Union army in the Wilderness, but that Union mistakes allowed him to do so.

A close analysis of the commanders' reports, however, suggests that the interpretations these postwar writers propagated were incorrect. These mistaken conclusions form but one piece of the larger Wilderness myth, and like the other parts of the myth, they were a child of hindsight that has survived into the present because of historians' reliance on postwar histories and memoirs as source material. Hooker's critics used the Wilderness to blame him for the defeat at Chancellorsville, while his supporters used it to defend his controversial actions. As for the battle of the Wilderness, Union partisans used it to explain the Army of the Potomac's shortcomings during the battle in order to protect it from criticism. Confederate historians, like in their accounts of Chancellorsville, used the Wilderness environment to highlight their own deeds and especially to glorify Lee's generalship, which was standard fare in Lost Cause writings.²

In all of these campaigns, the Union army acted on the strategic offensive and the Confederates reacted to their movements. This being the case, this chapter will focus on the initial Union plans and actions, as well as how the Confederates responded to the preliminary Union advances. It will especially emphasize how the Wilderness figured in their choices. A close study of the campaigns shows that there is little evidence that the Federals were trying to avoid this region or move through it quickly for the sake of avoiding a fight amidst the forests.

² For a better understanding of the Lost Cause mythology and how it affected the interpretation of the Overland campaign see Mark Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On: The Virginia Campaign, May–June 1864*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 235-236; Thomas L. Connelly, *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 90-91; Joan Waugh, *U. S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 185-186, 189; Brooks D. Simpson, "Continuous Hammering and Mere Attrition: Lost Cause Critics and the Military Reputation of Ulysses S. Grant," in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, eds. Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

The Union high command either did not take the Wilderness into account when crafting their strategies or allowed other factors to take precedence. The question then is, what drove strategic decision making in these three campaigns if not the Wilderness itself? During the Chancellorsville, Mine Run, and Overland campaigns, the Federal commanders consistently sought to avoid Confederate entrenchments and steer clear of a fight while crossing the Rappahannock or Rapidan rivers. Keeping the army supplied was also a major factor in the Mine Run and Overland campaigns. These concerns led Federal commanders to enter the Wilderness three times of their own free will.

For the Confederates, there is little to suggest that they would have wanted to bring on a battle in the Wilderness. Lee's reports on Chancellorsville and Mine Run recount in detail the problems that the Wilderness caused Rebel forces. Moreover, Lee's actions in the two campaigns offer scant evidence that he was wedded to the idea of fighting in the Wilderness's thickets. At Chancellorsville, Hooker chose the Wilderness for the battlefield, while at Mine Run when Lee had the chance to fight the Federals in the thick woods he chose to withdraw to his entrenchments at Mine Run. Lee's wartime and postwar commentary about the Overland campaign suggest he wanted to bring on a battle with Grant as soon as possible. This, however, does not necessarily indicate that Lee intended to trap the Union army in the Wilderness. It does show that he wanted to stop the Union advance as soon as possible and if the Wilderness was where the two armies were to clash, then so be it.

* * * * *

While many postwar sources castigated Hooker for his retreat into the Wilderness on May 1, 1863, contemporary accounts suggest that Hooker did not take the Wilderness into account when forming his initial plans. When Hooker sat down to decide what strategy he would

pursue in the spring of 1863, certain options were already closed to him. The failure of McClellan's Peninsula campaign eliminated that line of advance, and Burnside's disastrous attacks on Lee's army along the Fredericksburg heights certainly did not recommend that route as a viable option.³ This left Hooker with an overland route that presented two significant obstacles. First, his army would have to engage the Confederates at a point where they were not entrenched. Second, Hooker would have to cross over a river or rivers and avoid a fight while his army was in transit. Compared to these major obstacles, the Wilderness was a trifling concern and perhaps hardly crossed Hooker's mind.

The first obstacle that Hooker had to take into account when selecting a place to cross the Rappahannock and Rapidan was a line of Confederate entrenchments. Gouverneur K. Warren, then serving as the Chief of Topographical Engineers in the Army of the Potomac, explained the difficulties the Union forces faced in trying to find their way around some twenty miles of Confederate entrenchments. "The enemy," noted Warren, "occupied in strong force the heights south of the Rappahannock river from Skinker's Neck to Banks' Ford, having continuous lines of infantry parapets throughout . . . his troops being so disposed as to be readily concentrated on any threatened point." In addition to these impediments, the Confederates had placed artillery

³ Warren in his report on Chancellorsville discusses the strategic considerations that the Army of the Potomac's high command made. There is no report of them even considering a peninsula route. Warren did feel it necessary to explain that because of their superior artillery the Union army could cross the Rappahannock in front of the Confederate line near Fredericksburg, but admitted that "the prospect of [the army] gaining a footing on the heights . . . seemed hopeless," a conclusion he based on Ambrose Burnside's failed attempt in December of 1862. See U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 127 vols., index, and atlas (Washington: GPO, 1880–1901), ser. 1, 25 (1): 195, (hereafter cited as OR).

“for sweeping the hill slopes and bottom lands on which our troops would have to march to the assault,” and erected abatis, which, along with “impassable swamps in places, still further strengthened his lines and reduced the number of assailable points.”⁴ Suffice it to say that crossing the river in front of such a formidable array promised the kind of blood bath which any sensible army commander sought to avoid.

Instead, Hooker looked to outflank the Confederate position while avoiding a battle in mid crossing. In his testimony before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, given in March of 1865, he described his plan for forcing Lee out of his strong position along the Rappahannock. He had intended to send a flanking column across the Rappahannock at Kelly’s ford and then proceed south to cross the Rapidan at Germanna and Ely’s fords. These fords were not well-protected and were remote from the main body of Lee’s army, which should ensure that the Federals could cross there more or less unmolested. This maneuver would “knock away the enemy’s forces holding the United States and Banks’s fords,” which lay on the left flank of the Confederate line, “by attacking them in rear.” Once this was done, Hooker had planned to “reinforce the marching column sufficiently for them to continue the march upon the flank of the rebel army until his whole force was routed, and, if successful, his retreat intercepted.” While this flanking movement was underway, another part of the Union army would “cross the Rappahannock below Fredericksburg and threaten the enemy in that quarter, including his depot of supplies, to prevent his dispatching an overwhelming force to his left.”⁵ This demonstration would further ensure that the flanking column could cross safely. While crossing in the

⁴ OR 25 (1): 194.

⁵ *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, at the Second Session Thirty-Eighth Congress.* 3 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1865), 1:116.

immediate vicinity of Lee's army, this decoy force would be protected by the Federal artillery on the heights across the Rappahannock. Clearly, Hooker's initial strategy paid little attention to the nature the Wilderness. Instead the Union commander focused on avoiding the Confederate entrenchments and a battle at the river crossings.

The first part of Hooker's plan worked like a charm. The V, XI, and XII Corps crossed the Rappahannock and Rapidan rivers and regrouped in the vicinity of Chancellorsville. Meanwhile the other part of the Union army demonstrated in front of Fredericksburg. May 1, 1863, seemed a day of great promise. The Union forces around Chancellorsville advanced in the direction of Fredericksburg, but Lee's army, in turn, had marched out to intercept them. Hooker still had the opportunity to push his army into the open country east of the Wilderness, but when he was confronted by this Confederate force, Hooker chose to halt his advance and then march his men back to their former position in the woods around Chancellorsville.

Hooker later testified that "the passage-way through the forest was narrow," and he was "satisfied that [he] could not throw troops through it fast enough to resist the advance of General Lee," as he "was apprehensive of being whipped in detail."⁶ Hooker, then, explained his decision to remain in the Wilderness by blaming the forest for his inability to deploy his troops effectively along the narrow roadways. After the war, Hooker wrote to Samuel P. Bates, who was working on a history of the Chancellorsville campaign, and again explained his chosen course. "I soon discovered that I was hazarding too much to continue the movement," contended Hooker, as "it was impossible to maneuver, on which I had largely depended on for success." These circumstances led him to withdraw, and Hooker concluded that "if situated in like manner again,

⁶ *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 1:120, 124-125.

I do not hesitate to declare . . . I should repeat the order.”⁷ Bates in turn took up Hooker’s line of argument when writing his history, emphasizing the importance of the Wilderness in Union strategy. When explaining Hooker’s crucial decision on May 1 to return to the old lines around Chancellorsville, Bates parroted Hooker’s explanation, pointing to the disadvantage the Union forces operated under “hemmed in on three narrow roads leading through an almost impenetrable forest, where it was impossible for him to manoeuvre them,” while the Confederates were flanking the right end of his line.⁸

While Hooker’s testimony seems to confirm the idea that he did take the Wilderness into account once operations began, it is crucial to consider the context in which the general was making these claims. Previous to Hooker’s testimony, others had decried the May 1 withdrawal in their testimony before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War and asserted that this move had interrupted a promising Union advance. Among these was Winfield Scott Hancock, a general in the II Corps. Hancock certainly acknowledged “that the position of Chancellorsville was not a good one,” but “was a flat country” and lacked any “local military advantages.”⁹ He contended, however, that “if we had not stopped at Chancellorsville, but had marched right down to Banks’s ford, the whole movement would have been a perfect success.” For Hancock, “the mistake was, that when we had started an offensive fight, we stopped and fought a defensive one

⁷ Joseph Hooker to Samuel Bates, April 2, 1877, Samuel Penniman Bates Papers, 1853-1895, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, PA. Hooker also said in this letter that he “had no adequate conception” of the Wilderness.

⁸ Samuel P. Bates, *The Battle of Chancellorsville* (Meadville, PA: Edward T. Bates, 1882), 67-68.

⁹ *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 1:66.

before the concentration was complete.”¹⁰ Andrew A. Humphreys, at the time a division commander in the Army of the Potomac, criticized the May 1 halt for similar reasons. “We had advanced along the road to Fredericksburg to attack the enemy,” and “the troops were in fine spirits, and we wanted to fight a battle.” Humphreys thought “it was a mistake to fight a defensive battle after we had surprised the enemy,” and contended that the army ought to “have attacked the enemy immediately.”¹¹

Gouverneur Warren, who served as the Chief of Topographical Engineers during the Chancellorsville campaign, offered an alternative explanation, contending that the need to get out of the Wilderness was the main reason that Hooker should have kept advancing. Given his training and position, it is no surprise that in testimony before the Joint Committee on March 9, 1864, he dwelt at length upon the disadvantages that the Union army faced because of the Wilderness’s vegetation and topography. “All around [the Chancellor house] in every direction,” noted Warren, “were very dense woods, not very large trees, but very difficult to get through, mainly of scrubby oak . . . so that a man could hardly ride through it, and a man could not march through it very well with a musket in hand, unless he trailed it.” In addition to the challenges posed by the vegetation, “a further disadvantage about it was that the highest ground was in the possession of the enemy, especially towards . . . the left of the line.” Warren believed that Hooker had not looked over the ground, but had only ordered the army there because it had occupied this position the previous day. Under the circumstances, Warren thought it “was about

¹⁰ *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 1:69.

¹¹ *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 1:63.

the best that could be designated.”¹² Later in his testimony Warren concluded that had he been in Hooker’s place “I never should have stopped at Chancellorsville; I should have kept advancing, and fought the enemy, instead of waiting for him to attack me.” Warren argued that “the character of the country was the great reason for advancing, because as we advanced we kept getting out into more open country.”¹³ This reasoning had been strikingly absent from his official report on the campaign, written in May of 1863, which had only noted the Union position was a poor one because the Confederates held the higher ground along parts of the line.¹⁴

When Federal observers writing immediately after the Chancellorsville campaign lamented Hooker’s halt on May 1, 1863, it was not necessarily because it meant returning to the Wilderness *per se*. In part they expressed bafflement over the fact that they held the initiative and were just about to get Lee where they wanted him when Hooker inexplicably called off the advance. Some officers and soldiers found this very demoralizing, but the Wilderness had little to do with it. George Meade, one of Hooker’s corps commanders, for example, reported that his troops “had a very handsome little affair, in which [they] behaved very well and gained decided advantages, driving the enemy before them; but [they were] *recalled* just as [their] advance was successful.”¹⁵ Alpheus Williams, a Union general in the XII Corps, described how “the men

¹² *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 1:44. He did admit, however, that “it was probably not the best that might have been taken if [Hooker] had had more time to select it.”

¹³ *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 1:50.

¹⁴ See OR 25 (1): 193-204. While Warren would have been more free to criticize Hooker before the committee, he did not shy away from criticizing the line adopted by Hooker on May 1 in his report, he just criticized it for different reasons.

¹⁵ George Gordon Meade, *Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade*, ed. George Meade, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 1:372.

were eager and cheerful to joking, when up came an order to countermarch and go back to my original position.” After this withdrawal, the feeling among Williams’ troops changed dramatically. He found that “the men went back disappointed, not without grumbling,” noting that “it really required some policy to satisfy them that there was not mismanagement somewhere.”¹⁶ Gouverneur Warren criticized the Army of the Potomac’s new position in his campaign report. This position, in his estimation, “was a bad line, and had several commanding positions in its front for the enemy to occupy.” Yet despite his critical attitude, Warren did not disparage the position because it was in the Wilderness, like he later did in his testimony before the Joint Committee.¹⁷

After the war, there was a tendency to parrot Warren’s Joint Committee remarks and criticize Hooker’s conduct at Chancellorsville, especially his retreat on May 1, 1863, not only because it interrupted the advance and killed the army’s momentum, but because it meant having to fight in the Wilderness. For instance, William Swinton condemned Hooker for giving up “the fine position then gained” by which “he might have pushed out beyond the woods” and connected with the other wing of his army. Instead, Hooker “stood on the defensive in the Wilderness,” which, in Swinton’s mind “was absolutely a bad position” because higher ground commanded the army’s position, the thick woods prevented the use of cavalry or artillery and impeded the use of infantry, and the forest left the army’s flank in the air while providing a screen for Rebel movements.¹⁸ Theodore A. Dodge likewise argued that “there was every reason

¹⁶ Alpheus S. Williams, *From the Cannon’s Mouth: The Civil War Letters of General Alpheus S. Williams*, ed. Milo M. Quaife (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), 186-187.

¹⁷ OR 29 (1): 199.

¹⁸ Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, 280-281, 303-304.

why the army should be got out of the Wilderness, in the midst of which lies Chancellorsville,” for this area “of all places is that section,” is “the least fit for an engagement . . . to secure the best tactical results.” In contrast, moving in the direction of Fredericksburg “the ground opens, showing a large number of clearings, woods of less density, and a field suited to the operations of all arms.” If getting out of the Wilderness was not motivation enough, the need to unite the two parts of the army ought to have impelled Hooker forward.¹⁹

Darius Couch discussed this point at length in an oft-quoted piece he wrote after the war. After explaining Hooker’s order to withdraw, he said the officers around him “all agreed with me that the ground should not be abandoned, because of the open country in front and the commanding position.” Couch contrasted this with the area around Chancellorsville, which “for a defensive position was bad.” There, he argued, “were no commanding positions for artillery, and but little open country to operate over.” He concluded that “the advantage of ground for this arm was mainly with the attacking party.” Here the Confederates would command the position at

¹⁹ Theodore A. Dodge, *The Campaign of Chancellorsville* (Boston: J.R. Osgood and Company, 1881), 49-50. John Bigelow, in his mammoth study of the Chancellorsville campaign, was critical of Hooker not advancing out of the Wilderness on April 30 and as well as his withdrawal back to Chancellorsville on May 1. For Bigelow, however, the retreat into the Wilderness was not the key turning point that some postwar writers made it out to be. This is no doubt because Bigelow had a great appreciation for the many other flaws that marred Hooker’s performance at Chancellorsville, such as sending his cavalry away, expecting Sedgwick to save his army, and withdrawing the Army of the Potomac on the night of May 5 instead of awaiting Lee’s attack. See John Bigelow Jr., *The Campaign of Chancellorsville* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1910), 235-236, 241, 248, 254-255, 269, 477, 481-482

Chancellorsville and the Union forces would not be able to gain access to Banks's Ford.²⁰ "To hear from [Hooker's] own lips that the advantages gained by the successful marches of his lieutenants were to culminate in fighting a defensive battle in that nest of thickets was too much," Couch recounted. "I retired from his presence with the belief that my commanding general was a whipped man."²¹

Although this interpretation eventually became more or less standard in most histories of the battle, at first there were alternate understandings of the role the Wilderness at Chancellorsville. Lee's report dwelt on the disadvantages the Confederates faced in fighting in the Wilderness. After Hooker's forces retreated into the Wilderness surrounding Chancellorsville, Lee had gained the initiative. The Rebel chief, however, explained that Hooker "had assumed a position of great natural strength" because the Union forces were "surrounded on all sides by dense forest filled with a tangled undergrowth, in the midst of which breastworks of logs had been constructed in front as to form an almost impenetrable abatis."²² Such being the case, it was clear to Lee "that a direct attack upon the enemy would be attended with great difficulty and loss, in view of the strength of his position and his superiority of numbers." Lee and "Stonewall" Jackson subsequently "resolved . . . to turn [Hooker's] right flank and gain his rear, leaving a force in front to hold him in check and conceal the movement."²³ Jackson's

²⁰ Darius N. Couch, "The Chancellorsville Campaign," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, 4 vols. (New York: The Century Co., 1884), 3:159, 161.

²¹ Couch, "The Chancellorsville Campaign," 161.

²² Robert E. Lee, *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, ed. Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), 462.

²³ Lee, *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, 462.

famous flanking movement, then, was an attempt to bypass the obstacles the Wilderness placed in front of the Confederates, particularly the thick forest, field fortifications, and abatis.

Once the Confederates went on the offensive, the Wilderness presented additional problems. Lee noted that during Jackson's flank attack "in the ardor of pursuit through the thick and tangled woods the first and second lines . . . became mingled and moved on together as one," and later complained about having to realign his troops as they "were completely blended and in such disorder from their rapid advance through intricate woods and over broken ground."²⁴ Despite these impediments, the attack was successful and routed the Federal XI Corps. Darkness, Union troops, the disordered Confederate lines, and Jackson's wounding all combined to bring the attack to a halt, but the next day Lee had his men renew their assaults. When describing the May 3 attacks on the Federal lines around Chancellorsville, Lee observed that "the troops having become somewhat scattered by the difficulties of the ground and the ardor of the contest were immediately reformed preparatory to renewing the attack."²⁵ Later when Lee intended to batter the final Union position, he again lamented the delay "in getting the troops into position, owing to the broken and irregular nature of the ground and the difficulty of ascertaining the disposition of the enemy's forces."²⁶

Some postwar Confederate writers dissented from what became the traditional interpretation put forth by Warren, Swinton, Dodge, and Couch and instead chose to follow Lee's interpretation of seeing the Wilderness as a place that hampered the Confederates. Most

²⁴ Lee, *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, 463.

²⁵ Lee, *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, 465.

²⁶ Lee, *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, 468.

noteworthy among these were William Allan and Jedediah Hotchkiss, two former officers in the Army of Northern Virginia, who wrote about Chancellorsville shortly after the war. In their conventional description, the authors listed numerous obstacles that the Wilderness posed for any attacking force. To the usual complaints of limited visibility and disordered lines, they added that the “avenues of approach were few and could be easily commanded by artillery,” and that “the timber and brushwood afforded the amplest materials for fortifications to protect the attacked and delay the advance of the attacking force.” While the two admitted that the left part of the Federal line “in several places was commanded by the opposite heights,” they claimed that the Federal right “occupied a fine commanding position, running parallel to the Plank Road.” That the Confederates sought a way to flank the Federal line rather than attack it head-on suggests that the Confederates, at least at that time, thought the Wilderness favored the Federals.²⁷ Edward Porter Alexander also subscribed to this Confederate view, arguing that an army on the defense held an advantage in the Wilderness. “No better field fortification can be desired,” contended Alexander, “than what it was the quickest to build in the Wilderness.” He concluded that “any charging line is brought to a halt by the entanglement, and held under close fire of musketry and

²⁷ Jed. Hotchkiss and William Allan, *The Battlefields of Virginia, Chancellorsville: Embracing the Operations of the Army of Northern Virginia, from the First Battle of Fredericksburg to the Death of Lieutenant-General Jackson*, (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1867). 40-42. Hotchkiss and Allan also argued that the ravines around Chancellorsville cut up the battlefield and provided good places for Union soldiers to repel Confederate attacks. See Hotchkiss and Allan p. 66.

canister, while the surrounding forest prevents the enemy from finding positions to use his own artillery.²⁸

However, this Confederate interpretation effectively died out with time as the traditional view, that the Wilderness was disadvantageous for the Union army, took hold. Theodore Ayrault Dodge, for example, acknowledged Lee's points about the Wilderness, but found them unpersuasive. "While it is true," explained Dodge, "that the position was difficult to carry by direct assault, full compensation existed in other tactical advantages to the army taking the offensive." Dodge contended that had Lee and Hooker's roles been reversed, "it is not probable that Lee . . . would have selected such ground." After quoting Hotchkiss and Allan's description of how the Wilderness limited visibility and disordered linear formations, Dodge concluded that despite these drawbacks, "the density of these very woods was the main cause of Lee's success," pointing to how the trees limited Hooker's ability to maneuver and screened Lee's army.²⁹

While the Confederate interpretation has fallen from favor, Hooker's and Bates' interpretation—which justified Hooker's decision to retreat by emphasizing the danger of the

²⁸ Alexander, *Military Memoirs of a Confederate*, 327-328, 357. Note that in Alexander's other, long unpublished memoir, he straddles the line between traditional view that Hooker was mistaken to retreat into the Wilderness and the Confederate view that it offered Hooker's army some substantial defensive benefits, but ultimately agreed the former sentiment. "Defensive lines were quick & easy to make, & hold, &, by cutting a little abattis in front of them, an entanglement would result which only rabbits could get through. But Hooker's move, clearly, should have been to get his men through the Wilderness country & out into the more open fields beyond, where his superior artillery could be deployed, & to push his advance as rapidly as possible towards Sedgewick. Edward Porter Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 197.

²⁹ Dodge, *The Campaign of Chancellorsville*, 59-60.

army being beaten in detail as it tried to extricate itself from the Wilderness—has recently made a comeback of sorts. Stephen Sears, in his modern history of the Chancellorsville campaign, largely repeated their arguments justifying Hooker’s withdrawal into the Wilderness. He acknowledged criticism of the retreat on May 1, but argued that Hooker had a very definite idea of how many Confederates were in front of him. These Confederates outnumbered his troops and were concentrated along the turnpike and plank road, giving them a considerable advantage. He contended, moreover, that “the ground where [the Union forces] were then engaged was hardly worth fighting for” and that the chances of pushing the Confederates back far enough to allow the Federals to deploy beyond the Wilderness were slim, so “there was little profit in continuing the battle where it was being fought.” Sears concluded that despite the withdrawal, Hooker had actually “achieved his two primary aims—to get his army in good position south of the Rappahannock, and to draw General Lee out from behind his Fredericksburg fortifications.”³⁰

While various interpretations have come and gone, it remains clear that the Wilderness had little to do with Hooker’s initial planning and actions during the campaign. Enemy entrenchments and crossing the rivers safely shaped his planning. Nevertheless, Hooker elected to fight in the Wilderness, because he claimed, long after the fact, that he could not deploy his army fast enough along the narrow forest roads to avoid being overwhelmed by the oncoming Confederates. However, Hooker’s explanation was meant to defend his reputation from the damning testimony offered by other Union generals before the Joint Committee, and such being the case, it merits critical scrutiny. Contemporary testimony shows that the main criticism of the retreat was that it interrupted a successful offensive movement, not that it meant returning to the

³⁰ Stephen W. Sears, *Chancellorsville* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 212-213, 223-224.

Wilderness. It is also plain that far from a favorite battlefield, the Wilderness was a challenge and seemingly a constant headache for Lee and his army. The Wilderness thus became one of the chief scapegoats of the Chancellorsville campaign.³¹ For Hooker's critics it explained the army's defeat, for his defenders it justified his actions, while the Confederates used it to glorify their victory.

* * * * *

The strategies both sides pursued during the Mine Run campaign shared many similarities with those of the Chancellorsville campaign. The Union high command again had to contend with factors that narrowed the lines of advance. In the fall of 1863, Meade's army had

³¹ There were certainly other scapegoats in the Chancellorsville campaign, notably the Federal XI Corps, which crumbled and fled when faced with Jackson's flank attack on May 2. Many soldiers blamed their conduct for the campaign's unhappy ending and argued that the Army of the Potomac was not whipped although it had lost the battle. Cornelius Moore of the 57th New York wrote to his sister: "It is true, that Hooker did not accomplish all that he had so admirably planned, nor did we defeat the enemy; but we, on the other hand must deny being severely whipped ourselves. It is true, that owing to the cowardly and disgraceful conduct of one Corps of the Army and not for want of strategy or courage on the part of the commanding General, we were forced by the overwhelming numbers fighting against us, (and I never saw them fight with more determination) to fall back from our first position, and leave them in possession of the road they contended so hard for, but we took up another position but a very little further off and this we held for two days and nights, up to the time of our recrossing, without an attack from the enemy. This alone goes to show that their ranks were terribly cut, and their loss to more than double ours. It is my honest conviction that had that single Corps (the 11th) done its duty like men, and we held our ground without wavering Saturday night, the next day or night would have forced the enemy to retreat and leave their artillery and all large stores behind." Cornelius Moore to Adeline, May 10, 1863, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 147.

taken a position north of the Rappahannock along the Orange and Alexandria railroad. The army's commander was—as was nearly always the case—under pressure to advance, but the administration had a particular route in mind. On November 2, Meade had written to Washington proposing to move “the whole army rapidly and secretly across the Rappahannock at Banks’ Ford and Fredericksburg, and taking position on the heights beyond the town.” By doing so, Meade hoped to station his army in a formidable position and then invite Lee to attack him.³² The next day Henry Halleck, the Union General-in-Chief, torpedoed Meade’s plan. Lincoln had not found the proposed move very promising and Halleck wrote back that “any tactical movement to turn a flank or threaten a communication is left to your own judgment; but an entire change of base under existing circumstances, I can neither advise nor approve.”³³ Meade was stuck. One can only imagine that past Union failures around Fredericksburg probably had influenced Lincoln and Halleck’s thinking. Later that month, Meade ordered the Army of the Potomac to cross the Rappahannock along the Orange and Alexandria railroad and forced the Confederates to retreat across the Rapidan.³⁴ As a result, at the outset of the Mine Run campaign Meade’s army lay north of the Rapidan relying on the Orange and Alexandria railroad as a supply line, while Lee’s army lay south of the river around Orange Courthouse.

Once more Union strategy revolved around the factors of avoiding entrenchments and crossing the river without coming under fire. Like Hooker at Chancellorsville, Meade sought to avoid a network of Confederate entrenchments. Lee’s “strong intrenchments on the Rapidan” extended from “west of Orange Court-House” to Morton’s Ford. Assaulting these field works

³² OR 29 (2): 409.

³³ OR 29 (2): 412.

³⁴ OR 29 (2): 429, 449.

“had long been impracticable” and Meade reported to Halleck that he intended to turn one of the Confederates’ flanks.³⁵ When Meade weighed all the factors, including how to keep his army supplied, he concluded that he should move to the east on Lee’s right flank, as this would require marching a shorter distance, cover his communications, and allow the army to safely retreat if necessary. His objections to moving to the west on Lee’s left flank were that it was longer, forced him to abandon his communications, and made withdrawing in the face of the enemy more hazardous. He then added that “examinations are being made with a view of determining the practicability of turning the right by Germanna and Ely’s” fords, the same ones the Army of the Potomac had used in the Chancellorsville campaign.³⁶ Another factor in selecting this route was that Meade had learned “that the enemy had abandoned the design of guarding the lower fords, but relied for the protection of his right flank on an intrenched line he had constructed perpendicular to the Rapidan,” at Morton’s Ford but not extending far enough south to cover the turnpike or plank road.³⁷ After all this deliberation, Meade finally determined to cross his army east of the Confederate entrenchments at Germanna, Culpeper Mine, and Jacobs’ fords which would lead them into the Wilderness.

Once the route was determined, Meade had to figure out how to get his army across the Rapidan without having to fight the Confederates. Unlike Hooker at Chancellorsville, his army was not stationed near Fredericksburg, but farther to the north and west along the Orange and Alexandria railroad. Meade made no plans to pin Lee’s forces into place, like Hooker had done; rather he intended to shift his entire army in a quick flanking movement. He explained that he

³⁵ OR 29 (1): 13; OR 29 (2): 474.

³⁶ OR 29 (2): 474.

³⁷ OR 29 (1): 13; Meade, *Life and Letters*, 2:156-157.

hoped “to cross the Rapidan at the lower fords . . . and by a prompt movement seize the plank road and turnpike, advancing rapidly toward Orange Court-House, thus turning the enemy’s works, and compelling him to give battle on ground not previously selected or prepared.” Meade not only wanted to bring the Confederates to battle outside their entrenchments, but he hoped to catch a section of the Confederate army, which was strung out on a long line, and badly damage it before Lee’s forces could be united so “as to render more certain the success of the final struggle.”³⁸

Nowhere in Meade’s deliberations does the Wilderness appear as a factor in determining Union strategy or operations.³⁹ Instead, river crossings, entrenchments, and logistics occupied Meade’s mind. If the Union high command was so determined to avoid the Wilderness, they certainly could have hazarded the other, longer line of advance, but one way or another Meade decided to cross the Rapidan at the fords that would lead his army straight into the Wilderness. Meade’s efforts to advance toward the west were aimed at getting around Lee’s line of entrenchments, which petered out at the headwaters of Mine Run, and then engaging the Confederate army before it could concentrate.

At Mine Run, as at Chancellorsville, Lee simply reacted to the Federals’ movements. Once he discovered the Federals were marching towards the lower fords which led into the

³⁸ OR 29 (1): 13; Meade, *Life and Letters*, 2:156-157.

³⁹ Andrew A. Humphreys in his history of the campaign commented that at the end of the campaign Meade wanted to withdraw and occupy a position near Fredericksburg, but he was not allowed to do so by the powers in Washington. Humphreys observed after the fact that “had he done so, the first battle with Lee, in May, 1864, would not have been fought in the Wilderness, but in a more open country. Andrew A. Humphreys, *From Gettysburg to the Rapidan: The Army of the Potomac July, 1863 to April 1864* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1883), 68.

Wilderness, Lee moved to intercept them. Initially he was unsure of where the Federals intended to move because “the country in that vicinity,” namely the Wilderness, “was unfavorable for observation, being almost an unbroken forest.” With this thick curtain of vegetation blocking his view, Lee could not tell “whether it was the design of the Federal commander to advance toward Richmond or move up the Rapidan upon our right flank.” Without knowing his enemy’s destination, Lee concluded that he would attack the Army of the Potomac in the flank or in its rear if they moved towards the Confederate capital. If the Federals turned towards the Confederates, then Lee fully intended to bring them to battle. Lee’s cavalry later discovered the Federals marching up the turnpike and plank road on November 27, but even then it was not clear whether this was “only a force thrown out to cover the movement of the main body toward Fredericksburg,” and as a result Lee continued to advance his men until he was satisfied that a substantial Union force was in front of him.⁴⁰

Since he found “it impossible to ascertain” the Federals’ strength, Lee had his troops stall the enemy and skirmish in the Wilderness while his army concentrated. The only fight of consequence—a sharp little engagement at Payne’s Farm—was brought on by Union forces firing into Lee’s men. While this engagement ended in a draw, this benefitted the Rebels by preventing the Union army from concentrating and contributing to the ruin of Meade’s cherished timetable. However, on the night of November 27, 1863, Lee chose to leave the Wilderness’s thick forests and take up a defensive position in the more open Mine Run valley.⁴¹ Here he

⁴⁰ OR 29 (1): 827.

⁴¹ Oscar Hinrichs, a Confederate staff officer, pointed to low ammunition as a reason for why the Confederates withdrew on the night of November 27. Oscar Hinrichs, *Stonewall’s Prussian Mapmaker: The*

entrenched on the far side of the valley on high ground and waited the Union attack. When the Union forces failed to deliver, he sought to make a flank attack, but a timely Union withdrawal foiled his plans.⁴²

Nowhere in Lee's report does he give the impression that the Wilderness was a good place for his army to fight or that he hoped to trap the Union forces in the Wilderness. Had the Wilderness been such an advantageous place for Lee to fight, why did he not attack the Union army in the forest when he had them there? Why retreat to Mine Run instead of taking the initiative and attacking when the Federals were stumbling about in the thickets? He certainly wanted to bring them to battle if possible, but nothing he wrote suggests that he was bent on engaging Meade's army in the Wilderness. To the contrary, when Lee's army was in the Wilderness he complained about how the Union army's position was stronger and how the Wilderness prevented him from knowing his antagonist's strength. Not unexpectedly, when a lull presented itself, Lee took advantage of it and moved his army out of the Wilderness to high ground where he had his army construct entrenchments. Ironically, this was the situation that Meade had hoped to bring about on the Fredericksburg heights had Washington given him the freedom to act. While Lee's army was outnumbered, that certainly had not deterred him from attacking Union forces at Chancellorsville and neither would it during the Overland campaign.

Postwar writers made no connections between the Wilderness and strategy during the Mine Run campaign, an omission which lies in stark contrast to the interpretations surrounding

Journals of Captain Oscar Hinrichs, ed. Richard Brady Williams (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 98.

⁴² OR 29 (1): 828-829.

the Chancellorsville and Wilderness campaigns. If the Wilderness affected Union and Confederate strategy in the Chancellorsville and Overland campaigns, then why would it not do so in the Mine Run campaign? When it came time to report on the movement's failure, Meade blamed the Army of the Potomac's disappointing performance on factors such as the weather, the failure of the III Corps to keep to its schedule, the steep banks at the fords, and the invulnerability of the Confederate entrenchments.⁴³ In short, on everything but the Wilderness. The campaign's historians generally followed his lead.⁴⁴ In this sense, the postwar histories of the Mine Run campaign give a better feel for how the contemporary commanders would have approached operating in the Wilderness than do the histories of Chancellorsville and Wilderness, which have been skewed by postwar interpretations marred by hindsight and a desire to justify certain individuals or causes.

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⁴³ OR 29 (1): 14-18.

⁴⁴ For examples of how historians have interpreted the Mine Run campaign, see Humphreys, *From Gettysburg to the Rapidan*, 49-70; Jay Luvaas and Wilbur S. Nye, "The Campaign that History Forgot," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 8 (November 1969): 12-36; Martin F. Graham and George F. Skoch, *Mine Run: A Campaign of Lost Opportunities October 21, 1863–May 1, 1864* (Lynchburg, VA: H.E. Howard, Inc. 1987). Humphreys noted the many delays caused by weather, terrain, bad roads, etc., but put much of the blame on the bad leadership of the III Corps, which he argues "paralyzed the whole army, so far as concerned its carrying out the plan of operations successfully." Humphreys, 63. Luvaas and Nye blamed the campaign's failure of poor performances by Meade's subordinates and by neglect of the army's engineering operations. Luvaas and Nye, 36. Graham and Skoch concluded that "the reason for the . . . failure was that it was half-heartedly implemented by key subordinates. Also Meade was not totally committed to his line of operations." Graham and Skoch, 83.

The strategic considerations influencing the Army of the Potomac's high command at the outset of the Overland campaign were very similar to those they grappled with during the Mine Run campaign. Certain considerations, particularly the need to protect Washington, limited the possible line of advance to an overland route. In January 1864, Ulysses S. Grant had written Halleck about the possibility of abandoning "all previously attempted lines to Richmond" in favor of moving inland from Suffolk in southern Virginia toward Raleigh, North Carolina. The purpose of this movement would be to destroy or threaten all the railroads south of Richmond which "would virtually force an evacuation of Virginia" by the Confederates.⁴⁵ Halleck's response emphasized the military and political constraints under which the Army of the Potomac operated. He explained to Grant that the Union army simply did not have enough men to protect Washington and mount an expedition in North Carolina. If the Federals moved troops to North Carolina Lee would simply bolt northward and cause a panic, and "the popular sentiment [would] compel the Government to bring back the army in North Carolina to defend Washington, Baltimore, Harrisburg, and Philadelphia."⁴⁶

Halleck then argued that the best plan was to place the army so as to cover Washington. This would allow the Federals to gather all their strength into this main army, as they would not have to divide their forces between protecting the capital and operating against the enemy. Although Halleck conceded the past failure of McClellan on the Peninsula route and of Burnside, Hooker, and Meade along the overland route, he concluded that the best option was to fight the Rebels as near to Washington as possible. Along an overland route they would be able to "concentrate against [Lee] more men than anywhere else," and if they could not achieve a

⁴⁵ OR 33: 394-395.

⁴⁶ OR 23 (2): 411-412.

victory there “with [their] combined force, [they] cannot hope to do so elsewhere with a divided army.”⁴⁷ In short, it was going to be an overland campaign and the farther away from Richmond that Grant could bring the Confederates to battle the better. It is also worth noting that McClellan was *persona non grata* with the Republican administration and this made anything resembling McClellan’s Peninsula strategy unacceptable, while a successful overland advance would justify the route preferred by Lincoln’s administration.

Grant’s post-campaign report, explained that the Union high command considered two possible lines of advance. Grant makes no mention of the Wilderness, however, in weighing the two options. Instead his report revealed a desire that Lee would not head north like he had done in the past, that his men might have continuous access to supplies, that he could cooperate with Benjamin Butler’s army on the Peninsula, and that he could cross over the Rapidan safely. Grant’s only observation on the Wilderness was that “the whole army [was] brought into the fight as fast as the corps could be got upon the field, which considering the density of the forest and narrowness of the road, was done with commendable promptness.”⁴⁸ This suggests that Grant acknowledged the problems the Wilderness caused in retrospect, but even then he viewed the forest as just another obstacle his soldiers had overcome. More telling still is Grant’s comment that “the most serious apprehensions” he had was “of crossing the river in the face of an active, large, well appointed, and ably-commanded army, and how so large a train was to be carried through a hostile country.”⁴⁹ Meade’s report too has little to say about the Wilderness.

⁴⁷ OR 32 (2): 412-413.

⁴⁸ OR 36 (1): 15, 18

⁴⁹ OR 36 (1): 18. In his memoirs, Grant echoes his report, saying “our victory consisted in having successfully crossed a formidable stream, almost in the face of an enemy, and in getting the army together as a unit.”

When explaining why the Army of the Potomac crossed opposite the Wilderness, Meade simply explained that it was done “to avoid the intrenchments of Mine Run.”⁵⁰ There is no indication that the Wilderness entered into Meade’s thinking one way or another. Beyond this, Meade, like Grant, had little to say about the Wilderness, merely noting that at several points it impeded Union maneuvering.⁵¹

Union dispatches from May 5, 1864, confirm that the Wilderness was far from the center of Federal concerns. When Meade reported to Grant that the Confederates were positioning themselves in a line of battle opposite his forces in the Wilderness, his first reaction was to attack them while halting the army’s march “until this movement of the enemy is developed.” He did not think the Confederates intended to fight there, but instead were “trying to delay our movement.” Meade betrayed no concern here about stopping the Union advance in the middle of

In his memoirs though he makes more mention of the Wilderness. He found “there were some clearings and small farms within what might be termed the battle-field; but generally the country was covered with a dense forest. The roads were narrow and bad. All the conditions were favorable for defensive operations.” He notes how the woods disrupt formations and allowed the Confederates to approach undetected in some cases. He says the roads Lee had access to gave him “unusual facilities, for that country, for concentrating his forces to his right.” He also claimed that if Hancock had been able to see how much distress his opponents were in on May 6, he would have done Lee’s army so much damage that it would not have fought again outside Richmond. Ulysses S. Grant . . . 185, 187-188, 194, 197-199, 204,

⁵⁰ OR 36 (1): 189.

⁵¹ OR 36 (1): 189-190. His letters to his wife reveal next to nothing on this subject. A July 7, 1864 letter merely states that “I had hoped for better success at the beginning, but after we failed to defeat Lee at the Wilderness, I took it for granted we should have to manoeuvre him into the fortifications of Richmond, and then lay siege to that place.” During early May his brief comments are focused on Spotsylvania. Meade, *Life and Letters*, 2:194-195, 211.

the Wilderness. Grant's response to Meade was simple: "If any opportunity presents itself for pitching into a part of Lee's army, do so without giving time for disposition." Again, there are no worries here about the Wilderness, only an injunction to attack the enemy, to bring them to battle as soon as possible. Later Meade sent word to Grant that he thought "Lee is simply making a demonstration to gain time," in which case he meant to "punish him." In particular Meade boasted that if Lee was "disposed to fight this side of Mine Run at once, he shall be accommodated."⁵² Once more, there is no evidence here that the Union army commanders were concerned about fighting in the Wilderness. If they had been so troubled about the possibility of fighting in the Wilderness, would they not have expressed it, or acted in some way to avoid such a fate? But they did not. Of more concern was the fact that at least a portion of Lee's army had left its formidable Mine Run entrenchments and consequently appeared vulnerable. Even if the Federals had unexpressed desires to avoid a fight in the Wilderness, the allure of fighting the Confederates away from their entrenchments was enough to make them jettison such worries.

Judging Confederate strategy is more difficult because no official report on the Wilderness campaign from Lee has survived.⁵³ Past reports from the Chancellorsville and Mine Run campaigns, however, reveal some of Lee's thinking about the Wilderness. These reports demonstrate that Lee understood the character of the Wilderness well. Nevertheless, the conclusion that Lee intentionally engaged the Federal army there to take advantage of the Wilderness's environmental characteristics seems fanciful given that Lee constantly complained about how the region put himself and his army at a disadvantage. Assuming that Lee was not using the Wilderness as an excuse to cover his own or his army's shortcomings, then his reports

⁵² OR 36 (2): 403-404.

⁵³ Lee did send some brief dispatches to Richmond regarding the overland campaign, but these reveal little.

show that he did not find the Wilderness a very good battleground, much less an ideal place to trap the Federal army. Lee's reports do not show that he had gone out of his way to fight in the Wilderness in the 1863 campaigns and, despite the claims that Lee actively sought to catch the Union army in the Wilderness in 1864, there is nothing here to suggest that he would have had any desire to do so. During the Chancellorsville campaign, Lee attacked Hooker in the Wilderness because the latter chose the field and he wanted to take the initiative. At Mine Run, Lee could have fought the Union army in the woods, but chose instead to withdraw to a good defensive position along Mine Run in an open stretch on the edge of the Wilderness. While this decision made sense considering the strength of the Confederate entrenchments, Lee found waiting on the Union forces to attack a frustrating experience. By nightfall of December 1, 1863, he had had enough and put in motion a flank attack on the Union line that came to naught because the Federals had already abandoned their position. Lee confessed himself "greatly disappointed at [Meade] getting off with so little damage."⁵⁴

Considering his frustration at Mine Run, it is no wonder that at the start of the Overland campaign Lee chose to strike Grant on the march when he had the chance instead of waiting behind his Mine Run entrenchments, although he certainly contemplated a retreat to Mine Run if necessary. A May 4, 1864 order to Richard Ewell provides a window into Lee's thoughts. The order explained that "if the enemy moves down the river, he wishes to push on after him," but "if he comes this way, we will take our old line," most likely meaning the Mine Run entrenchments. The order concluded that Lee wanted "to bring [the enemy] to battle as soon now as possible."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Robert E. Lee, *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, ed. Clifford Dowdey and Louis Manarin (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), 631.

⁵⁵ OR 36 (2): 948.

Lee's postwar testimony strengthens this interpretation. An 1868 letter explained that "notwithstanding the demonstrations made against our front and left at the opening of the campaign of '64, I believed that Genl. Grant would cross the Rapidan on our right, and resolved to attack him whenever he presented himself."⁵⁶ Again there is no mention here of trapping Grant's army in the Wilderness. Rather, Lee seems to share Grant's conviction of the necessity of swiftly bringing his enemy to battle, regardless of the field.

In stark contrast to these contemporary accounts, the association of the Wilderness with strategy became standard fare in the postwar histories of the Overland campaign. William Swinton, a critic of Grant's writing in the immediate aftermath of the war, argued that the Wilderness played a primary role in determining Confederate and Union strategy during the first stage of the Overland campaign. In particular, he claimed that Lee sought to engage the Army of the Potomac in the Wilderness as he had done with Hooker a year earlier, in order to trap it in "tangled labyrinths of confusion and disaster"⁵⁷ that minimized its greater numbers.

The musings of Union soldiers after the battle reveal the seeds from which Swinton's interpretation grew. Some focused on what a difficult landscape the Wilderness was. James L. Van Buren, a staff member in Burnside's IX Corps judged the Wilderness's "tangled, dense low growth" to be "terrible for fighting through," while Charles Mills, an adjutant in the 56th Massachusetts, claimed that "the extra-ordinarily dense woods . . . made [the site of the battle of

⁵⁶ Robert E. Lee to William L. Smith, July 27, 1868, Mss1 L51c 738, Lee Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁵⁷ Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, 418. For more on Swinton's criticisms of Grant and how Grant's critics used them see Brooks D. Simpson, "Continuous Hammering and Mere Attrition," 156-159.

the Wilderness] the worst battleground . . . of the war.”⁵⁸ Other soldiers sought to explain why they had fought in such a dreadful place. One Federal soldier thought that “Lee hopes to draw us off and defeat us in the ‘*Wilderness*.’”⁵⁹ Another soldier agreed, remarking that “the rebels were bound to fight us in the dense wilderness.”⁶⁰ A letter to the *Columbia Democrat* by a Union soldier provided one of the richest contemporary accounts explaining why the Federals thought the Confederates had chosen to fight them in the Wilderness. He first recounted some of the difficulties the Union soldiers faced there: the dense vegetation “not only presents the ordinary manoeuvres of troops, but conceals the enemy,” moreover, “success or disasters at the different points cannot be noted, commands cannot be rapidly communicated, and in fact the only way to get along is to bush-whack on a grand scale.” To this assessment the soldier added that “in this [meaning bushwhacking], the enemy are evidently our superiors.” He then remarked how Confederate infantry was thought to be better than Union infantry while the reverse was true when it came to artillery. From this assumption, he concluded that “this probably induced Lee to select the Wilderness as a battle ground, thereby depriving us of the use of our most efficient weapon.”⁶¹

It is easy to see how the fact that the Confederates intercepted the Federal army’s march, combined with the problems the Union soldiers faced there and the assumptions that soldiers

⁵⁸ James L. Van Buren, *Diary*, May 5, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 466; Charles Mills to his mother, May 10, 1864, Coco Collection, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

⁵⁹ “From the 140th Regiment,” *Washington Reporter* (Pennsylvania), June 1, 1864.

⁶⁰ “From the Seventeenth Regiment,” *Lamoille Newsdealer* (Hyde Park, Vermont), June 8, 1864.

⁶¹ “Grant’s Virginia Campaign,” *Columbia Democrat* (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania), June 18, 1864.

harbored about Union and Confederate strengths and weaknesses, could persuade Union soldiers to think that the Confederates chose to fight in the Wilderness for those reasons. James Carter, a member of the 45th Georgia, saw things very differently. For him, the battle of the Wilderness “was a hard fought battle and a fair test of the courage and prowess of the contending armies neither party having the advantage of breastwork or fortifications.” As for the Confederates trapping the Federals in the Wilderness, Carter thought “the two armies ran together apparently by chance in the woods or forest.”⁶²

Many subsequent historians echoed Swinton’s arguments in one form or another. Most of those who espoused this interpretation were former Confederates who had every reason to use the Wilderness to glorify Lee’s generalship and attack Grant’s.⁶³ Armistead Long, an artillery commander in the Army of Northern Virginia, for example, asserted that Lee, “perceiving that Grant was making the mistake that had proved so disastrous to Hooker, by plunging with his army into that dense and sombre thicket well named ‘The Wilderness,’ . . . took care to do nothing to obstruct so desirable a result.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, he contended that “there was much reason to believe that his antagonist would be at his mercy while entangled in these pathless and entangled thickets.”⁶⁵ Evander Law, one of Lee’s generals, likewise claimed that “General Lee had deliberately chosen this as his battle-ground,” for “he knew this tangled wilderness well, and

⁶² James W. Carter to Mrs. Bell A. Montfort, May 29, 1864, Montfort-Pope-Spain Families Collection, Middle Georgia Archives, Washington Memorial Library, Macon Georgia.

⁶³ See Waugh, *U. S. Grant*, 185-186, 189; Simpson, “Continuous Hammering and Mere Attrition,” 148, 157.

⁶⁴ Armistead Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee* (New York: J. M. Stoddart & Company, 1886), 325-326.

⁶⁵ Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 327.

appreciated fully the advantages such a field afforded for concealing his great inferiority of force and for neutralizing the superior strength of his antagonist.” Moreover, Law maintained that the Federal route “offered the expected opportunity of striking a blow upon his flank while his troops were stretched out on the line of march.”⁶⁶ William Dame, a lowly private in Lee’s army, similarly observed that Lee “was far too deep a file, to stop his enemy from getting himself into ‘a fix.’ He knew what when Grant’s great army got over there, they would be ‘entangled in the land, the wilderness would shut them in.” He concluded that “Lee wouldn’t lift a finger to keep Grant from getting *into* the wilderness, but quick as a flash he was, to keep him from getting out.”⁶⁷

Some Federal writers who were hostile to Grant argued that the Union army had either actively avoided fighting in the woods or regretted the choice of battlefield.⁶⁸ For instance, Andrew Humphreys, Meade’s chief of staff during the Wilderness campaign, commented that “the objection to moving by our left consisted in the character of the country south of the Rapidan, through which [they] must pass . . . after crossing the river, and in which [they] might be obliged to fight the first battle.” Humphreys suggested that the Union high command only chose to pass through the Wilderness because they thought they could clear the region before Lee’s army arrived. Once in more open country Humphreys thought the army could then “turn,

⁶⁶ E. M. Law, “From the Wilderness to Cold Harbor,” in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York: The Century Company, 1884), 4:122.

⁶⁷ William M. Dame, *From the Rapidan to Richmond and the Spottsylvania Campaign* (Baltimore: Green-Lucas Company, 1920), 76.

⁶⁸ See Simpson, “Continuous Hammering and Mere Attrition,” 160-161, 166.

or partly turn, the right flank of Lee before a general engagement took place.”⁶⁹ Some Federals lamented the Union army halting on May 4 when they might have continued onward to the open country beyond. Francis Walker of the II Corps believed “there was nothing, . . . , to prevent the Army of the Potomac being established on any north or south line it might have chosen to take up between ‘the Wilderness’ and Mine Run.” Looking back he called the May 4 halt “the first misfortune of the campaign.”⁷⁰

Others, most notably Adam Badeau, a former staff member of Grant’s turned historian, disagreed with these other interpretations and insisted that Grant meant to force a battle as quickly as possible. Badeau, like other Union commentators, described the Wilderness as “the most impracticable country possible for the manoeuvres of an army.” However, Badeau, whose purpose in writing was to defend Grant’s generalship, explained that “it was not [Grant’s] object to avoid the enemy,” nor did he “desire to out-flank the rebel army, in a purely strategic sense, so much as to bring it to speedy battle.” Thus when “he decided to plunge direct into the

⁶⁹ Andrew A. Humphreys, *The Virginia Campaign of '64 and '65* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1885), 10-11.

⁷⁰ Francis A. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 409. Walker also criticized Grant for recalling the II Corps in mid-march on May 5, arguing that if they had been allowed to continue their wide march then they have come in on the Confederate’s rear. Lawrence Kreiser, in his more recent history of the II Corps dismisses Walker’s criticism, arguing that “had the Union lost control of the Brock Road intersection, the Army of the Potomac might have been cut in half,” a result that would have been disastrous for the Federals. See Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps*, 411-412 and Lawrence A. Kreiser, Jr., *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 167.

Wilderness,” he did so to force “either immediate battle or the immediate retreat of Lee.”⁷¹ In this interpretation, the Wilderness was far from the deciding factor when it came to strategy, although Badeau claimed that “it was the forest, and not the enemy, that had thwarted Grant.”⁷²

Gordon Rhea later challenged parts of the traditional interpretation of Lee trapping the Army of the Potomac in the Wilderness. He argued that “from the rebel perspective, the Wilderness offered an ideal battlefield,” and “was clearly the Confederates’ most advantageous field of battle,” because of all the obstacles it supposedly presented the Union army. This was straight from the traditional telling, but then Rhea changed tack. If the Wilderness really was the best field, Rhea questioned why “Lee neglected to take any steps calculated to influence Meade’s advance or to ensure that the Confederates would reach the Wilderness ahead of him.” Only the Union decision to halt the troops in the Wilderness on May 4, rather than have them continue their march, afforded “Lee the opportunity that he had neglected to achieve by his own planning.” Rather than a craftily laid trap, Lee’s army stumbled into good fortune, trapping Grant’s army in the woods and managing to survive a battle with a stronger Union army while waiting for Longstreet’s arrival. In other words, Rhea accepted the traditional idea that the Wilderness was an advantageous place for the Confederates to fight in, but he criticized Lee for not taking the trouble to actually attempt to trap the Union army there.⁷³

⁷¹ Adam Badeau, *Military History of Ulysses S. Grant from April, 1861, to April 1865*. 3 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881), 2:96-97.

⁷² Badeau, *Military History of Ulysses S. Grant*, 2:130.

⁷³ Gordon C. Rhea, *The Battle of the Wilderness: May 5-6, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 27-28, 55.

Which of these interpretations then is most accurate? The contemporary reports made by Grant and Meade support Badeau's assertion that the Union commanders did not take the Wilderness landscape much into account when determining strategy. Union reports, for instance, suggest that political considerations, logistics, the dangers of crossing a river, and the location of intrenchments held greater sway over Union decision making than did the presence of a forest, even a very thick one. Their actions once the battle had begun suggest that they were more concerned with damaging Lee's army while he was unprotected by entrenchments than concerned about avoiding the Wilderness. Furthermore, understanding Lee's true opinion of the Wilderness goes a long way toward explaining the contradiction that Gordon Rhea observed in his actions during the Wilderness campaign. Lee took no steps to trap the Union army in the Wilderness because it was not his intention to do so. As Rhea observed, the fact that he did so was a matter of happenstance, not a matter of calculation. A much more likely explanation is that Lee simply sought to intercept his opponent as soon as he could as Lee's wartime and postwar testimony indicates. This, however, does not necessarily indicate that Lee wanted to trap the Union army in the Wilderness. It does show that he wanted to stop the Union advance as soon as possible and if the Wilderness was where the two armies were to clash, then so be it.

* * * * *

Having reviewed the three campaigns conducted in the Wilderness, it is clear that this area's distinct environmental characteristics played an inconsequential role in shaping strategy for the Union army. In contrast, Lee's strategy did take into account the Wilderness, but not in the way that many writers have asserted. Rather such considerations were largely postwar inventions, the product of hindsight and of a desire to explain away Union failures or highlight Lee's generalship. As is the case with all scapegoats, the Wilderness was blamed for that which

it was blameless, and has since come down in history as a stumbling block of a battlefield, foolishly selected by Hooker at Chancellorsville and craftily chosen by Lee during the battle of the Wilderness. Whatever reservations the Union commanders felt about the Wilderness, they were not strong enough to override other concerns such as entrenchments, logistics, and safe river crossings. The commanders' reports, moreover, reveal little in the way of anxiety about the terrain interfering with their plans. Lee, in contrast, showed a marked awareness of the Wilderness and the problems it caused his army, which suggests that he would not intentionally fight there unless other circumstances compelled him to, and they certainly did at the opening of the Overland campaign. These case studies also suggest that historians would do well to reevaluate their interpretations of Civil War battlefields, asking how postwar traditions have overshadowed contemporary evidence, creating a skewed interpretation or in other words a Wilderness myth.

CHAPTER. 4: FIGHTING LEE AND THE WILDERNESS

On May 4, 1864, Frank Wilkeson, a private in the II Corps of the Army of the Potomac, “walked to and fro over the old battle-field” at Chancellorsville. While the afternoon light lasted he and his comrades tarried to inspect the “bullet-scarred and canister-riven trees,” but what really caught their eye were the bones. Last spring’s dead, carelessly interred, were there for one final viewing. “Many polished skulls lay on the ground,” and Wilkeson observed that “leg bones, arm bones, and ribs could be found without trouble.” Perhaps even more unsettling was the “grinning, bony, fleshless face” which now and again “peered through the low mound that had been hastily thrown over” the dead. With the sun setting, the soldiers, now seated on the burial mounds, gathered around a fire. There with “the dead . . . all around,” Wilkeson and his fellow soldiers “talked of the battle of the preceding year.” A soldier recounted how many of the wounded had burned when the woods had caught fire. He concluded with a warning that this was “an awful place to fight in.” Once within the thick woods they could barely see, their artillery was next to useless, and, as at Chancellorsville, the wounded were “liable to be burned to death.” The prospect of breaking a leg and being unable to escape the flames terrified the crusty veteran and he wished that the army would “get through this chapparal without fighting.” His hope, however, was in vain, as the next day a battle opened in the very heart of the Wilderness.¹

Most, if not all, historians have agreed with this veteran’s grim assessment of the Wilderness. Traditionally scholars have argued that during the Battle of the Wilderness (May 5–

¹ Frank Wilkeson, *Recollections of a Private* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1887), 49–50.

6, 1864) the landscape handicapped the Union army while helping the Confederates. Typical of this perspective is William Swinton's 1866 account, remarkable not only because it was one of the first widely referenced interpretations of the battle, but also because most memoirists and historians repeated its conclusions in part or in whole. He argued that because Lee knew the area better than Grant, because artillery could not be used, because Grant's numerical superiority could not be wielded effectively, and because the Confederates had "an almost Indian skill in woodcraft," they held a decided advantage over their Federal adversaries.² Over time, the interpretation settled into two main points, which form the traditional interpretation of the Wilderness. First, the Confederates knew the area better than the Federals did. Second, the Wilderness prevented the Federals from taking advantage of their great strength in both infantry and artillery.³

² William Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles B. Richardson, 1866), 418

³ Interesting to note is the fact that Swinton focuses on how advantageous the Wilderness was to the Confederates during the Wilderness campaign, but in his treatment of the Chancellorsville campaign he admits that "it is true that the Wilderness is a region unfavorable for manoeuvring a large army; but it was as bad for Lee as for Hooker." If it were as bad for one as the other at Chancellorsville, then why not at the battle of the Wilderness? Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, 304. John Bigelow on the other hand, argues for superior Confederate woodmanship at Chancellorsville. "The forests did not prevent the Confederates as they did the Federals from deploying off the roads and marching in line. The Confederates moved through the Wilderness in every direction and in every kind of formation. They were better woodsmen than the Federals, and better acquainted with the terrain, or better supplied with guides. They were hardier, tougher men. They cared less if they tore their clothes or scratched their hands and faces." John Bigelow Jr., *The Campaign of Chancellorsville* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1910), 476.

However, the assertion that the Wilderness favored the Confederates tactically is largely unsubstantiated. Recently Earl Hess has challenged this traditional historiography, asserting that the Wilderness hindered Lee's army just as much as it did Grant's, prevented either army from gaining a decisive victory, and hampered Confederate flank attacks. In short, Hess concluded that "Lee's offensive tactics were muffled by his choice of battlefield."⁴ Union and Confederate accounts suggest that Hess is mostly right. First, the two armies were more or less equally familiar with the Wilderness. Second, the Wilderness caused similar problems for both armies, except for the fact that the Confederates had access to a better road network that initially made it easier for them to deploy their forces. Hess is also correct about the Wilderness disrupting both Confederate flank attacks and limiting their ultimate success.

Hess's assessment, however, loses sight of the fact that the only advantage the Wilderness offered for an attacking force was that it could screen movements and allow troops to advance on the enemy unexpectedly. As Hess has pointed out, direct attacks tended to bog down in close-range fighting, and while the Wilderness would disorder any attack eventually, a flank attack was the Confederate's best choice given the circumstances and in many ways the effectiveness of the flank attack was enhanced by the Wilderness's screening power. And certainly those attacks show that despite the difficult landscape, the Confederates, through their initiative, could turn the Wilderness to their advantage. In the end, however, the Wilderness in and of itself did not prove innately beneficial to one side over the other. If it was a good place for the Confederates to fight it was because they made it so by aggressively taking advantage of the limited opportunities the Wilderness afforded.

⁴ Earl J. Hess, *Trench Warfare under Grant & Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 39–41.

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Traditionally historians have argued that the Confederates enjoyed an advantage over their Union foes because of their superior knowledge of the Wilderness.⁵ William Swinton asserted that while the Wilderness was “well known” to Lee, to Grant it was “pure *terra incognita*.” Many memoirists and historians repeated these assertions and claimed that not just Lee but also his army was intimately acquainted with the Wilderness—or at the very least more familiar with it than the Federals—and therefore the Rebels held a distinct advantage during the battle. For instance, Frank Wilkeson, a soldier in the II Corps, claimed that “the Confederates knew the region thoroughly,” that “many of their soldiers had worked in the region,” and that “they knew where the roads led to, where the water was, [and] where the natural line of defence was.”⁶ Francis Walker, the historian of the Federal II Corps, pointed out that the Confederate army was “defending a country with which it had become perfectly familiar by long occupation, and which was, more or less, of a kind with that in which all its soldiers had been reared.”⁷ The historian of the 146th New York asserted that the Federals “were in an enemy’s country, unfamiliar both to ourselves and to our commanders.”⁸ Similarly, Adam Badeau, a former

⁵ Lee certainly benefitted from local knowledge at Chancellorsville when one of the locals showed the route by which Jackson could execute his famed flank march. This may be the origin of the myth that the Confederates benefitted from a superior knowledge of the Wilderness during the Overland campaign.

⁶ Wilkeson, *Recollections of a Private*, 48.

⁷ Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps*, 409.

⁸ Mary Genevieve Green Brainard, *Campaigns of the One Hundred and Forty-Six Regiment, New York State Volunteers* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1915), 176.

member of Grant's staff, compared "the ignorance of the country under which the national soldiers labored" with the fact that "the enemy was perfectly familiar" with the Wilderness, "having held it in constant military occupation for nearly two years, and moved over it in actual campaigning three separate times."⁹

Not long after the battle was over Union soldiers concluded that the Confederates had held an edge in the Wilderness because of their greater familiarity with it. A. Jackson Crossley, a

⁹ Adam Badeau, *Military History of Ulysses S. Grant from April, 1861, to April, 1865*. 3 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881), 2:113. Another good example of the Confederates supposedly having a better knowledge of the Wilderness is found in the regimental history of the 150th Pennsylvania Volunteers. The author of that work states that "it must be remembered that we were in a wilderness, and unacquainted with the ground," while "on the other hand, the enemy was well acquainted with the ground and could get its forces into action more rapidly. As Jim Cummings used to say: 'All that General Lee would have to do would be to call some of his men and ask them if they were acquainted through there,—Oh, yes! we used to hunt cows through here, and know every cow-path.'" Thomas Chamberlain, *History of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers, Second Regiment, Bucktail Brigade* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1895), 217-218. For other examples of this argument see Joseph R. C. Ward, *History of the 106th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers 2d Brigade, 2d Division, 2d Corps, 1861-1865* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, Jr. & Co., 1906), 239-240 and Hyland C. Kirk, *Heavy Guns and Light: A History of the 4th New York Heavy Artillery* (New York: C. T. Dillingham, 1890), 154. Some postwar writers argued that familiarity with woods in general could help one perform better in the Wilderness. Andrew Humphreys, Meade's chief of staff, thought that "the greater familiarity of the Southern men with the dense forests and wooded swamps of the South would give them an advantage in an encounter in the Wilderness tending to neutralize the disparity of numbers." See Andrew A. Humphreys, *The Virginia Campaign of '64 and '65* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885), 12. Morris Schaff drew a similar conclusion about the western troops in the Army of the Potomac, arguing that they were more at home in the woods than the easterners and were consequently more successful in the Wilderness. Morris Schaff, *The Battle of the Wilderness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910), 199-200.

soldier in the engineer battalion, explained that “it is all woods and heavy undergrowth” with “very few cleared places which give the enemy a great advantage, we being the attacking party and they knowing the country so well they do good execution with their artillery while our own artillery have done but very little” while “our infantry have had to do this fighting under great disadvantages.”¹⁰ Theodore Lyman likewise conceded that “the Rebels had a very superior knowledge of the country.”¹¹

Former Confederates writing after the war offered more mixed assessments. Some agreed with their Union counterparts that they, or at least General Lee, had a superior knowledge of the Wilderness. Evander Law, a general in Longstreet’s corps, claimed that Lee “knew this tangled wilderness well, and appreciated fully the advantages such a field afforded for concealing his great inferiority of force and for neutralizing the superior strength of his antagonist.”¹²

Armistead Long, an artillery officer in the Army of Northern Virginia, agreed that “Lee had already tried the woods of the Wilderness as a battlefield, and knew its advantages,” and perhaps more importantly, he remarked that “its intricacies, which were familiar to him and his generals, were unknown ground to Grant.”¹³

¹⁰ A. Jackson Crossley to Sam, May 19, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 264.

¹¹ Theodore Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters 1863–1865: Letters of Colonel Theodore Lyman from The Wilderness to Appomattox*, ed. George R. Agassiz (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1922), 99.

¹² E. M. Law, “From the Wilderness to Cold Harbor,” in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York: The Century Company, 1884), 4:122.

¹³ Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 326.

Other observers, however, expressed doubts on this score, arguing that the Union and Rebel forces had comparable knowledge of the region. Even though Edward Porter Alexander called the Wilderness the Confederates' "favorite fighting ground," he still believed that because the Army of the Potomac had fought there previously it "knew" the Wilderness's "geography & physical features & could form a very fair estimate of the difficulties [it] had to meet & the best ways of overcoming them."¹⁴ Cadmus Wilcox, a general in A. P. Hill's Corps, drew a similar conclusion, noting that the Army of the Potomac had spent nearly a week in the Wilderness near Mine Run and suggested that "the country about and near [Mine Run] was as well known to [the Federal] army as to that commanded by General Lee."¹⁵ Andrew Humphreys, Meade's chief of staff, corroborated these statements to some degree, confessing that "the Army of the Potomac was well acquainted with the chief roads passing through that region," although he made no such claim about the "numerous wood-roads" which crisscrossed the Wilderness.¹⁶

By May 1864, both the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia were already well acquainted with the region as a whole, although only portions of the Confederate army had passed through the thicker Wilderness battlefield, while most of the Union soldiers had done so. Edward Porter Alexander, Longstreet's artillery chief, noted as much. He explained that the Union advance of May 1864 "was the 3rd campaign which the enemy had tried in the

¹⁴ Edward P. Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 351.

¹⁵ Cadmus Wilcox, "Lee and Grant in the Wilderness," in *The Annals of the War Written by Leading Participants North and South*, (Philadelphia: The Times Publishing Company, 1879), 500.

¹⁶ Humphreys, *The Virginia Campaign*, 10.

Wilderness within 13 months.”¹⁷ In May 1863, the two armies had fought to a standstill near Chancellorsville, immediately east of what was to become the 1864 battlefield. During this campaign, Stonewall Jackson’s Confederates had marched along the Brock road, which according to Theodore Lyman could boast the densest vegetation in the Wilderness, while the remainder of the Confederates were either in the open areas beyond the Wilderness or in what Union veterans claimed were the thinner parts of forest. The Union army, meanwhile, operated in one of the more open parts of the Wilderness around Chancellorsville. In November and December 1863, the Army of the Potomac had mounted a second campaign in the area, which came to grief along Mine Run, just to the west of the 1864 battleground. In this campaign, the Union army marched along the Turnpike and Plank Road, covering much of the same thickly-wooded ground that they would pass through in May 1864. The Confederates, in contrast, spent much of the campaign in the more open areas west of the Wilderness battlefield.¹⁸ In short, portions of both armies had spent time in the thicker and thinner parts of the Wilderness. Neither side monopolized knowledge about the region, but if either had an edge it should have been the Union soldiers as a greater number of them actually spent time in the more thickly wooded parts of the Wilderness battlefield.

If many soldiers in the two armies shared a basic familiarity with the Wilderness from past campaigns, there were others who were unacquainted with its peculiarities. For example, in the Army of Northern Virginia, James Longstreet, Lee’s senior corps commander, had not been

¹⁷ Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy*, 350-351.

¹⁸ For more information on Chancellorsville see Stephen W. Sears, *Chancellorsville* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996). For more information on Mine Run see Andrew A. Humphreys, *From Gettysburg to the Rapidan: The Army of the Potomac July, 1863 to April 1864* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1883).

at Chancellorsville or Mine Run.¹⁹ Portions of his corps had also missed these actions.²⁰ Martin L. Smith, the Army of Northern Virginia's chief engineer, who later figured prominently in Longstreet's famous flank attack on May 6, was also new to the Wilderness.²¹ In the Army of the Potomac, Burnside's IX Corps, and more importantly, Ulysses S. Grant were unfamiliar with the area.²²

Although the Wilderness lay on the Confederate side of the Rapidan, it does not follow that the Rebels were any more familiar with it than were the Union soldiers. Lee's infantry was stationed west of the Wilderness, and besides cavalry patrols, the Wilderness usually saw few Confederates.²³ Even the supposed advantage that might come from having native Virginians in the Confederate army proved negligible. Of Lee's 34 brigades that participated in the battle of the Wilderness, only 6, or about 18%, contained Virginians.²⁴ Of these troops how many were sufficiently familiar with the Wilderness to give them a material advantage over their Federal foes? Even when certain Confederates, such as General William Mahone, who had worked as an engineer laying out the Orange Plank Road, were familiar with the area, there is no evidence that

¹⁹ Gordon C. Rhea, *The Battle of the Wilderness May 5-6, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 354.

²⁰ Kershaw's division had missed Mine Run, while Field's division had missed both Chancellorsville and Mine Run. See Chapters I and III of Humphreys, *From Gettysburg to the Rapidan* and the respective orders of battle in the appendices of Sears, *Chancellorsville* and Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness*.

²¹ Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 354.

²² Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 7, 34.

²³ Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 22–23.

²⁴ For the number of Virginia units during the Wilderness campaign, see the Appendix in Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness* which contains the order of battle for the Army of Northern Virginia.

the Confederates were able to take advantage of this knowledge. In fact, Mahone himself had trouble controlling and coordinating his forces in the Wilderness's thickets, a fact which ultimately resulted in the accidental shooting of Longstreet. Meanwhile Lee's chief engineer, M. L. Smith, who had never before set eyes on the Wilderness provided crucial intelligence that allowed Longstreet to make a powerful flank attack.²⁵ And while, it is true that the Confederates could more easily obtain local guides, such as James Robinson, a "sheriff and a lifelong resident of the Wilderness" who helped direct Longstreet, it is unclear whether these guides provided that much of an advantage to the Army of Northern Virginia.²⁶ Furthermore, the Union army was equally adept at drawing on "reports of spies and of negroes" and had in the past found locals who were willing to act as guides, even if they were not always up to the task.²⁷

For those who had fought in the Wilderness previously, the benefit of this experience is questionable. While the soldiers might be acquainted with its general qualities—dense trees, narrow roads, etc.—this knowledge did not prepare those in either army to fight more effectively

²⁵ Robert E. L. Krick, "Like a Duck on a June Bug: James Longstreet's Flank Attack, May 6, 1864," in *The Wilderness Campaign*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 238, 251–252.

²⁶ Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 86; James Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1896), 557.

²⁷ Theodore Lyman, "Uselessness of the Maps Furnished to Staff of the Army of the Potomac Previous to the Campaign of May 1864," in *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts*, 14 vols. (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1881–1918), 4:79. During the Mine Run campaign Meade made use a local Unionist as guide, who appeared to be of little use. See U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 127 vols., index, and atlas (Washington: GPO, 1880–1901), ser. 1, 29 (2): 493. (hereafter cited as OR) Another Union general during the campaign apparently used a black man as a guide without great success. See OR 29 (2): 762.

on terrain that was far from uniform, especially if assigned to areas of the Wilderness with which they were unfamiliar. At best troops might enjoy a local advantage over the enemy in a specific area. Regardless if certain individuals knew the Wilderness better, it seems unlikely to have offered their army much of an advantage.

* * * * *

According to the traditional interpretation, another of the supposed advantages the Wilderness afforded the Confederates is that it hindered the ability of the Union army to make use of its superior numbers, especially its artillery and infantry. Even a superficial survey of both Union and Confederate accounts confirms the conspicuous absence of artillery. A chaplain with the 10th Massachusetts found that “from the nature of the country no artillery could be employed to advantage.”²⁸ A soldier with the 56th Pennsylvania commented that “there was scarcely a piece of artillery fired in the whole action, owing to the ground.”²⁹ Another Union soldier found “the ground rolling, and covered with wood, so that neither artillery nor cavalry can be used to advantage.”³⁰ Confederates largely echoed the Union accounts. One Confederate explained that

²⁸ “Letter from Chaplain Perkins,” *Boston (Ma.) Recorder*, May 27, 1864.

²⁹ Charles Mills to his mother, May 10, 1864, Coco Collection, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

³⁰ Darius Starr, “From Spotsylvania Courthouse to Andersonville: A Diary of Darius Starr,” ed. E. Merton Coulter, *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (June 1957): 180. For other Union examples see Elisha Hunt Rhodes, *All for the Union: The Civil War Diary and Letters of Elisha Hunt Rhodes* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 136; “From the 86th Regiment,” *Corning Journal* (Corning, New York), May 19, 1864; Francis B. Harris, Diary, May 5, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 352; and Cyrenus Stevens, Diary, May 5, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 36.

“the thicket that lay, along the whole face of the Confederate array is so impenetrable as to have excluded the use of artillery by the enemy, save only for the breadth of those openings where it is penetrated . . . by the old turnpike, and . . . by the plank road.”³¹ Likewise, Jacob Raymer of the 4th North Carolina remarked that “very little artillery was used” because of the thick Wilderness vegetation, while Philip Pendleton, a Confederate artilleryman made similar observations, blaming the topography and vegetation for the Rebels’ inability to employ their artillery.³²

Despite the challenges posed by the Wilderness, a small number of Union cannons did come into play and, on the whole, provided valuable service. These guns generally acted on the defensive, protecting fixed positions from enemy attacks, usually in clearings or along the roads, where they had a better range of fire. For instance, on May 5, a small detachment of Union artillery made the Confederates pay dearly as they advanced up the Plank Road. One artilleryman recounted that when the Confederate column entered the road he had his guns fire canister into it, “and well was it used.” He discovered that “the plank road was well suited for it, as the splinters did as much damage as the shot,” while the Confederates “learned that they could

³¹ “Battle of the Wilderness,” *Daily Constitutionalist* (Augusta, Ga.), May 31, 1864.

³² Jacob Nathaniel Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent: The Civil War Reports of Jacob Nathaniel Raymer, Fourth North Carolina*, ed. E.B. Munson (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 127; Philip H. Pendleton to his mother, May 5, 1864, Mss2 P3748 c 6-7, Pendleton Family Papers, 1861-1864 Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. For other Confederate examples see Charles Trueheart and Henry Trueheart, *Rebel Brothers: The Civil War Letters of the Truehearts*, ed. Edward B. Williams (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 94-95 and OR 36 (1): 1038.

not advance down a narrow road in the face of two guns capable of throwing into their midst *a peck of bullets a minute.*”³³

Likewise, on May 6, Union artillery played an important role in repelling the Confederate attack on the Brock Road. The Confederates had penetrated the outer Union entrenchments, which were incidentally on fire, and at that precarious moment, Union artillery “opened with shell and case-shot.” Later, when a Confederate “line advancing through the woods on” the “right and front” came into view, the Union artillery “opened upon it with double-shotted canister” which “checked the enemy’s advance until Carroll’s brigade charged the enemy with such fury as to utterly rout them.”³⁴ Francis B. Harris of the 12th New Jersey recalled that “our masked brass battery opened with canister and mowed them down like grass.”³⁵ Another Union soldier simply concluded that “a few of our Batteries did good service, firing best at the most critical moment.”³⁶

Confederate gunners also had limited opportunities but made the most of them. William Pendleton’s report on the Rebel artillery noted that the Confederates used the few guns posted in the Turnpike sector of the battlefield “several times . . . with good effect in repelling partial attacks of the enemy.”³⁷ Along the Plank Road corridor on May 5, Poague’s artillery “was

³³ “Grant’s Virginia Campaign,” *Columbia Democrat* (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania), June 18, 1864.

³⁴ OR 36 (1): 514.

³⁵ Francis B. Harris, *Diary*, May 6, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 352.

³⁶ “Grant’s Virginia Campaign,” *Columbia Democrat* (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania), June 18, 1864.

³⁷ OR 36 (1): 1038.

effectively used in the bloody repulse . . . to a very heavy assault of the enemy.”³⁸ The next day these guns again came into play and provided immeasurable service to Lee’s army. Hancock’s morning assault had broken through the weak Confederate line and Poague’s guns opened fire on the “immense masses” of Union troops, an act that “checked [their] advance and enabled Longstreet’s troops, just arriving on the field, to seize the favorable moment and compel them to recede with heavy loss.”³⁹

But what of the infantry? Did the Wilderness prevent the Army of the Potomac from bringing to bear its superior numbers? In order to address this important question, it is essential to understand how a Civil War army moved and how local circumstances affected that movement. As to the first point, Civil War armies, when not in battle, moved in columns, like a long snake of men and wagons. Theodore Lyman witnessed this spectacle during the Mine Run campaign in which the Army of the Potomac used many of the same roads that they would later travel during the Battle of the Wilderness. “A division of 4000 men, closed up,” explained Lyman, “would occupy some 1000 yards” assuming they were marching four abreast in a column. After “adding the space for pack horses, and the usual gaps and intervals, it would be nearer a mile.” He concluded that “even with no artillery,” which would take up even more space in the road, “an army would string out.” Moreover, the winding column could only move as fast as its head, whose speed depended in large part upon the road being used.⁴⁰

³⁸ OR 36 (1): 1039.

³⁹ OR 36 (1): 1040.

⁴⁰ Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 55. For other estimates for the length of columns see Earl J. Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 56-57.

The speed at which troops could march obviously depended on the condition of the roads, and the roads that cut across the Wilderness were of varying quality.⁴¹ The two main east-west routes were the Orange Turnpike and the Orange Plank Road. The former was originally a macadamized road made up of crushed stone, but by the time of the Civil War had become a plain dirt road fallen into disrepair.⁴² During the Mine Run campaign, Theodore Lyman noted how troops “clattered along” what he called “the most infernal of pikes, in holes and over rocks.”⁴³ In a letter home, he grumbled, “the road was horribly rough, full of great holes and big stones.”⁴⁴ A Union surgeon described the Turnpike as “flinty” when it was dry and “quite muddy” if it rained.⁴⁵ The Orange Plank Road was of more recent construction. Completed sometime in the 1850s, only “the right-hand side coming eastward”—which is where “the more heavily loaded wagons” would travel—was actually planked.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, like the Turnpike, the Orange Plank Road had fallen into disrepair by the time war came to the Wilderness. Alpheus Williams, a Union general during the Chancellorsville campaign, called it “an old,

⁴¹ For a discussion of the speeds at which a Civil War army column could march, see Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics*, 56.

⁴² Happel, “The Chancellors of Chancellorsville,” 261. Also see note 5 on p. 261.

⁴³ Theodore Lyman, *Meade’s Army: The Private Notebooks of Lt. Col. Theodore Lyman*, ed. David W. Lowe (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2007), 76.

⁴⁴ Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 58.

⁴⁵ J. Franklin Dyer, *The Journal of a Civil War Surgeon*, ed. Michael B. Chesson, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 133.

⁴⁶ Happel, “The Chancellors of Chancellorsville,” 261. The Plank Road lay to the south of the Turnpike for much of its length, but for some stretches, the Plank Road followed the course of the old Turnpike. In general, the road ran along the ridge between the Rapidan’s, Ny’s, and Po’s tributaries.

worn-out plank road, full of holes and gullies and very slippery from the rain, the mud on what planks were left being a foot or so deep.”⁴⁷ During the Mine Run campaign, Theodore Lyman, a Union staff officer, complained of the “holes . . . among the broken boards.”⁴⁸ A Confederate observer during the Wilderness campaign was equally critical of a road that “consists of one track of worn planking, and another of earth,” while “its course, very irregular, vibrates in and out of the south side of the generally straight line, known as the turnpike.” Another plank road made its way from Culpeper, to Germanna Ford, and then eventually merged with the Orange Plank Road.⁴⁹ Often called the Germanna Plank Road, it too was in poor shape by the Wilderness campaign, according to Milton Myers of the 110th Ohio, who found it “much out of repair.”⁵⁰

Despite sorry conditions, Theodore Lyman maintained that the Turnpike and plank roads were among the handful of “roads that can be counted on” in the Wilderness. In contrast were the “many narrow roads,” which crisscrossed the region. “Winding and little known,” Lyman thought that these roads “in good weather may serve for the slow passage of columns (though they are mere farmers’ or woodcutters’ thoroughfares),” but he warned, “a day’s rain will render them impassable for waggons and artillery.”⁵¹ The Army of the Potomac had access to two decent north-south roads leading from Germanna and Ely fords respectively, but even these could only handle so many soldiers at a time. When the Confederates arrived unexpectedly on

⁴⁷ Alpheus S. Williams, *From the Cannon’s Mouth: The Civil War Letters of General Alpheus S. Williams*, ed. Milo M. Quaipe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), 184.

⁴⁸ Lyman, *Meade’s Army*, 76.

⁴⁹ “Battle of the Wilderness,” *Daily Constitutionalist* (Augusta, Ga.), May 31, 1864.

⁵⁰ Milton Myers, *Diary*, May 6, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 153.

⁵¹ Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 53.

May 5, the Federals altered their marching plans and had to rely upon the lesser routes running between the Orange Turnpike and Plank Road. In contrast, two of Lee's corps could advance along two of the best roads in the Wilderness and arrive much faster than the Union high command had expected. Moreover, Lee did not have to rely on narrow back roads to reposition his forces once they had arrived, as his men were already on the two best east-west roads available. An exception was Longstreet's corps, which had to rely on a number of narrow back roads before it reached the Plank road.⁵²

The narrow roadways and the thick woods of the Wilderness made it difficult for the Army of the Potomac to deploy its four corps—II, V, VI, and IX—during the battle. On making contact with the Confederates on May 5, the army was badly strung out. The V Corps was partly on the Turnpike and partly between that road and the Plank Road. The VI Corps was farther back and had yet to reach the Turnpike, while the II Corps was spread along back roads south of the Plank road.⁵³ In order to fight the Confederates effectively, the Army of the Potomac needed to concentrate its strength. The V Corps had to pivot into line while reeling in its scattered units.⁵⁴ The VI Corps was stuck behind the V Corps and consequently had to make its way along a narrow trail in an effort to engage the enemy and protect the V Corps' dangling flank.⁵⁵ However, as Meade reported, "the Sixth Corps had not been able to get into position" to assist in

⁵² Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 82–83.

⁵³ Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 97–99, 104, 106, 109, 188; Mark Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On: The Virginia Campaign, May–June 1864*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 34–35, 42.

⁵⁴ Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 104, Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On*, 34–35.

⁵⁵ Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 106; Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On*, 34–35

the morning attack “owing to the dense thicket and want of roads.”⁵⁶ Meanwhile the II Corps was held up as well. Hancock, the corps’ commander, blamed the delay on “the Brock road being very narrow and heavily wooded on both sides,” which caused “the formation of the infantry in line of battle [to be] extremely slow,” a problem aggravated “by the artillery occupying the road” which “greatly retarded . . . their march.”⁵⁷ These delays nearly allowed the Confederates to seize the crucial intersection of the Plank and Brock roads, but a division of the VI Corps arrived just in time to prevent this from happening.⁵⁸ The next day Burnside found deploying his forces in the gap between the Turnpike and Plank Road to be a real struggle, noting that “a dense and almost impenetrable undergrowth caused considerable confusion, irregularity, and delay.”⁵⁹ Although Burnside’s attack made some headway, Theodore Lyman observed that “it was too late and [Burnside] had not enough force to follow on.”⁶⁰

The Confederates deployed their troops more easily than the Federals because of their smaller numbers, the better roads which they had access to, and the superior handling of their forces on the march. On May 5, Ewell’s Corps moved along the Turnpike and Hill’s Corps along the Plank Road. Their deployment was relatively easy, as they moved along two wide roads with smaller bodies of troops.⁶¹ The following day, Longstreet’s Corps arrived on the Plank Road, but its deployment proved troublesome. By the time his troops had arrived, Hancock’s attack had

⁵⁶ OR 36 (1):189.

⁵⁷ OR 36 (1): 320.

⁵⁸ Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On*, 39.

⁵⁹ OR 36 (1): 906.

⁶⁰ Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 96.

⁶¹ Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 82, 84–85, 120–127.

sent A.P. Hill's corps reeling. Thus, while Longstreet's men were "forming line of battle in a dense thicket under a severe fire of the enemy the line was constantly broken through by men hurrying to the rear."⁶² These conditions, Longstreet concluded, "were most unfavorable," nevertheless, he concluded that his troops "not only held their own, but formed their line, and in turn, charging the enemy, drove him back in confusion over half a mile."⁶³ Longstreet's deployment epitomized the deft hand and pugnacious spirit, which characterized the Army of Northern Virginia in the Wilderness.⁶⁴

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⁶² OR 36 (1): 1063.

⁶³ OR 36 (1): 1055.

⁶⁴ Postwar memoirs by Moxley Sorrel, Edward Porter Alexander, and Longstreet himself emphasize the difficulties that Longstreet's men faced while deploying on May 6 and exalt their conduct in overcoming them. Despite losing their way at one point, Longstreet's troops avoided any delays by having the rear of the column keep marching until it caught up with the front half. Then moving in two parallel columns, they made their way to the field, formed their battle lines, and allowed the fleeing Confederate's of Hill's Corps to pass through. Sorrel considered "the simple act of forming line in that dense undergrowth, under heavy fire and with the Third Corps men pushing to the rear through the ranks," as "perhaps [Longstreet's Corps'] greatest performance for steadiness and inflexible courage and discipline." He concluded that "none but seasoned soldiers . . . could have done even that much." See G. Moxley Sorrel, *Recollections of a Confederate Staff Officer* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1905), 240; Edward P. Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 357; and James Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1896), 559-560.

As Earl Hess has argued, once battle actually commenced, the Wilderness played no favorites, limiting and frustrating both sides. One of the woods' most pronounced effects was that it limited the soldiers' ability to maneuver. One Vermont soldier recalled "there was no double quick about it—for a mile or more into the woods . . . stumbling over logs, ditches, brush, etc., till our faces, hands and shins smarted from bruises and scratches."⁶⁵ A Chaplain with the 10th Massachusetts observed that the "thick growth of small oak trees from one to three inches in diameter and with the branches so interlaced," made "passage through them extremely difficult."⁶⁶ Thomas Galwey suggested that "it was no easy matter to work one's way through the wild and formidable thicket, so dense that even at noonday the sun's light scarcely penetrated it." Even though Galwey's unit "could see the Confederates advancing almost at a run on our rear," they found themselves unable to shift their lines, as "the stiff and crooked hazel brush that surrounded [them] prevented any sort of a regular formation at all."⁶⁷ Confederates also had difficulty maneuvering. Alexander Boteler, a Confederate staff officer, claimed that the "tangled mass of undergrowth apparently interminable as so densely intricate that it would be difficult for a dog to get through it."⁶⁸ Another Rebel observed that "the undergrowth of bushes and briars [were] so matted and tangled that it is very difficult to force a way through it."⁶⁹ Lewis Leon of

⁶⁵ Lemuel Abijah Abbot, *Personal Recollections and Civil War Diary 1864* (Burlington, VT: Free Press Printing Co., 1908), 46.

⁶⁶ "Letter from Chaplain Perkins," *Boston (Ma.) Recorder*, May 27, 1864.

⁶⁷ Thomas Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 195, 199.

⁶⁸ Alexander Boteler, Diary, May 4, 1864, William Elizabeth Brooks Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁶⁹ "Gen. Longstreet and the Battle of the Wilderness, May 6, 1864," *Daily Constitutional* (Augusta, Ga.), December 20, 1865.

the 1st North Carolina griped that “it is almost impossible for a man to walk, as the woods are thick with an underbrush growth and all kinds of shrubbery, old logs, grapevines, and goodness knows what.”⁷⁰

Predictably, the thick vegetation also disrupted linear formations in both armies. The Army of the Potomac recounted many a tale of woe on this score. A soldier from the 5th New Jersey found “it was impossible to keep a battalion or even company front, so dense was the growth of young saplings.”⁷¹ The 5th Wisconsin’s James Anderson explained that his unit fought “in a dense thicket and our ranks were broken at every step.”⁷² Thomas Galwey of the II Corps described his unit “pushing [their] way through infernal thickets that flew up and struck [them] in the face at every step,” and noted that “the struggle up to this point had been over ground so rough and through a thicket so dense that when a halt was called to re-form, only a small part of any one command could be assembled.”⁷³ The Confederates faced similar difficulties. James Armstrong of the 1st South Carolina thought that the “dense thicket” ahead of his unit was “almost impassible for advancing in line.”⁷⁴ During Gordon’s May 6 flank attack, Henry Wingfield, a member of the 58th Virginia, discovered that “owing to the thick branches and

⁷⁰ Lewis Leon, *Diary of A Tar Heel Confederate Soldier* (Charlotte, N.C.: Stone Publishing Company, 1913), 60. For another example, see Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent*, 127.

⁷¹ “The 5th Regiment—One Month’s Record,” *Newark Daily Advertiser* (Newark, New Jersey), June 17, 1864.

⁷² James S. Anderson, *The Papers of James S. Anderson*, ed. Dennis R. Moore (Madison: Archives of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1989), 313.

⁷³ Thomas F. Galwey, *The Valiant Hours: An Irishman in the Civil War*, ed. W.S. Nye (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Company, 1961), 197–198.

⁷⁴ “Letter from Virginia,” *Charleston (Sc.) Courier*, May 26, 1864.

undergrowth in the woods through which we passed our line was in considerable disorder.”⁷⁵

One Rebel private recalled that after driving some Federal soldiers his unit too was soon “advancing in considerable disorder.”⁷⁶

Another important impediment for both armies was limited visibility caused by a combination of thick vegetation and smoke from all the musketry. While it is safe to say that visibility was generally poor, the Wilderness’s vegetation was a patchwork of different types of growth, and visibility varied accordingly as evidenced in the soldiers’ accounts. Lemuel Abbot of the VI Corps described how “the brush . . . kept each from seeing the other” although the enemy was “hardly a hundred yards away.”⁷⁷ Washington Roebling commented that part of the V Corps “had to advance through an exceedingly thick growth of small pines and underbrush where a man could not be seen 20 feet off.”⁷⁸ Theodore Lyman, who saw several parts of the battlefield, explained that “there were many places where a line of troops could with difficulty be seen at fifty yards.” In addition, Lyman recalled speaking with one Union general who claimed that “the whole of Hill’s Corps was in his front and the skirmishers only 300 yards” away, but “for all [Lyman] could see they might have been in Florida.”⁷⁹ In the Plank Road corridor,

⁷⁵ Henry W. Wingfield, *Diary*, May 6, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 167.

⁷⁶ Roberts, “The Wilderness and Spotsylvania, May 4-12, 1864,” 62.

⁷⁷ Abbot, *Personal Recollections and Civil War Diary*, 44. Note that he is in Rickett’s division, and is stationed north of the Turnpike.

⁷⁸ Report of the Operations of the 5th Corps, A. P. in Genl. Grant’s Campaign from Culpeper to Petersburg as Seen by W. A. Roebling, Maj. & A.D.C. 1864, May 5, 1864, box 24, volume 7B, Gouverneur Kemble Warren Papers (SC 10668), New York State Library, Albany.

⁷⁹ Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 89.

Thomas Galwey also found that “in most parts of the thicket one could not see twenty feet plainly in any direction.”⁸⁰ Charles Mills, an adjutant with the 56th Massachusetts in Burnside’s IX Corps griped that “it was all blind work” as “the woods were intolerably thick, and composed of young trees, so that it was impossible to see half a rod [a little over 8 feet] in front.”⁸¹ Noting the thick vegetation, Daniel Holt, a Union surgeon, thought it “no wonder [that] we cannot find or see a reb until we get right upon them.”⁸²

The Wilderness caused similar problems for the Confederates. One Rebel recalled “the woods in front were so thick that it was impossible to see more than 20 steps from our line.”⁸³ James Armstrong of the 1st South Carolina pointed out that “in the Wilderness you could not see the left of your own regiment.”⁸⁴ Another Confederate remarked that “at a distance of forty or fifty yards the form of a man could scarcely be distinguished by any but a quick-sighted observer.”⁸⁵ Henry Heth, one of Lee’s generals, complained that “the dense wood, on our right, left, and in our front obstructed all view.”⁸⁶ Peter Alexander, a Confederate soldier, explained this in a letter to a South Carolina newspaper. “So thick are the woods in some places,”

⁸⁰ Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 197.

⁸¹ Charles Mills to his mother, May 10, 1864, Coco Collection, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle Barracks, PA..

⁸² Holt, *A Surgeon’s Civil War*, 182.

⁸³ “Richmond Correspondence,” *Mobile Advertiser and Register* (Mobile, Alabama), June 1, 1864.

⁸⁴ “Letter from Virginia,” *Charleston (Sc.) Courier*, May 26, 1864.

⁸⁵ “Gen. Longstreet and the Battle of the Wilderness, May 6, 1864,” *Daily Constitutionalist* (Augusta, Ga.), December 20, 1865.

⁸⁶ Henry Heth, Report, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 178.

concluded Alexander, “that it is impossible to distinguish a man, even in the absence of verdure, at a distance of fifty paces.”⁸⁷

Under such conditions, soldiers had to rely on senses other than sight.⁸⁸ Theodore Lyman, one of Meade’s staff officers had plenty of practice at this. In one instance he explained that the

⁸⁷ “From General Lee’s Army,” *The Daily South Carolinian* (Columbia, South Carolina), May 28, 1864.

⁸⁸ For an analysis of how senses affected the way people experienced certain events of the Civil War see Mark Smith, *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). Smith noted how “war is hell on” the senses as “the violence of it engraves sensory memory in ways other experiences cannot approach, memory so powerful it can be relived, over and over again.” He also observed that the senses “blend and interact,” but argued that one sense might “dominate and . . . overwhelm the others, while also informing them all.” See Smith, 7-8. At the battle of the Wilderness, one of the senses that came to the forefront was hearing, and many soldiers noted how loud and intense the musketry was, often overwhelming other senses. A good example of this is provided by A. M. Stewart, a Union Chaplain, who discovered that “suddenly these hitherto quiet woods seemed to be lifted up, shook, rent and torn asunder” as “thousands and thousands of minie-rifles united their sharp crack and ear-piercing sound, rendering the tumult one of terrible grandeur.” Later he explained how the fire “along the whole line, often extending for miles, rolls an ever recurring crash, crash, roar, roar,” and while it “occasionally, and without any seeming concert, a momentary cessation occurs, yet like the lull in a hurricane, but to increase its strength.” For him the battle in the Wilderness was fought “beneath a canopy of Sulphur and a bedlam of sounds, like confusion confounded.” “Chaplain Stewarts Letter,” *American Presbyterian* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), May 19, 1864. It is not surprising that men often claimed the musketry at the battle of the Wilderness was the loudest they ever had heard. For examples, see William H. Morse, Diary, May 5, 1864, Androscoggin Historical Society, Auburn, Maine; William Owen, Diary, May 6, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 318; AEOF to ?, May 15, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 325; and Alfred Apted, Diary, May 6, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 195.

“sudden sound of heavy firing told of some new attack.”⁸⁹ In another, he used musketry to measure the progress of Union forces, at one moment finding their advance “was quite apparent from the distance of the receding firing and the absense of those infernal minié balls.”⁹⁰ Later as the Union forces were driven back “the musketry now drew nearer” and soon “stragglers began to come back, and, in a little while, a crowd of men emerged from the thicket in full retreat.”⁹¹ Thomas Galwey reported that the Confederates used noise to find the position of Union troops they could not see. “The enemy,” he wrote, “could see us no better than we could see them. But they could hear us as the brake crackled around us, and they could very well guess at what course to direct their fire.” Galwey could also tell “from the heavy volleys” that his unit was “in action against fresh troops with plenty of ammunition.”⁹² A member of the 5th New Jersey remarked that his unit “commenced a rapid and steady fire upon the enemy, whose direction and strength we could only judge by the storm of bullets whistling about us.”⁹³ Gen. Richard S. Ewell who commanded the Turnpike sector, relied on sound to measure the progress of A.P. Hill’s corps along the Plank Road.⁹⁴ Col. James Hagood, commanding the First South Carolina Infantry judged by “the timid firing of the enemy . . . that he was not in heavy force,” but had to confirm this by sending out skirmishers to feel for the enemy.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 97.

⁹⁰ Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 94.

⁹¹ Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 95.

⁹² Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 197-198.

⁹³ “The 5th Regiment—One Month’s Record,” *Newark Daily Advertiser* (Newark, New Jersey), June 17, 1864.

⁹⁴ OR 36 (1): 1070.

⁹⁵ OR 36 (1): 1068.

As Earl Hess has contended, the various limitations soldiers in both armies experienced combined to produce deadly, close-range shootouts. A signal officer in the II Corps reported that “in a place like this neither army could see the other until meeting almost face to face, necessarily making the fighting the closest and most desperate.”⁹⁶ For instance, Washington Roebling found “large crowds of soldiers pouring out of the woods in great confusion and almost panic-stricken; some said they were flanked, others that they had suddenly come upon the Rebs. lying concealed in two lines of battle in the thick underbrush, and that our men had broke and run after the first volley.”⁹⁷ The soldiers in Wilbur Fisk’s outfit “saw nothing of the enemy, and heard nothing of them until just before we reached the latter point, when our column unexpectedly came up on a column of rebel troops coming this way.”⁹⁸ They were “under fire over three hours” and Fisk found that their line was “close on to them, and their fire was terribly effective.” He remarked that “had the rebels fired a little lower, they would have annihilated the whole line; they nearly did it as it was.”⁹⁹ Several Union chaplains described the type of battle fought in the Wilderness. One remarked that his unit “suddenly encountered [the Rebels] without any previous admonition of their near proximity” and found themselves “within direct and

⁹⁶ “From the Army,” *Brockport Republic* (Brockport, New York), June 16, 1864. See also Charles Cummings to his wife, May 15, 1864, in *A War of the People: Vermont Civil War Letters*, ed. Jeffrey D. Marshall (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 228.

⁹⁷ Report of the Operations . . . by W. A. Roebling, May 5, 1864, Gouverneur Kemble Warren Papers, New York State Library.

⁹⁸ Wilbur Fisk, *Hard Marching Every Day: The Civil War Letters of Private Wilbur Fisk, 1861–1865*, ed. Emil and Ruth Rosenblatt, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1983), 215.

⁹⁹ Fisk, *Hard Marching Every Day*, 215.

deadly range” of the enemy’s musketry.¹⁰⁰ Another chaplain named Perkins noted that the battle “was simply a stand up fight of the most desperate and deadly nature,” while John N. Brown, the chaplain of the 111th New York, labeled it “a pure musketry fight of the severest kind with heavy loss on both sides.”¹⁰¹

The Confederates experienced similar difficulties. Charles T. Bowen of the 12th U.S. recalled waiting to fire on the advancing Confederates “[until] just as they raised above the hill” at which point the men “poured in our volley with deadly aim & raising to our feet charged,” although they only found “the dead & wounded” in front of them.¹⁰² He concluded that “a regiment never got a more deadly volley than they & no wonder for we were within 20 yards of them.”¹⁰³ John Roberts, a Confederate soldier, observed that “the contending forces were about eighty yards apart and the contest becoming warmer each minute.” His line continued advancing until it was “soon in forty paces of the Yankees . . . standing erect and firing deliberately enough.” However, “the woods were fortunately very thick and they had not discovered our true position.” Once the Confederates “commenced pouring into their ranks [their] well directed storm of lead” they Yankees found “it was more than they could stand and in less than three minutes their line broke.”¹⁰⁴ Another Confederate remembered the Union forces “advanced to

¹⁰⁰ “Chaplain Stewarts Letter,” *American Presbyterian* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), May 19, 1864.

¹⁰¹ “Letter from Chaplain Perkins,” *Boston (Ma.) Recorder*, May 27, 1864; John N. Brown, *Diary*, May 5, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 419.

¹⁰² Charles T. Bowen, *Dear Friends at Home: The Civil War Letters and Diaries of Sergeant Charles T. Bowen*, ed. Edward K. Cassedy (Baltimore: Butternut & Blue, 2001), 459.

¹⁰³ Bowen, *Dear Friends at Home*, 459.

¹⁰⁴ John W. Roberts, “The Wilderness and Spotsylvania, May 4-12, 1864: Narrative of a Private Soldier,” ed. Albert Hubbard Roberts, *Florida Historical Society Quarterly* 11 (October 1932): 59-60.

within fifty yards of our line, but were repulsed . . . leaving one hundred dead on the field.”¹⁰⁵ A member of the 15th Georgia simply concluded that “we had necessarily to fight at close quarters with muskets,” since there was little chance for artillery support.¹⁰⁶

Often the fighting was described as a sort of back-and-forth affair with no clear winner except the Angel of Death. A Federal signal officer claimed “the fighting was little more than charging and recharging, our men leaving their entrenchments, charging on the enemy, they repulsing us and driving us out, following us back, and we driving them back in turn.”¹⁰⁷ A member of the 5th New Jersey noted that his unit “would halt and fire for a few moments, and then charge forward with a yell, the Johnnies retiring at every advance of our line.”¹⁰⁸ Theodore Lyman observed that “a great battle in America” consisted of little more than advancing and “then *wrang, wr-r-rang*, for three or four hours, or for all day, and the poor, bleeding wounded streaming to the rear.”¹⁰⁹ Elisha Hunt Rhodes commented that “the line surged backwards and

¹⁰⁵ “The Late Operations of Lee’s Army—Battles in the Wilderness. Battle of Tuesday, the 10th, &c.,” *Sentinel* (Richmond, Virginia), May 24, 1864.

¹⁰⁶ “Benning’s Brigade in the Virginia Battles,” *Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle and Sentinel*, June 1, 1864. Tree could provide some protection in these close range battles, but this sort of cover benefitted both sides. Henry Heth, one of Lee’s generals explained that in his Plank Road front on May 5 “the men had no protection other than that afforded by the growth of timber in their front, which, of course afforded the enemy equal protection.” Henry Heth, Report, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 178.

¹⁰⁷ “From the Army,” *Brockport Republic* (Brockport, New York), June 16, 1864.

¹⁰⁸ “The 5th Regiment—One Month’s Record,” *Newark Daily Advertiser* (Newark, New Jersey), June 17, 1864.

¹⁰⁹ Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 101.

forwards, now advancing and now retreating until darkness put an end to the carnage.”¹¹⁰ Hess was correct then that the Wilderness made it difficult for either side to gain a decisive advantage.

While these examples might suggest that the Wilderness prevented the armies from functioning at all, it is important to realize that despite such conditions the armies continued to operate, albeit not at peak efficiency. Earl Hess in his study of Civil War infantry tactics has noted that many historians “imply that the linear system was inadequate to meet the cluttered nature of the battlefield.” However, he maintains that “nothing could be further from the truth.” Hess observes that unit commanders “normally overcame the difficulties and maintained forward movement or restored cohesion.”¹¹¹ The same could be said for the soldiers who fought in the Wilderness. They advanced despite the vegetation, although at a slower rate and in a less orderly manner than might be expected on an open battlefield. Moreover, when the lines became disordered, unit commanders did their best to dress their lines by calling a halt or reforming in an open area after a chaotic march through the woods. A soldier in the 5th New Jersey provided an excellent account of this pattern during the battle of the Wilderness. He discovered that in advancing “it was impossible to keep a battalion or even company front, so dense was the growth of young saplings; but the men soon found their places when the line came to be established, and lying flat upon the ground, commenced a rapid and steady fire upon the enemy.” Later his unit charged the Rebels and the men “advanced as rapidly as possible under the circumstances for 50 or 75 yards.” Then they realized that only part of the line had charged, they “halted and again commenced our fire lying down,” and “the line soon became readjusted.”¹¹² It was not parade

¹¹⁰ Rhodes, *All for the Union*, 136.

¹¹¹ Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics*, 101.

¹¹² “The 5th Regiment—One Month’s Record,” *Newark (NJ) Daily Advertiser*, June 17, 1864.

ground standards, but the soldiers made it work and were still able to fight despite being in the Wilderness's tricky thickets.

The Wilderness's thickets not only disrupted formations and limited visibility, but also provided fuel for fires. One could certainly argue that the fires that raged during the battle of the Wilderness proved advantageous to the Confederates. This is especially the case in the oft-cited May 6 fire along the Plank Road corridor that engulfed the Federals' Brock Road breastworks, forcing the soldiers manning it to evacuate, while the Confederates took possession of it for a time before being expelled by a Union counterattack. Moreover, some Federals were quick to argue that the Confederates had not only benefitted from these forest fires, but had intentionally started them to alter the course of battle in one way or another.¹¹³ In the Turnpike sector, for instance, Emory Upton, a general in the Federal VI Corps, thought "the woods in front and around our position had been set on fire by the enemy to prevent our advance."¹¹⁴ Other Union soldiers thought the Confederates were working to create a smoke screen for their attacks or to drive the Federals from their position. Josiah F. Murphey, a sergeant in the 20th Massachusetts thought either "the enemy set the underbrush on fire or it caught fire," but was sure that "under cover of the smoke they charged on us."¹¹⁵ A soldier in the 5th New Jersey noted how the Confederates located the unprotected Union flank along the Plank Road and then proceeded to

¹¹³ Many Union soldiers simply stated that the woods were on fire or had caught fire without pointing a finger at the Confederates. For example, see Elisha Hunt Rhodes, *All for the Union: The Civil War Diary and Letters of Elisha Hunt Rhodes* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 138.

¹¹⁴ OR 36 (1): 665-666.

¹¹⁵ Josiah F. Murphey, Sergeant, Company I, 20th Massachusetts Vols. Reminiscences Ms. "20th" Cab. 6.5

“set fire to the woods, advancing under cover of the smoke upon our flank.” The Federals soon became aware of the fact when they received “a volley . . . from about 300 yards in our rear.”¹¹⁶ Similarly, James Freeman of the 11th New Jersey concluded that the Confederates had “got upon our left flank a few minutes by setting the leaves on fire in front of us, and drove us entirely out of the woods.”¹¹⁷ Robert Robertson, a member of the 93rd New York, likewise claimed that on the night of May 6, 1864 “the Rebels set the woods on fire to drive us out of our position.”¹¹⁸

Despite these assertions, there is no evidence that the Confederates intentionally started these fires. They never claimed to do so, and—revealingly—never accused the Union soldiers of having done so.¹¹⁹ If anything, these assertions are just one more example of Union soldiers accusing the Confederates of being up to something, a conspiratorial mindset that would ultimately lead them to conclude that the Confederates had tried to trap them in the Wilderness where they held an edge over their Yankee foes. Furthermore, the effect the fires actually had on

¹¹⁶ “The 5th Regiment—One Month’s Record,” *Newark Daily Advertiser* (Newark, New Jersey), June 17, 1864.

¹¹⁷ James W. Freeman, *Diary*, May 6, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 480.

¹¹⁸ Robert S. Robertson to his parents, May 14, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 219.

¹¹⁹ The Confederates did not accuse the Federals of starting fires intentionally at the battle of the Wilderness, although some Rebels made such an accusation against the Union soldiers at Chancellorsville, arguing that they had set the woods on fire to cover their retreat or destroy the ammunition they had left in the woods. See John Piney Oden, “The End of Oden’s War: A Confederate Captain’s Diary,” ed. Michael Barton, *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 84 and David Read Evans Winn to Fannie, May 9, 1863, David Read Evans Winn Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

the battle's outcome is debatable. Traditionally historians have argued that the Brock Road entrenchments catching fire was the reason the Confederates were able to penetrate the Union works on May 6. However, Winfield S. Hancock, whose soldiers manned these breastworks, hinted that the fiery breastworks merely aggravated an already deteriorating situation. The general reported that the Confederate musketry "was very heavy" although not very effective at first. "Some of the troops began to waver" though after about half an hour of this musketry, and some of the soldiers stationed at the breastworks "gave way, retiring in disorder toward Chancellorsville." Hancock claimed that the "confusion and disorganization among a portion of the troops . . . on this occasion was greatly increased, if not originated, by the front line of breastworks having taken fire a short time before the enemy made his attack." The soldiers stationed there faced "the intense heat and the smoke, which was driven by the wind directly into" them which "prevented them on portions of the line from firing over the parapet, and at some points compelled them to abandon the line."¹²⁰ Hancock's account then suggests that the Union troops were already wavering and starting to retreat, and that the fire just acted as a catalyst, speeding a process already under way. William W. Swan, a Union V Corps veteran, noted as much long after the war, observing that "to this fire is generally attributed the temporary loss of the works," but he argued "that too much importance has been given to this fire."¹²¹ Besides, had the wind simply blown the other way, it might have hindered, or even prevented, the Confederate assault, rather than aiding it. Suffice it to say that even had the Confederates set the fires, there was no

¹²⁰ OR 36 (1): 324.

¹²¹ William W. Swan, "Battle of the Wilderness," in *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts*, 14 vols. (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1881–1918), 4: 161.

way for them to control them once they were ablaze, and the fact that the Union breastworks caught fire was pure luck.

* * * * *

But did Lee's choice of battlefield hamstring his offensive tactics, especially the flank attacks which his army had so profitably employed in the past? Just consider Longstreet's morning assault on the Army of the Potomac's right flank and Gordon's evening attack against its left flank. In each case, the commanding general scouted the position to find a way around the Union army's flanks, which, although hidden by the forest, were still vulnerable to being turned. In both cases, the Confederates took the initiative to find their opponent's unprotected flank, which the Federals might have done just as easily. On Longstreet's end, Maj. Gen. M. L. Smith, along with others reconnoitered the Union line and "reported that the left of the enemy's line extended but a short distance beyond the plank road," which presented an inviting target to be sure. Moreover, the Confederates could get at this dangling flank undetected by means of an unfinished railroad that ran more or less parallel with the Plank Road.¹²² On Gordon's front, the Confederates found the Union position was "resting in a dense woodland" with its flank given no protection or support save a few lookouts. Gordon also had a convenient staging ground in a field that lay some 400 yards from the Union flank. Here he could assemble "a line out of view and at right angles" to the Federal line.¹²³

Longstreet and Gordon's flank attacks were initially successful because the Wilderness's thick forest screened the movement of their forces and concealed the number of troops they had

¹²² OR 36 (1): 1055.

¹²³ OR 36 (1): 1077.

in their columns. Longstreet's soldiers, noted one Confederate, "rushed forward with overwhelming impetuosity, driving the enemy panic stricken and in . . . confusion from all his strongholds." The Rebels relished the chase, and as "the enemy continued to rush pell mell through the dense thicket of undergrowth on the left of the road," the Confederates hounded them, "pursuing rapidly and pouring a destructive fire into their scattered ranks."¹²⁴ Another Confederate contended that "the flank movement was completely successful" as "the enemy was taken by surprise and driven back . . . with heavy loss," while others were "retreating rapidly down the plank road."¹²⁵ On the other end of the Confederate line, Gordon's men found the Union flank unprepared to meet the Confederate attack. Gordon himself reported that the Union troops were "surprised by this sudden and vigorous attack," and they "deserted their trenches and fled," while "repeated efforts were made by brigade commanders to change front and check" the Rebel advance. These efforts were in vain, as the Federal units "were rapidly broken and scattered." Gordon concluded that "of the entire force which my brigade encountered not an organized regiment was left," in his words "the rout was complete."¹²⁶

The Union soldiers who witnessed or experienced Longstreet and Gordon's flank attacks offered similar accounts. One caught sight of a "perfect stampede" that "was pouring down from the front" in the wake of Longstreet's attack and did the best he could just to rally the jittery men at the Brock Road, "which they were beginning to leave in panic."¹²⁷ Union soldiers found

¹²⁴ "Wofford's Georgia Brigade," *Southern Confederacy*, (Atlanta, Georgia), June 15, 1864.

¹²⁵ "From General Lee's Army," *The Daily South Carolinian* (Columbia, South Carolina), May 28, 1864.

¹²⁶ OR 36 (1): 1077.

¹²⁷ Charles Mills to his mother, May 10, 1864, Coco Collection, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle Barracks, PA..

Longstreet's attack particularly galling because they lost the ground they had won at great cost earlier that morning.¹²⁸ Lemuel Abijah Abbot, a soldier in the 10th Vermont, remarked that Gordon's attack "threw [the Union troops] into disorder . . . , and created temporary confusion among the trains and hospital corps nearby."¹²⁹ Washington Roebling, a staff officer in the V Corps, witnessed "an excited crowd of soldiers apparently scared to death" in the wake of Gordon's attack. He claimed that "they amounted . . . to almost a division, and not a single one could tell why he was running."¹³⁰ A soldier in the 110th Ohio, found himself caught up in the rout. He complained that "new troops broke and ran, coming down on us like a whirlwind," and despite his unit's readiness to repel the attackers, he and his comrades were reluctant to fire in the growing blackness, lest they mow down their own men. Such being the case, he felt "we could do no better than to go with the crowd," and quickly withdraw.¹³¹

The obstacles presented by the Wilderness, as well as other factors, limited the success of each flank attack. Longstreet's attack petered out as the "dense thicket of undergrowth" through which his soldiers were passing disordered their ranks. Gen. William T. Wofford, whose unit was involved in the flank attack, was obliged to call "a halt, in order that his line might be reformed," while giving his exhausted troops a breather.¹³² Worse still, converging Confederate

¹²⁸ For examples see Charles Mills to his mother, May 10, 1864, Coco Collection, U. S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle Barracks, PA; Fisk, *Hard Marching Everyday*, 216.

¹²⁹ Abbot, *Personal Recollections and Civil War Diary*, 48.

¹³⁰ Report of the Operations . . . by W. A. Roebling, May 6, 1864, Gouverneur Kemble Warren Papers, New York State Library.

¹³¹ "From the 110th—Letter from Fred. Larue," *Xenia Torchlight* (Xenia, Ohio), June 1, 1864.

¹³² "Wofford's Georgia Brigade," *Southern Confederacy*, (Atlanta, Georgia), June 15, 1864.

forces fired into each other, badly wounding Longstreet. Mahone's brigade, which had been part of the flank attack, "was drawn up in the dense woods parallel to the [plank] road, and not more than seventy five paces from it." At such close range, they were "unable to distinguish one man from another through the woods," and fired on their perceived enemies.¹³³ One Confederate lamented that since there was "no one present to take charge of and make a proper disposition of our forces," after Longstreet's wounding, "we failed to follow up our glorious success, and thus permitted the enemy to escape an overwhelming and decisive defeat."¹³⁴

Gordon's flank attack ran into similar problems. One Confederate explained how one of the brigades (Pegram's) met disaster. "A misconception of orders" led to the brigade breaking into two pieces, each following different trajectories. Darkness combined with "the nature of the ground, which was a bog, covered with a thick and scrubby undergrowth" only increased the muddle, "breaking the line and throwing the men into huddles sometimes twenty deep picking their way through." What was left of the line then came "suddenly upon a portion of the enemy's works," and, to top things off, other Confederates involved in the attack fired into the brigade's flank.¹³⁵

In the case of both Longstreet and Gordon's flank attacks, the Wilderness proved a double-edged sword. On the one hand the Wilderness screened the Confederates, which made it possible for them to surprise the Federals on their vulnerable flanks—an opportunity which Lee's army might not have had in the open. It also amplified the effect of the relatively small

¹³³ "From General Lee's Army," *Daily South Carolinian* (Columbia, South Carolina), May 28, 1864.

¹³⁴ "Wofford's Georgia Brigade," *Southern Confederacy*, (Atlanta, Georgia), June 15, 1864.

¹³⁵ "The Late Operations of Lee's Army—Battles in the Wilderness," *Sentinel* (Richmond, Virginia), May 24, 1864.

Confederate attacks because the Union soldiers could not determine their opponents' strength. On the other hand, the Wilderness inevitably disordered the Confederate assaults, although other factors such as Longstreet's wounding and the oncoming darkness no doubt added to the confusion. Hess then is correct that the Wilderness foiled some aspects of the Confederate offensive capability, but he fails to recognize the opportunities that the Wilderness offered and to give the Confederates credit for taking advantage of those opportunities. It is also important to recognize that the way was open on May 6 for either army to mount a flank attack. Both sides were aware of the routes the Confederates used, but only the Rebels were bold enough to do so.¹³⁶ Furthermore, despite the problems with Longstreet and Gordon's flank attacks, they were still among the most effective assaults during the battle. These attacks turned the Wilderness's thick forest—which was in most offensive operations a major liability—into an substantial asset that allowed the Confederates to turn the enemy's flanks undetected, while magnifying the panic and confusion caused by a relatively small attacking force. While the Wilderness ultimately limited the success any offensive movement might have, one should not lose sight of what the Confederate flank attacks did achieve with so little force in such a difficult environment.

Although these operations were impressive, any account of Confederate tactical superiority must acknowledge that the Rebels did not always put in a good showing and that the Union army nearly achieved victory at one point. Certainly Lee's May 6 frontal assault on the Brock Road entrenchments was a bloody failure that marred the Rebels' record. Long after the war, Edward Porter Alexander, an artillery officer in Lee's army, argued that "this attack ought never, never to have been made," as it only resulted in "wasting good soldiers" and

¹³⁶ Krick, "Like a Duck on a June Bug," 239–240; Rhea, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 353; Hyde, *Following the Greek Cross; or, Memories of the Sixth Army Corps* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1894), 186.

“discouraging pluck & spirit by setting it an impossible task.”¹³⁷ Perhaps the most telling example, though, is on the morning of May 6 when Hancock’s men on the Plank Road combined with Wadsworth’s force coming from the north to rout A. P. Hill’s corps. When the Union attack began, the Confederate lines were in a sorry state to say the least. Neither entrenched, nor aligned, nor prepared, the Rebels were soon in flight. Unsurprisingly, however, the Federal assault columns “had become terribly mixed and disordered,” and the Federals lost momentum as they were forced to realign. One Union soldier commented that his unit’s advance “had been over ground so rough and through a thicket so dense that when a halt was called to re-form, only a small part of any one command could be assembled.” Furthermore, his outfit did not advance for two hours after the halt, which proved a devastating delay.¹³⁸ This gave Longstreet time to counterattack and ultimately drive the Federals back to the Brock road.

In this case, then, the Wilderness only acted to hinder the Union attack. Certainly not in a unique way—it had disordered the Confederate flank attacks in a similar manner. The difference was that the power of this Union attack—and it was powerful and initially very successful—came not from any environmental advantage offered to the Union forces by the Wilderness. Rather, Union success stemmed from sloppy Confederate preparation and from the immense weight of a finally-concentrated Federal force on both the front and flank of the Confederate line. While the Confederate attacks also benefited from a lack of Union preparation, a key difference is that the Confederates took advantage of the Wilderness to conceal their movements and cloak their small numbers. There is nothing to suggest that this tactic was premeditated, or that the Federals could not have gained the same advantages had they sought them. Admittedly, the

¹³⁷ Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy*, 363.

¹³⁸ Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*, 198.

Wilderness was a drawn battle tactically, though strategically the Union forces were able to continue their march south because they held key roads. Nevertheless, the question is not who won the battle, but who took better advantage of the Wilderness. And clearly there the Confederates outperformed their Federal opponents.

Ultimately, the Wilderness was not a good place for the Confederates to fight because of any natural advantages it afforded to them alone. By and large it gave the Confederates as much grief as it did the Federals. They enjoyed no special familiarity with the region. They could see through the undergrowth no better than the Federals. Nor could they move through its thickets with greater ease. They certainly did not start a fight in the Wilderness for the sake of obtaining some tactical edge from the ground itself. Yet despite this the Confederates made it a good place to fight. They saw opportunities in the otherwise inhospitable Wilderness and boldly seized the initiative. Their aggressive advance on May 5, the skillful deployment of Longstreet's Corps on May 6, and the flank attacks that same day demonstrate as much. As Theodore Lyman noted, the Confederates proved to be "more daring and sudden in their movements," even in such a challenging landscape.¹³⁹ In short the Army of Northern Virginia followed the advice of Lee to "live in the world you inhabit. Look upon things as they are. Take them as you find them. Make the best of them. Turn them to your advantage."¹⁴⁰ And that is what made all the difference.

¹³⁹ Lyman, *Meade's Headquarters*, 99.

¹⁴⁰ Emory Thomas, *Robert E. Lee: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 414.

CHAPTER 5: THE WILDERNESS MYSTIQUE

There is no question the Wilderness has a mystique about it. Historians have often conveyed it, even if they never put a name to the aura the region invoked.¹ Yet no historian has systematically analyzed this mystique or sought to explain its origins. Obviously, the nature of combat during the battle of the Wilderness was an important component in the region's mystique. The historian of the Federal V Corps believed that "the peculiar nature of the ground fought over made this a weird uncanny contest—a battle of invisibles with invisibles." While "there had been wood-fights before," he concluded that there were "none in which the contestants were so completely concealed as in this."² This mystique—which no other battlefield of the war could match—went beyond battle conditions and was an amalgamation of multiple elements that created something that none of its individual parts could have produced.

It began with a name. Unlike many battlefields, the Wilderness had a title that carried specific negative connotations, indicating a forest, empty of man and beyond his control. The name also set the Wilderness apart as a distinct region. Many Union and Confederate soldiers who entered the Wilderness in the spring of 1863 had no inkling that they had stepped into a place marked by a special name and physical characteristics. By the time of the Overland

¹ Of all of the modern historians, none captures this mystique better than Bruce Catton did. No doubt this is because of Catton's literary style and his heavy reliance on memoirs and regimental histories, sources which simply reeked of this mystique. See Bruce Catton, *A Stillness at Appomattox* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1953), 55-92.

² William H. Powell, *The Fifth Army Corps* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896), 610.

campaign, however, soldiers in both armies were calling it the Wilderness and attributing certain features to this forested region. Over time, and especially in the postwar years, descriptions of the Wilderness created images of a malevolent landscape. In the contemporary accounts of the battle of the Wilderness and later in postwar writings, the Wilderness became increasingly associated with death and destruction. The remains of the old Chancellorsville battleground, the high casualties, the destruction of vegetation, and the corpses, skeletons, and graves that littered the Wilderness combined to cast the region as a place where the shadow of Death lingered. The Wilderness also became connected to the fires that ravaged the battlefield and engulfed the wounded. Such scenes caused some postwar writers to compare the Wilderness to hell itself. These images of death and destruction, fire and hell, formed important elements in the Wilderness mystique. The supernatural also found its way into the Wilderness's picture, as postwar writers portrayed the Wilderness as haunted or even as a spirit itself that could lash out and change the course of battle and with it the destiny of the nation.

* * * * *

Most Civil War battlefields derive their name from a nearby town, landmark, or body of water, but the battle of the Wilderness derived its name from a region. It was this name—the Wilderness—where the investigation should commence, for it was not a neutral term. In order to understand a place bestowed with such an evocative name, it is necessary to investigate the origin of the term, as well as the contemporary meaning that it held for Civil War soldiers. Roderick Nash, in his path-breaking book, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, argues that “although later extensions of its meaning obscured the word’s original precision, the initial image wilderness generally evokes is that of a forest primeval.” Wilderness also “implied the absence of men, and the wilderness was conceived as a region where a person was likely to get

into a disordered, confused, or ‘wild’ condition.” Nash’s definition of wilderness then conjures “the image . . . of a man in an alien environment where the civilization that normally orders and controls his life is absent.”³

When soldiers from both armies encountered the Wilderness they often remarked that the name fit perfectly. Moreover, agreeing with Nash’s definition, they pointed to the lack of cultivation, the vast unbroken forest, and the absence of inhabitants as the region’s defining characteristics. “It may well be called the Wilderness,” explained Robert McAllister, “for there is not one acre of land in a hundred that is cleared.”⁴ Likewise, a Rhode Island infantryman remarked that “this place is called the Wilderness,” and judged that “it is rightly named for ten square miles there is not a dozen acres of cleared land.”⁵ Philip H. Powers, a Confederate, complained that “this is a dreary dismal country . . . most fitly called the Wilderness,” and explained that “for many miles not a house and not an open field” was present, instead “a wilderness of tree and underbrush and marsh” all of which was “perfectly flat” confronted his view.⁶ Wilbur Fisk concluded that “it would be hard to conceive of a name more appropriate” for the area as “it appears to be one uninterrupted wilderness, extending fifteen or twenty miles

³ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 1-2.

⁴ Robert McAllister, *The Civil War Letters of General Robert McAllister*. ed. James I Robertson, Jr. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1965), 372.

⁵ Daniel Handy to his wife, May 13, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 119.

⁶ Philip H. Powers to his wife, May 5 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 245.

either way, without any other inhabitants than owls, buzzards, and such like animals.”⁷ In short, the Wilderness was a wilderness because it was a region full of trees, empty of men, and beyond human control.

Nash also notes the traditions linking the Wilderness with “wild men,” and argues that savages “sweeping out of the forest to strike, and then melting back into it . . . were almost always associated with wilderness.”⁸ With such notions as these embedded in American culture, it is no surprise that veterans of the battle at times associated the battle with Indian fighting or painted their enemies as savages.⁹ A. M. Stewart, a Federal chaplain, found that the fighting at the battles of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania “much more resembles the old back-woods’ contests with the Indians, than modern, or what may be termed “civilized” warfare.”¹⁰ Likewise, William Swinton claimed the Confederates had “an almost Indian skill in woodcraft” and that “only Indian tactics told” when it came to fighting at the battle of the Wilderness.¹¹ Orlando B. Wilcox similarly thought that “the fighting reminded [him] of stories of Indian fighting in the northwest.”¹² One postwar article on the battle of the Wilderness argued that “it was not even Indian-fighting” as at least “the scalp locks of the Aborigines were . . . occasionally exposed,”

⁷ Wilbur Fisk, *Hard Marching Every Day*, 166.

⁸ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 28.

⁹ The majority of the references I have found to Indian warfare or referring to the Confederates as Indian-like at the battle of the Wilderness were from postwar writings, not contemporary sources.

¹⁰ A. M. Stewart, *Camp, March, and Battle-Field; or, Three Years and a Half with the Army of the Potomac* (Philadelphia: Jas. B. Rodgers, 1865), 380.

¹¹ Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, 418, 429.

¹² Orlando B. Wilcox, *Forgotten Valor: The Memoirs, Journals, and Civil War Letters of Orlando B. Wilcox*, ed. Robert Garth Scott (Kent, OH: Kent State Press, 1999), 511.

whereas in the battle of the Wilderness “nothing could be seen of the enemy.”¹³ Fitzhugh Lee also compared the battle of the Wilderness to “a huge Indian fight.”¹⁴ Mason Whiting Tyler, a veteran of the 37th Massachusetts, recalled the strain that fighting in the Wilderness against an unseen and savage enemy could exert on the men. “In recesses of the forest,” remembered Tyler, “lurked our foes, using all the tricks and devices of savage warfare, crawling through the brush, shooting at us from concealed thickets, springing at us from trees and bushes, while the bullets from unseen guns and masked batteries prostrated our soldiers by the thousand.” He concluded that “human nerves were not made to stand the strain of such a warfare as this,” claiming that “a man can be brave as long as he can see his foe, but will quail and tremble in the presence of darkness and the goblins of the air.”¹⁵

While the Wilderness’s name was meaningful in itself, the mystique was more than just a catchy label. It also had to do with the Wilderness’s reputation as a malevolent landscape associated with gloom, darkness, and woe among other things. This reputation developed over time culminating in the war’s aftermath. At Chancellorsville, many, if not most, soldiers did not recognize the Wilderness as a distinct place and merely commented on some of its features, such as dense woods and underbrush. Moreover, the feelings expressed towards the Wilderness were usually neutral. During the Mine Run campaign, however, an increasing number of Union

¹³ “The Wilderness. A Chapter in the History of the Second Day’s Battle,” *Cincinnati (Oh.) Commercial*, September 24, 1881.

¹⁴ Fitzhugh Lee, *General Lee* (New York: Appleton & Company, 1894), 333.

¹⁵ Mason Whiting Tyler, *Recollections of the Civil War*, ed. William S. Tyler (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1912), 140. See also Thomas S. Allen, “Drop your Guns,” *Official Bulletin G. A. R.*, 23d National Encampment, June 10, 1889.

soldiers had begun to recognize the Wilderness as a special and hostile environment. They tended to focus on the vast forest as a perfect incarnation of a wilderness. By the battle of the Wilderness soldiers in both blue and gray were calling the battleground the Wilderness and continued to marvel at how fittingly it was named. It was also during this battle that the descriptions of the Wilderness really began to take a serious negative turn. This pattern then continued into the postwar years when visitors and writers set the Wilderness apart as a strange and hostile environment.

The Chancellorsville campaign (May 1863) was the first encounter the two armies had with the Wilderness, and soldiers' reactions were mixed. Many, if not most, witnesses gave no indication that they knew they were in a place called the Wilderness or that there was anything special or distinct about the region in which they were fighting. They might notice certain environmental characteristics such as thick trees, swampy areas, and vegetation, but there was no effort to make these local observations apply to the entire region. Their comments gave little indication that the place was especially haunting. Alpheus Williams, a general in the XII Corps found "the densest kind of pine thickets and underbrush," along with "thick woods, mostly of stunted pines" in addition to mud holes.¹⁶ The piece of the Wilderness which Jacob Raymer's 4th North Carolina charged through on May 3, "was thickly set with trees of ordinary size, saplings and underbrush," while later his unit "entered a dense pine thicket."¹⁷ The 27th Virginia was

¹⁶ Alpheus S. Williams, *From the Cannon's Mouth: The Civil War Letters of General Alpheus S. Williams*, ed. Milo M. Quaife (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), 186, 189, 197-198.

¹⁷ Jacob Nathaniel Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent: The Civil War Reports of Jacob Nathaniel Raymer, Fourth North Carolina*, ed. E.B. Munson (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 68.

stationed in “very thick bushes and small timber,” while the 44th Georgia was “in a dense oak forest.”¹⁸ A Georgia soldier remarked on “the tangled and almost impassable forests.”¹⁹ Lemuel Jeffries provided one of the more negative assessments, finding the area covered in “a jungle of scrub and bun oaks and brambles,” that “in places . . . is almost impregnable.” The soldiers who tried to “force their way through” would find “their faces cut, clothes torn, and knapsack jerked off.”²⁰ For Union and Confederate soldiers, the Wilderness, at this point, was just an undefined forest in which they happened to be fighting.

There were, however, some men in each army who did recognize the Wilderness as a distinct region during the Chancellorsville campaign. On the Federal side, generals such as Gouverneur K. Warren, Winfield Scott Hancock, Daniel Sickles, and Henry W. Slocum used the term “the Wilderness” in their reports.²¹ Confederate officers likewise showed a similar awareness. J. E. B. Stuart, Lee’s cavalry commander, commented in his after-action report “this

¹⁸ John Garibaldi to his wife Sarah May 11, 1863 Virginia Military Institute Archives, Lexington, Virginia; “Gen. Doles’ Brigade in the Chancellorsville Battle,” *Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle and Sentinel*, June 6, 1863.

¹⁹ “A Full and Complete Description of the Battle of the Wilderness, Chancellorsville, Va.,” *Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle and Sentinel*, May 26, 1863.

²⁰ Lemuel Jeffries, “‘The Excitement Had Begun!’ The Civil War Diary of Lemuel Jeffries, 1862-1863,” ed. Jason H. Silverman, *Manuscripts* 30 (Fall 1978): 272.

²¹ OR 25 (1): 193, 196-197, 311, 315, 385, 386, 390, 394, 670. What exactly that term meant to them is not always clear, but it is plain that they knew they were in or near a region that bore that name. Of all the contemporary accounts of the Wilderness dating from the Chancellorsville campaign, Gouverneur K. Warren provided the first description of the Wilderness that not only sets it apart by name but puts it into a larger context, describes its attributes, and explains how it affected combat.

region of country is known as the ‘Wilderness.’”²² In addition, a handful of men in both armies made observations about the Wilderness. Warren B. Person of the 64th New York recalled “turning into a piece of woods which proved to be a vast forest called ‘The Wilderness.’”²³ Likewise, a Confederate described the Wilderness as “a dense skirt of woods running for several miles . . . ‘with occasional openings of cleared and cultivated fields.’” He found the woods to be “principally black jack, and to the eye presented almost an impenetrable thicket.”²⁴ Gouverneur Warren, the chief of topographical engineers for the Army of the Potomac, made similar observations, commenting on the “dense woods and thickets of black-jack oak and pine [which] cover most of the ground” and declared that “no one can conceive a more unfavorable field for the movements of a grand army than it presents.”²⁵

By the time of the Mine Run campaign, an increasing number of Union soldiers showed a remarkable awareness that they were in a distinct region, known as the Wilderness, a marked change from before. Examples of this recognition abound, often coupled with commentary on the density and breadth of the forest. A soldier from the 13th Massachusetts told the folks back home that they “were now in the portion of Virginia known as the Wilderness, it being almost

²² OR 25 (1): 888.

²³ Warren B. Persons to Daniel Dodge Persons, May 30, 1863, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 147.

²⁴ *Mobile (Al) Advertiser & Register*, May 24, 1863. Another Confederate soldier who identified the Wilderness as the location of the battle of Chancellorsville is George Wren of the 8th Louisiana. See George Lovick Pierce Wren, Diary, May 15, 1863, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

²⁵ OR 25 (1): 196-197.

impenetrable, and extending for miles, in front, rear, and on both flanks.”²⁶ Many Union soldiers at Mine Run claimed that the region was the very incarnation of what the word wilderness meant. An artilleryman remarked that “the nature of the whole country from the Rapidan is a perfect ‘Wilderness,’ and as the country is covered with an almost impassable jungle, you can imagine the difficulties under which we labored.”²⁷ A soldier from the 65th NY reported that “we entered the Wilderness, and for six miles saw nothing but forests on either hand; dense, black, mysterious, the abode of hydras and goblins.”²⁸ This last remark is especially interesting, as it hints at the fearful images that the Wilderness was already developing among Union soldiers.²⁹

In contrast to their Union foes, Confederate soldiers during the Mine Run campaign generally did not identify the Wilderness as a specific place, although they did comment on some of its salient features. One exception would be J.E.B. Stuart, who having called the area the Wilderness during the Chancellorsville campaign, naturally identified it again at Mine Run, noting that “the ground on either side” of the Plank Road was “covered with the dense scrub-oak

²⁶ “The 13th Regiment on the March,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 4, 1864.

²⁷ “Letter from the Potomac Army,” *Columbia Democrat* (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania), December 12, 1863.

²⁸ “Over the Rapidan,” *Providence (RI) Evening Press*, December 17, 1863.

²⁹ For more examples of Union reactions to the Wilderness during Mine Run, see “Letter from the Second Regiment,” *Providence (RI) Evening Press*, December 9, 1863; Joseph C. Rutherford, to Hannah Rutherford, December 13, 1863, in *A War of the People: Vermont Civil War Letters*, ed. Jeffrey D. Marshall, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 198; J. Franklin Dyer, *The Journal of a Civil War Surgeon*, ed. Michael B. Chesson, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 132.; Elisha Hunt Rhodes, *All for the Union: The Civil War Diary and Letters of Elisha Hunt Rhodes* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 126.; Charles Harvey Brewster, *When This Cruel War Is Over: The Civil War Letters of Charles Harvey Brewster*, ed. David W. Blight, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 269.; Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 53.

characteristic of that wilderness region.”³⁰ In contrast, Robert E. Lee in his after-battle report did not name the region, but did describe “the country in that vicinity” as “being almost an unbroken forest.”³¹ Oscar Hinrichs, a Confederate staff officer, recalled that “the country is thinly settled, and heavily wooded; [its] undergrowth [is] very much on the style of the Chancell[or]sville woods.”³² Other Confederates provided more localized descriptions of the immediate areas in which they operated, rather than the region as a whole. Charles F. Bahnson, a member of the 2nd North Carolina battalion, found himself “in an old field, in which pine trees had grown up to a considerable size,” and remarked on their thickness.³³ One of Lee’s division commanders, Edward Johnson, ordered his men “to drive the enemy out of the tangled wilderness in which he had sheltered himself.”³⁴ But there was nothing here to indicate that any of these men—with the exception of Stuart—set the Wilderness apart in their minds, and certainly none of them implied that it was a particularly frightening place.

³⁰ OR 29 (1): 900. Later when he was stationed to the right of the Confederate Mine Run entrenchments, he commented that “the country was covered mostly with pine and undergrowth.”

³¹ OR 29 (1): 827.

³² Oscar Hinrichs, *Stonewall’s Prussian Mapmaker: The Journals of Captain Oscar Hinrichs*, ed. Richard Brady Williams, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 98.

³³ Charles Frederic Bahnson, *Bright and Gloomy Days: The Civil War Correspondence of Captain Charles Frederic Bahnson, A Moravian Confederate*, ed. Sarah Bahnson Chapman (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 97.

³⁴ OR 29 (1): 847.

During the Overland campaign, the Union soldiers' descriptions of the Wilderness grew more negative still.³⁵ A member of the 143rd Pennsylvania wrote home that he could hardly "give . . . any idea of the country through here," but encouraged them to "just think of . . . nothing but woods of scrub oak, stunted pines, and vines with here and there a small farm and a cleared field with ravines and hollows and a stream of water here and there."³⁶ A Pennsylvania soldier explained that the Wilderness's name was "a word which expressed much of the toil and pain to any one who has experienced its brushy and swampy and somber realities."³⁷ Henry Keiser of Pennsylvania recollected making his way "for two miles through the awfullest brush, briars, grapevines, etc. I ever was in."³⁸ Daniel Holt, a Union surgeon, called the Wilderness "the raggedest hole I about ever saw. . . . Swampy, hilly, bushes thick as dog's hair, grape vines, rotten logs and fallen trees, make up this pretty picture. A fine place to fight in surely: a perfect

³⁵ There were always soldiers on both sides, even during the Overland campaign, whose descriptions of the Wilderness were relatively neutral. For example, William Randall, a sharpshooter from Michigan, remembered "a Wilderness of Pines extending for many miles." William H. Randall, *Reminiscences*, May 7, 1864, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, MI. The difference during the Overland campaign is that the negative portrayals grew in frequency and intensity.

³⁶ Edwin Groff to parents, May 20, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 362.

³⁷ "From the 140th Regiment," *Washington Reporter* (Washington, Pennsylvania), June 1, 1864.

³⁸ Henry Keiser, *Diary*, May 5, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 41.

quag mire.”³⁹ Vermonter Wilbur Fisk called it “an endless wilderness” and heard the men in his unit call it simply “a wilderness of woe.”⁴⁰

Meanwhile, during this same campaign, many of their Confederate counterparts showed a newfound awareness of the Wilderness, recognizing the woods as a distinct place for the first time. One Rebel remarked that they “fought in the woods of the Wilderness (a very continuously and densely wooded poverty stricken section in Spotsylvania Co. in which the Battle of Chancellorsville was fought).”⁴¹ Jacob Raymer, of the 4th North Carolina, called it “the renowned Wilderness,” where “the face of the country is broken into gentle hills, interspersed with many swamps and marshes; the soil sterile, few farms or habitations are to be seen—large timber is scarce, but the underbrush, brambles and such like, are so dense as to be almost impenetrable.”⁴² Alexander Boteler, a Confederate staff officer, agreed with his Union counterparts that the name Wilderness “fitly applies to the locality it designates, for a gloomier, wilder and more forbidding region can hardly be found this side of the Alleghenies.” He added that “for miles . . . the forests are unbroken by a single clearing and the traveller may journey on

³⁹ Daniel M. Holt, *A Surgeon's Civil War: The Letters and Diary of Daniel M. Holt, M. D.*, ed. James M. Greiner, Janet L. Coryell, and James R. Smither (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994), 182-183. For other Union reactions to the Wilderness during the opening of the Overland campaign, see August Seiser, “August Seiser’s Civil War Diary,” ed. Blake McKelvey, *The Rochester Historical Society Publications* 22 (1944): 189; “Grant’s Virginia Campaign,” *Columbia Democrat* (Bloomsburg, Pa), June 18, 1864.; “Chaplain Stewarts Letter,” *American Presbyterian* (Philadelphia, Pa), May 19, 1864.

⁴⁰ Fisk, *Hard Marching Every Day*, 215.

⁴¹ Charles Trueheart and Henry Trueheart, *Rebel Brothers: The Civil War Letters of the Truehearts*, ed. Edward B. Williams (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 90.

⁴² Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent*, 127.

for hours without seeing a sign of . . . habitations. Not only do over-arching trees on either hand hem in the road and hid the sky, making it at high noon there seem more like twilight gray, but there is also on both sides a tangled mass of undergrowth apparently interminable as so densely intricate that it would be difficult for a dog to get through it.”⁴³

What would cause Union and Confederate soldiers’ descriptions of the Wilderness to evolve over the course of the three campaigns? One possible explanation is the Wilderness’s far-from-uniform vegetation. As explained in Chapter 1, some Union veterans argued that there was a core or heart of the Wilderness. This part of the forest was supposedly thicker than the woods around Chancellorsville or the woods stretching towards Mine Run. This postwar interpretation might go a good way toward explaining why the soldiers who participated in the Wilderness campaign seemed to react harshly against the environment and would account for why more Union soldiers mentioned the Wilderness sooner than their Confederate counterparts. The Federals had marched through this core during the Mine Run campaign, after which many Union soldiers first began to mention the Wilderness as a specific place with special features. It would also explain why the Confederates suddenly started mentioning the Wilderness in greater numbers and more vivid detail in May of 1864, when they campaigned in this extra thick

⁴³ Alexander Boteler, Diary, May 4, 1864, William Elizabeth Brooks Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. For more examples see: *Confederate Union* (Milledgeville) June 7, 1864; “Battle of the Wilderness,” *Daily Constitutionalist* (Augusta, Ga.), May 31, 1864; Philip H. Powers to his wife, May 5 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 245; “From General Lee’s Army,” *The Daily South Carolinian* (Columbia, SC), May 28, 1864; Lewis Leon, *Diary of A Tar Heel Confederate Soldier* (Charlotte, N.C.: Stone Publishing Company, 1913), 60; “Benning’s Brigade in the Virginia Battles,” *Augusta (Ga) Chronicle and Sentinel*, June 1, 1864.

vegetation for the first time. The Wilderness battlefield might have been simply a more difficult, thicker, and less open tract of woods. It is also conceivable that the Union forces had simply developed an aversion to the Wilderness through experience. Repeated frustrations only compounded with each failure, leading men to view it as a place of misfortune.⁴⁴ It seems likely, however, that if the armies had not met for a third time in the Wilderness in May 1864, then the name Wilderness might mean little to modern historians.

Another possibility is that Union soldiers might have found the woods more noteworthy. For example, when writing his memoir, Norton C. Shepard of the 146th New York felt obliged to clarify the different meanings wilderness had in the North and South. “In the North,” explained Shepard, “a wilderness is a wood in a state of nature with great trees that have stood for ages, with other trees uprooted and fallen, with old logs lying prone upon the ground, with dry stubs and dead trees ready to fall at the first storm, so that in places it is almost impossible to travel.” To this primeval, northern notion of wilderness, Shepard contrasts the southern, man-made Wilderness. He found that “in the South, . . . especially in Virginia, most of the land has been cleared off and cultivated,” and “after many years of cultivation it has become worn out and has been abandoned as useless.” In the place of the original forest, “grows up . . . pine and scrub oak to become a wilderness,” with trees that “are usually about six inches in diameter with branches growing thick from the ground to the top.”⁴⁵ Shepard’s explanation then suggests that Union soldiers were unaccustomed to seeing these sorts of wasted and abandoned areas in the North, while Southerners might have found them more familiar, and thus less worthy of remark.

⁴⁴ Fisk, *Hard Marching Every Day*, 215.

⁴⁵ Norton C. Shepard, *Out of the Wilderness: The Civil War Memoir of Cpl. Norton C. Shepard, 146th New York Volunteer Infantry*, ed. Raymond W. Smith (Hamilton, NY: Edmonston Publishing, 1998), 2.

Whatever the cause, by the time of the Overland campaign soldiers in both armies recognized the Wilderness as a distinct place.⁴⁶

These increasingly negative descriptions actually gained strength in postwar memoirs and histories, which fixed the Wilderness in history as a confusing, strange, sad, and malevolent place.⁴⁷ Hazard Stevens, a Federal veteran, called the forest “dense, gloomy, and monotonous.”⁴⁸ Another Union veteran, Thomas Hyde, portrayed the Wilderness as a “bushy, briery, labyrinth.”⁴⁹ The historian of one Union regiment recalled that “it was a wild, weird region.

⁴⁶ Reid Mitchell’s study of Civil War soldiers found that Union soldiers were generally critical of the Southern landscape. For them “it proved to be not a land of romance but a land of poverty, sloth, and slavery” a landscape marked by “disorder, confusion, and illogic” that gave the “ominous sensation of leaving civilization behind” of being in a wilderness. Of particular importance, Mitchell found that “Tidewater Virginia, where land exhausted by tobacco had been reclaimed by the forest after the planters had moved west, presented a particularly dreary spectacle to Northern soldiers.” There “they could see cleared land and old plantations grown over with twenty-year-old pine; the countryside full of wasteland, ‘rendered useless by poor cultivation.’” Likewise, Mitchell quoted one Federal who remarked that “‘Old tobacco fields with the last ridges of the plow still visible grown up with pine fifty feet high were good representations of the wastefulness and wickedness of slavery.’” Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers* (New York: Viking, 1988), 95, 97, 98, 102.

⁴⁷ It is interesting that one Confederate memoirist noted that “what I have read—& more particularly from northern writers raises a mystery [sic] or horror about the name of that part of Spottsylvania Co.” St. George T. Bryan, “Recollections of experience in the Confederate Army in Virginia, 1861-1865,” Mss5:1B8407:1, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁴⁸ Hazard Stevens, “The Sixth Corps in the Wilderness,” in *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts*, 14 vols. (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1881–1918), 4:187.

⁴⁹ Thomas W. Hyde, *Following the Greek Cross; or, Memories of the Sixth Army Corps* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1894), 185.

Everywhere was dense and trackless forest. The piercing cry of the whip-poor-will rang through the somber pines and the screech owl echoed from the tree tops.”⁵⁰ Another Federal regimental historian recalled the “sense of ominous dread which many of us found almost impossible to shake off,” as the sounds of birds, insects, and hushed men combined, “seeming to forebode evil to those who had invaded this solitude.”⁵¹ Moxley Sorrel, a member of Longstreet’s staff, called the place “a wild, tangled forest of stunted trees,” a “repulsive district,” and “the horrid Wilderness.”⁵² Morris Schaff, a Union veteran, described the Wilderness as a “mystery-wrapped country,” a “lonely region” with confusing roads. Moreover, Schaff noted that the Wilderness seemed to sap Union commanders of their reason and strength. Hooker, explained Schaff, “no sooner was . . . there than he became mentally numb and purposeless as though he had breathed some deep, stagnating fumes.” At the battle of the Wilderness, Schaff claimed “the lotus in the fateful region’s gloom was again at work.”⁵³ Sartell Prentice, a Federal veteran, portrayed nature as having refurbished the exploited land only to then wreak vengeance on man when he returned

⁵⁰ *History of the Corn Exchange Regiment, 118th Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: J. L. Smith, 1888), 397.

⁵¹ Mary Genevie Green Brainard, *Campaigns of the One Hundred and Forty-Six Regiment, New York State Volunteers* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1915), 176.

⁵² G. Moxley Sorrel, *Recollections of a Confederate Staff Officer* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1905), 226, 232.

⁵³ Morris Schaff, *The Battle of the Wilderness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910), 58, 62, 110.

in 1864. Now “Nature’s obstacles hindered and hurt the invading thousands in such way as history tells no like on in all its hundreds of years of memory.”⁵⁴

Postwar travel accounts continued to portray the Wilderness as a malevolent landscape. An article for *Metropolitan Magazine* published in 1907 tried to explain the feeling of traveling through the Wilderness where the “path is narrow, dense foliage meets overhead, and the traveler is completely hemmed in.” The “solitude is awesome, broken only by the disturbance of the dry leaves as the lizards and creeping things flee before approaching hoofbeats. It is boundless!”⁵⁵ Visitors seemed to expect such feelings when they entered the Wilderness. An 1879 narrative betrayed the anticipation one traveler had of finding “the dark lugubrious, somber, impenetrable jungles of the Wilderness.” In obvious disillusionment, the traveler “saw nothing particularly ‘wild,’ ‘weird,’ or ‘howling,’ about the Wilderness,” and contented himself with observing, “it was not the most interesting country to be sure.” The ruins of “the far-famed Chancellorsville” proved equally disappointing, as the traveler “rather expected to see a neat little village,” but found only “the remains of a large and pretentiously built tavern.” The generous hospitality he received at the well-kept Ellwood estate, “situated in a beautiful valley and extending in some directions as far as the eye could reach” also seemed to ill-fit his idea of the “weird shadows and

⁵⁴ Sartell Prentice, “The Opening Hours in the Wilderness in 1864,” in *Military Essays and Recollections, Papers Read Before the Commandery of the State of Illinois, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States*, Vol. II (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1894), 102.

⁵⁵ Wells, “The Scars of War,” 547.

the awful gloom of the Wilderness.”⁵⁶ While the account suggests a failure to visit many of the important parts of the battlefields, the expectations were very telling.

Some modern accounts of the battle of the Wilderness continue to reflect similar themes. In *A Stillness at Appomattox* (1953), Bruce Catton’s Wilderness “was a mean gloomy woodland . . . lying silent and forbidding.”⁵⁷ Edward Steere’s 1960 study of the Wilderness campaign called it “a dreary wasteland,” and a “brooding jungle” which set “eternal shadows over stagnant pools and marshy creek bottoms,” and “imposed the conditions of combat in its gloomy depths.”⁵⁸ James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988) was more subdued, portraying the Wilderness as “that gloomy expanse of scrub oaks and pines.”⁵⁹ Mark Grimsley’s history of the Overland campaign, published in 2002, painted the Wilderness as a “country [that] seemed to hate every man who dared walk through it.” Grimsley concluded: “it was less a patch of vegetation than a force of nature.”⁶⁰ Such depictions suggest that while the Wilderness’s image evolved during the war years, becoming increasingly negative, the postwar interpretation became a static, if not

⁵⁶ Peyton H. Hoge and Howard R. Bayne, *The Travels of Ego and Alter, an Epistolary Narrative of a Tramp Through the Old Dominion*, (Richmond, VA: West, Johnston & Co., 1879), 9-10.

⁵⁷ Catton, *A Stillness at Appomattox*, 56.

⁵⁸ Edward Steere, *The Wilderness Campaign: The Meeting of Grant and Lee* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1960), 1.

⁵⁹ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 724.

⁶⁰ Mark Grimsley, *And Keep Moving On: The Virginia Campaign, May-June 1864* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 34.

exaggerated, rendition—the malevolent Wilderness—which received the sanction of tradition, while losing none of the image’s appeal.

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Just as the Wilderness morphed into a malevolent landscape, it also became associated with death and destruction.⁶¹ This is not particularly astonishing considering that it was a battlefield, but all the same, the association is a key element in the Wilderness mystique. This process began with the Overland campaign of 1864 and continued into the postwar years. Some Union soldiers began the campaign passing through the old Chancellorsville battlefield, taking in the debris, graves, and bones that lay scattered across the landscape. After the battle of the Wilderness, the soldiers remarked on the carnage, especially how unseen death struck at the unwary soldiers. They also commented on the destruction of the vegetation and were amazed that anyone could have survived. In the aftermath of the battle, burial parties collected the remains of the soldiers, and later visitors to the Wilderness remarked on the ruined vegetation and the shadow of death over the land. Those who wrote about the Wilderness in the postwar histories and memoirs continued this association with death and brought it to its highest form.

At the start, as well as the conclusion, of the battle of the Wilderness, Federal soldiers passed through the old Chancellorsville battleground and saw the ruins, the debris, and especially the dead. William D. Landon of the 14th Indiana visited the old Chancellorsville battlefield

⁶¹ For a wider discussion on the role that death played in Civil War America see Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008) and Mark Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008).

during the Wilderness campaign and noted that “strange feelings crept over me as we marched along the same road and over the same ground where one year and a day before I had stood up with my comrades in line of battle,” and saw “the old white house occupied as headquarters by Gen. Couch during the fight, shattered and torn with hostile shot and shell, still standing, a refuge for bats and owls (ghosts, too, for aught I know).”⁶² Cornelius Moore, a soldier with the 57th New York, came upon the Chancellor house, “now a mass of ruins,” which appeared in his “mind’s eye spectre-like, reminding me of the horrors of a scene witnessed with-in their site, but one short year ago.”⁶³ Albert Reid of the 77th New York simply concluded, “It looks pretty rough around there.”⁶⁴ Another Federal soldier discovered that “over the whole field was scattered the

⁶² William D. Landon, “Fourteenth Indiana Regiment, Letters to the Vincennes Western Sun,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 34 (March 1938): 92.

⁶³ Cornelius Moore to Adeline, May 13, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 147.

⁶⁴ Albert J. Reid, Diary, May 8, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 284. Apparently there was a strange juxtaposition between the ruined buildings, trees, etc. and the efforts of nature to rejuvenate the Chancellorsville battlefield. Francis B. Harris of the 12th New Jersey commented on “how natural the ground looks where one year ago such heavy battles were fought,” although he admitted that the Chancellor house was now “a complete wreck and so with every other buildings and fences.” Francis B. Harris, Diary, May 4, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 352. Orin G. Dority testified that “the forest [around Chancellorsville] that stood so thick is completely felled by the storm of bullets and shells that swept through them for two days and nights. Hardly a tree was to be seen, either standing or laying, but which bore marks of a cannon musket ball,” while the Chancellor house “is completely ruined as it was burned by the enemy.” Moreover, “the massive walls are still standing and are pierced by shell in many places,” with some still lodged in the walls. Despite all this destruction, Dority observed that “the whole field at present is one vast

usual *debris* of a battle field.”⁶⁵ Soldiers from the 86th New York found the old battlefield “covered with graves” and that night they “slept among the graves of their comrades who fell just one year ago to-day.” Bedding down in such a place, “the scenes of that fearful conflict [were] fresh in their recollection and they retired for the night knowing that but a few hours would elapse before they would be repeated with all its horrors of blood and carnage.”⁶⁶

Perhaps most unnerving of all were the skeletons. Many soldiers recorded seeing those grisly reminders as they passed through the old battlefield. “The woods were strewn with the skeletons of comrades killed here one year ago,” remarked one Indiana infantryman.⁶⁷ Another Federal explained that these men had been buried, but “only a few inches of dirt was thrown over them and now their bones lie bleaching in the sun, scattered about where the beasts of the forest left them.”⁶⁸ Cornelius Moore of the 57th New York observed “one of the boys [pick] up, at our feet, a man’s foot, incased in a stocking and shoe, just as it was when shot from the leg.”⁶⁹ Charles Brewster found “there were lots of human skulls and bones lying top of the ground and

flower bed and presents a beautiful sight.” Orin G. Dority, “The Civil War Diary of Orin G. Dority,” pt.1. *Northwest Ohio Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1964-65):26.

⁶⁵ “Grant’s Virginia Campaign,” *Columbia Democrat* (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania), June 18, 1864.

⁶⁶ William Owen, Diary, May 6, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 318; “From the 86th Regiment,” *Corning Journal* (Corning, New York), May 19, 1864.

⁶⁷ Landon, “Fourteenth Indiana Regiment, Letters to the Vincennes Western Sun,” 89.

⁶⁸ Dority, “The Civil War Diary of Orin G. Dority,” 26.

⁶⁹ Cornelius Moore to Adeline, May 13, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 147.

we left plenty more dead bodies to decay and bleach to keep their grim company.”⁷⁰ If there was a perfect place to rehearse the graveyard scene from Hamlet, this was it.

During the battle of the Wilderness, this association with death continued as soldiers faced the terrible toll caused by an unseen foe. This is hardly surprising given the high casualties in the battle of the Wilderness. Andrew J. McBride, a soldier in the 10th Georgia observed that “the woods . . . is riddled with bullets . . . and is tonight thickly strewn with dead and wounded Yankees.”⁷¹ A Federal signal officer saw 450 dead Rebels in front of the II Corps’ line, which he called “only one instance of the terrible slaughters and encounters of the Wilderness battle.”⁷² Elisha Hunt Rhodes, a Union infantryman, viewed the fighting on May 5 as a “scene of death and destruction” and recalled the uncomfortable night that followed “amid the dead and wounded” the latter “groaning on all sides.”⁷³ In these descriptions, the Wilderness had become a terrible place where soldiers went in whole and came out wounded, mangled, or lifeless. Theodore Lyman attested to this. As General Carroll’s brigade “disappeared in the woods,” it would “waken the musketry with double violence” only to see Carroll “brought back wounded.” General Hays’ brigade followed, and “in a few minutes, General Hays was carried past . . . covered with blood, shot through the head.”⁷⁴ Wilbur Fisk, a Vermont soldier, wrote home that his regiment had had 264 casualties and thought that “had the rebels fired a little lower, they

⁷⁰ Brewster, *When This Cruel War Is Over*, 295.

⁷¹ Andrew J. McBride to ?, May 6, 1864, Andrew J. McBride Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

⁷² “From the Army,” *Brockport Republic* (Brockport, New York), June 16, 1864.

⁷³ Rhodes, *All for the Union*, 138.

⁷⁴ Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters*, 92.

would have annihilated the whole line; they nearly did it as it was.” Fisk then lamented that “there was so many men missing from our number that it hardly seemed like the same regiment.”⁷⁵ Likewise, a Confederate in the Texas Brigade mourned losses in his regiment. “At sun-up two hundred and seven strong men stand in line of battle; half an hour afterward all but seventy-seven of them are dead or wounded—mangled, torn, and dismembered.”⁷⁶

The soldiers often paired their remarks about high casualties with comments on the destruction of vegetation and marveled that anyone could have come through the battle alive. A Union soldier from the 14th Indiana saw a “thick undergrowth of black-jacks . . . literally mowed down with balls,” came upon “trunks splintered, bruised and torn by rifle balls and cannon shot,” and found “saplings . . . split into matches by the storm of bullets.”⁷⁷ Meanwhile, Wilbur Fisk spotted a place along his unit’s line where “every bush and twig was cut and splintered by the leaden balls,” and he wondered “if a single tree could have been found that had not been pierced several times with bullets, and all . . . hit about breast high.”⁷⁸ Confederates too recorded nature’s doom. “Every sapling and every twig,” declared one soldier, “were-some many times-pierced with balls,” and another commented on the trees being “literally torn into splinters.”⁷⁹ Jacob

⁷⁵ Fisk, *Hard Marching Everyday*, 215-216.

⁷⁶ J. B. Polley, *A Soldier’s Letters to Charming Nellie* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1908), 233.

⁷⁷ Landon, “Fourteenth Indiana Regiment, Letters to the Vincennes Western Sun,” 90, 92-93.

⁷⁸ Fisk, *Hard Marching Every Day*, 215.

⁷⁹ John W. Roberts, “The Wilderness and Spotsylvania, May 4–12, 1864: Narrative of a Private Soldier, John W. Roberts.” ed. Albert Hubbard Roberts. *The Florida Historical Society Quarterly* 11 (October 1932): 61; Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent*, 128.

Raymer of the 4th North Carolina concluded “that a single soul should come out living is truly a wonder.”⁸⁰

By the end of the fight, the Wilderness battlefield was covered with casualties, and would in time be pocked with graves and littered with bones. Charles Brewster remarked that “the woods we have fought over both there and here are strewn with the dead bodies of both parties who lay as they fell unburied.”⁸¹ A Union soldier returning after the battle to bury the dead found that those who were farther than a mile away from the hospital “remain as death found them, with the exception of their clothing,” which had been removed. “It is estimated,” he went on, “that 15,000 of our men, and as many, or more, of Rebels lie here unburied; and as six weeks have passed since the battle, imagination in its wildest fancies cannot begin to paint the spectacle.” It is little wonder that he called the field of battle “this wilderness of death” and “this wilderness and shadow of death.”⁸² One Union soldier returning to collect the wounded remarked that “hastily dug graves could be seen everywhere; some with head-boards; some with nothing to tell whether the men below were rebel or patriot.” Advancing towards Parker’s store he stumbled upon “large numbers of rebel graves” on one side of an entrenchment and a “great many” Union graves on the other.⁸³

In other instances, the dead remained where they fell, uncovered by even the shallowest of graves. John Trowbridge, a reporter who visited the battlefield after the war, discovered “the

⁸⁰ Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent*, 128.

⁸¹ Brewster, *When This Cruel War Is Over*, 295.

⁸² “The Dead in the Wilderness,” *Corning Journal* (Corning, New York), July 21, 1864.

⁸³ “The Wounded in the Wilderness,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 22, 1864.

unburied remains of two soldiers” while making his way through the Wilderness’s thickets.⁸⁴ While disturbing, the sight of skeletons in the Wilderness was becoming increasingly rare due to the efforts of the United States government.⁸⁵ As Drew Faust pointed out in her book on death in the Civil War, the Federal government took steps in the war’s immediate aftermath to account for the Union dead, especially to identify and inter those who had not received a decent burial. One of the first efforts was at the Wilderness and Spotsylvania.⁸⁶ In June 1865, soldiers came to inter “the remains of Union soldiers yet unburied” while “marking their burial places for future identification.”⁸⁷ A Federal soldier involved in the effort found that “very few had been buried” on the Union right, and “every fourth man carrying a sack, [they] commenced the search for skeletons through woods, thickets, fields and swamps.”⁸⁸ He discovered that “bodies of our soldiers were thickly strewn through woods and fields in all directions,” and for the soldiers “there was no difficulty in ascertaining where those lay who fell in the open field, as the rank growth of weeds marked each spot.”⁸⁹ Several days of labor produced “a huge pile of grinning, ghastly skulls-the frames of three hundred and fifty Union soldiers.”⁹⁰ It was summer, and

⁸⁴ Trowbridge, *The South*, 126.

⁸⁵ For a more in-depth discussion of burial practices during the Civil War, see Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 61-81.

⁸⁶ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 213-219.

⁸⁷ James M. Moore, July 3, 1865 report in *Names of Officers and Soldiers found on the Battle-fields of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House, VA*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1865), V.

⁸⁸ William D. Landon, “Prock’s Last Letters to the Vincennes Western Sun,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 35 (March 1939): 77.

⁸⁹ Landon, “Prock’s Last Letters,” 80.

⁹⁰ Landon, “Prock’s Last Letters,” 77.

“many had to be buried where they lay in the swamps and marshes, their remains being too offensive to handle under the circumstances.”⁹¹ Along the Plank Road they “gathered . . . six hundred and fifty of the bleaching bones of our gallant dead,” of which, “many . . . we were compelled to bury as they lay.”⁹² In front of the Brock Road works the rebel dead “were piled in heaps,” and the soldier claimed that “had our search been made early in the spring before vegetation was so far advanced, many more remains would have been discovered.”⁹³ An 1884 travel account warned those who would tour the Wilderness that “even now a straggler through the tangled and scrubby woods will occasionally come suddenly upon a skeleton with a few tattered threads of blue or gray clinging to the bones—a ghastly reminder of war’s grim horrors.”⁹⁴

Postwar visitors to the Wilderness continued to connect the place with death and destruction. The Wilderness seemed to evoke a palpable feeling in many who visited it. At the Wilderness battlefield, John Trowbridge, observed in typically overwrought language that “a cloud passed over the sun,” and “all the scene became somber, and hushed with a strange brooding stillness, broken only by the noise of twigs crackling under my feet, and distant growls of thunder. A shadow fell upon my heart also, as from the wing of the Death-Angel, as I

⁹¹ Landon, “Prock’s Last Letters,” 77.

⁹² Landon, “Prock’s Last Letters,” 78.

⁹³ Landon, “Prock’s Last Letters,” 81.

⁹⁴ “An Ex-Campaigner in Virginia” in *Rifle Shots and Bugle Notes; or, the National Military Album of Sketches of the Principal Battles, Marches, Picket Duty, Camp Fires, Love Adventures, and Poems Connected with the Late War*, eds. Joseph A. Joel and Lewis R. Stegman, (New York: Grand Army Gazette Publishing Co., 1884), 428.

wandered through the woods, meditating upon what I saw.”⁹⁵ Writing about a visit to the Chancellorsville battlefield, David McIntosh, a former Confederate artillery officer, sensed that “the spirit of death seemed still to brood over the place. Not a sound could be heard through all the forest, not the note of a bird. The silence and the gloom was painful.” Being in the Wilderness, “brought back some of the memories of that night, when all around was din and confusion, and when after darkness had set in, the forest was lit up by the bursting of shells and by the vivid sheets of fire which ran along the infantry lines until both sides were exhausted.” The battlefield brought back a “strong and lasting memory . . . spending a night after the battle, on the ground amid the carcasses of dead horses which emitted an insupportable stench, and what if possible was worse, the bodies of the dead only partially buried.”⁹⁶ An article for *Metropolitan Magazine* published in 1907 painted the locals as fearful, even superstitious about the Wilderness. The article reported how “the natives shake their heads and look puzzled when one, of his own free will, accepts the challenge of that nigh boundless tract.” One person preferred to lose some of his hogs rather than chase after them in the Wilderness. So too, “the negroes and simple folks thereabouts pass” the derelict Chancellor House “quickly and quietly in broad daylight” and “after nightfall they avoid it entirely.”⁹⁷

The ruinous state of the Wilderness further reinforced this connection, as attested to by both witnesses and contemporary photographs. The vegetation long remained scarred. John Trowbridge, in 1865 noted how “the marks of hard fighting were visible from afar off.” Of

⁹⁵ Trowbridge, *The South*, 125.

⁹⁶ David Gregg McIntosh Manuscript, #1889, page 17, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁹⁷ Wells, “The Scars of War,” 546, 548.

particular interest was the “growth of saplings edging the woods on the south [which] had been killed by volleys of musketry” and which “looked like thickets of bean-poles.”⁹⁸ West of the Chancellor House, Trowbridge found “the tree-trunks pierced by balls, the boughs lopped off by shells, the strips of timber cut to pieces by artillery and musketry fire.”⁹⁹ Lyman found similar destruction on the Wilderness battlefield. In 1866, he saw along the Plank Road “the noted spot where every tree (they are saplings all) was cut down by the musketry,” something which he was reluctant to believe “without [his] own observation.”¹⁰⁰ East of the Tapp field, he discovered “every tree with two, three, even half a dozen bullet marks on its lower trunk and many cut in two by the rebel shells.” Some 500 yards in front of the Brock Road Lyman noticed that not one tree “was standing for a distance of some hundred yards in length,” like “a whirlwind had twisted off each trunk and left the top hanging by the torn fibres.”¹⁰¹ One post-war account, published in 1884, claimed “the woods still bear the marks of the fierce struggling . . . , and although the lapse of time and nature’s softening touches have to a great extent obliterated the traces of battle, yet the larger trees are scarred and torn with bullets and here and there a shell-mark shows itself.”¹⁰²

Postwar writers cemented the association of the Wilderness with death and destruction. Here again were tales of visiting Chancellorsville on the eve of the battle of the Wilderness.

⁹⁸ J. T. Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of its Battle-Fields and Ruined Cities, A Journey Through the Desolated States, and Talks with the People*, (Hartford, CT: L. Stebbins, 1866), 121.

⁹⁹ Trowbridge, *The South*, 122.

¹⁰⁰ Theodore Lyman to his wife, April 14, 1866, Microfilm P374, Reel 28, Lyman Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

¹⁰¹ Theodore Lyman to his wife, April 17, 1866, Microfilm P374, Reel 28, Lyman Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

¹⁰² “An Ex-Campaigner in Virginia,” 428.

Frank Wilkeson, a Union veteran, recalled scenes of walking the old battlefield where “many polished skulls lay on the ground.” Later as the soldiers spoke of last year’s battle, “the dead were all around” and “their eyeless skulls seemed to stare steadily at us.” After a sobering talk about the obstacles that would face them if they fought in the Wilderness, one soldier “who had . . . been prying into the shallow grave he sat on with his bayonet, suddenly rolled a skull on the ground before us, and said in a deep, low voice: “That is what you are all coming to, and some of you will start toward it to-morrow.”¹⁰³

The fearful carnage that took place at the battle of the Wilderness again took center stage. William Swinton wrote of “a region of gloom and the shadow of death.” Here in this “horrid thicket there lurked two hundred thousand men, and through it lurid fires played; and, though no array of battle could be seen, there came out of its depths the crackle and roll of musketry like the noisy boiling of some hell-caldron that told the dread story of death.”¹⁰⁴ William J. Seymour, a member of Ewell’s Corps thought that “never was there a more grim and ghastly spectacle of the horrors and terrible destructiveness of War than was presented under the deep and solemn shades of the Wilderness; while the atmosphere for miles around was filled with the noisome odors that came up from the putrifying corpses.”¹⁰⁵ Channing M. Smith, a Confederate veteran, recalled how “the battle smoke had settled like a funeral pall upon the scene, and by the dim crepuscular light the faces of the living along the front looked as pale and ghastly as the dead at

¹⁰³ Frank Wilkeson, *Recollections of a Private* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1887), 49-51.

¹⁰⁴ Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, 429.

¹⁰⁵ William J. Seymour, *The Civil War Memoirs of Captain William J. Seymour*, ed. Terry L. Jones (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 118.

their feet.”¹⁰⁶ The common connection between the high casualties and the destruction of nature also persisted in the postwar literature. “Thousands of men,” observed one regimental history, “lay scattered in through the woods,” and “trees were riddled with bullets from their roots to the top, and the brush was cut away as if mowed with a scythe. Walking over the ground after the battle it seemed almost impossible that any one should have escaped.”¹⁰⁷

For the soldiers who fought in the Wilderness, the forest was a place where Death held high carnival, and the two became one and inseparable. Death was everywhere in the Wilderness, from the remnants of Chancellorsville, to the terrible toll in killed and wounded, to the toppled trees, the buried bodies, and the bleaching bones. It was for this reason that Union veterans like Horace Porter, almost seemed compelled to connect the two. For Porter, the Wilderness would always be “a tangled forest the impenetrable gloom of which could be likened only to the shadow of death,” a legacy that lives on.¹⁰⁸

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Alongside death and destruction, fires had raged during the battle of the Wilderness and these also found a home in the Wilderness tradition, forming an important element in the Wilderness mystique. Contemporary witnesses and images focused on two aspects of the fires, the burning of the wounded, often described as the worst part of the battle, and the fight amid the

¹⁰⁶ Channing M. Smith, “In the Wilderness,” *Confederate Veteran* XXIX no. 6, 212.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Chamberlain, *History of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers, Second Regiment, Bucktail Brigade*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1895), 219. For a similar description of dead soldiers, mowed down vegetation, and the wonder at anyone surviving, see Channing M. Smith, “In the Wilderness,” *Confederate Veteran* XXIX no. 6, 212.

¹⁰⁸ Porter, *Campaigning with Grant*, 72.

flames along the Plank Road on May 6, 1864. Postwar writers continued and some would say embellished these accounts, which became standard fare in any history of the battle of the Wilderness. It was in the postwar histories and memoirs that the Wilderness not only became associated with fire, but with hell itself.

The connection between the Wilderness and fire began at the battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863. There, on May 3, fires broke out in the woods, consuming wounded soldiers from both sides and leaving those who witnessed the affair deeply disturbed. John Tiffany, of the 27th Virginia, called the burning of the wounded “one of the most horrible sights I ever witnessed in my life,” observing that when his unit got to the Chancellor house, “the bodies were singeing and frying among the burning fragments of the house.”¹⁰⁹ Francis S. Johnson, a Confederate in the 45th Georgia similarly expressed the strong reaction that witnessing these men being burned to death could elicit. “One of the most horrible and heart rending things,” explained Johnson, occurred on May 3 at Chancellorsville when the fires caught the wounded. “The poor fellows tried to get out of the way but could not do it,” and Johnson concluded “it was the worst thing I ever saw in my life and I have seen many bad sights.”¹¹⁰ Union general Robert McAllister confessed “it is horrible to think of” the wounded burning, but suspected that “some will no doubt survive to tell the particulars of these sad and painful stories.”¹¹¹ Charles Wainwright, a

¹⁰⁹ John Tiffany, letter to his parents, May 8, 1863, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 207.

¹¹⁰ Francis S. Johnson, Letter to Emmie, May 9, 1863, Special Collections, University of Georgia, Athens, GA.

¹¹¹ Robert McAllister, *The Civil War Letters of General Robert McAllister*. ed. James I Robertson, Jr. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1965), 307.

Union artillery officer, shared a similar sentiment at the prospect of soldiers suffering a fiery death, and his only comfort was the hope “that many of them crawled, or were got off before the fire reached them, and that it made quick work with the others.”¹¹²

Roughly a year later, the battle of the Wilderness, like Chancellorsville before, left the woods both ablaze and littered with dead and wounded men. Many contemporary witnesses dwelt upon the fires because of the dangers they posed to these wounded and helpless men. This situation greatly troubled soldiers on both sides even if they never actually saw anyone burn to death, but only heard reports or rumors to that effect. Alexander Boteler, a member of Jeb Stuart’s staff, found it “horrible to think of hundreds of wounded men [being] in danger of being roasted alive.”¹¹³ Others, however, had a more direct experience. William W. Williamson, an officer in the 8th Georgia, saw that the “dead and wounded were burned and scorched until they looked as black as negroes.”¹¹⁴ Likewise, William D. Landon, a soldier in the 14th Indiana observed “all the horrors of a battlefield, including the charred and blackened remains of those who were burned and smothered in the blazing leaves and underbrush.”¹¹⁵ Yet there was literally

¹¹² Charles S. Wainwright, *A Diary of Battle: The Personal Journals of Colonel Charles S. Wainwright 1861-1865*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), 197. For other good accounts of the Chancellorsville fires see James Houghton, *Journal*, May 3?, 1863, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan and Warren B. Persons to Daniel Dodge Persons, May 30, 1863, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 147.

¹¹³ Alexander Boteler, *Diary*, May 4, 1864, William Elizabeth Brooks Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

¹¹⁴ *Confederate Union* (Milledgeville, Georgia), June 7, 1864.

¹¹⁵ William D. Landon, “Fourteenth Indiana Regiment, Letters to the Vincennes Western Sun,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 34 (March 1938): 93.

more to the Wilderness fires than met the eye. William W. Williamson, of the 8th Georgia, agreed that “it was a most horrible sight” but also found “the smell that the burnt corpses emitted extremely shocking and sickening to the senses.”¹¹⁶ The cries of the wounded could also be awful, especially when accompanied by the sound that burning bodies makes. Jacob Raymer of the 4th North Carolina discovered that “their bodies burned with a crackling noise” and “the screams, the unearthly shrieks made the night hideous.” Given the strong emotions that the burning of the wounded evoked, it is not surprising that some witnesses thought this all marked the culmination of their most horrific experiences during combat in the Wilderness. Raymer wrote that the wounded men burning to death “in one awful funeral pile” infused “untold horrors to the scene of carnage.”¹¹⁷

Combat amid the flaming forest proved to be yet another serious problem. George A. Bowen of the 12th New Jersey wrote of how “the heat and smoke [were] almost suffocating.”¹¹⁸ There was also the danger of explosions when the fires found the black powder the men carried. In his after-action report, Edwin Dow of the Sixth Maine battery gave a good example of this danger. Dow complained that during Longstreet’s May 6 along the Brock Road his unit’s entrenchments “composed of dry logs, caught fire,” and some of his green men brought up cartridges to a gun near the fiery works. “The cartridges took fire . . . and exploded, burning 5 of

¹¹⁶ *Confederate Union* (Milledgeville, Georgia), June 7, 1864.

¹¹⁷ Raymer, *Confederate Correspondent*, 67.

¹¹⁸ George A. Bowen, Diary, May 10, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 228.

the cannoneers severely.”¹¹⁹ Josiah Murphey, a sergeant in the 20th Massachusetts explained how the Union soldiers were obliged to let the breastworks burn until the battle concluded. Once the shooting stopped, they felt at liberty to tear down the entrenchments near the burning portion and simply “built around it letting the fire burn itself out.”¹²⁰

The fires that swept the Wilderness were not only hazardous, but they had the potential to change the course of battle. The best example occurred at the battle of the Wilderness when on the afternoon of May 6, 1864 the Confederates launched an attack on the Union entrenchments along the Brock Road. By this time the fires, which had begun earlier in the day, spread and reached the Union breastworks. Francis Galwey, a Union soldier in the II Corps, painted the scene graphically. “Some of the brush had taken fire and the flames, smoke, and heat had driven many of the men out of the works,” and during this weak moment the Confederates pressed their attack “in heavy masses” and “some of them got in through the burnt-out sections of the log parapets and were subjecting our first lines to attacks simultaneously in front and flank.” The Confederates soon had control of a portion of the Union breastworks and “their little red flags” flew about them.¹²¹ Despite this stroke of luck, the Union forces were able to expel the

¹¹⁹ U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 127 vols., index, and atlas (Washington: GPO, 1880–1901), ser. 1, 36 (1): 514. (hereafter cited as OR)

¹²⁰ Josiah F. Murphey, Sergeant, Company I, 20th Massachusetts Vols. Reminiscences Ms. “20th” Cab. 6.5 Boston Public Library.

¹²¹ Thomas F. Galwey, *The Valiant Hours: An Irishman in the Civil War*, ed. W.S. Nye (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Company, 1961), 200-201.

Confederates from the burning entrenchments through a one-two punch of close-range canister and an infantry charge.¹²²

The postwar accounts of the Wilderness fires repeat much of what the contemporary sources had to say. The familiar themes of the horror of the wounding burning alive and the battle amid the flames along the Brock Road appear time and again in memoir after memoir to the point that the absence of these themes becomes more notable than their presence. Individual memoirs, however, diverge from the standard formula providing interesting details that elaborate or, some might say, embellish these fiery Wilderness episodes.¹²³

One contribution that the memoirs make is providing accounts of those who were in peril of being consumed by the merciless flames. Frank Wilkeson emphasized the fear the soldiers felt during the battle of the Wilderness at the thought of burning to death. Before the battle, a crusty veteran warned the men of the fires that were likely to break out and expressed his own fear of roasting in the flames.¹²⁴ Once the battle had commenced, Wilkeson reported that “the wounded were haunted with the dread of fire.” He recalled that “they conjured the scenes of the previous year, when some wounded men were burned to death, and their hearts well-nigh ceased to beat when they thought they detected the smell of burning wood in the air.” Once wounded, “the bare prospect of fire running through the woods where they lay helpless, unnerved the most courageous of men, and made them call aloud for help,” while clinging to their rifles in case they

¹²² Francis B. Harris, Diary, May 6, 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 352; “Grant’s Virginia Campaign,” *Columbia Democrat* (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania), June 18, 1864.

¹²³ Most contemporary accounts from the battle of the Wilderness focus on the Brock Road sector, but in the memoirs there are expanded accounts of the fires along the Turnpike sector as well.

¹²⁴ Wilkeson, *Recollections of a Private*, 50.

needed to put themselves out of their misery. One instance in particular stuck with Wilkeson, when he saw a wounded soldier whom he knew “meant to kill himself in case of fire—knew it as surely as though [he] could read [the man’s] thoughts.”¹²⁵

The postwar memoirs also recounted moments when the sight of the dead and the fires combined to create terrifying experiences. Abner R. Small of the 16th Maine recalled that Confederate shells landed from time to time which “would start a blaze in dry leaves.” The dark night would be illuminated for a moment, and then the blackness would set in again. Under these circumstances, Small was trying to make his way through the darkness when he lost his footing and his “outflung hands pushed up a smolder of leaves” from which a fire ignited and “caught in the hair and beard of a dead sergeant.” The effect of this “ghastly face and wide-open eyes” illuminated by the sudden spurt of fire was too much, and Small “rushed away in horror.”¹²⁶

Like many contemporary accounts, memoirs often focused on the fires as the culmination of the horror that was fighting in the Wilderness, but they took the descriptions to new levels of hyperbole by comparing the fighting in the flames to a battle in hell. The historian of the 106th Pennsylvania depicted the Confederates, who attacked the fiery Brock Road entrenchments on May 6, as pressing forward “like so many devils through the flames, charging over the burning works upon our retreating lines.”¹²⁷ Others compared the burning of the wounded to some

¹²⁵ Wilkeson, *Recollections of a Private*, 66-67.

¹²⁶ Abner R. Small, *The Road to Richmond: The Civil War Memoirs of Abner R. Small of the 16th Maine Volunteers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939), 133.

¹²⁷ Joseph R. C. Ward, *History of the 106th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers, 2d Brigade, 2d Division, 2d Corps, 1861-1865*, (Philadelphia, F. McManus, Jr. & Co., 1906), 242. Later historians also referred to hell when describing the fires in the Wilderness. For example, Douglas Southall Freeman called it “war in Inferno” and Jeffry

terrible vision of hell. “To add to the horrors of the scene,” recalled Channing M. Smith, a Confederate, “the woods caught fire, and many of the wounded of Grant’s army were burned alive.” Smith doubted whether “the scenes depicted in ‘Dante’s inferno,’” could top what he saw in the Wilderness.¹²⁸ Of all the memoirists, perhaps Horace Porter, a Union veteran, best captures the spirit of how the Wilderness fires came to be remembered. “All circumstances seemed to combine to make the scene one of unutterable horror,” reported Porter, as “forest fires raged; ammunition-trains exploded; the dead were roasted in the conflagration; the wounded, roused by its hot breath, dragged themselves along, with their torn and mangled limbs, in the mad energy of despair, to escape the ravages of the flames; and every bush seemed hung with shreds of blood-stained clothing. It was as though Christian men had turned to fiends, and hell itself had usurped the place of earth.”¹²⁹

* * * * *

If the Wilderness was a place of death, akin to hell, then it is only natural that some postwar authors portrayed the region as a haunt of ghosts and spirits.¹³⁰ One Federal, returning to the Wilderness battlefield looking for his fallen brother, found partially exposed bones. He tried

D. Wert in his history of the Army of the Potomac contended that “the horror of the unfortunate men’s screams and the smell of burning flesh could only have elicited images of hell.” See Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography*, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935), 3:297 and Jeffrey D. Wert, *The Sword of Lincoln: The Army of the Potomac* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 338.

¹²⁸ Channing M. Smith, “In the Wilderness,” *Confederate Veteran* XXIX no. 6, 212.

¹²⁹ Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant* (New York: The Century Co., 1897), 72-73.

¹³⁰ Roderick Nash also points out the traditional connection between wilderness on the one hand and the “supernatural and monstrous” on the other. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 10.

to pull one of them but found that “something at the other end seemed to detain it, and . . . stopped suddenly as if the dead man himself had put his scrawny hand on my shoulder and said ‘Don’t disturb my bones with such rude hands.’” The notion “that lifeless bones should make resistance as though still animated by an unwilling spirit, filled [him] with dread and [he] hurried away.”¹³¹ Others saw the Wilderness as a place where spirits ambled about. Channing M. Smith, a Confederate veteran, called the Wilderness “a place of gloom, the home of the snake, the bat, and the owl” and claimed that “if the souls of departed heroes are permitted to visit the spot where their bodies lie, it is surely visited by specters who wander in the gloom of the forest until cockcrow.”¹³² Francis Walker, the historian of the Federal II Corps, incorporated spirits into his account of the fighting. He recollected that “many [soldiers] had not beheld the enemy; yet the tangled forest had been alive with flying missiles; the whistling of the bullets through the air had been incessant; the very trees seemed peopled by spirits that shrieked and groaned through those hours of mortal combat.”¹³³

One of the more imaginative interpretations of the Wilderness as a haunted region came from Morris Schaff, a Union veteran. Schaff portrayed the Wilderness itself as an active spirit that intervened in the battle of the Wilderness to defeat the Confederates and strike down

¹³¹ J. E. Curran to ?, August 17, 1866, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Bound Volume 342.

¹³² Channing M. Smith, “In the Wilderness,” *Confederate Veteran* XXIX no. 6, 212.

¹³³ Francis A. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 415.

slavery.¹³⁴ His description nicely combined the idea of the Wilderness as a malevolent landscape and the Wilderness as a haunted region. After Schaff laid out Lee's hopes for victory in the Wilderness, he observed that Confederate general had not "reckoned upon a second intervention of Fate: that the spirit of the Wilderness would strike Longstreet just as victory was in his grasp as it had struck Stonewall." Later in his account the ghost of Stonewall Jackson appears, wandering the old battleground at Chancellorsville while the Spirit of the Wilderness, described as a "cowled figure," stalks him in the brush. Apparently the Spirit of the Wilderness was haunting others as well, because Jackson's ghost runs into "a gaunt, hollow-breasted, wicked eyed, sunken-cheeked being," who beseeched him saying, "Stonewall, I am Slavery and sorely wounded. Can you do nothing to stay the Spirit of the Wilderness that, in striking at me, struck you down?" As the battle progresses and Longstreet's May 6 flank attack reaches the height of its success, Slavery rejoices, and "frenzied with delight over her prospective reprieve, snatches a cap from a dead . . . Confederate soldier, and clapping it on her coarse, rusty, gray-streaked

¹³⁴ Schaff depicts the Wilderness as an avenging spirit. In his telling, the slaves who had tended the iron furnaces and cut down the original forest suffered great wrongs, injustices that the Wilderness observed and for which the forest set out to exact revenge against the Confederates. In contrast to the traditional interpretation which argues that the Confederates benefitted from fighting in the Wilderness, Schaff portrays the region, or at least the Spirit of the Wilderness, as an enemy to the South's cause. "Who knows what happened there, what heart breaking, due to slavery and to slavery alone, and which the Wilderness was witness to or moved by mournings of far distant exiles! . . . And was there a Spirit of the Wilderness, that, as tears gathered in eyes of fathers and mothers over separation from children and home, recorded an oath to avenge the wrong? Else why did the Wilderness strike twice at the Confederacy in its moments of victory? Who knows!" Schaff, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 63-64. See also Stephen Cushman, *Bloody Promenade: Reflections on a Civil War Battle* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 183-187.

mane, begins to dance in hideous glee.” Schaff subsequently warns Slavery to “dance on, repugnant and doomed creature! The inexorable eye of the Spirit of the Wilderness in on you! . . . For in a moment Longstreet, like “Stonewall,” will be struck down by the same mysterious hand, by the fire of his own men, and the clock in the steeple of the Confederacy will strike twelve.”¹³⁵

* * * * *

What then constitutes the Wilderness’s mystique? Part of it was certainly the combat conditions at the battle of the Wilderness, but there was more to it than that. The Wilderness’s name itself evoked negative connotations of an area uninhabited and beyond the control of man’s favorite tool for taming nature—agriculture. The soldier’s reactions to the Wilderness also changed over the course of time. At first, the Wilderness was just a forest like any other, but the soldiers began to attach the name to the place and soon certain conditions to the name as well. By the time of the Overland campaign, the soldiers in both armies called it the Wilderness and from that campaign on into the postwar years, the region became increasingly portrayed as a woebegone, gloomy, malevolent labyrinth of a forest. The battle of the Wilderness was the key event that defined the region’s mystique. It was in the immediate aftermath of this battle that the region became closely associated with death, destruction, and fire. This was only magnified in the years following Appomattox until the Wilderness had become a land of the shadow of death and a region compared to hell itself. The postwar literature also saw the Wilderness become a land of ghosts and a haunt of specters, and even in one instance, a spirit itself that could strike down those it deemed fit.

¹³⁵ Schaff, *Battle of the Wilderness*, 108, 121-124, 273-274.

This then was the aura that came to surround the Wilderness, a mystique that has continued from the war to the present day. It was the creation of the soldiers. There were many woods in which Civil War soldiers fought, even ones similar to the Wilderness, yet there was only one Wilderness. Only one carried the name. Only one became the malevolent woods where one would find death and hell with accompanying spirits. Why was this the case? It is undeniable that terrible things happened in the Wilderness. Thousands of men died there, not a few of them at the hands of the merciless flames. Yet, in the end, there were other battlefields noted for slaughter and other engagements where forest fires took their toll. What made the Wilderness different then?

The size of the seemingly interminable Wilderness unquestionably set it apart and awed those who entered it. Moreover, repeated visits to the forest led the soldiers' understanding of the Wilderness to evolve. The Wilderness's very name evoked the animus between man and untamed nature, while its decayed landscape provided a gloomy backdrop for the fighting. Any analysis of why the soldiers set the Wilderness apart would be incomplete though without acknowledging the supreme importance of the battle of the Wilderness in this process. Without that bloody engagement it is doubtful that the region would have received the notoriety it did. Depictions of the Wilderness became decidedly negative in the battle's aftermath, and in its travails, the mystique was born. Of all the many claims that the Wilderness was unique in this or that respect, it is this mystique, above all its other characteristics, that made the Wilderness most distinctive. It is truly the one thing that sets the Wilderness apart from any other battlefield, and it is a major reason why people are drawn to the battles fought in these woods. The Wilderness's wounds have healed, the armies have left, the dead have returned to mother Earth, but the

Wilderness mystique lives on, and will live on as long as men remember what happened in that Virginia forest so long ago.

CONCLUSION

The Wilderness was a region that lent itself to mythmaking, and postwar writers did not disappoint. Their creation—their Wilderness myth—had three components. First, the Wilderness was exceptional. It was unlike any other field of battle and this landscape in turn created a fight unlike any other at the battle of the Wilderness. Second, the Wilderness and the battlefield conditions it created favored the Confederates who tried to trap the Union army there at the battle of the Wilderness. Third, there was a mystique surrounding the Wilderness, which associated it with woe, gloom, death, destruction, hell, fire, and the supernatural among other things.

As the preceding chapters have shown, however, many components of this Wilderness myth were simply not true. Contemporary sources suggest that the Wilderness was not the monolithic, second-growth forest of legend, but instead a complex forest with a variety of different types of vegetation, with a density ranging from near impassable thickets to open areas. It was also not a unique landscape created by the local iron industry, as Wilderness-like forests could be found in other parts of Virginia where tobacco cultivation had taken place. Nor did the Wilderness create unique battlefield conditions. Chancellorsville, although it was fought in the same region, was a very different type of battle than the battle of the Wilderness, while Chickamauga, despite being fought in a different forest, created many of the same tactical problems traditionally associated with combat in the Wilderness. The Wilderness, furthermore, did not favor the Confederates. They did not know it any better than their Union opponents, they experienced the same tactical problems as the Federals, and any advantage the Confederates gained at the battle of the Wilderness can be credited to their aggressive pursuit of the few

opportunities this difficult field offered. Such being the case, it should come as no surprise that Lee did not attempt to trap the Union army in the Wilderness, and that the Union commanders made no effort to avoid the region. In the end, the only truly unique characteristic of the Wilderness was the mystique that grew up around it. This mystique grew out of the soldiers' repeated experiences in the region, but hardened—after the battle of the Wilderness—into the exaggerated aura that has characterized the Virginia forest to this day.

This study suggests that our understanding of Civil War battlefields—their character, the combat conditions they created, and how these conditions affected strategy or aided one side or another—can suffer from certain distortions. The passage of time and the agendas of pro-Union and pro-Confederate historians certainly did this in the case of the Wilderness. While the portrayal of combat conditions—low visibility, difficulty maneuvering, etc.—at the battle of the Wilderness by both contemporaries and historians was largely accurate, the meaning attributed to these circumstances by postwar memoirists and historians—such as its supposedly unique nature or how the Confederates held an advantage because of it—was misleading. What other battlefields and battles do we misunderstand because of our reliance on postwar traditions instead of contemporary sources? Additional studies along these lines would give a clearer picture of how postwar interpretations have distorted our understanding.

For now, there are many lingering questions. For example, did the physical landscape affect the strategy of commanders in other Civil War campaigns? If so, in what ways? Did the Federals think other battlefields were advantageous to the Confederates in the same way they claimed the Wilderness battlefield was? Did the Federals always claim that Confederates fought better than their Union opponents in forested terrain? How did other wooded battlefields—like Shiloh or Chickamauga—figure into the narratives that soldiers created about their wartime

service? What kind of reputations did other battlefields earn and did postwar reputations differ from wartime ones? Did soldiers react more negatively towards other areas they fought in multiple times like Manassas or the Virginia Peninsula? Did soldiers from more settled areas find fighting in the woods more distressing than those from frontier regions? How did the experience of battle differ between engagements that were fought in open areas, wooded areas, swamps, deserts, beaches, and mountains? This study of the Wilderness is just one piece of a much larger story that not only deserves to be told, but must be told in order to understand how environmental factors affected the Civil War as well as how veterans chose to remember battlefields. Until we have a larger scale investigation of the relationship between the generals, soldiers, and armies on the one hand and the landscape of war on the other, our understanding of Civil War battle and battlefields will remain incomplete, and we will perpetuate our reliance on tradition and myths instead of history and facts.

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