



W. Britain figures depict Lee meeting with his staff in the field across the Chambersburg Pike from the Thompson house.

# Location, Location, Location

James H. Hillestad applies a popular real estate maxim to the Battle of Gettysburg

TEXT AND PHOTOS: JAMES H. HILLESTAD

In buying or selling real estate, it is a well-established belief that “location, location, location” is all important. Location was certainly all important at the Battle of Gettysburg fought in Pennsylvania July 1-3, 1863.

In thinking and talking about the American Civil War clash, the usual focus is on Little Round Top and three Confederate generals’ assaults: William Barksdale’s attack at the Peach Orchard, J.E.B Stuart’s aborted foray at East Cavalry Field and George Pickett’s Charge at Cemetery Ridge.

Less dramatic — but decisive — was the tactical command factor.

## LEE’S HEADQUARTERS

Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee established his headquarters at the residence of the widow Mrs. Mary Thompson, whose home was one of the oldest in the area. It was situated near the crest of Seminary Ridge, along the Chambers-

burg Pike, three-quarters of a mile from the center of the village of Gettysburg.

Lee held Army of Northern Virginia staff conferences and ate several meals at the Thompson house, now a museum run by the National Park Service. Lee was averse, however, to enjoying better quarters than those of his men. He preferred tents set up by his staff in an orchard on the other side of the Pike to the more comfortable Thompson house.

## MEADE’S HEADQUARTERS

Union Maj. Gen. George G. Meade, commander of the Army of the Potomac, selected as his personal headquarters the centrally located farmhouse of Mrs. Lydia Leister.

She was a widow whose property bordered on the Taneytown Road just south of Cemetery Hill, at the eastern base of Cemetery Ridge. The farmhouse was severely damaged by Confederate artillery fire which preceded Pickett’s Charge.

## THE BATTLE UNFOLDS

On July 3, the final and critical day of the battle, Lee waited at his headquarters. He took no active steps to ensure that the attack as it unfolded was coordinated and that a maximum effort was mounted. Oversight was tragically absent.

In contrast, Meade stayed in close contact with his front lines and was often seen on horseback, riding along Cemetery Ridge.

Meanwhile, Lee sat on a tree stump far behind the battle lines, sending and receiving just one dispatch during the whole afternoon. In the course of that afternoon, Pickett received no support and was left to “hang out and dry.”

Meade directed Union forces from the core. His headquarters on the Leister Farm was three times closer than Lee’s headquarters to every major part of engagement on the battlefield.



The Leister farmhouse, headquarters of Gen. Meade. Figures and building by W. Britain.

**COMMENT FROM PICKETT**

Some years after the battle, Pickett was asked why the Confederates were defeated at Gettysburg. His famously laconic response was:

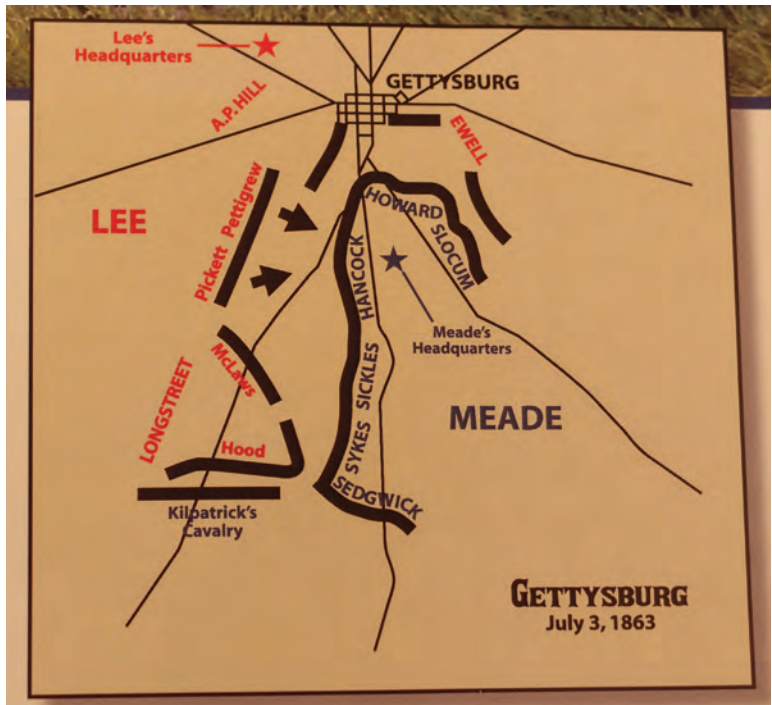
“I always thought the Yankees had something to do with it.”

And perhaps it also involved the element of command location, location, location.

*Note: In re-creating the two headquarters scenes at Gettysburg, I recruited figures and accessories from W. Britain, along with the maker’s model of the Leister farmhouse to serve as a backdrop. ■*



Figures of Lee and Meade (from left) by W. Britain.



Map of the battlefield showing the location of the opposing headquarters and their proximity to the fighting.



**ABOUT THE WRITER**

James H. Hillestad is a military historian and proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum in Cresco, Pa., USA.