



*"...they may as well pack up their haversacks and make for Richmond."  
--Gen. Hooker*

## Chancellorsville, 1863 -- Lee's Master Stroke

*James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6, focuses on the battle of Chancellorsville, which distinguished Lee as a brilliant tactician and marked the apogee of his military career.*

**F**ollowing Burnside's calamitous loss at Fredericksburg in December 1862, the Army of the Potomac was ordered to advance upstream, north of the Rappahannock River. Under their new commander, "Fighting Joe" Hooker, Union infantry began marching on April 27, 1863. (Like "Stonewall" Jackson, "Fighting Joe's" nickname was a creation of the press.)

Hooker had developed an impressive plan. With 134,000 men, he outnumbered Lee by a margin of more than two-to-one. First, he detached 28,000 men to hold Lee's attention at Fredericksburg. Then, he split his army. Half would concentrate at the hamlet of

Chancellorsville, while the other half would outflank and envelope Lee's forces west of Chancellorsville -- thus trapping Lee in a pincer movement. The two halves of his army both outnumbered their opposition, and together, they were thought to be invincible.

Hooker commented to newspaper reporter William Swinton, "...they may as well pack up their haversacks and make for Richmond."

The whole area west of Fredericksburg where the battle was to take place was one vast forest, with secondary growth of oak and pine. The thicket of brush was so dense that it was called the Wilderness. Poor visibility and the



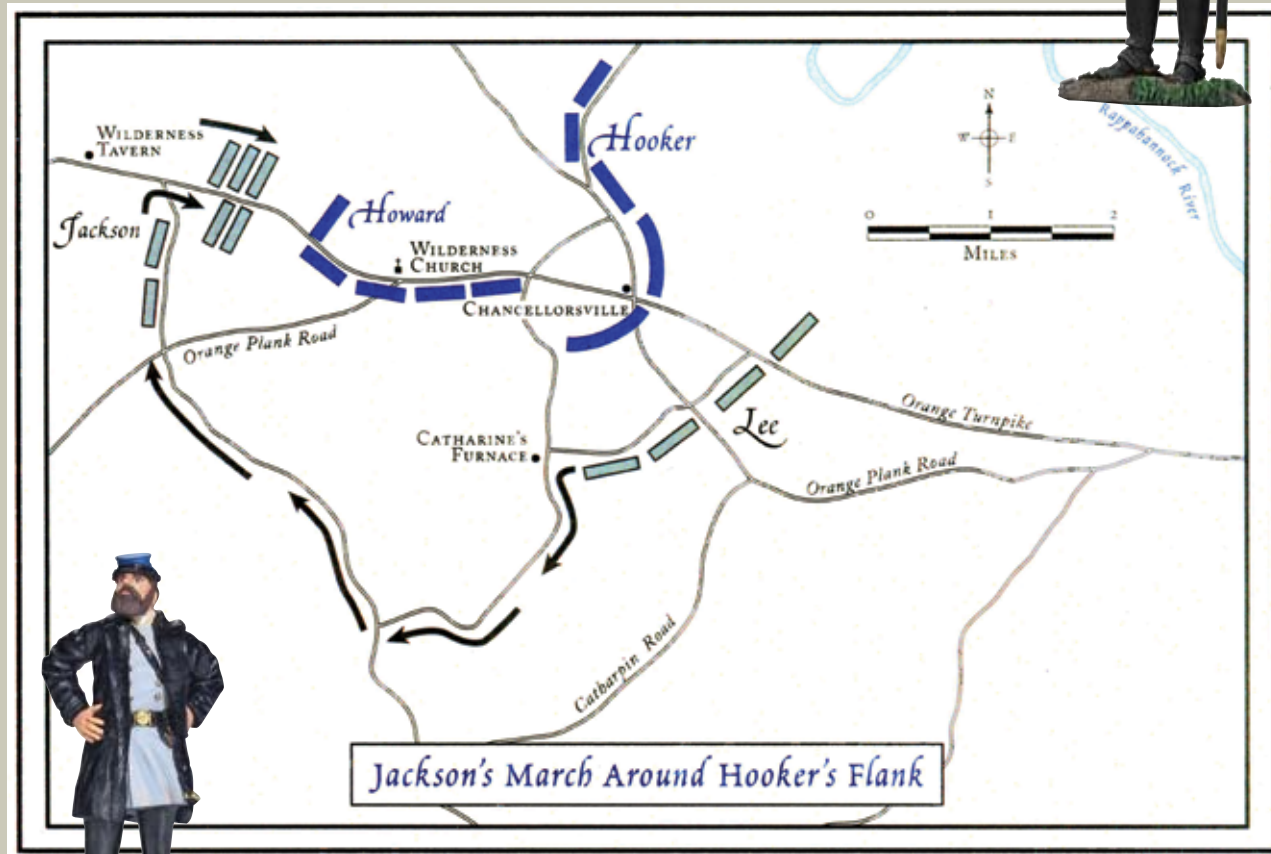
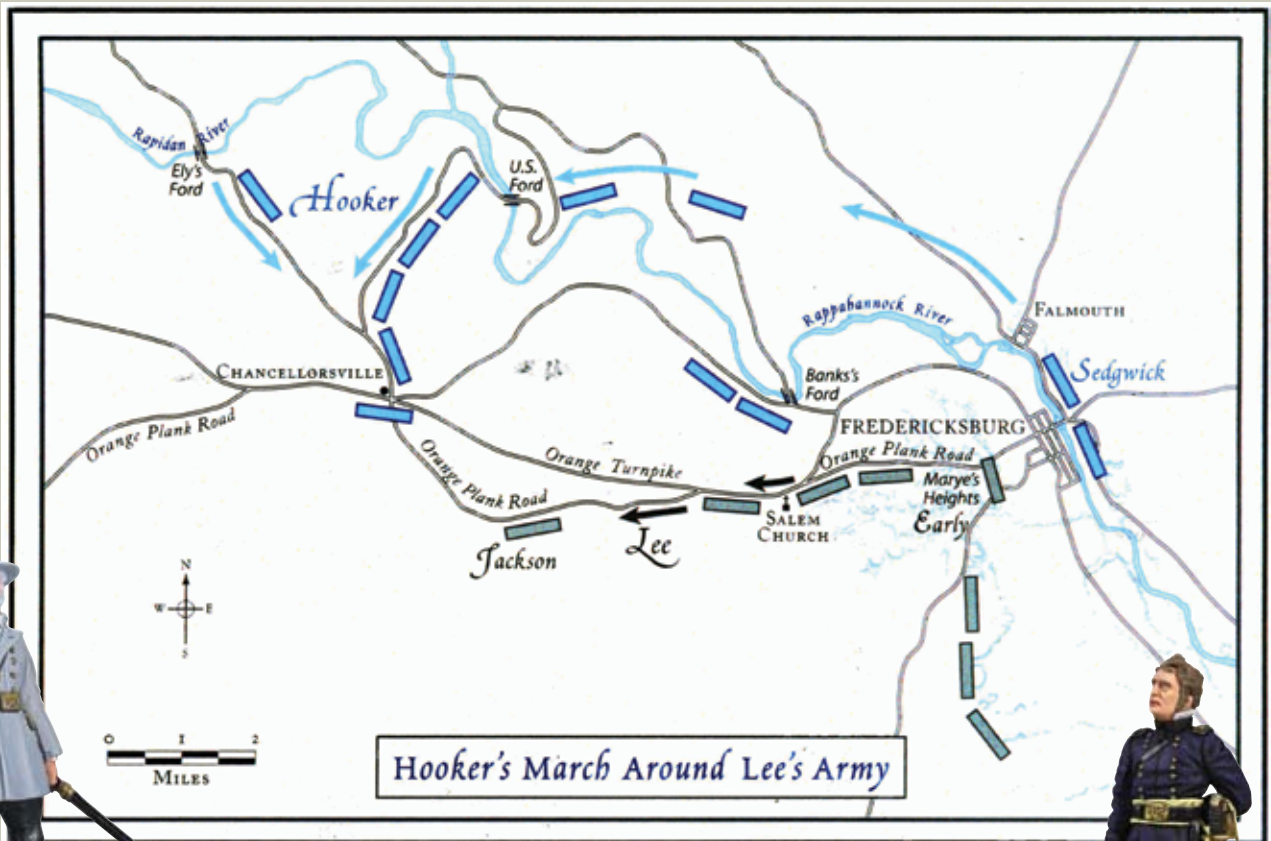
Union Gen. Joseph Hooker

**TOP**  
The evening of May 1, Lee and Jackson, joined by Jeb Stuart, plan Jackson's "lightning strike."  
No.31172

inability of both sides to deploy troops conventionally -- or even to move them around effectively -- would characterize the coming fight.

On May 1, the unthinkable happened. Joe Hooker lost his nerve, suspended the attack, and ordered his troops to prepare defensive positions.

Despite protests from his corps commanders, Hooker was adamant in his decision, citing disquieting intelligence that Confederate forces were getting ready to attack him. Historians have suggested that his timidity came from a loss of confidence in his ability to manage such a large and complex operation.





Trees shattered by artillery fire on the south side of Plank Road near where Gen. Stonewall Jackson was shot



The right wing of Hooker's army crossing the Rappahannock. From a wartime sketch.

Seeing that Hooker had assumed the defensive and was no longer an immediate threat, Lee met with Jackson on the night of May 1. At that meeting, Lee embarked on one of the most daring and brilliant plans of the Civil War. He had already reduced his army of 60,000 by sending off Jubal Early with 10,000 men to defend Marye's Heights on the western outskirts of Fredericksburg.

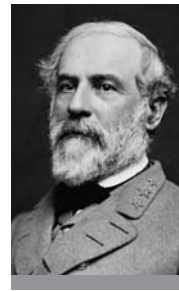
Now he proposed to split his army yet again, by detaching Jackson with 30,000 men to surreptitiously by-pass the Union front lines and hook back around the Union's vulnerable right flank. He had total confidence in Stonewall Jackson's capabilities. Lee knew him to be a master of concealment, and a genius at exploiting surprise.

Lee would be left with a mere 17,000 men to defend against a vastly superior force. By dividing his army not once, but twice, he

ignored an established military maxim: when faced with superior enemy forces, it is reckless to split your resources and to leave yourself open to defeat in detail.

Jackson's march did not go unnoticed. Nevertheless, Hooker dismissed the threat, in the belief that Jackson was retreating. At 5:15 p.m. on May 2, Jackson's force emerged from the concealed cover and fell upon the extended right flank of the Union army, rolled it up, and advanced nearly all the way to Hooker's headquarters.

Despite commanding twice the number of Lee's troops, Hooker allowed Lee to dictate the course of the battle, which ended with Hooker ordering a retreat back across the Rappahannock River. Once again, the Union army had been dealt a staggering defeat at the hands of a force half their number.



Gen. Robert E. Lee

**RIGHT**  
The bible of Robert E. Lee. Collection of the National Civil War Museum, Harrisburg, PA



## General Joseph Hooker

Major General "Fighting Joe" Hooker, age 48, had a reputation for unparalleled egotism. When he was given command of the Army of the Potomac, he boasted, "May God have mercy on General Lee, for I will have none."

His rowdy headquarters were likened to a combination of barroom and brothel (notwithstanding the widespread belief, the term "hooker" predates the General). He was known as a heavy drinker, though it should be noted that at the battle of Chancellorsville he



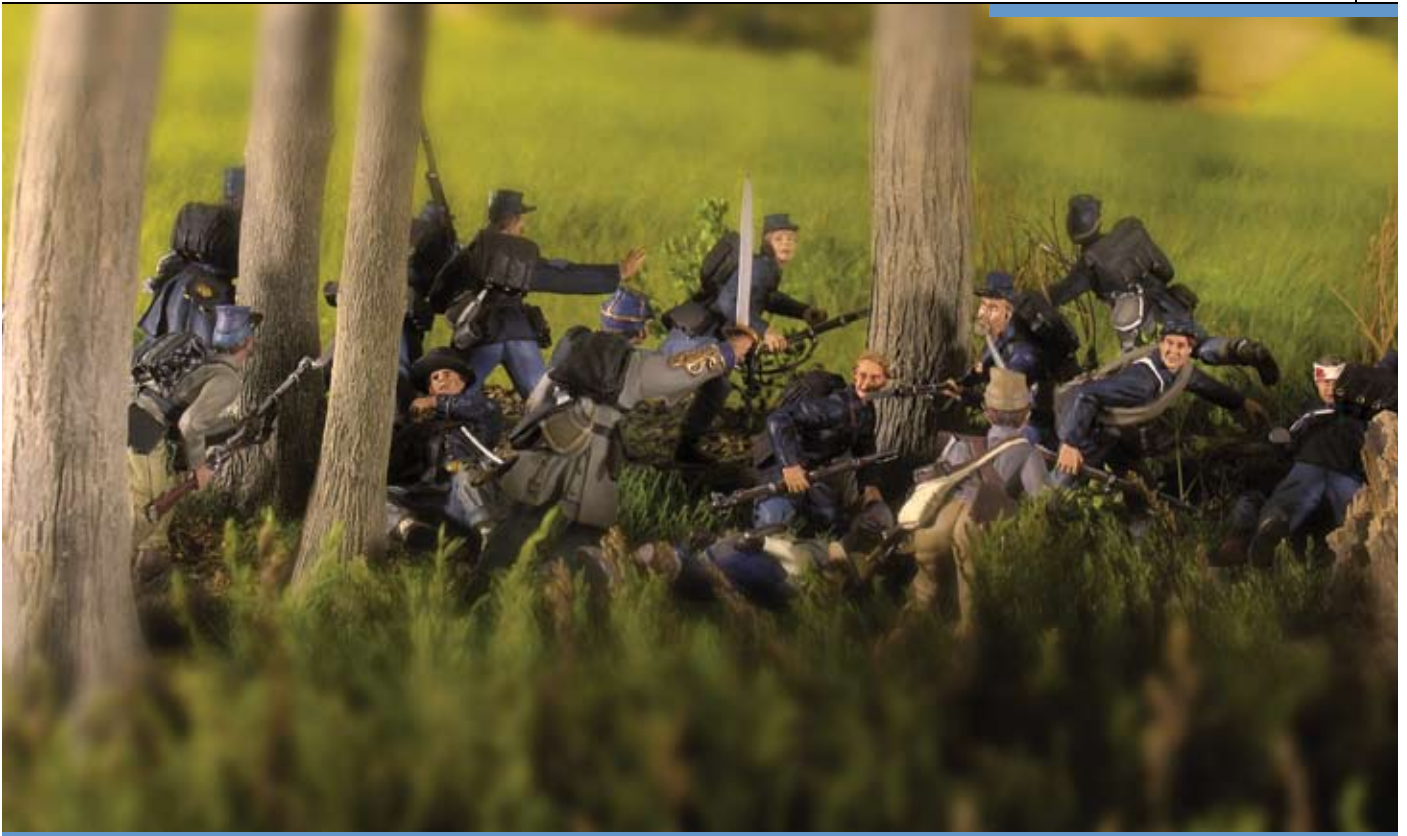
Union General "Fighting Joe" Hooker No. 31171



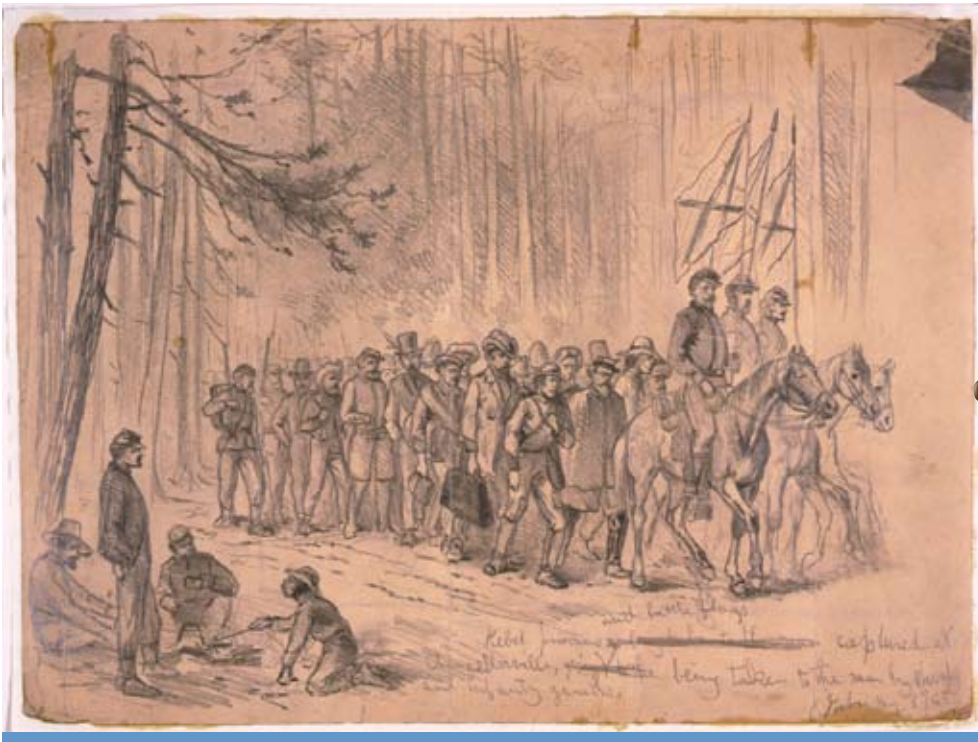
Major-General Joseph Hooker, full-length portrait, seated on horse, facing left, wearing military uniform, two tents and large building in the background

was "on the wagon." Some have suggested that a bit of John Barleycorn during the battle might have given him the "liquid courage" to pursue the offensive.

Lincoln removed Hooker from the Army of the Potomac's command on June 28, 1863 -- three days before the battle of Gettysburg.



The far right flank of the Union line breaking before the surprise attack of Jackson's corps.



**ABOVE** Rebel prisoners and battle flags captured at Chancellorsville, being taken to the rear by cavalry and infantry guards



Stonewall Jackson's gauntlet glove. Collection of the National Civil War Museum, Harrisburg, PA

Union losses were 17,000, Confederate 13,000. Lincoln was near despair when he got the news. "My God! My God!" he cried, "What will the country say?"

The Confederate victory was a costly one, however. Returning from a reconnaissance on the night of May 2, Jackson's party was shot at by a picket line of the 18th North Carolina Infantry, mistaking them for a Union cavalry patrol. Jackson was wounded in three places, resulting

in the amputation of his left arm. On May 10, Jackson succumbed to pneumonia and died. His last words were "Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of the trees."

Lee had lost his "strong right arm." Military historians have hypothesized that if Lee had had the support of Jackson at Gettysburg, the outcome might have been very different.

**Jim Hillestad is a frequent contributor to The Standard and is proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum. His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him at 570 629-7227 or visit his website: [www.the-toy-soldier.com](http://www.the-toy-soldier.com)**