



Sailor's Creek

The Last Major Battle of the Civil War by James H. Hillestad

In writing about his war experience, Federal General J. Warren Keifer once remarked, "Not five per centum of the intelligent people of the United States, North and South... ever heard of the battle of Sailor's Creek at all, or, having heard of it by mere name, still know anything of its magnitude or importance."

Background

Following the Confederate defeat at Petersburg on March 25, 1865, Robert E. Lee gave orders for the evacuation of that fortified city and Richmond. The plan was for the 35,000 Confederate evacuees to march west to Amelia Court House, located along the Richmond and Danville Railroad. Here they would be resupplied with provisions. Following this, they would march on into North Carolina, there to join up with the Confederate Army of the Tennessee -- 25,000 men -- under

the command of General Joseph E. Johnston.

This, however, was not to be. First, it was hampered by the lack of rations for the hungry, footsore troops. Instead of bringing food



to Amelia, the trains had brought ammunition. Second, there was the Federal cavalry to contend with, under the very aggressive General Philip Sheridan.

ABOVE
The final Federal Assault on the Confederate positions.

SAILOR'S CREEK
"Sailor's" is the correct Civil War-era spelling of the battle. During later years, it has been popular to adopt the spelling "Sayler's." The American Battlefield Protection Program (National Park Service) and the Civil War Trust use the older spelling "Sailor's Creek."

In desperation, Lee ordered a 23-mile night march, further westward, to Farmville on the Southside Railroad, where supply trains from Lynchburg awaited him with 80,000 rations for his men.

The Race Is On

Alerted to the westward Confederate movement, the Federal 2nd Army Corps under General Andrew Humphreys immediately pursued the column. At the same time, the 6th Army Corps under General Horatio Wright followed along Lee's flank on a parallel road to the south. He was accompanied by Sheridan's fast-moving cavalry.

The Confederate line of march was made up of the First and Third Corps (General James Longstreet), the Fourth Corps (General Richard Anderson), followed by the Richmond Reserve Corps (General R.S. Ewell), and in the rear, the main Confederate wagon

train. Bringing up the tail end was the Second Corps under the command of General John B. Gordon.

"On and on, hour after hour..." So wrote Confederate General Gordon, whose task it was to cover the retreat. From hilltop to hilltop, the lines were alternately forming, fighting and retreating. A boy soldier came running by at the top of his speed. When asked why he was running, he shouted back "I'm running 'cause I can't fly!"

Lee's army continued west. The Federals pressed in constant pursuit.

Sailor's Creek

As the Confederate troops moved on, Anderson's men could not keep up with Longstreet's troops in front of them, and a gap developed in the column. On April 6, Federal cavalry under Brigadier General George Armstrong Custer charged into the gap, cutting off Anderson and all the units behind him at a small stream known as Little Sailor's Creek.

Ewell directed that the wagon train with his artillery turn off to the north and follow a road less exposed. General Gordon, lacking instructions to the contrary, set off

to accompany the wagon train.

Now without artillery, Ewell deployed his troops on the west side of Sailor's Creek. East of the creek was a cleared hillside that led up to the Hillsman House, where Federal field guns had been positioned. The blue infantry ran

down the hill, splashed across the stream, and overwhelmed the Confederates.

Compounding this debacle, both Anderson's and Gordon's troops suffered a similar fate.

Three Federal corps had thus cut off and ensnared one-quarter of

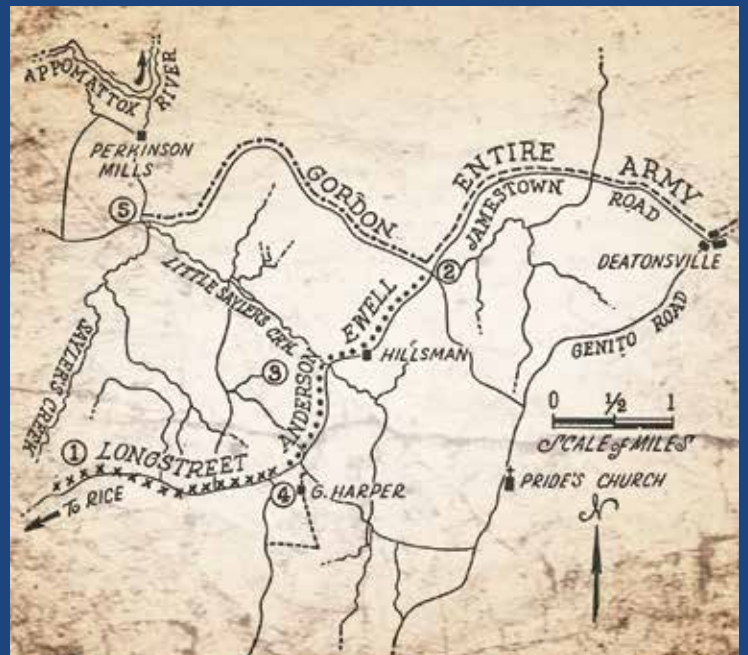
BELOW
A view from the defending Confederate position.



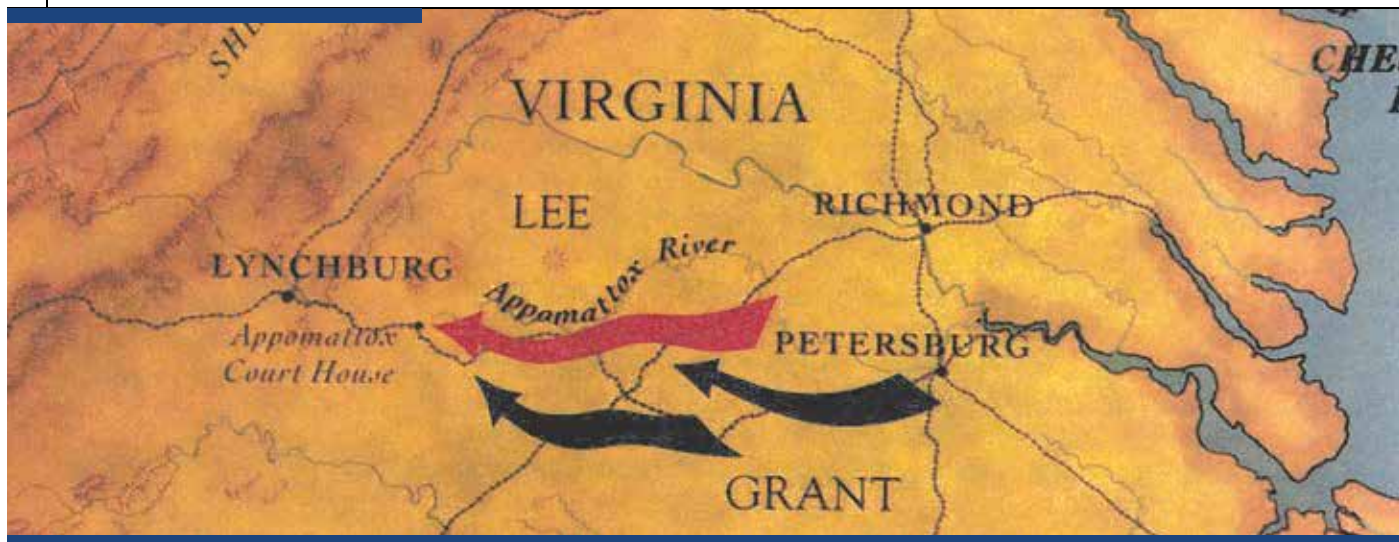
BELOW Federal troops ford the shallow creek.



Vicinity of Saylor's Creek



Vicinity of Saylor's Creek, scene of the battle of April 6, 1865. The encircled numbers represent" 1: the line of Longstreet's march to Rice. 2: Forks of the Jamestown Road where Gordon mistook the route of the wagon train for that of the army and turned Northwest. 3: Scene of Ewell's stand and surrender. 4: Ground of Anderson's halt and vain attempt to cut his way through. 5: Gordon's battleground. (After Michler's map of 1867)



Lee's army (7,700 men), destroyed much of its irreplaceable wagon train, and in the process captured eight of Lee's generals -- including Ewell and Lee's own son Custis Lee.

The Mortal Blow

Lee knew at once that this was a mortal blow. When he saw his men running from the battlefield, he exclaimed, "My God! Has the army dissolved?"

Lee regrouped what was left, and trudged on to Appomattox Courthouse. But here again he was confronted by Sheridan's cavalry, supported by two Federal infantry corps. Two other Federal corps were closing in on his rear.

A private in the Federal Army said, "Lee couldn't go forward, he couldn't go backwards, and he couldn't go sideways!"

So here was the Army of the Potomac, getting ready to fight its old antagonist, and, for the first time in its history, its battle line was facing toward the northeast. It had won the race.

Surrounded and outnumbered by six to one in effective troops, Lee faced up to the inevitable. He surrendered on Palm Sunday, April 9, 1865. 🏳️



Federal Light Artillerymen load their 12 pound Napoleon



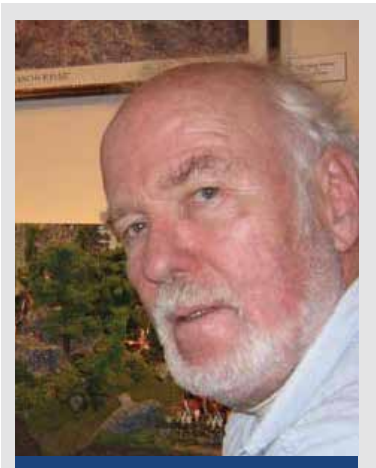
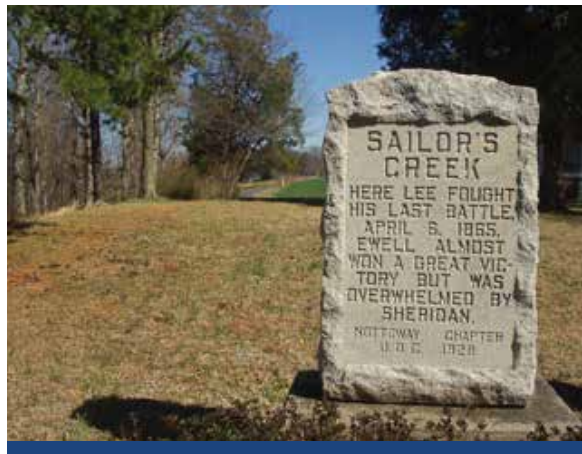
W. Britain No.51004 18th/19th Century Farm House stands in for the Hillsman House

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am indebted to Chris Calkins, author of "Thirty-six Hours Before Appomattox" and Park Manager of Sailor's Creek Battlefield Historical State Park for his insights into this historic battle.

NOTE

Federal corps designations used numbers or Roman numerals, while Confederate corps were identified by spelling the numbers.



This article, "Sailor's Creek," marks Jim Hillestad's 80th piece researched and written for our magazine.

His articles have ranged from tips on displaying your collection, building dioramas, and incidents in history illustrated with his wonderful collection of miniatures and accessories.

Using his talent he has brought our readers hours of enjoyment writing about American battles that took place in the French & Indian Wars, the American War for Independence, and especially the American Civil War.

Jim and his wife own The Toy Soldier Museum in the beautiful Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. If you are ever in the area, it is a "must see" with over 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria on display.

For directions and hours, call him at 570-629-7227 or visit his website:

www.the-toy-soldier.com



Jim's Sailor's Creek diorama measures 24" x 48" and includes Federal soldiers wading the creek during the assault.



A desperate moment

