



Left, "Lee go back," exclaimed astonished Texans as the Commander in Chief attempted to lead them into battle. A reluctant Lee turned and rejoined his Corps Commander, James Longstreet, who shortly afterward was critically wounded by friendly fire on the Orange Plank Road. Right, Ulysses S. Grant kept a watchful eye over General George Meade during the Battle of the Wilderness. It is said that he wore a pair of string gloves, given him by his wife. Chain-smoking cigars, he sat on this stump and whittled sticks until there was a pile of shavings and thread from the new gloves at his feet.



Slowly he slumped in his saddle."

Longstreet was eased down and propped up against a tree. Fearing the worst, a British volunteer galloped off in search of a surgeon and had the incredible luck to find the medical director for the entire Corps, Dr. Dorsey Cullen, who returned on the volunteer's horse and staunch the bleeding. The friendly fire incident happened almost exactly a year after and just a few miles away from where Stonewall Jackson was mortally wounded at the Battle of Chancellorsville.

After that, the Confederate flanking maneuver fizzled. Lee ordered a frontal assault on Federal earthworks up and down the Brock Road which intersects the Plank Road. Fire briefly helped the Confederates as a westerly wind actually burned a gap in the Union defenses. The Confederates even planted a flag briefly before being repulsed by a counterattack. "As soon as the enemy was driven back, we devoted ourselves to saving the wounded from roasting to death in the woods in front," wrote Union soldier Josiah Favill. That was the last frontal assault Lee ever ordered.

On this second day, not much happened at Saunder's Field. One Confederate General, John Gordon reconnoitered and finally won approval to mount a flanking maneuver from the north. Union soldiers were just settling down to dinner of fried pork and coffee when they heard, "an unearthly screeching and yelling." They ran, "leaving the pork in the pan and the coffee in the fire." The flanking maneuver

had promise; it even threatened Grant's headquarters. But it was approved too late and after initial success fizzled. However, two Union Generals were taken prisoner by "straggling vagabonds."

At one point an officer warned Grant about Lee's cunning. Grant snapped back, "Oh, I am heartily tired of hearing about

what Lee is going to do. Some of you seem to think he is suddenly going to turn a double somersault and land in our rear and on both of our flanks at the same time. Go back to your command and try to think what we are going to do ourselves, instead of what Lee is going to do."

Night fell and the Battle of the

Wilderness was over. Long streams of wounded hobbled, crawled or bumped agonizingly in ambulances back toward Orange. We'll never know how many were treated at the Gordonsville Exchange Hotel; they were too busy to keep records. Longstreet was carried by ambulance to the home of his quartermaster, Erasmus Taylor at Meadowfarm and put on a train the next day to Lynchburg where he miraculously recovered.

Grant, meanwhile, had spent most of the two days of the battle sitting on a stump, whittling and chain-smoking cigars. Although he had let Meade run most of the show, "this was where Grant was beginning to learn what he might have to do," says Frank Walker. And the massive assaults the morning of May 6th gave the Confederacy a taste of the man's style in battle. Like a dog with a bone, Grant would not relent.

The Battle of the Wilderness was ruled a stalemate. When they marched out of the Wilderness, the Union Army came to a crossroads. If it turned east it meant they were retreating...once more. The order came down the line to continue south on Brock Road. The entire Army of the Potomac erupted into cheers. There was no turning back this time. They were headed to Spotsylvania Courthouse and the Bloody Angle. "I think the army has found a leader who will lead us through a sea of blood to victory," prophetically wrote one Union soldier.

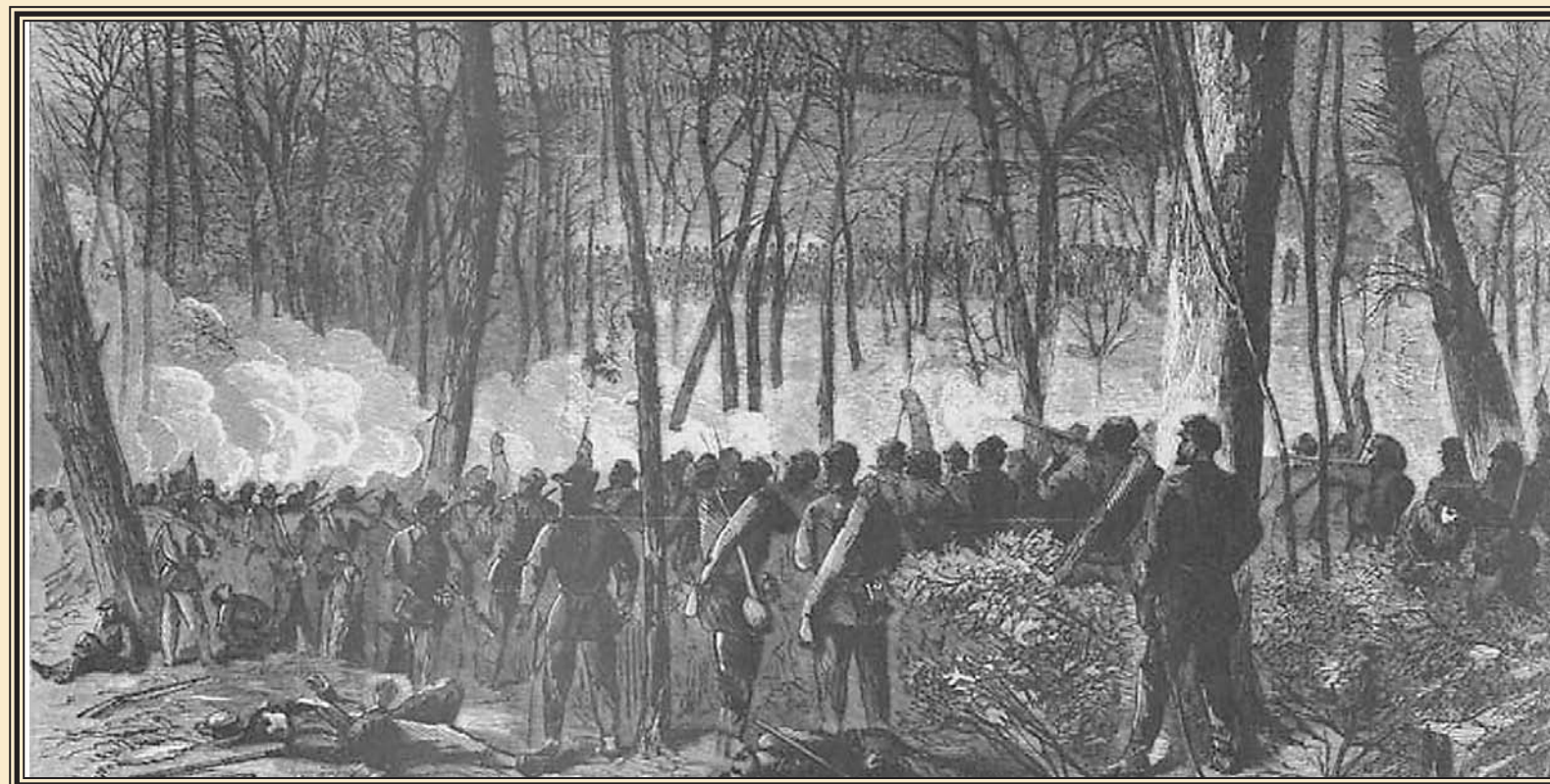
Still it took Grant almost a year to bring Lee to his knees at Appomattox.



Re-enactors for the Federal Army take a break at Ellwood. The Federal Army was well supplied with a train of 4,300 wagons. Ellwood was the scene of a field hospital during the Battle of the Wilderness. The Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield will hold a 142nd anniversary celebration May 5-7. For information about the weekend's activities, visit the group's website at www.fowb.org

Photo by Phil Audibert

BATTLE OF THE WILDERNESS

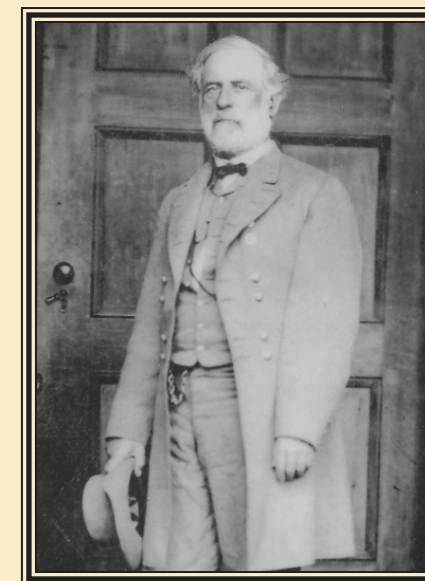


25,000 killed, wounded, missing

142 years ago this coming Friday and Saturday, Orange County bore witness to a fire-breathing hell on earth—the Battle of the Wilderness. Up to this point in history few other battles in this country, produced as many casualties—at least 25,000 killed, wounded, and missing.

The next time you are traveling east on Route 20 and you crest the hill at Saunder's Field, pull over and consider what was happening on this very ground on May 5th of 1864. It is staggering that human beings, who had already suffered so much could endure so much more.

The southern half of this "ragged uneven old corn patch" was on fire. Wounded were crawling away from the flames to the relative safety of the firebreak caused by the Orange Turnpike (Rt. 20) running right through the middle of the



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field. The cartridge boxes of the slow ones exploded from the heat of the flames, inflicting horrible wounds. At least one crippled soldier was seen lying next to his loaded cocked gun, saving the last bullet for himself. Dead and dying were strewn everywhere. "Blizzards of lead" musket balls swarmed like bees through the air. Clouds of thick smoke drifted too and fro, and always the noise... the screams of plunging horses, the yells of men, the volleys of musket fire, and the occasional artillery burst that one man termed "a double bass in the concert of death."

Hold that thought for a moment, and let's go back and set the stage for this home-grown horror movie.

Before first light the morning of May 4th, the great slumbering giant that was the Federal army awoke after spending a long, relatively comfortable and certainly well-supplied winter staring across the Rapidan River at the starving and ragged Confederates in Orange County. This 120,000-man giant, with its newly appointed leader, Ulysses S. Grant, arose long before first light and lumbered southeastward through the wasteland that was Culpeper County. Following them was a wagon train 37 miles long. Marching men had been issued three days rations and 50 rounds of ammunition each. Their packs weighed 50 pounds. As the "lovely spring day" turned hot, Federal troops were soon pitching blankets and overcoats to the side of the road to lighten their load.

Across the river on top of Clark's Mountain, Confederate observers marveled at the scene unfolding below... a sea of blue, accented by the sun glinting off muskets and bayonets, "the largest army ever assembled in the country," writes Gordon Rhea. Two days earlier, General Robert E. Lee stood at this same observation post and conferred with his three Corps Commanders: the tall bear-like James Longstreet, his "War Horse," the bug-eyed, hawk-nosed Richard S. Ewell, with his distinctive high-pitched voice and the sickly Ambrose P. Hill. Lee correctly predicted that Grant would move soon and that he would cross the Rapidan at Germanna and Ely's Fords.

Lee's prediction was spot-on. Union troops erected pontoon bridges and crossed into Orange and Spotsylvania counties with negligible resist-

ance. Grant's Overland Campaign had begun, and it would not end until almost a year later.

Packing up from the long winter encampment along the Rapidan River, the Confederate forces, numbering 65,000 men, mobilized to meet the invaders. Among them were soldiers of the 13th Virginia Regiment... local boys, who had an even greater stake in protecting their homeland. Ewell's and Hill's men marched down two roughly parallel roads, the Orange Turnpike (parts of Rt. 20 today) and The Orange Plank Road (Route 621). Longstreet's Corps, coming up from below Gordonsville, played catch-up. Although malnourished, the men's spirits were high; they traded jokes as they marched. Both forces converged on an area known as the Wilderness an entangled expanse of bushes, brambles, and stunted trees some 70 square miles in size. The reason this land was in such a condition is that it had been clear-cut 100+ years prior to feed Alexander Spotswood's six blast furnaces, each one of which could consume two acres of woodland a day.

Numerous diaries attest to, "woods so thick not even a hare can get through," and a "jungle of switch 20 or 30 feet high and more impenetrable than pine." According to Orange County Historian, Frank Walker, "the trees are twice as tall now as at the time of the Battle of the Wilderness and the undergrowth is at least half as dense." Frank scuffs his foot in the dirt of Saunder's Field and adds, "bad soil, naturally acidic, shallow, very poorly drained."

Although the plan was to push through this thicket and meet Lee out in the open or at Mine Run, the exhausted Federal troops, who had not marched this far in months, spent the night of May 4th at and around Wilderness Tavern and Chancellorsville. In the middle of this thicket, bisected by what is now Route 20, lay a rare clearing, some 400 yards wide by 800 yards long. Looking up the road to the west they saw what they thought was the campfire smoke of their outriders. What they really saw was Ewell's Corps at Robertson's Tavern (Locust Grove). On the parallel Orange Plank Road sat Hill's Corps.

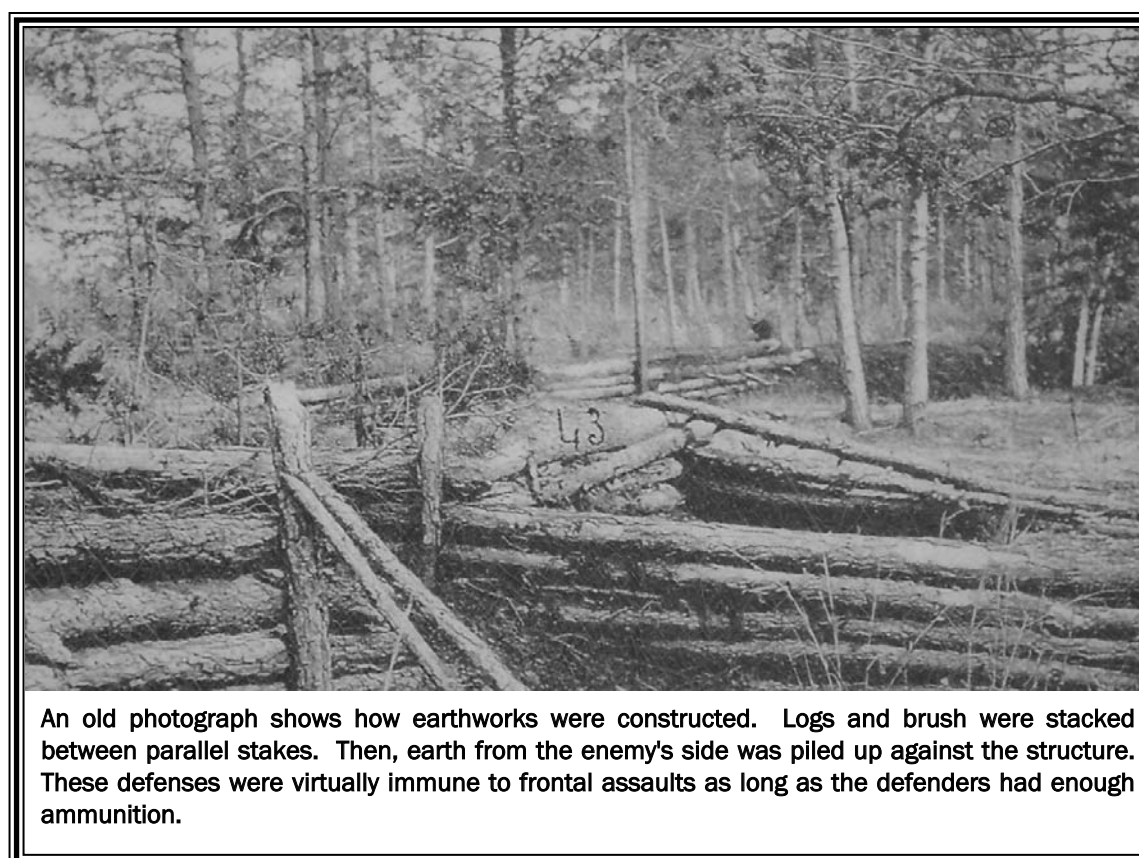
Outgunned as usual two to one, Lee had Grant in the perfect place...the Wilderness. At stake here was control of the roads, in particular the intersection of the north-south Brock Road with the east-west Plank Road. That race was narrowly won by the Federals.

The next morning dawned hot and still. Under the watchful eye of Grant, General George Meade, "the old snapping turtle," ordered up an attack that proved doomed from the start, because it was launched piecemeal before everyone was ready. The Battle of the Wilderness was on. Charles Wilson, an 18-year-old Massachusetts boy was the first casualty.

Saunder's Field soon became a killing ground. The Confederates had constructed earthworks at the western end of the field, and at one point two New York regiments were so far forward that the Confederates filled in behind them and they had to charge back through the enemy just to retreat. In that engagement alone, four Union standard bearers were shot down in succession.

It was even more confusing in the thickets. Lines became impossible to form or straighten. Regiments lost sight of each other. Officers would turn around and shove their way backwards through vines and brambles. "Many went into the enemy thinking they were going back," writes Gordon Rhea. Volleys of musket fire from unseen Confederates filled the woods with choking, blinding smoke. In some places men fought in waist deep mud, "a hell hole" in the swampy areas in and around Wilderness Run. Friendly fire claimed lives. Several officers swilled whiskey from their canteens as they staggered about.

Ragged lines of earthworks were hurriedly



An old photograph shows how earthworks were constructed. Logs and brush were stacked between parallel stakes. Then, earth from the enemy's side was piled up against the structure. These defenses were virtually immune to frontal assaults as long as the defenders had enough ammunition.

patched together on both sides, and you can see these lines to this day running from Saunder's Field through the woods along Hill-Ewell Drive, even down the median strip of the gated community of Fawn Lake in Spotsylvania County. Union soldiers told stories of listening to the Confederate axe falls well into the night as these defensive lines were built.

"And they could get them up in a heart beat," says Frank Walker of this effective breastwork system. Frontal assaults against such defenses on

both sides were almost always turned back with horrific losses.

The battle raged back and forth on two fronts—one along the Orange Turnpike at Saunder's Field and one along the Plank Road. The Federals continually tried to drive through the gap between Ewell and Hill and then turn to flank both, without success. Lee's strategy was for Ewell and Hill to hold their ground until Longstreet arrived.

Lee set up his headquarters at a 40-acre clearing by the Orange Plank Road called the Widow Tapp Field. Grant's headquarters were on a hill behind where the McDonald's and Sheetz are at Route 3 and 20 today. Couriers madly dashed to and fro. Re-supply wagons jockeyed for position in the McDonald's parking lot. A field hospital was set up at Ellwood.

Because of the undergrowth, artillery was not particularly effective; it was hard to deploy. The same with cavalry; riding a horse through this was impossible. And although there were several cavalry engagements, the battle really boiled down to a hail of musket fire. The firing was so intense the leaves were stripped from the trees, saplings were skinned to bare bark. One man wrote on the second day, "the bullets swished by in swarms. It seems to me that I could have caught a pot full of them if I had a strong iron vessel rigged on a pole as a butterfly net." Another Union soldier said the Confederates could have easily advanced right through them because they had all shot their 50 rounds.

And then to complete the perfect hell, the woods caught fire. The first fire may have started

in Ewell's earthworks and quickly spread to Saunder's Field. Other fires popped up in the thickets. The sun set. Nightfall came, issuing a new kind of hell. Beneath a moonless sky lit up by fires and muzzle flashes, choking smoke swirled and point-blank volleys continued to be exchanged. Axes rang out as breastworks were augmented. Ambulances clattered down roads. Eerily, an owl hooted and a whippoorwill trilled. But the worst sounds of all were the relentless and agonizing moans and cries of the wounded and dying. Sleep was next to impossible. When they arose the next morning, the ground was "literally covered with dead bodies," wrote a Louisianan.

The day's events had so rattled Union General Gouverneur Warren that he was seen falsifying casualty reports. Paddy Ryan's 140th New York had gone into Saunder's Field with 529 men; 268 came back. When some companies called roll the next morning only one man showed up.

The next day, most of the action focused on the Plank Road in Spotsylvania County. It was no better. The Federals mounted a more organized attack

Still the boys in blue came. "Is this splendid brigade of yours running like a flock of geese?" a horrified Lee asked one commander as terrified men sprinted back down the Plank Road. As it turned out, they ran right into the arms of Longstreet's Corps, making a dramatic 11th hour arrival after an all night march. Straight across the Widow Tapp Field, Longstreet's Texans threw themselves against the advancing Federals. "Texans always move them," an uncharacteristically animated General Lee was heard to say. "I would charge hell itself for that old man," a courier remarked.

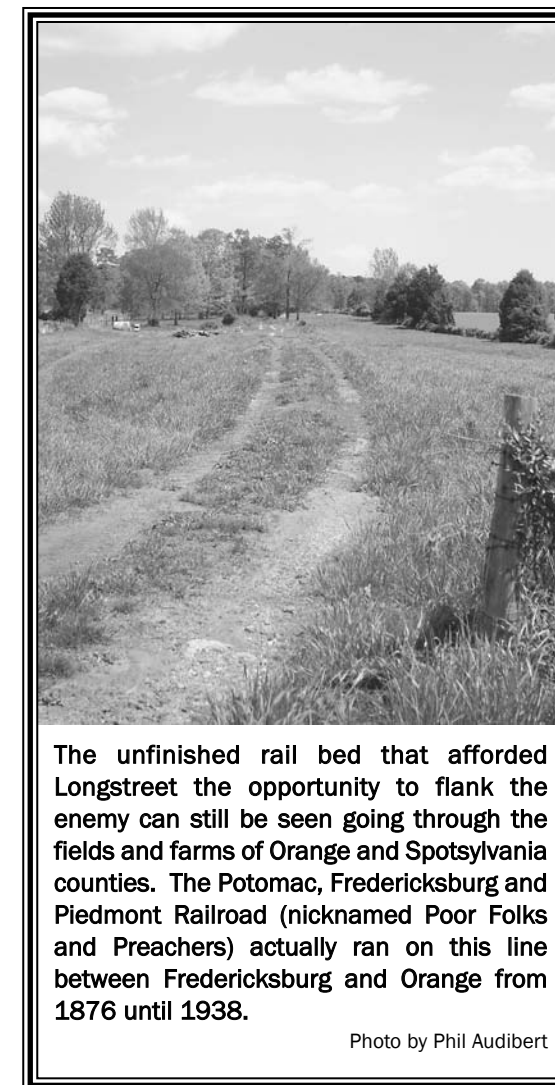
Suddenly, with bullets whizzing overhead the Texans realized that Lee was coming with them into the battle. Amongst cries of "Lee go back," the Texans stopped, refusing to move further forward until "the old man" reluctantly turned back towards Longstreet. Later Lee was described as being "off his balance."

Meanwhile, Longstreet, with the help of Lee's engineer, had discovered an unfinished railroad cut roughly parallel and south of the Plank Road.

He sent an enterprising young officer named G. Moxley Sorrell with several brigades. They pulled a brilliant flanking maneuver on the Federals that, in Union General Winfield Hancock's words, "rolled me up like a wet blanket." For a moment there, it looked like the Confederates were going to send the Federals packing back across the Rapidan River.

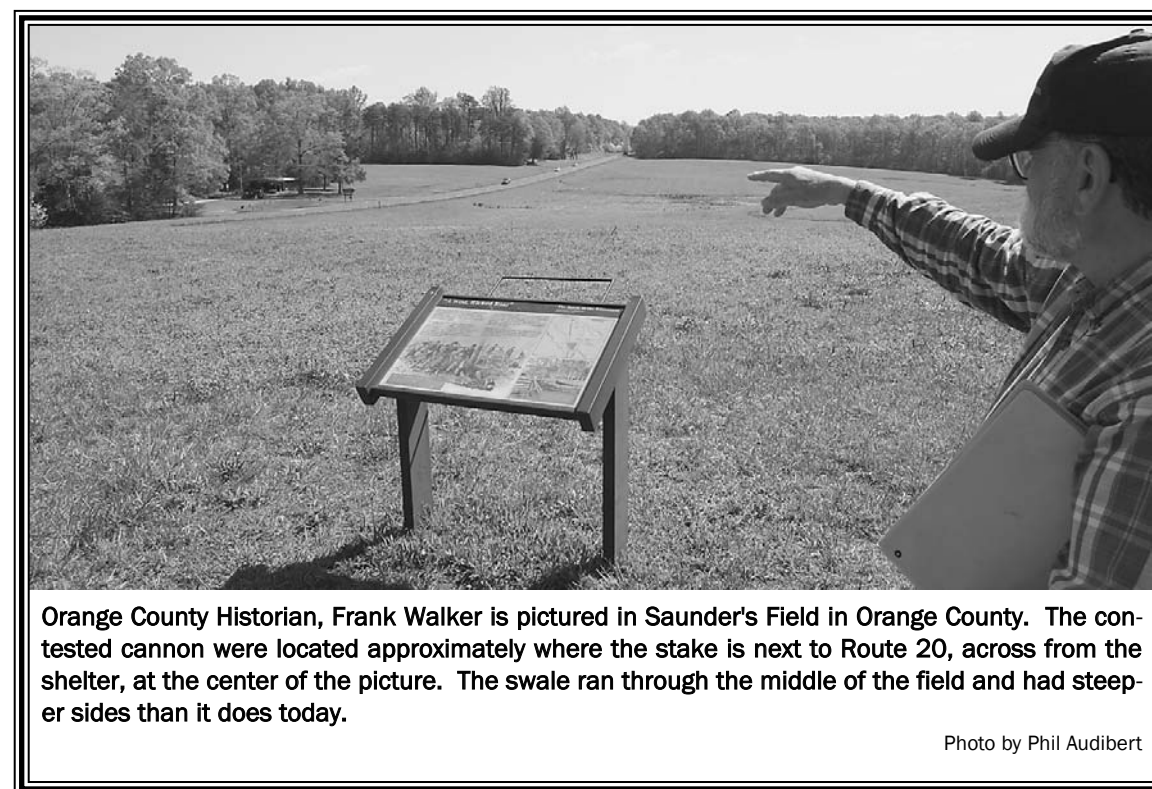
Then disaster struck. Despite a warning from his aide, Longstreet insisted on riding along the Plank Road with South Carolinian troops who were all sporting brand new uniforms of a gray so dark it looked almost black...or blue. Despite desperate calls of "Friends," Sorrell's men fired on them, hitting Longstreet. Gordon Rhea describes it thus. "A confused look clouded Longstreet's face.

Blood spurted from a gaping hole in his neck. More gushed from an exit wound by his right shoulder. Not fully comprehending what had happened, the War Horse tried to turn and ride back.



The unfinished rail bed that afforded Longstreet the opportunity to flank the enemy can still be seen going through the fields and farms of Orange and Spotsylvania counties. The Potomac, Fredericksburg and Piedmont Railroad (nicknamed Poor Folks and Preachers) actually ran on this line between Fredericksburg and Orange from 1876 until 1938.

Photo by Phil Audibert



Orange County Historian, Frank Walker is pictured in Saunder's Field in Orange County. The contested cannon were located approximately where the stake is next to Route 20, across from the shelter, at the center of the picture. The swale ran through the middle of the field and had steep sides than it does today.

Photo by Phil Audibert