

SIXTEEN YEARS AFTER.

The Pit of Death at Petersburg—How a Fort Was Lifted in Air.

A Death-Trap Which Caught Four Thousand Federals.

Some Strange Sightings on a Sabbath Morning.

Detroit Free Press.

Up the hill, past the burying grounds, and as the roads fork I look for signs of the crater. There are the signs. Away to the left and high in the air are the buzzards sailing in slow circles. I found them at Starnsburg, at Winchester, at Malvern Hill, at Cedar Creek—I saw them hovering over a score of different battle-fields. That was the first thing I looked for as I rode along the dusty highway towards the fighting grounds. When the buzzards could be seen there was no need to ask further information. At Malvern Hill there were a hundred of them fluttering over the field where the corpses had lain thick. At Cedar Creek I could have killed them as they sat on the breastworks and uttered their horrible notes. At Chancellorsville I drove one off the stone erected to the memory of Stone, wall Jackson, and over in the field where a blackened chimney, rotting cannon wheels and blocks of earth mark the spot where Hooker massed his guns, half a hundred of the creaking birds disputed the ground with me.

And so, turning to the left, I ride down a foot-path running between a cotton and a peanut field and find myself at length in front of a hill covered with pine and peach trees. This hill is the crater. When once you have climbed its side it is no longer a hill. You look down into an irregular hollow a hundred and fifty feet long by from twenty to forty broad, and that hollow will live forever in our war history as the crater. Weeds, grass and the young peach and pine trees hide much of the horror of the spot, but one who has time to tarry can place everything as it was on that morning of July 30, 1864, when it was a hole twenty-five feet deep and full of dead and wounded Federals.

The mine. The mine can be traced from the crater to the spot where the federals turned the first sod. The long gallery is marked by a caving in of the earth, and the shaft has caved in and filled up until one would not know what it was. Right at this point, and what first suggested the idea of the mine, the lines are so close together that one can stand at the crater and hurl a reach-stone into the thicket where the federal pickets were stationed. At no other point on the lines around Petersburg were federal and confederate able to look into each others' eyes. It is hardly twenty feet across the cotton-field to the edge of the thicket, and here for months not a hand could be shown that a dozen bullets did not whiz for it. When there was no firing, the confederates in the fort and the federal pickets in the thicket could converse in ordinary tones of voice. When Grant swung around he pushed on until Lee checked him, and then stopped right there and began intrenching. This made a very irregular line. At the crater the federals held the thicket along the creek, the railroad behind it and the forest still further back. Hardly eighty rods above, the confederates held the same thicket, creek and railroad track.

It is said that the idea of tunneling under the six-gun confederate fort at this point originated with a Pennsylvania miner who was serving in one of the regiments in Burnside's corps. A lieutenant in a New York infantry regiment is also mentioned, and had the mine been a success probably a dozen men would have stepped forward to claim the honor. No matter who carried the idea to Burnside, he grasped at it. War means horrible wounds and sickening sights and death in a dozen terrible forms, but in a war between civilized nations men do not look upon such weapons as mines with much favor. A direct attack upon this six-gun fort would have resulted in repulse. If it could be blown out of the way there would be a gap in the Confederate lines through which whole brigades could pass. One brigade through that gap and Lee's lines were gone.

The work. The work was done by old coal miners working in regular gangs, and the shaft was sunk about 500 feet from the fort, and went down twenty feet before the gallery branched off. This gallery was wide enough for two men to work abreast, and over four feet high. One of the greatest troubles was in surveying the route, and striking the proper distance, and even when the gallery was under the fort no one felt exactly sure within six or eight feet. A little science and a great deal of guessing, however, struck the right spot, and galleries were then dug to the right and left for a distance of thirty feet.

Unsuspecting victims. The confederates within the fort were totally unsuspecting of what was going on beneath them. Once, when one of the wing galleries was being excavated, a soldier who was lying on the ground suddenly called out that he could hear the sounds of digging, but those to whom he appealed said that it must be rats burrowing their way in to get at the provision. Again, a negro who had been within Burnside's lines reported seeing the shaft, but the men supposed the federals were digging a well.

Placing the powder. When the mine had been finished Grant suddenly discovered that it was a grand thing and certain to work, though during its progress "Burnside's Tunnel" was as much jeered at as Butler's Dutch Gap Canal. Powder was brought up for it and carefully carried through the long, dark hole until eight tons were heaped under the fort. Then a single section held the place until Grant should be ready.

Grant was ready on the 30th of August. He had sent a force to the north of the James to

compel Lee to draw off some of his force from the Petersburg lines, and every federal foot the length of the long line was ordered to open fire from every gun at a given signal. It was hoped that this terrific fire would repulse the column of assault at the fort to be blown up.

Waiting. At half-past 3 o'clock on the morning of the 30th it would be break of day. It would be the hour when even watchful soldiers would regard the dangers of the night as passed and feel sleep tugging at their eye-lids. Long before that hour Marshall's brigade of Lee's division had marched silently down from the pine forest and drawn up in column for assault, within half-pistol shot of the fort; other brigades followed, and in the gray of morning there stood Burnside's whole corps in battle line, every man knowing of the mine, and every man believing that success was sure. The last regiment down had been standing in line half an hour when the stars paled, a dim light crept over the fields, and men whispered to each other that they could see the flag on the fort. The moment had come for the explosion, and a whole corps was trembling with excitement.

The first blunder. Men who had planned, excavated placed the powder could surely be trusted to lay the fuse and light it, but either fear or carelessness upset the whole plan. The fuse burned a little way and then the fire died out. Daylight came faster and grew broader. From being barely able to discern the flag flying over the sleeping fort, the soldiers could, at length, see the roofs and spires of St. Petersburg, a mile and a half distant. Reveille was sounded all along the confederate lines when a volunteer descended the shaft, replaced the fuse, and made sure of his work.

The explosion. There first came a slight heaving of the earth, then a sinking down, and all at once the fort rose in a cloud of flame and smoke, and the ground shook for a mile around. Even before the rods and dirt had ceased falling the New York Fourteenth Artillerymen were dashing into the cloud of smoke, closely followed by the whole brigade.

What they saw. As the men rushed for the spot where the fort had stood they found the ugly hole which has since been known as the Crater. The burned and blackened and mangled bodies of nearly 200 Confederates were lying in and around the pit, some half buried in the dirt, some gasping in agony, and some crushed to pulp under the heavy guns which had followed them into the air and fallen back to earth with an awful thud.

Forward to death! At Fredericksburg, when Burnside found his assaults upon Mary's Hill resulting only in horrible slaughter, he appeared to grow wild and reckless. At the Crater, when he found his columns of assault checked by the pit, he continued to add to its horrors by urging forward other columns. The space between the fort and the thicket was then a plowed field, barren of even a bush. This space was soon covered by the guns of the Confederates, and the fort had been swept away, and here was the gap, but to pass through Lee's lines the federals must jump down those ragged banks, clamber over that horrible debris, and scramble up a height of twenty-five feet and reform. Those who had planned the destruction of the fort had not planned this horrible death-trap for federal soldiers, but it was to prove one just the same.

Forward! Forward! Wild with excitement the officers cried "Forward!" and company after company and regiment after regiment tumbled into the pit on one side and tried to climb out on the other. All organization was at once lost, and the heroic sights in the pit dampened all enthusiasm. It was a mob in the Crater—a shouting, struggling mob, and when one got out three fresh men charged in as the assaulting columns advanced.

It was a surprise. To the Confederates, even when so many were awake and daybreak had come. Had this explosion taken place as planned Lee's lines would have been broken. As it was, the men in the two flanking forts were so dumfounded and dazed by the shock that not a gun was fired until the rumble of Grant's cannon had gone clear down his lines and back and the Crater was full of federals. Then the confederates realized the situation and acted quickly. The fort was gone, but the parallels had not been disturbed. Moving to the threatened point from right and left they soon had force enough to hold the gap. Indeed, they soon held the pit with its mob of disorganized soldiers, and not a man could raise his head without receiving a bullet, and after the ground had been heaped with dead there was a general retreat to cover. The brigades which had flanked the Crater had not come prepared with axes to tear away the chevaux-de-frise protecting the earthworks, and as a consequence not a man passed it. It seems almost past belief at this day that after 3,000 men had been slaughtered in and around the Crater, and while at least a thousand living ones were cooped up in the pit and unable to get out, Burnside ordered up the negro troops and piled them in on top of the veterans who had gone before. Such was the case, however, and white and black, private and officer, were mixed together in a terrified mob, and held prisoners in the hole until Gen. Bartlett raised the white flag and surrendered to the Confederates.

Firing into the crater. After the confederate fire had been trained upon the space between the thicket and the crater, those who attempted to retreat from the latter to the center of the fort were killed on this spot had four bullets in them. The confederates at length crept close enough to shoot into the crater itself, and then occurred the slaughter among the negro troops. They had come in last and were consequently most exposed.

When Bartlett surrendered there were 700 or 800 corpses in the Crater, with over 1,000 muskets and a wagon load of other accoutrements. All were buried out of sight by caving in the banks to fill up the pit and re-establish the line.

SOME STRANGE SIGHTS.

In that narrow space, scarce forty rods square, the federals lost nearly 4,000 men and the confederates over 1,000. On Sunday morning when Grant sent in a flag of truce and asked permission to bury his dead, he found them corded up on each side of the trenches and waiting for him. Hardly a corpse was handed by the burial party which was not hit more than once; and many of them were struck five and six times. There are now on exhibition at the Crater by the owner of the farm muskets with three or four bullets imbedded in the stocks, gun barrels with flattened bullets wedged to them, and dozens of other evidences to prove the truth of the words of one of the federals who came out alive: "If there is any hell hotter than your old rebel crater I don't want to get within a million miles of it." Petersburg, Va. M. QUAD.

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Table with columns: Counties, No. of Scholars, Amt. due. Lists counties from Adams to York with corresponding scholar counts and amounts.

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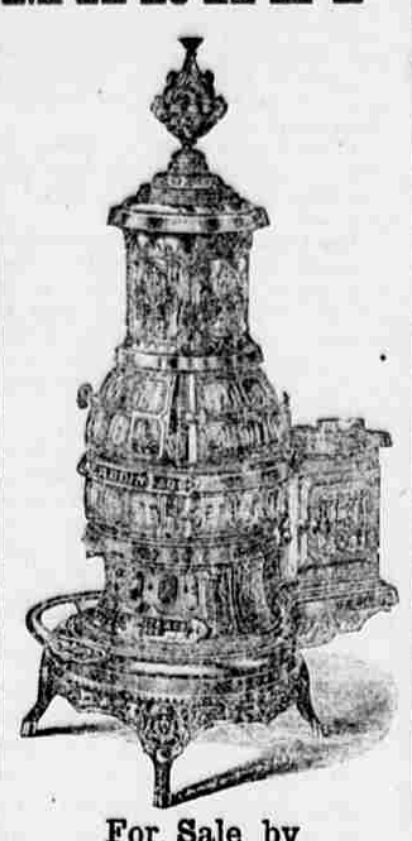
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