APUS Library Capstone Submission Form

This capstone has been approved for submission to and review and publication by the APUS Library.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Forziati Richard W.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Number</td>
<td>MILH699 Paper Date [See Title pg.] 12/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Name</td>
<td>Chappo, John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Name</td>
<td>See list History and Military History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords [250 character max.]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed with Distinction</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security Sensitive Information</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB Review Required</td>
<td>N If YES, include IRB documents in submission attachments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnitin Check</td>
<td>Y All capstone papers must be checked via Turnitin.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Required

Capstone Approval Document

The thesis/capstone for the master’s degree submitted by the student listed (above) under this title *

SUCCESS IN THE MIDST OF DEFEAT: MAJOR GENERAL JOHN SEDGWICK AND THE CHANCELLORSVILLE CAMPAIGN

has been read by the undersigned. It is hereby recommended for acceptance by the faculty with credit to the amount of 3 semester hours.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Representatives</th>
<th>Signatures</th>
<th>Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signed, 1st Reader [capstone professor]</td>
<td>Dr. John F. Chappo Digitally signed by Dr. John F. Chappo Date: 2016.12.28 12:18:01 -06'00'</td>
<td>12/18/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed, 2nd Reader (if required by program)</td>
<td>Steven J. Ramold, PH.D. Digitally signed by Steven J. Ramold, PH.D. DN: cn=Steven J. Ramold, PH.D., o, ou, email=<a href="mailto:ramold@emich.edu">ramold@emich.edu</a>, c=US Date: 2017.02.20 16:22:07 -06'00'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation accepted on behalf of the program director</td>
<td>Richard K. Hines Digitally signed by Richard K. Hines DN: cn=Richard K. Hines, o=American Public University System, ou=History and Military History, email=<a href="mailto:khines@apus.edu">khines@apus.edu</a>, c=US Date: 2017.02.21 08:28:23 -06'00'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approved by academic dean</td>
<td><a href="mailto:gglass@apus.edu">gglass@apus.edu</a> Digitally signed by <a href="mailto:gglass@apus.edu">gglass@apus.edu</a> DN: cn=<a href="mailto:gglass@apus.edu">gglass@apus.edu</a> Date: 2017.02.22 09:25:11 -06'00'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Required
SUCCESS IN THE MIDST OF DEFEAT: MAJOR GENERAL JOHN SEDGWICK
AND THE CHANCELLORSVILLE CAMPAIGN

A Master Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty
of
American Military University
by
Richard W. Forziati Jr.

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

In
Military History
December 2016
American Public University
Charles Town, WV
The author hereby grants the American Public University System the right to display these contents for educational purposes.

The author assumes total responsibility for meeting the requirements set by United States copyright law for the inclusion of any materials that are not the author’s creation or in the public domain.

© Copyright 2016 by Richard Forziati Jr.

All rights reserved.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis project to all soldiers who fought in the American Civil War, may your bravery and sacrifices never be forgotten in the annals of history.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, to my wife Robin, who has patiently endured endless months of my researching and writing all the while providing support and encouragement. I would also like to extend my appreciation to Dr. John Chappo who provided me exceptional feedback and assistance during this project and from whom I have learned greatly about Civil War Military History.

During my research process, there are several individuals who I would like to thank for their assistance to my primary source findings. First, Jaime Cantoni from the Cornwall Historical Society who graciously granted me access to documents that had previously been inaccessible. Secondly, I wish to thank John Hennessy, the Chief Historian / Chief of Interpretation from the Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park for providing many primary sources that were invaluable to my research. And finally, the assistance from Aaron McWilliams from the Pennsylvania State Archives who helped in locating important letters that provided supportive evidence to the project.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

SUCCESS IN THE MIDST OF DEFEAT: MAJOR GENERAL JOHN SEDGWICK AND THE CHANCELLORSVILLE CAMPAIGN

by

Richard Forziati Jr.

American Public University System, December 18, 2016

Charles Town, West Virginia

Professor Dr. John Chappo, Thesis Professor

This thesis will examine Union Sixth Corps Major General John Sedgwick and his performance during the Chancellorsville Campaign from April 28, 1863 to May 5, 1863. The foundation of this study will cover Sedgwick’s conduct both in the micro-tactical level and the larger operational scale with the overall focus on his triumphs and inevitable challenges. The research findings provided through official reports, dispatches, memoirs, and personal letters indicate Sedgwick performed strongly in an independent command role as emphasized by his consistent decisions and flexibility to unexpected events. Additionally, the use of statistics and logical inferences will further support the conclusion on Sedgwick’s positive achievements. This judgment is in contrast to a vast majority of existing historiography originated by immediate post-battle criticisms that characterize Sedgwick’s command style during the campaign as slow and tentative. Although the Chancellorsville Campaign ended in defeat for the Army of the Potomac, the highest moments of the campaign came from John Sedgwick and his Sixth Corps as shown by their participation in the sub-battles of Second Fredericksburg, Salem Church, and Banks’ Ford.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. LITERATURE REVIEW: 1880s TO THE PRESENT</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE RISE OF A MAJOR GENERAL</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. TACTICAL ASSESSMENT</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. SEVEN STAGES OF THE CAMPAIGN</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. TACTICAL COMMITMENT</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. THE GRAND OPERATIONS</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. STRATEGIC INCONCLUSIVENESS</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. INTELLIGENCE AND COMMUNICATION</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII EPILOGUE</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# MAPS, CHARTS AND TABLES

## FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. SEVEN STAGES OF THE CHANCELLORSVILLE CAMPAIGN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. MAP OF MAY 1, 1863 ACTIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. MAP OF MAY 2, 1863 ACTIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. MAP OF MAY 3, 1863 ACTIONS 10 A.M. TO 5 P.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. MAP OF MAY 4 – 6, 1863 ACTIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. CASUALTIES BY UNION INFANTRY CORPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. CASUALTIES BY SIXTH CORPS DIVISION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. CASUALTIES BY SIXTH CORPS BRIGADE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. CASUALTIES COMPARISON BETWEEN SEDGWICK’S COMMAND AND THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
Introduction

Even before the last shot fired, artillery round exploded and surrender terms signed culminating the end of the American Civil War, our understanding of military commanders has been influenced by overt criticalities within existing historiography. Virtually no prominent commander during the bloodiest conflict in American history has been exempt from historical examinations ranging from a broad spectrum of questioning tactical capabilities to more personal inquisitions of perceived personality discretions that impaired full success on the battlefield. Nevertheless, it is hard to come to grips with these determinations when taking into consideration the challenges that faced these commanders. Technological advances in warfare, particularly the transition of the smooth bore to rifling, proved to be a transcending development on the battlefield which left the most astute military leaders at a disadvantage. Other innovations such as telegraph lines, new reconnaissance methods, and army organizations were still in their infancies during the Civil War and did not have the time needed for their full utilization even by the time the war ended. Civil War leaders encountered obstacles at every turn with these new variables coupled with the volatile political environment and cunning ambition firmly cemented within the armies themselves. These difficulties have at times been secondary in the deliberations of judgments upon generals while some historians have latched onto generalizations that are incomplete without all these difficulties explained in a balanced context. Furthermore, these assessments infused with wartime classifications have sustained themselves for decades and supported by the convenience of minute details and analysis not available to the commanders at the time of the battles.

The Chancellorsville Campaign during the spring of 1863 presented a clear example of the fault-finding practices of post-war historical analysis. The campaign displayed the most
extraordinary developments yet witnessed in the Civil War. For the Federals, the campaign began brilliantly with a well-executed strategy that seemed to finally ensure victory for the Army of the Potomac. However, Robert E. Lee quickly pivoted a portion of his Army of Northern Virginia and confronted the threat which ultimately culminated in his grandest victory of the war. However, as typical in the sensitive and often politicized environment of the top command in the Army of the Potomac, the diversion of fault to anyone with a prominent role in the campaign rapidly digressed in the battle’s aftermath. Another Union defeat in the Eastern Theater left the war effort in flux for the Union but in doing so, manufactured opportunities for scores to be settled within the army. Central to the issue of the battle’s unexplainable reversal for the Union Army, its commander Joseph Hooker targeted Sixth Corps Major General John Sedgwick for failing at the most critical junctures in the campaign. Hooker quickly promoted this agenda even before the campaign ended by blaming Sedgwick directly to Lincoln himself.\(^1\) This initial determination by Hooker implanted the long and expansive belief by historians that John Sedgwick lacked initiative and simply was not competent enough to conduct an independent command in a complex campaign. Sedgwick received further blame by the collaboration of other high ranking antagonists within the Army of the Potomac. After the battle, many of the officers in the Army of the Potomac testified to the Congressional Committee for the Conduct of the War regarding the defeat at Chancellorsville. One of the Sixth Corps Divisional Commanders Albion Howe testified against Sedgwick’s conduct during the battle and laid the responsibility

---

for the misfortunes in no unequivocal terms at the Major General’s direction.² Brigadier General David Birney and Chief of Staff Daniel Butterfield’s testimonies further supported the case against Sedgwick. Moreover, Gouverneur Warren’s deposition as the Chief Engineer during the battle placed Sedgwick in a less than endearing light during the closing days of the campaign. Resultantly, Hooker along with the support of several key subordinate commanders built the foundation for historians to base their conclusions of Sedgwick’s participation in the Chancellorsville Campaign.

Despite being criticized publicly by several officers, Sedgwick did not go without his advocates within the army who fully supported his decisions and conduct during the most difficult moments. The Provost Marshall of the Sixth Corps, Major Thomas W. Hyde placed his allegiance with Sedgwick by later writing, “The disastrous campaign of Chancellorsville was over, and we soon learned that Hooker was trying to make Sedgwick and the 6th Corps his scapegoat, when we had lost nearly as many men, and taken more prisoners, colors, and guns than all the rest of the army together.”³ First Corps Artillerist Colonel Charles S. Wainwright expressed frustration in Hooker’s inactivity during the campaign while Sedgwick persevered against Confederate assaults without the army commander’s support.⁴ Captain Richard Halsted in the Sixth Corps emphasized what many of the Sedgwick supporters believed,

How different everything might, nay, would have been, if we had had the cooperation of even a small part of the immense force with Fighting Joe Hooker! Why did he not keep Lee occupied so that he would not have dared turn his back to Chancellorsville, to fall

³ Thomas W. Hyde, Following the Greek Cross or Memories of the Sixth Corps (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 134.
upon us? Or if, finding that he had so left him, why did he not know it and act accordingly?... 5

In the decades after the battle, numerous regimental histories within the Sixth Corps materialized and all of them supported Sedgwick. These alternative viewpoints provided historians a separate list of alternatives to consider. As a result, a limited subset of historians emerged in the subsequent historiography whose research vindicated Sedgwick’s role in the Chancellorsville Campaign.

Notwithstanding this debate, there is still much research work required to understand John Sedgwick’s conduct in the Chancellorsville Campaign fully. The campaign has been long dominated by several prominent narratives unrelated to Sedgwick himself and as a result there are research gaps specifically on the Sixth Corps commander. Instead, Robert E. Lee’s bold strategy to separate his army in front of the Army of the Potomac three times during the campaign and by doing so defied all military tactical logic to an improbable victory is a dominating storyline. Furthermore, highly regarded subordinate Stonewall Jackson’s contributions marked by initial success but also by his untimely tragedy has also been a point of emphasis in the coverage of the campaign. Jackson’s wide-ranging flank attack on the Union Eleventh Corps’ right became infamously regarded as one the most brilliant maneuvers by historians and history buffs alike. Similarly, Jackson’s death leaves students of the campaign to ponder the consequences to the Confederate war effort had he survived. Moreover, Joseph Hooker’s loss of initiative in the most favorable situations during the campaign has led to speculation and psychological examinations in the subsequent historiography. In the progression of these unique themes of the campaign, the result further fails to focus on the actions and

---

decision-making of Sedgwick throughout the campaign and allows early mischaracterizations to remain prevalent in the current understanding of Chancellorsville.

The significance to the study of John Sedgwick will take a different approach than what has been customarily covered in the Chancellorsville Campaign. This study will add to the understanding of the campaign by placing a focused approach to Sedgwick’s performance supplemented by the assessments of his decisions under the circumstances. New research within this evaluation contributes a greater appreciation for Sedgwick’s leadership that produced clear opportunities for the Federals to reverse their misfortunes in the campaign and represents one of many departures from existing historiography. Alternatively, a tangible link will substantiate the events on May 3 and May 4 to Hooker’s right wing and Sedgwick’s command on the left. These two sections of the Army of the Potomac have been widely studied as independent entities in previous historical works and the proven connection between the two will show Sedgwick’s importance in the campaign. In addition to long-standing historiography, recent developments surrounding the preserved land Sedgwick’s Sixth Corps fought over has also contributed to the lack of attention to present day thinking of this part of the campaign. For example, the area around Salem Church where Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps’ combated various elements of Lee’s army has fell victim to urban development, leaving just a shred of property preserved where this fighting took place. Such developments keep Sedgwick’s contributions in obscurity.

Furthermore, the ground Sedgwick commanded to finally capture Confederate defenses along Marye’s Heights, west of Fredericksburg has been overshadowed by the First Battle of Fredericksburg that claimed 13,000 Union casualties that past December.\(^6\) Comprehensively, this

study will reinvigorate the discussion of Sedgwick’s accomplishments during the entire Chancellorsville Campaign while displacing the common critiques on his performance.

In the over one hundred and fifty-three years since the Chancellorsville Campaign ended, there has been unfair characterizations placed on John Sedgwick for his conduct. However, the conclusions of Sedgwick’s slowness or missing initiative as the Sixth Corps commander are concerning perceptions when taking into account the continuous lapses in available intelligence, strategic miscues and insufficient communication he encountered, all of which were not of his doing. Instead, Sedgwick’s misunderstood pedestrian-like or introverted personality mannerisms have assisted in this false evaluation as well. The Army of the Potomac commander Joseph Hooker started almost immediately after the battle with criticisms of Sedgwick in the campaign, and Hooker’s closest allies in the army continued this trend. This early outreach rooted a widely-accepted notion that Sedgwick did not perform adequately and thus, revealing his deficiencies as a Major General. Despite receiving misdirected criticism for his participation in the Union’s defeat during the Chancellorsville Campaign, a comprehensive examination reveals Sixth Corps commander John Sedgwick employed the correct tactical decisions with the information available at the time while persevering against erratic communication and failed support from the Army of the Potomac’s hierarchy.

The presentation of the research findings towards John Sedgwick’s performance will be accomplished in a dual manner. The first path will evaluate Sedgwick on a tactical level by systematically evaluating each day of the seven-day campaign. The second area that Sedgwick’s assessment will be based on is in the larger operational realm of the campaign which Sedgwick did not necessary have control over but is vital to understanding his role. Both methods will take into account the decisions, actions, and reactions of the Sixth Corps commander on a broad scale.
The interpretation of the various sub-battles of the campaign will rely upon what has been referred to as the “fog of war” which will feature the uncertainties present at the time of the fighting. It will further explain that these ambiguities were exacerbated by a lack of strategic vision and inconsistent upper-level communication not within the control of John Sedgwick but yet fell victim to their consequences. In the epilogue, the aftermath of the battle will be underscored by the influence of the Press, political incursions and unrelated inter-army disputes that all helped in shaping the perceptions of Sedgwick’s role in the campaign. The crux of the research findings will prove out Sedgwick’s vindication in the campaign while at the time establishing a greater appreciation of his contributions.

The research findings are largely based on official reports written by key individuals in the Army of the Potomac. Catalog of dispatches and orders written during the campaign will assist in pointing out deficiencies and doubts that prohibited Sedgwick from taking advantage of strategic opportunities during the campaign. Conversely – personal letters, memoirs, archived documents and regimental histories – will all contribute to building the case that Sedgwick performed justly. Pertinent testimonies during the Congressional Conduct of the War Committee hearings will provide supplemental support for Sedgwick decisions and the difficult circumstances of the campaign. Secondary sources will also play a pivotal role in broadening the understanding of John Sedgwick. These will include works from John Bigelow Jr., Samuel Bates, Richard Winslow and among others. An entirely unique tactic of statistical analysis will enunciate key casualty evaluations that explains Sedgwick’s performance in the larger context of the campaign. These types of quantitative tools have been used infrequently in the past but provide essential insight in proving out Sedgwick’s leadership.
What the presentation of these research findings will not attempt to do is to delineate John Sedgwick as the perfect commander of the campaign. Like any other commander during the Civil War, Sedgwick experienced inherit flaws in battlefield tactics including the management of unprecedented complexity that involved tens of thousands of soldiers with no other option but to adapt as the battle dictated. Sedgwick was human and of course susceptible to the emotional stresses and strains of orchestrating troop movements in broken terrain with little knowledge of the landscape that possessed irrevocable consequences to his soldiers’ lives. Mistakes and regressions were unavoidable. Nevertheless, Sedgwick adjusted the best that could have been expected given the extraordinary circumstances that were presented to him. The following research will explain that Sedgwick cared deeply for the men but concurrently desired success in the campaign and displayed a willingness to do anything within reason and the capabilities of his Corps to complete that objective.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review: 1880s to Present

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, early military historiography continued to be divided on Sedgwick’s leadership during the battle. The earliest assessment came from a Pennsylvania – based historian and friend to Joseph Hooker, Samuel P. Bates. In the Battle of Chancellorsville (1882), Bates could not resist stating, “…had [Sedgwick] moved more promptly, he would everywhere taken the enemy by surprise. But moving thus deliberately, he allowed the enemy everywhere to take him by surprise.” 7 In one of the most highly regarded Civil War memoirs in existing historiography, Confederate General Edward Porter Alexander strongly condemned Sedgwick with, “I have always felt surprise that the enemy retained Sedgwick as corps commander after that day [May 3], for he seems to me to have wasted great opportunities, & come about as near to doing nothing with 30,000 men as it easily possible to do.” 8 While Abner Doubleday’s Chancellorsville and Gettysburg (1912) appraised Sedgwick’s missed opportunity during the campaign with, “…[Sedgwick] felt that he had fully borne his share of the burden and that it was better to place his corps beyond the risk of capture, then run the chances of renewing the battle..if [Sedgwick] could have continued to hold Taylor’s Hill….He would thus have a gained a strategic if not tactical victory…” 9 Douglas Southall Freeman in his Pulitzer Prize winning biographical set R.E. Lee (1934-1935) cemented Sedgwick’s performance, “As Hooker’s own difficulties increased in the Wilderness, he made, in


9 Abner Doubleday, Chancellorsville and Gettysburg (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 67.
the second place, enlarged and perhaps excessive demands on Sedgwick, who during this
campaign was much below the level of best performances." The prominent historian, John
Bigelow Jr. contributed perhaps the most detailed and even-handed assessment of the campaign
but also questioned Sedgwick deployment tactics.  

However, similarly to the dichotomy of assessments on the Chancellorsville Campaign
during the war, there were also early historians who found little to criticize of Sedgwick and in
fact, commended his decisions. The most vigorous and sustained support for John Sedgwick was
in *The Campaign of Chancellorsville* (1881) written by Theodore A. Dodge. Dodge devotes an
entire chapter of his work specifically in the defense concerning the accusations leveled at
Sedgwick. Dodge describes his viewpoint on Sedgwick’s underestimated quandary as follows,

…keeping in view all the facts, - that Sedgwick was on unknown ground, with an enemy
on his front, familiar with every inch of it and with Sedgwick’s every movement; that he
had intrenchments [sic] to carry where a few months before one man had been more of a
match for ten; that the night was dark and foggy; and that he was taken unaware by
[Hooker’s] order, - it seems that to expect him to carry the heights [Marye’s] before
daylight [May 3rd] savors exorbitance.  

In the most famous nineteenth-century histories on the Army of the Potomac, *Story of the Grand
Army* (1882) by William Swinton and J.H. Stine’s *History of the Army of the Potomac* (1893),
both defend Sedgwick in the campaign. Swinton wrote of Hooker’s accusation that Sedgwick
made no effort to obey his orders with, “This is a cruel charge to bring against a commander now

---


11 John Bigelow Jr., *The Battle of Marye’s Heights and Salem Church*, vol. 3 of the
*Papers of the Military Historical Society Massachusetts* (Boston: Military Historical Society
Massachusetts, 1903), 308 – 309.

12 Theodore A. Dodge, *The Campaign of Chancellorsville* (Boston: James R. Osgood and
Company, 1881), 181.
beyond the reach of detraction; whose brilliant exploit in carrying the Fredericksburg heights and
his subsequent fortitude in a trying situation, shine as the one relieving brightness amid the
gloom of that hapless battle.”13 On the other hand, Stine holds Hooker principally responsible for
the failures of the campaign and repeatedly eludes to Sedgwick’s preparation and perseverance
of the awkward positions on May 4 as Lee’s forces strengthened toward his front and both
flanks.14 While other more specific histories on the Chancellorsville Campaign, James Beale’s
Chancellorsville (1882) and Charles Richardson’s Chancellorsville Campaign: Fredericksburg
to Salem Church (1907) provides a higher level narrative of the entire campaign but not
necessarily conclusive on an assessment of Sedgwick.

The men who fought for or alongside John Sedgwick during the Chancellorsville
Campaign also enacted a significant presence in the early stages of the successive historiography.
The vast majority of the regiments that comprised the Sixth Corps’ published accounts covering
their experiences and thoughts. All of them took a complimentary stance when describing
Sedgwick in the campaign. In The Tenth Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-
1864, A Western Massachusetts Regiment (1884), the author glorifies Sedgwick’s conduct at
Chancellorsville, “…Yet the grand man at the head of the Corps so disposed his men, so fought
them and eventually, so brought them out of their dangerous situation that, to his dying day, they
wanted no more reliable leader than the trusted, modest, indefatigable Sedgwick.”15 While in the

13 William Swinton, Story of the Grand Army: Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac
(New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1882), 305-306.

Bros, 1892), 380.

15 Alfred S. Roe, The Tenth Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1864, A
Western Massachusetts Regiment (Springfield: Tenth Regiment Veteran Association, 1909), 190.
Frederick Bidwell’s *History of the Forty-ninth New York Volunteers* (1916) maintained a similar tone. This work praises Sedgwick’s accomplishments by, “General Sedgwick, with the gallant Sixth Corps, had crossed the Rappahannock before Fredericksburg, captured Marye’s Heights, moved to Salem Church, and keeping the Right of General Lee’s army more than busy…”16 The regimental histories pinpoints the unique perspectives of the individuals carrying out Sedgwick’s decisions and felt the most from their consequences. The results of these accounts are overwhelmingly supportive of Sedgwick.

Memoirs and personal recollections of the persons that interacted or closely related to Sedgwick comprise a vital portion of primary sources on the Major General’s performance. These materials are critical for the personal details that are not often published in more general histories. In John Gibbon’s *Personal Recollections of the Civil War* (1928), the divisional commander at the time of the battle brings to light a “stormy” confrontation between John Sedgwick and Joseph Hooker after the battle that has otherwise rarely been mentioned.17 In 1888, one of closest assistants in Sedgwick’s staff, Martin McMahon spoke at a reunion of Vermont veterans which ultimately got published and covers in detail the Chancellorsville Campaign. Additionally, another one of Sedgwick’s staff members, Thomas Hyde also provides his experiences working as Sedgwick’s subordinate in *Following the Greek Cross or Memories of the Sixth Army Corps* (1894). While Charles Wainwright writes in vivid detail concerning the early parts of the Chancellorsville Campaign along the Rappahannock River in *A Diary of Battle: The Personal Journals of Colonel Charles S. Wainwright 1861-1865* (1962). In shorter

---


publications, several prominent veterans well acquainted with Sedgwick and his conduct during the campaign provided their own prospective in the third volume of Battles and Leaders of the Civil War (1888). Included in this volume are specific essay-like articles written by Darius Couch, Huntington W. Jackson, Alfred Pleasanton and Samuel Bates who all place their assessments on the Sixth Corps commander.

Existing histories centered exclusively on John Sedgwick are few and far between. The single most important source is written by the Major General himself in the two-volume set, Correspondence of John Sedgwick Major General (1902-1903). These volumes include the private thoughts of Sedgwick through letters mostly written to his father or sister and provides an insightful resource to gaining a better understanding of a person that such little has been written about. Aside from Sedgwick’s published letters, there are only two comprehensive biographies in existence on the Sixth Corps commander, General John Sedgwick: The Story of a Union Corps Commander (1982) by Richard Elliot Winslow III and A Biographical Sketch: John Sedgwick Major – General (1899) by Emily Sedgwick Welch. A 1966 shorter length biography written in the Civil War Times Illustrated by Harold Round provides a higher-level overview pertaining to Sedgwick’s actions at Chancellorsville. Further information on the Major General is scattered among a variety of sources from soldiers’ reminiscences, diaries, reunions, remembrance ceremonies and official reports. As a result, there is a clear absence of comprehensive research on Sedgwick in general and more specifically, on his conduct during the Chancellorsville Campaign.

During the last sixty years, contemporary historians have been consistent in criticizing Sedgwick during the Chancellorsville Campaign. Stephen Sears, noted historian of numerous general histories of Civil War campaigns including Chancellorsville (1992), denounced:
Sedgwick’s high character and war reputation as “Uncle John” concealed a most ordinary level of generalship. His failure to act on his discretionary orders to break through Early’s Fredericksburg lines on May 2, and his unnecessary retreat across the Rappahannock on the night of May 4, were results of crippling caution and unjustified belief in the enemy’s capability and superior forces.18

Furthermore, Sears repeats a similar suggestion that Hooker made years after the war that perhaps another general, such as John Reynolds, was a better alternative for success in the campaign.19 Popular Civil War historian Gary Gallagher shares these apprehensions by concluding in the Chancellorsville Campaign, “any impartial observer likely would conclude that Sedgwick had shown little aggressiveness or dash.”20 Edward Stackpole’s Chancellorsville (1958) provides Sedgwick some credit to the difficulties of the campaign but ultimately determines, “The fact that Sedgwick failed to capitalize on the fleeting opportunity thus presented to him reflect no credit on the alertness if that General, and suggests that the contact which he should have been maintaining with his much smaller opponent was decidedly inefficient.”21

In one of the few works to exclusively cover the sub-battles of the campaign, Chancellorsville’s Forgotten Front: The Battles of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church


19 Ibid.

20 John Sedgwick, Correspondence of John Sedgwick Major General (Baltimore: Butternut & Blue, 1999), xxxiii. Note: reprinted version of Sedgwick letters with the preface written by Gary W. Gallagher.

May 3, 1863 (2013) authors Kristopher White and Chris Mackowski’s assessments on Sedgwick are mixed. Despite admitting Sedgwick had the hardest task of any of the Union Corps commanders, the noted historians ultimately speculated that his popularity within the army protected him from widespread criticism in the campaign and his death at Spotsylvania in 1864 only shielded him from further disparagement. In the biographical account, Fighting Joe Hooker (1964), Walter Herbert also concluded that Sedgwick was too slow and contributed to the outcome of the battle. To counter-balance some of the recent critics of Sedgwick, Phillip Parsons’ The Union Sixth Army Corps in the Chancellorsville Campaign, A Study of Engagements of Second Fredericksburg, Salem Church and Banks’ Ford, May 3 – 4, 1863 (2006), pursues a completely positive viewpoint of Sedgwick’s leadership while placing the blame upon Hooker.

In the century and a half of historiography written about John Sedgwick’s execution in the Chancellorsville Campaign, there has been a wide range of critics and advocates that are firm in their analysis concerning his culpability for the defeat. However, missing in all of the analyses and conclusions is a comprehensive study that evaluates Sedgwick exclusively during entire of the campaign, April 28 through May 5, 1863. In many of the histories, Sedgwick’s management of the sub-battles of Second Fredericksburg, Salem Church, and Banks’ Ford has been treated as secondary in the larger context of the campaign. Yet Sedgwick is one of the first names targeted as a primary culprit for the defeat when the general verdict is made on the campaign in its’ entirety. However, this determination is compiled without a complete coverage of the situational

---


23 Walter H. Herbert, Fighting Joe Hooker (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 224-225.
scrutiny required for a more complete judgment. The majority of the histories written on Chancellorsville provides a general strategic and tactic overview of the campaign but has been void of such detail on Sedgwick.
CHAPTER 3

The Rise of a Major General

The understanding of Civil War commanders’ decisions and conduct on the battlefield is partly explained based on their personal backgrounds and previous military experiences. These attributes shaped leaders as individuals and in doing so brings reasoning to their behaviors in times of battle. The analysis of John Sedgwick in the Chancellorsville Campaign is no different. From his humble upbringing in a rural community, his education at West Point, and steady military wisdom gained from the Second Seminole War to the Civil War, all imparted some form of significance related to his management in the campaign. Sedgwick developed personality traits, leadership quantities and tactical approaches earlier in his life which suited him well in the uncomfortable military situations during the Chancellorsville Campaign. A review of his life before Chancellorsville reveals a man who believed in fulfilling duty while implementing a stable but flexible demeanor to his command style.

John Sedgwick was born on September 13, 1813, in Cornwall Hollow, Connecticut, nestled in the Berkshires. The agricultural backdrop of the area contributed to personality tendencies that persisted throughout his entire life. Humility and a commonality with ordinary people served as valuable traits for Sedgwick and these intangible characteristics endeared him with men under his command. On the contrary, his conservatism installed an aversion to undue outside attention but rather he felt more comfortable on focusing on the task at hand. Sedgwick exemplified a skillful approach where he kept any personal ambitions secluded from professional settings. Stories of his grandfather’s fighting in the Revolutionary War impressed his awareness
to the meaning of the Union, and the sacrifices pledged in forming the country.\textsuperscript{24} This ancestry
influence also inspired his direction into a military career. As a young man, Sedgwick regularly
referred to himself as “General.”\textsuperscript{25} Sedgwick clearly knew what he wanted to be and this early
self-premonition materialized years later.

Despite Sedgwick’s eagerness, the path to a military career did not come without
challenges. Cornwall Hollow did not afford the academic platform necessary to succeed outside
the region and Sedgwick needed to rely on his dedication to offset this. Sedgwick’s earliest
education was strictly relegated to the local district school and later supplemented by a brief stint
at nearby Sharon Academy.\textsuperscript{26} As often the case with many of the appointments to the prestigious
West Point Military Academy, Sedgwick relied upon political assistance to gain his admission.
Connecticut Senator Jabez Huntington employed his influence for the appointment in 1833,
despite the West Point Review Board’s efforts to cancel the enrollment due to Sedgwick’s initial
educational insufficiencies.\textsuperscript{27} Regardless of all the obstacles, in 1837, Sedgwick graduated
twenty-fourth out of fifty-one students in a class that included Joseph Hooker, Jubal Early,
Braxton Bragg, William French and John C. Pemberton.

After West Point, John Sedgwick’s military career picked up quickly with the promotion
to Second Lieutenant of the Second Artillery. He spent the next eight years participating in
military campaigns including the Seminole War then engagements with the Cherokee Indians

\textsuperscript{24} Emily Sedgwick Welch, \textit{A Biographical Sketch: John Sedgwick, Major-General} (New

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
and finally involvement in the Northern Frontier along the Canadian Border.\textsuperscript{28} By 1846, Sedgwick continued to build upon his military experience in the Mexican War. Early on in the war, Sedgwick waited patiently in Texas to finally get involved. During this time, Sedgwick displayed his first frustration with Washington and the bureaucracy enmeshed in military matters.\textsuperscript{29} This irritation reoccurred for Sedgwick during the Civil War and always made him uneasy. By 1847, after an arduous wait on the steamer \textit{Massachusetts}, Sedgwick finally commanded a company in the successful capture of Vera Cruz.\textsuperscript{30} The fall of Vera Cruz served as the beginning of the sustained campaign against Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna’s Mexican forces with the main objective of Mexico City. Sedgwick participated in many of the subsequent engagements leading towards the Mexican Capital that included: San Juan De Ulloa, Jalapa, and Puebla.

As the campaign reached the outskirts of Mexico City, a false armistice negotiated by Santa Anna only prolonged the inevitable U.S. occupation of the Mexican capital.\textsuperscript{31} The events leading to its’ fall proved to be the most successful early accomplishments in Sedgwick’s career. At Contreras and Churubusco, his execution of orders brevetted him to Captain and at Chapultepec, a promotional rank of Major awaited Sedgwick by September 1847.\textsuperscript{32} Sedgwick’s additional actions at Molino del Rey and San Cosmo Gate granted him further recognition in the

\textsuperscript{28} John Sedgwick, \textit{The Correspondence of John Sedgwick Major-General}, vol. 1 (New York: C and E.B. Stockel, 1902), 185.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 34-35.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 51.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 117.

overwhelmingly successful campaign. Back at home, the Office of Secretary of the State of Connecticut formally recognized Sedgwick for his contributions to the war effort. Similar to several other future Civil War commanders, the Mexican War prepared Sedgwick with the acumen to command in the Civil War thirteen years later.

While many of the veterans from the Mexican War left the military to pursue wealth in the private sector during the 1850s, Sedgwick remained where he felt comfortable in the military ranks during the lull between the Mexican and Civil Wars. As a consequence, Sedgwick continued to build upon his military expertise which generated into accolades and pointed to his unselfish duty for the Union. In 1849, Sedgwick received the rank of full Captain, and by 1855, superiors awarded him with the rank of Major in the First Cavalry. Meanwhile, the situation in the newly formed Kansas territory became unstable based on the dilemma of whether slavery would be permitted to expand. Abolitionists and slavery proponents flooded into the region with hopes of swaying the pendulum of the issue to their favor. With the alarming uptick in violence, the necessity for a military presence in “Bloody” Kansas became apparent. On February 15, 1856, then Secretary of War Jefferson Davis deployed Sedgwick and his First Cavalry unit to Kansas for peacekeeping purposes.

However, Sedgwick’s responsibilities in the region extended beyond maintaining peace between disputing fractions of slavery. Moreover, Army Headquarters also ordered Sedgwick to the Santa Fe Trail with his existing cavalry unit and four companies of the Sixth infantry

---

33 Letter written for the General Assembly State of Connecticut July 14, 1848; The John Sedgwick Papers, MS034, Box 1, folder 4; Cornwall Historical Society.


35 Orders from Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, February 15, 1856; The John Sedgwick Papers, MS034, Box 1; Folder 5; Cornwall Historical Society.
regiment. Sedgwick’s involvement in the corresponding Cheyenne Expedition helped to stabilize the region during the spring of 1857. Later in the year, the department congruently ordered Sedgwick to oversee the security for the first public elections in the Kansas territory. Beyond the military matters at hand in the plains, sickness in the form of cholera ran rampant in Sedgwick’s ranks. While successfully completing orders, Sedgwick took time out of each day to spend with stricken and dying soldiers. This type of thoughtfulness beyond the notorieties of military campaigns displayed Sedgwick’s constant awareness of the soldiers’ quandaries. The soldiers recognized this consideration and reciprocated with their endearment towards him. This type of relations between Sedgwick and the soldiers under his watch evolved as a hallmark to all the commands he held.

In the summer of 1858, orders placed Sedgwick farther west to Utah. His command spent much of this time with endless marching between Forts Riley and Laramie. During the Civil War, Sedgwick’s ability to march men quickly became one of his strengths as a General, although critics of the Chancellorsville Campaign discredited this attribute. By 1860, Sedgwick and his command settled at Fort Wise in Colorado. Ultimately, political unrest in the east began to weigh heavily on Sedgwick with word reaching Fort Wise to the increased probability of secession in the South. While Abraham Lincoln’s election triumph left Sedgwick content, he

---

36 Orders from Army Department, May 17, 1857; The John Sedgwick Papers; MS034; Box 1; Folder 6; Cornwall Historical Society.

37 General Orders No. 14 from Army Headquarters; The John Sedgwick Papers; MS034; Box 1, Folder 8; Cornwall Historical Society.


40 Sedgwick, *The Correspondence of John Sedgwick Major-General*, vol. 1, 196.
was fully cognizant of the possibility that may result. With no weakness in his desire for the preservation of the Union, Sedgwick wrote disparately in January 1861, “All other evils compared to disunion are light, cemented as the Union is with so much blood and treasure.”

Despite Sedgwick’s better wishes, the Civil War reached an unreturnable point with the surrender of Fort Sumner in April 1861. The escalation of hostilities now seemed unavoidable. Meanwhile, Sedgwick had reached a pivotal point in his life. Sedgwick spent the prior twenty-four years living in harsh environments, serving in virtually every major military arena in the United States and Mexico but he longed to return to his roots in Connecticut. However, Sedgwick eventually decided to continue his service to the Union and provide his leadership to its preservation. Sedgwick’s internal persistence to duty consumed his personal judgments during both war and peace and with the Civil War in the Union’s future, he could not remove himself from the nation’s crisis.

The secession of Virginia to the Confederacy evoked Robert E. Lee to resign from the U.S. Army and correspondingly left a vacancy within the First Cavalry that Sedgwick briefly assumed. However, untimely sickness prevented Sedgwick from seeing this command materialize. After the disastrous Union defeat at First Bull Run in July 1861, Lincoln called upon George B. McClellan to rebuild the Federal army, later christened the Army of the Potomac. In the interim, a division under the command of Brigadier General Charles P. Stone took a highly-publicized defeat at the Battle of Ball’s Bluff that following October. The aftermath erupted into a political fiasco which Stone fought to redeem the validity of his

---


actions. Nonetheless, with this firestorm draped over Stone, McClellan selected Sedgwick as the replacement for the command of the division. In this early instance, Sedgwick witnessed firsthand the consequences of political persecution that awaited commanders after a defeat irrespective of the truth. Sedgwick grew even more familiar with this unsavory political practice after Chancellorsville. In short time, Sedgwick reinstated the morale of the recently defeated men. In making this decision McClellan remembered,

To Sedgwick I gave a brigade. Not knowing him well, I did not at first appreciate his high qualities but soon discovered them and gave him the first vacant division - the originally commanded by Stone. He [Sedgwick] was one of the best and most modest soldiers we had. Possessing excellent ability and judgment, the highest bravery, great skill in handling troops, wonderful powers in instructing and disciplining men, as well as in gaining their love.

The relationship between McClellan and Sedgwick both in their generalships and personalities provides insight into the faultfinding targeted at Sedgwick in the Chancellorsville Campaign. The generals’ similarities formed a bond between the two but political enemies that McClellan gained through his reign as commander of the Army of the Potomac made Sedgwick susceptible to attacks via association later in the war. Nonetheless, the soldiers admired both McClellan and Sedgwick for their organizational aptitudes and caring demeanors that captivated the men. Sedgwick commanded in a methodical manner, much like McClellan, underlining the knowledge and responsibilities that had gotten each of them to their upper ranks. Although not as


45 Letter from George Smalley to John Sedgwick, 1864; The John Sedgwick Papers; MS034, Box 1; folder 19; Cornwall Historical Society.
emphatic, Sedgwick like McClellan detested political meddling in military operations. Sedgwick possessed an absolute loyalty to the army commander as simply stated, “I mean to stand and fall with McClellan.”46 Even after Lincoln removed McClellan from the army command, the two remained in contact.47 Their relationship had been undoubtedly strong but characterized Sedgwick as a “McClellan Man.”48

During the first winter months of the war, McClellan deployed Sedgwick and his new division for guard duty at the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad near Harper’s Ferry.49 However, McClellan pulled the unit back to rejoin the Army of Potomac just in time for the grand Peninsula Campaign planned in the spring of 1862. At the time, McClellan believed Nathaniel Banks contained Stonewall Jackson’s Confederate forces in the Shenandoah Valley leaving Sedgwick’s support unnecessary. The rapid movement to Sandy Hook and Point of Rocks displayed Sedgwick’s strength to lead a sizable group of men on a forced march.50 This ability proved pivotal later in the Chancellorsville Campaign. McClellan assigned Sedgwick’s division to William “Bull” Sumner’s Second Corps. Sumner and Sedgwick were well acquainted with one another from their time together on the Plains before the war and held a mutual respect. The Peninsula Campaign exposed Sedgwick to variables never fully refined in real time military operations before. These newly introduced facets including the unpredictability of intelligence,

46 Sedgwick, The Correspondence of John Sedgwick Major-General, vol. 2, 43.

47 Letter from George McClellan to John Sedgwick, March 30, 1864; The John Sedgwick Papers; MS034, Box 1; folder 22; Cornwall Historical Society.

48 Letter from George Smalley to John Sedgwick, 1864; The John Sedgwick Papers; MS034, Box 1; Folder 19; Cornwall Historical Society.


50 Winslow, General John Sedgwick: The Story of a Union Corps Commander, 8.
logistical support for such a large army and the cooperation over many corps, divisions, and brigades. Likewise, the Chancellorsville Campaign required this same type of coordination in Sedgwick’s operations.

The Battle of Fair Oaks on May 31, 1862 was the first major action that Sedgwick’s division participated in during the Peninsula Campaign. The men of the division performed superbly under distress. Confederate army commander Joseph Johnston organized an unexpected counteroffensive catching McClellan’s vast army separated by the Chickahominy River. Sedgwick’s objective consisted of crossing the river and furnishing support to the Union’s left, which hoped to repulse the rebel thrust on that sector. However, early rains flooded the river and complicated matters for Sedgwick. The rise in the river flooded the Union bridges intended to carry Sedgwick’s infantry and artillery over to the threatened wing. Only one bridge remained, and the use of this single crossing point became urgent. Despite these hardships, Sedgwick managed to get his division over the Chickahominy in time and ultimately stymied Johnston’s advance upon the isolated Federal left flank. 51 This occasion was the first of many examples in the Civil War where Sedgwick displayed an ability to react to unexpected circumstances and progressed forward to success.

The complexion of the Peninsula campaign changed after the Battle of Fair Oaks. The battle resulted in Joseph Johnston’s wounding and shortly after catapulted Robert E. Lee to the lead command of the Army of Northern Virginia. With the Army of the Potomac within mere miles of the Richmond, Lee turned the tables on McClellan by threatening his supply lines. As a result, McClellan altered his supply base from White House along the Pamunkey River to Harrison’s Landing on the James River. With McClellan on the defensive, Lee pressed the

51 Ibid., 16.
advantage aggressively in a series of engagements known as the Seven Days’ Battles. The first action Sedgwick’s division participated in during this new round of fighting was at the Battle of Savage Station. In this instance, Sedgwick’s division impeded another advance of Confederate forces.\footnote{Round, “Uncle John Sedgwick,” 16.} The division assisted in first stopping the advance of Paul Semmes and Joseph Kershaw’s brigades, and then on the next day assisted Philip Kearny and George McCall’s divisions against further attacks. In the battle, Sedgwick received his first of several wounds in the war.\footnote{Sedgwick, \textit{The Correspondence of John Sedgwick Major-General}, vol 2, 70.} Sedgwick also dealt with an illness which nearly incapacitated him, but he placed aside his physical discomfort and stayed with his command.\footnote{Winslow, \textit{General John Sedgwick: The Story of a Union Corps Commander}, 22.} Just before the battle, Confederate artillery rounds nearly killed Sedgwick along with the Sixth Corps commander, William Franklin and marked one of the many times in the war where Sedgwick dodged death by the narrowest of margins.\footnote{Ibid., 24.} Near brushes with death confirmed Sedgwick’s mantra that he would not ask his men to go to a place where himself unwilling to go.

The end of the Seven Days’ Battles and the conclusion of the entire Richmond Campaign left Sedgwick relieved but disappointed. He was firm in the belief that his division performed well during the last several weeks by pointing out that, “McClellan paid me [Sedgwick] and my division a high complement in presenting us to the President” a week after the Battle of Malvern Hill.\footnote{Sedgwick, \textit{The Correspondence of John Sedgwick Major-General}, vol. 2, 74} However, the consequences of the failure to capture Richmond worried Sedgwick. Political forces became more pronounced on discrediting McClellan’s leadership and rumors...
within the army speculated to immediate changes as a result. Despite the underlining turmoil in the highest levels of the army, Sedgwick’s superiors recognized his individual contributions throughout the campaign and awarded him another promotion to Major General on July 4, 1862.

While Lincoln attempted to reorganize the war effort, Lee quickly took advantage of the momentum and defeated the newly formed Army of Virginia at the Second Battle of Manassas. After this victory, Lee firmly grasped the momentum and constructed his first invasion of the North into Maryland during early September 1862. Lincoln reluctantly called upon McClellan to defend Washington by pursuing Lee and turning back the progress of the invasion. Sedgwick wrote his sister of his frustration to what he perceived as Union military campaigns dominated by the influence of politicians while he admired the Confederate Generals who were free of these obtrusions. Sedgwick delineated the difference in a letter, “On our part it has been a war of politicians; on theirs it has been one conducted by a despot and carried out by able Generals.”

A lack of focus on the matter at hand further discouraged Sedgwick,

The enemy has out generaled [sic] us. Their hearts are in the cause; our men are perfectly indifferent, think of nothing but marauding and plundering, and the officers are worse than the men…Governors of States, instead of filling up the old regiments, some of which are reduced to two hundred and fifty men, organize new regiments for the patronage it gives, and make the most shameless appointments.

Despite irritation with politicians in Washington, Sedgwick’s new rank of Major General quickly presented him an opportunity at corps level command. McClellan offered the Twelfth

\footnote{Ibid., 71.}

\footnote{Round, “Uncle John Sedgwick,” 17.}

\footnote{Sedgwick, \textit{The Correspondence of John Sedgwick Major-General}, vol. 2, 80.}

\footnote{Ibid.}
Corps to Sedgwick but opted to remain under Sumner as a divisional commander in the Second Corps.\textsuperscript{61} The decision reflected a tendency for Sedgwick to stay in command structures that he knew and felt comfortable commanding. Also, the higher level brought the downside of more political attention which Sedgwick had no intention of exposing himself to at this point in his career. It also revealed his disinclination to personal ambition which surprisingly in his letters to his family at times alluded otherwise. However, he suppressed these personal motivations and his actions within the army never displayed anything but loyalty to the soldiers he commanded. Both armies soon consolidated near the small Maryland town of Sharpsburg. Sedgwick entered the battle commanding the division he had performed so well with during the Peninsula and Seven Days’ Campaigns while Joseph Mansfield took the reins of the Twelfth Corps.

In the morning of September 17, 1862, McClellan rigorously attacked the left portion of Lee’s defensive line. The thin Confederate line rested dangerously near the Potomac River and any Union breakthrough could have been catastrophic to Lee. The previous day, McClellan ordered the First Corps under Joseph Hooker across the Antietam Creek, east of the Confederate lines. McClellan’s strategy included a systematic assault against the entire Confederate line in hopes of finding a vulnerability. However, miscommunication derailed the foundation of his strategy and the early morning action focused exclusively on crushing the Confederate left. McClellan advanced the First Corps, then the Twelfth Corps and ultimately, the Second Corps. The Federal assaults commenced in Miller’s Cornfield; from there action progressed across Hagerstown Pike and then towards the Dunker Church and the West Woods. Hooker coordinated many of the initial assault lines of the morning but received a wound and retired from the field. Joseph Mansfield took over command of the Union left flank, but a rebel bullet mortally

\textsuperscript{61} Winslow, \textit{General John Sedgwick: The Story of a Union Corps Commander}, 42-43.
wounded him near the East Woods. Next, Sumner became the third commander to assume leadership of this sector of the field. The costly assault early in the morning won the Federals initial success as successive brigades and divisions pushed the rebels from the Cornfield and past Hagerstown Pike. Sumner believed the collapse of the Confederate line was imminent and a final push into the West Woods would finish it. However, Sumner based this assumption on no real intelligence gathered.

Sumner ordered Sedgwick to advance his division across Miller’s cornfield and push through the West Woods. Sumner viewed capturing the strategic woods to be no problem as he believed no significant force occupied them. Sumner’s remaining two divisions, William French and Israel Richardson ended up splintered towards Sedgwick’s left and headed to attack the Sunken Road. Sedgwick enjoyed no support if needed other than George Greene’s Twelfth Corps’ division that stalled in front of the Dunker Church. Sumner compounded the problem by further ordering Sedgwick to compress the lines in between his brigades only furthering the possibility of heavy casualties. In actuality, the Confederates prepared for Sedgwick’s division by drawing upon reinforcements from the divisions of Lafayette McLaws and John G. Walker. When the first two brigades of Sedgwick’s Division entered the West Woods, the newly arrived Confederates poured destructive fire into his lines. The ambush wounded Sedgwick three times. Sedgwick received injuries to his leg, wrist and finally the last wound to his shoulders forced him off the field for good due to the loss of blood. Casualties in his division numbered 2,210 including the death of Sedgwick’s chief aid and cousin, William Sedgwick.

---


The trap in the West Woods taught Sedgwick painful lessons in the importance of intelligence gathering, topography, deployment tactics and availability of reinforcements. Ironically, Sedgwick emphasized all these points in his leadership in the Chancellorsville Campaign indicating how his experiences in West Woods affected him. Sedgwick spent the following three months recuperating under the care of his sister in Cornwall Hollow. The wounds took their toll on the forty-nine-year-old Sedgwick. He later confirmed, “If I am ever hit again, I hope it will settle me at once. I want no more wounds.”

During this downtime, Sedgwick once again reached a decision point in his military career. Even before the war started, he desired to live out the remainder of his life with his family in Connecticut. After the Battle of Antietam, he was a decorated veteran that nobody would blame for retiring after years of tiring military service. Sedgwick’s disappointment in the interference of politicians from Washington coupled with the general direction of the Union war effort all seemed to point for him to call it a career. Nevertheless, his call to duty prevented otherwise. In only three months after his Antietam wounds, Sedgwick returned to the army in late December 1862.

John Sedgwick returned to the Army of the Potomac organized much differently from when he departed the past September. Lincoln permanently removed McClellan from the overall command of the army in November and replaced him with Ambrose Burnside. Over a month

---

64 Ibid., 46-47.


68 Welch, A Biographical Sketch: John Sedgwick, Major-General, 16.
later, Burnside led a costly Union defeat at Fredericksburg. Insubordinate activity within the army infuriated Burnside to the point of delivering an ultimatum to Lincoln calling for the removal of several corps commanders or he himself would resign. Subsequently, Lincoln accepted Burnside’s resignation and named Joseph Hooker the new commanding officer of the Army of the Potomac. The Corps leadership underwent a complete overhaul as well. William Sumner, Fitz Porter, William Franklin and Samuel Heintzelman were all replaced by new emerging officers. Sedgwick joined this new group by being temporarily assigned the command of the Ninth Corps. However, this did not last long and on January 5, 1863 Army Headquarters named Sedgwick the new Sixth Corps commander instead. 69

A lifelong set of experiences established the stage for John Sedgwick’s performance during the Chancellorsville Campaign. His down to earth personality created an affinity with Sixth Corps’ soldiers. Conversely, the men trusted Sedgwick and supported him in his decisions. The years Sedgwick spent managing military operations in the Plains for various objectives introduced duty and professionalism to his command style. The Mexican and prior Civil War experience taught Sedgwick the significance of information, strategy, and tactics when flexibly used resulted in success. Sedgwick learned from mistakes and rarely made them twice. His passionate commitment to the Union cause despite extraordinary circumstances brought strength to his Corps in the most difficult times of the campaign. As the upcoming analysis, both tactically and in the larger operations of the campaign will show Sedgwick applied his experience in an effective manner.

CHAPTER 4: Tactical Assessment

The Seven Stages of the Campaign

Through the eight days of the Chancellorsville Campaign, Major General John Sedgwick displayed rational decisions on the Federals’ left wing, which underlined the necessity for active and expeditious operations. A systematic process to examine Sedgwick’s tactical leadership is to define his actions in seven successive stages from April 28 to May 5, 1863. From the crossing of the Rappahannock River on a foggy morning that started the campaign to the high-pressured retreat of his Sixth Corps at its conclusion and the stages in between demonstrated a pattern of extraordinary energy in the face of difficult challenges. Comparatively, each one of these steps displayed evidence to contradict criticisms of slowness and tactical commitment on Sedgwick’s behalf. Instead, these finite intervals presented a General whose ability to command independently and adjust proved pivotal to his management of these engagements. Sedgwick leveraged these qualities by exercising the full capabilities of the Sixth Corps indicated by their often-overlooked achievements in the campaign. From a tactical perspective, these seven stages function as the judgment criteria for Sedgwick’s conduct with the decided outcome as being exceptional participation in the Chancellorsville Campaign.

In the first stage, Sedgwick coordinated the movements of three Union Corps from their bivouacs and forded the Rappahannock River at two essential crossing points below Fredericksburg at Franklin and Fitzhugh's Crossings. Preparation, secretive troop deployments and ability to learn from the past misfortunes emphasized Sedgwick’s successes in the first stage of the campaign. The implementation of alternative tactics from the crossing of the Figure 1: The Seven Stages of John Sedgwick’s Command in the Chancellorsville Campaign from April 28 to May 5, 1863
Rappahannock in the First Battle of Fredericksburg five months’ prior proved to be vital. Likewise, the troop deployments from their staging point at White Oak Church to the vicinity of the crossings proceeded with an active awareness of concealed movements. With the transport of men and materiel of this scale, untimely delays and in-fighting endangered the success of the operation, but Union officers ultimately circumvented these difficulties. Nonetheless, the stage ended with a favorable outcome with the crossings completed and Sedgwick possessed a firm grasp on the western banks of the Rappahannock that allowed demonstrations to begin in the second phase of the campaign.

On the evening of April 27, 1863 Sedgwick received the initial order to start his part of the Chancellorsville Campaign on the left wing. The order entailed a plan for Sedgwick to establish a bridgehead on the Confederate side of the Rappahannock with the goal of eventually placing pressure on Telegraph Road. The importance of the artery was its connection to the Confederate capital and Sedgwick’s ability to badger Confederate movements in that direction. Joseph Hooker believed that as soon as Lee realized the right wing of the Federal army turned his rear, the Army of Northern Virginia would hastily retreat south towards Richmond – leaving Sedgwick in a position to actively pursue. At this juncture of the campaign, Sedgwick held three Union corps and one division from the Second Corps under his supervision – First Corps under John Reynolds, Third Corps commanded by Daniel Sickles, his own Sixth Corps and John Gibbon’s Second Corps Division – approximately numbered a total of 55,000 men. The order specified Sedgwick to support the Engineering Corps under the supervision of Brigadier General Henry Benham for two bridges to be laid down at each of the crossing points. While the order mandated Sedgwick’s Sixth Corps to ford at Franklin’s crossing, approximately three miles south of Fredericksburg, the First Corps used the second crossing located an additional mile and
a half south at Pollock’s Mill Creek or otherwise known as Fitzhugh's Crossing. Sickles’ Corps served in reserve situated in between the two corps but slightly towards their rear. The directive stipulated a completion by 3:30 a.m. on April 29. However, in the order Hooker did not specify the desired holding force he wanted on the banks. Moreover, while the contents of the order asserted for secretive measures, it also did not provide instructions on the marching route for this vast body of soldiers and equipment.  

The following morning Sedgwick called a meeting with Reynolds, Sickles, and Benham and ironed out the finer details of the directives established the previous evening. Sedgwick worked productively with his subordinates to have a tactical plan in place that met the objectives of the order. The men agreed that one division from each Corps, the Sixth and the First, would be the landing force for each of the crossings. For the movement at Franklin’s Crossing, Sedgwick chose William Brooks’ Division while Reynolds selected James Wadsworth’s Division. The group determined the marching route for the infantry, artillery, bridges and equipment as circuitous to protect the intent of their movement. To avoid the pitfalls of the previous December, Sedgwick acquiesced to Benham’s request for an alternative method of transport for the bridges to their crossing points. Rather than the noisier wagon method that would invariably alert the Confederate skirmish lines outlining the river bank, Benham preferred the bridges manually carried in the final stages of their chosen designations. Benham additionally lobbied for the labor of this transportation completed by selected infantry rather than his own Engineering Corps. Sedgwick designated the “Light” Brigade as the carrying force while Reynolds also

---


agreed to contribute a section of his infantry for the same purpose at the lower crossing. The resulting plan was solid. It took into the consideration the problems experienced in the Federals’ passage over the Rappahannock in the first Fredericksburg Campaign while it established the troop deployment for successful completion.\textsuperscript{72}

Early in the afternoon of April 29, Sedgwick’s command began their successful march to the designated crossing and support positions. The corresponding march proceeded as planned. The multiple corps began southward moving out of their camps in the afternoon and advanced through “dense thickets, across deep ravines and over treacherous bogs”\textsuperscript{73} all intended to keep their movements secluded from rebel spies and skirmishers located at various points along the river. As planned, the soldiers arrived at their assigned locations near dusk and waited. The army’s Chief of Artillery Henry Hunt assisted with battery support for each of the crossings. Sixth Corps Artillerist Colonel Charles Tompkins situated a total of forty-six guns at Franklin’s Crossing and another thirty-four guns commanded by Colonel Charles S. Wainwright at Fitzhugh’s Crossing.\textsuperscript{74} Harn, McCarthy, Rigby and Cowan’s Sixth Corps Batteries positioned themselves upon a high ridge, six hundred yards from Brooks’ planned crossing while Williston and Seely’s Third Corps Batteries situated a bit closer to the action at three hundred and five hundred yards respectfully.\textsuperscript{75} For the lower crossing, Wainwright deployed his artillery in an efficient manner during the evening. Cooper, Amsden, Hall and Reynolds’ Batteries overlooked

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 814-818.

\textsuperscript{73} David Wright Judd, \textit{The Story of the Thirty-third N.Y.S. Vols, or, Two years campaigning in Virginia and Maryland} (Rochester: Benton & Andrews, 1864), 281.

\textsuperscript{74} John Bigelow Jr., \textit{The Campaign of Chancellorsville: A Strategic and Tactical Study} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1910), 206.

\textsuperscript{75} OR 25, pt. 1, 563.
Pollock’s Mills while Wainwright placed Thompson and Ricketts’ Batteries with fourteen rifled three-inch guns at the Fitzhugh House. Moreover, Wainwright culminated his dispositions with Taft’s twenty-pound Parrots and further supported by a reserve battery about a mile farther down the river. The logical adjustment to the transport of pontoon equipment via the hand-carried process developed with notable improvements. No longer did the rattling of transport wagons present a risk of ruining the surprise action, but the clandestine carrying forces gained an important advantage to the campaign. Sedgwick could not have wished for any more with the movement of three Union corps, equipment, and artillery to their planned locations up until the placement of the bridges.

Despite the progress during April 28, an unnecessary fiasco erupted between Henry Benham and the infantry commanders predetermined to support his engineers. This self-inflicted struggle risked Sedgwick’s plan in the first stage of the campaign but resolved itself without significant compromise to the result of the operation. At midnight of April 29, Benham claimed upon his arrival at Franklin’s Crossing, he found no supporting infantry prepared to assist in the crossing of the river and thus endangered the protection of his engineers. He then scolded divisional commander William Brooks for the shortcoming and acted well beyond his power by placing one of Brooks’ brigade commanders, David Russell, under arrest. Brooks designated Russell’s infantry for the establishment of the bridgehead on the opposing side of the Rappahannock leaving the engineers free to construct the bridges devoid of heavy enemy fire. Both Brooks and Russell ignored Benham’s preemptive measures while bystanders Captain Wesley Brainerd and Lieutenant Stephan Weld described Benham as drunk. Wainwright

---

confirmed this drunkenness claim by his observations, “He [Benham] had been up all night and taken so much whiskey to keep himself awake that he was tight as a brick; had fallen off his horse once and scratched his face badly.”

Thoroughly frustrated, Benham sought the assistance of Sedgwick to correct the matter and get the operation going again. Sedgwick sent two of his most trusted aides to Franklin’s Crossing, Thomas Hyde and Martin McMahon, both of whom Benham asserted did not help in the dispute. Benham’s official report after the incident went to great lengths to defend his conduct by attributing the delays to, “countermanding of my orders about carrying the boats by hand and the failure of crossing squads as requested and a lack of superior power to direct the orders and labor.” On the contrary, virtually all of the other official reports by the commanders involved in the crossings vaguely or if at all got into detail about the incident. The contrast between Benham’s account and the seeming insignificance of the transgression in other officers’ reports caused difficulty in the assessment of Sedgwick’s role in the delay. Nevertheless, if there was a delay that could not resolve itself between the mid-level subordinates or if there was intoxicated subordinate endangering the success of the operation, Sedgwick needed to be personally involved. The criticality of the operation warranted it.

Notwithstanding the details of the dispute, this instance marked the only gray area where Sedgwick did not appear front and center for tactical leadership during the Chancellorsville Campaign.

---

77 Chris Mackowski and Christopher D. White, *Chancellorsville’s Forgotten Front: The Battles of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church*, 63.


80 OR 25, pt. 1, 209.
Albeit delayed, Confederate pickets did not stop Brooks nor Wadsworth’s attempts from fording the Rappahannock. The established bridgeheads clinched the successful conclusion of the first phase of the campaign for John Sedgwick and the left wing of the Army of the Potomac. Between 5:45 a.m. and 7:30 a.m., Russell’s brigade pushed aside Confederate skirmishers on the western bank of the river and Benham’s engineers completed two bridges and later, a third as ordered by Divisional Commander John Newton. On the lower crossing, Confederate forces presented stiffer resistance to Wadsworth’s efforts but by 11:45 a.m. the lower crossing possessed two fordable bridges as well. The operation caught Confederate forces off guard and unprepared. The regimental historian to the Thirty-third New York infantry regiment boasted, “So stealthily had the operations been conducted, the enemy pickets did not sound the alarm, until they saw boat loads of armed men approaching.” However, when there did exist even the slightest bit of resistance, supporting Federals such as the Sixteenth New York Regiment sent over volleys across the river that seemingly calmed opposing firing. Sedgwick ended the first phase of the campaign with two divisions firmly planted on the opposing banks of the Rappahannock, bridges at both Franklin and Fitzhugh’s crossings with seven infantry divisions nearby and further supported by artillery spread out from the Stafford Heights southward to the hills that overlooked the two crossings.


82 OR 25, pt. 1, 213.

83 Judd, *The story of the Thirty-third N.Y.S. Vols, or, Two years campaigning in Virginia and Maryland*, 281.

84 OR 25, pt. 1, 580.
The execution of the first phase in the Chancellorsville Campaign on the left wing initiated the success into the next stage. Although this second stage represented the least combative of all the stages, this interval presented tactical difficulties for Sedgwick. For the following three days, mid-morning April 29 to the afternoon of May 2, Sedgwick kept up the facade of an imminent advance at any moment. Sedgwick utilized critical deployment of troops and artillery that used surrounding topography to his advantage. This ultimately discouraged Robert E. Lee from attacking his separated wing that held such commanding positions.

Sedgwick faced continued internal restrictions as Hooker decreased forces on the left wing by detaching the Third Corps and later, the First Corps to join the main army near the Chancellor House. Nonetheless, Sedgwick reconciled these reductions and remained effective. And finally, Sedgwick used his better judgment to deviate on orders that unnecessarily endangered his men. The eventuality of these three days prepared Sedgwick for the most adverse conditions encountered in the remaining phases of the campaign.

To start the second stage, Sedgwick intended to pin Lee’s army in place with demonstrations using the three Federal corps on hand for as long as possible. Sedgwick’s initial arrangement for these maneuvers tied the Army of Northern Virginia for a sufficient amount of time while Hooker turned Lee’s left flank. During the rest of the day on April 29, William Brooks’ Division extended their left as to connect with Wadsworth's men. This merger strengthened the Federal's newly established position on the Confederate side of the Rappahannock. In the meantime, Stonewall Jackson rushed skirmishers towards the newly arrived Federals to block any further advancement. However, after several hours the rebels

---

85 OR 25, pt. 2, 268.

86 OR 25, pt. 1, 566.
pulled back to the protection of nearby wooded lots where several men could be seen climbing trees to ascertain Sedgwick’s intentions.87 Sedgwick kept the theater-like performance up. In plain view of the Confederates, entire columns were formed on the eastern side of the river then moved in the direction of the bridges and at the last moment turned into a nearby gully and then countermarched again.88 At first, Jackson wished to attack the separate divisions that crossed in the morning but based on Lee’s recommendations, and upon his further reconnaissance, Jackson agreed with his army commander.89 Not only the presence of sizable numbers of infantry under Sedgwick nearby to the crossings but also the locations of his artillery placed along the Heights overlooking the Rappahannock all but prevented any semblance of a Confederate attack on the left wing. Sedgwick used the power of uncertainty with the tactical maneuver of demonstration while he leveraged his resources available to do his best to keep Lee’s attention off the Federal right wing.

However, through intelligence reports Lee soon deciphered Hooker’s true intent of a wide turning movement from the Second, Fifth, Tenth and Eleven Union Corps. Ultimately, Lee concluded correctly from the nature of Hooker’s advance that the Union attack would come from his left. For the threat to his right, Lee also surmised correctly at the moment that Sedgwick was the holding force. In response, Lee peeled 40,000 soldiers comprised of Jackson’s Second Corps, Richard Anderson’s Division and a portion of Lafayette McLaws’ Division from Sedgwick’s front. This detachment engaged with Hooker’s approaching wing while Divisional commander Jubal Early and the brigade of William Barksdale’s Mississippians remained to defend the five-

---

87 Judd, The story of the Thirty-third N.Y.S. Vols, or, Two years campaigning in Virginia and Maryland, 285-286.

88 Ibid., 46.

89 OR 25, pt. 1, 796.
mile front from Taylor’s Hill, Marye’s Heights to Lee’s Hill which comprised the heights west of Fredericksburg. In this stage, Hooker’s plan clearly adhered to the strategic idea that the right wing would serve as the hammer while Sedgwick’s command assumed the anvil role. Hooker muddled these roles with the corresponding orders during this stage that were confusing and difficult to comply with tactically.

Figure 2: Tactical situation at the beginning of stage two on May 1, 1863. Sickles’ Third Corps stripped from Sedgwick’s command, and the main portion of the Federal army engaged at Zoan and Tabernacle Churches.

The first problematic aspect of this stage, Hooker stripped Sickles’ Corps on April 30 and then Reynolds’ men on May 2 from Sedgwick’s supervision and joined them to the right wing of the army. In doing so, the reduction to the left wing deprived the Sixth Corps with few reinforcement options if needed and shortened Sedgwick’s margin for error on any further operations. Sedgwick's command started with 55,000 men which ultimately Hooker decreased down to 26,000 exclusively to his Sixth Corps and one division from the Second Corps within the three-day stage. Aside from the Sixth Corps, only John Gibbon's division at Falmouth remained at Sedgwick’s disposal, and yet, one these brigades under Joshua Owens would later be diverted to support the Engineering Corps at Banks' Ford. The reduction to Sedgwick’s command obstructed his ability to comply with the repeated suggestions from Army Headquarters to transform his demonstrations into an offensive should the opportunity present itself. Also, the firm shift of strength towards the right wing indicated to Sedgwick that risks

---


91 Ibid., 558.

should be minimized to the left during this stage. Sedgwick supposed that Hooker had full confidence in the main army being the hammer as intended. However, in the end Hooker did not use these added resources for a rigorous offensive. This upper-level decision left Sedgwick with a downsized force which limited his full tactical options for this stage and all the future stages to come after it. Hooker simply thinned Sedgwick's resources too aggressively if he intended Sedgwick’s wing to be more involved in the operations of the campaign.

In addition to the dilemma created by force reductions to the left, uncertainty and at times, infeasibility described Hooker’s orders sent to Sedgwick. In response, Sedgwick either obeyed the orders the best he could or took an alternative course of action. On May 1, Hooker ordered Sedgwick to oversee a more threatening demonstration for the purpose of detecting whether Lee weakened his front. The order took three hours to get to Sedgwick but his men complied with the directive upon receipt. In the early hours of May 2, Hooker sent Sedgwick a separate order to release Reynolds’ Corps to Army Headquarters and pull up all bridges at Franklin's Crossing. The mandate sent at such an early hour and as prevalent in this campaign, communication deficiencies delayed the decree. Upon receipt at dawn, Sedgwick objected to both orders by reasonably assessing that neither objective could be accomplished during daylight. Furthermore, Hooker’s order confused Sedgwick on what resources were at his disposal for the bridge removal. Hooker's Chief of Staff, Daniel Butterfield ordered Benham to Banks’ Ford and the removal of two corps from Sedgwick’s command stretched his capabilities thin. While Sedgwick eventually released Reynolds to the right wing during May 2nd, Hooker agreed

93 Ibid., 350.
94 Ibid., 351.
95 Ibid.
with Sedgwick on the subject of the bridges and deferred this action to Sedgwick’s better judgment.  

Defensive characteristics coupled with troop reductions and complicated orders dominated the second stage but the next stage commenced with Sedgwick’s first large-scale offensive movement of the campaign. The demands mounted on Sedgwick as Hooker asked more out of him but the escalation of challenges announced the Sixth Corps commander’s tactical aptitude. During this period, Sedgwick once again had no choice but to diverge from Hooker’s orders as situations dictated. Without the luxury of time or notice, Sedgwick planned and executed a night march consisting of his entire Sixth Corps' movement towards Fredericksburg. This type of action presented dangers to the Sixth Corps but Sedgwick approached them appropriately. Another important consideration to the third stage was the pace of the march as it relates to Hooker’s expectations and the realities of what the Sixth Corps encountered. The result of the third stage was a notable achievement for Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps which paved the way for the significant assault on the heights beyond Fredericksburg in the fourth stage.

Figure 3: Tactical situation near end of stage two on late afternoon May 2nd. Reynolds’ First Corps stripped from Sedgwick’s command, the Sixth Corps’ demonstration and Jackson’s surprise attack on Oliver Howard’s Eleventh Corps.

In the last hours of May 2, Hooker assigned Sedgwick with the ambitious task of the Sixth Corps falling upon Lee’s rear in a united action with the main Federal army and desired its completion by dawn of the following day. Hooker relied upon inaccurate assumptions but

96 Ibid., 363.

nonetheless, Sedgwick adjusted independently. At 6:30 p.m. Sedgwick received an order from Butterfield directing him to move his Sixth Corps to engage Jubal Early’s along Bowling Green Road which Sedgwick complied and began pushing the rebels from the road.98 Brooks’ Division took possession of a portion of Bowling Road and proceeded until nightfall while Newton’s Division marched towards Hamilton’s Crossing with the expectation that his men would advance by the following morning. With the Sixth Corps well on its’ way to comply with the last issued order, Sedgwick received a new set of confusing orders at 11:00 p.m. that directed him to cross the Rappahannock at Fredericksburg alternatively and then proceed on Plank Road to advance towards the Chancellors House.99 In this mindset, Hooker wanted to trap Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia in the vice established by the unbalanced wings of the Federal army. Aside from the impossibility of the time expectation, the order itself failed to understand that Sedgwick’s Divisions under Brooks and Burnham were already on the western side of the Rappahannock. Furthermore, there were no bridges laid down at Fredericksburg, and Sedgwick was well on his way to conform to Hooker’s earlier order. Despite this, Sedgwick handled the new orders with flexibility. There was no choice but for Sedgwick to ignore the portion of the directive that required his Corps to cross at Fredericksburg. The communication with opposing wings of the army proceeded tediously and Sedgwick took discretionary action to comply with the overall objective of the order. To re-cross a portion of his men over the Rappahannock, pick up the existing bridges at Franklin’s crossing and install them at Fredericksburg would have consumed time that the order did not allow. As a logical alternative, Sedgwick selected a night

98 OR 25, pt. 1, 558.

march north on Bowling Green Road to enter Fredericksburg. Sedgwick assisted his Corps greatly by disregarding impracticable features of the order and replaced them with a feasible approach to get his forces to Fredericksburg within hours of the order’s receipt.

In Civil War era military operations, night marches were inherently ineffective movements and typically avoided but Sedgwick’s execution of such a challenging march without a true understanding of Confederate deployments or surrounding topography proceeded productively. The aftermath of the march culminated with Sedgwick’s troops entering Fredericksburg in the pre-dawn hours of May 3. Sedgwick deployed Newton’s Division to the lead as Hiram Burnham, Albion Howe, and Brooks’ divisions followed. Once all the divisions left the confines of the bridges, harassment from Confederate skirmishers commenced almost immediately. Early’s skirmishers did their best to resist the movement, and although the stall tactic did result in caution in advance of the Sixth Corps, the Federal occupation of Fredericksburg was inevitable. One soldier described the night movement as, “…blind, tedious march through woods and over two unbridged streams and, but by a favoring fortune, we reached the rear of Fredericksburg…” Noted Chancellorsville Historian John Bigelow Jr. surmised the hazards, “Under these circumstances, the progress of Sedgwick’s column was necessarily slow and cautious.” To fully appreciate the calamities of night movements in Civil

---


103 John Bigelow, Jr., “The Battle of Marye’s Heights and Salem Church” in *Papers of the*
War campaigns, one has to look no farther than this campaign where Stonewall Jackson received several wounds in an attempt to coordinate troops movements during the night while being in close proximity of opposing forces on the Union right wing. The death of Jackson a week later further cemented the disaster of the night movement attempt. Second Corps Commander Darius Couch provided his opinion on Sedgwick’s trying march, “The night was moonlight, but any officer who had experience in making night marches with infantry will understand the vexatious delays occurring even when the road is clear; but when, in addition, there is an enemy in front, with a line of fortified heights to assault, the problem which Sedgwick had to solve will be pronounced impossible of solution.”

While the Sixth Corps’ march does not garner much attention, Sedgwick did well in leading the movements under difficulty by getting his troops into Fredericksburg in mere hours after receiving the order.

For the Sixth Corps to comply with Hooker’s order to march to the vicinity of Chancellorsville, the defenses along the heights beyond Fredericksburg unavoidably had to be cleared for the advancement to continue along Plank Road. The action of capturing the vaunted Marye’s Heights and the surrounding elevations outside of Fredericksburg covered the left wing's stage four of the Chancellorsville Campaign. This phase was characterized by Sedgwick’s persistence to clear the heights despite uncertain information about Confederate strengths and setbacks. Numerous obstacles included the complications of support from John Gibbon’s two brigades, stout defense from Confederate forces that included the veteran Mississippi Brigade and the psychological barriers originated from the Union large scale attempts to take the same

---


heights that past December. Sedgwick overcame each one of these complications. Additionally, Sedgwick employed an original tactical plan that swiftly claimed the heights after his men exhausted alternative attempts. Sedgwick fought the stage to a hard-won success. Ultimately, Sedgwick thwarted the tactical loose ends caused by Hooker and the Army Chief of Staff Daniel Butterfield’s insistence on expedience at all costs.

Intelligence reports concerning the Confederates along the heights beyond Fredericksburg to Sedgwick were disjointed. As a result, Sedgwick took the path of caution on his approach to sweep the heights of Confederates. On the Federal right, engagements on May 1 and Jackson’s mass flanking attack on the late afternoon of May 2 indicated to Hooker that Lee significantly weakened his forces confronting Sedgwick and believed the Sixth Corps could rush right through the skeleton force defending the heights. Even more problematic, Early received an erroneous order during the morning of May 2 to pull out of his positions along the heights except for one brigade and reinforce Lee’s efforts near Chancellorsville. After a short march, Lee corrected the mistake and Early returned uninterrupted to his defenses. The mass exodus of Confederate troops did not go unnoticed by Thaddeus Lowe and his Balloon Corps who reported the movement of Early's troops to Union Army Headquarters. Under this false confidence, the intelligence report compelled Butterfield and Hooker to assert even more strongly on taking the heights immediately despite the fact that Lowe later reported that the defenses appeared manned once again. This back and forth intelligence played havoc with Sedgwick’s plans to attack the Confederate positions. Sedgwick distrusted the intelligence of Butterfield and subsequently took his own measures to understand first-hand the disposition of Confederate troops to his front.

105 OR 25, pt. 2, 385.
106 Ibid., 386.
Shortly after entering Fredericksburg, Sedgwick tested the center of the heights beyond the town with a limited reconnaissance force. The result of the probe gained information on the strength of Jubal Early’s line but its repulse forced Sedgwick to turn to alternative plans to remove the Confederates from the heights. In this first exploration of the heights, Sedgwick ordered three regiments, the Ninety-third, Ninety-eighth and One hundred and Thirty-ninth Pennsylvania infantry regiments of Frank Wheaton’s brigade towards Marye’s Heights. A part of Barksdale Mississippi Brigade, the Eighteenth Mississippi supported by Harry Hays’ Louisianans promptly checked this first movement and indicated to Sedgwick that any assault on the heights would be costly. Sedgwick viewed the initial advance from a close viewpoint and witnessed first-hand the difficulties of the firm position Marye’s Heights held. Undoubtedly, the failed probe frustrated Sedgwick and equally important to the strength of the position was the implication that time would be required to break the line. Critics of Sedgwick often focus on the limited numbers of Confederates defending the extended line. However, the impact of topography on the defenses which consisted of Telegraph Hill, Marye’s Heights and Taylor’s Hill coupled with obstructions from canals and streams all of which helped to bridge the gap in Early's limited resources. After the repulse, Sedgwick concerned himself with the need for expedition by exclaiming after Wheaton’s withdrawal, “By heaven, sir, this must not delay us.” Nonetheless, Sedgwick would not allow the pressure of time to interfere with the protection of his Corps in this difficult operation.

After Wheaton’s repulse, Sedgwick remained uncertain of the Confederate strength that opposed him. Based on this undetermined information, Sedgwick viewed it more prudent to attempt a simultaneous flanking attack at both ends of Early’s line. The Sixth Corps

---

107 McMahon, *Gen. John Sedgwick: an address delivered before the Vermont Officers' Reunion Society, at their sixteenth annual meeting at Montpelier, Nov. 11, 1880*, 16.
commander’s logic in this circumstance was reasonable since the early morning repulse seemed to indicate that Early had strengthened his center but in doing so possibly at the cost of weakening either of his flanks. In actuality, Early reinforced his right flank possibly attributing this to Federals success in that area during the First Battle of Fredericksburg\textsuperscript{108} while his left flank presented an opportunity for an attack. Unfortunately, topographical features on the both ends impeded each attempt. For the flanking attempts, Sedgwick assigned Howe’s Division to Early’s right while John Gibbon’s two brigades of 2,500 soldiers that just forded the Rappahannock from the Lacy House proceeded to move towards the Confederate left near the intersection of Fall Hill and River Roads. Gouverneur K. Warren, the Army’s Chief Engineer at the time accompanied Gibbon and discovered two canals from the Rappahannock to their front. Warren easily crossed the first canal as there was an undamaged bridge still intact but the second canal possessed missing planks on the existing bridge work which the timely arrival of Confederate artillery on the opposing Taylor’s Hill ended the possibility of its repair.\textsuperscript{109} This essentially stalled any further advance of Gibbon’s men and Sedgwick could not expect gains in that area of the field. Howe did not fare much better on the Early’s right. The topographical hazard of Hazel Run split his division from Brooks and ultimately made the turning movement unadvisable.\textsuperscript{110} There has been admonishment directed to Sedgwick that these efforts were simply a waste of time and merely alerted Early to his intentions. However, one must remember that Sedgwick did not have the luxury of reinforcements should disaster strike and inconsistencies in communications made matters unstable. Additionally, if the First Battle of


\textsuperscript{109} OR 25, pt. 1, 201-202.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 559.
Fredericksburg taught the Union commanders anything, the strength of Marye’s Heights was formidable regardless of the force there to protect it. In any event, the reconnaissance efforts implied that turning movements alone could not remove the Confederates from his front, but rather the Confederate center, specifically Marye’s Heights required a frontal assault despite Sedgwick’s better wishes.

In his only remaining option, Sedgwick staged a frontal charge on Marye’s Heights but with a unique troop formation designed to sustain their momentum. The attack line included two compact columns of four regiments each to rush into the Confederate position. Colonel Burnham’s “Light” unit consolidated under Newton’s Division and applied pressure on the heights with the support of Howe’s Division. Consequently, Sedgwick’s plan worked successfully. Ambrose Burnside’s failed attacks on these heights nearly five months before served as Sedgwick’s pretense for the unusual formation tactic. Although Sedgwick was not present for those previous attempts in December, his Second Battle of Fredericksburg attack plan itself indicated his understanding of past failures. Sedgwick believed in December that by the troops stopping to fire during the forward movement, their momentum stalled and resulted in high casualties after several attempts on the heights. Sedgwick had no intention of allowing his men to be slaughtered in a similar fashion, but rather he wished the advancing columns to charge without stopping until they reached the heights. Sedgwick surmised of the plan, “we must depend on the bayonets alone.” Sedgwick and Newton watched anxiously from an abandoned

111 Ibid.
113 James L. Bowen, History of the Thirty-Seventh Regiment Mass. Volunteers in the Civil War of 1861-1865: with a comprehensive sketch of the doings of Massachusetts as a state, and of
house just outside of the town along Telegraph road. By not allowing interruptions in momentum, Sedgwick broke Early’s frail line albeit protected by defensively favorable terrain. Once Marye’s Heights fell, the integrity of Early’s entire line began to disintegrate and shortly after, Sedgwick had swept the rebels from all the surrounding heights as well. Sedgwick’s Sixth Corps conquered the demons of Fredericksburg Heights that the Army of the Potomac dealt with during the long winter of 1863. The success overrode obstacles from conflicting intelligence reports, no available reinforcements, and the pressure of expediency. Sedgwick for the first time in the war showed his capabilities in leading a corps level command against adverse conditions to victory.

The planning, execution and finally success of Sedgwick’s command of the Second Battle of Fredericksburg underlined an important psychological impact. Burnside’s defeat at First Fredericksburg and more specifically, the failed attempt against Marye’s Heights presented a thorn in the Federal’s side. However, Sedgwick’s victory in this second installment evolved as the true high point for the Federals in an otherwise disappointing Chancellorsville Campaign. Before Sedgwick’s final assault one soldier surmised, “It was at once felt that a desperate encounter was to follow, the recollections of the previous disaster [The First Battle of Fredericksburg] were by no means inspiring.” After the assault succeeded, Sedgwick’s assistant Thomas Hyde later reminisced in his memoirs, “It was with high exhilaration we started forward, for with about six thousand men we had just taken the place Burnside had hurled so

---

the principal campaigns of the war (Holyoke: Clark W. Bryan & Company Publishers, 1884), 146


many divisions against, in vain, the preceding December.”¹¹⁶ The victory uplifted the Sixth Corps and provided a level of redemption that Sedgwick was more than willing to provide the entire army even with the heights being re-occupied by rebels the next day. For Sedgwick, the capture of the heights was his crowning achievement in the war and perhaps even further, over his entire twenty-six-year military career. The psychological barriers that the heights held over his corps did not make matters any easier. However, Sedgwick’s final assault marked a movement filled with confidence and determination that flowed down to the men executing the plan.

The success of the Second Battle of Fredericksburg did not come without cost. The number of casualties the Sixth Corps incurred during this battle made the coming hours harder to follow-up on this success. The Sixth Corps lost approximately 1,500 men in their objective on the morning and early afternoon of May 3 or 6.8 percent of the entire corps, reducing the total number of soldiers to 20,500.¹¹⁷ Along with the proud gain of the heights themselves, the Sixth Corps captured the guns from the heralded Washington Artillery along with a number of seasoned veterans from Barksdale’s brigade. Sedgwick utilized three out of four divisions within his Corps for the last attacks on Fredericksburg Heights, and the aftermath left many of them exhausted and disorganized. This large-scale participation only left William Brooks’ Division available for immediate action, but even his division was three miles away and took a couple of hours to get into place for the next movement in stage five. The Second Battle of Fredericksburg also sacrificed the valuable resource of time but this was unavoidable. Sedgwick made

¹¹⁶ Hyde, Following the Greek Cross or, Memories of the Sixth Corps, 128.

¹¹⁷ Bigelow, “The Battle of Marye’s Heights and Salem Church” in Papers of the Massachusetts Historical Society of Massachusetts vol. 3, 269.
reasonable progressions during this juncture from throwing three regiments of Wheaton’s brigade at the Confederate center, proceeding to the alternative turning movements and then finally, the grand assault that carried the Sixth Corps’ momentum over the heights. The result was a victory on this sector of the battlefield in the Chancellorsville Campaign, but the sacrifices unavoidably hampered Sedgwick’s future progress toward the Chancellors House.

In the immediate aftermath of the battle, Sedgwick decided between the choice of two tactical options – first, to pursue Early’s retreating forces southward to eliminate the threat of their return to his rear or second, continue immediately west towards Chancellorsville and join with Hooker. Without cavalry to assist, reinforcements or the luxury of time, Sedgwick resolved to continue his Corps’ progress towards the Chancellor House despite not knowing that Lee completed his victory on the army’s right wing earlier in the day. As not allowed by Hooker’s orders, Sedgwick’s inability to addressed Early’s dispersed forces became a problem during the next day. Historian John Bigelow Jr. explains the problem, “…After the fall of the heights, the obvious lesson to be learned, having broken a portion of the enemy line, one must turn on a separate fraction and disperse them before one can safely proceed to the enemy’s rear…”

Sedgwick ordered John Gibbon’s two brigades to remain at Fredericksburg to protect communications there. For the remainder of the campaign, Sedgwick could only rely on his own Sixth Corps. From the earliest hours of the morning and throughout the entire afternoon, Butterfield persistently prodded Sedgwick to connect with Hooker rapidly. Despite these urgencies, Butterfield continued to send dispatch after dispatch without properly informing Sedgwick of the circumstances on the right wing and held only a vague understanding of the challenges Sedgwick faced. Orders afforded Sedgwick only to proceed towards Chancellorsville

118 Bigelow, “The Battle of Marye’s Heights and Salem Church” in Papers of the Massachusetts Historical Society of Massachusetts vol. 3, 260.
and thus leaving Early’s withdrawal unaffected. However, in less than twenty-four hours later, Early’s division simply returned to the same heights that Sedgwick’s men vigorously fought for and in turn, now threatened Sedgwick’s rear.

The Sixth Corps did not have the time to bask in the victory of the Battle of Second Fredericksburg, but rather Sedgwick called upon his corps for the second time on May 3 to engage in a desperate fight. This time at the Battle of Salem Church. This fifth stage of the campaign started with Sedgwick’s progression along Plank Road towards his rendezvous with Hooker at Chancellorsville but ended in a tactical draw with intervening Confederates arriving at Salem Church before he could accomplish his objective. There were underlining details within this phase of the campaign that explained the circumstances that impacted its success. To start the period, long-distance troop deployments and stalling tactics from Confederates affected Sedgwick’s schedule significantly. Newly arrived Confederate reinforcements stymied Brooks’ effort to rush the offensive primarily based on Hooker's orders. The developments of the Battle of Salem Church made it apparent for Sedgwick’s necessity for more troops and the end result of a draw further emphasized this point. Sedgwick’s Corps invariably wore down from the progression earlier in the day that started with a night march to Fredericksburg then Battle of Second Fredericksburg and now presented with the Battle of Salem Church. However, despite the odds against his success, Sedgwick vigorously approached this phase of the campaign.

After the fall of the Fredericksburg Heights, Sedgwick only possessed one fresh division to continue the march along Plank Road while his remaining command got organized after their participation in the Battle of Second Fredericksburg. Brooks’ command was three miles away near Franklin’s Crossing, but Sedgwick’s behavior by calling up his subordinate indicated a general who understood the importance of time. Brooks’ men, the freshest in the Corps,
naturally took the lead in the movement to the west. Brooks first performed a controlled withdraw from the left where the Fifteenth New Jersey with the Thirty-second and Twenty-seven New York regiments performed rear guard duty while the remainder of the division cleared Fredericksburg and moved towards the captured heights.\textsuperscript{119} Sedgwick rode further ahead along Plank Road and waited anxiously at the Guest House while Brooks’ lead elements appeared.\textsuperscript{120} While Brooks was doing his best to get his troops up to the lead, Cadmus Wilcox’s Confederate Alabama Brigade withdrew west towards Banks’ Ford rather than south like the remainder of Early’s retreating forces. Wilcox described his tactical situation,

\begin{quote}
After the fall of Fredericksburg Heights, I felt a duty to delay the enemy as much as possible in his advance, and to endeavor to check him all that I could should he move forward on the Plank Road. I formed my brigade promptly in line along the crests of the hills running near Stansbury’s house, at right angles to the Plank Road.\textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}

Wilcox deployed a dismounted skirmish line of the Fifteenth Virginia Cavalry that Brooks brushed away with the advance of the New Jersey Brigade and support from Rigby’s Battery. This delaying force took precious time nonetheless. Sedgwick pushed Brooks forward despite not being concentrated or understanding the disposition of enemy forces entirely to his front. Orders for expedience motivated Sedgwick to continue towards Salem Church without three out of his four divisions of his corps ready to immediately engage.\textsuperscript{122}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{119} OR 25, pt. 1, 567.
\textsuperscript{120} Phillip W. Parson, \textit{The Union Sixth Corps in the Chancellorsville Campaign: A Study of Engagements of Second Fredericksburg, Salem Church, Banks Ford, May 3-4, 1863} (Jefferson: MacFarland & Company Publishers, 2006), 90.
\textsuperscript{121} OR 25, pt. 1, 856-857.
\textsuperscript{122} Bigelow, “The Battle of Marye’s Heights and Salem Church” in \textit{Papers of the Massachusetts Historical Society of Massachusetts} vol. 3, 269.
\end{flushright}
Figure 4: This map depicts stages four and five including Sedgwick’s victory at Fredericksburg during mid day on May 3rd followed by the advance by Brooks’ Division towards Salem Church.

The subsequent Battle of Salem Church represented an unexpected resistance to Sedgwick’s offensive predicated on Lee’s triumph over Hooker earlier in the day against the Federal right wing. As a result, the battle was a decided tactical draw but in doing so, halted any hopes for Sedgwick to connect with Hooker. Initially, Sedgwick believed the resistance he encountered along Plank Road at the Toll House simply represented a retreating brigade. However, unknowingly to Sedgwick, Wilcox bought enough time for McLaws’ Division to reinforce him with three of his brigades under Paul Semmes, Joseph Kershaw and William Wofford along with the brigade of William Mahone from Richard Anderson’s Division. Earlier in the day on the Union right wing, Lee successfully connected with Jeb Stuart and pinned Hooker in the Wilderness. The Confederate success against the main portion of the Federal army afforded Lee the freedom to deal with the threat to his rear from Sedgwick. The Confederate reinforcements spanned out along a wooded ridge on both sides of Plank Road with Salem Church situated in between. Sedgwick only possessed a vague understanding of the events on Hooker’s right wing earlier in the day and correspondingly, this left Sedgwick unaware of the possibility of rebel reinforcements coming in his direction. Instead, Brooks deployed his division on both sides of Plank Road and advanced, the magnitude of the resistance caught the Sixth Corps unprepared. Upon reaching Toll Gate, Sedgwick provided direction to artillery positions and an artillery duel ensued with the Confederate line at Salem Church. Finally, at 5 p.m.,

---


124 OR 25, pt. 1, 801.
Sedgwick ordered Brooks to proceed with the advance.125 William Brooks described their advance towards Salem Church as, “Immediately upon entering the dense growth of shrubs and trees which concealed the enemy, our troops were met by heavy firing; yet our lines advanced until they had reached the crest of the hill in the outer skirts of the woods, when, meeting with and being attacked by fresh and superior numbers of the enemy, our forces finally being compelled to withdraw.”126

The fighting continued until dusk where Wilcox launched his counteroffensive, but ultimately Union artillery repulsed the attempt. Brooks' Division suffered severe casualties from the battle with nearly 1,500 men including three colonels and one lieutenant colonel.127 The result disappointed Sedgwick whose Corps experienced the highest of emotions with the capture of Marye’s Heights only to fight to a draw hours later at Salem Church. However, the result was not a consequence of negligence on Sedgwick’s part but rather a combination of lack of intelligence reports, no reinforcements to hasten the pace to assist in operations and the inability of the right wing to prevent Lee from funneling troops back towards the Sixth Corps’ advance. None of these were Sedgwick’s fault but nonetheless constructed the events for the conclusion of stage five.

The conclusion of stage five for the left wing ended any further offensive movements from Sedgwick’s Corps for the remainder of the campaign. The stage started with confidence, but unexpected Confederate reinforcements shifted the momentum. Immediately upon

125 Ralph Happel, Salem Church Embattled (Eastern National Park & Monument Association, 1980), 41.

126 OR 25, pt. 1, 568.

127 Ibid.
Fredericksburg Heights falling, Sedgwick pushed aggressively to get Brooks into position and continue the advance, but Brooks was miles away at Franklin’s Crossing. As essential as it may have been, Sedgwick lost hours in the process to get Brooks into position, but no fault should apply to any commander for this as this was simply the necessary deployment of troops to protect a crossing while a large-scale assault occurred. Cadmus Wilcox deserved credit as well for his impromptu stall tactics to Sedgwick’s front which allotted the time needed for Lee to bring up four brigades. Sedgwick handled the new-found resistance the best he could by the use of artillery and skirmish lines. When the Battle of Salem Church proceeded, Sedgwick simply ran out of soldiers to complete the ambitious order to connect with Hooker. Sedgwick only possessed one fresh division to get through this latest line of resistance. The calamities that fell upon Hooker at the Chancellors House hemmed his line in the thickets of the Wilderness without any indication that Hooker desired to shift back to the offensive. For the safety of the Sixth Corps, Sedgwick needed to understand the right wing’s dispositions but Butterfield provided only an unclear indication of the true condition on the Federal right. Nevertheless, the Sixth Corps performed well tactically during the entire day via marching, maneuvers, and large assaults. Sedgwick’s leadership proved to be the base of this performance while navigating the difficulties placed upon him.

The second to the last stage of the campaign, the Battle of Banks’ Ford witnessed a changing of roles –Sedgwick no longer initiated the offensive but rather more Confederate reinforcements dictated that he must assume the defensive. Nevertheless, as Sedgwick shown in the offensive effectiveness of the movements in the Battles of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church, he displayed equal high skill in coordinating efforts for the defense of Banks’ Ford and nearby Scott’s Ford. Sedgwick’s defensive line possessed flaws due to its overextension and the
number of men he had to defend it but yet, through mounting Confederate reinforcements surrounding Sedgwick’s extended lines his use of artillery proved critical to counteract these deficiencies. Communications continued to plague Sedgwick’s operation but for the sake of this battle were surmounted through the disobedience of an important order issued from Daniel Butterfield. Moreover, through all that could have gone wrong, Sedgwick led his Sixth Corps to the successfully repulse Lee’s concentrated attack during the late afternoon of May 4 and allowed for a successful retreat later that evening to save his corps.

During the evening of May 3 through the morning of May 4, Robert E. Lee no longer concerned himself with the Federal right wing and brought more reinforcements to confront Sedgwick's position at Toll Gate along the Plank Road. The Confederate reinforcements left no choice but for Sedgwick to dramatically refine his battle plan into a defensive posture. Jubal Early’s Division with Barksdale’s Brigade that Sedgwick previously forced south to the Cox House after the fall of Marye’s Heights simply marched back up Telegraph Road during the morning of May 4 and re-took the heights that the Sixth Corps worked so adamantly for a day before.128 Early left Barksdale’s Brigade to assume their prior position at Marye’s Heights and applied pressure to Sedgwick’s rear with his entire division. Subsequently, Early severed Sedgwick’s communication lines to John Gibbon in Fredericksburg. Lee brought up Richard Anderson’s three remaining Confederate brigades: Edward Perry, Carnot Posey, and Ambrose Wright to Sedgwick’s front. In all, between McLaws, Anderson and Early’s Divisions, Lee increased his force in front of Sedgwick's line to twenty thousand men. Sedgwick, whose Corps fought two battles the previous day, were reduced to nineteen thousand soldiers. False intelligence made Sedgwick’s situation even worse. There had been reports indicating that James

128 OR 25, pt. 1, 802.
Longstreet and his two divisions under John Bell Hood and George Pickett, totaling fifteen thousand men arrived from Richmond and also deployed in his direction. Although this intelligence turned out to be false, Sedgwick at that moment had no reason not to believe that he had forty thousand Confederate soldiers surrounding him. Sedgwick had no other choice but to convert to the defensive while he waited for Hooker to decide upon the next course of action on the south side of the Rappahannock.

Sedgwick spent the early parts of the morning on May 4 rigorously establishing a defensive perimeter using every man available in his corps into a shape of a horseshoe with both flanks resting on the Rappahannock. This formation protected his crossing escape points at Banks and Scott’s Fords. Sedgwick completed this line, albeit thinly defended at points but the assistance of well-placed artillery made a difference. Newton and Burnham’s Divisions formed the right of Sedgwick’s line with Brooks’ Division set up in the front and Howe Division aligned on the left with their flank rested near Taylor’s Hill. In all, Sedgwick’s defensive line spanned five to six miles. Civil War veteran James Huntington wrote, “It [Sedgwick’s defensive line] had no strength, and was too long for the force under Sedgwick to properly defend.” The men of the Sixth Corps understood their predicament but Sedgwick seemed to uplift their resolve as a veteran of the First Massachusetts Light Battery wrote, “[Sedgwick] seemed intuitively to perceive the mental condition of his troops, as their confidence or lack of confidence in their ability to do, and he had, moreover, the gift of inspiring confidence when untoward


131 James Huntington, “The Battle of Chancellorsville” in Papers of the Massachusetts Historical Society of Massachusetts vol. 3, 188.
circumstances might beget a temporarily faltering in the disposition of some in the corps.”  

Sedgwick spent the entire night listening to the movements of the arrival of more Confederate reinforcements and personally directed the defensive line accordingly. One of Sedgwick’s trusted assistants wrote of an incident where a staff member inquired with Sedgwick about the possible destruction of the Sixth Corps. By which Sedgwick responded, “If the Sixth Corps goes out of existence today, I hope it will be with a blaze of glory that will light the history of war for all time.” Then added, “I will tell you a secret, there will be no surrendering.” Sedgwick no doubt gambled with the safety of his corps but in doing so, kept options on the table for Joseph Hooker to continue with the campaign if Hooker deemed fit. Sedgwick resolved to defend the line for at least a day with limited resources to obey Hooker’s orders and hoped it would salvage the campaign for the Federals.

Sedgwick encountered further issues in understanding the nature of the Confederate buildup surrounding his defensive line. As a consequence, Sedgwick along with the Signal Corps disobeyed an order from Butterfield to cease using signal flags but instead used ciphered relays to gain at least a rudimentary understanding of Lee’s dispositions of newly arrived troops.

Captain Samuel Cushing, the Acting Chief Signal Officer, wrote,

During the morning, General Sedgwick’s forces being cutoff from General Hooker and from Fredericksburg, it was immense importance communication should be established with him. His orders prevented him using signal officers for that purpose. I was very much afraid that no communication could be opened. However, Cpt. Gloskoski and Babcock established a station near the Guest House and near General Sedgwick’s

---

132 Andrew J. Bennett, *The story of the First Massachusetts light battery, attached to the Sixth army corps: A Glance at Events in the Armies of the Potomac and Shenandoah, from the Summer of 1861 to the Autumn of 1864* (Boston: Press of Deland and Barta, 1886), 112.


headquarters. These officers had not been informed of the order restricting the use of signals, and consequently open communications. I considered keeping the communication so great as to excuse me for ordering and the station should be held open as long as possible. The same order was given to Sedgwick and during the day, this station was of great importance as Cpt. Hall and Lt. Peter A. Taylor at the Phillips House kept Sedgwick thoroughly informed of the movements of the enemy. My directions was all information were to be sent in cipher. The station was kept open until Sedgwick had to retire from his position.135

This communication was Sedgwick’s only source of intelligence from his defensive position pinned against the Rappahannock. Had Butterfield’s order been complied with, Sedgwick would have been completely ignorant to Lee’s formations. Hooker did not provide any assistance to the Sixth Corps’ defensive arrangement and indicated to Sedgwick that his Corps would be on their own.136 Nevertheless, Sedgwick forcefully defended his line with this little bit of information he could ascertain from proactive signal officers. Information on Confederate deployment was hard to come by, but Sedgwick understood the fate of the Sixth Corps would depend on any information he could obtain.

During the late afternoon of May 4, Lee ordered a large-scale assault on Sedgwick’s defensive line intended to destroy the largest corps in the Army of the Potomac. However, Sedgwick’s constant defensive fighting along the line during the day and shifting of infantry and artillery to the most vulnerable areas of his line sustained a favorable result against Lee’s attacks. During the morning and early afternoon of May 4, Lee experienced difficulty getting an organized attack on Sedgwick line going. McLaws during the morning felt uncomfortable proceeding with the forces he had on hand and Lee responded by sending the balance of Anderson’s Division to McLaws. Lee turned frustrated by the delays and ultimately arrived on the scene about noon to get the assault proceeding. While skirmishing continued along the Sixth

135 OR 25, pt. 1, 221.

Corps’ line, the delays placed the element of time ironically to Sedgwick’s advantage. The Confederate attack finally commenced at 5 p.m. Early located on Lee’s right sent John B. Gordon and Harry Hays at Howe’s defensive position and initial success ensued. In any event, Sedgwick called up Wheaton’s Brigade to reinforce Howe’s threatened position and the additional troops contained the potential breach. Meanwhile, Anderson’s Division assailed Brooks’ section of the line but artillery support, repulsed the advance as well. McLaws continued to delay his part of the attack and and ultimately never got his full assault in place. As a result, the full brunt of the Confederate attack became disjointed. At dusk, even with McLaws still applying pressure, Sedgwick’s line held. Although circumstances beyond the Sixth Corps’ control left them in a less than desirable position by the evening of May 4, Sedgwick led the defense of his line successfully.

Figure 5: This map illustrates stages six and seven. The May 4 attack on Sedgwick’s line comprising the Battle of Banks’ Ford and the ultimate retreat of the Sixth Corps back over the Rappahannock River during the early hours of May 5.

In the seventh and final stage of the campaign, Sedgwick guided his Sixth Corps’ retreat over the Rappahannock River. But the maneuver did not go without confusion and indecision from Hooker that inevitably drew more challenges for Sedgwick in the tense final hours of May 4. Regardless of this hesitancy, Sedgwick completed a complicated withdrawal to the safety of the north banks of the Rappahannock. McLaws continued to provide pressure with infantry and batteries while Sedgwick systematically withdrew his Sixth Corps to terrain more suitable for defense during the evening. In the final condensed line, Sedgwick still held the position as long

---

as possible and waited for Hooker’s assistance. However, Hooker was unable to determine the
next step and Sedgwick had no other choice but to pull across the river and take up the bridges
afterwards. The Sixth Corps’ disengagement revealed Sedgwick’s withdrawal as anything but as
an accomplishment when compared to the extraordinary circumstances of their tactical plight.

After Sedgwick momentarily deadlocked elements of the Army of Northern Virginia at
the Battle of Banks’ Ford, Hooker became uncertain of what he wanted Sedgwick to do next.
Sedgwick communicated with Army Headquarters throughout the day explaining his
circumstance and the necessity for an eventual withdrawal at some point but would hold his
position as long as he could. Hooker seemed uncommitted to any course of action. Late in the
evening, Sedgwick once again requested direction from Hooker on whether he should withdraw
or maintain his position on the south side of the Rappahannock. 138 At 1 a.m. on May 5,
Sedgwick received Hooker’s response, “Dispatch this moment received. Withdraw. Cover the
river, and prevent any force crossing.” 139 Sedgwick complied with this order beginning at 2 a.m.
Then Hooker counterminded his order to withdraw twenty minutes later, but Sedgwick received
the second order too late to get his Corps back over the Rappahannock before sunrise. 140 This
series of communication abnormalities should alleviate any criticism placed on Sedgwick for
withdrawing too early. While there is no question that Sedgwick worried over his position after
the Battle of Banks’ Ford and the firm possibility of Lee renewing his assaults in the following
morning, Sedgwick held his position until he formally received orders to withdraw. In the end, it
was the only option for Sedgwick as it appeared unlikely that Hooker would provide him any

138 OR 25, pt. 2, 418.

139 Ibid.

140 Ibid., 418.
support. Sedgwick cared about the safety of his men and he also understood the gravity of his corps on the south side of the Rappahannock and the options it afforded Hooker should he had decided to act. Nonetheless, when the order was received, Sedgwick enacted the withdrawal to its completion.

Sedgwick understood the difficulty to retire his Corps across the Rappahannock with Confederate skirmishers nipping at his rear elements. As a result, Sedgwick conducted an orderly and calm withdrawal indicative of his leadership qualities under pressure. Sixth Corps surgeon George Stevens astutely recognized Sedgwick’s behavior during the retreat,

“General Sedgwick had manifested during the fights, those masterly qualities which made him one of the greatest soldiers of the age. His conduct on the retreat was cool and unimpassioned. Personally examining every part of the ground in the front and rear, riding from one end of the line to the other, now ordering a battery placed at some commanding point, and now looking out a new position to which his troops might fall back in case of necessity, he was everywhere present, full of energy, as determined to save as he had been to win.”¹⁴¹

The survival of Sedgwick’s Sixth Corps depended on the escapes routes of both Scott and Banks’ Fords and was the reason why he fought so stoutly during May 4 to maintain control of each of them. The benefits of the fords’ protection and consequential sacrifices came to fruition during the retreat where Sedgwick led his Sixth Corps to safety by successfully crossing the river. Although a retreat was not the desired result where twenty-four hours beforehand Sedgwick and his Sixth Corps immersed themselves in offensive movements. However, circumstances on the right wing dictated that a withdrawal become a necessity to save his isolated corps. On May 5 Sedgwick remained near the north bank of the Rappahannock in a defensive posture and waited for any forced crossing by Lee that was unlikely to occur. The completion of the retreat ended the long list of engagements that Sedgwick and his Sixth Corps

¹⁴¹ George T. Stevens, Three Years in the Sixth Corps (Albany: S.R. Publisher, 1866), 205-206.
participated in during the Chancellorsville Campaign. In a thirty-six-hour span, Sedgwick’s Corps fought alone in three separate battles – Second Fredericksburg, Salem Church and Banks Ford and sustained over 4,600 casualties indicating the stress and sacrifice the Sixth Corps undertook.

**Tactical Commitment**

In the entire Chancellorsville Campaign, John Sedgwick’s tactical approach covered three common trends: high casualties that represented a strong investment in the campaign, a broad range of difficulties that did not discourage his leadership and an appropriate pace to his Corps’ movements in the light of the extraordinary objectives ordered upon them. The culmination of these aspects marked among the highest achievements of the Union forces in the Chancellorsville Campaign that otherwise had been characterized with disappointments. Despite criticisms otherwise, these patterns relieve Sedgwick from the common criticisms of his lack of initiative, a stigma of an ordinary commander who could not handle an independent command and finally, an individual of inept slowness. To the contrary, Sedgwick fully vested himself to commanding his Sixth Corps and accordingly performed to the highest level given the circumstances. These three points provide the insight needed to understand the microelements of Sedgwick’s tactical command and the basis by which students of the campaign should judge Sedgwick.

In April 1863, Lincoln met with Joseph Hooker and Darius Couch and at the end of the meeting, Lincoln left one bit of advice for the commanders, “I want to impress upon you two
gentlemen; in your next fight…put in all your men.”

Although Hooker did not follow that advice, Sedgwick certainly did in his leadership during the Chancellorsville Campaign as shown by the number and distribution of casualties in his Corps. Hooker allocated the most difficult tasks upon Sedgwick than any other of his corps commanders. The 4,610 total casualties in the Sixth Corps represented this responsibility which was the highest compared to any other Corps in the Army of the Potomac. Furthermore, the Sixth Corps sustained 28 percent of the total Army of the Potomac’s casualties. The only other Union corps comparable to this level of losses was Sickles’ Third Corps at 4,119. Conversely, the Sixth Corps possessed at minimum 38 percent more losses than each of the remaining five infantry Corps aside from Sickles’ command. At the division level, the Sixth Corps possessed three divisions that sustained at least one-thousand casualties or more. Of the remaining divisions in the Federal army, there were only two other divisions, David Birney’s Third Corps Division and Alpheus Williams’ Twelfth Corps Division with 1,607 and 1,612 casualties respectively that met this minimum benchmark. As a point of emphasis, no other Union Corps had more than one division in its’ ranks that met this precedent whereas the Sixth Corps had all their divisions essentially (with Burnham “light” Division primarily a brigade) meet it.

Figure 6: Union Casualties per Corps in Chancellorsville Campaign. Results indicated Sedgwick incurred more casualties than any other Corps in the Army of the Potomac.

---


144 OR 25, Pt. 1, 174-191.

By concentrating on the Sixth Corps at the brigade level, the distribution of casualties indicates a relative balance in the level involvement of individual brigades in the campaign. The statistical analysis of casualties draws upon the detail that Sedgwick utilized his entire corps in an even manner. The three highest brigade casualty percentage consisted of Neill’s brigade at nineteen percent, Burnham’s “brigade” at seventeen percent and Bartlett’s brigade at thirteen percent, all belong to separate divisions within the Sixth Corps. The remaining distribution possessed five brigades all within 8 to 13 percentage points with only Shaler’s brigade under 5 percent. This distribution indicates Sedgwick spread out the action among his divisions which ultimately flowed down to the brigade level. The importance of the distribution is not only Sedgwick followed Lincoln’s advice to get all the men involved, but it also indicated Sedgwick utilized his entire corps to its’ fullest capabilities. Sedgwick rotated the divisions and brigades in a balanced fashion. First, Sedgwick involved Brooks’ Division in the crossing of the Rappahannock to start the campaign and then primarily Newton, Burnham and Howe’s men for the assault on Marye’s Heights and finally back to Brooks again at Salem Church. While the nature of Sedgwick’s objectives called for the use of all his forces, Sedgwick’s did not rely excessively on one division over the other. Sedgwick’s rotational scheme allowed for his Corps to be involved in multiple engagements and sustained their effectiveness over a longer span of time.

Figure 7: Casualty rates among each division in Sedgwick’s Corps.\textsuperscript{146} With Burnham’s “Light Brigade eventually attached to Newton’s Division, the losses represent a level distribution from division to division in the Sixth Corps.

\textsuperscript{146} OR 25, pt. 1, 188-191.

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.

Figure 8: Pie Chart indicating percent losses of each brigade in the Sixth Corps.\textsuperscript{147}
The most revealing statistics of the Sixth Corps’ involvement is an extensive breakdown of killed, wounded and missing in comparison to the rest of the Army of the Potomac. The comparison provides the magnitude of action and engagements that Sedgwick’s command participated in during the campaign which fully indicated their vestment. Furthermore, the high percentages in the major areas contradict the notion that Sedgwick possessed limited initiative or a tentativeness to engage. In the area of officers killed in the Army of the Potomac, one out of every four officers came from Sedgwick’s command. This ratio is a particularly perceptive as Sedgwick continued his operations with the interior leadership of his Corps decimated. Equally alarming is the number of enlisted men killed as 32 percent of these came from Sedgwick’s command alone. The percentage of wounded officers and enlisted men were relatively high as well in comparison to the entire army. On the other hand, it may appear from an overview perspective that these high percentages reflected that Sedgwick did not command his men with caution or due diligence. However, the previous tactical review of each of the seven stages indicated a balance Sedgwick held between the safety of his corps and the overly ambitious order that Hooker mandated on the evening of May 2. The statistics prove out that even with this discretionary approach, Sedgwick displayed a tactical commitment that levied the price of alarmingly high losses in comparison to Hooker’s right wing. Moreover, although the largest of any of the Union corps, these high percentages from the Sixth Corps occurred with Sedgwick’s men only comprising approximately 18 percent of the total infantry strength of the Army of the Potomac entering the campaign. No reinforcements were readily available to Sedgwick from May 2 through May 5 while the right wing had five Corps and portion of the Second Corps in a position to support each other. The high number of casualties related to Sedgwick's command is
an indicator that Hooker placed an uneven amount of responsibility on the Sixth Corps than any other Corps he had under his command.

Figure 9: Detailed account of Sedgwick’s command losses versus the rest of the Army of Potomac. Note: John Gibbon’s two brigades were added to the count since they connected to Sedgwick command for the Battle of Second Fredericksburg and remained in the town as Sedgwick’s Sixth Corps proceeded towards Chancellorsville.

Along with analysis of casualty statistics to support Sedgwick’s tactical commitment, the actual difficulties that faced the Sixth Corps and how Sedgwick confronted them are important considerations as well. Despite dilemmas to correct problems that went beyond his scope of his control, Sedgwick performed steadily in his leadership. Communication, intelligence, lack of reinforcements, uncertainty from upper command plagued the Sixth Corps’ tactical operations. However, the Sixth Corps under Sedgwick accomplished more tactically than any other Corps in the Army of the Potomac. Sedgwick led two separate assaults in a single day under much different scenarios, the Battles of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church. Additionally, Sedgwick performed well in the finer Civil War era tactical techniques that were difficult to orchestrate with large masses of soldiers. The techniques included demonstrations, covert crossing over the Rappahannock and force marches that brought his Sixth Corps from Franklin’s Crossing to Fredericksburg and ultimately to Banks Ford. The Sixth Corps completed these tactics under fire and in continuous close proximity to Confederates. Sedgwick handled the vulnerability of his corps by adjusting the details of orders from Army Headquarters to correspond with the true tactical realities of his situation but all the while sustaining the integrity of the overall objectives of the orders.

Hooker bestowed no luxuries of reinforcements or time for organizational purposes to the Sixth Corps, and Sedgwick worked the best he could with limited resources. As a result,

---

Sedgwick could not conduct his operations as he would have like particularly with both of his offensives on May 3. Instead, circumstances forced Sedgwick to be flexible in his tactical approach to each situation as they occurred. The tactical flexibility allowed Sedgwick’s transition from offensive to defensive postures to occur effectively, but reinforcement limitations offset the success that may have been obtained. With all the variables working against the Sixth Corps, Sedgwick did not sustain a single tactical defeat through the entire campaign. The closest Sedgwick came to defeat was a tactical draw at Salem Church, but ultimately the result forced Sedgwick on the defensive the following day. However, even in this section of the campaign, the vast majority of the Sixth Corps had already been engaged earlier in the day, greatly reducing Sedgwick pool of fresh soldiers. Sedgwick’s ability to confront tactical difficulties prevented his Corps from being routed and navigated the dangerous situations that events placed upon his isolated Corps.

Many critics of the Chancellorsville Campaign have placed high energy in critiquing Sedgwick’s perceived slowness particularly in a twenty-four-hour period from May 2 evening to the close of May 3. However, a review of events during this time span reveals there were no unnecessary gaps in the Sixth Corps’ actions, indicating Sedgwick proceeded as quick as circumstances dictated. Sedgwick started the period by reacting swiftly to an importune late evening order to connect with Hooker’s right wing via Fredericksburg. The Sixth Corps proceeded with a five-hour night march and eventually occupied Fredericksburg. The following nine hours were spent performing reconnaissance, turning movements and ultimately a mass frontal assault that ended the Second Battle of Fredericksburg. Despite the number of Jubal Early’s men holding onto their defensive position along the heights, the amount of time required for its capture was warranted due to the inherent strength of the terrain the Confederates
defended, unknown topographical features and troop deployments. After the fall of
Fredericksburg, the following five hours were spent getting Brooks’ Division from Franklin’s
Crossing to come up into position to take the lead in the advance march through Fredericksburg
and eventually westward along Plank Road. While Confederate skirmishers whose only intent
was to buy time, took up precious minutes as Brooks along with the help of artillery needed to
systematically remove these obstacles. The length of time until Brooks’ assault at Salem Church
was largely a consequence of not having reinforcements readily on hand to more forcefully push
on the advance. Instead, Sedgwick relegated his only remaining fresh division forward without
being properly concentrated. All accounts of Sedgwick’s behavior during the intervals speaks of
his apparent urgency for pushing forward the pace of operations to connect with Hooker. As the
case with the tactical overview of the Sedgwick’s actions, the overall operational viewpoint of
the campaign provides further appreciation to the Sixth Corps General’s decisions and reactions.
CHAPTER 5: The Grand Chancellorsville Campaign

Strategic Inconclusiveness

John Sedgwick’s conduct in the larger strategic realm in the Chancellorsville Campaign was invariably dependent upon Joseph Hooker’s overall management of the campaign. As a result, Sedgwick experienced undue difficulties and calamities not within his control but proceeded with orders nonetheless. The events on the Army of the Potomac’s right wing witnessed a broad range of policy missteps to which directly correlated to Sedgwick's performance of his own Sixth Corps. The strategic uncertainty developed a level of uneasiness within Sedgwick’s command without a clear understanding of Hooker’s overall intent. Sedgwick’s greatest strategic difficulty of the campaign was an impracticable order late in the evening of May 2 for the Sixth Corps to march towards Chancellorsville. The details of the instructions were impossible to execute within the expected time and distance parameters. The mandate reversed Sedgwick’s strategic role in the campaign where Sedgwick's smaller Sixth Corps assumed the offensive role while the remaining corps in the army remained on the defensive. Hooker exacerbated the problematic reversal of roles within the two sections of the army by his unwillingness to support Sedgwick in any manner for the remainder of the
campaign. Sedgwick attempted to overcome the inconsistent strategic decisions of the entire Union army which presented no clear contingency planning when unexpected events worked against the right wing of the army. Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps could not escape these strategic indiscretions and although Sedgwick commanded remarkably well given the circumstances, strategic inconsistencies at the head of the army allowed the Sixth Corps’ commendable efforts to go without fruition.

General Sedgwick’s uncertainty in the strategic direction of the Army of the Potomac during the Chancellorsville Campaign corresponded to the policy of conduct from Army Commander Joseph Hooker. Sedgwick as commanding officer of the army’s left wing encountered difficulties with aligning his operations due to an ambiguous Federal strategy. The tendency for secretiveness largely among Hooker and his closest staff members left the Sixth Corps commander with minimal details for a semblance of a plan to be pieced together. Sedgwick endured the blurred strategic vision by several countermands of orders that lacked logic and drew into question if there was a compact strategic design in place at all. The abrupt changes in schemes, particularly Hooker’s willingness to give up the initiative on May 1 and forfeit the significant advantages that the earlier parts of the campaign yielded, only afflicted Sedgwick’s side of the operation further. This relinquishment of the offensive on the right, in turn, placed the emphasis and the fate of the Union overall success in the campaign upon Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps. This cause was a direct consequence of Hooker and Army Headquarters not keeping Sedgwick fully cognizant of the rapid setbacks of the right wing that possessed a direct impact on Sedgwick’s operations.

From the critical turning point of May 1, Sedgwick weathered through several countermanded orders which continued to complicate the strategic situation on the left wing.
Nonetheless, Sedgwick handled such unexpected surprises with flexibility and a behavior of a General who sought to fulfill Hooker’s changeable strategic vision. The first of these countermand orders occurred during Hooker’s engagement near Zoan and Tabernacle Churches on the afternoon of May 1. Initially, Hooker ordered Sedgwick to proceed with a heightened demonstration on the Confederates towards his front. The Sixth Corps commander executed the stronger feint with Reynolds’ Corps and a brigade from Newton’s division while the “Light Brigade” marched across the Rappahannock and strengthened Brooks’ position on the right.\footnote{OR 25, pt. 1, 558.} The order originated at 1 p.m. but did not arrive to Sedgwick until four hours later at which point the Sixth Corps began to comply with the order. Then at 8:50 p.m. Hooker rescinded the order due to the lateness of its execution.\footnote{OR 25, pt. 2, 343.} The intent of Sedgwick’s movement was to lock Lee’s forces towards his front, discouraging any Confederate reinforcements from reaching Hooker’s approach along Plank Road and Orange Turnpike. However, the fighting on May 1 persuaded Hooker to halt the main army’s progression eastward, and as a result, the increased demonstrations on Sedgwick’s wing were no longer applicable. The inconsequential demonstration departed more of the Sixth Corps division over the Rappahannock near Franklin’s Crossing and placed Sedgwick in a quasi-position between a defensive and offensive posture with the overall intent still unknown to Sedgwick. In any event, the countermand of the demonstration instilled uncertainty for Sedgwick on the general ambition of the right wing and how that related to his responsibilities on the left.

The second set of retracted orders transpired on the afternoon and evening of May 2. The confusing instructions began at 4:10 p.m., before Jackson’s strike against the Army of the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{149}}\text{OR 25, pt. 1, 558.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{150}}\text{OR 25, pt. 2, 343.}\]
Potomac’s right flank. Hooker first ordered Sedgwick to capture Fredericksburg and pursue the Confederates to his front. Hooker believed the reported Confederate troop movements earlier in the day represented a retreat and their activity entailed “trying to save their trains.” In actuality, this movement indicated Jackson’s procession of 24,000 troops on a long roundabout march with the end purpose of turning Hooker’s flank. Sedgwick did not receive this order for his first offensive movement until well over a half an hour from its origination. Then over two and a half hours later, Hooker sent Sedgwick a supplementary order that altered the direction of the Sixth Corps’ movement, and now Hooker wanted Sedgwick to pursue Confederates on Bowling Green Road. Finally, at 11 p.m., Sedgwick received the final altered order of the day which now mandated, once again, a capture of Fredericksburg but now with the caveat that after the fall of the Confederate stronghold, Sedgwick must continue the march until he engaged in Lee’s rearguard. Hooker wanted this forced march completed by daylight. The context of the day’s final order implied that Hooker would resume his offensive on the right while simultaneously, Sedgwick would harass the Confederates from the opposite side. In over a seven-hour span on May 2, Sedgwick experienced a fluctuated set orders that generated doubt in the commitment of a sustained movement. The origin of this trouble corresponded to Hooker’s struggles through adversity from Jackson’s attack on the Eleventh Corps and the result left Hooker tentative in his strategic initiative for the remainder of the campaign. This set of orders introduced the persistent element of unpredictability to the grand scheme of the Federal’s path to

\[\text{\textsuperscript{151}}\text{Ibid., 363.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{152}}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{153}}\text{Ibid., 366-367.}\]
victory in the Chancellorsville Campaign and reciprocated the heightened difficulties in Sedgwick’s future tasks as well.

The final set of conflicting orders issued to Sedgwick during the last retreat of the Sixth Corps across the Rappahannock at Banks’ Ford occurred on May 4 and the early hours of May 5. Similar to orders from the first two days of May, indecisiveness in countermanded orders sent Sedgwick’s Sixth Corps unclear strategic messages. By early afternoon of May 4, Lee surrounded Sedgwick’s isolated Corps and organized for assault. In the meantime, Sedgwick informed Hooker of his desire to hold his defensive position on the south side of the Rappahannock albeit a problematic defensive position at that.\textsuperscript{154} After the Confederate assault in the late afternoon failed, reports informed Hooker’s Chief of Staff, Daniel Butterfield of Sedgwick’s dangerous predicament which prompted Hooker to withdraw the Sixth Corps across the Rappahannock. This order was administered at 1 a.m. and received an hour later on May 5.\textsuperscript{155} Sedgwick, whose defensive line significantly consolidated during the Confederate attempts to break his lines, quickly crossed his Sixth Corps before a subsequent order from Hooker called for a cancellation of the withdrawal and to hold his position.\textsuperscript{156} This time the countermand came too late as Sedgwick completed the withdrawal before the new order receipt. For the Sixth Corps to re-cross the Rappahannock within a short amount of time before sunrise would have placed Sedgwick’s men in unnecessary danger with large Confederate forces toward their front, closely monitoring their movements. The countermand drew into question the strategic role of Sedgwick’s position at Banks’ Ford into Hooker’s plans at this late stage of the campaign. The

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 410.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 418.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 419.
final countermand order indicated that Hooker planned to assist Sedgwick in some manner the following day. But this decision came too late with Sedgwick’s lines too heavily tested during the afternoon of May 4 and their resultant vulnerability during the evening. A more appropriate assistance to Sedgwick’s Sixth Corps needed to come during the morning of May 4 from the main army after it was evident of a Confederate build up in that area. This would have afforded Hooker at least twenty hours to recoup after the difficult fighting on the morning of May 3. However, no assistance came to Sedgwick during the entire day or evening, but Sedgwick held his condensed position during the Battle of Banks’ Ford on the south side of the Rappahannock regardless. The countermanding of the orders for the necessary withdrawal capped the final uncertainty that Sedgwick experienced during the campaign. In retrospect, Sedgwick never received an explanation for the strategy during the campaign and the orders underlined an unclear Federal blueprint. Sedgwick for his part, conducted his command in a robust style despite the distressing elements of an ambiguous plan that appeared to be changing at every moment.

The little information provided to Sedgwick during the Chancellorsville Campaign covering the developments on the right wing of the Army of Potomac lingered further apprehensions on Hooker’s strategy. As a consequence, Sedgwick never fully discerned the true condition of the main Army, and Army Headquarters did not afford him the opportunity to adjust his operations on the left in parallel. The informational gap between the two Federal wings started virtually immediately as fierce fighting enveloped Hooker’s right fraction of the Union army. After having time to comprehend the fighting on May 1, Hooker wrote of his mindset after the day’s fighting,

I probably might have advanced by desperate marches to the nearer point but that I did not desire with my limited knowledge of the country and the force not equal in numbers
to the enemy and considerably wearied by two days of long and heavy marching….The field of operations [sic] was in what is called the Wilderness but of which I had no adequate conception…It was impossible to maneuver, on which I had largely depended on for success.  

Hooker’s words implied no contingency planning to counteract the first confrontation with Lee and these developments on the right handicapped Sedgwick’s operations by no concerted communication. Sedgwick was unaware of Hooker’s desire not to move out of the deep thickets of the Wilderness and in doing so, the Army Commander assumed a preferred defensive position. Hooker nor Butterfield kept Sedgwick updated on the change in strategy which initially suggested that Hooker would aggressively pursue the advantage from his successful turning movement. Instead, orders streamed into Sedgwick that stripped him of Reynolds’ First Corps which implied of a strengthened offensive to Hooker’s wing. Additionally, in the same day, Sedgwick fulfilled an ordered demonstration that only further supported the strategy that Hooker’s offensive had been progressing. All the while, Sedgwick possessed no contradictory information that his Sixth Corps would be anything but a holding force. Unknowingly to Sedgwick, the other Corps commanders with the main part of Hooker’s army settled into a defensive posture by establishing obstructions to protect their lines and manufactured openings in the deep thickets of the Wilderness for limited artillery placements. The strategy evolved into one where Hooker hoped that Lee would attack him. Sedgwick on the other hand, possessed no inclination of Hooker’s plan for a prolonged defensive set that lasted the final four days of the campaign.

On the following day, May 2, Stonewall Jackson and his Confederate infantry exploited Hooker’s venerable right flank and rolled up the Eleventh Corps’ position. Hooker admitted, “In

157 Letter from Joseph Hooker to Samuel P. Bates; August 29, 1876; Samuel Penniman Bates Papers, Box MG-17, folder 17; Pennsylvania State Archives.
a moment my whole army knowing to this stampede were thrown momentarily into a nervous excited condition for a time filled me with alarm."\textsuperscript{158} The unexpected course of events further cemented Hooker’s resolve to remain on the defensive but digressions of the day prompted another strategic alteration for Sedgwick to change from a defensive stand along the Rappahannock to one that was offensive minded. Sedgwick’s Sixth Corps was now the offensive arm of the Army of the Potomac. Hooker wanted Sedgwick to march and occupy Fredericksburg, then capture the heights beyond the town and finally drive into Lee’s vulnerable rear. Meanwhile, the Army Headquarters sent no clear information to Sedgwick indicating Jackson mauled Hooker’s right flank during the late afternoon surprise. Without the knowledge of the perilous condition of the right wing, Sedgwick could only infer to what the strategy of the campaign was based solely on Hooker’s additional order in the late evening of May 2nd for the forced march to Fredericksburg. The informational basis of the strategic change, namely an accurate assessment of the calamities of the day on the right, would have provided Sedgwick the context to conduct his operations by the orders. However, the knowledge of these dangers on the right wing went unfulfilled and Sedgwick operated partially in the blind as he moved his Corps towards Fredericksburg. Nevertheless, Sedgwick proceeded on his march with expedition without understanding the basis for the order nor what to expect in immediate future. Second Corps commander, Darius Couch summed up Sedgwick’s strategic plight,

\begin{quote}
On the night of May 2nd, the commanding general [Hooker], with 80,000 men in his wing of the army, directed Sedgwick, with 22,000 to march to his relief. While that officer was doing this on the 3rd, and when it would be expected that every effort would be made by the right wing to do its part, only one half of it fought, and then the whole
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{158} Letter from Joseph Hooker to Samuel P. Bates; April 2, 1877; Samuel Penniman Bates Papers, Box MG-17, folder 17; Pennsylvania State Archives.
Civil War journalist William Swinton’s opinion of Hooker approach also agreed with Couch’s viewpoint, “…The false step in the conduct of Hooker was that, having started out to fight an offensive battle, he reduced himself, at the very moment when action was above all imperative, to a perilous defensive.” Hooker offset these realities by claiming, “The effect of so heavy body of fresh troops [Sedgwick’s Corps] coming upon the enemy’s flank I calculated would be decisive.” The problematic aspect of this new strategy called for approximately twenty percent of the Army of the Potomac, the Sixth Corps, to be the decisive offensive hand while the remainder of the main army stayed on the defensive and in doing so, placed Sedgwick’s in an entirely separate realm of difficulty.

The events on the Federal right wing continued to worsen on the morning of May 3. Both Jeb Stuart on the left and Lee on the right commenced their pincer movement along Hooker’s line until the two sectors of the Army of Northern Virginia reunited at the burning Chancellor House. While the Confederate attack proceeded, a rebel artillery shell knocked out a pillar on the Chancellor House porch that ultimately incapacitated Hooker for a couple of hours. The extent of the injury is debatable, but the strategic consequences for Sedgwick underlined a consistent pattern of strategic instability. Similar to the major troubles Hooker encountered during the previous two days, Hooker's immediate staff kept the lead commander’s head injury from Sedgwick’s attention. While the entire command of the Army of the Potomac laid in limbo,

---

Sedgwick prepared to take the Fredericksburg Heights and move upon Salem Church with a nebulous understanding of the state of the main army. The dispatches of the news of Hooker’s wounding were kept initially between Butterfield and Chief Quartermaster Rufus Ingalls. As Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton anxiously peppered Butterfield with requests for updates on the battle’s progress, Butterfield dismissed the extent of Hooker’s condition to “...slightly, but not severely, wounded.”162 Once Hooker regained consciousness, he instructed Couch to withdraw to a set location drawn up on a map, and by 1 p.m., Hooker directly sent a dispatch to Lincoln setting the root of the campaign’s fate upon Sedgwick’s conduct. Although a replacement to the command of the Army of the Potomac is speculative, the possibility of Couch taking permanent command of the army in all likelihood would have benefited Sedgwick’s tasks. After the war, Couch criticized Hooker’s lack of initiative in assisting Sedgwick which indicated the Second Corps commander would have supported the Sixth Corps’ movement on May 3. Although the switch in army commanders did not develop, the right wing conclusively fell back into a condensed line with their flanks resting on the Rappahannock. The strategic realities for Sedgwick were harsh – the only hope for success now rested in Sedgwick’s control, but the odds were stacked against him as the main army provided no support.

The last full day of the campaign that included major engagements, May 4, consisted of an unusual strategic arrangement for the Federals which Hooker developed an amenity to his defenses in the Wilderness. While Sedgwick held onto his positions along Banks and Scott’s Fords waiting for Hooker to make a judgment call on the next course of action in the Chancellorsville Campaign. The strategic consequences characterized by inconclusiveness continued for Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps with further activity dependent on the actions or

162 OR 25, pt. 2, 378.
inaction of the main army. Sedgwick’s anxiety increased as Lee targeted the Sixth Corps’ isolated position for an attack at any moment. Additionally, Sedgwick remained unaware of the state of the main army, now five miles to his right. Warren sent a status report to Sedgwick concerning the right wing received 6:30 a.m. on May 4,

> I find everything snug here. We contracted the line a little and repulsed the last assault with ease. General Hooker wishes them to attack him to-morrow. If they will, he does not desire you to attack them again in force unless he attacks him at the same time. He says you are too far away for him to direct. Look well to the safety of your corps, and keep up with the communication with General Benham at Banks’ Ford and Fredericksburg. You can go to either place if you think it best. To cross at Banks’ Ford would bring you in supporting distance of the main body, and would be better than falling back to Fredericksburg.163

The dispatch was as significant for what it did not say as much as for what it implied. Warren gave Sedgwick no disclosure on Hooker’s injury while leaving out the fact that Lee reunited his forces and pinned Hooker deep in the Wilderness and explained no consequences from the fighting during May 3 along the right wing’s front.

The report did imply Hooker had no desire to regain the offensive unless Lee presented an opportunity in evoking his movement. The dispatch also opened the door for Sedgwick to use his discretion to conduct an orderly withdrawal. The only caveat Hooker placed on this freedom was if Sedgwick did decide to withdrawal that he preferred it would be via Banks’ Ford rather than towards Fredericksburg as this would keep the Sixth Corps in closer support distance to the main army. The overall context of the order was the first true indication to Sedgwick that the initiative firmly rested with Lee and certainly the future strategic steps were muddled. If Hooker simply wanted Lee to attack his lines in the Wilderness, then the purpose of Sedgwick’s defensive position at Banks and Scott’s Ford and the overall disposition of the separated nature

163 Ibid., 396.
of the two wings of the Army of the Potomac all together was questionable. Conversely, the strategic value of Sedgwick’s successful repulse of McLaws, Anderson and Early’s divisions across his entire line was also suspect if Hooker planned for the much larger right wing to remain inactive. During the remainder of the day, Sedgwick responded with persistence to hold his defensive position with the intention of buying Hooker time to adjust his general strategy. However, by later in the evening and after a heated repulse of Lee assault on his lines, Sedgwick displayed uncertainty of the entire campaign by an urgent message, “My army is hemmed in upon the slope, covered by the guns from the north side of Banks’ Ford. If I had only this army to care for, I would withdraw it to-night. Do your operations require that I should jeopard [sic] it by retaining it here? An immediate reply is indispensable, or I may feel obliged to withdraw.”

Sedgwick bought Hooker the entire day on May 4 to determine a course of action and yet, Hooker’s could not seem to capitalize upon a delineated strategy at this point of the campaign.

One of the most questionable strategic decisions in the Chancellorsville Campaign was Hooker’s order on the evening of May 2 that mandated Sedgwick to performed a forced march to Fredericksburg. The order in its entirety stated,

The major-general commanding directs that you cross the Rappahannock at Fredericksburg on the receipt of this order, and at once take up your line of march on the Chancellorsville road until you connect with him. You will attack and destroy any force you may fall in with on the road. You will leave all your trains behind except the pack mule trains of small ammunition, and march to be in the vicinity of the general at daylight. You will probably fall upon the rear of the forces commanded by General Lee, and between you and the major-general commanding, he expects to use him up.

The contents of the order in itself contained inaccuracies and misunderstandings that made the order essentially impossible to accomplish. Hooker misunderstood Sedgwick and the Sixth

---

164 Ibid., 412.

165 Ibid., 365-366.
Corps’ positioning when he issued the order. Correspondingly, the total distance and time constraints presented Sedgwick with impossible expectations to meet the objective. Sedgwick confronted several real challenges in the ordered march which Hooker and Butterfield believed to be minimal. Moreover, these challenges continued to go unappreciated while Sedgwick’s Sixth Corps advanced on their march. Finally, the Federal’s inability to pin Lee’s troops toward the front of the Federal right wing was another contributing factor that compromised the integrity of the decree. Despite this, Sedgwick remained vigilant in the efforts which presented high risks but the Sixth Corps commander conducted in a way that attempted to surpass the impossibility of the order while still protecting his Sixth Corps.

Hooker presented this instruction under the pretense of the Sixth Corps’ location on the evening of May 2. This misconception forced Sedgwick to scramble the best he could to get his divisions moving and on track with the order. Hooker confessed nearly two years later under oath that he was unaware that Sedgwick’s Corps at that time situated near Franklin’s Crossing, three miles south of Fredericksburg nor did Hooker recall that the majority of Sedgwick’s command already crossed the Rappahannock at that point. However, on April 26, Hooker ordered Sedgwick to cross at Franklin’s Crossing to establish a bridgehead. Then on May 1, Hooker ordered a strong demonstration also in this same vicinity and finally early on May 2, he instructed Sedgwick to pick up the bridges at that ford. The evidence suggests Hooker was acutely aware of Sedgwick’s position from April 28 thru May 2 morning, but after the unexpected flank attack by Jackson that afternoon, it was possible the shock of the assault jolted Hooker’s memory. It is also plausible that Hooker confused the Sixth Corps’ position with John

---

166 Report of the Conduct of the War vol. 4, 147.
Gibbon’s division who were staged at the Lacy House and forded the Rappahannock directly at Fredericksburg. Nonetheless, the confusion persisted well after the battle when Hooker testified that Sedgwick needed to march only six or seven miles when in actuality, Sedgwick's position required marching twelve miles to get the order’s destination. Moreover, virtually all those twelve miles would be under some form of contested fire from Confederate forces. Despite information to the contrary, Hooker remained vigilant in the belief that nothing prevented Sedgwick from getting towards Lee’s rear at Chancellorsville despite the incorrect starting point of Sedgwick’s Sixth Corps.¹⁶⁷

Both the distance and time provisions within the order curtailed the feasibility of the order for Sedgwick’s command. While the Sixth Corps attended against skirmishers, defense lines, and timely Confederate reinforcements, Sedgwick proceeded with the march with no real possibility of closing the twelve-mile gap to the main army within five hours. A member of the Thirty-Seventh Massachusetts stressed the impracticality of the order, “the distance to be covered was 12 to 14 miles or more than the corps could have accomplished by an unimpeded march during the timed named…But the stout-hearted commander of the Sixth Corps, through ordered to undertake a prima facie impossibility, promptly obeyed the spirit, if he could not meet the letter of the instructions.”¹⁶⁸ On the other hand, Sedgwick later displayed a high aptitude in leading strenuous marches. In the Gettysburg Campaign, only eight weeks later, Sedgwick completed a forced march underlining the fact that Sedgwick had been fully capable of leading an extraordinarily difficult movement. In that campaign, Sedgwick commanded the same corps

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 145.
comprised of thirty-eight infantry regiments, eight batteries, and cavalry units totaling eighteen thousand men which marched over thirty miles with the lead-elements of the Corps arriving at Gettysburg under twenty-four hours from its origination.\textsuperscript{169} The march was among the most epic of the entire Civil War. In the Chancellorsville Campaign, Warren approximated that Sedgwick could have advanced two miles an hour allocating a total of six hours to complete the twelve-mile trek under the caveat that no resistance would not be encountered.\textsuperscript{170} This comfort, of course, was not the case as Confederate skirmishers annoyed Sedgwick’s advance as soon as it started. Brigadier General Thomas Neill described in his official report of his picket line comprised of the Forty-ninth Pennsylvania infantry regiment that dealt with Confederate attacks while proceeding up Bowling Green Road.\textsuperscript{171} Later on, the much larger resistance of Marye’s Heights and Salem Church continued to be obstacles that did not calculate into the May 2 order.

During John Gibbon’s testimony in front of the Committee of the Conduct of the War, the division commander proclaimed, “I do not consider the order sent to General Sedgwick on Saturday night, to be at Chancellorsville at daylight on Sunday morning, was a practical one.”\textsuperscript{172} The first reason Gibbon cited was the long distance that needed to be traveled.\textsuperscript{173} Gibbon also referenced the order had been provided at night making it “impracticable to obey the order because it was then after daylight.”\textsuperscript{174} Prominent post-war historian John Bigelow Jr. also


\textsuperscript{170} Report of Conduct of War vol. 4, 46.

\textsuperscript{171} OR 25, pt. 1, 608.

\textsuperscript{172} Report of the Conduct of the War vol. 4, 87.

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
concluded that the time and distance parameters of the orders were too far-reaching,
“..[Sedgwick] should not have been expected to cover the 11 miles between the head of his column and the “vicinity of Chancellorsville” by night march under these circumstances…”175

The other Union Corps, the First and Third, previously stripped from the Sedgwick’s wing avoided the obstacles that the Sixth Corps were required to encountered by circling the Confederate defenses of Fredericksburg by way of U.S. Ford. Alternatively, Sedgwick needed to take the most difficult route of any of the transport options available to fall upon Lee’s rear. The time and distance constraints left no further options but to grind through Confederates defenses the hard way.

Along with distance and time impossibilities constructed in the mandate, the structure of the order trivialized the challenges that the Fredericksburg Heights presented to Sedgwick’s Corps. Nonetheless, Sedgwick careful approached this critical Confederate position with the appreciation the positions demanded. Hooker recalled about Sedgwick’s task on capturing the heights, “The heights around Fredericksburg were occupied by a small number of the enemy, but in front of the walls of Marye’s Heights as you well know a formidable stonewall with earth embankments as support and as General Sedgwick ought to have known from his service with Genl Sumner of December 13th.”176 In Hooker’s account, he was mistaken by Sedgwick’s previous experience at the Battle of First Fredericksburg. Sedgwick, previously wounded at the Battle of Antietam, had not returned to the army until after the December 13 grand assault on the heights. Sedgwick never experienced first-hand the result of the past attempts to take the prominent defensive area although there is no doubt that he was aware of the first battles’

176 Letter from Joseph Hooker to Samuel P. Bates; April 2, 1877; Samuel Penniman Bates Papers, Box MG-17, folder 17; Pennsylvania State Archives.
struggles as indicated by his methodical approach. Jubal Early’s dispositions of troops along the heights consisted of 3300 men from Wilcox Brigade and four regiments from Harry Hays’ Louisiana Brigade situated from Plank Road to the Rappahannock. Their line protected the vital Taylor’s Hill along with 6,100 more men from Gordon, Hoke and Smith’s brigades whose lines protected Early’s right from Brick Cabin to Hazel Run which commanded Telegraph Hill. In the center of the Confederate line rested 1300 men from Eighth Louisiana, Twenty-first Mississippi and the Eighteenth Mississippi regiments of Barksdale brigade who defended Marye’s Heights while two more regiments, the Seventeenth and Thirtieth Mississippi who assumed positions on the left center. Early positioned forty-eight guns to support his extended lines along the heights. Early’s total strength was 11,600 men. Although Sedgwick enjoyed more than a two to one advantage in strength, Early possessed enough men to make the heights still a dangerous position to take. That past December, Confederates only used seven thousand men to rout Burnside much larger assaults towards the heights. As a result, in the Chancellorsville Campaign relocated forces from other areas of Early’s line toward his center possessed a potential problem for Sedgwick. Also, often unrealized in Hooker’s account was Early’s decision to strengthen his right and left making anything but a mass assault towards the center the only viable option. Further concerning, the Federals could not precisely locate Longstreet’s two divisions of John Bell Hood and George Pickett, approximately 15,000 men. The very possibility of these divisions coming from Richmond to assist Early would undoubtedly be disastrous for Sedgwick. Sedgwick respected all these variables, and the Sixth Corps' leader carefully crafted the capture of the heights as a consequence. While later assessment of Sedgwick by Hooker failed to recognize this complexity.
After the battle, Hooker’s possessed concerns on Sedgwick’s decision to take Marye’s Heights by direct assault. Hooker wrote, “…the most – formidable point and the most difficult of assailing in all the works around Fredericksburg and I could not think he [Sedgwick] would select that point [Marye’s Heights], in preference to all others for his point of attack.” In actuality, Sedgwick spent a large part of the morning of May 3 testing other areas of Early’s line in hopes to avoid a mass assault towards the center. However, with time being the ultimate factor, Sedgwick attempts had been exhausted by Early’s strengths on each of his flanks along with topographical barriers forced an assault on Early’s weakest point of his line, Marye’s Heights. Butterfield prodded Sedgwick during the entire morning with dispatches that implored expediency at all costs. Time took away any further option of maneuvering and Sedgwick made the difficult, but the only decision he could have with a direct assault. The Sixth Corps lost fifteen hundred men in less than an hour in the final takeover of the position which illustrated that although Early lightly defended Marye's Heights, the strength of the terrain and support of artillery guns did not make for an easy task. Despite being placed in a troublesome situation by Hooker and Butterfield’s simplification of the capture of the heights, Sedgwick performed with diligence even though he questioned every bit of intelligence Army Headquarters provided and confirmed the Confederate dispositions on his own. This concluded with the Sixth Corps’ success.

Another questionable strategic decision from Hooker that prevented Sedgwick’s complete success in the Chancellorsville Campaign was the army commander’s inability to pin Lee’s forces to his front or resume any offensive on the right wing while the Sixth Corps attempted to advance towards Chancellorsville. As a result, Sedgwick ended up being

---

177 Ibid.
overwhelmed by Confederate reinforcements at the Battle of the Salem Church and encountered
dangerous consequences from being isolated during the Confederate assault on the evening of
May 4 at the Battle of Banks’ Ford. Thirty-six hours, from the middle of May 3 after Sedgwick’s
capture of the Fredericksburg Heights to the end of May 4 after Sedgwick’s repulse of Lee’s
assault on his line near Banks Ford – the Sixth Corps received no assistance from the main
army.\textsuperscript{179} Warren during his testimony on March 9, 1864 placed the fate of the campaign on how
each wing of the Army of the Potomac fought and believed, “…for General Sedgwick, with his
20,000 men was in great danger of being destroyed if he became isolated.”\textsuperscript{180} Sedgwick
ultimately became isolated on May 4. First Corps Brigadier General James Wadsworth
concurred and told the Congressional Committee that Hooker should have attacked at
Chancellorsville once Sedgwick began his attacks on May 3.\textsuperscript{181} Sedgwick could not explain to
the committee why the main army did not resume any offensive.\textsuperscript{182} Additionally, Warren did not
believe the decision was correct for the right wing to remain static while fighting immersed
Sedgwick’s Corps.\textsuperscript{183} However, by the effort of his leadership, the conduct of his Corps and the
Confederate failure to coordinate the most effective assault all contributed to saving the Sixth
Corps.

\textsuperscript{179} William Swinton, \textit{Story of the Grand Army}, 306.
\textsuperscript{180} Report of Conduct of War vol. 4, 47.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 72.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 49.
John Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps fully expected the main army to proceed their offensive which would have placed pressure on Lee from two sides. Hooker’s explanation on why he did not help Sedgwick either on May 3 or May 4 were multifaceted. First, Hooker pointed out to the Conduct of the War Committee that Sedgwick failed to keep him abreast of the Sixth Corps’ positions. However, recorded dispatches revealed Sedgwick consistently kept Hooker’s assistant Daniel Butterfield up to date on his current situation and on May 4 even requested for the right wing’s cooperation but Hooker’s responded that he could do anything to assist the Sixth Corps. Hooker further explained,

I felt all along his [Lee’s] line on the 3rd and 4th of May, and found that Lee’s army was half to three-quarters of a mile in my front and could make no impression on them. A reconnaissance on the 4th of May enabled his [Lee’s] whole line to be examined, which found to be strong; he had thrown up heavy defensive works from a half a mile or more advance of me in the front.

However, during the last half of May 3 and the morning of May 4, Lee peeled away McLaw’s Division, then Richard Anderson’s soldiers afterwards towards Sedgwick’s front while leaving only nineteen thousand troops under Jeb Stuart to keep the main Federal army in place. During May 4, Hooker enjoyed a nearly four to one numerical advantage over Stuart but yet failed to take advantage which would have relieved the pressure applied to Sedgwick’s Corps. In a less formal setting years later when visiting the Chancellorsville battlefield for the first time after the

---


185 *Report of the Conduct of the War* vol. 4, 87.

186 Bowen, *History of the Thirty-seventh Regiment, Mass., Volunteers, in the Civil War of 1861-1865: with a comprehensive sketch of the doings of Massachusetts as a state, and of the principal campaigns of the war*, 152.

187 *Report of the Conduct of the War* vol. 4, 142.
battle, Hooker eluded to the difficulties of the Wilderness while making a rare insinuation of regret on his part for not helping Sedgwick,

> Would seem to have been the right thing to do [attack while Confederates forces were being stripped from his front to be used against Sedgwick]. But we were in this impenetrable thicket. All rounds and openings leading through it the enemy immediately fortified strongly, and planted thickly his artillery commanding all avenues, so that with reduced numbers he could easily hold his lines, shutting me in, and it became utterly impossible to maneuver my forces.\(^{188}\)

Sedgwick’s positions near the Scott and Banks’ Ford on May 4 provided offensively favorable terrain that the entire Federal army needed to exploit their strength superiority over Lee. This relieved the necessity to do any fighting in the Wilderness at all. Instead of the deep thickets of the Wilderness, the area where Sedgwick’s Corps occupied around the crossings was open to maneuver and to the strong implementation of artillery. However, despite this opportunity, Hooker opted best not to move and as previously communicated by Hooker, Sedgwick was to be on his own.

The evidence from May 4 indicated no semblance of any renewal of offensive from the main army. Almost twelve years after the campaign, Hooker proclaimed he intended to go with a plan to reinforce Sedgwick at Banks’ Ford on May 5.\(^{189}\) However, Hooker had not introduced this notion at his testimony a year after the battle where he indicated a council of war held on May 4 persuaded him from any further offensive thinking.\(^{190}\) From the line of dispatches on May 5, Hooker hinted at this plan with his countermanded order for Sedgwick to not withdraw across the Rappahannock but by that point, it had been too late. Despite this possible insinuation, the


\(^{189}\) Letter from Joseph Hooker to Samuel P. Bates; April 2, 1877; Samuel Penniman Bates Papers, Box MG-17, folder 17; Pennsylvania State Archives.

\(^{190}\) *Report of the Conduct of the War* vol. 4, 144.
accounts of the council of war meeting without Sedgwick present revealed a much different scenario where only two options were presented to Corps commanders: Meade, Sickles, Howard, and Couch. These options included a direct movement toward the right wing’s front or withdraw via the U.S. Ford and end the campaign. However, no mention had been made about a re-crossing at Banks’ Ford and renewing the campaign at Sedgwick’s position. Couch’s impression of the meeting was Hooker had no intention of resuming any offensive and remained firm with the idea of retreat. Noted Hooker biographer Walter Herbert wrote,

He [Hooker] had no serious intention, however, of relieving Sedgwick, for he had told Butterfield that information obtained to date showed the enemy would try to pierce his center; consequently, he wanted Sedgwick to place two brigades in a position where they would be available to support the main army!

Sedgwick accurately accessed the force towards the main army’s front on May 4 of 20,000 men and believed any assistance provided to him would have changed the momentum of the campaign.

During May 4, Sedgwick noted to Hooker of his dispositions and defined the surrounding areas in the vicinity of Banks’ Ford as unfavorable for defensive measures. Sedgwick further requested the value to the army’s grand strategy for his corps to remain in this dangerous predicament. Moreover, in the correspondence Sedgwick stressed that the position was dependent on the action from the main army on his right. Huntington Jackson wrote of the

193 Walter H. Herbert, Fighting Joe Hooker (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 216.
disappointment in Sedgwick’s command in being isolated from the main army, “The feeling became widely prevalent that the Sixth Corps would be compelled to take care of itself. At first, it was cautiously whispered that Hooker had failed, and as soon the worst was surmised and it was concluded that no help could be expected from him.”\textsuperscript{195} Frustration within the Sixth Corps developed as they became engulfed in a Confederate assault while no sounds of firing could be heard from their right. However, members of the Sixth Corps believed Hooker made a strategic mistake by not sending reinforcements to their aid.\textsuperscript{196} The point was valid as the area around Banks Ford, although not suitable for a defensive stance, was exactly the type of ground Hooker wanted to draw Lee’s army into battle. On May 1, Hooker missed an opportunity to grab control of the vicinity around Banks Ford with George Meade’s Fifth Corps and Sedgwick’s presence there from the evening of May 3 and the entire day of May 4, afforded Hooker the opportunity to amend this mistake and renew his control of the initiative. Consequently, Sedgwick’s stout defensive on the south of the Rappahannock gave the army one more opportunity to salvage the Chancellorsville Campaign. Veteran James Stine presented a likely scenario should Hooker advanced on May 4,

> Those three corps—the First, Third, and Fifth—would have sent Stuart back over the ground lost by Howard, while Howard, Slocum, and Couch would have relieved Newton [a division in Sedgwick’s corps] and forced McLaws to retreat south towards Brock Road, and Hooker’s great hopes would have been realized, but he silently held his position near Chancellorsville while Sedgwick was attacked and fought another desperate engagement on the evening of the 4th without assistance, although the Sixth Corps lay within five or six miles, and half of them have never participated in the battle.\textsuperscript{197}

\textsuperscript{195} Jackson, “Sedgwick at Fredericksburg and Salem Heights,” \textit{Battles and Leaders of the Civil War} vol.3, 230.

\textsuperscript{196} Camile Baquet, \textit{History of the First Brigade, New Jersey Volunteers from 1861 to 1865} (Trenton: MacCrellish & Quigley Printers, 1910), 87.

\textsuperscript{197} Stine, \textit{History of the Army of the Potomac} (Washington: Gibson Bros, 1893), 380.
Regardless, Sedgwick’s leadership credited for holding onto a defensive position for the entire
day of May 4 and by doing so, presented the Army of the Potomac the option of redemption in
the campaign.

The consequences of no assistance provided from the main army during May 3 and May
4 ensured Sedgwick’s efforts on the left remained unfulfilled. Hooker’s strategic vision on the
evening of May 2 through May 4 called for a reversal of roles where Sedgwick assumed the
hammer role with only twenty percent of the army’s total strength while Hooker waited in the
Wilderness with the remaining eighty percent. Sedgwick and the entire Sixth Corps were
unaware of this reversal and conducted the May 3 operations with the understanding that
Hooker, too, would press forward. However, instead, Lee focused primarily on Sedgwick’s
threat from the middle of May 3 until the end of the campaign. The concentration of Confederate
forces around Sedgwick halted any further action unless the main army somehow acted. If the
conclusion is correct that Hooker never intended to renew his offensive, then the necessities of
the Battles of Salem Church and Banks’ are questionable. Each engagement cost Sedgwick 1,500
casualties. Each movement of the Sixth Corps proceeded with extended risks, but the potential
strategic gains by those engagements, a tentative foothold near Banks and Scott’s Fords went
unrealized. Sedgwick and his Sixth Corps fought at the Battle of Second Fredericksburg, Salem
Church and Banks Ford at high costs with the safety of the Sixth Corps at hand, but the main
army could not capitalize.

The strategic relationship in the Chancellorsville Campaign between John Sedgwick and
Joseph Hooker was complex. Sedgwick’s efforts with the movements of his Sixth Corps on May
3 and the defensive position on May 4 introduced new opportunities to the army that Hooker was
unable to take advantage. Sedgwick commanded the majority of the campaign blind to the
strategy envisioned by Army Headquarters but his command of the Sixth Corps consisted of the type of decisiveness that brought newly founded strategic opportunities. From the pure effort and sound military tactics, Sedgwick and his corps placed aside the uncontrollable strategic digressions and put together a productive thirty-six hours of campaigning irrespective of the result for the Army of the Potomac. Sedgwick for his role executed excellence in leadership by navigating through contradictory and misinformed orders, little to no information on the main army, and no reinforcements in any form. A veteran surmised Sedgwick’s contribution in light of all strategic uncertainty,

…the simple reading of the record of accomplishments of the Sixth Corps, during the 24 hours after receiving the order to join the rest of the army, is sufficient refutation. And advance of two miles in constant contact with the enemy, the fighting of two desperate battles, the last against great odds, and the successful withdraw across the river, after an all day conflict on the second day shows that the part which Sedgwick and the 6th Corps took is the only really admirable feature of the entire campaign.198

Communications and Intelligence

The inability to readily communicate and transport essential information during the Chancellorsville Campaign plagued the Army of the Potomac. The problems in communication particularly hampered Sedgwick’s ability to react to the rapidly changing events in the campaign and his Sixth Corps’ movements. In the various forms of communication and information gathering methods of the Union army, all experienced some setbacks or internal hindrances to which undermined Sedgwick’s ability to process a reasonable level of disclosure on the condition of the army’s right wing along with the Confederate activity. Sedgwick and the Army Headquarters relied upon intelligence gathered by Thaddeus Lowe’s Balloon Corps but

information collected in this manner were often unreliable. Inferior telegraph lines and non-support of the Flag Corps proved equally problematic to Sedgwick’s operations. Courier lines used for traditional communication between Sedgwick and Army Headquarters were arduous for a range of operations that at times ran over fourteen miles. The ramifications for communication shortcomings included several instances of missed or severely delayed orders received by Sedgwick. Intelligence gathering as the campaign progressed proved difficult to execute which left Sedgwick uneasy towards Confederate dispositions. The culmination of self-inflicted communication deficiencies within the entire army and inability to obtain reliable intelligence made Sedgwick’s tasks all the more difficult, but yet Sedgwick displayed an unwillingness to allow this to discontinue his operations.

Extended telegraph lines presented a precarious aspect to the communication for the Army of the Potomac. At times, Sedgwick’s wing separated from the main army by over a dozen miles during the campaign and the new installments of telegraph lines could not keep up with the campaign’s developments. The Acting Chief Signal Engineer, Captain Samuel Cushing complained Army Headquarters refused to replace the inferior wire from existing material that had used for several months before the campaign.199 As a result, Cushing could not consistently establish the line in working order by the time Sedgwick had started his crossing on April 29. Although, the use of Morse operators temporarily established communication between Sedgwick and Army Headquarters on April 30, the quick progression of events weighed too heavily on maintaining the convenience of telegraph lines for the remainder campaign.200 The route lines meandered on the north side of the Rappahannock River for the sake of protection from

199 OR 25, pt. 1, 217.

200 Ibid., 218.
Confederate interception which exacerbated the deficiency. Combined the overall army policy of secretiveness and a changing strategy, the Signal Corps were unequipped with sufficient lines to cover the distances required for a steady stream of communication.  

Hooker admitted to the shortcomings, “Perhaps I should add that our communications by telegraph between Falmouth and Chancellorsville were imperfect and sometimes unusual delays occurred in the transmission of communications.”  

Although the technology of telegraph lines during the battle in 1863 was still at a developmental stage for an operation of this magnitude, certainly ensuring sufficient supply of lines with adequate quality would have introduced an advantage for Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps collectively within the entire main army. Due to the telegraph ineffectiveness, Sedgwick’s command suffered mightily during the campaign with the want of information and clarification of orders that took significant gaps of precious time.

The deficiencies in both telegraph lines and the use of flag communication during the campaign caused damaging delays for the receipt of orders to Sedgwick. As a consequence, Sedgwick lost valuable time and energy from not receiving time sensitive orders and impaired his operations. During the Chancellorsville Campaign, three main orders characterized by time delays marred Sedgwick’s operations. First, the orders to Sedgwick for a determined demonstration on May 1 delayed by four hours, went without any benefit once the left wing finally proceeded with the order late in the afternoon. The other two significant instances Sedgwick encountered were on May 2 that instructed the Sixth Corps to move upon Fredericksburg and then a May 4 order that countermanded Sedgwick’s withdrawal from his defenses but was received too late to change course. The culprit of the delays were the long

---

202 Report of the Conduct of the War vol. 4, 147.
distances that couriers traveled to get the communication between the two separate wings of the army. Thomas Hyde, a member of Sedgwick's staff, wrote of the nature of these difficult communications while the Sixth Corps were on the defensive during May 4,

It was so evident we were being surrounded by a greatly superior force. Morning broke gray and pale. We could, perhaps, get communication with Hooker by Banks’s Ford, off to our right and rear where the engineers under General Benham were guarding the bridges they had laid. He did not return. Captain Farrar was sent. He came back to us some months after by way of Richmond and exchange. Then General Sedgwick in impatience sent me. I did not take the road, but took a beeline across the country, most fortunately, for I was back in an hour, having seen no rebels. 203

The persistent problem of getting and sending out communication between the right and left wing disjointed the general campaign. It placed Sedgwick under disadvantages that were not of his doing, but when the orders were received, Sedgwick displayed a willingness to perform what the orders as instructed in principle.

The methods of intelligence gathering in the midst of the campaign proved to be troublesome as well for the Army of the Potomac. On a consistent basis, Sedgwick operated his command under a cloud of faulty intelligence. During the campaign, the Army Headquarters and Sedgwick himself received information obtained from the army’s Balloon Corps. Thaddeus Lowe commanded the aeronautical unit, but the Corps had fallen out of favor within the upper command of the Army of the Potomac and the Chancellorsville Campaign marked their last contributions. These aeronautical instruments were stationed at Falmouth but struggled with daily occurrences of the fog off the Rappahannock and could not detect Confederate movements at night. 204 Lowe sent Sedgwick a continuous flow of dispatches covering what his Corps viewed leading up to the Battle of Second Fredericksburg. Sedgwick did not rely upon much of any of

203 Hyde, Following the Greek Cross or Memories of the Sixth Corps), 129.

204 Fishel, The Secret War for the Union, 389.
Lowe’s information which he believed as questionable. When John Reynolds’ First Corps was attached to Sedgwick’s command, Reynolds also worried about the soundness of the intelligence gathered by the balloons and sided that the Confederate in their defenses at Fredericksburg were setting a trap.\textsuperscript{205} With the apparent instability of intelligence, Sedgwick deferred to obtaining the necessary information on enemy depositions through his movements. It had been apparent Sedgwick felt uncomfortable with deficiencies in intelligence and the additions of delays, various countermanded orders and limited communication with the right wing, only provides greater appreciation to the environment in which Sedgwick commanded.

Even through traditional intelligence gathering methods such cavalry, scouts, captured soldiers, reconnaissance units; Sedgwick remained at a disadvantage from the Army of the Potomac’s information gathering shortcomings. Hooker sent the majority of the cavalry off for a raiding expedition and did not factor in the mix for any intelligence accumulations. On May 3 as Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps marched toward Fredericksburg, Butterfield suggested, “Seize the mayor of Fredericksburg or any citizen. Put them ahead as guides, on pain of death for false information. Meanwhile I will send you one, if I can.”\textsuperscript{206} The suggestion as brute as it appeared, displayed the absence of any intelligence for Sedgwick to grasp while the difficulty of his command heightened with each passing mile. Similarly to the right wing, the Army of the Potomac’s inability to confirmed the location of James Longstreet’s two divisions, John Bell Hood and George Pickett’s men played havoc with Sedgwick’s command. Although reports that stated otherwise, the Army Headquarters witnessed a steady stream of deserters and captured Confederates indicated Longstreet’s men were in the vicinity. Meanwhile, Union General John

\textsuperscript{206} OR 25, Part II, 366.
Peck’s reports from Suffolk, Virginia continued to place Longstreet’s divisions in his front, well away from the action of the Chancellorsville Campaign. Nonetheless, the conflicting reports kept everyone on edge and particularly from Sedgwick whose Corps was isolated and would be in gravest danger of a rapid build-up of fresh Confederate troops. Even ten months after the campaign, Sedgwick testified that 40,000 Confederate placed toward his front during his defense of Banks and Scott’s Fords. In actuality, the Sixth Corps never had more than 21,000 rebels confronting them. The estimate provided by Sedgwick indicated that he believed that Longstreet’s command joined McLaws, Anderson, and Early. The uncertainty of Longstreet’s exact position weighed heavily on Sedgwick, and with the conflicting intelligence reports, Sedgwick demurred to the appropriate caution until any solid reports indicated otherwise. The underling fact was that intelligence failures impacted the entire Federal operations and Sedgwick’s Sixth Corps were particularity susceptible due to their isolated positions.

---

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

In the Chancellorsville Campaign, Sixth Corps Major General John Sedgwick managed significant achievements despite the result of the overall Union defeat. Critics tarnish Sedgwick's performance by exceedingly critical assessments fueled by post-battle writings and continued through subsequent historiography. These appraisals have installed common conceptions of Sedgwick’s leadership from habitual slowness, absences in initiative and ineptitude to lead independently. Despite criticisms otherwise, a review of both Sedgwick’s tactical approach and his ability to handle the larger strategic uncertainties demonstrated an entirely different narrative. In fact, research revealed Sedgwick’s high energy and even-handed guidance to his command that covered a coordinated crossing of the Rappahannock, two separate offensive battles at Fredericksburg and Salem Church followed by a heated repulse of Robert E. Lee’s forces at the Battle of Banks’ Ford. Sedgwick also endured through circumstances not within his control but withered through the effects to his portion of the campaign. The review of Sedgwick’s conduct proceeded in two halves – the first, the evaluation of a micro-tactical approach which Sedgwick managed these elements completely under his control and the second, the larger viewpoint of Sedgwick’s reactions to the campaign’s strategy and complimentary operations from communications and intelligence gathering. The completion of the review of these separate areas illustrated that criticisms leveled at Sedgwick were difficult to support but rather, pointed to the conclusion that Sedgwick deserved no admonishment for his role in the campaign. Furthermore, the research results went beyond just an exemption of blame in the campaign, it also confirmed Sedgwick’s high skill as a Corps commander.
The inner details of the research on Sedgwick and the Chancellorsville came from an assortment of primary sources and further supported by historians’ important work. Personal letters, testimonies in front of Congressional committees, regimental histories, and finally, official reports infused unique information to draw a different conclusion on Sedgwick’s performance. Conjunctively, post-war writings from general histories of the Chancellorsville Campaign to biographies on Sedgwick and the related commanders also were critical in research discoveries and correlations. The locations of these sources came from a diverse set of areas. Archival material from historical societies brought differentiation from existing research on the subject while published but hard to find materials were patched together through private sellers and an assortment of libraries. The more readily available sources, although previously referenced in other works, had a multitude of new research findings that had not fully developed in past works. The culmination of the sources together settled new discoveries and renewed the approach to John Sedgwick and his performance in the Chancellorsville Campaign.

The new research findings presented Sedgwick in a different and more detailed light than what other historians believed. Coupled with the results of research, an interpretive set of tools were used to represent the conclusion that Sedgwick commanded well during the campaign. It identified the evaluation of Sedgwick’s tactical leadership defined in seven distinct stages where patterns of sound decisions, diligence to move rapidly while not inducing disaster to his Corps and the ability to effectively lead an independent command characterized his conduct. Statistical evaluation of the Sixth Corps casualties compared in multiple arrangements displayed Sedgwick’s tactical commitment in the campaign and underlined the evenness to the use of his men. On the larger scale of the entire Federal effort in the campaign, Sedgwick’s conduct judged well. The impacts of contradictory and countermanded orders from Army Headquarters
presented liabilities at every step for the Sixth Corps but Sedgwick successfully avoided catastrophe. The strategic uncertainty created by fighting on the Federal right corresponded directly to the environment that Sedgwick commanded in on the left. Sedgwick overcame consistently changing strategic visions of the campaign as best he could. Rarely mentioned aspects of communication and intelligence failings left their mark on the challenges Sedgwick encountered as well. Inadequate telegraph lines, arduous courier routes and unknown intelligence seldom referred to in connection with Sedgwick’s performance. There is no doubt these elements affected Sedgwick’s ability to manage his operation the way he preferred, but he proceeded forward nonetheless. The research findings and their evaluation are complex but illustrated a convergence of evidence that the Army of the Potomac’s defeat in the Chancellorsville was not in any form Sedgwick fault but rather his achievements instilled among the most successful moments of the campaign for the Union.

The significance of the research findings introduced a new understanding of the campaign and Sedgwick’s role within it. Furthermore, it developed a stronger sense of appreciation for the challenges that Sedgwick encountered and renewed attention to his participation. Critics have characterized Sedgwick as unassuming and lacking audacity, but the research indicated alternatives to these perceptions. To the contrary, Sedgwick displayed a vocal determination for success and undertook calculated risks to get results during the entirety of the campaign. The Chancellorsville Campaign study that leaves a different characterization of Sedgwick in itself is significant. Sedgwick’s actions also bring interesting variables concerning the campaign that has not been completely studied. For example, Sedgwick dogged defensive position at Banks’ Ford on May 4 brought a new opportunity to the Army of Potomac to regain the initiative. Alternatively, Sedgwick’s battle at Salem Church forced Confederates to reduce
their strength towards the front of the main army and by doing so introduced another opportunity for the Federals. Sedgwick’s role and the consequences of his contributions introduced a critical understanding of the Chancellorsville campaign. The campaign has been long dominated by the names of Joseph Hooker, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson and even Jeb Stuart, as they should, but Sedgwick should be included in these larger discussions as his role was among the most important of the entire campaign.

There is also significance to the additional issues that a study of John Sedgwick produces. These interconnections to other individuals and problems of the campaign underline the further importance to Sedgwick’s role in the Chancellorsville Campaign. Sedgwick’s relationship with Joseph Hooker is important to understand the state of mind of the Army Commander as the campaign evolved. A review of Sedgwick’s tactical plan at the Battle of Second Fredericksburg produces an understanding of the terrain obstacles and condensed troop deployments for a different style of assault. Sedgwick’s personal direction of artillery before the Battle of Banks’ Ford displayed how artillery guns can assist in an overly extended defensive line. The night march on the evening of May 2 that Sedgwick supervised constructed how an effectively forced march proceeds under the danger of Confederate skirmishers. On the less positive side, Sedgwick’s inability to communicate with the army’s main wing effectively reveals the importance of secure lines of communication and the significance of time-sensitive information and its distribution. The importance of reinforcements being readily available at the right time resulted in unfulfilled opportunities that Sedgwick lost due to no support from the remainder of the army. Moreover, finally, the power of a contingency planning and concise strategies can be understood through the hardship that Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps encountered during the campaign. Ultimately, the significance of the research presented a duality. First, focus on the
personal importance of Sedgwick within the campaign and secondly, complementary understandings of the campaign that developed through the focused research on Sedgwick.

There does exist limitations to the general concept that Sedgwick should not be assigned any blame for the Union defeat in the campaign and rather he performed well in his leadership of the left wing. Sedgwick himself did make mistakes in the campaign highlighted particularly in two instances. First, Sedgwick’s absence during the early morning hours of April 29 to rectify a potentially destructive conflict between Henry Benham and other infantry officers. The result held the possibility of endangering the Sixth and First Corps’ crossing of the Rappahannock. The second occurred at the Battle of Salem Church where Sedgwick rushed Brooks’ Division into the unknown situation where Confederate reinforcements funneled towards his position. Correspondingly, Sedgwick was the most senior corps commander, and despite the fact he may not be at fault, he and like the other six infantry corps commanders along with Hooker should be held responsible for the defeat. Sedgwick’s high command in itself warrants some level of accountability. In all fairness, Sedgwick was proud of his Sixth Corps’ performance but Sedgwick never attempted to avoid responsibility for the ultimate result of the campaign. There does exist research deficiencies as well that limits the general thesis of Sedgwick’s performance. There is not much material on Sedgwick’s divisional commanders: William Brooks, John Newton or Albion Howe that corresponds to Sedgwick’s actions in the campaign aside from official reports or congressional testimonies. The less formal assessments via letters or personal correspondences would add new insight. Thus, researchers are left with a more traditional material of reports and formal writings to build a supplementary understanding of John Sedgwick in the Chancellorsville Campaign.
There is a vast number of new research opportunities for historians to approach Sedgwick and the Chancellorsville Campaign subject matter. The political interworking of Sedgwick and his relations to Joseph Hooker and other prominent members of the Army of the Potomac has largely been untouched, and it is vital to the further understanding of the campaign. The campaign displayed an interesting dynamic of four 1837 West Point Graduates: Sedgwick, Hooker, Early, and Benham. These men undoubtedly knew each other well during their younger years, and correlation to their performance in Chancellorsville Campaign indeed provides a profound insight into their personalities. Furthermore, to gain a fuller understanding of the Gettysburg Campaign, more focus is necessary on the preceding Battle of Chancellorsville.

Another important consideration for future research is the strategic value that Sedgwick brought to the Chancellorsville Campaign. Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps are the often forgotten about Federal wing of the campaign and further research would provide importance to the strategic significance of Sedgwick’s decisions and actions specifically on the larger strategy. In the end, Sedgwick is known but not fully appreciated in present day study of the Civil War and that in itself provides numerous opportunities to advance our understanding of his contributions to the campaign.

After Sedgwick’s death at the Battle of Spotsylvania on May 9, 1864, authorities transported his remains back to his hometown of Cornwall Hollow, Connecticut. On Memorial Day, thirty-six years after his death, local official commemorated his remembrance by unveiling a new monument adorned by artillery cannons and ordnance across the road from his resting place. On the backside of the monument, listed five battles Sedgwick participated in during the Mexican War and five others he led in the Civil War. Interestingly enough, the monument did not list Chancellorsville specifically but rather it simply stated Fredericksburg in a clear reference to
Sedgwick's perseverance there on May 3, 1863. It is important that planners of the monument sought to separate Sedgwick’s success from the remainder of the Chancellorsville Campaign. As proven by the preponderance of evidence and results, Sedgwick’s successes in the Chancellorsville marked the accurate intangible results that other Corps commanders and soldiers who participated on the opposite wing admired and admitted his successes as the highest points of the campaign. It is because of these successes from his tactical leadership to the strategic opportunities afforded to the entire army that relieves Sedgwick of any denunciations on the unfortunate defeat for the Federals in the campaign. The day after the campaign Sedgwick wrote his sister in a positive tone of what he and Sixth Corps accomplished, “Our campaign was very brief, but very unfortunate. I am perfectly satisfied with the part my corps took in it, and their conduct was admirable. All the success we had was obtained by this corp. Believe little that you see in the papers. There will be an effort to throw blame for the failure on me, but it will not succeed.” Moreover, over a hundred and fifty years later, Sedgwick’s words remain true.

209 Sedgwick, *Correspondence of John Sedgwick Major General*, vol. 2, 92.
CHAPTER 7

Epilogue

Instability but ultimately change characterized the aftermath of the Chancellorsville Campaign within the Army of the Potomac. Sedgwick persisted through these uncertain times which maintained his high ranking within the army for the remainder of his life. Sedgwick endured through internal attacks upon his conduct during the campaign and the rapid changes within the army left his future as Corps commander in question. The Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War represented a clear challenge to Sedgwick. However, the future subsistence of Sedgwick’s role within the army through the remainder of 1863 and to the spring of 1864 provided vindication to the Sixth Corps commander from his peers. Sedgwick continued to command the Sixth Corps and even for a short time, assumed the overall command of the Army of the Potomac. Sedgwick’s unexpected death from a Confederate sharpshooter during the open days of the Battle of Spotsylvania complicated the subsequent assessment of his actions in the previous May 1863 engagement but supplanted a lasting legacy that has withstood for the last century and a half. In the end, Sedgwick’s handled post-Chancellorsville Campaign tribulations with the same diligence that he encountered the challenges in the campaign and described the character of the General.

Later in the day on May 5, 1863, after Sedgwick’s withdrawal from the south side of the Rappahannock and subsequently given the responsibility of defense of the river, Daniel Butterfield continued to pursue the agenda that Hooker began on May 3 concerning Sedgwick’s performance in the campaign. In Butterfield’s report to Lincoln on May 5, along the throwing blame toward the army’s cavalry, the Chief of Staff pointed to the cause of the defeat towards Sedgwick. Butterfield stated to the President “General Sedgwick failed in the execution of his
orders, and was compelled to retire and crossed the river at Banks’ Ford last night; his losses not known.”210 The short dispatch spoke nothing of the truths of Hooker’s actions on the right wing nor any of the hardships that Sedgwick encountered. After the campaign, Sedgwick directly confronted Hooker on the allegations in a heated exchange and indicated that the reports written about his proclaimed failures were a pack of “lies”.211 Nevertheless, along with Hooker’s dispatch early in the afternoon of May 3 and Butterfield’s report to Lincoln two days later, this early criticism established a theme which grew in the coming years after the battle and the war itself.

Joseph Hooker did not have much time to dwell on the failures at Chancellorsville as Lee rapidly followed up with a renewed invasion, the second in so many years. However, the loss had lasting impacts. Hooker lost standing within the large majority of his immediate subordinates resulting from his decisions at Chancellorsville and became embroiled in a disagreement with Washington about control of troops at Harper’s Ferry. Similar to his two predecessors, McClellan and Burnside, Hooker’s disagreements with Washington did not bode well for the future of the army commander. Based on what Hooker believed as a righteous quarrel, he offered his resignation in the middle of Lee’s largest invasion on Union soil. A vast majority of the Corps commanders including Sedgwick preferred the Fifth Corps commander George Meade to serve under instead of Hooker. On June 28, 1863, Lincoln gave them what they desired by accepting Hooker’s offer and named Meade as the commander of the Army of the Potomac. The move firmly placed Sedgwick as the number two ranking member of the army and the most likely choice should Meade no longer be the commander.

210 OR 25, pt. 2, 421.

With the Gettysburg Campaign quickly upon the Federals, Hooker and Butterfield’s slights towards Sedgwick from the previous campaign were not addressed nor Hooker’s complaints towards other individuals in the army as well. Sedgwick remained as the Sixth Corps commander and performed well during the Gettysburg Campaign although largely overshadowed by the fighting of the three-day battle. The Sixth Corps were the last of the Union Corps to arrive in Gettysburg as the leading elements arrived in the late of the afternoon of July 2. Colonel David Nevin's brigade from the Sixth Corps provided assistance to Samuel Crawford’s Division and successfully repulsed the much-exhausted elements of Longstreet’s Corps who advanced from the Wheatfield towards valley in between the Round Tops and Houck’s Ridge. After the July 2 fighting, much of Sedgwick’s Corps were splintered off in various areas of the Union line to sure up locations that Confederate attacks battered during the fighting from the previous day. These relocations left Sedgwick, the most senior Corps commander on the field, essentially without a command during the climaxing action of July 3. This result had nothing to do with Sedgwick’s conduct at Chancellorsville but rather a product of the immediate needs of the entire army and the Sixth Corps’ distant location when the battle unexpectedly began. The consequence, however, disappointed Sedgwick with the seemingly never ending war and despondingly wrote, “I feel that I have done more than my share of field duty in the last four years; there are many General officers that have never been in the field, and I am one of the few that started out and have constantly on duty with the Army of the Potomac.”\(^{212}\) Despite exhaustion and disappointment for the remainder of 1863, Sedgwick remained as the Sixth Corps commander which underlined the point that there existed no residual damage from Hooker’s attacks upon him.

\(^{212}\) Sedgwick, *Correspondence of John Sedgwick, Major General*, vol. 2, 145.
The next widespread attention on the Chancellorsville Campaign began with the Congressional hearings. These meetings consisted of the testimonies of the most significant figures of the Army of the Potomac involved in the campaign. Over the course of several months prominent officers from Joseph Hooker, Daniel Butterfield, John Gibbon, Gouverneur Warren, George Meade, and John Sedgwick provided their assessments in front of a partisan group of politicians. The majority of the member of the committee comprised of radical Republicans at the time which predictably proved problematic to their findings on Sedgwick. The committee consisted of three senators: Benjamin Wade, Zachariah Chandler, Benjamin Harding and four congressmen from the House of Representatives: Daniel Gooch, George Julian, Moses Odell and Benjamin Loan. Two out of the three senators, Wade and Chandler, were radical Republicans while three out of the four House Reps, Gooch, Julian, and Loan were Republicans as well. Sedgwick’s ties and loyalty to Democrat George McClellan were well known and ultimately placed Sedgwick as a target for the culpability of the campaign.

Sedgwick gave his testimony to the committee on April 8, 1864 and his answers were remarkably consistent to his official report written almost a year prior. Wade, Gooch, and Odell asked questions that focused primarily on two important aspects of the Sedgwick’s participation in the campaign. The first, Sedgwick’s attempt to comply with Hooker’s May 2 evening order to march to Lee’s rear by daylight on May 3 and second, the process of the Sixth Corps’ ultimate withdrawal via Banks’ Ford in the early hours of May 5. Near the end of the testimony, Representative Gooch asked the pertinent question regarding Hooker’s refusal to act while Lee attacked Sedgwick on May 4, “If General Hooker had but 20,000 men to oppose him, how do you account for it that he did not make an attack, and why should he withdraw?”

---

answered to the opportunity presented for Hooker, “I believe if he [Hooker] had ordered an advance they could have gone right through.” The overall context of the line of questioning towards Sedgwick appeared that the committee appreciated his challenges during the campaign and his answers provided a clear and logical case that his Sixth Corps had done all they could given the set of circumstances that they endured.

Other testimonies from Hooker and Butterfield continued to disparage Sedgwick’s conduct during the campaign. However, depositions from John Gibbon and James Wadsworth presented a reasonable case to the impossible expectations placed on the Sixth Corps commander. The committee elected to bring two subordinates from the Sixth Corps, former divisional commander Albion Howe and Colonel Thomas Johns to testify in front of the committee but the motives of the individuals draw questions. The testimony on March 3, 1864 Howe’s answers were highly critical of the Sixth Corps commander by aggressively attacking Sedgwick on his leadership. Howe described, “I must unhesitatingly say that whatever might have been animus of the 6th Corps commander, his acts did not amount to zealous support; for I do not think the 6th Corps did anything as ordered which it was capable of doing in point of time.” However, during the previous autumn of 1863, Howe had been removed from the Sixth Corps and assigned to the command of the Artillery Depot and Office of Inspector of Artillery in Washington and out of infantry high command all together. To the level of emotion in Howe’s answers that following March indicated that this transfer served as a motivating factor to his animosity towards Sedgwick. Many of the questions that the Committee asked of Howe were

---

214 Ibid.

215 Ibid. 25.

beyond the scope of his command and his answers to these types of inquisitions were speculative. Colonel Johns’ testimony also directed criticisms towards Sedgwick by asserting there was no reason why Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps could not have complied with Hooker’s May 2 order to march to Chancellorsville.217 The choice of the committee to sequester Johns is suspect. As he had been wounded during the charge on Marye’s Heights on May 3 and missed the remainder of the campaign that consisted of the Battles of Salem Church and Banks’ Ford. John’s lower rank of colonel also brought into question the reasoning behind being put in front of the committee unless his answers coincided with the committee’s views.218 The committee brought no other divisional or brigade commanders from the Sixth Corps to Washington for their recorded testimonies which introduced further questions of the committee’s agenda.

The Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War’s final report after the testimonies judged that Sedgwick’s actions during the Chancellorsville Campaign as one of the leading factors for the Federal’s defeat. The report stated,

> From the testimony, which gives these transactions much more in detail than the committee deem necessary in their report, it will be seen that nearly all the witnesses concur in the opinion that the movement of General Sedgwick was not made with the energy and promptness which the preemptory character of his orders demanded and the importance of the emergency required; that the movement directed by General Hooker was perfectly feasible, and if his orders had been promptly carried out by General Sedgwick, in all probability a fatal blow would have been struck Lee’s army. As it was, however, the movement was made without promptness and energy, was executed but partially, and proved entirely ineffective for the purpose it was ordered.219

The Committee disregarded the challenges and the sacrifices made by Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps despite testimony that clearly illustrated these key points to the campaign. Instead, the

---

217 *Report of the Conduct of the War* vol. 4, 41.


219 *Report of the Conduct of the War* vol. 4, XLVIII.
report focused on biased opinions that defied the facts presented and overlooked aspects of the testimonies that did not subscribe to the radical Republicans’ views. The final determination appears to possessed impactful consequences to the decades of analysis to follow which uses similar connotations of Sedgwick’s low energy and slowness.

Newspapers played a major role in how the views of Sedgwick progressed from the Chancellorsville Campaign. Sedgwick had both allies and enemies who like the Congressional Committee understood Sedgwick’s connection to McClellan. In one newspaper account, the reporter wrote critically,

The copperhead reporter of the Associated Press, in noticing the appearance of Gen. John Sedgwick before the committee of the Conduct of War makes the remark that his testimony was very severe on Gen. Hooker. To this, we desire to append the remark, that if Gen Hooker had been duly severe on Gen. Sedgwick, he would have ended his career by drum head court martial immediately after the battle. 220

The articles went on to state, “General Sedgwick was, therefore, much more severe on General Hooker at Chancellorsville then he possibly could have been before the Committee on the Conduct of War. By and by, we shall have the full history and the final verdict from the country.” 221 While George Smalley from the New York Tribune personally wrote Sedgwick, “…no part of General Hooker misfortunes should be chargeable to you.” 222 A friend to Sedgwick, Smalley requested Sedgwick’s side of the story but conclusively states that his relationship to McClellan was problematic to his adversaries. Smalley’s goal was to put the “lies” of the campaign to rest concerning Sedgwick and advert the movement against the Sixth

220 Newspaper clipping, 1864; The John Sedgwick Papers, MS034, Box 1; Folder 19; Cornwall Historical Society.

221 Ibid.

222 Letter from George Smalley to John Sedgwick, 1864; The John Sedgwick Papers, MS034, Box 1; Folder 19; Cornwall Historical Society.
Corps Commander. Despite the controversies, none of the attacks against Sedgwick gained enough traction to signal his removal from the army.

During the remainder of 1863 and into March of 1864, the Army of the Potomac went through significant re-organization. Despite all of this change, Sedgwick remained firmly with the army. In the several weeks after Gettysburg, the War Department relocated both the Eleventh and Twelfth Corps to the Western Theater while in March 1864, both the First and Third Corps were disbanded due to the heavy losses they assumed and reassigned to the remaining Corps of the army. The introduction of Ulysses S. Grant as the overall commander and his new rank of Lieutenant General brought further uncertainty to Sedgwick’s position. From September the previous year to March 1864, the War Department consolidated the number of Army of the Potomac Infantry Corps from seven to three. Sedgwick remained as the Sixth Corps commander while Winfield Hancock and Gouverneur Warren led the Second and Fifth Corps respectively. Even with all these re-organization initiatives, Sedgwick’s standing with the army further emphasized the point that blame had not been associated with Sedgwick among his peers and superiors. Other commanders involved in the Chancellorsville Campaign such Henry Slocum, Oliver Howard and Joseph Hooker were re-assigned outside the Army of the Potomac but Sedgwick remained. While Meade stayed as the commanding officer of the Army of the Potomac, it appeared that Sedgwick was second in command and even took over the army for a short tenure in winter of 1864 during Meade’s absence. It further seemed that no scars existed from the initial criticism for any perceived wrong doing during the Chancellorsville Campaign.

The death of John Sedgwick during the Battle of Spotsylvania in May 1864 created a new dynamic in the way subsequent generations interpreted the General as a commander in the Civil

---

223 Ibid.
War. Unfortunately, this new element from his death reduces the attention to some of his significant accomplishments during the Chancellorsville Campaign and his other achievements during his military career. Moments before being struck dead by a sharpshooter’s projectile, Sedgwick had admonished a section of his defensive line for dodging from periodic Confederate fire from their distant lines. Sedgwick’s ironic assertion that the enemy could not hit an elephant at that distance only moments later to receive a fatal shot proved to ascend in the common knowledge of the General in later years. This course of events is typically referenced when Sedgwick’s name is mentioned in current day thought and has served as an unworthy anecdote to an individual who devoted his entire life to the country. In doing so as well, it has further obscured his extraordinary leadership in the Chancellorsville Campaign and has further relegated his Corps’ contributions as a side event to the larger battle at the Chancellors House.

Joseph Hooker for his part continued to vigorously fight to justify his actions in the Chancellorsville Campaign through the remaining years of his life. Hooker lashed out to generals, some alive and deceased at the time from Ambrose Burnside, Oliver Howard, George Meade and of course, John Sedgwick. During the 1870s, Historian Samuel Bates began writing a general history of the Battle of Chancellorsville and submitted drafts of each chapter to Hooker for his feedback. In 1878, a year before his death, Hooker took exception to Bates’ assessment of Sedgwick’s actions by asserting,

Another important point in Sedgwick’s character you omit to mention and perhaps I never have before alluded to it that was his utter deficiency in the topographical faculty and consequently his great distrust of himself in exercising on the field important commands. I was well aware of this weakness in his character when I detailed him and his Corps for independent command around Fredericksburg, but as his Corps was encamped in full view of the enemy, any movement of him would awaken suspicions in which I did not wish to arouse. Could I have left Genl. Reynolds with his small Corps to
Hooker deciphered Sedgwick’s perceived shortcomings as, “Sedgwick, Stoneman, a host of other officers in the Army of the Potomac were the creations of the wavering and vacillating policy of Genl. McClellan and noted that they had been with me long enough to have this spirit worked out of them, but in this it appears I was mistaken.”225 As customary with Hooker’s recounts of the events of the Chancellorsville, the former army commander refused to assume any responsibility for the defeat and by doing so, significantly diminished the validity of his viewpoints. However, despite the fact that Hooker himself has withstood high levels of criticisms to his conduct in the campaign from the subsequent historiography, elements of his criticisms on Sedgwick have also stuck.

Today, Sedgwick’s last lasting legacy can be seen in the various areas of the United States. Battlefield monuments at Gettysburg and Spotsylvania commemorate Sedgwick’s contributions in the Civil War as the commander of the Sixth Corps. Sedgwick’s burial site located in the northwestern corner of Connecticut of the town of Cornwall displays a monument to the life of its most famous hometown hero. Sedgwick’s alma mater of the West Point Military Academy in New York also has adorned their campus with a remembrance of Sedgwick as well. There are a number of areas in the west, including a county in Kansas named in Sedgwick’s honor certainly alluding to his time in the region during the 1850s. Moreover, during World War II, the cargo ship, The SS John Sedgwick proved to be a worthy namesake to a General who seventy-eight years’ prior given everything for the country. In memory, Sedgwick has been

224 Letter from Joseph Hooker to Samuel P. Bates; November 29, 1878; Samuel Penniman Bates Papers, Box MG-17, folder 17; Pennsylvania State Archives.

225 Ibid.
remembered as the second highest ranking commander to be killed in action in American History and the respect he garnered from his men is still universally recognized to this day. However, the memory of Sedgwick remains incomplete as long as there is an absence of a general appreciation for his conduct and sacrifices both before and during the Civil War. And the Chancellorsville Campaign needs to be part of this required appreciation.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

General Primary Sources:


Mark, Penrose G. *Red: white: and blue badge, Pennsylvania veteran volunteers. A history of the 93rd regiment, known as the "Lebanon infantry" and "One of the 300 fighting regiments" from September 12th, 1861, to June 27th, 1865*. Harrisburg: Aughinbaugh Press, 1911.


Tyler, Mason Whiting and William Seymour Tyler (ed.). *Recollections of the Civil War: with many original diary entries and letters written from the seat of war, and with annotated references*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1912.


**Unpublished Letters and Manuscripts**

General John Sedgwick Civil War Letters. 1848 - 1864, Cornwall Connecticut Historical Society, Box 1.


**Maps:**


**Secondary Sources:**


____________. *The Battle of Marye’s Heights and Salem Church*, vol. 3 of the Papers of the Military Historical Society Massachusetts. Boston: Military Historical Society Massachusetts, 1903.


