

HISTORY · MILITARY HISTORY SUB-SERIES

Military History: The US Civil War

The American Civil War as a war — from Fort Sumter and First Bull Run, through the blockade, Antietam, Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Sherman's march, and Grant's campaign against Lee, to Appomattox — closing with an honest test of the popular claim that it was the "first modern war."

10 Chapters

Philip Osztromok

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: SCOPE & THE DISTINCTION FROM US HISTORY'S OWN SOCIAL/POLITICAL LENS

Military History: The US Civil War

Chapter 1 · Introduction: Scope & the Distinction From US History's Own Social/Political Lens

This is the eighth entry in this site's Military History sub-series. It follows the American Civil War (1861–1865) as a war: its campaigns, commanders, tactics, weapons, and logistics. It was the deadliest war in American history, and one that looked forward to the industrial wars of the 20th century as much as back to Napoleon.

What This Course Covers, and What It Doesn't

Topic	Where it's covered
Slavery and the real political causes of secession	US History (the site's social/political course) — summarised here only as context
Emancipation as politics and law; Reconstruction after 1865	US History
Campaigns, battles, generals, strategy, weapons, supply, and the soldiers' experience	This course
The earlier American war fought with muskets and linear tactics	Military History: The War of US Independence

WHY THE CAUSE STILL MATTERS HERE

A military course can't pretend the war was about nothing. The Confederate states seceded to protect slavery — their own secession declarations said so directly. That matters militarily too: the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) turned enslaved people into a source of Union soldiers, and around 180,000 Black men served in the Union army by 1865. Chapter 6 and later chapters come back to this.

The Scale of the War

	Union	Confederacy
States	23 at the start (more joined later)	11
Population, 1860 (approx.)	About 22 million	About 9 million, of whom about 3.5 million were enslaved
Factories	About 100,500	About 20,600
Value of manufactured goods	About \$1.5 billion	About \$155 million
Railroad mileage	About 20,000 miles	About 9,000 miles
Total who served	About 2.2 million	About 750,000–1,000,000

SO WHY DID IT TAKE FOUR YEARS?

On paper the North had overwhelming advantages. But the Confederacy didn't need to conquer anyone; it only needed to survive until the North gave up. The Union had to invade and occupy a territory larger than western Europe, with long supply lines, while the South fought on the defensive, on home ground. Much of this course is about how the North eventually turned its economic advantage into actual military victory.

The Death Toll Has Been Revised

For over a century, the standard figure was about 620,000 soldiers dead, based on counts compiled in the late 19th century. In 2011 the historian J. David Hacker used census data to estimate that about 750,000 died, possibly between 650,000 and 850,000. The exact number can't be known, because Confederate records were incomplete and many were destroyed.

DISEASE KILLED MORE THAN BULLETS

Around two out of every three deaths were from disease — dysentery, typhoid, pneumonia, measles — rather than combat. Crowded camps, bad water, and limited medicine made armies deadly places even away from battle.

WEAPONS OUTRAN TACTICS

The rifled musket and the Minié ball were far more accurate at long range than older smoothbore muskets, but many commanders still used close-order, massed attacks. The result was very heavy losses in frontal assaults.

A SHARE OF AN ENTIRE GENERATION

By any estimate, a larger share of the American population died in this war than in any other war in the country's history.

The Real Arc This Course Traces

April 1861

Confederate guns fire on Fort Sumter (Chapter 2).

July 1861

First Bull Run ends hopes of a short war (Chapter 3).

1861–1865

The Union naval blockade slowly strangles Southern trade (Chapter 4).

September 1862

Antietam, the bloodiest single day in American history (Chapter 5).

July 1863

Gettysburg and the fall of Vicksburg, within a day of each other (Chapters 6–7).

1864

Sherman's march through Georgia and Grant's Overland Campaign against Lee (Chapters 8–9).

April 1865

Lee surrenders at Appomattox; the last Confederate forces surrender over the following weeks (Chapter 9).

TWO MAIN THEATERS

The **Eastern Theater**, mostly Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, where the famous battles between the capitals happened. The **Western Theater**, between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, where the Union arguably won the war.

A "FIRST MODERN WAR"?

Railroads, the telegraph, rifled weapons, trenches, ironclad ships, and mass armies all feature. Chapter 10 tests whether that popular label actually holds up.

Questions to Sit With

With such large advantages in population and industry, why might the North still have struggled for years?

Why might the death toll have been underestimated for over a century? What does that suggest about other "settled" historical numbers?

Can a military history of this war be written without discussing slavery at all? Where would leaving it out distort the story?

Quick Reference — Chapter 1

- This course covers the war's campaigns, commanders, tactics, weapons, and logistics; slavery, emancipation as politics, and Reconstruction belong to US History
- The war ran from April 1861 to spring 1865; Lee surrendered at Appomattox on 9 April 1865
- The Union had about 22 million people and five times as many factories; the Confederacy about 9 million, including about 3.5 million enslaved people
- About 2.2 million served for the Union and 750,000–1,000,000 for the Confederacy; around 180,000 Black soldiers served in the Union army
- The traditional death toll of about 620,000 was revised in 2011 to about 750,000 (range 650,000–850,000); roughly two-thirds died of disease

What's Next

Chapter 2: **Fort Sumter (1861): The Real Opening Shots.**

CHAPTER 2: FORT SUMTER (1861): THE REAL OPENING SHOTS

Military History: The US Civil War

Chapter 2 · Fort Sumter (1861): The Real Opening Shots

The Civil War began with an artillery bombardment in which nobody was killed. Fort Sumter was militarily unimportant — a half-finished fort on an island in Charleston Harbor, held by fewer than 90 soldiers. What made it matter was that both sides understood whoever fired first would carry the political weight of starting the war.

Secession: The First Seven States

Abraham Lincoln won the presidential election of November 1860 without carrying a single Deep South state. Before he even took office in March 1861, seven states declared they had left the Union.

20 December 1860

South Carolina secedes — the first state to do so.

January 1861

Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana follow.

1 February 1861

Texas secedes.

February 1861

The seceded states form the Confederate States of America at Montgomery, Alabama, with Jefferson Davis as president.

4 March 1861

Lincoln is inaugurated, promising not to interfere with slavery where it existed, but refusing to accept secession.

As states left, they took over federal forts, arsenals, and navy yards inside their borders, mostly without a fight. By spring 1861 only a handful of forts in the South

were still in federal hands — the most prominent being Fort Sumter.

Why Sumter?

MAJOR ANDERSON'S MOVE, 26 DECEMBER 1860

The federal garrison in Charleston, under Major Robert Anderson, was stationed at Fort Moultrie, which was easy to attack from land. Six days after South Carolina seceded, Anderson secretly moved his men across the harbour at night to Fort Sumter, an island fort far easier to defend. South Carolina saw it as an act of aggression; much of the North saw Anderson as a hero.

THE *STAR OF THE WEST*, 9 JANUARY 1861

President James Buchanan sent an unarmed merchant ship, the *Star of the West*, carrying troops and supplies to reinforce Sumter. Cadets from The Citadel military college fired on it from shore batteries, and it turned back. Those were arguably the first shots of the conflict — but neither side was yet ready to treat them as the start of a war.

Lincoln's Dilemma

By April the garrison was running out of food. Lincoln had three options, each with a real cost.

Option	The problem
Withdraw the garrison	Would look like accepting secession, and demoralise the North
Reinforce with troops and weapons	Would look like an act of war, and could push the undecided Upper South states to secede

Option**The problem**

Send only food, and say
so openly

Left the decision to fight with the Confederacy

Lincoln chose the third option. He had the Governor of South Carolina formally notified that a relief expedition would bring provisions only, and would not bring men or ammunition unless it was attacked.

PUTTING THE FIRST SHOT ON THE OTHER SIDE

Lincoln's approach meant the Confederacy had to choose between allowing a federal fort to be resupplied inside its own territory, which would undermine its claim to be an independent country, or firing on a ship carrying food. Jefferson Davis's government chose to demand the fort's surrender before the ships arrived.

The Bombardment: 12–13 April 1861

The Confederate commander at Charleston was General P.G.T. Beauregard — who had once been taught artillery at West Point by Robert Anderson himself. Anderson refused to surrender, though he told the Confederate messengers his men would be starved out within a few days anyway. That wasn't soon enough.

4:30 a.m., 12 April

A signal shell is fired from a mortar at Fort Johnson; batteries all around the harbour open fire.

12–13 April

Around 3,000 shots are fired at the fort over about 34 hours. Anderson's small garrison, short of men and ammunition, can reply with only a few guns. Fires break out inside the fort.

13 April

Anderson agrees to surrender. The relief ships, waiting outside the harbour, can do nothing.

14 April

The garrison marches out with honours, firing a salute to the US flag before leaving.

WHO FIRED THE FIRST SHOT?

A popular story says the first shot was fired by Edmund Ruffin, an elderly Virginia secessionist. The record points instead to the signal mortar at Fort Johnson, usually credited to Lieutenant Henry S. Farley. Ruffin did fire one of the early shots from a battery on Morris Island, and later claimed more than that. Like many "first shot" stories (compare Lexington in *Military History: The War of US Independence*), the legend grew because the moment was so symbolic.

A BLOODLESS BATTLE — ALMOST

No one on either side was killed during the bombardment itself. During the surrender salute on 14 April, a pile of cartridges exploded, killing two Union privates, Daniel Hough and Edward Galloway. They were the first soldiers to die in the war, killed by an accident rather than by enemy fire.

Why Sumter Mattered: The Upper South Chooses

On 15 April 1861 Lincoln called on the states to supply 75,000 militia volunteers to put down the rebellion. That call forced the states that hadn't yet decided to pick a side.

FOUR MORE STATES SECEDE

Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee refused to send troops against other Southern states and left the Union (April–June 1861).

Virginia's decision was the biggest: it brought the South's largest industrial centre at Richmond, which became the Confederate capital, and Robert E. Lee.

FOUR BORDER STATES STAY

Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri — all slave states — stayed in the Union, some only after real pressure and fighting. Keeping them, especially Kentucky and Maryland (which surrounded Washington), was one of Lincoln's most important early aims.

A SPLIT WITHIN VIRGINIA

Virginia's mountainous western counties rejected secession and eventually became a separate state, West Virginia, in 1863.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE WAR IS SET

With Virginia in the Confederacy, the two capitals — Washington and Richmond — were only about 100 miles apart. That short distance explains why so much of the war's most famous fighting took place in the narrow strip of northern Virginia between them, starting with the battle in Chapter 3.

Questions to Sit With

Was Lincoln's decision to send only food a genuine peace offer, a clever trap, or both? What evidence would help you decide?

If the *Star of the West* was fired on in January, why is April 1861 treated as the start of the war?

Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers cost him four more states. Could he have avoided that, and at what price?

Quick Reference — Chapter 2

- South Carolina seceded on 20 December 1860; seven Deep South states had left by 1 February 1861 and formed the Confederacy under Jefferson Davis
- Major Robert Anderson moved his garrison to Fort Sumter on 26 December 1860; the *Star of the West* was fired on and turned back on 9 January 1861
- Lincoln sent a food-only relief expedition and announced it openly, leaving the choice to fire to the Confederacy

- General Beauregard (Anderson's former student) opened fire at 4:30 a.m. on 12 April 1861; about 3,000 shots were fired over 34 hours; Anderson surrendered on 13 April
- The "Edmund Ruffin fired first" story is a legend; no one died in the bombardment, but two Union privates were killed in an accident during the surrender salute
- Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers (15 April) led Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee to secede; Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri stayed in the Union

What's Next

Chapter 3: **First Bull Run (1861) & the Real Collapse of "A Quick War"**.

Military History: The US Civil War

Chapter 3 · First Bull Run (1861) & the Real Collapse of "A Quick War"

After Fort Sumter (Chapter 2), many people on both sides expected one big battle to settle everything. In July 1861 two inexperienced armies met near a small stream in northern Virginia, about 25 miles from Washington. The battle was confused, amateurish, and far bloodier than anyone had imagined — and it ended the idea that the war would be short.

Two Names for One Battle

BULL RUN OR MANASSAS?

The Union usually named battles after the nearest stream or river; the Confederacy after the nearest town or railroad junction. So this battle is *Bull Run* (a stream) to the North and *Manassas* (a railroad junction) to the South. The same pattern gives us Antietam/Sharpsburg in Chapter 5.

Pressure to Attack

"ON TO RICHMOND!"

Northern newspapers and politicians demanded a quick advance on the Confederate capital. Many believed one victory would end the rebellion.

90-DAY SOLDIERS

Most volunteers from Lincoln's April call had signed up for only 90 days. Their enlistments were about to run out, so if the army was going to be used, it had to be soon.

"GREEN ALIKE"

The Union commander, Brigadier General Irvin McDowell, warned his

troops weren't ready. Lincoln reportedly replied that they were green, but the enemy was green too.

McDowell's plan was sound on paper: pin the Confederate army under P.G.T. Beauregard along Bull Run with a frontal demonstration, then send a large column on a long march around its left flank. A separate Union force was supposed to keep a second Confederate army, under Joseph E. Johnston, busy in the Shenandoah Valley so it couldn't join Beauregard.

The Railroad Changes the Battle

JOHNSTON SLIPS AWAY

The Union force in the Shenandoah failed to hold Johnston in place. Johnston moved much of his army to Manassas Junction by railroad, with some of his troops arriving during the battle itself. It's regarded as the first time railroads were used to move troops to a battlefield in a way that decided the outcome. McDowell's own slow advance gave Johnston the time he needed.

A PREVIEW OF THE WHOLE WAR

Chapter 1 noted the North had more than twice the South's railroad mileage. Bull Run shows why that mattered: railroads let armies move faster than marching men, and whoever used them better could concentrate force where it was needed. Railroads return again in Chapter 8, when Sherman sets out to destroy the South's.

The Battle: 21 July 1861

Morning

The Union flanking column crosses Bull Run upstream and drives back the Confederate left. Things are going McDowell's way.

Midday

Confederate troops fall back to Henry House Hill, where Brigadier General Thomas J. Jackson's Virginia brigade holds firm.

Afternoon

Fighting swirls around the hill. Two Union artillery batteries are pushed forward, and a Confederate regiment dressed in blue is mistaken for friendly troops long enough to overrun them.

Late afternoon

Fresh Confederate brigades, including Johnston's arrivals, counterattack. The exhausted Union line starts falling back — and then breaks.

"STANDING LIKE A STONE WALL"

Confederate General Barnard Bee is said to have rallied his men by pointing at Jackson's brigade and shouting that Jackson was "standing like a stone wall." Jackson became "Stonewall" Jackson for the rest of his life. But Bee was mortally wounded soon afterward, and his exact words were only reported second-hand. Some historians have suggested he may even have meant it as criticism — that Jackson was standing still instead of coming to help. We can't know for sure.

BLUE AND GREY WEREN'T STANDARD YET

Early in the war, uniforms were a mess. Some Union regiments wore grey, some Confederate regiments wore blue, and flags looked similar in battle smoke. The mistake that cost the Union its guns on Henry House Hill was a direct result. Standard colours and distinct battle flags — such as the Confederate battle flag — came partly out of confusions like this one.

The Retreat

The Union withdrawal began in reasonable order but turned into a panic. When a wagon was overturned on the bridge over Cub Run, blocking the road, frightened soldiers abandoned equipment and fled toward Washington. Civilians who had driven out from the capital to watch the battle, including members of Congress, got caught up in the rout; one congressman was captured.

	Union (McDowell)	Confederate (Beauregard & Johnston)
Present in the area	About 35,000	About 32,000
Actually engaged	About 18,000	About 18,000
Killed	About 460	About 390
Wounded	About 1,120	About 1,580
Missing / captured	About 1,310	Few

WHY THE CONFEDERATES DIDN'T TAKE WASHINGTON

The Confederate army was almost as disorganised by victory as the Union army was by defeat. It was short of supplies, had no fresh troops, and faced heavy rain the next day. Washington's defences were also stronger than the panic suggested. Some Southerners later argued the war was lost that evening by not pursuing; most historians think a pursuit was never realistic.

What Changed

A LONG WAR

Lincoln signed bills calling for 500,000 more volunteers, this time for three-year terms. The North began preparing for a long, organised war rather than one campaign.

MCCLELLAN ARRIVES

McDowell was replaced by George B. McClellan, who turned the beaten troops into a trained, disciplined force: the Army of the Potomac. His caution in using it becomes a problem in Chapter 5.

SOUTHERN CONFIDENCE

The victory made many Southerners overconfident, reinforcing the belief that Northern soldiers wouldn't fight

hard — a belief the next four years disproved.

BULL RUN WASN'T THE ONLY FRONT

At the same time, the Union was putting in place a much slower plan to squeeze the South economically: blockading its ports and seizing the Mississippi. That strategy, mocked at first as the "Anaconda Plan," is the subject of Chapter 4.

Questions to Sit With

McDowell's plan was reasonable, but his army lost. How much of the defeat was the plan, and how much was inexperience?

Why might it be useful for a nickname like "Stonewall" to become fixed, even if we can't be sure what Bee meant?

Did losing at Bull Run actually help the Union in the long run? Consider what it forced the North to do next.

Quick Reference — Chapter 3

- First Bull Run (Union name) / First Manassas (Confederate name), 21 July 1861, about 25 miles from Washington
- Political pressure ("On to Richmond!") and expiring 90-day enlistments pushed McDowell to attack with an inexperienced army
- Johnston moved troops by railroad from the Shenandoah Valley to the battlefield — the first decisive use of railroads in battle
- Jackson's brigade held Henry House Hill and he earned the name "Stonewall," though Bee's exact meaning is uncertain
- Confusing uniforms helped Confederates capture Union guns; a late Confederate counterattack broke the Union army, whose retreat became a rout

- About 18,000 engaged on each side; roughly 460 Union and 390 Confederate killed; the Confederates were too disorganised to pursue
- Afterward Lincoln called for 500,000 three-year volunteers and put McClellan in command

What's Next

Chapter 4: **The Anaconda Plan: The Real Union Naval Blockade Strategy.**

Military History: The US Civil War

Chapter 4 · The Anaconda Plan: The Real Union Naval Blockade Strategy

Bull Run (Chapter 3) was loud, visible, and quickly lost. The Union's slower strategy was much less dramatic: close the South's ports, take control of the Mississippi River, and let economic pressure do its work. It was mocked when it was first proposed. It turned out to be one of the most important reasons the North won.

Winfield Scott's Plan

In 1861 the Union's senior general was Winfield Scott, then in his seventies and a veteran of the War of 1812 and the Mexican War. In letters in May 1861 he set out a strategy with two parts.

1 · BLOCKADE

Close every Confederate port so the South couldn't sell its cotton abroad or import weapons, machinery, and supplies.

2 · THE MISSISSIPPI

Send an army and gunboats down the Mississippi River to split the Confederacy in two, cutting off Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana from the east.

3 · WAIT

Scott hoped that squeezing the South this way might bring it back into the Union with far less bloodshed than invading it directly.

MOCKED, THEN USED

The press ridiculed the plan as too slow and passive, comparing it to an anaconda slowly squeezing its prey — which is where the name comes from. The public wanted a quick march on Richmond. Scott retired in late 1861 and the plan was never formally adopted as a single strategy. But its two main parts, the blockade and the Mississippi, became central to how the Union actually won.

The Blockade: An Enormous Task

Lincoln proclaimed a blockade of Southern ports on 19 April 1861, a week after Fort Sumter.

The challenge	The scale
Coastline to watch	About 3,500 miles of Atlantic and Gulf coast, including 12 major ports
Union ships suitable for blockade duty in 1861	Only a handful
Union Navy by 1865	About 670 ships

A LEGAL COMPLICATION

Under international law, a country blockades an enemy, not its own rebellious citizens. By declaring a blockade, the Union was in effect treating the Confederacy as a belligerent in a war — even though Lincoln insisted it wasn't a real country. Britain and France used this to recognise the Confederacy as a belligerent (though never as an independent nation), which let it buy ships and supplies from neutrals.

TAKING BASES ON THE ENEMY COAST

Steam warships needed coal, so the Navy needed harbours close to the blockade. Early joint Army-Navy operations captured the forts at Hatteras Inlet, North Carolina (August 1861) and Port Royal, South Carolina (November 1861), giving the fleet bases along the Southern coast itself.

Blockade Runners

The Confederacy fought back with blockade runners: fast, low, often grey-painted steamships, many built in Britain, that ran between Southern ports and neutral harbours such as Nassau in the Bahamas, Bermuda, and Havana. They carried cotton out and brought back rifles, gunpowder, medicine — and, very profitably, luxury goods.

Period	Roughly how often a runner was caught
1861–1862	About 1 in 10
1863–1864	About 1 in 3
End of the war	About 1 in 2

"LEAKY" DOESN'T MEAN USELESS

Many runners got through, and some historians have argued the blockade didn't matter much. But the blockade didn't have to stop every ship. By making each voyage risky, it pushed shipping costs up, forced runners to carry small, high-value cargoes rather than bulk goods like railroad iron, and slashed Southern trade overall. Cotton exports fell by about 95% compared with before the war.

KING COTTON BACKFIRES

Confederate leaders believed Britain's textile mills depended so heavily on Southern cotton that Britain would have to intervene. In 1861 they even held back cotton themselves to increase the pressure. It didn't work: British warehouses had a large surplus from the huge 1860 crop, new supplies came from Egypt and India, and Britain had no wish to fight a war on behalf of a slaveholding republic — especially after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

The Ironclads: Hampton Roads, March 1862

The Confederacy couldn't build a navy to match the Union's, so it tried new technology instead. At Norfolk, Virginia, it rebuilt the burned Union frigate *Merrimack* as an armoured ironclad, the CSS *Virginia*, to break the blockade.

8 March 1862

The *Virginia* attacks the wooden Union blockading ships at Hampton Roads. It rams and sinks the USS *Cumberland* and destroys the USS *Congress*; around 250 Union sailors are killed. Union cannonballs bounce off its armour.

Night of 8 March

The Union's own new ironclad, the USS *Monitor* — a low, flat ship with a revolving gun turret — arrives just in time.

9 March 1862

The two ironclads fight for about three hours at close range. Neither can seriously damage the other. The *Virginia* withdraws; the blockade holds.

A DRAW THAT CHANGED EVERY NAVY

Tactically the battle was a draw, but strategically it was a Union success: the blockade survived. And it showed every navy in the world that wooden warships were obsolete. Britain and France stopped building wooden-hulled ships of the line, and "monitor" became the name for a whole type of turreted warship.

The River War

The second half of Scott's idea — controlling the Mississippi — was fought with river gunboats and armies working together.

February 1862

Union forces under Ulysses S. Grant, with river gunboats, capture Forts Henry and Donelson in Tennessee, opening the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers into the Confederate heartland.

April 1862

Flag Officer David Farragut's fleet runs past the forts guarding the lower Mississippi and captures New Orleans, the Confederacy's largest city and port.

1862–1863

Union gunboats and armies push down from the north and up from the south, leaving one key Confederate stronghold still controlling the river — Vicksburg (Chapter 7).

The Blockade Closes

MOBILE BAY, AUGUST 1864

Farragut forced his way into Mobile Bay past Confederate mines (then called "torpedoes"). His famous order is usually quoted as "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!" — though the exact wording was only recorded later.

THE FIRST SUBMARINE KILL, FEBRUARY 1864

The Confederate submarine H.L. *Hunley* sank the USS *Housatonic* off Charleston — the first time a submarine sank a warship. The *Hunley* itself was lost with its crew.

FORT FISHER, JANUARY 1865

The fall of Fort Fisher closed Wilmington, North Carolina, the last major Confederate Atlantic port. Lee's army lost its last real link to overseas supplies.

Questions to Sit With

Why do you think a slow, economic strategy was so unpopular in 1861, even though it turned out to be effective?

If many blockade runners got through, how would you measure whether the blockade "worked"?

Hampton Roads was a tactical draw.
Why can a draw still be a real
strategic victory for one side?

Quick Reference — Chapter 4

- General Winfield Scott's May 1861 plan: blockade the South's ports and take the Mississippi; mocked as the "Anaconda Plan," never formally adopted, but central to Union victory
- Lincoln proclaimed the blockade on 19 April 1861; it covered about 3,500 miles of coast and 12 major ports; the Union Navy grew to about 670 ships
- Blockade runners sailed via Nassau, Bermuda, and Havana; the capture rate rose from about 1 in 10 early on to about 1 in 2 by 1865; cotton exports fell about 95%
- "King Cotton" diplomacy failed: Britain had surplus cotton, new sources, and no wish to back a slaveholding state
- Hampton Roads (8–9 March 1862): CSS *Virginia* vs. USS *Monitor* — a draw that kept the blockade intact and made wooden warships obsolete
- River war: Forts Henry and Donelson (February 1862), New Orleans (April 1862), leading toward Vicksburg
- Mobile Bay (August 1864), the *Hunley* (February 1864), and Fort Fisher (January 1865) closed the blockade

What's Next

Chapter 5: Antietam (1862): The Real Bloodiest Single Day in American History.

CHAPTER 5: ANTIETAM (1862): THE REAL BLOODIEST SINGLE DAY IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Military History: The US Civil War

Chapter 5 · Antietam (1862): The Real Bloodiest Single Day in American History

By September 1862 the Confederacy had seized the initiative in the East, and Robert E. Lee carried the war into the North for the first time. Near the small Maryland town of Sharpsburg, his army and McClellan's met in a battle that produced more casualties in one day than any other in American history. It was a tactical draw — and one of the war's most important political turning points.

How Lee Got to Maryland

Spring 1862

McClellan, who rebuilt the army after Bull Run (Chapter 3), lands it on the Virginia Peninsula and advances slowly on Richmond.

June 1862

The Confederate commander Joseph Johnston is wounded; Robert E. Lee takes command of what he names the Army of Northern Virginia.

June–July 1862

In the Seven Days Battles, Lee attacks repeatedly and drives McClellan back from Richmond, despite heavy Confederate losses.

August 1862

Lee defeats a separate Union army at Second Bull Run.

September 1862

Lee crosses the Potomac into Maryland.

WHY INVADE?

To move the fighting out of war-damaged Virginia, feed his army from

THE BIGGER PRIZE

A major victory in the North might push Britain and France toward

Northern farms, encourage pro-Southern feeling in Maryland, and win a victory on Union soil.

recognising the Confederacy, and strengthen Northern politicians who wanted a negotiated peace before the November elections.

The Lost Order

SPECIAL ORDER 191, FOUND 13 SEPTEMBER 1862

Lee boldly split his army into several parts; Stonewall Jackson was sent to capture the Union garrison at Harpers Ferry. At a campsite near Frederick, Maryland, two soldiers of the 27th Indiana found a copy of Lee's orders setting out the whole plan, wrapped around three cigars. It reached McClellan the same day.

THE GREATEST INTELLIGENCE COUP OF THE WAR — USED SLOWLY

McClellan knew exactly where Lee's scattered army was. He reportedly said, "Here is a paper with which if I cannot whip Bobbie Lee, I will be willing to go home." But he waited about 18 hours before moving, and then advanced cautiously. That gave Lee time to start pulling his army back together.

On 15 September Jackson captured Harpers Ferry and more than 12,000 Union soldiers — the largest surrender of US troops until the Second World War — then hurried to rejoin Lee at Sharpsburg.

The Battle: 17 September 1862

	Union (McClellan)	Confederate (Lee)
Engaged	About 72,000	About 38,000
Killed	About 2,100	About 1,550

	Union (McClellan)	Confederate (Lee)
Total casualties (killed, wounded, missing)	About 12,400	About 10,300

McClellan attacked in three separate phases, one after another, rather than all at once. That let Lee move his outnumbered troops from one threatened point to the next.

MORNING · THE CORNFIELD

Union attacks on the Confederate left, around a farmer's cornfield and a small Dunker church, met Jackson's troops. The field changed hands again and again — by one count at least 15 times — with appalling losses on both sides.

MIDDAY · THE SUNKEN ROAD ("BLOODY LANE")

In the centre, Confederates held a farm road worn down below ground level, forming a natural trench. After hours of assaults, Union troops got a position where they could fire straight down the road; the defenders were cut down and the line broke. The Confederate centre was open — but McClellan kept thousands of fresh reserve troops out of the fight rather than send them through the gap.

AFTERNOON · BURNSIDE'S BRIDGE

On the Union left, General Ambrose Burnside spent hours trying to force his way across a narrow stone bridge over Antietam Creek, held by a few hundred Georgia riflemen. When his troops finally crossed and began pushing toward Sharpsburg, A.P. Hill's division arrived around 3:30 p.m. after a hard march from Harpers Ferry and struck their flank. The Union advance was driven back.

LEE'S ARMY WAS NEARLY DESTROYED

Lee fought with his back to the Potomac River and almost no reserves. Coordinated Union attacks, or the use of McClellan's unused reserves at Bloody Lane, could very

likely have broken his army. Instead, Lee held his line, stayed on the field the next day, and withdrew across the Potomac on the night of 18–19 September. McClellan did not seriously pursue.

"BLOODIEST SINGLE DAY" — WHAT IT MEANS

About 22,700 men were killed, wounded, or missing in roughly twelve hours of fighting. That's the highest number of casualties from a single day of battle in American history, including later wars. Around 3,650 of those were killed outright; many of the wounded died in the days and weeks afterward.

Why a Draw Became a Turning Point

THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

Lincoln had drafted a proclamation freeing enslaved people in rebel territory, but waited for a victory so it wouldn't look like desperation. Antietam was enough. He issued the preliminary proclamation on 22 September 1862, taking effect on 1 January 1863.

EUROPE STEPS BACK

Britain had been seriously considering offering to mediate between the two sides. Lee's retreat, and a war now openly about slavery, made intervention much less likely.

MCCLELLAN GOES

Frustrated by McClellan's slowness to pursue, Lincoln removed him from command on 5 November 1862 and replaced him with Burnside.

THE MILITARY SIDE OF EMANCIPATION

The Proclamation was also a war measure. It encouraged enslaved people to flee to Union lines, weakening the Confederate economy and labour force, and it opened

the way for Black men to enlist in the Union army — the roughly 180,000 soldiers mentioned in Chapter 1. The political and legal story belongs to US History; its military effects run through the rest of this course.

THE FIRST BATTLEFIELD PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE DEAD

Two days after the battle, photographers working for Mathew Brady, including Alexander Gardner, photographed bodies still lying on the field. When the images were shown in Brady's New York gallery in October 1862 as "The Dead of Antietam," they gave civilians a direct view of combat deaths for the first time.

Questions to Sit With

McClellan had Lee's plans and twice as many men. What seems to have stopped him from winning decisively?

Why might Lincoln have been right to wait for a victory before announcing emancipation?

How might photographs of the dead have changed how people at home thought about the war?

Quick Reference — Chapter 5

- Lee took command in June 1862, drove McClellan from Richmond in the Seven Days, won at Second Bull Run, and invaded Maryland in September
- Special Order 191 was found wrapped around cigars on 13 September; McClellan waited about 18 hours to act on it
- Jackson captured Harpers Ferry and over 12,000 Union troops on 15 September
- Antietam (Sharpsburg), 17 September 1862: about 72,000 Union vs 38,000 Confederate; three separate phases — the Cornfield, Bloody Lane, Burnside's

Bridge; A.P. Hill arrived in time to save Lee

- About 22,700 casualties, including about 3,650 killed — the bloodiest single day in American history
- A tactical draw but a strategic Union success: Lee retreated, Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on 22 September, and European intervention became much less likely
- McClellan was removed on 5 November 1862; Gardner's photographs showed the dead to the public

What's Next

Chapter 6: Gettysburg (1863): The Real Turning Point & Pickett's Charge.

CHAPTER 6: GETTYSBURG (1863): THE REAL TURNING POINT & PICKETT'S CHARGE

Military History: The US Civil War

Chapter 6 · Gettysburg (1863): The Real Turning Point & Pickett's Charge

After Antietam (Chapter 5), Lee's army went on to win two of its most famous victories. Confident that his men could beat any Union army, Lee invaded the North a second time in summer 1863. Over three days in July, in and around a Pennsylvania market town, the largest battle ever fought in North America ended that confidence for good.

Lee at His Peak

13 December 1862

Fredericksburg: Burnside, McClellan's replacement, throws wave after wave of attacks against Confederates on the high ground of Marye's Heights. It's one of the most one-sided Union defeats of the war.

30 April – 6 May 1863

Chancellorsville: facing Joseph Hooker's much larger army, Lee splits his own force and sends Jackson on a flank march that routs the Union right. It's often called Lee's greatest victory.

2 May 1863

Jackson is accidentally shot by his own men in the dark at Chancellorsville. He dies of pneumonia on 10 May — a loss Lee felt for the rest of the war.

June 1863

Lee marches north through the Shenandoah Valley into Pennsylvania. On 28 June Lincoln replaces Hooker with George G. Meade, only three days before the battle.

LEE'S MISSING "EYES"

Lee's cavalry commander, J.E.B. Stuart, was off on a long raid around the Union army and out of contact for days. Without his cavalry, Lee didn't know where the Union army was until the fighting had already begun.

The Two Armies

	Union (Meade)	Confederate (Lee)
Soldiers	About 94,000–104,000	About 65,000–80,000
Guns	About 360	About 270
Casualties (killed, wounded, missing)	About 23,000	About 23,000–28,000

Day 1: 1 July — A Meeting Nobody Planned

Neither commander chose Gettysburg. It was a crossroads town where ten roads met, so both armies' columns converged on it. Union cavalry under John Buford dismounted west of town and held off the leading Confederate infantry long enough for Union infantry to arrive.

By the afternoon, more Confederate divisions arrived from the north, and the Union line collapsed back through the town. But the retreating troops rallied on high ground south of Gettysburg: Cemetery Hill and Cemetery Ridge. Lee told his corps commander Richard Ewell to take Cemetery Hill "if practicable"; Ewell decided it wasn't, and the Union kept the heights overnight.

THE "FISHHOOK"

By the morning of 2 July the Union line ran in a curved shape like a fishhook: from Culp's Hill, round Cemetery Hill, and down Cemetery Ridge toward two hills called Round Top and Little Round Top. Because it was curved, Meade could move troops across the inside of the curve quickly, while Lee's longer line around the outside had to march much farther.

Day 2: 2 July — Attacks on Both Flanks

Lee ordered James Longstreet to attack the Union left. Longstreet, who preferred moving around the Union army rather than attacking it head-on, took most of the day getting into position.

SICKLES MOVES FORWARD

Union General Daniel Sickles, without orders, moved his corps forward off Cemetery Ridge to higher ground at a Peach Orchard. It exposed his men, and they were badly mauled in fighting through the Peach Orchard, the Wheatfield, and a rocky area called Devil's Den.

LITTLE ROUND TOP

This hill overlooked the whole Union line. Union engineer Gouverneur Warren saw it was undefended and got troops rushed onto it minutes before Confederates arrived. At the far end of the line, the 20th Maine under Colonel Joshua Chamberlain ended a desperate fight with a downhill bayonet charge.

THE OTHER END

Evening Confederate attacks on Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill, on the Union right, came close in places but were driven off.

WHY CHAMBERLAIN IS SO FAMOUS

The 20th Maine's defence was real and important. But its fame owes a lot to Michael Shaara's 1974 novel *The Killer Angels* and the 1993 film *Gettysburg*. Several other regiments on Little Round Top fought just as hard; Colonel Strong Vincent, who commanded the brigade that held the hill, was killed there. Popular memory tends to settle on one story and one hero.

Day 3: 3 July — Pickett's Charge

Having attacked both flanks, Lee decided to strike the Union centre on Cemetery Ridge. Longstreet argued against it. Lee went ahead.

About 1:00 p.m.

Around 150 Confederate guns open the largest artillery bombardment of the war. Much of it overshoots the Union line on the ridge.

About 3:00 p.m.

Roughly 12,500 Confederate infantry step out of the woods and march across about a mile of open fields toward the ridge.

The advance

Union artillery and then rifle fire tear into the lines. A few hundred men reach the Union position at a stone wall near a clump of trees; they are quickly killed, captured, or driven back.

The result

Around half of the attackers become casualties. Lee meets the survivors and tells them it was all his fault.

PICKETT WASN'T THE ONLY GENERAL

The attack is named after George Pickett, whose Virginia division took part, but more than half the troops came from divisions under J. Johnston Pettigrew and Isaac Trimble. Historians often call it the Pickett–Pettigrew–Trimble Charge. Pickett's name stuck partly because Virginian newspapers and veterans told the story first.

RIFLES AGAINST OPEN GROUND

Chapter 1 noted that rifled weapons outran the tactics of the day. Pickett's Charge is the clearest example in this course: a mile-long advance in the open against an entrenched enemy with artillery and rifles. The same lesson had been taught at Fredericksburg, in reverse, seven months earlier.

After the Battle

LEE RETREATS

On 4 July, in heavy rain, Lee began withdrawing to Virginia with a wagon train of wounded many miles long. Meade followed cautiously; Lincoln was deeply frustrated that Lee's army escaped across the Potomac.

THE SAME DAY IN THE WEST

Also on 4 July, the Confederate stronghold at Vicksburg surrendered to Grant — the subject of Chapter 7. Together, the two events marked the moment the war turned decisively.

THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

On 19 November 1863, at the dedication of a national cemetery for the Union dead, Lincoln gave a speech of about 270 words, lasting only a couple of minutes. It reframed the war as a test of whether government "of the people, by the people, for the people" could survive.

"THE HIGH-WATER MARK OF THE CONFEDERACY"

The spot where Pickett's men briefly reached the Union line is often called the Confederacy's "high-water mark." The phrase was popularised after the war. Many historians argue the Confederacy's real military peak came earlier, or that the war was being decided more in the West, at places like Vicksburg, than in any single Eastern battle. Gettysburg was a real turning point in the East — but not the whole story.

Questions to Sit With

Lee had beaten larger Union armies before. What was different at Gettysburg?

Why might a novel and a film shape our memory of a battle more than historians do? Is that a problem?

Lee took responsibility for Pickett's Charge immediately. Why do you think later Confederate writers tried to blame Longstreet instead?

Quick Reference — Chapter 6

- Before Gettysburg: Union defeats at Fredericksburg (December 1862) and Chancellorsville (May 1863); Jackson died after being shot by his own men
- Meade replaced Hooker on 28 June 1863; Stuart's cavalry was away, leaving Lee short of information
- Gettysburg, 1–3 July 1863: about 94,000–104,000 Union vs 65,000–80,000 Confederate; 46,000–51,000 total casualties, the largest battle in North America
- Day 1: Buford's cavalry delayed the Confederates; the Union fell back to Cemetery Hill and Ridge, forming the "fishhook" line
- Day 2: Sickles' exposed advance; Little Round Top held (20th Maine and others); attacks on Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill repulsed
- Day 3: Pickett's (Pickett–Pettigrew–Trimble) Charge of about 12,500 men lost around half; Lee retreated on 4 July, the same day Vicksburg fell
- Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (19 November 1863) was about 270 words; the "high-water mark" label came later and is debated

What's Next

Chapter 7: The Vicksburg Campaign (1863): Grant's Real Siege & Control of the Mississippi.

Military History: The US Civil War

Chapter 7 · The Vicksburg Campaign (1863): Grant's Real Siege & Control of the Mississippi

Gettysburg (Chapter 6) gets most of the attention, but on the very next day, a thousand miles away, the Union won something arguably more important. Vicksburg, Mississippi, was the last major Confederate fortress on the Mississippi River. Taking it completed the river half of the Anaconda Plan (Chapter 4), split the Confederacy in two, and made Ulysses S. Grant the Union's leading general.

Why Vicksburg Was So Hard to Take

HIGH BLUFFS

The city stood on bluffs about 200 feet above a sharp bend in the river. Its heavy guns could fire on any ship passing below.

SWAMPS TO THE NORTH

North of the city lay the Yazoo delta: rivers, bayous, and flooded forest that made moving an army almost impossible.

THE WRONG SIDE OF THE RIVER

Grant's army was on the western (Louisiana) bank and upriver. To attack, he had to get across the Mississippi and past the guns.

Phase One: Failure (December 1862 – March 1863)

26–29 December 1862

William T. Sherman's direct assault at Chickasaw Bayou, north of the city, is thrown back with heavy losses.

● Winter 1863

Grant tries five different ways to get around the guns through the waterways: digging a canal across the river bend, and expeditions through bayous such as Yazoo Pass and Steele's Bayou. All of them fail.

WHY THE FAILURES STILL MATTERED

Northern newspapers called for Grant's removal. But the failed expeditions kept his army busy through a wet winter, kept Confederate commanders guessing, and ruled out every easy option. Lincoln kept Grant. A later account says Lincoln had already defended him after the bloody battle of Shiloh in 1862 with the words "I can't spare this man; he fights" — a famous line, though it rests on one witness's memory.

Phase Two: The Gamble (April – May 1863)

Grant's new plan was risky: march his army south down the Louisiana bank, run the Navy's gunboats and transports downriver past Vicksburg's guns at night, and use them to ferry the army across the river well south of the city.

● 16–22 April 1863

Admiral David Dixon Porter's flotilla runs past the Vicksburg batteries at night. Despite heavy fire, almost every vessel gets through.

● 17 April – 2 May

Grierson's Raid: Colonel Benjamin Grierson's Union cavalry rides hundreds of miles through Mississippi, tearing up railroads and drawing Confederate attention away from the river.

● 29–30 April

Grant's army crosses the Mississippi at Bruinsburg, south of Vicksburg, in one of the largest river crossings in American military history up to then.

FIVE BATTLES IN SEVENTEEN DAYS

Instead of heading straight north to Vicksburg, Grant first struck east toward the state capital, Jackson, to keep two Confederate forces from joining. In seventeen days he won five battles — Port Gibson, Raymond, Jackson, Champion Hill (16 May, the decisive one), and Big Black River Bridge — and drove the Confederate army under John C. Pemberton back inside Vicksburg's defences.

"LIVING OFF THE LAND" — PARTLY TRUE

Grant is often said to have "cut loose" from his supply lines and fed his army entirely from the countryside. He did rely heavily on local food, livestock, and forage, which let him move fast. But he still ran wagon trains of ammunition and some rations along a road back to the river. It was a bold reduction of his supply line, not a complete abandonment of it — and Sherman would take the idea much further in Georgia (Chapter 8).

Phase Three: The Siege (18 May – 4 July 1863)

Grant tried two direct assaults on the city's defences, on 19 and 22 May. Both failed with heavy losses. He then settled into a formal siege, digging trenches ever closer to the Confederate lines and cutting the city off completely.

SOLDIERS STARVING

By late June, half the Confederate garrison was sick with scurvy, malaria, or dysentery. Rations shrank, and there were reports of soldiers eating mules and even shoe leather.

CIVILIANS IN CAVES

Under daily shelling from Union guns and gunboats, many of the city's residents dug caves into the hillsides and lived in them for weeks.

A MINE UNDER THE LINES

On 25 June Union engineers exploded a large charge of gunpowder in a

tunnel under a Confederate fort, the 3rd Louisiana Redan. Troops rushed into the crater but were driven back — a smaller version of a tactic that would fail more famously at Petersburg in 1864.

MILLIKEN'S BEND, 7 JUNE 1863

Confederates attacked a Union supply post at Milliken's Bend, across the river, defended mostly by recently recruited Black regiments. After fierce hand-to-hand fighting, the defenders held with the help of gunboat fire. It was one of the first battles to show sceptical Northern commanders that Black troops would fight — a direct military result of the emancipation policy from Chapter 5.

The Surrender

On 4 July 1863 — the day after Pickett's Charge — Pemberton surrendered about 29,500 men. He chose the date partly in the hope that Grant would offer better terms on Independence Day. Grant paroled the prisoners rather than send them north, which saved him the huge task of moving and guarding them.

	Union (Grant)	Confederate
Casualties, whole campaign	About 10,100	More than 38,000, most of them the soldiers captured at the surrender

THE FOURTH OF JULY MYTH

A popular story says Vicksburg refused to celebrate the Fourth of July for over 80 years, until the Second World War. It makes a neat symbol of lasting resentment — but records show large Independence Day celebrations in the city at least as early as 1907.

Why It Mattered

THE RIVER IS OPEN

When Port Hudson, Louisiana, the last Confederate position on the river, surrendered on 9 July, the whole Mississippi was in Union hands. Lincoln wrote that "the Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea."

THE CONFEDERACY SPLIT

Texas, Arkansas, and most of Louisiana were cut off from the rest of the Confederacy, along with the cattle, horses, and supplies they had sent east.

GRANT RISES

After another victory at Chattanooga in November 1863, Grant was promoted in March 1864 to lieutenant general and command of all Union armies. Chapter 9 follows him east to face Lee.

GETTYSBURG AND VICKSBURG TOGETHER

Chapter 6's closing note asked whether Gettysburg was really the war's turning point. Many historians point to Vicksburg as the more decisive of the two: Gettysburg stopped an invasion, while Vicksburg took an entire army out of the war and permanently changed the map. What made July 1863 so important was that both happened at once.

Questions to Sit With

Grant failed repeatedly through the winter. What might have happened if

Why do you think Gettysburg is so much better remembered than

Lincoln had given in to calls to remove him?

Vicksburg, even though Vicksburg arguably did more to end the war?

Grant's plan depended on the Army and Navy working closely together. Where else in this course has that kind of cooperation decided a campaign?

Quick Reference — Chapter 7

- Vicksburg's high bluffs, northern swamps, and position on the river made it the Confederacy's strongest river fortress
- Chickasaw Bayou (December 1862) and five winter waterway attempts all failed
- April 1863: Porter's gunboats ran the batteries, Grierson's Raid distracted the Confederates, and Grant crossed at Bruinsburg
- Grant won five battles in seventeen days, including Champion Hill (16 May), relying heavily on local supplies
- After failed assaults on 19 and 22 May, the siege lasted until 4 July; Black troops held at Milliken's Bend (7 June)
- Pemberton surrendered about 29,500 men on 4 July 1863; Port Hudson fell on 9 July, opening the whole Mississippi
- The Confederacy was split; Grant rose to command all Union armies in March 1864

What's Next

Chapter 8: **Sherman's March to the Sea (1864): Real Total War Strategy.**

Military History: The US Civil War

Chapter 8 · Sherman's March to the Sea (1864): Real Total War Strategy

Chapter 7 ended with Grant rising to command all Union armies. His plan for 1864 was simple: attack everywhere at once, so the Confederacy couldn't move troops from one crisis to another. While Grant took on Lee in Virginia (Chapter 9), his closest partner, William Tecumseh Sherman, drove into the Deep South. What Sherman did next is still argued over today.

First, Atlanta

From May to August 1864 Sherman fought his way from Tennessee toward Atlanta, Georgia, a major railroad hub and manufacturing centre. It was a campaign of manoeuvre: Sherman kept moving around the flanks of Joseph Johnston's Confederate army, which kept falling back. Frustrated, Jefferson Davis replaced Johnston with the more aggressive John Bell Hood, who attacked and lost heavily.

"ATLANTA IS OURS, AND FAIRLY WON" — 2 SEPTEMBER 1864

After Sherman cut its last railroad, Hood abandoned Atlanta. The timing mattered enormously. In summer 1864, with casualties soaring in Virginia, many Northerners, and even Lincoln himself, expected him to lose the November election to George McClellan, the Democratic candidate running on a platform that called for peace talks. The fall of Atlanta changed the mood. Lincoln was re-elected in November.

A MILITARY VICTORY THAT WAS REALLY POLITICAL

Chapter 1 noted the Confederacy only needed to outlast the North's will to fight. Atlanta is where that hope effectively died: with Lincoln re-elected, there would be no negotiated peace.

The Plan: Leave the Enemy Army Behind

Hood took his army north into Tennessee, hoping to draw Sherman after him. Sherman did something unusual: he sent part of his force back to defend Tennessee under George Thomas, and with the rest — about 62,000 men — he cut his supply line completely and marched toward the Atlantic coast.

NO SUPPLY LINE

Where Grant had only reduced his supply line at Vicksburg (Chapter 7), Sherman abandoned his altogether. His army would eat what it found in the countryside.

A WIDE PATH

The army marched in two wings across a band of Georgia roughly 60 miles wide, covering about 300 miles from Atlanta to Savannah.

THE REAL TARGET

Not a Confederate army, but the South's ability to wage war: its railroads, factories, food, and belief that the Confederacy could protect its own people.

HOOD IS DESTROYED ANYWAY

Hood's invasion of Tennessee ended in disaster: a suicidal frontal attack at Franklin (30 November 1864), then near-destruction by Thomas at Nashville (15–16 December). Sherman's gamble that Thomas could handle Hood alone paid off.

The March: 15 November – 21 December 1864

Sherman's orders (Special Field Orders No. 120) told the army to "forage liberally," but also said soldiers weren't to enter private homes, and that destroying property should depend on whether locals resisted. In practice, discipline was loose. Groups of

foragers, nicknamed "bummers," often took far more than food, looted houses, and were joined by deserters and outlaws from both sides.

What was destroyed	Detail
Railroads	About 300 miles. Rails were heated over bonfires of the wooden ties and twisted around trees so they couldn't simply be straightened and reused — "Sherman's neckties"
Food and animals	Thousands of horses, mules, and cattle, and millions of pounds of grain and other food
Industry	Cotton gins and mills, depots, and anything useful to the Confederate war effort
Total damage	Sherman himself estimated \$100 million, of which he said only about a fifth was of real military value; the rest was "simple waste and destruction"

"TOTAL WAR" OR "HARD WAR"?

The march is often called the first example of "total war." Many historians, notably Mark Grimsley, prefer the term "hard war": Sherman's army destroyed property and supplies on a huge scale, but civilians were very rarely killed, and there was no systematic violence against the population. It was devastating and frightening, but it wasn't the indiscriminate killing of civilians that "total war" came to mean in the 20th century.

SHERMAN IN HIS OWN WORDS

Sherman explained his thinking bluntly: "We are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war." Replying to Atlanta's mayor in 1864, he wrote that "war is cruelty, and you cannot refine it." The shorter phrase "War is hell" is usually traced to a speech he gave years later, in 1879, as remembered by people in the audience.

The People Who Followed the Army

Tens of thousands of enslaved people left the plantations to follow Sherman's columns to freedom. For an army that had cut its supply line, they were a real burden, and many Union officers didn't want them.

EBENEZER CREEK, DECEMBER 1864

At Ebenezer Creek near Savannah, Union General Jefferson C. Davis (no relation to the Confederate president) had the army's pontoon bridge taken up after his troops crossed, stranding hundreds of freedpeople on the far bank as Confederate cavalry approached. Many drowned trying to swim across; others were captured and returned to slavery. It caused outrage in the North.

"FORTY ACRES"

In January 1865, partly in response, Sherman issued Special Field Orders No. 15, setting aside confiscated coastal land for freed families in plots of up to 40 acres — the origin of the phrase "forty acres and a mule." After the war, President Andrew Johnson reversed the policy and most of the land was returned to its former owners. The rest of that story belongs to US History.

Savannah and the Carolinas

21 December 1864

Savannah is taken almost without a fight. Sherman telegraphs Lincoln, offering him the city "as a Christmas gift."

January–March 1865

Sherman marches north through South Carolina — where secession began (Chapter 2) — and the destruction is noticeably harsher.

17 February 1865

Much of Columbia, South Carolina's capital, burns. Who started the fire is still disputed: burning cotton left by retreating Confederates, drunken Union soldiers, and high winds all played some part.

March–April 1865

Sherman moves into North Carolina, closing in on Joseph Johnston's last remaining army.

WHAT THE MARCH PROVED

Sherman's army crossed the heart of the Confederacy almost unopposed. The Confederate government could no longer protect its own territory or people, and letters from home made that clear to Lee's soldiers in Virginia, where desertion rose sharply that winter. The march did more to break Confederate morale than to destroy Confederate armies.

Questions to Sit With

Was the capture of Atlanta more important for its military value or its effect on the election? Can the two be separated?

Is "hard war" a meaningful distinction from "total war," or does it soften something that was genuinely brutal for the people who lived through it?

How did the march treat the freedpeople who followed it, and what does Ebenezer Creek reveal about the Union army's attitudes?

Quick Reference — Chapter 8

- Grant's 1864 strategy: attack everywhere at once; Sherman advanced on Atlanta while Grant faced Lee
- Atlanta fell on 2 September 1864, turning Northern opinion and helping Lincoln win re-election in November
- Sherman left Hood behind (Hood was crushed at Franklin and Nashville) and marched about 62,000 men 300 miles to the sea, 15 November – 21 December

1864, with no supply line

- About 300 miles of railroad were destroyed ("Sherman's neckties"); Sherman estimated \$100 million in damage, only about a fifth of it militarily useful
- Historians debate "total war" vs "hard war": property destruction was vast, but civilians were rarely killed
- Ebenezer Creek stranded hundreds of freedpeople; Special Field Orders No. 15 (January 1865) promised 40-acre plots, later reversed
- Savannah fell on 21 December ("a Christmas gift"); the march continued through the Carolinas, where Columbia burned in February 1865

What's Next

Chapter 9: **Grant vs. Lee: The Overland Campaign & the Real Road to Appomattox (1865).**

Military History: The US Civil War

Chapter 9 · Grant vs. Lee: The Overland Campaign & the Real Road to Appomattox (1865)

Every Union commander in Virginia before 1864 had fought Lee and then pulled back to recover. Grant did not. From May 1864 he kept attacking and kept moving, accepting casualties no earlier Northern general could have survived politically. Eleven months later Lee's army, trapped and starving, surrendered at a small village in central Virginia.

Grant's Plan: Never Let Go

LEE'S ARMY IS THE TARGET

Grant, travelling with the Army of the Potomac (still formally commanded by Meade), told Meade that wherever Lee went, he would go too. Destroying Lee's army mattered more than capturing Richmond.

KEEP MOVING AROUND THE FLANK

When a battle stalled, Grant slid his army sideways around Lee's right, always moving closer to Richmond and forcing Lee to follow and dig in again.

PRESSURE EVERYWHERE

At the same time, Sherman pushed toward Atlanta (Chapter 8), so the Confederacy couldn't shift troops between the two main armies.

The Overland Campaign: May – June 1864

5–7 May

The Wilderness: dense woodland near the old Chancellorsville battlefield (Chapter 6). Lee attacks, the woods catch fire, and many wounded burn to death. Two days of fighting end in a draw.

7 May

The turning point: instead of retreating north, Grant turns the army south. Union soldiers, who had expected yet another retreat, cheer.

8–21 May

Spotsylvania Court House: at a bulge in the Confederate line called the Mule Shoe, the fighting at the "Bloody Angle" on 12 May goes on for nearly a day, much of it hand-to-hand across the earthworks.

23–26 May

North Anna: Lee sets a clever trap with a V-shaped line, but is too ill to spring it.

3 June

Cold Harbor: Grant orders a massive frontal assault on entrenched Confederates and loses thousands of men in a short time for almost no gain.

"IF IT TAKES ALL SUMMER"

During Spotsylvania, Grant wrote to Washington that he proposed "to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer." It became one of the war's best-known lines — and it took far longer than a summer.

WAS GRANT A "BUTCHER"?

The Overland Campaign cost the Union about 55,000 casualties against about 33,000 Confederate, and critics called Grant a butcher. But Lee's losses were a much larger share of a smaller army, and the South couldn't replace them. Grant himself wrote in his memoirs that he always regretted the final assault at Cold Harbor. The fairer judgement is that his strategy was costly by design — and it worked, where cheaper approaches had failed for three years.

TRENCHES EVERYWHERE

By 1864 both armies dug in almost every time they stopped, building earthworks within hours. Frontal attacks on trenches failed again and again. That's the most important change since First Bull Run (Chapter 3), and it leads directly into Chapter 10's question about the war as a preview of 1914.

Petersburg: Nine Months in the Trenches

In mid-June Grant secretly moved his army across the James River toward Petersburg, the railroad junction that supplied Richmond. Confederate defenders held just long enough, and both sides settled into a siege that lasted from June 1864 to spring 1865, with lines of trenches eventually running more than 30 miles.

THE BATTLE OF THE CRATER, 30 JULY 1864

Union soldiers who had been coal miners dug a long tunnel under the Confederate line and packed it with gunpowder. The explosion blew a huge crater in the defences. A division of Black troops had trained to lead the attack, but at the last minute was replaced by an untrained white division, which charged *into* the crater instead of around it and got trapped. When the Black troops were finally sent in, they were caught in the same slaughter; some who tried to surrender were killed by Confederate soldiers. It was a disaster of leadership, not of the idea itself.

THE LARGEST CONCENTRATION OF BLACK TROOPS

Petersburg saw the war's largest concentration of Black Union soldiers. Nearly 180,000–190,000 Black men served in the Union army in all, as noted in Chapter 1.

The Collapse: April 1865

1 April

At Five Forks, Union cavalry and infantry under Philip Sheridan smash Lee's far right, cutting one of his last supply railroads.

2 April

Grant attacks all along the Petersburg line and breaks through. Lee tells Jefferson Davis that Richmond must be abandoned.

3 April

Union troops, including Black regiments, enter Richmond. Lincoln visits the city the next day.

6 April

At Sailor's Creek, a large part of Lee's retreating army is cut off and captured.

8–9 April

Sheridan's cavalry gets ahead of Lee near Appomattox Court House, blocking his escape to the west. Lee agrees to meet Grant.

Appomattox: 9 April 1865

THE SURRENDER IN WILMER MCLEAN'S PARLOUR

Lee and Grant met in the house of Wilmer McLean. McLean had moved to Appomattox to escape the war — his earlier farm at Manassas had been used as a Confederate headquarters during First Bull Run (Chapter 3). The war, it's often said, began in his front yard and ended in his parlour. Grant's terms were written out by his aide Ely S. Parker, a Seneca.

GENEROUS TERMS

Confederate soldiers were paroled and allowed to go home, not imprisoned. Officers kept their side arms, and men who owned horses or mules could take them home for spring planting.

RATIONS

Grant sent food to Lee's starving army — about 28,000 men were paroled in the following days.

THE SALUTE, 12 APRIL

At the formal surrender ceremony, Joshua Chamberlain (Chapter 6) had his troops salute the Confederates marching past, and John B. Gordon's men returned it.

APPOMATTOX DIDN'T END THE WAR ON ITS OWN

Lee surrendered only his own army. Joseph Johnston surrendered to Sherman at Bennett Place, North Carolina, on 26 April; the Confederate forces west of the Mississippi gave up in late May and early June; and the last Confederate general to surrender, Stand Watie, a Cherokee commander, did so on 23 June 1865. The Confederate raider CSS *Shenandoah* didn't surrender until November 1865, in Liverpool. Meanwhile, on 14 April, five days after Appomattox, Lincoln was shot at Ford's Theatre in Washington and died the next morning.

Questions to Sit With

Grant lost more men than Lee in almost every battle of 1864, yet won. What does that tell you about how to measure success in war?

Why do you think Grant offered such generous surrender terms? What was he trying to achieve after the war?

The Crater was a good idea that failed through poor leadership. Where else in this course has that happened?

Quick Reference — Chapter 9

- Grant's 1864 plan: target Lee's army, keep moving around its flank, and apply pressure everywhere at once
- Overland Campaign (May–June 1864): the Wilderness, Spotsylvania (the Bloody Angle, 12 May), North Anna, Cold Harbor (3 June); about 55,000 Union vs

33,000 Confederate casualties

- After the Wilderness Grant moved south instead of retreating; "fight it out on this line if it takes all summer"
- Siege of Petersburg, June 1864 – April 1865: over 30 miles of trenches; the Crater (30 July 1864) failed through poor leadership, with heavy losses among Black troops
- April 1865: Five Forks (1 April), breakthrough and evacuation of Richmond (2–3 April), Sailor's Creek (6 April)
- Lee surrendered at the McLean house, Appomattox, on 9 April 1865; generous terms, about 28,000 paroled; terms written by Ely S. Parker
- Johnston surrendered on 26 April, Stand Watie on 23 June, the *Shenandoah* in November 1865; Lincoln was assassinated on 14 April

What's Next

Chapter 10: **Capstone: The Real Legacy — Rifled Muskets, Trenches, Railroads & the "First Modern War".**

Military History: The US Civil War

Chapter 10 · Capstone: The Real Legacy — Rifled Muskets, Trenches, Railroads & the "First Modern War"

Chapter 1 flagged a popular label: that the Civil War was the "first modern war." This capstone tests that claim, one piece at a time, using what the previous nine chapters showed. The honest answer turns out to be "partly" — and the parts where the label is wrong are as interesting as the parts where it's right.

1 · The Rifled Musket: Revolution or Myth?

The standard infantry weapon was the rifled musket, firing the Minié ball, a conical bullet developed in France in the late 1840s. It expanded into the barrel's rifling when fired, so a muzzle-loading rifle could be loaded as quickly as an old smoothbore but was far more accurate. In tests it could hit targets at several hundred yards.

THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

For a long time historians argued the rifle made frontal attacks suicidal, explaining the huge losses at Fredericksburg, Pickett's Charge, and Cold Harbor (Chapters 6 and 9), while generals trained on older tactics failed to adapt.

THE REVISIONIST VIEW

Historians such as Paddy Griffith and Earl J. Hess have challenged this. Studying actual battles, they found most firefights still happened at quite short ranges — often around 100 yards — because of smoke, woods, hilly ground, and soldiers who had little training in judging distance or aiming at long range. On this view, the rifle mattered less than its test-range performance suggests, and the heavy losses came as much from armies' size, entrenchment, and the sheer length of the fighting as from a single new weapon.

NEWER WEAPONS EXISTED, BUT WEREN'T STANDARD

Breech-loading and repeating rifles such as the Spencer and Henry appeared, mostly with Union cavalry, and the hand-cranked Gatling gun was patented in 1862 but barely used. They pointed toward the future without yet changing how most battles were fought.

2 • Trenches

This is the strongest case for the "modern" label. In 1861 armies fought in the open (Chapter 3). By 1864 both sides dug in almost every time they stopped (Chapter 9), and the siege of Petersburg produced over 30 miles of trench lines, mines, and months of static warfare that look strikingly like the Western Front half a century later.

MINES, TWICE

Union engineers blew up mines under Confederate lines at Vicksburg (Chapter 7) and at the Crater (Chapter 9). Both times the explosion worked and the follow-up attack failed — a pattern British and German armies would repeat in 1916–1917.

3 • Railroads and the Telegraph

RAILROADS WIN BATTLES

First Bull Run was decided partly by troops moved by rail (Chapter 3). In September 1863 the Union moved about 25,000 men 1,200 miles from Virginia to reinforce the West in about 12 days — the largest troop movement by rail of the war.

RAILROADS AS TARGETS

The Union's Military Railroad grew to operate over 2,000 miles of track. Sherman's march (Chapter 8) was, in large part, an attack on the Southern rail network.

THE TELEGRAPH

Lincoln spent long hours in the War Department's telegraph office reading messages from the front. For the first time a head of government could follow, and interfere with, campaigns almost in real time.

4 • War at Sea

Chapter 4 covered two genuine firsts: the clash of ironclads at Hampton Roads (1862), which made wooden warships obsolete, and the *Hunley* (1864), the first submarine to sink a warship. The blockade itself was a slow economic war on a whole society, the kind of strategy later used against Germany in both World Wars.

5 • Mass Armies and the Home Front

Feature	What happened
Conscription	The Confederacy passed the first draft law in American history in April 1862; the Union followed in March 1863. Only a small share of Union soldiers were actually drafted — about 2%, with around 6% paid substitutes — but the threat of the draft pushed many men to volunteer.
Resistance	Draftees could pay \$300 or hire a substitute, fuelling "rich man's war, poor man's fight" anger. The New York City draft riots of July 1863 killed over 100 people, many of them Black New Yorkers attacked by mobs.
War on the economy	The blockade (Chapter 4) and Sherman's march (Chapter 8) aimed at the South's capacity to fight, not only its armies.
Public image	Photographs of the dead (Chapter 5) and mass-circulation newspapers brought the war home in a new way.

Where the "Modern" Label Fails

MOSTLY MUZZLE-LOADERS

Most soldiers still loaded powder and bullet down the barrel by hand.

Machine guns, smokeless powder, and breech-loading artillery — the real killers of 1914 — weren't yet part of the story.

HORSES EVERYWHERE

Armies moved at walking pace once they left the railroads, and depended on horses and mules for almost all transport and much of their scouting.

DISEASE WAS THE MAIN KILLER

About two-thirds of deaths (Chapter 1) came from disease, a very old pattern. Real medical progress — like Jonathan Letterman's organised ambulance and field-hospital system in the Union army — saved lives, but modern medicine was still decades away.

DID EUROPE LEARN THE LESSONS?

European armies sent observers, but mostly concluded that the war had little to teach them, since American armies were largely volunteers without long professional traditions. A famous remark attributed to the Prussian commander Helmuth von Moltke, dismissing the war as "two armed mobs chasing each other around the country," is widely repeated but has never been reliably sourced. Either way, the trench lessons of Petersburg were not taken seriously until 1914 made them impossible to ignore.

Looking Back Across the Course

Thread	Where it appears
Economic power slowly turned into	The North's industrial advantage (Ch. 1), the blockade (Ch. 4), Grant's ability to replace losses (Ch. 9)

Thread**Where it appears****military victory****The West mattered
as much as the East**

The river war and New Orleans (Ch. 4), Vicksburg (Ch. 7), Atlanta and the march (Ch. 8)

**Victory was political
as much as military**

Fort Sumter's first shot (Ch. 2), Antietam and emancipation (Ch. 5), Atlanta and Lincoln's re-election (Ch. 8)

**Black Americans
shaped the war's
outcome**

Emancipation as a war measure (Ch. 5), Milliken's Bend (Ch. 7), the freedpeople following Sherman (Ch. 8), the Crater and the entry into Richmond (Ch. 9)

**Famous stories need
checking**

Ruffin's "first shot" (Ch. 2), "Stonewall" (Ch. 3), "Damn the torpedoes" (Ch. 4), Little Round Top's fame and the "high-water mark" (Ch. 6), Vicksburg's Fourth of July (Ch. 7), "War is hell" (Ch. 8)

A BRIDGE BETWEEN TWO ERAS

The fairest verdict is that the Civil War sat between two kinds of war. Its soldiers still loaded by hand, moved on foot and horseback, and died mostly of disease. But its railroads, telegraphs, ironclads, mass conscription, trench lines, and attacks on an enemy's whole economy looked forward to 1914. *Military History: World War I* picks up exactly where those lessons were finally, and very expensively, learned.

Questions to Sit With

If most firefights were still fought at short range, what does that suggest about why the war was so deadly?

Which single development covered in this course do you think did most to decide the outcome: railroads, the blockade, trench warfare, or emancipation?

Why might professional European armies have been reluctant to learn

from a war fought mostly by volunteers?

Quick Reference — Chapter 10

- The rifled musket with the Minié ball was accurate at long range in tests, but historians such as Griffith and Hess argue most combat still happened at short range
- Trench warfare, especially the 30-mile lines at Petersburg and the mines at Vicksburg and the Crater, is the strongest "modern" feature
- Railroads (25,000 men moved 1,200 miles in about 12 days in 1863) and the telegraph transformed movement and command
- Ironclads and the first submarine kill changed naval warfare; the blockade was economic warfare against a whole society
- Conscription (Confederacy April 1862, Union March 1863) and the New York draft riots show a war that reached the whole home front
- Not modern: mostly muzzle-loaders, horse transport, and disease as the main killer; European observers largely ignored the lessons
- Verdict: a war between two eras, anticipating the First World War

Course Complete

This closes **Military History: The US Civil War**. For slavery, emancipation as politics, and Reconstruction, see **US History**; for the earlier American war, see **Military History: The War of US Independence**; and for where this war's lessons were finally learned, see **Military History: World War I**.