

GETTYSBURG, WHAT IF?

BY

JAMES MORSE

THE CHIT CHAT CLUB

1992

GETTYSBURG

JAMES R. MORSE
1992

WHAT IF ?

I am a firm believer in the uniqueness and greatness of the United States of America. It has provided democracy, freedom of speech and religion, and great opportunities to all peoples of the world. It is not a perfect system and very frustrating at times, as we are witnessing today with the budget crisis, but it has done more for mankind than any other political system. Prior to 1776 the rights of the individual hardly existed. The Christian religion which had started nearly two thousand years earlier had not noticeably improved the life of the common man. Was the founding of the United States just a chance of event or was there some divine providence that brought Jefferson, Washington and the other great and selfless founders together to create the framework of democracy that we enjoy with equal rights for all and freedom of religion and speech ?

When one speaks of the Battle of Gettysburg, the first thought that usually comes to mind is President Lincoln's Gettysburg address, a masterful speech given in the fall of 1863 that will be forever remembered. What is not generally appreciated is that this battle was possibly the closest the United States of America has come to being changed from what we know it to be today into possibly two nations. In my opinion, no wars or other events since the British surrendered in 1781 up until the present, threatened the country's continuity as did the Battle of Gettysburg. Wars and military conflicts have been an ongoing part of man's history and a major force in shaping our nation and civilization. Individual battles have

been won or lost often by one person's decision or act, a chance event of weather or by some other seemingly small thing, even when quantitative factors of men and equipment would have indicated otherwise. The battle of Gettysburg was lost by the South, not necessarily won by the North.

My interest in this subject began nearly fifty years ago when I had the unique opportunity to visit the Gettysburg battlefield with Douglas Southall Freeman then editor of the Richmond, Virginia newspaper and at that time a renowned authority on the War Between The States. I remember yet looking from the Emmitsburg Road at the route of Pickett's charge up the hill, which seemed so very steep to me, to Cemetery Ridge and wondering at the bravery of the Southern soldiers and wondering too why anyone would have ordered such a charge. On the other hand it was impossible not to wonder what if the charge had been successful and the Battle of Gettysburg a victory for the South what would have been the outcome of the war and the United States? This Question has been with me ever since and now is my opportunity to review it and put it to rest.

It is not intended that this paper go into the causes of the Civil War or as called by the South, "The War Between The States". When the war started in the Spring of 1861 not many people thought it would be serious and no one thought that it would last very long. States' rights were the issue and few people shared Lincoln's fervor for maintaining the United States of America as one nation or understood the long term consequences of not opposing secession. Most Southerners realized that slavery would not last forever but were very concerned about states rights and did not begin to comprehend Lincoln's resolve.

It is now June of 1863 and there have been ~~no more~~. The only fighting in 1861 was the battle of Bull Run; both sides were new at war and 3000 casualties were relatively light in terms of subsequent battles. By 1862 the battles of ~~Shiloh, Second Manassas, Seven Days, Antietam, and Fredricksburg~~ had also been fought. Total casualties in these battles were in excess of 110,000 men on both sides but had not brought any prospects for resolution to the conflict. In the Spring

5

50

of 1863 the battle of Chancellorsville followed on the earlier battle of Fredricksburg which had taken place the previous December. The two battles which were victories for the South inflicting casualties on the North in excess of 21,000 men killed or wounded. The Northern Democratic Peace Party growing in strength contended that the South could not be conquered by force but might be won back by a generous peace. Morale in the Union armies and on the home front reached a new low in the early months of 1863. Captain Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. a future Supreme Court Justice who was recovering from the second of the three wounds he would receive in the war, wrote that "the army is tired with its hard and terrible experience. I've pretty much made up my mind that the South have achieved their independence." The staunchly patriotic editor of the Chicago Tribune vented his frustration and depression in a private letter on January 14: "An armistice is bound to come during the year '63. The Rebs can't be conquered by the present machinery".

The North was tired of the war and of the loss of human life. In March 1863 the Union Congress decreed that all male citizens aged 20 to 45 must enroll for the draft inasmuch as there were no longer enough volunteers for the war. President Lincoln was frustrated that he could not find a general who could overcome Robert E. Lee, who had controlled every battle against every Northern general he faced. Earlier in the year Lincoln's Declaration of Emancipation had freed the slaves of the South and confirmed emancipation as a Union war aim. Pressure from abolitionists as well as a military necessity for troops and laborers had eroded much of the discrimination against the blacks. Nevertheless, Lincoln's primary goal still was to prevent the secession of the Southern states and a limitation of state's rights. But the public's initial enthusiasm for the war was fading and the resolve of the Northern populous to continue the war was rapidly weakening.

Now to the Battle of Gettysburg.

After defeating the North at the battle of Chancellorsville in May of 1863, the

politicians of the South realized that the only way they could achieve their desire to protect their right to secede from the Union was to invade the North and win a major victory. They understood that the North had vastly more resources particularly in the form of manpower, and that time was against them. Even though the war in the West was going against the South and General Grant was laying siege to Vicksburg it was decided that the best course of action was for the South to use its resources to invade Pennsylvania. It was hoped that the North discouraged by the heavy human cost of the war would agree to a peaceful settlement if the South could win one more major battle particularly close to Washington, the capitol. In addition, Europe was suffering from a shortage of cotton caused by the North's blockade of the South and was seriously considering recognition of the South. This would also mean military aid. Therefore, in early June General Lee started his troops northward with Pennsylvania his goal. At this time he had in his command about 75,000 soldiers, probably the peak strength of the Army of Virginia and of the South itself. The army commanded by Lee had three corps led by Generals James Longstreet (the senior commander) Richard S. Ewell and A. P. Hill and a cavalry division under General J.E. B. Stuart. Lee after so many victories was undoubtedly very if not over confident about the ability of his forces and the weakness of his enemy.

Earlier in May after the battle of Chancellorsville General Lee and Longstreet had spent the better part of a week together discussing strategy. Longstreet who had seen many battles up close and knew that attacking well established defensive works was extremely costly in lives. As a result he had developed a theory for offensive strategy and defensive tactics. Up to this time the Army of North Virginia under Lee had never made a direct frontal assault on defensive positions but had fought either defensive battles such as Antietam and Fredericksburg or battles of maneuvering such as Second Manassas, and Chancellorsville where by skillful tactics he forced the North to attack him in defensive positions. The most recent battle at Chancellorsville, although a Southern

victory, had cost the life of General Jackson as he was leading a flanking attack against the right flank of the Northern forces commanded by General Joe Hooker. The immensity of this loss in terms of its impact on the effectiveness of Lee's forces was not realized until later. But it is possible the loss effected Lee's desire to again send his leading general on independent operations. Longstreet appalled not only at the cost to the North for its offensive actions but at the South's losses from frontal attacks at Malvern Hill and other battles earlier in the war tried to get a commitment from Lee that there would be flanking movement in this campaign to the North and no direct assaults thereby conserving the lives of his soldiers. According to many biographers' reports on this meeting Lee was noncommittal and did not give any indication that he would not attempt frontal assaults. Nevertheless, Longstreet left the meeting believing that it was generally agreed that attacks on defensive positions would be avoided. This misunderstanding led to unexpected consequences. Subsequent to the battle of Gettysburg, Lee would never again make a direct attack against fortified works fighting mainly defensive actions.

It is now late June and The Army of North Virginia has entered the southern part of Pennsylvania occupying Carlisle, Chambersburg and Fayetteville. Lee's army was strung out over a 50 mile area. They were living off the land but were very careful to requisition food and supplies in ways that least antagonized the local populace. The men were surprised by the prosperity of the area compared to the situation in the South and by the indifference of the people to the Southern cause. On June 30 in Cashtown Henry Heth a brigade commander in A. P. Hill's corp requested permission to go to a town about ten miles east where he had heard there was a supply of shoes something the army always needed. Thus began the Battle of Gettysburg.

One of the key elements of the events of the next several days was the absence of General Jeb Stuart who was normally the eyes of the army with his calvary men and able to know both the location and strength of the enemy forces. .

Stuart, who loved independent operations was off on a scouting mission that took him away from the main body of Lee's army. Otherwise his men could have made a quick reconnaissance of Gettysburg to ascertain what Northern forces might be there. At this time Lee had no understanding of where or of what size the forces were that opposed him and had only recently learned that General Meade had taken the Union command as Lincoln yet again another change in his generals by relieving General Hooker. Therefore, as Heth's brigade started off early on the morning of July 1 for Gettysburg, they had no real idea of what to expect in the way of opposition. He did not know that Meade had ordered a force of cavalry to inspect Gettysburg or that they had positioned themselves just west of the city. As Heth approached the outskirts of Gettysburg early that morning he met a major force of Northern troops and the fighting began immediately. The battle began to grow as more of Lee's troops under the command of General Ewell arrived from north of the town down the Carlisle Road. The fierce sound of gunfire brought General Lee himself down the Chambersburg road close to Seminary Ridge. He was soon joined by Longstreet, at about nine in the morning who immediately upon seeing the situation of strong forces in front proposed a flanking action around the left flank of the Northern troops. It is reported that Lee responded negatively to the idea and with a very flushed face and an angry thrust of his arm toward the enemy said "If the enemy is there tomorrow, we must attack him". Longstreet had never disagreed before more openly and forthrightly with Lee and was surprised at Lee's impatience to attack the enemy. He was still remembering the May meeting where he understood that direct attacks were to be avoided and that a major engagement would be fought only if they were attacked in a location of their choice.

Nevertheless, the battle continued to build all day with Southern forces coming in from the north and the west of Gettysburg and Northern forces gathering from the east. The Southern forces were able to push the enemy back and by four pm the Federal corps were in retreat through Gettysburg to Cemetery Hill to the south. Federal losses for the day numbered slightly over 9000, including some 3000 captured compared with Confederate losses of about 6500. The day's action had

resulted in a Confederate victory, but Federal forces held onto the high ground south of Gettysburg, where their positions were soon to be strengthened by reinforcements as July 1 ended.

It is now Thursday July 2, 1863, a fateful day. Both Lee and Longstreet were up at day break assessing as best they could without Stuarts calvary the strength of the Federal position in preparation for an offensive. Lee indicated that he wanted to attack the Union army and wanted Longstreet to prepare his men. Longstreet opposed the idea of an offensive strategy, and for a second time within twenty four hours voiced his strong objection. He again suggested a broad turning movement around the enemy's left flank that would place the Confederate army between the Federal capital and Meade's army. The Northerners would then have to assail entrenched Southerners with hopefully the same results achieved as at Fredericksburg and elsewhere. After a heated discussion Lee once again rejected the proposal. It is important to appreciate that at this time Lee was revered as a national hero in the South and to disagree forcibly and publicly with him twice in a short period of time was unheard of and is indicative of Longstreet's strong feelings on the matter. Subsequent actions would seem to indicate according to a number of biographers that from that point in the battle until its end Longstreet was resentful, his conduct reflecting the attitude that Lee had made a bad decision and now he could live with it and if the battle is lost it his problem, not Longstreet's.

Lee and his generals on July 2 while continuing to observe the North's position and to send out scouts to gather information on the enemy's disposition, were still hindered by the lack of Stuart's calvary who did not arrive until later that day. In the meantime more and more Federal as well as Confederate troops were arriving at the battle site. At about eleven o'clock Lee gave direct orders to Longstreet to begin an attack against the center of the North's position. Longstreet began to position his troops but not with the sense of urgency as he had usually

shown; several false marches and counter marches wasted time. Early in the afternoon General Hood who commanded one of the three divisions of Longstreet's corps and was on the right flank of the army opposite the left flank of the enemy sent a dispatch to Longstreet that Big Round Top and south appeared to be empty of Northern troops. Longstreet's response was that "Lee has ordered us to attack and I will not change his orders". Finally at about four o'clock the attack Lee had ordered earlier in the day against the center of the Federal position began. The attack was uncoordinated and the battle raged on until after dark. Although the Southerners fought valiantly, the Northern troops had had all day to prepare their positions and were ready and Southern losses as well as Northern were heavy. Over 9000 casualties were suffered by each side in this second day of fighting, July 2. This was the day of such memorable fights as the Devil's Den, the Peach Orchard and Culp's Hill.

Lee's confidence was unshaken by the events of July 2 and he remained firm in the belief that his troops were unbeatable. That night, he ordered Longstreet, who had been reinforced by Major General George Pickett's division with nearly fifty-eight hundred Virginians to renew his assault on the Federal's main position on Cemetery Ridge. However, the orders although given in writing were not completely clear and would lead to confusion the next day. Moreover, Longstreet was embittered by the losses of the previous day from attacking fortified positions. At sunrise Lee rode to Longstreet's camp and found him not organizing the assault ordered the previous night but still considering a movement around the left flank of Meade's army and beyond Big Top to the rear of the Federal's position. Lee with impatience rejected the proposal and pointing toward Cemetery Ridge said that the attack would be there. Once again Longstreet objected as strongly as he could, but Lee insisted the attack go as he had planned. Lee rode with Longstreet to a point on the Emmitsburg road and indicated exactly where the assault should be. It was the first time under Lee's command that a frontal assault of this magnitude was undertaken by the Army of Virginia.

Preparations for the attack consumed the entire morning of July 3. Some of the delays were undoubtedly unavoidable but there is no question that Longstreet did not move with the urgency and ability that he had demonstrated in previous preparations for attack. Almost fourteen thousand men had to be positioned for the attack. There were orders and counter orders. It was reported that Longstreet's mood darkened as the day progressed but that he continued to expose himself at the most dangerous parts of the battle line. He is reported to have said that he believed the attack would fail. Finally at about three in the afternoon Pickett's famous charge was mounted and failed. To bring this charge into better perspective image that the South's battle line was at the foot of California Street and the North's battle line was at Stockton Street or a distance of about 1000 yards. The elevation to Grant street is about the same as Cemetery Ridge from the beginning of Pickett's charge. From the start of the charge Pickett's men were exposed to cannon fire and from Sansome Street on were within deadly rifle range. Although some of Pickett's men did reach the Union lines they were repulsed. The North had had nearly two days to prepare their defenses. This charge was the high water mark of the war for the South but cost the South nearly 5600 casualties. The fighting faded but continued until dark. The battle of Gettysburg was over, with both sides too exhausted to continue fighting. Federal losses numbered approximately 23,000 and Confederate losses ranged between 20,000 and 28,000. Lee immediately assumed responsibility for the failure of his army to win a deciding victory and began a withdrawal.

On July 3 General U. S. Grant was completing his siege and capture of the town of Vicksburg on the Mississippi river opening up this waterway to the North for the first time since the war had started. This campaign had started in December 1862 and it had been long, bitter and frustrating time that had seemed interminable to the people of the North. While the capture of Vicksburg would eventually be as important in the defeat of the South as the event in Gettysburg, it

was over shadowed by the latter battle.

Now comes "What if"?

If on July 2 General Lee after having disagreed on July 1 had approved more characteristically Longstreet's plan to go around the Northern army's left flank and find a defensive position between General Meade and Washington what would have been the outcome? Or what if Longstreet had swallowed his pride, obeyed orders and had made a vigorous attack against what was at that time a somewhat disorganized Union army defense on Cemetery Ridge. At that time the Union army had not strengthened its left flank meaningfully because the main pressure from Lee's army had been on their right flank at Culp's Hill. If Lee had allowed Longstreet to make an aggressive flanking attack in the morning of July 2 possibly he could have proceeded with his corps to a position behind the left of Union forces and established defensive works. This would have required a march of not much more than 5 or 6 miles. General Jackson had marched more than 10 miles to flank the Union army in the battle of Chancellorsville. With Longstreet in a good defensive position by mid day on July 2 where the Union army would have been forced to make immediate attacks to keep open their roads to Washington. Even a minor defeat to the North at this point could have panicked officials in Washington, could have caused Vicksburg to continue to hold out and could have resulted in the immediate recall of General Grant to Washington to save the Union. The people of the North in their frustration of yet another major costly defeat could have brought great pressure on President Lincoln to settle the war and let the South go, as the price of continuing the effort was becoming too great. At this time it is doubtful that Lincoln could have withstood such pressure.

There has been a flood of books on the Civil War, its major participants and its battles. I have read a great many of them and have always been surprised that no writer "to my knowledge" has ever made the point of how close the South came to winning the battle of Gettysburg and what would have been the consequences if

they had won. Starting immediately after peace in 1865 books were written on every aspect of the war. The Battle of Gettysburg was certainly the most notable major event of the war and was fought and refought by both sides in massive detail. General Lee was never personally blamed for the lack of victory. He was so revered as the hero of the South that no one would find fault with him. In an 1886 book on Lee's life by James D. McCabe the question was raised of why a flanking action was not attempted as Longstreet had recommended, but it never blamed Lee for not doing so. In another book written in 1871 John Esten Cooke, a very popular writer about the war raised the question again about why a direct frontal attack was made instead of some sort of flanking action. Nevertheless, the author felt it was the failure of Pickett's charge that lost the battle. Many more books were written some saying that Lee was sick during the battle and others saying that failure was due to Longstreet's delay in attacking when ordered. It was easy for Southerners to blame Longstreet after the war because he became a Republican. Douglas Southall Freeman in a definitive biography on Lee in 1935 summed it up as "It was Lee's misfortune at Gettysburg that he had to employ in an offensive operations a man whose whole inclination was toward the defensive". However, prior to this battle their roles were actually reversed. As an aside, Freeman's interest in Robert E. Lee came about when he was writing a six volume biography of George Washington and realized that both men had married women of the Custis family.

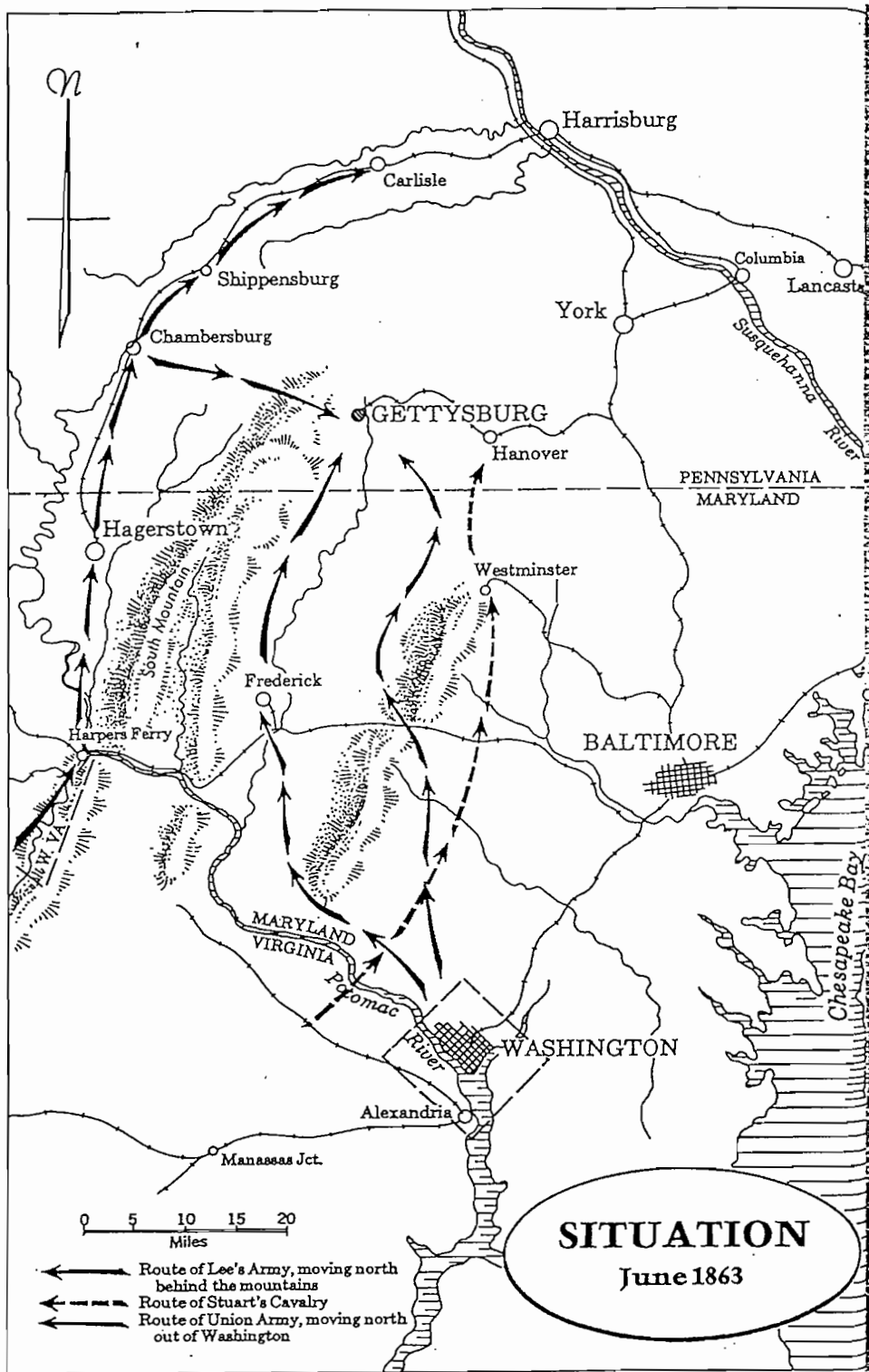
At the centennial in the mid 1960s another flood of books was published on all aspects of the war, giving more detailed examination to the events but still with no discussion of how close the outcome really was in the battle of Gettysburg. Nevertheless, interest in the Civil War continues even today with yet more books and movies. A new book in 1995 by Emory Thomas on R. E. Lee offers no new insights on this battle but is very analytical in describing what happened. Another book from several years ago by Jeffery Wert on General Longstreet was one of the few books in depth ever published on this important participant and certainly the most favorable. This volume takes Longstreet's position at the battle of Gettysburg and dismisses his tardiness in making the attacks ordered by Lee as being

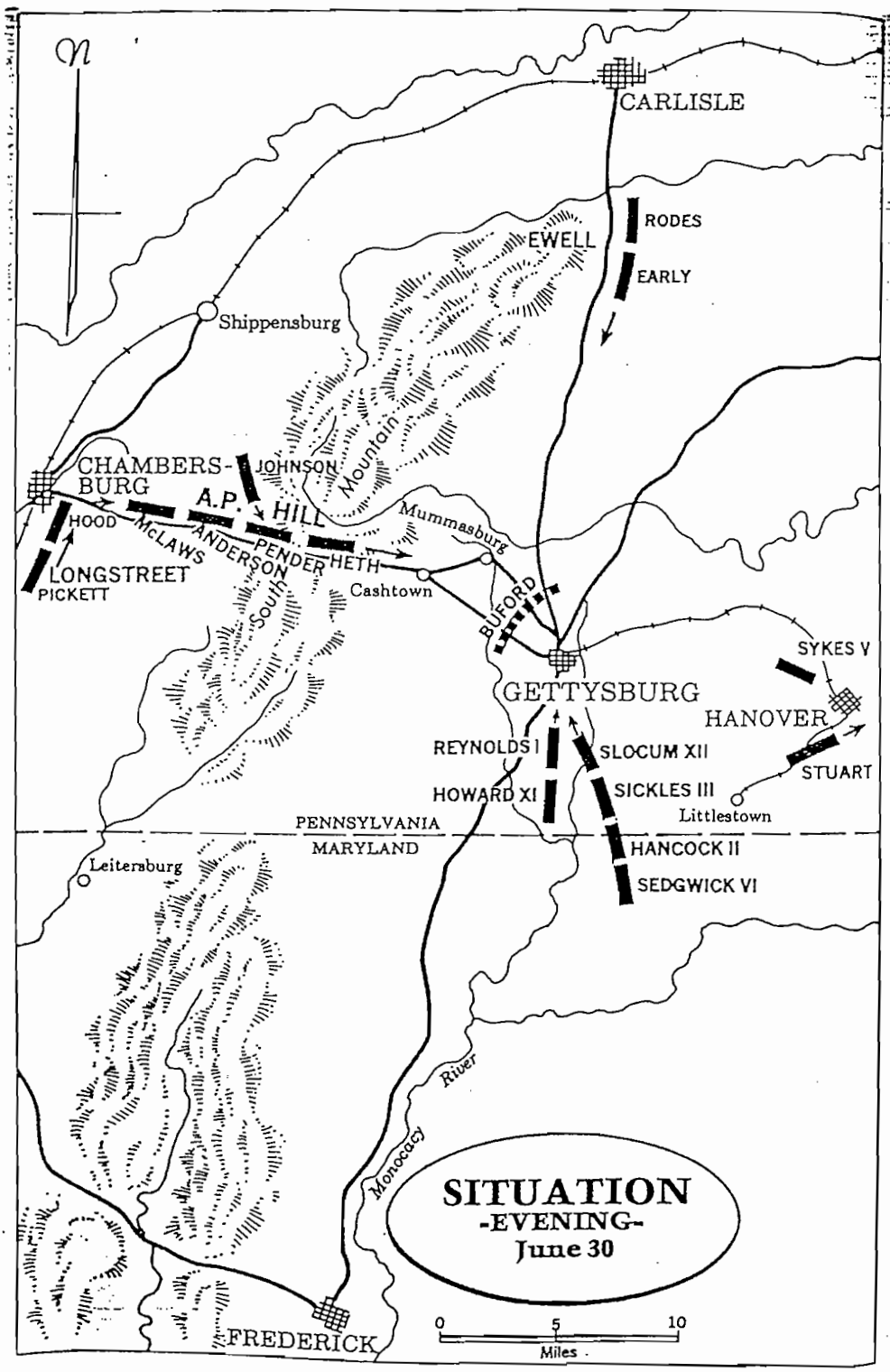
unavoidable. Finally there is a C-D-ROM available on the Battle of Gettysburg showing the battle minute by minute as it developed, accompanied by a narrator and the sound of guns and battle. It allows the C-D Rom player to fight the battle as he wants. I won by making a flanking action on the Union's army left flank. So interest in the Civil War and its battles continues but with to me at least, with surprisingly little appreciation of how close the South came to victory at Gettysburg.

If Lee had won the battle of Gettysburg and if the North had let the South secede from the Union and form a new nation would we still exist as two nations today? No one knows. But remembering Tom Jukes talk last Fall about how the earth appears to be so unique in the universe that one has to wonder about divine providence's role in events makes me wonder about the Battle Of Gettysburg. Did the divine providence to stop a break up of the United States intervene and make Generals Lee and Longstreet act in a different than expected manner on July 1 and 2 ? Again, no one knows, but it was a much closer decision for the history of the United States than is generally appreciated.

GETTYSBURG

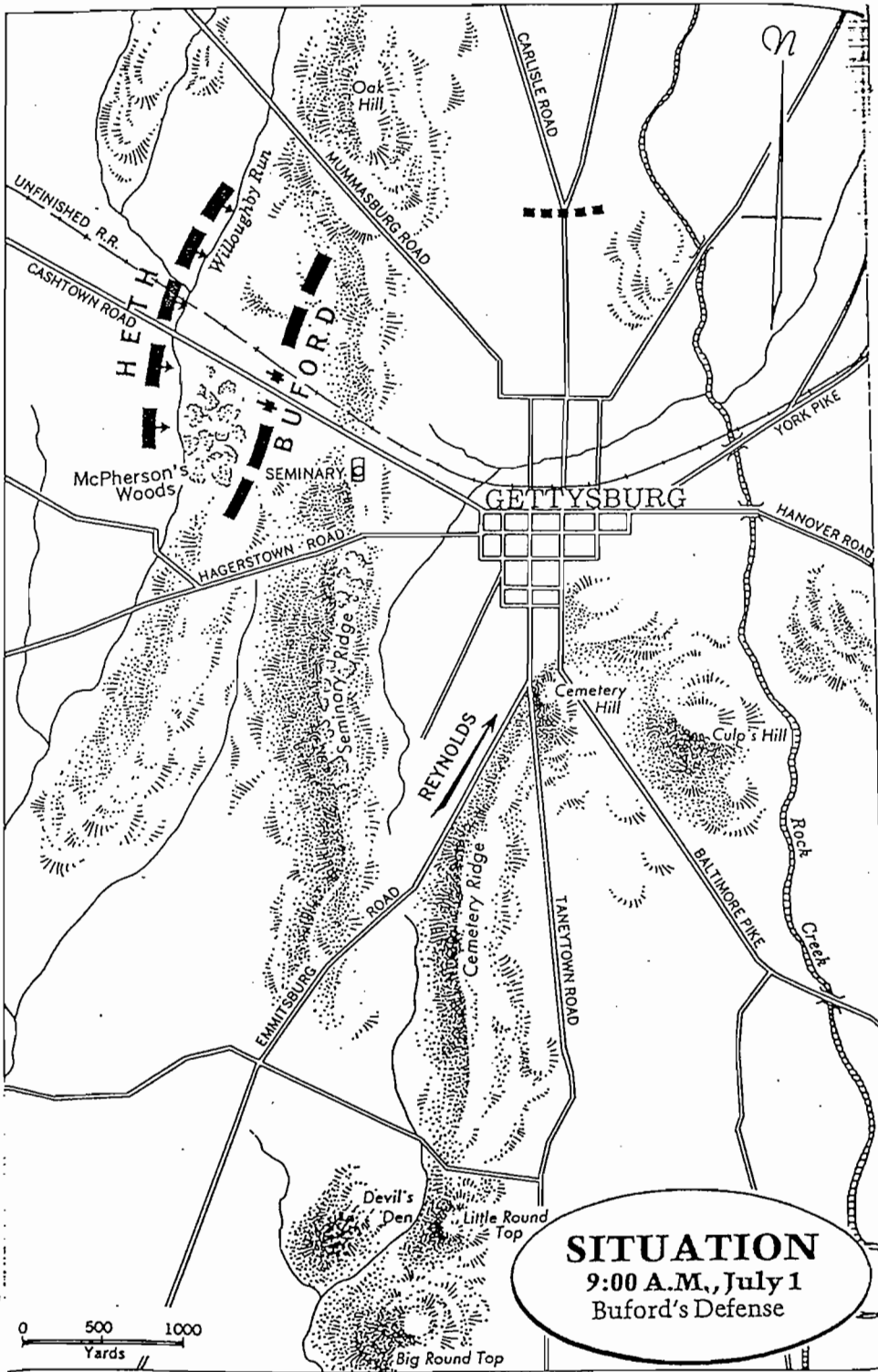
June 30 - July 3,
1863



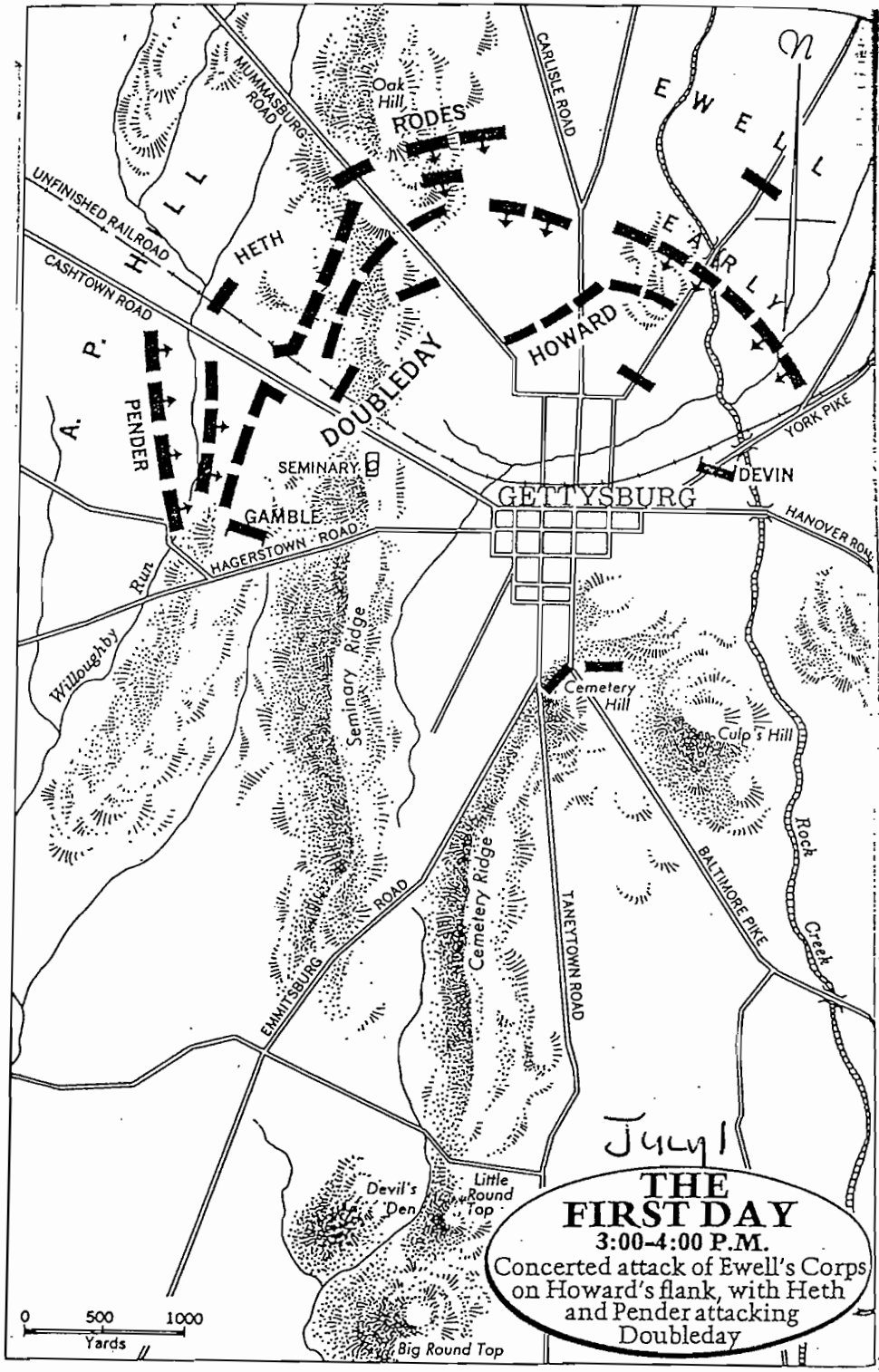


SITUATION
-EVENING-
June 30

0 5 10
 Miles

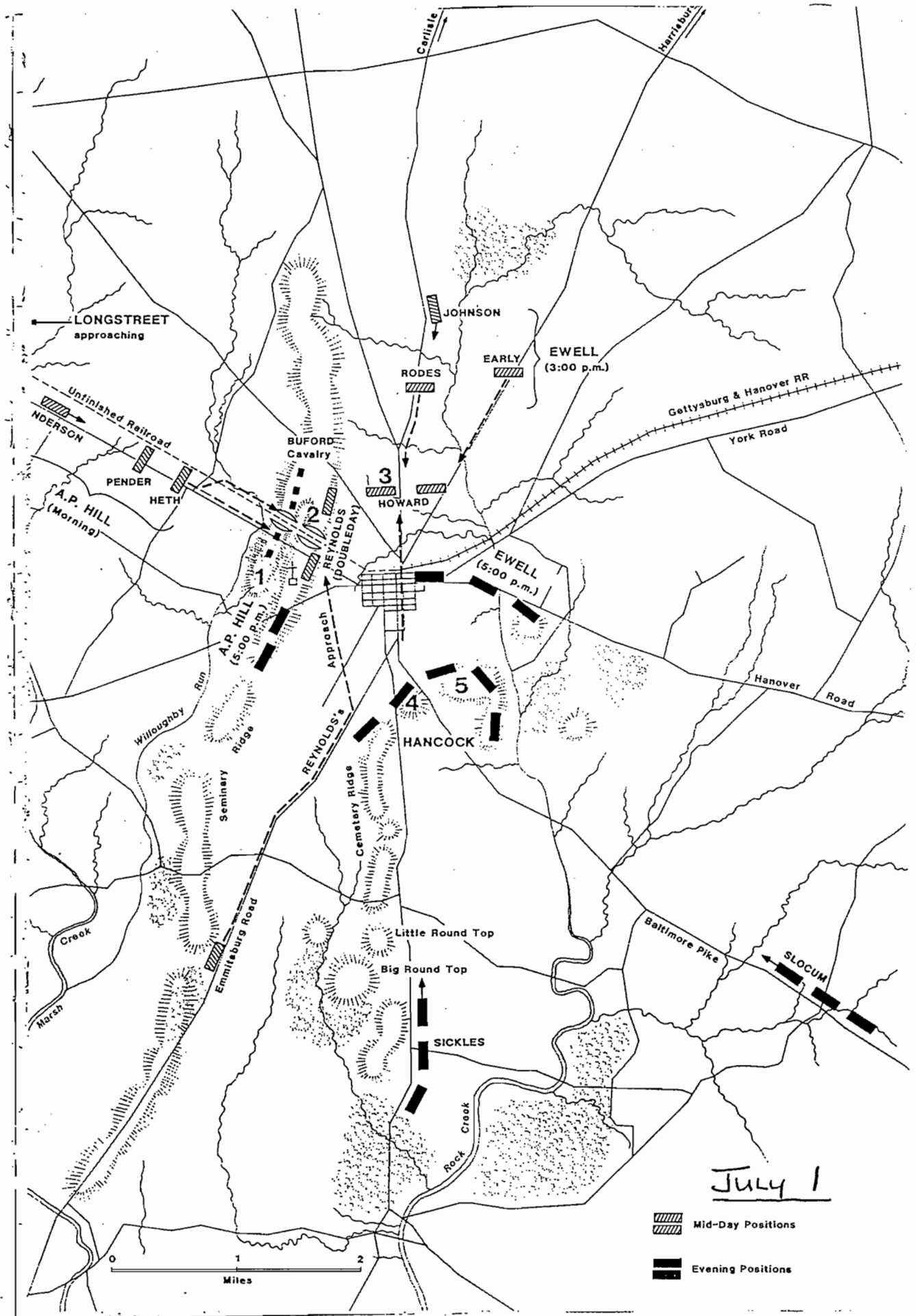


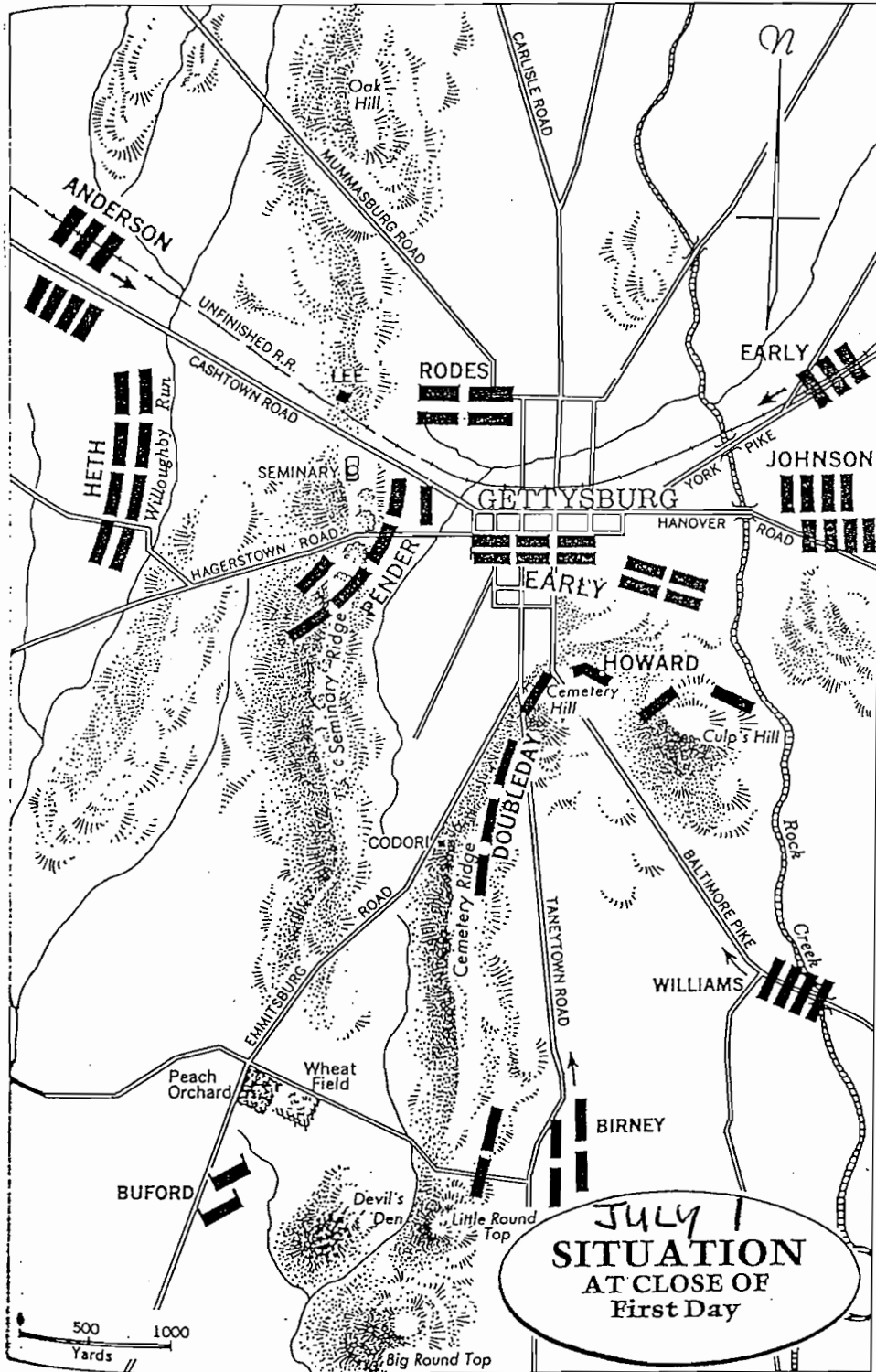
SITUATION
 9:00 A.M., July 1
 Buford's Defense

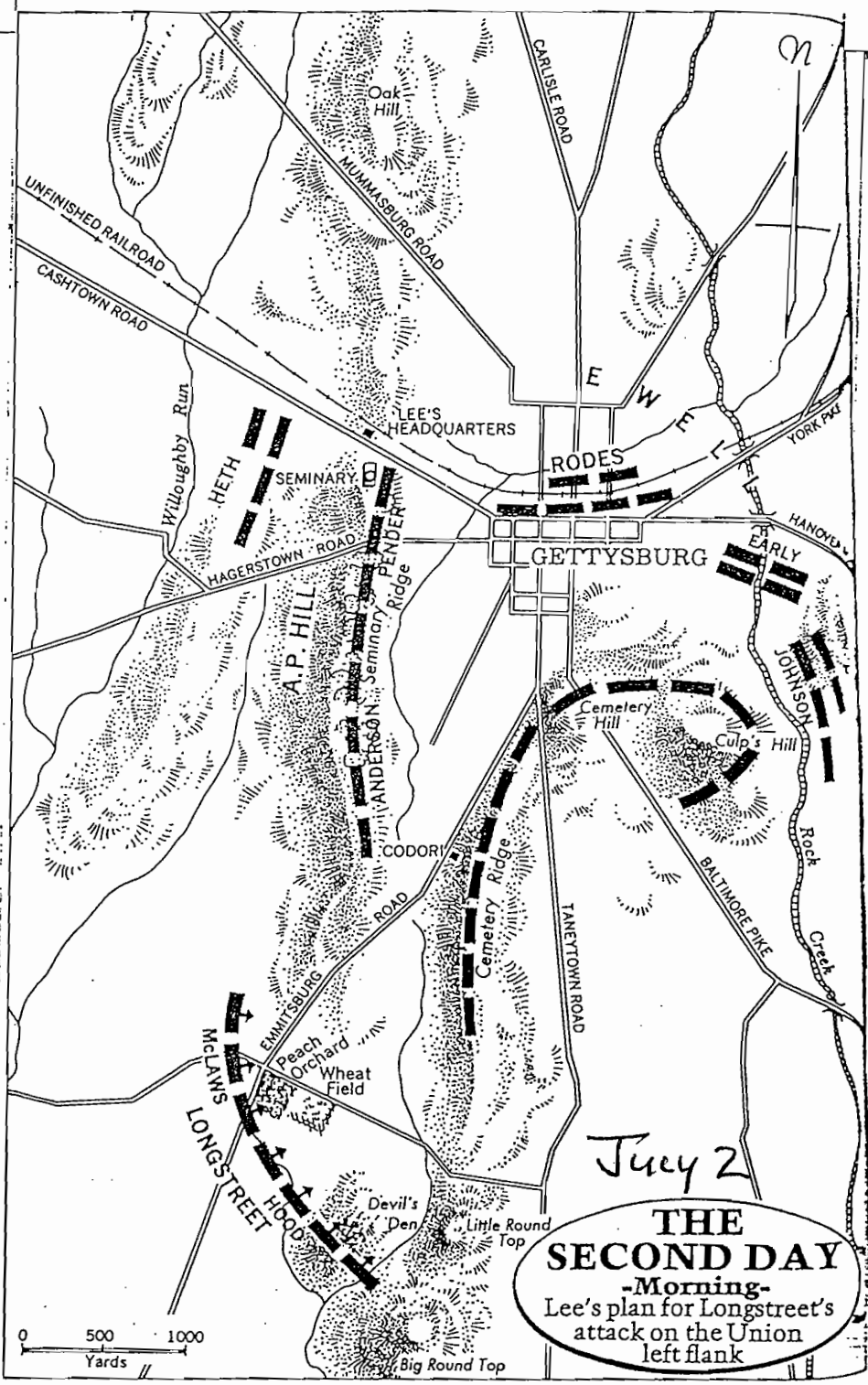


July 1
THE FIRST DAY
 3:00-4:00 P.M.
 Concerted attack of Ewell's Corps
 on Howard's flank, with Heth
 and Pender attacking
 Doubleday

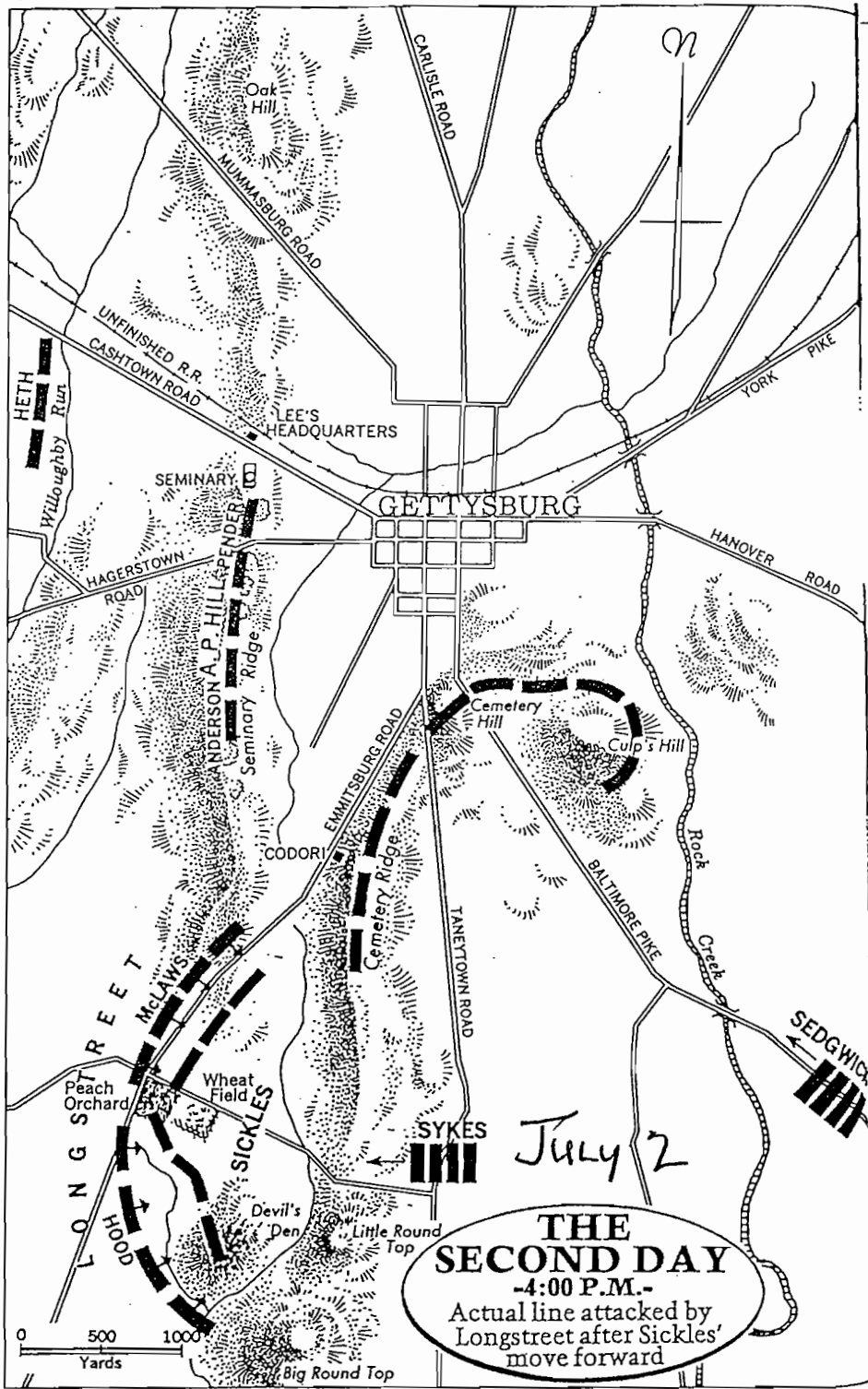
0 500 1000
 Yards



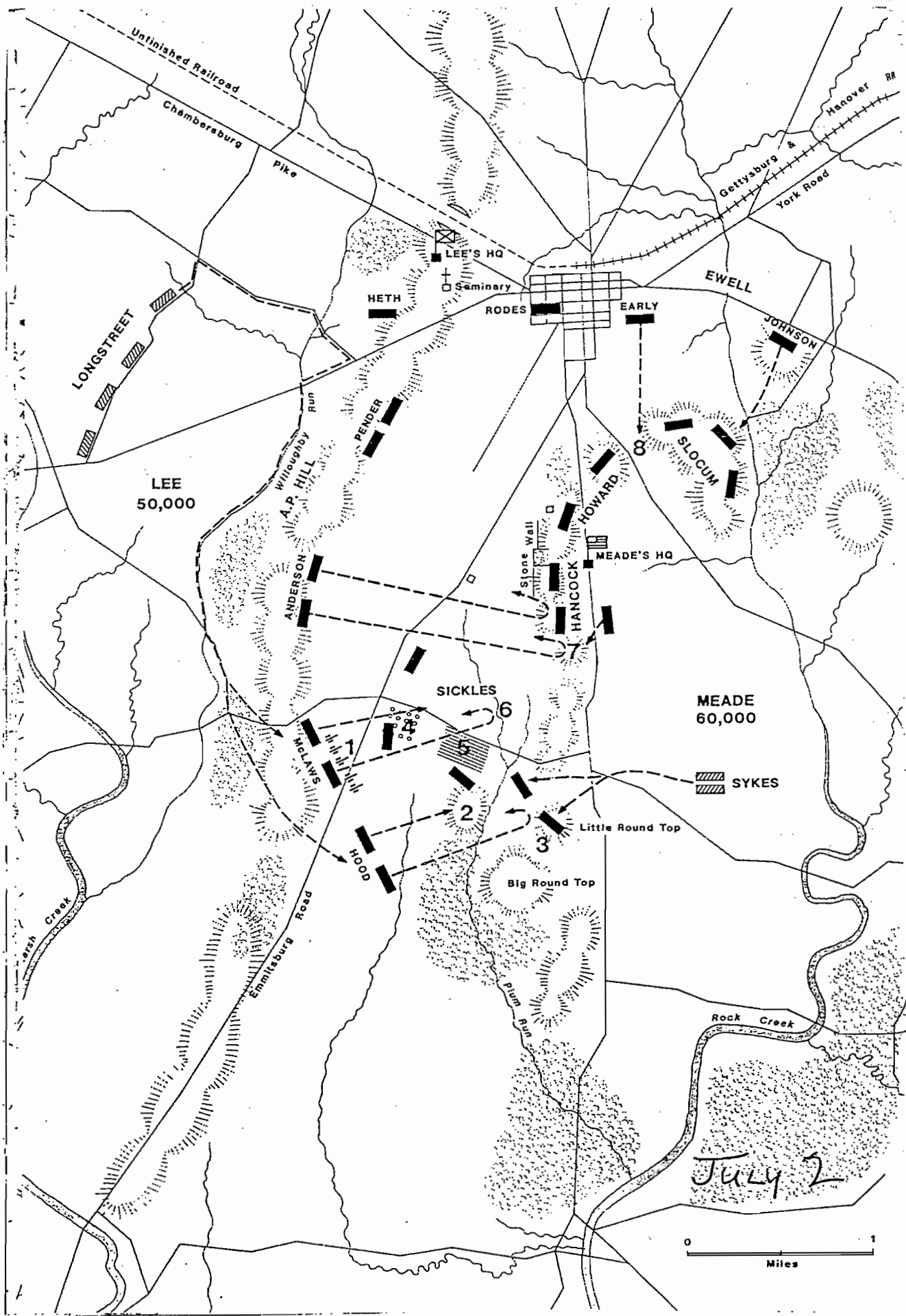




July 2
THE SECOND DAY
 -Morning-
 Lee's plan for Longstreet's
 attack on the Union
 left flank



THE SECOND DAY
 -4:00 P.M.-
 Actual line attacked by Longstreet after Sickles' move forward



LEE
50,000

MEADE
60,000

SYKES

July 2

