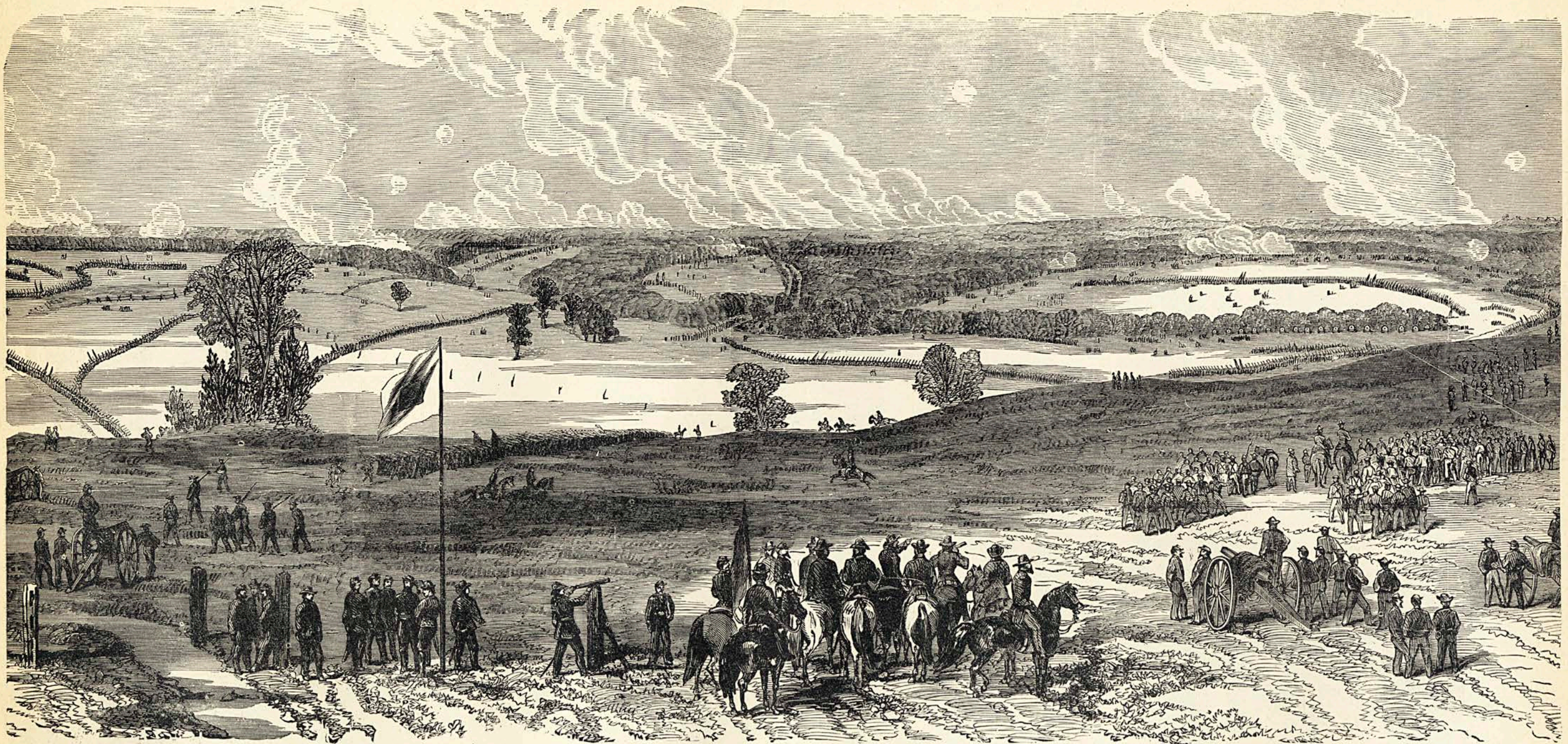




BATTLE OF THE WILDERNESS, FRIDAY, MAY 6, 1864.—FEDERAL FORCES UNDER GENERAL U. S. GRANT; CONFEDERATE FORCES UNDER GENERAL ROBERT E. LEE.—FROM A SKETCH BY J. BECKER.

The battle, or, more properly, battles, of the Wilderness, during the second week of May, 1864, opened the great campaign of the Union Army of the Potomac against Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. Ulysses S. Grant had been made commander-in-chief of all the armies of the United States, and was personally leading the troops in Virginia, though Meade retained his place as ranking major-general and nominal commander. Grant's idea was that the proper object of attack was not Richmond, but Lee's army, and his purpose was to follow that wherever it went and attack it as often as possible—to force the fighting from the start. The campaign opened by the movement of crossing the Rapidan, which was accomplished by the end of the 4th of May. South of the river was a large tract of rough, hilly, ravine-cut, sparsely inhabited country, almost covered by brush and pine woods, and traversed only by narrow roads. It was a country in which cavalry could do little, and artillery be moved only with great difficulty. Grant proceeded very cautiously, expecting attack, and on the morning of the 5th received it. He was still in the heart of the woods and ravines, but he was prepared, and though the parts of his line of 100,000 men had no knowledge of what was happening elsewhere, for thickets and ridges hid everything but their own squad from view, the commander had his host well in hand and was ready. The first day's fighting was principally between Hancock and Longstreet, and each in turn repulsed and drove the other back. Toward the end of the day Longstreet was disabled, whereupon Lee took personal command and made an assault upon Hancock's line, which was almost successful. The losses on both sides had been very heavy, and to add to the horror, the woods were set on fire by the shooting, Hancock's breastworks burned, and his lines had to retreat before the flames, which at the same time protected them from the rebels, consumed the dead of both sides, and put to death many a wounded man who could not be saved from the conflagration. The next day the battle was fiercer and more general. Lee made the most determined assaults, hurling his whole army again and again upon the Union line, and men struggled and charged and withstood onsets in the midst of the rocks and forests and swamps, under falling trees and amid the smoke of burning brush, cannon-mouths and incessant musketry. Thousands were killed and many more thousands wounded and lost in the maze of woods. There is something peculiarly dreadful about this battle, with its awful concomitants of burning forest and inability to understand what others were doing, or to see whence would come the next on-surge of the enemy through the smoke-laden districts. On the night of the second day (May 6) Lee retired to his line of entrenchments, and swung his flank backward to protect his road to Richmond. The 7th of May was quiet except for cavalry engagements, but on the 8th Grant moved forward by the left flank and began those aggressive movements which brought on the battle of Spottsylvania, and ultimately carried him to the threshold of the Confederate capital.