

Introduction: A Fatal Mistake

“In front of General Longstreet the enemy held a position from which, if he could be driven, it was thought our artillery could be used to advantage in assailing the more elevated ground beyond.”

– General Robert E. Lee,
Army of Northern Virginia (July 31, 1863)¹

The battle at Gettysburg on July 2, 1863, is primarily remembered as one fought for control of Little Round Top, a small hill on the Army of the Potomac’s left flank. Although other terrain features also proved significant that day, including a farmer’s wheat field and a rocky ridge later known as “Devil’s Den,” Little Round Top overshadows all others in Gettysburg historiography. Confederate forces struck the position and Union forces repulsed the attack. The Northern army’s heroic defense saved the day and prevented the Southerners from capturing the high ground. This is the typical interpretation of the second day at Gettysburg.

In reality, another location played a greater part in Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s plan of attack, and inadvertently defined Union Major General George G. Meade’s defense. Major General Daniel E. Sickles, the controversial commander of the Army of the Potomac’s Third Corps, had orders to occupy Little Round Top, but he apparently considered another

¹ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, DC, 1880-1901), Series 1, vol. 27, pt. 2, 308. Hereafter cited as OR. All references are to Series 1 unless otherwise noted.

position more important. Lee and Sickles both valued roughly four acres of elevated terrain along the Emmitsburg Road as a key artillery platform. A farmer's fruit orchard, forever afterwards known as the Peach Orchard, sat on this elevation and became the scene of brutal combat on the afternoon of July 2. Not only did the Peach Orchard heavily influence the second day's fighting, but it also partially persuaded Lee to launch the disastrous assault known as "Pickett's Charge" on July 3. Clearly, the Peach Orchard was vital to both armies at Gettysburg. Yet, the story has often been overlooked by Gettysburg historians.

From a military perspective, a battle's outcome is often determined by effective evaluation of terrain and the resulting selection of positions. Terrain is defined as a "geographic area, a piece of land, ground" or "the physical features of a tract of land." The physical features of terrain include ridgelines, roads, fences, woodlots, and open farm fields. The works of military theorist Antoine-Henri Jomini and West Point instructor Dennis Hart Mahan influenced many Civil War commanders who studied at institutions such as the United States Military Academy at West Point. Both Jomini and Mahan prescribed rules for selecting offensive and defensive positions. Mahan considered topography, "or the study of the natural features of positions" as one of "the most important modern additions to the military art."²

While allowing for some evolution and terminology changes, many of the basic principles accepted by Civil War officers still exist today. A modern concept of terrain assessment expects leaders to evaluate ground through five aspects: key terrain that can give a marked advantage to combatants; observation to see and maintain effective fields of fire; cover and concealment to protect against enemy fire; obstacles to impede troop movements; and avenues of approach to reach an objective. General officers from both armies utilized similar concepts to varying degrees of success in and around the Peach Orchard.³

This terrain evaluation process is one of the few parallels between civilians and soldiers. Civilians use their own form of terrain assessment when deciding

2 Mahan, *An Elementary Treatise on Advanced Guard, Out-Post, and Detachment Service of Troops*, 63-65; Jomini, *Art of War*, 163-166. "Terrain," *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/terrain> (July 25, 2018).

3 This terrain assessment technique is often referred to as KOCO, or also OKCOA. This practice is also used in modern battlefield preservation. These same analytic techniques help the National Park Service at Gettysburg National Military Park determine "exactly which terrain features were significant to the outcome of the Battle of Gettysburg. By definition then, those features which were significant to the outcome of the Battle of Gettysburg automatically became the most significant features of the historic landscapes of the battlefield, and became our highest priority for preservation and rehabilitation." See "Battlefield Rehabilitation at Gettysburg National Military Park," <https://www.nps.gov/gett/learn/news/gett-battlefield-rehab.htm>.

where to build their homes and their lives. Is the land accessible? What obstacles exist? Are there open fields for farming? Is there shelter for concealment from the elements? This was particularly true in nineteenth century America when a family's livelihood often literally depended on their land.

The intersection of these assessments frequently causes collisions between armies and civilians. This was true at the Peach Orchard in Gettysburg. The roads and ridgelines that convinced an enterprising fruit dealer to build a better life for his family also cost the lives of countless soldiers. Military historians emphasize command decisions made by the general officers. The stories of civilians who lived there are often forgotten, but they too valued the same terrain and often for the same reasons.

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Confederate General Robert E. Lee had commanded the Army of Northern Virginia since June 1862. For more than one year, Lee's army provided the Confederacy with hope through a series of victories that frustrated the Northern army and the Lincoln Administration. The morale in Lee's army soared during the opening days of May 1863. Lee secured another success against the Army of the Potomac and Major General Joseph Hooker at the battle of Chancellorsville, in the wilderness of Spotsylvania County, Virginia. Lee fought with aggressive audacity, divided his outnumbered army, and stole the initiative from Hooker with a series of feints and marches.

Lee's aggressiveness culminated in a surprise flank attack unleashed by Lieutenant General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson on May 2. Jackson marched 30,000 of his men over narrow and circuitous country roads, and massed opposite the Army of the Potomac's exposed right flank. However, members of General Sickles's Third Corps discovered Jackson's flanking march while in progress but misinterpreted the movement as a Confederate retreat. This mistake contributed greatly to a general lack of preparedness within Federal lines. Major General Oliver Howard's Eleventh Corps held the Federal right flank. When Jackson launched the attack, the sight of thousands of screaming Rebels pouring out of the woods and undergrowth sent many of Howard's men to flight. Negative feelings against Howard's corps ran strong in the Army of the Potomac after this debacle, and every Union general hoped to avoid being caught in a similar situation the next time these two armies met.⁴

4 OR, 25/1: 386; Dodge, *The Campaign of Chancellorsville*, 70; Howard, "The Eleventh Corps at Chancellorsville," *Battles and Leaders*, 3:196-197; De Trobriand, *Four Years With the Army of the Potomac*, p. 440; Sears, *Chancellorsville*, 239, 256, 262, 264, 269. For a deeper discussion

Sickles's Third Corps was in a critical position again on the following morning, May 3. His infantry and artillery initially occupied a salient position in advance of the army's main line. Hooker decided to consolidate his lines into a defensive posture and reduce the chances of the Confederates catching Sickles in a crossfire from multiple sides. Hooker ordered the Third Corps to abandon Hazel Grove, an open grassy ridge of several hundred yards in length. Confederate artilleryist Colonel Edward Porter Alexander later described Hazel Grove as simply "a beautiful position for artillery."⁵

Brigadier General Charles Graham's infantry brigade and one battery fought as the rear guard during the Federals' evacuation of Hazel Grove. Advancing Southerners quickly outflanked Graham's men, and the Northerners withdrew. After their departure, Southern artillery rolled in as many as 28 cannon under Colonel Alexander. His gunners could see much of the Federal line from Hazel Grove, including Hooker's headquarters at the Chancellor house. Alexander placed an additional 14 guns in positions nearby and opened fire on Hooker's beleaguered army.⁶

"A converging fire of the enemy's guns from front, right, and left swept the ground," near the Chancellor house wrote New Yorker Josiah Favill, "round shot and shell filled the air about us, and confusion reigned supreme." Alexander considered Hooker's decision to remove Sickles from Hazel Grove "a fatal mistake." The Southern artilleryist added, "There has rarely been a more gratuitous gift of a battle-field."⁷

There was little doubt about Lee's tactical victory and "Fighting Joe" Hooker's humiliating defeat. Strategically speaking, however, the Confederate cause was no better after the battle than it was before. They had suffered dearly in terms of casualties, including the mortal wounding of the irreplaceable General Jackson. Both armies afterwards returned to a stalemate along the

of Sickles and the Third Corps's role in Jackson's attack and Howard's defense, see James Hessler, *Sickles at Gettysburg* (El Dorado Hills, CA, 2009), 55-58.

5 OR, 25/1: 390; *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 8 (hereafter *CCW*); Dodge, *The Campaign of Chancellorsville*, 126-128; Alexander, *Military Memoirs*, 342, 345; Sears, *Chancellorsville*, 193, 286, 312-313. Historian Stephen Sears, critical of Sickles's overall Chancellorsville performance, admitted that there was danger at Hazel Grove, but thought Sickles might have been capable of holding the position with seven brigades and 38 artillery pieces. Sears wrote, "And whatever Dan Sickles might have lacked in military judgment he could make up for with military pugnaciousness." See Sears, 313.

6 *CCW*, 8; De Trobriand, *Four Years with the Army of the Potomac*, 457; Doubleday, *Chancellorsville and Gettysburg*, 46; Dodge, *The Campaign of Chancellorsville*, 128; Sears, *Chancellorsville*, 316-320.

7 Favill, *Diary of a Young Army Officer*, 234-235; Alexander, *Military Memoirs*, 345.

Rappahannock River near Fredericksburg, Virginia. Nevertheless, the combatants learned lessons and many officers, including General Sickles, did not forget their experiences at Chancellorsville. As a result, Chancellorsville significantly influenced the combat that occurred at Gettysburg later that summer.

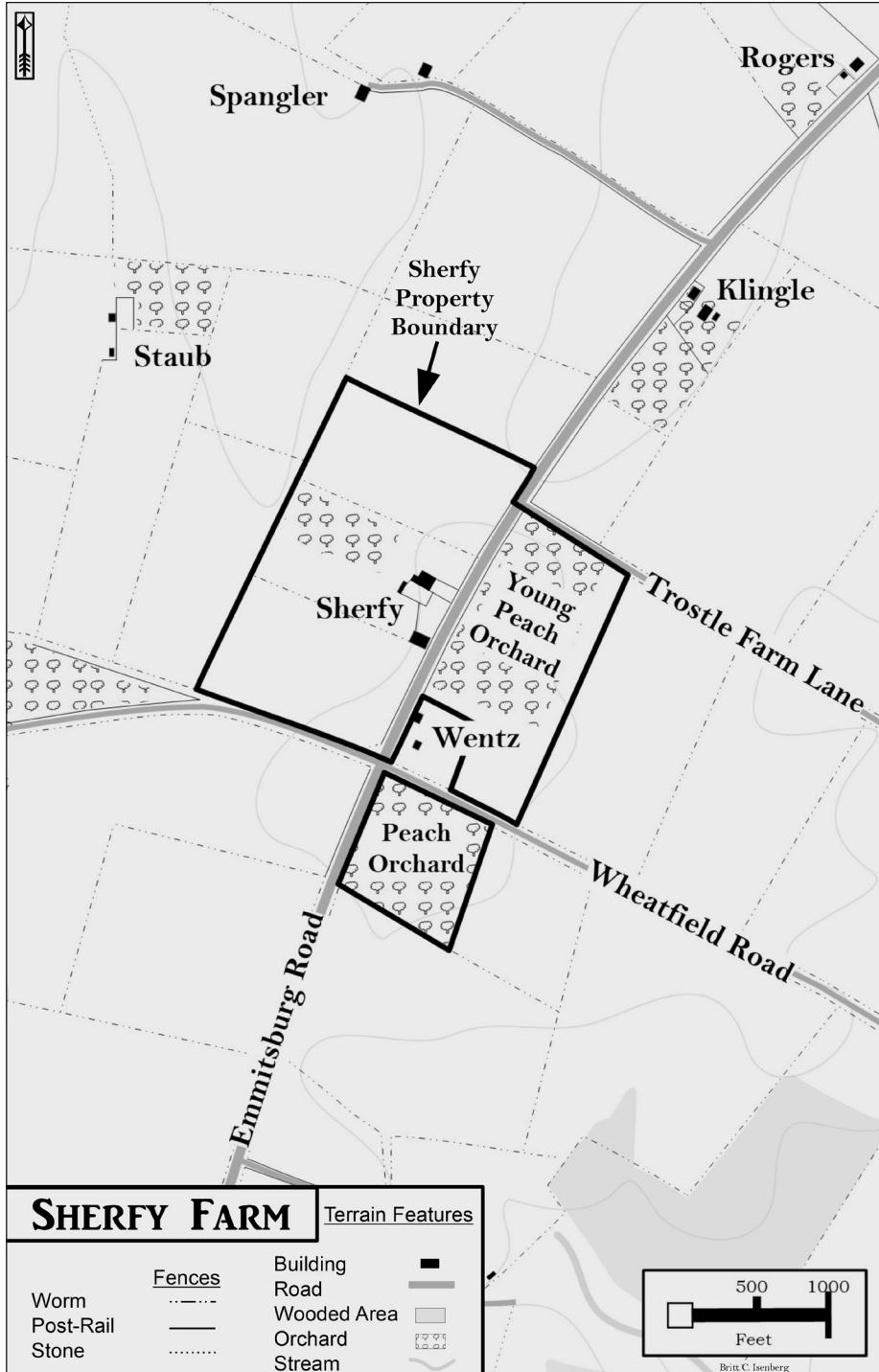
After subsequent meetings in Richmond, Lee proposed and received permission to undertake a summer campaign in Pennsylvania. His objectives included removal of occupying enemy armies from Virginia, resupply of his own army via the Northern economy, and alleviating Federal pressure in the western theater. Although a journey into enemy territory was risky, Lee wrote, “It was determined to draw it [Hooker’s army] from this position, and, if practicable, to transfer the scene of hostilities beyond the Potomac.” If the Army of Northern Virginia was “unable to attain the valuable results which might . . . follow a decided advantage gained over the enemy in Maryland or Pennsylvania, it was hoped that we should at least so far disturb his plan for the summer campaign.”⁸

Meanwhile, the final days of June 1863 were overcast and unseasonably cool in Cumberland Township, Pennsylvania. The prized peach trees of Joseph and Mary Sherfy, whose farm was roughly two miles south of the town of Gettysburg, displayed their scraggly limbs and blossoming fruit. The Sherfys’ mature peach orchard of four acres rewarded their years of dedicated care. The orchard sat about 300 yards south of their residence at the southeast corner of two intersecting country roads, the Emmitsburg and Millerstown roads. The more prominent of these two thoroughfares was the Emmitsburg Road, which ran on a roughly southwest to northeast axis between Gettysburg and Emmitsburg, Maryland. The Millerstown Road was an artery to nearby Fairfield, Pennsylvania. These roads conveniently located the Sherfys in an era of travel and commerce that was reliant on foot, horse, and wagon traffic.⁹

The Sherfys recently added another six-acre orchard to their holdings just across the Emmitsburg Road from their house. This lot consisted of 500 young trees that were not yet producing. The new orchard held great promise, however, and the family might soon double their annual peach harvest. This

8 OR, 27/2: 313; Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox*, 335 -337; Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, 5-9.

9 Elmore, “A Meteorological and Astronomical Chronology of the Gettysburg Campaign,” *Gettysburg Magazine* 13, 20. Daily high temperatures recorded between June 25 and June 30 ranged 63 to 79 degrees. The east to west Millerstown Road is referred to as the Wheatfield Road once east of the Emmitsburg Road intersection. It will be referred to as such in this text. The Wheatfield Road then connected the Emmitsburg and Taneytown roads, which was another path from Gettysburg to Maryland.





Postwar photo by William Tipton of the Sherfy house from the Emmitsburg Road looking southwest. Warfield Ridge can be seen in the background.

Sue Boardman Collection

was important because Joseph's primary means of supporting his family was as a "fruit dealer." Although horticultural techniques for peach trees had been around for generations, the practice was generally untapped in Adams County, Pennsylvania. The Sherfys undoubtedly looked forward to a productive summer of 1863.¹⁰

¹⁰ Copy of the Claims of Joseph Sherfy, National Archives, RG 92, Records of the Quartermaster General (hereafter Sherfy Claims), on file at Gettysburg National Military Park (hereafter GNMP), Library Box B-5; Georg, "The Sherfy Farm and the Battle of Gettysburg," GNMP, 6; United States Census of 1860, Cumberland Township, Adams County, Pennsylvania, house number 546. The Millerstown (or Wheatfield Road) has also been referred to as "The Peach Orchard Road" in some sources.

The Sherfys' peach orchard was prominent enough that it appeared as a separate entity, labeled "Peach Orchard," in the commercially popular 1858 Adams County wall map. Crops and orchards were otherwise not included on this map so the inclusion of "Peach Orchard" was something of a curiosity. Significantly, the map was the most readily available guide to Adams County, and both armies made use of it during the 1863 Gettysburg campaign. Due to the presence of the Peach Orchard on the map, generals became aware of its location in relation to the surrounding road network, and perhaps mistook it as an individual settlement of farms.¹²

By 1863, the prosperous 50-acre Sherfy farm had everything necessary for a self-sufficient and profitable agricultural business. Sherfy's acreage was not particularly large, but his real estate value of \$3,000 and personal property of approximately \$600 both surpassed the average. In addition to the house, other buildings included a barn, hog stable, corn crib, and windmill. Woodlots surrounded the periphery of the property, providing not only lumber but also foliage for grazing livestock. Hundreds of feet of fencing crisscrossed the property. Along the Emmitsburg Road ridge, the Peach Orchard sat as a crown at the center of it all.¹³

Sherfy built his modest empire in the years after his property purchases. He also practiced as a German Baptist Brethren minister at the Lower Marsh Creek Brethren Church. Whether they were participating in religious activities or working the farm, their close proximity to Gettysburg made Reverend Joseph and Mary's busy daily routine easier. The town provided a market to sell their fruit and also offered plenty of social opportunities.¹⁴

Joseph Sherfy celebrated his 51st birthday on June 12, 1863. He and his 46-year-old wife could easily boast of their relative prosperity, but their faith kept them from such indulgences. Together the couple had six children by 1863, three boys and three girls. They ranged in age from two to 20 years old. Mary's widowed mother, Catherine, also lived with the family since her husband's passing. The entire Sherfy family was well respected in the Gettysburg community.¹⁵

12 For a history of the development of the 1858 Adams County map and its importance to both armies, see Frassanito, *Early Photography at Gettysburg*, 7-10. The map could have been available either in its original form or as a tracing on other maps.

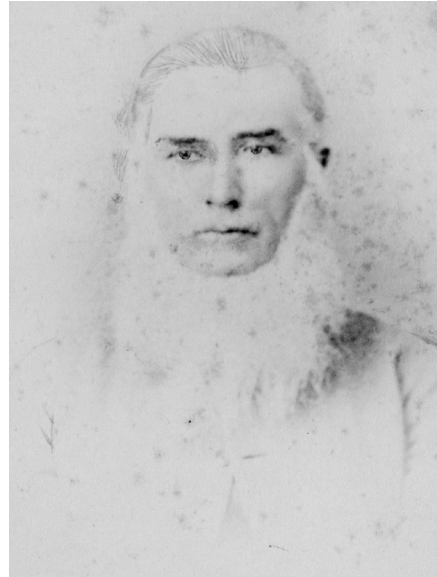
13 Georg, "The Sherfy Farm and the Battle of Gettysburg," 3, 6.

14 The German Baptist Brethren church is also known as Dunkard or Dunker.

15 Sherfy, *The Sherfy Family in the United States*, 195, 204, 207; Georg, "The Sherfy Farm and the Battle of Gettysburg," 4. The six children were Raphael (born 1843), Otelia (born 1845), Mary (born 1847), Anna (born 1850), John (born 1853), and Ernest (born 1860).

Reverend Joseph Sherfy

ACHS



The planting of a new orchard demonstrated Joseph's ambitions for expansion. Every member of the household played a part in successfully sustaining the operations. The Sherfy children's chores left little time for daydreaming about personal aspirations, but eldest son Raphael fostered ambition for something more than farming. He loved books, attended the local schools, and pursued a classical education to become a teacher. The uncertainty of unfolding events threatened Raphael's educational goals. He could choose not to fight in the war, but only if the war avoided him.¹⁶

The Sherfys' closest neighbors were John and Mary Wentz, an elderly couple both in their mid-seventies. Their one-and-a-half-story log and weatherboard home and other structures were roughly 200 yards from the Sherfy house, on the opposite side of the Emmitsburg Road. The Wentz house stood on a small lot just north of the mature peach orchard, along the Wheatfield Road. John Wentz acquired these modest holdings in 1836. John and Mary's children were all adults, and only one daughter still lived at home. Their oldest son Henry had long since left the Gettysburg area, but his circumstances were noteworthy.¹⁷

Henry Wentz was likely born in 1827 when the family lived in neighboring York County, Pennsylvania. As a young man, Henry apprenticed in Gettysburg's growing carriage manufacturing industry. Around 1852, he migrated to Martinsburg, Virginia, to work and perhaps start his own carriage business. How his parents felt about the move remains unknown, but by 1860 Henry was working in Martinsburg as a plasterer. Wentz joined the local militia, and he enlisted into Confederate service with the outbreak of the Civil War.

¹⁶ Bradsby, *History of Adams County*, 403.

¹⁷ McMillan, *Gettysburg Rebels*, 8-9.

He joined what eventually became the Wise Artillery from Berkeley County. The unit served throughout the war, and Henry earned a promotion to first sergeant in February 1862. Wentz transferred in October of that year to what later became Osmond B. Taylor's Virginia Battery. Henry's promotion and length of service suggest that he was well regarded and devoted to his job. There is no evidence of any wartime correspondence between Henry and his parents, but John and Mary surely worried about their son's safety as the war continued into 1863.¹⁸

Unfortunately, the opening days of July 1863 put an end to all hopes for a prosperous and peaceful summer. The Sherfys and their neighbors soon learned that two powerful armies in transition, and holding the fate of their respective countries in hand, were about to collide at Gettysburg.

18 Ibid., xiii-xiv, 10-13; Clouse, "Whatever Happened to Henry Wentz?" *The Battlefield Dispatch* (October 1998): 6-10; United States Census of 1860, Martinsburg, house number 1195; *Survey Report for Restoration and Rehabilitation of Historic Structures: Wentz Buildings*, GNMNP. Henry Wentz's birth year is estimated by the dates from his tombstone at Green Hill Cemetery in Martinsburg, West Virginia. His stone states that he died December 10, 1875 at the age of 48 years, suggesting an 1827 birth.