The Town at Marsh Creek

In 1681, a Quaker named William Penn founded Pennsylvania. Settlers cleared the land to raise crops, and the forests soon became rolling farmland. Penn’s family bought more land in the area from Native Americans in 1736. By 1761, about 150 families lived near a stream called Marsh Creek.

Samuel Gettys, an ambitious settler, started a tavern there so that people would have a place to go for food. His son James was even more ambitious. By 1786, he had organized the land around the tavern into a town square and 210 plots for new houses. Soon the town at Marsh Creek became known as Gettysburg.

Gettysburg was a quiet town surrounded by farmland.
Gettysburg had many roads surrounding the town.

Gettysburg is at the very southern edge of Pennsylvania. It is about 90 miles north of Washington, D.C., and just 40 miles south of Harrisburg, the capital of Pennsylvania. Merchants traveling north from Baltimore or Washington, west from Philadelphia, east from Pittsburgh, or south from Harrisburg would stop in Gettysburg to rest. The town became a crossroads.

By 1860, ten roads spread out from the town. The businesses in the town served the travelers who stopped there. Craftworkers made saddles, carriages, and shoes. There were shops, banks, and several taverns. The sleepy village had become a bustling market town with about 2,400 residents.
The Road to War

In the 1800s, an argument broke out among people in the North and the South of the United States. One cause of the argument was slavery. Many people in the North thought that slavery was wrong. But many people in the South relied on the work of slaves to run their large farms, called plantations.

In 1861, people in some Southern states decided to secede from the United States to keep their way of life. They formed the Confederate States of America. People from the North, or the Union, did not want the Southern states to secede. Fighting broke out between the Confederacy and the Union.

The Union had many advantages. It had a bigger army, more money, and many factories to produce the supplies it needed.
The Confederacy, on the other hand, had a smaller army, very little money, and few factories. Southerners hoped that the French and the British would send the supplies the Confederates needed, because Southern plantations shipped cotton and tobacco to France and Britain.

However, the Confederates did have an advantage. The Confederacy only had to defend itself. Its armies did not have to attack the Union. In order to win the war, the Union would have to move its armies and supplies into Confederate states and attack.

In 1861 and 1862, Union and Confederate forces both won and lost battles. Battles were fought at Shiloh, in Tennessee, and near Antietam, in Maryland. These battles cost thousands of soldiers their lives, and neither side seemed to be winning the war.
A Battle Begins

The Union did not want the country to stay divided. The Confederacy was also worried, for different reasons. The Union navy had blockaded Southern ports, stopping all trade. The Confederacy was running out of money.

General Robert E. Lee took command of one division of the Confederate army in the summer of 1862. Over the next months, he forced the Union army out of Virginia and ordered attacks on Union troops in Tennessee and Kentucky. Lee was not willing just to wait for the Union to give up. His forces won one victory after another, even though his troops were almost always outnumbered. By the spring of 1863, Lee's Army of Northern Virginia seemed unbeatable.
Lee's Risky Idea

Lee proposed a daring invasion of the North. He needed to get his army out of Virginia, where there was nothing left to eat after two years of constant warfare. He also thought a victory on the Union's own land would crush the Union army's spirit.

Lee marched his army into Pennsylvania. The soldiers took what they needed from shops and farms, just as Union soldiers had been doing in Virginia. On July 1, 1863, a division of Confederates marched into the town of Gettysburg. However, two brigades of Union soldiers had also marched into Gettysburg. The battle of Gettysburg began.
"The Enemy Is There"

When the shooting started, there were three Confederate soldiers for every Union soldier. Yet the Union’s forces, under the command of General George Meade, held off the Confederates for two hours, until reinforcements arrived. Lee and Meade both moved their armies toward Gettysburg.

The Union reinforcements were the first to arrive. The Iron Brigade was a group of Midwesterners who had earned their reputation in battle after battle. However, two-thirds of the brigade members were killed or wounded that afternoon.

The Confederates decided to charge before more Union forces could arrive. They pushed the Union troops back through the town and out to the countryside. Then the Confederates encountered a big surprise. Looking up, they saw Union cannons lined up above them on a hill. As dusk fell, the Confederate advance stopped.

The Iron Brigade
The Second Day

On the morning of July 2, the two armies faced each other again. Meade’s army was in the shape of a hook. The curved part was on Cemetery Hill and Culp’s Hill, while the straight part stretched back along Cemetery Ridge to two other hills, Round Top and Little Round Top.

James Longstreet, one of Lee’s best officers, urged Lee not to attack the Union forces because they had a strong defensive position. Lee insisted. “The enemy is there,” the general said, pointing at the hill, “and I am going to attack him there.”

Longstreet’s soldiers pushed the Union troops back through a peach orchard, a wheat field, and a rocky hillside called Devil’s Den. But they could not break through the Union line. As the sun set, the two armies held their ground.
Charge and Retreat

After two days of fighting, a total of 35,000 soldiers had been killed, wounded, or captured. The battle was not yet over. On July 3, determined not to leave Pennsylvania without the victory he had come for, Lee ordered another attack.

The Third Day

Having failed to break the sides of the Union line the day before, Lee decided to attack the Union’s center. Fifteen thousand soldiers would charge the Union line from the front.

The Confederates began by bombarding the Union position with artillery fire. The Union guns fired back. After two hours, the Union guns slowed and then stopped. The Confederates thought the Union forces had run out of ammunition.

Boom!

The artillery battle on July 3 at Gettysburg was the largest artillery battle of the war. The thundering of 300 guns could be heard in Pittsburgh, 180 miles away.
Pickett's Charge

The Confederates decided this was their chance. George Pickett, a Confederate officer, sent his 15,000 soldiers across an open field toward the Union line.

The Union troops saw thousands of Confederate soldiers marching forward in perfect lines. The Union soldiers did not stare for long.

The Union had not run out of ammunition. The army had only pretended to do so in order to trick the Confederates. Suddenly, the Union guns fired on Pickett's men, killing or wounding more than half of them in less than an hour.

The Confederate troops pushed on. Through the thick smoke of battle, a handful of Confederate soldiers struggled all the way up to the Union cannons. Then Union reinforcements forced them back. Pickett's Charge and the Battle of Gettysburg were over.

Mathew Brady, a famous Civil War photographer, stands in a field near Gettysburg.
The Tide Turns

"It is all my fault," Lee told his soldiers. "It is I who have lost this fight, and you must help me out of it the best way you can." Lee urged his men to be ready for a counterattack. He was sure that Meade would attack. The Confederate forces would have lost.

Meade did not know at the time how badly he had defeated Lee. Meade had taken over the Army of the Potomac just a few days earlier. He had not planned to fight a major battle at Gettysburg. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia was said to be invincible, and the Union general felt lucky to have stood his ground.

Some of Meade’s men urged him to attack again. If he had, the war might have ended then. Meade told them, "We have done well enough." He let Lee retreat into Virginia.

Shortly after Gettysburg, Ulysses S. Grant took over command of the Union armies.
Although Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia fought for two more years, the Confederacy did not invade the Union again.

After the Union won at Gettysburg, the French and the British no longer wanted to help the Confederacy. Lee had been wrong when he thought that an invasion of the Union would make the Union soldiers want to quit. After Gettysburg, the Union soldiers became even more determined to win.

President Lincoln was angry with Meade for letting Lee escape. By October 1863, Ulysses S. Grant was the new general of the Army of the Potomac. Grant did not let Lee escape. Finally, in 1865 at Appomattox Court House, Lee surrendered.

**Sherman’s March**

While Grant and Lee fought in Virginia, other important battles were taking place farther south. William Tecumseh Sherman, one of Grant’s generals, captured and burned Atlanta, Georgia, in 1864. His army then moved through Georgia to Savannah, destroying everything in its path. This campaign is known as Sherman’s March to the Sea.
"A New Birth of Freedom"

Many Americans fought and died at the Battle of Gettysburg. After the three days of fighting ended, the armies moved on.

Following the battle, there was no time to bury the dead properly. In the fall of 1863, the townspeople decided to make the battlefield into a cemetery and rebury the 7,000 soldiers who had died there. They invited President Lincoln to speak at the ceremony.

Lincoln had thought long and hard about what he wanted to say. He wrote, and rewrote, his remarks. When he spoke before the crowd on November 19, 1863, he knew it was his chance to tell the divided country why the Union was fighting.

Lincoln's speech lasted only a few minutes. He did not talk about slavery. He did not say anything specific about the battle at Gettysburg itself. Newspapers across the country carried his words to every city and town in the nation—both in the Union and in the Confederacy. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address has become a reminder of the soldiers who gave their lives in the battle of Gettysburg.
Gettysburg Address

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.