



# Battle of Chancellorsville | Summary, Civil War, & Facts

## Battle of Chancellorsville Summary

How would you fight a battle against an army twice your size? Would you say it couldn't be done? If you were **General Robert. Lee** of the Confederate Army, you wouldn't give up; you would settle in and plan out your masterpiece. This battle was Robert E. Lee's crowning achievement and went down in history as the **Battle of Chancellorsville**. But how did Robert E. Lee defeat a Union army over twice the size of his Confederate army?

## Battle of Chancellorsville Facts

<b>Date</b>	April 30 – May 6, 1863
<b>Location</b>	Spotsylvania County, Virginia, <a href="#">United States</a>
<b>Participants</b>	Confederate States of America > United States
<b>Context</b>	<a href="#">American Civil War</a>

[See all Facts](#)



## The American Civil War



The [American Civil War](#) was complicated, and like most wars, there were many reasons it started. Of course, one of the many reasons for the Civil War was the question of slavery. Now, we understand that the concept was wrong, and back in the early 1800s, it became illegal to buy people who had been kidnapped from their homes in Africa and brought across the ocean to a land they knew nothing about. However, people were still allowed to enslave people. And it was nearly impossible to become free.



The publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852 made abolition a popular movement in the North. Economically, the South was based on agriculture, and many Southerners were afraid that taking away the slave population would ruin the economy. By the end of the 1860s, tensions between the North and the South had escalated so much that South Carolina seceded from the Union.

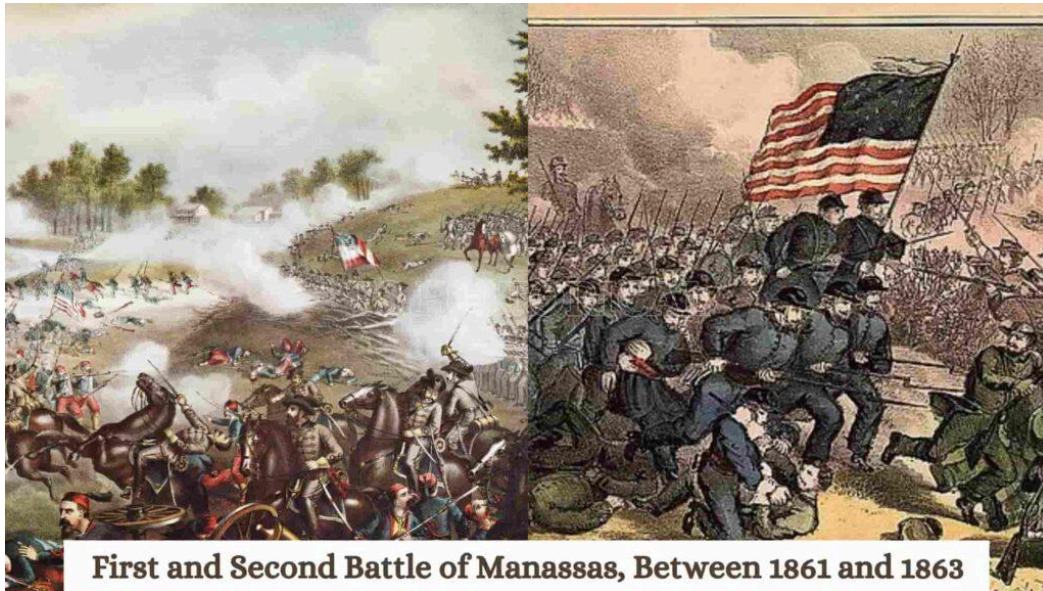
The Civil War had begun. Eleven states seceded from the Union during the Civil War and called themselves the Confederacy. Both sides underestimated their opponents. The Confederacy thought the war would be easy to win since they had skilled generals. They also had people passionate about fighting for their rights, whether it states' rights or slavery, or both. Although there were people in the North who were vehemently against slavery, most people fought for the preservation of the Union.

The Confederacy's greatest weakness, though, was manpower. There were only nine million people in the Confederacy (with four million of them being African Americans) compared to 22 million in the Union; the Confederacy was largely outnumbered! However, what the Confederacy lacked in industrialization or manpower, they made up for in military leadership. Many United States army officers were from the South, so they remained loyal to their home states when the war started. Although the North had more human resources, arms and firepower, and industrial advancements such as railroads, they needed more solid, experienced leadership in their army for most of the war.





## First and Second Battle of Manassas



**First and Second Battle of Manassas, Between 1861 and 1863**

Between 1861 and 1863, there were a few major battles, such as the **First and Second Battles of Manassas** (also known as the **First and Second Battles of Bull Run**) and the Seven Days Battles. The Union thought it would win the war easily as well. In fact, during the First Battle of Bull Run on July 21st, 1861, people came from Washington, DC, with picnic baskets like they were expecting a social party! Watching the Confederates defeat the Union soldiers, the onlookers realized the war was not good entertainment. They had to flee back to the capital to save themselves!

The Civil War was fought on land and at sea, and the South dominated both areas initially. “Stonewall” Jackson –who got his nickname for standing against the Union “like a stone wall” during the First Battle of Manassas – and Robert E. Lee showed off their excellent leadership skills during these large battles during the first half of the American Civil War. The Union, by contrast, was suffering from bad leadership, and it could not seem to comprehend how the Confederacy was winning with fewer men. The two armies also had smaller battles, like those on the coast of Georgia and the Carolinas, that set the stage for the **Battle of Chancellorsville** in the spring of 1863. Before we go



any further, though, let's meet some of the key players on the battlefield. Robert E. Lee was one of the Confederate generals in charge of the Battle of Chancellorsville, and this battle was his masterpiece.

## Robert E. Lee

Lee was born in 1807 to a military family. His father had served with [George Washington](#) during the [American Revolution](#), so it seemed natural for Lee to join the US Army himself. He served in the Corp of Engineers for many years and gained his notoriety on the battlefield during the [Mexican-American War](#) in 1846-1848. When the Civil War broke out, Lee chose to fight for his home state of Virginia. During his time as **General, Robert E. Lee** turned the Army of Northern Virginia into one of the most famous fighting forces in [American history](#).

Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson was another Confederate general who was just as famous and important to the war as Robert E. Lee. Jackson was born in 1824 and pursued a career in the army. Throughout his life, Jackson dealt with unfair tragedies and merciless teasing from those around him, characterized as "strange" by all who knew him. Although this has later endeared him to historians, the people he worked with before the American Civil War do not appear to have found his unique behavior endearing. After fighting in the Mexican-American War, Jackson moved on to teach at the [Virginia Military Institute](#), where he taught artillery tactics, science, and philosophy. Stonewall Jackson also decided to fight for his home state of Virginia when the Civil War broke out. "Fighting" Joe Hooker led the Union.

## Joseph Hooker

Hooker was the latest in the line of Union generals, but unlike George McClellan before him, he was certainly not afraid of a fight. Although he is best known today as the man Lee and Jackson defeated, Joseph Hooker was a good military man in his own right. He joined the Union as quickly as he could when the American Civil War broke out, and he was critical of the failure and timidity of the Union leadership. Early in 1863, Hooker was named Commander of the Army of the Potomac, and he quickly planned to destroy the



Confederate Army and end the war. Now that we know the three major generals, we can focus on what happened during the **Battle of Chancellorsville**. How did this battle go down in history as one of the most impressive Confederate victories? Well, it all started with the **Battle of Fredericksburg**.

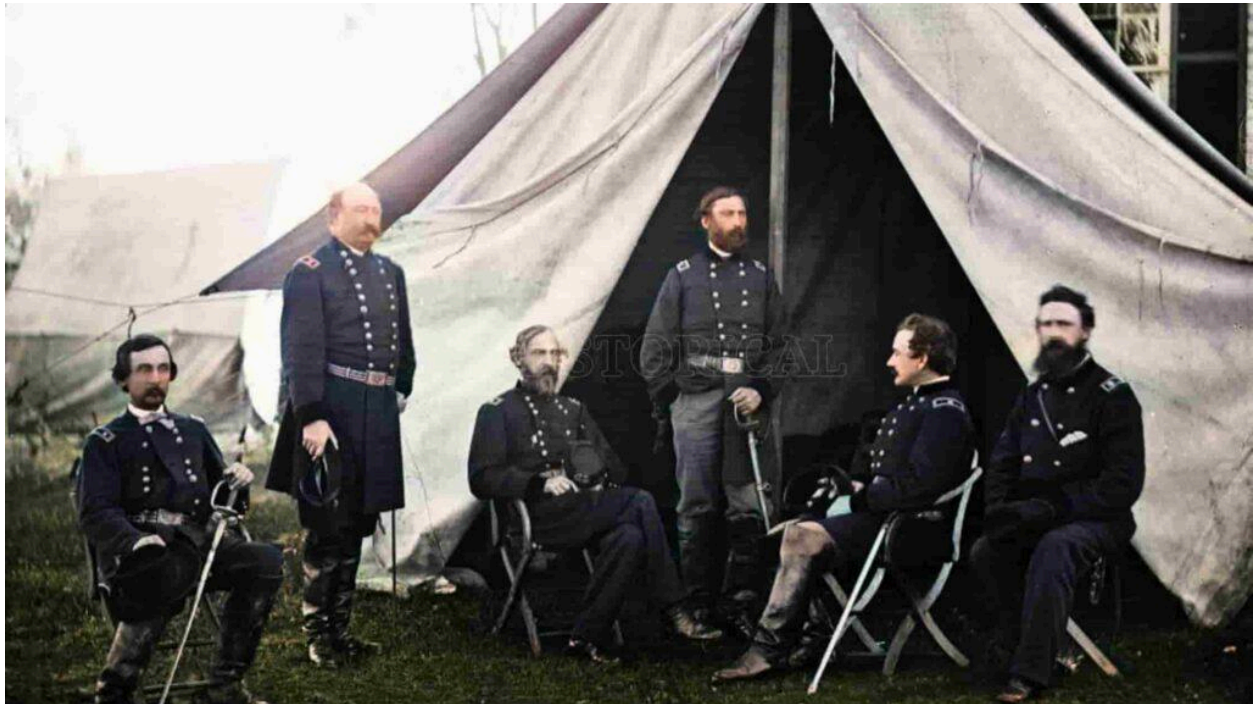
This battle was fought in December 1862 and marked a new low for the Union. The commanders of the Union Army thought they could overwhelm the Confederate forces that day with sheer numbers, so they didn't count on Confederate strategy to carry the day. Thousands of Union soldiers were sacrificed that day to bad military command as they were ordered to march directly into enemy fire. Although this was not the bloodiest of the battles during the American Civil War, it was still shocking to the Union. The next day, the Union sent a white flag of truce.

They collected their wounded and their dead, then moved out of Fredericksburg, the Southern town they had used as their battle station during the fight. The Union soldiers had looted the town, leaving the damage from their occupation behind them, which enraged General Stonewall Jackson. After the Battle of Fredericksburg, both armies stayed in the area. Fredericksburg is not far from Richmond, which was the Confederacy's capital. Both armies had reasons for wanting to be close to Richmond. The Union wanted to take the capital, and the Confederacy wanted to defend it.





## Army of the Potomac



**Army of the Potomac Generals at Culpeper, Virginia, 1863**

Hooker took over the **Army of the Potomac** in January of 1863, and his first task was to restructure it to be more efficient. After that, Hooker focused his attention on defeating Robert E. Lee. He planned to push Lee back away from Chancellorsville and towards Richmond. As Lee retreated, Hooker would send part of his army around and envelop Lee, forcing him to fight on multiple sides. This tactic usually results in a victory because fighting on multiple fronts at once can be difficult! Hooker's plan might have worked had it not been raining – and if Lee hadn't divided his forces! Lee didn't initially know what Hooker had planned, but he decided to divide his forces and defeat at least part of Hooker's army before the Union army was upon him. He left a small force behind at Fredericksburg to take care of the Union forces approaching from behind and took most of his men to Chancellorsville.



In the early hours of the battle, the Union had the advantage. But Hooker stopped the offensive. He wanted to fight on the defense, as he wanted Lee to send his men against the Union's numerically superior army. He retreated into the woods around Chancellorsville, waiting for the fight to come to them. Commands were then given to some commanders, telling them to hold their position, but the men had already started to move back. Hooker's officers were upset about the squandered opportunity. And the Confederates realized that the wooded area would make it hard for the Union to form effective lines. That evening, May 1st, a legendary meeting took place between Confederate leaders Jackson and Lee.

The two discussed the upcoming battle, with intelligence arriving mid-meeting. The Union had a weak spot, and there was a road in the forest that would allow them to travel unseen. Lee gave his orders to Jackson. He would attack the Union's right flank, some twelve miles away, and do so undetected. In the meantime, Lee would divide his forces again. Usually, good generals do not separate their forces, but Lee knew he was facing a different situation. To keep his troops from being walled in, he had to surround the Union army without realizing they were being surrounded. It was a tricky plan, but Lee successfully used Virginia's wild landscape to disguise his troops' movements. At dawn, Jackson set off to attack the flank of Hooker's army.

Lee picked a fight with the Union men. Like Hooker had been trying to do, Lee managed to keep the Union occupied so they wouldn't notice Jackson's movements; that meant that Jackson's attack on the right flank of Hooker's army came as a complete surprise that evening, with it occurring around 5 p.m. Jackson ordered his men to continually press on through the divisions, which were nicely lined up and settling down for dinner when the Confederates attacked. Jackson was forced to stop when darkness fell, and the Union reorganized itself around Chancellorsville. They had taken severe losses, though, from the Jackson press. The fighting led directly by Lee also dealt heavy blows on the Union, forcing those forces into a smaller area of the town.

The next few days were full of battles. The Union forces found that instead of surrounding the Confederate army, they had been surrounded! The Union army retreated out of Chancellorsville, leaving the Confederacy with one of its most impressive victories. The **Battle of Chancellorsville** is celebrated and studied





**TS HISTORICAL**  
ENCYCLOPEDIA

worldwide today as one of the greatest Confederate victories, but for **Robert E. Lee**, **the victory was bittersweet**. He successfully drove the Union away from Chancellorsville and Fredericksburg, but Stonewall Jackson did not survive the battle. He had been shot in his left arm, which was then amputated. He would die of pneumonia about a week later. Robert E. Lee would continue to lead the Confederate army through the rest of the American Civil War, but it would not be the same without the help of **General Stonewall Jackson**.

