

# The Civil War Poems

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To Bry and Ann Nelson



Pickett's Charge area looking west toward Virginia Mountain, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania  
(photograph from Lane Studios, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania)

## A Leaf: A Benediction

A leaf may fall,  
Alight, and burn through eternal Fall.  
Soldier, rise into eternal Spring,  
The blue and deathless calm.

# My Peace I Give unto You: Epigraph of the Savior

All those who remember  
The peregrinations of history,  
Forget forget forget.  
Only I may retain  
The glory, and the glory of pain.

## Dayspring at Fort Sumter

The brisk morning of luminous bays, reeds, and lace in water,  
Mysteries requisite in the slopes of evergreen, inklings  
Of jetsam and plaitings stainless and floating.  
You are there from the upper air of the windfall, where  
Clouds cascade from the upper air into twilight.  
Gray prince, you shape the evanescence that whispers  
Its light above the dark ship and primes the shadow  
Veering from it into reeds and leaves of the sea.  
I move under leaves of the shore, rustling  
In the diamond and emerald mists to find the shipline  
Halyard. As if the bridgehead of darkness, it stands  
Against the green of shadows, sombre and stolid,  
The rapprochement of eternities, solace of waves  
Beyond, in bays of winds, where sails rise from the lines  
Of the horizon shielding the distances, and the brooding  
Sound: paradise of seas, shining the liturgy  
Of your devotion, around the peninsulas of twilight,  
Our mortality.

# Apocalypse

I disclose the windward darkness  
In the phosphor of a glimmering;  
The word pales and burns, aerating  
Heat that folds and trembles  
Like silk against a spire of wind.  
It spreads, wavering,  
And through it the image stirs,  
Tropical and warming:  
Hyacinth and the lustre of tamarisk  
Against the flowerless grey.

# The Turning Point: General Stonewall Jackson at Chancellorsville

Strange skirmishes into Virginia, secession  
The cause. The Potomac the watery border,  
And the South a strange land, another order,  
And Stonewall moving like mist or recession,

Clouding vision, querulous, waiting, like the hint  
Of probability, poised somewhere in a dark glen,  
His black stallion rustling leaves where the wren  
Barely sings, quieted. A burnished sabre's glint

Or wink of firefly burned the morning mist  
Into small fires of sun across a quiet field  
Open to the day. Who, riding there, must wield,  
Unrestrained, the gloved and practiced fist?

The quiet, sunlit paths around the main salient  
Traveled as if by wraiths of butternut and gray,  
Or by what dim soldiery? Early dawn might play  
Brightly over pastel but brighter over the alien

Blue array. Stonewall coursed near the ground  
Of war, forested vales and meadows, his campaign  
Gathering, waiting. Then instinct, like champagne,  
Gleamed, heady and clear: now. And the sound

Of drums and cavalry began before the driving  
Noon of light. It could not last, swift firelight  
Sweeping in. Some erring fusillade could slight  
All but the countermeasure and his striving.

So he lay, his spirit grazed by the thought of trying,  
And even the admissible gray throngs must stop  
And inquire: What was he, glittering, new? What fought  
War was that he helped to end, the end his dying?

## Shenandoah

The blue ridge remains as dark as evening  
In the afterglow. The gray line vanishes  
North into pallor where mist vanquishes  
The memory of Antietam Creek. The leavening  
Of history is like a drift of snow ravening  
Light that must remain to shine. Who languishes  
In a creek, aglow, reddening, as his wishes  
Calm themselves into tears? Convening  
Blood, ardent across the sodden wool  
Of his bivouac, is crumpled still, unresponsive  
To the heaving twist of reaching down into the pooling  
Rill where his feet remain. Generalissimo, full  
Of salients of secession, coordinate  
The sweep and thrust of columns as, inebriate  
With advantage, you seek out Gettysburg.



General Robert E. Lee, equestrian statue, c. 1917, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. This statue was erected near the site where General Lee met the returning veterans of Pickett's Charge (photograph courtesy Gettysburg National Military Park, National Park Service).

# The Battle of Gettysburg

GENERAL LEE

*Commander of the Army of Northern Virginia*

GENERAL MEADE

*Commander of the Army of the Potomac*

GENERAL LONGSTREET

*Southern commander under General Lee*

GENERAL PICKETT

*Leader of the assault on Cemetery Hill*

Lee: Soldiers of the South, Jackson rests in Paradise!  
Let your voices rise like the crest of our victory!

(A general shout.)

Meade: (In darkness.) General Lee. General Robert E. Lee!

Lee: Who speaks?

Meade: A voice from across the fields.  
It is the third of July.

Lee: Who is it?

Meade: The sinew, the resolution of the North.

Lee: Who?

Meade: Meade, of the Army of the Potomac.

Lee: Then I am hearing things most easily.  
You stand on Cemetery Hill, a horizon from here.

Meade: You know it is I, General Lee. We have dealt  
War across the board of destiny until  
We are as familiar as friends. I have felt  
Your demeanor in your cavalry and in the thrusts  
Of your infantry.

Lee: (Gallantly.) The first and second of July!  
General Meade, I am worn like the mask of death,  
But I shall say, though your voice is the voice  
Of death, that I am at your service, sir, whatever  
This day may bring. But, sir, you know  
That I have come here with 75,000 men in grey.

Meade: And you know, sir, that I have appointed General Custer  
To guard my flank, which you have very nearly turned.

Lee: So we speak from the order of our conscience  
Of war? You, who from across the ridges,  
Speak with your guttural cannon, waiting  
For the wheeling maneuvers of cavalry that daybreak  
brings?

Meade: We speak out of your voiceless consciences  
That have brought us to this day.

Lee: So be it,  
If it will bring us more closely to the issues.

Meade: General Lee, you have your preparations,  
And I have mine, each contriving his strength  
From the zeal of his cause. We shall speak again.

Lee: No doubt of it, though what we have said makes me  
The more somber.

Meade: Because of knowledge I have given you?

Lee: No, for I have seen that you have but a simple recourse  
Here, as simple as mine is complicated.  
You have only to defend.

Meade: Yes, my strategy is as simple  
As my cause. Forgive me.

Lee: By your leave, sir,  
Forgive me! My generals of the Confederacy wait.  
Be ready for us today.

Meade: The fields before us  
Are as bright as the hour. What time is it?

Lee: Ten. I think, ten.  
(He turns.) General Longstreet!  
May I see you, sir? Where are you?

Longstreet: General Lee,  
Here at your side.

Lee: Do you have the time?

Longstreet: Ten-thirty, sir.

Lee: And where is General Jackson?

Longstreet: Do not taunt me, General.

Lee: But where is he?

Longstreet: At Chancellorsville. You know at Chancellorsville.

Lee: The whip of my right arm is dead at Chancellorsville. He cannot come. What is my arm without him?

Longstreet: Ask *me*, General. What is your command For the Army of Northern Virginia?

Lee: Not the surprise  
Of the Union's Iron Brigade in the underbrush.

Longstreet: We have word that General Reynolds of the North is dead.

Lee: And so have I. And who is to replace him?  
They improve in death, and Stonewall died  
Like the opportunity of complete victory,  
And there are none to replace him, not with his zest  
For routing the black brigades of the North.

Longstreet: Sir, give me your order! Jackson cannot ride back From the grave!

Lee: Am I given over to your indecision?  
Stonewall *acted*!

Longstreet: In the name of our cause, General,  
What do you want of me? I am Longstreet,  
The scholar of your campaigns! There is nothing  
I would not do for the South!

Lee: Then why was it  
Not done yesterday or the day before?

Longstreet: Yesterday  
And the day before lie strewn before Cemetery Hill!

Lee: And that is our horror—that we do not break their lines.  
Somehow, it does not happen. . . .

Longstreet: Let us begin  
The cannonading at noon, directly into the center  
Of their line, and so break them that our infantry  
May walk through them and north of Washington.

Lee: So we have determined—and so I hear my plan  
From a schoolboy at my own feet! Longstreet,  
I beg of you, let me see the touch of my Stonewall  
In you and an interest only in the report of victory.  
This is what I want; this is what I want. . . .  
Meade, Meade, you cannot know where we will  
strike,  
But you feel our presence slowly . . . If we could only  
strike  
Before you know the least of our intention, then—  
then . . .

Longstreet: General, what is your command?

Lee: Must I think for you,  
Longstreet? Ride into their center on Cemetery Hill.  
We have tried the right and left, so they will not expect  
The logic of the center, the maneuver that divorces  
them  
From their will to continue.

Longstreet: Many of our command  
Are lost or dead.

Lee: You avoid the presence  
Of my command, listless and waiting. The center  
Is your place. Why now do you divert the air of my  
command?

Longstreet: Sir, it is only that our young have died right and left  
Before the hill that rests before us as sure as night.

Lee: They died as Reynolds died, under the banners of their  
glory.  
What can we say more than that, that we shall win  
This day and make their glory sure?

Longstreet: We cannot say. . .

Lee: But we must try, here at Gettysburg, the work  
Of our thrust from Sumter years ago.

Longstreet: Hood did not turn  
Their flank only yesterday, and our effort was forlorn,  
Warren of the North the spirit of defense. His dress  
sword  
Dangles blood on our right; the line is stabilized.  
Sedgwick and the Sixth Corps settle there and wait.

Lee: Why do you dally over the attrition we knew would come?  
Only at Agincourt in France was the victory consummate,  
The only time in history when the battle went perfectly  
According to design. But if we do not act,  
Impotence will be the habit of our mind, and then  
We shall retire from here in blood, hapless and wan-  
dering.

Longstreet: Last night Gregg's cavalry rose up like apparitions  
Grisly with the memory of battle, and we could not  
take  
The western peak. What is the aspect of their terror that  
turns  
Our resolution into the mist of memory?

Lee: Take the center.

Longstreet: Shall I begin? When shall I begin? Will Pickett go?

Lee: Though Stuart sleeps in a despair of weariness,  
He is as resolute as you are questioning. Yes, Pickett  
Is the corps d'élite. He will go, and I pray for your  
support.

Longstreet: And so it is committed, the Virginia division.

Lee: Longstreet, those troops on the hill facing us  
Have fought the flooding weariness of marching here  
And cannot stay the cannon and the waves of grey  
That we shall serve them in a little space. Their wings  
Are staunchly turned, though they have held, and I  
know  
Meade has furnished them support from his center  
line  
That I have said will fail today. Pickett will have them  
On his blade, and victory! Then peace will be upon  
My decision that I chose the command of Virginia  
Rather than the corporal aegis of the North.

Longstreet: Sir, their artillery rests behind the stone, in the center.  
I doubt . . .

Lee: What forges doubt but dissolution?  
You have known the gentility we follow in the South,  
The graceful years of ambiance and charm . . .  
I dream of it.

Longstreet: But this is Meade, whose factory  
Is war, undreaming war. The cannon there . . .

Lee: Attack!

Longstreet: I give you this: the meadows dream,  
Dotted with our dead. My voice is the voice  
Of muskets cracking virulence into wounds!

Lee: The sun rises to Zenith. Attack! Where is Pickett?  
Tell him.

Pickett: (Approaching.) General Lee? General Longstreet?  
My division of Virginia is ready for the field we see.

Lee: You divine my reasoning, General? You see,  
Longstreet,  
That Pickett is my General Jackson now!

Longstreet: This is not  
The device of strategy, but frontal war. What do  
cannon  
Know of gallantry?

Lee: (Turning away.) General Pickett, General Longstreet  
Will tell you what to do.

Pickett: General Longstreet?

Longstreet: My commander tells me where the victory lies,  
In the center where the cannon are. Avoid them as you  
can,  
But lead your men across that space inured with  
visions  
Of the real. The meadows flicker the appalling bright-  
ness  
Of time forgotten, an injunction that holds us hard  
against  
The part that we lose in the Confederate grace  
Of Richmond.

Pickett: General?

Longstreet: This is all we know  
And so perhaps deserve. Attack!

Meade: (Distantly.) Your horses toil uselessly,  
Arranging your cannon in the silence of an error.  
Avoid me now. Hancock rules the center with his  
infantry.

Pickett: Who is that?

Longstreet: The voice of deception. Attack! Perhaps  
Deception. Of course, deception! Would Meade seem  
Exactly as he is? No. That cannot be. But if it were . . .

Pickett: General?

Longstreet: Attack! He is the deceptor. Lee is right.  
I am swept by him into the vast design that cannot fail.  
And yet, romance . . . the South of porticos and the  
summer  
Of fields in flower . . . but it is not real! To save it,  
Go! Attack and save what never was, for this is real,  
That we can be of use and die!

(The sound of many cannon firing.)

Pickett: Forward!

(The order, repeated by junior officers, seems to echo  
in the distance. He leaves.)

Voice in the distance: See you in Washington!

(There is a roll of drums, then the sound of thousands  
marching. In the distance, the music of "Dixie"  
begins.)

Lee: (Turning to Longstreet.) There they go, the flower  
Of the Confederacy! Jubilant as the sun! Ah, their  
glory!  
See them, Longstreet! There is Pickett, his auburn  
Demeanor ahead of them. The center of Meade's line,  
The militia he has found, will sag and collapse  
Before those grey lines that march so quietly there.

Meade: Not militia. Black Hancock and the Second Corps.

Lee: What? Longstreet, what did you say?

Longstreet: It was not I.

Meade: It was I, Meade of the North, again. I see the waves  
Of grey begin. Do not come.

Lee: General Meade, they come,  
The honor of the South in their banners!

Meade: (Aside.) Hancock,  
Take your position. You are the pawn of my might,  
My resolution to hold.

Lee: Hold? Your center is weak.

Meade: No. My mettle is there, the terror of the black legions  
Of freedom. But the waves of grey begin.  
We will not rout again; Mannassa is a memory.

Lee: You have no cannon, and who can stand  
Against the hurrah and call of those grey lines  
That carry with them the honor of Richmond?

Meade: My cannon are here, the rows of them, cooling  
From their first assault.

Lee: What?

Meade: Colonel Lee,  
Who stood at Harpers Ferry, I am not the wish  
Or sleight of your strategy. Your desire is glory,  
But only desire. You have wished for a victory  
That cannot be, whatever your valor. You are the  
cavalier;  
I the watchman of the pain I deal. I cannot fail  
In Pennsylvania: there is no cushion here against the  
will  
Of God that holds for liberty.

Lee: We must be free.

Meade: Free  
Only under the agreement to be free, with us.  
I am your brother of the government of the United  
States.  
Let the bugle sound, and call them back!

Lee: I cannot.  
We must try the strength of such duplicity. Honor!

Meade: We must find in that the darker scene of graves against  
the wall  
Where resolution ends. Stop them! They are of our  
Virginia,  
Where Washington and Jefferson kept the Union as a  
dream!

Lee: Are we a dream of failure? I am the decision of my  
loyalty.

(The lights go down on Lee and Longstreet and come  
up on Meade.)

Meade: Valor wings grey  
In the sky, and the span of knowing  
The black ascent of time crowds like a claw  
And tears in me.  
Splendor and terror strive, shine with the midday  
Clarion and the far roll of drums.  
The grey lines wave before the field  
And skeletal grain, then march and rise to me,  
My cannon their shore of sound.  
Blind with wrath, Jehovah stands in me and feels them  
come,  
Trembling in the immanence of their charge.  
Line on line they come, like the fallen cohorts of  
heaven;  
They offer themselves on the field, nearer,  
Steady as their cause.

(There is a burst of cannonading.)

The cannon twist and cross  
Their lines like fingers of an automatic hand.  
But in the fright of death, I deal paralysis  
Like snow on still and vacant fields.

Where in the source of my fear will I find  
The mortal command?  
Where in the orders of God will I find  
The gash of faces open with the white hysteria  
That I must make?  
Bright as the banner we followed here,  
We, faltering, find war a myth of souring mouths  
Declaiming, here and there, the valor of dust.  
For this is real, real as any wild dream,  
And, taut as I am, they come on and on,  
Rising to our ridge.

My arm signals,

Then falls,

(There is a great burst of cannonading and a sound like  
the ripping of paper.)

. . . numb in its sleeve from the wish  
To hold the fire that rides  
Their broken line and blows them airily in mounds  
Of iron, cloth, and bone.

(The anguished cries of the dying.)

The gusts of smoke  
Hush their dying cries for peace,  
But ever in my living grave  
I rend the clods of flesh that bury me.

Lee: (In the darkness.)  
Armistead is breaking your center!

Meade: And I have ordered  
The counterattack. . . . Hall's New Englanders wheel  
and charge.  
The crest shudders and falls. Armistead is dead!

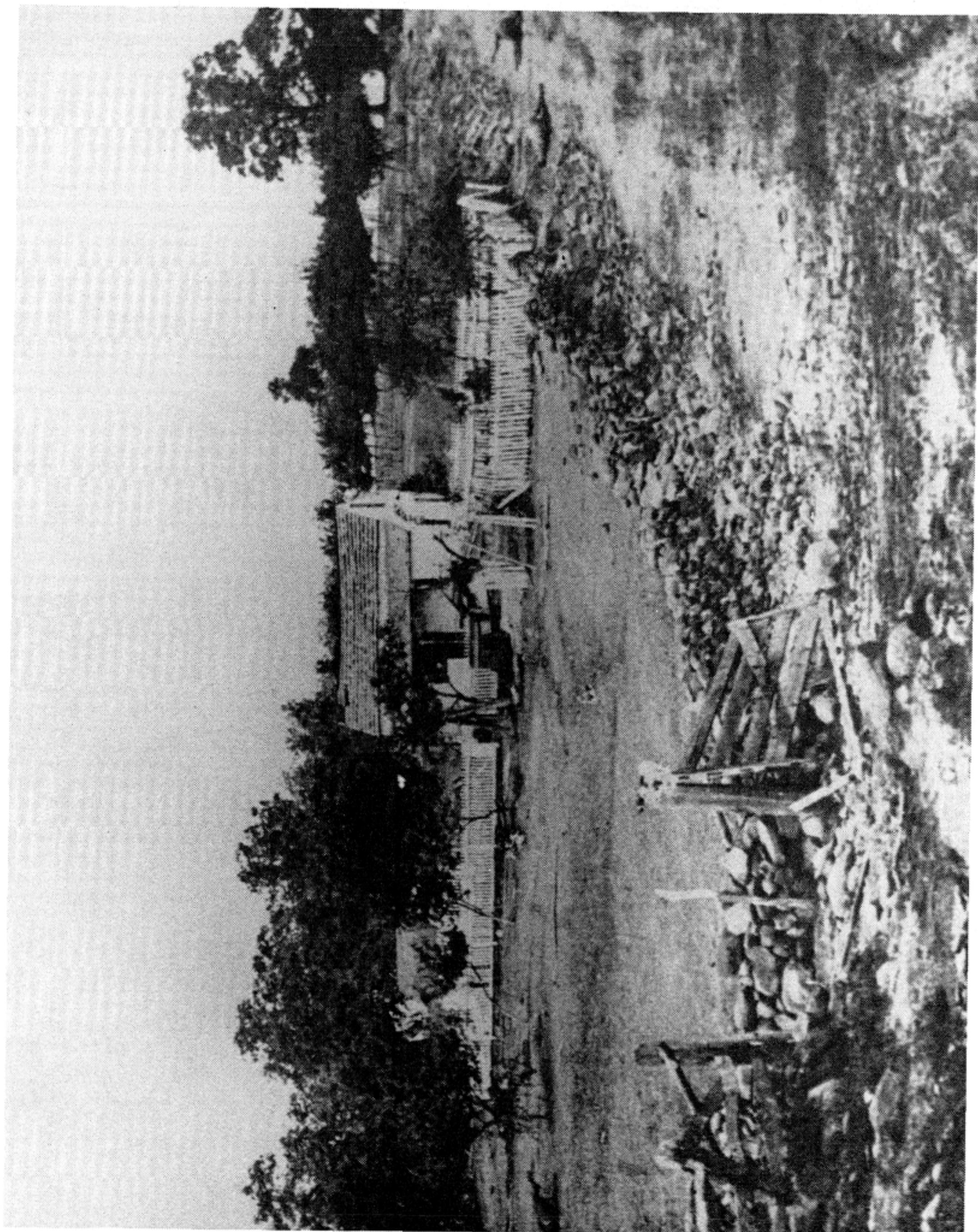
Lee: Armistead? Longstreet, his position swarms  
With the hunched infantry of the North! You were  
right  
In the cold measure of their strength!  
This is a strength I cannot know! Meade,  
It is not in you; the fury of hell is in them  
Out of a tall righteousness I cannot fathom.  
They take us down and down, and our banners fall!

Meade: No, it is not in me, but in the commander  
That broods in Washington, who was born in Illinois.  
He is the arm of iron sinew around whom  
We bustle, officious for his will that does not falter.  
Lincoln! Lincoln! Who makes our day but he?

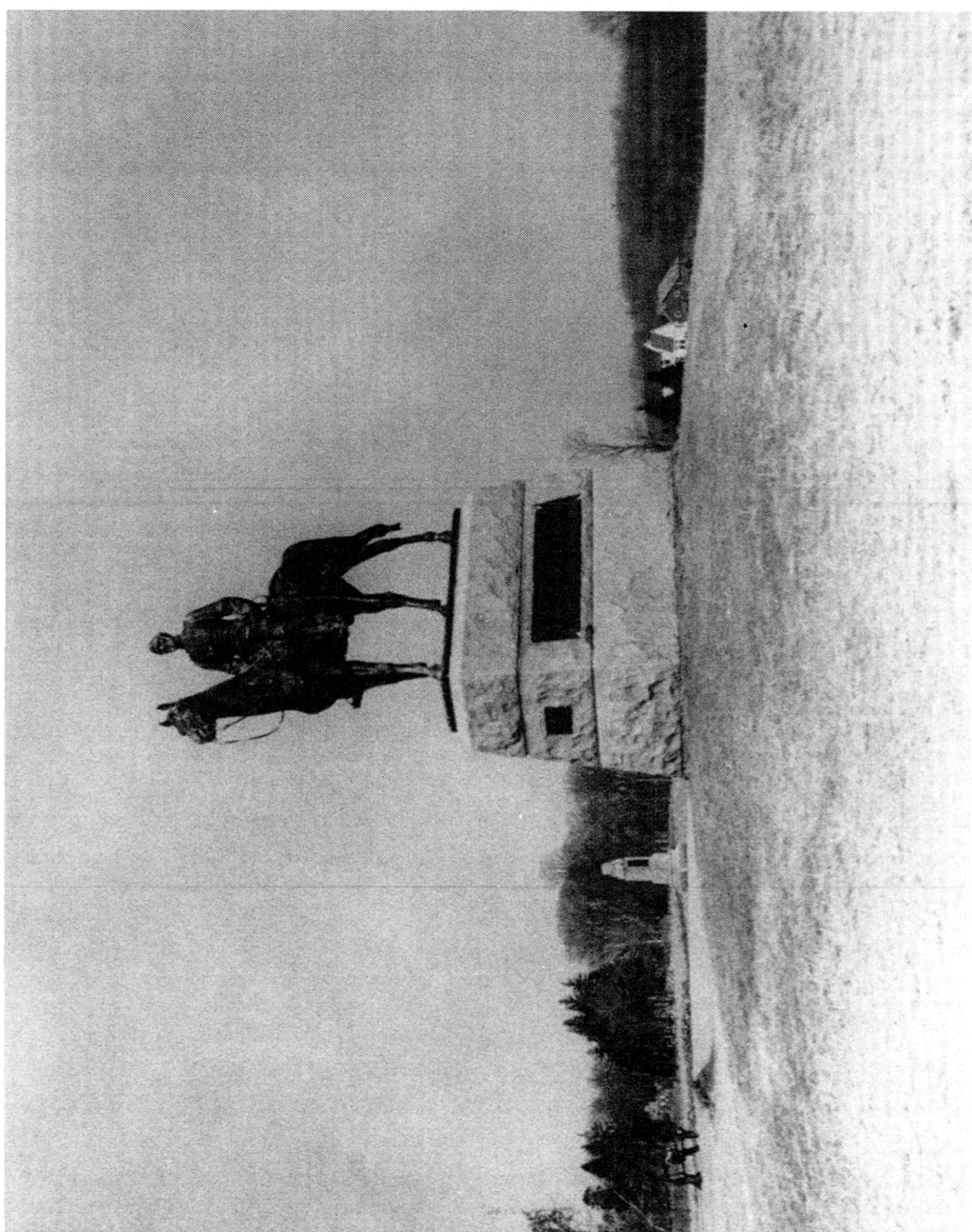
Lee: Lincoln! I never knew him! I am sorry!  
I never knew him. He eludes maneuver  
And defeat, and moulders our destiny.

Meade: The Army of Northern Virginia returns to you,  
A tatter of the regiments that came to us.  
You are shorn of the purpose of rebellion.  
Look, now, upon the dreams of terror  
In your soldiers' eyes, who came against the cliff  
Of Lincoln's rectitude.

Lee: Lincoln! My soldiers of the South,  
The fault is in me. Kemper has fallen, and Garnett.  
Custer rides with fury against our testament,  
And we are torn from front and flank!  
Lincoln, I am your device at last, the strategy  
Of God! The fault is in me, the pride,  
For coming here to Gettysburg!



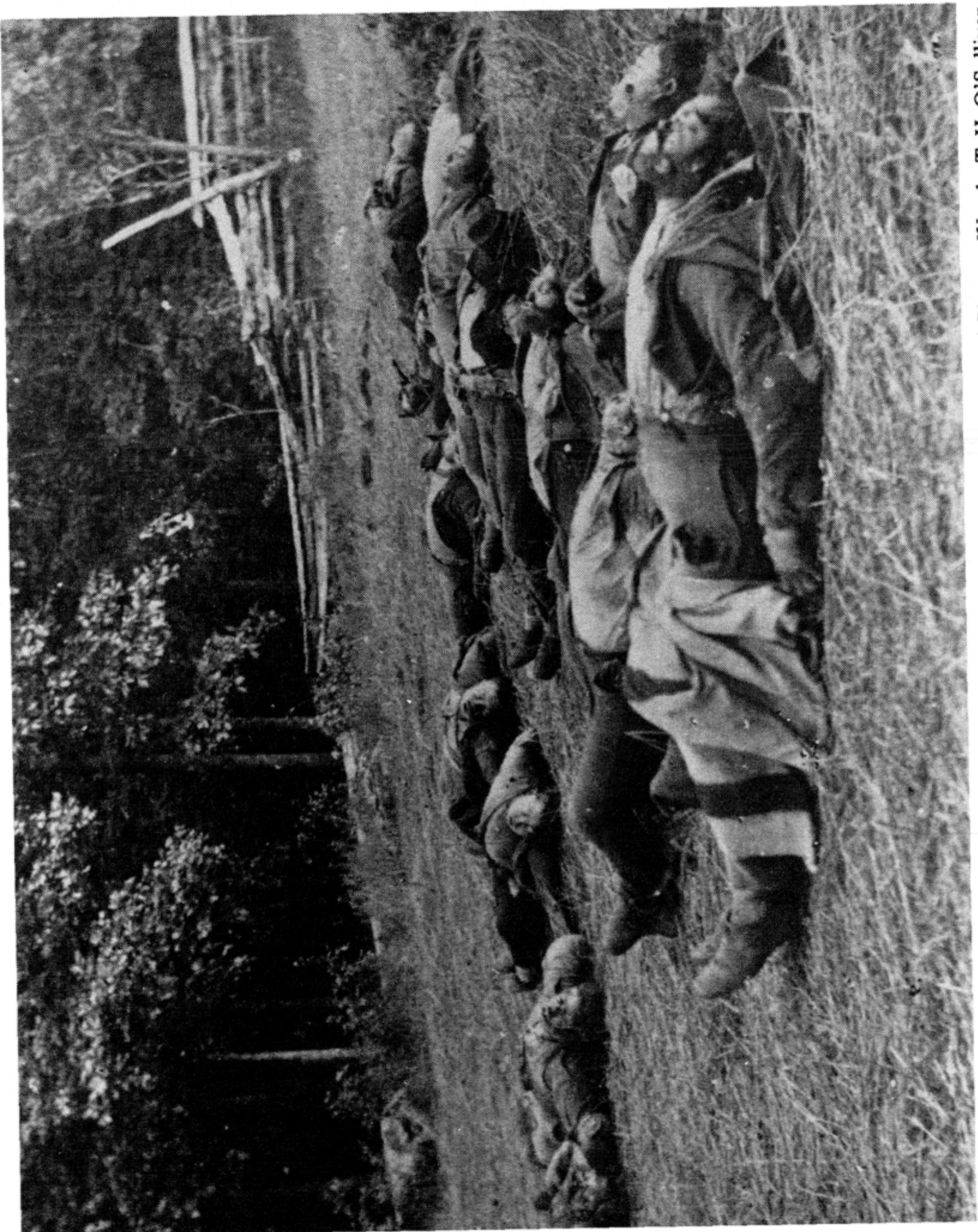
General George Gordon Meade's headquarters at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (photograph courtesy Gettysburg National Military Park, National Park Service)



Equestrian statue of General Meade, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (photograph from Lane Studios, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania)

# General Meade of Gettysburg

Why am I the army's command? And here? The field  
Trespasses into the sky, and trees, in the railing  
Light, move as if shaken from below. The tides  
Of armament rise along a perimeter. Lincoln,  
Of official Washington, sets my will to stay  
And field the revulsion of calm. A bugle cries  
The solemnity of charge, and tight stars of rank  
Revive my bearing into a rod of the mind's alignment.  
Look! Brevet Custer wheels left against a hill.  
Stannard levels his cannon. Hancock braces  
In a chamber of trees. Fires of light intercede,  
Driving through smoke. In the cleft of a devil's den  
A rift appears. Rows and rows of Carolingians  
Pitch and fall graciously to smolder in halls  
Of lesser vision. Soldiery march sunlit and drawn  
As in a sketch for a daguerreotype in the seethe  
Of a thundercloud gathering heat and rolling.  
The mounted slip askew, failing from sabres  
That rise and sparkle where underlings thresh  
And wind in unison. The grille of white smoke  
Keeps apertures of fire that reverberate  
The sounds of powdering. Why am I here in turn,  
A way of being in command in avenues of holiness,  
Fevering into decisions to hold here and there  
Along the line? Christianly, I yield myself  
Near the rock of an angle, caisson in the rustling field,  
And the canister that puffs away, emblazoning  
The shadows of my humility before the prince  
Of generals on his white mount, pointing here.  
I stay. I pitch and hold against his command.  
I stay because the field is Gettysburg in the ring  
And cavalry of Lincoln's wish, gripped as reins  
Are gripped and steadied. I am the horseman with a scythe  
That holds the dead that become the dead I touch  
In my marrow, in the dials of silence, and in flares  
That steal into the dark of my eyes. I worship  
The leaping crown fire as it draws my soldiery  
To mass and hold in Lincoln's vivid resolution.



Dead Confederate soldiers killed on 1 July 1863 at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, collected near McPherson Woods, T. H. O'Sullivan photograph, July 1863 (photograph courtesy Gettysburg National Military Park, National Park Service)

## Battlefield

A nick of tone in silence that broods like perfume  
Of honeysuckle, then rippling and arpeggios at random  
In the loft of trees: summer is a tropic  
Of suffusions and melody, endless song and singing  
Rendering presences of history that are fallen.  
At Gettysburg and Verdun, what songs are sympathy  
Or solace for the once disquieted? All flickering  
Or edging of sound fulfills the day and says,  
“Hush now. Ease is here, over hillock where you strew  
Insignia, having held your uniform where they were pinned,  
Mercilessly enjoined by canister. Birdcall  
In an orchard, plaint rising through sun,  
And the grass glitters dew. Lines of infantry  
Moved through the radiance of noon where puffing loam  
Was fertile year upon year, where farmer kept his sons  
As agents for a fantasy. Desire kept them low  
As laden boughs, but the fusillade arrived  
From hill and rock, slight at first, then singing,  
Quietly, quietly now.”

## General Lee, after Gettysburg

All away, south to the Potomac, soldiers slip  
The energy that keeps a light across their faces.  
They fall in distances, at the very places  
They put behind them in our invasion of the pale  
North. Others have failed, as they, in the grey shale  
Of commitment. But this claret, with bright traces  
Stippling dust, dulls to iron, will soon rail  
In a sentiment of oratory, but will not prevail  
Behind them in the dark, forgotten spaces  
Of our passing. Inveighing against my spate  
Of sudden pride, I said that the fault was mine  
For loosing tens of thousands against a hill.  
Now, along the way to the Wilderness, a rill  
Bequeaths itself. It is blue from air. It is thine,  
O sepulchre; it becomes us all. Richmond, far away,  
Is a resting place, and glory is a brilliant cay  
Within the silver air.

## General Robert E. Lee

Sunset is a lake, an evening silk  
That slips and darkens, issuing  
Away and calming. Dawn's talc  
Of morning is dusk, the memory.  
Fingers may touch a nearby fold  
As if to gather, gather softly  
And raise it into sun, cold  
Against the deeper shades, west  
And down: ah, sun's lake  
Is slowly flowing, and in it  
An embering, as if volcanos break  
Horizons in a languor of the sun.  
Last lights burnish steel  
Of leaves as if a slowing  
River folding into an inlet  
Where willows stir the air  
Though they are brittle and bare  
Like arms I have seen, imploring.

## Lincoln on the Battle of Gettysburg: What Will the People Say?

The duel begins. The distant cannon shout  
Across the way in the flummery and rout  
Of birds along a ditch. Skirmishers scout  
The sun for angles. A repository of the Lord  
Of Hosts is taken, is the field. It is noon,  
And noon approaches, high and visceral toward  
The eagle that trespasses dark and heavenward  
To waver like an aegis. The vast room  
Of day contains the space for the sudden shard  
Or Michael of the testament. Now the low tomb  
Of time is ready for the sacrifice where must strive  
The ecstasies of rippling flame. Across the loom  
Of an agate Saracen is a battle ready as a scythe  
To sweep and fell. O solemn grain, leaves tremble  
As the cannon do, milling where the sky is alive  
With angels descending. They evolve and assemble  
Visions for a resurrection. They are as seconds  
For a time as ministers of nigre resemble  
Them where bright talons show. One counts  
The seconds. Now. Pickett's line arises, stiff  
With cold. In a fold of prayer one mounts  
A horse as an officer. And now in a hollow rift  
Of smoke, he signals time, and a general prompts  
His underling to chant a charge when and if  
He inclines to die. A soldier, as he haunts  
The past like a boy at play, has fallen across  
His rifle but staggers up, chastened by the taunts  
Of others steadier than he. Where is his loss  
Of manhood as he sees a clump of trees  
Across the way? His manhood is the dross

Of canister there ahead, in the very frieze  
That statuary must commend. A century will dismay  
His hope as he pitches forward, down in the lees

Of his own blood. Soldiers breathe and walk to play  
With the imagery they stare to see. What can they do  
But fumble through ferocity to find and stay

A moment for their breathing? One, who drew  
A bayonet, falls towards it. Another holds a crest  
And twists to follow an impulse that flew

Against him as a shell. At whose behest  
Is this, a strewn bequest of parts, a routing  
And a carpentry? That fragile chest

Is hollow. The rest is for the touting  
Of some valkyrie. Horses fail as soldiers do,  
And, tossing in some regimen, doubting  
The upright world, flail in the abject rue

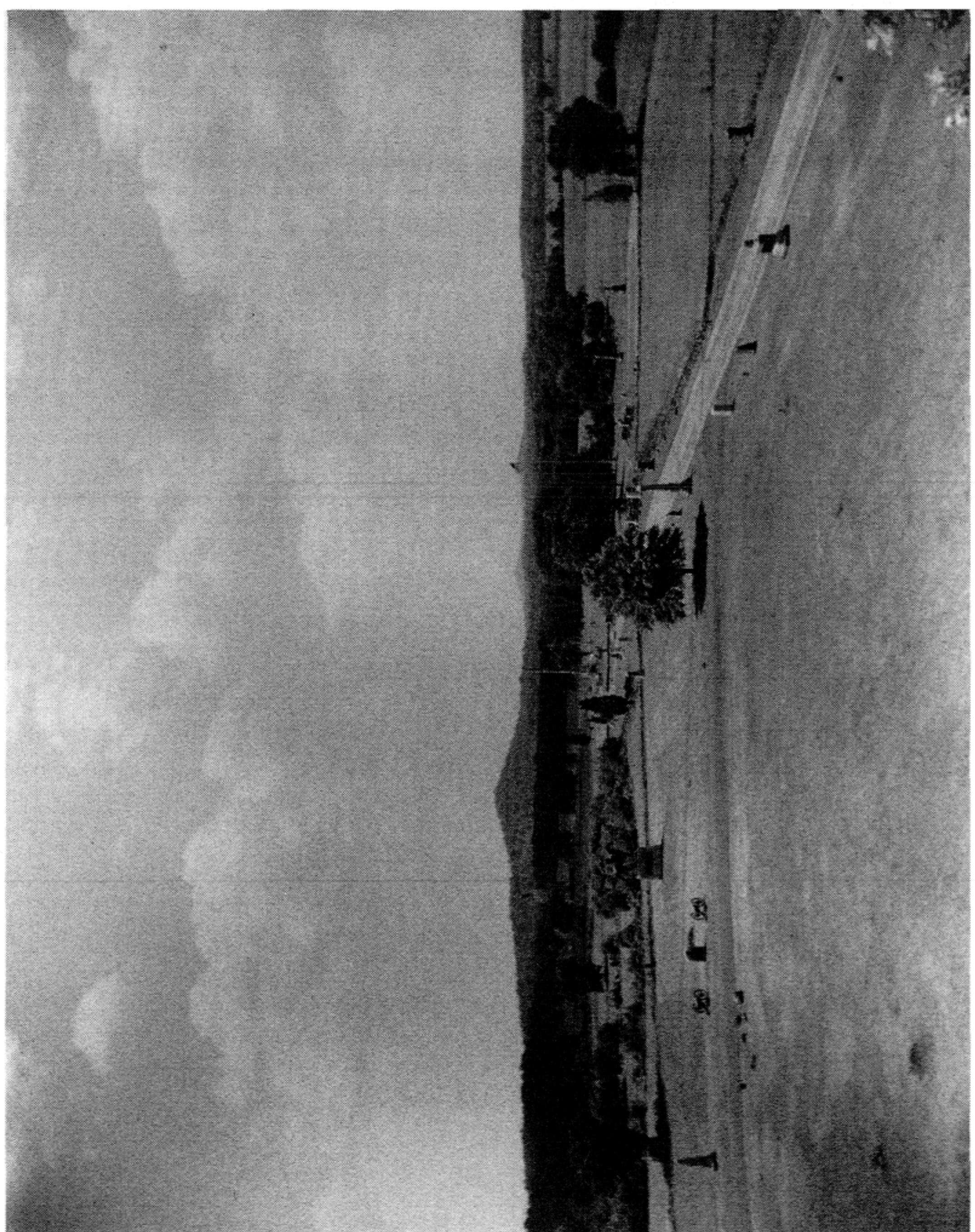
Of pain and bleat a sacrament of hissing  
Over those who, slumping under, blue  
From asphyxiation, die. Stannard, pressing

Choices, orders canister at a rod in lieu  
Of accuracy. Some, turning over and confessing  
A variety of sins, consider and then renew

Their vows to watch the silent sky. The high point  
Comes, passes by, and Virginia will anoint  
Them coming, somehow, home. Who will appoint

The rows of boxes for a convocation? Pray,  
What rests inside? What will the people say?  
North or South? Their very thoughts will stray

Into a turpitude that this should happen, away,  
Away from home, unsanctified as pain.



Pickett's Charge area, Big Round Top in the distance, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (photograph from Lane Studios, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania)

## The Field of Gettysburg

Like music softening into silence, sunset  
Dims into pastels and then into coloratura  
Of grey and, from the dark, mild bravura  
Of sills and tinges still paling, kismet  
The halos of midnight, elision failing:  
The quiet dark. Ah, sleep, the very field  
Of sleep is strewn with soldiery who yield  
Pungency of flame that rose from railing  
Cannon on line in a glade, somewhere hidden.  
Now hidden more, they are still, as if tired,  
As are they who writhe and yield, bidden  
To consider restraint of purpose now mired  
In loam that reddens darkly, the dimming sky  
A chamber for those who pass, or are passing by.

# Near Appomattox, April 1865

## I

### General Robert E. Lee

The gait of my horse, though I keep it slow  
With a hand of restraint, is the only sound  
Of my secrecy. Philip Sheridan must round  
My excursions to right and left with the flow  
Of cavalry. Leaves and branches tremble low  
In the pastel of sun as I rein beside a wand  
Of red and gray. The day settles as if fond  
Of whispering, the call of skirmishers or foe  
So very near. I pass, not knowing whether  
Death is the wanlight where field and town  
Await the honor that slips like a feather  
Before it hovers down. I stop near a tree  
To gather my immediate staff, but before me  
An array appears, cavalry brandishing the light  
Of steel, but still, and then, as my columns move,  
It parts to show the infantry behind, to prove  
The mind of surrender, and its terms.

## II

### General Philip Sheridan

Pommel and whip in hand, I ride the field  
For the edge or margin to turn or nip with sting  
Of shot or sabre the confederate will for war.  
In against Robert E. Lee's army is ally  
To nick its length. It writhes, hunching feebly,  
Paling even from grey, and where skirmishers  
Were, ghosts of the brigades of Chancellorsville  
Glint in the sunlight and faintly disappear.  
The verifiable cordons, or ranks, remain,  
Easing along, aware of my continuum.  
I watch from a glen. Then suddenly forward,  
I cross his column and wait with an iron  
Brigade at my rear. I stiffen and exult  
To see Lee's guard approaching, lost,  
Only to see me hesitate, cleave my line,  
And gather it at the flanks of infantry.  
His guard slows, and then his center, amazed,  
Offers the white banner, waving the dead  
Will of valor before us—Richmond gone,  
Petersburg, the Wilderness, and Gettysburg  
Long ago. The angles of the triangle, the glen,  
The ridge, the field are gone, and the pitched  
Fire I see is halation of water and luciferin  
Aloft and momently vanishing, as if a remnant  
Only here as memory to reconstruct a cause  
That failed before it began to pique my curiosity.

## Terms of Surrender, 1865

Are these later than they should have been  
In war, like love? I cast the regiments ahead,  
Invoking the skiey field of light instead  
Of the issues of maneuver before the fen  
We had to cross. What angles in the ken  
Of brilliance did I fail to see? The dead  
Bestir themselves as lost decay. They were bred  
Into darkness, and I cannot sense the when  
And where advantage was. I shift the anatomy  
Of strategy like a coin, but it opens to olios  
Of cause, desertion, prurience, and folios  
Of terms. This is edema, not metonymy.  
Our purpose feigns itself and struts in a uniform.  
A paper stuns me. I sign where it is warm.

## The Spirit of Robert E. Lee after Appomattox

I once held Gettysburg, where stones are the soldiery  
Of silence as they survey the field for a fiery test  
Of Honor. And I still know it, though I keep the rest  
Of meadows in sunlight lazing north and south in the witchery  
Of wives whose command is milk, that white treachery  
That is their goodness of cream and golden honey, lest  
It be thought a deprivation, in Canaan. West  
Of what I see is the forest that, like a wave of stitchery  
Across a lap, smooths green and yellow to a peak  
Of darkest evening. Now I vacillate as my experience  
Becomes a history. The overlay of war is expedience  
Of duty, but it is the primal justice of what I seek.  
It came along, through maneuver, as dramatic play.  
The meadow is better if I know the substance of the day  
That history brought me to, and surrender.



Little Round Top from Devil's Den

Little Round Top from Devil's Den, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, c. 1896–1900, devastation still apparent (photograph courtesy Gettysburg National Military Park, National Park Service)

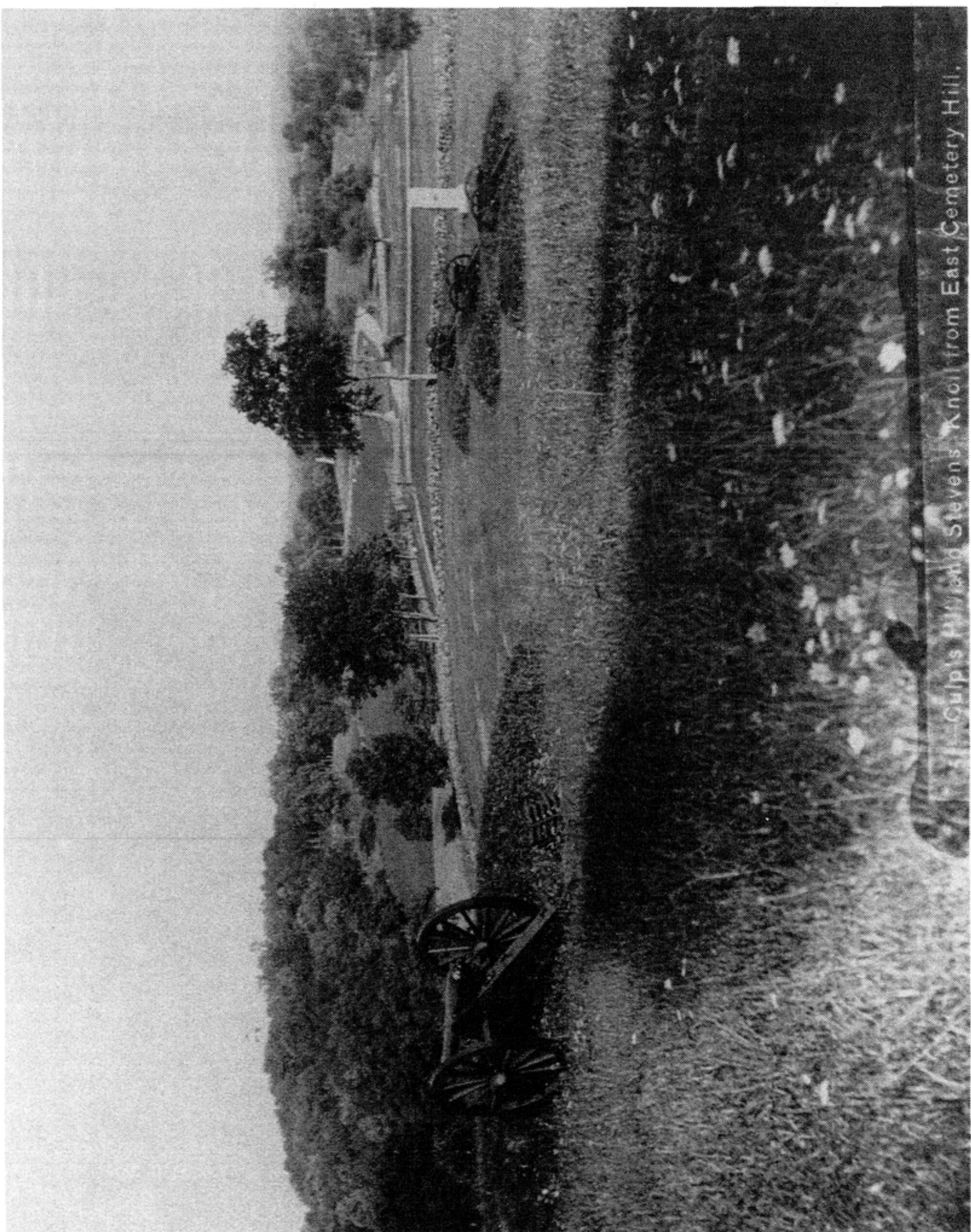
## The Rebel Cause

Moss in the bayou,  
The air still as a web,  
Vines hanging like caught  
Sound, the evening still  
Beyond recollection,  
Still as a boat unwavering  
In water. Now the ghost of Jackson  
Maneuvers for the vision of the field,  
The wilderness.  
Whether the prince of generals  
Seeks the intrigue of the blue deployment  
Or marshals the wizardry of moths  
Or fireflies, one cannot tell.  
The greater visor of sunset lowers,  
And the eye of twilight glimmers  
In an old intelligence:  
Lee before the shallow draw,  
Hill in the dusk of trees,  
Early before the wheeling cavalry,  
Longstreet in the invidious orchard.  
They limp in the march from the Shenandoah,  
Gazing at the apparitions of the North  
Against hill or rock  
Or in the empty towns of Pennsylvania.  
The lustre of conquest remands the vision  
As if to some accountancy.  
Those halt and lame who press their hand invisibly  
Where shot entered look for the expedient hush  
Of forgetfulness, where in the leagues beyond war  
Rest is a commodity to be cherished like the puff  
Of a rifle at the brow of a hill, briefly seen,  
Or the sky that tosses and turns from the dart of fire,  
Or the irruption numbing chest and arms. Darkness.  
We cannot see. The twilight deepens there and there.  
What are the political issues translated  
Into a bloody angle at Sharpsburg,

Or into the mind before Richmond?  
The damp settles over brow and arm,  
And we are laid to rest in dreams  
That possess the century as it wavers away.  
Stillness.  
The war cry of the owl,  
The red glimmer of the firefly,  
The maneuvering of the fox,  
And we remand these heroics  
To the public mind in perpetuity.



Little Round Top looking toward Devil's Den area, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (photograph from Lane Studios, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania)



Culp's Hill and Stevens Knoll from East Cemetery Hill, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, c. 1896–1900 (photograph courtesy Gettysburg National Military Park, National Park Service)

# Gravesend

A vagrant patch of lichens etches  
A gravestone where a cursive name  
Weathers away. Nothing's the same  
Where memory's credence hardly fetches

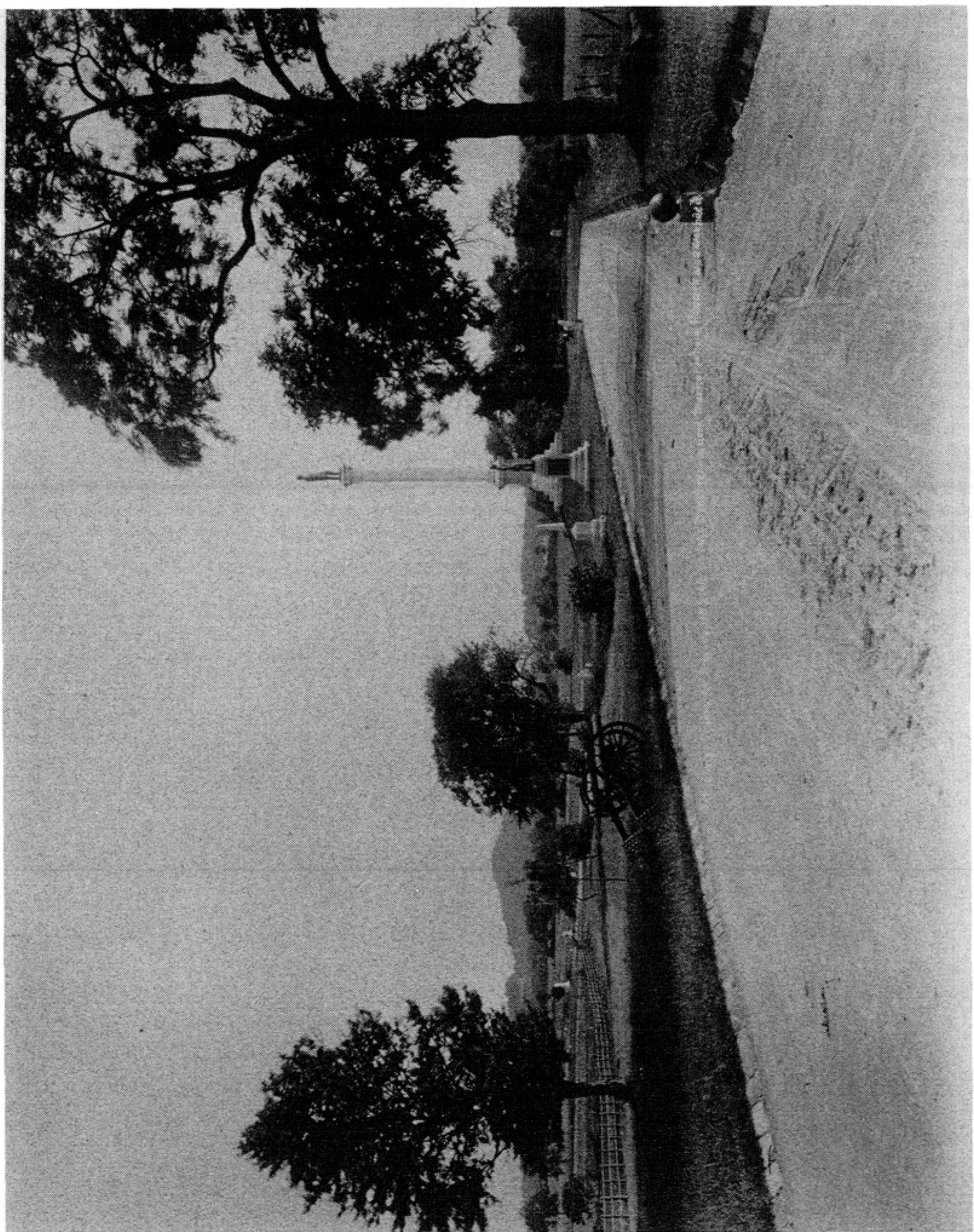
Feeling for a quiet rest in peace.  
The name's illegible. A register inside  
The chapel contains pages that abide  
In dust, where a golden-glowing fleece

Of identity was thrown that it might lift  
Into wind and light. No one remembers  
Even the age as one casually dismembers  
Messias in the ranging censure and rift

Of his mind. Flares of history illumine  
Tares of the vindictive repining  
That grew abundantly in his vining,  
Continuous will, where a dimming lumen

Wanders over surfaces and flickers out.  
What can remain beyond the cause  
Of a stay against time as we pause  
To wonder why we apparently flout

Someone whose headstone is awry,  
Whose presence is the very sheen  
Of photogenesis in brown or green,  
Becoming dust, the azure sky?



View south down Union line on Cemetery Ridge, Big Round Top in the background, Union regimental and state monuments along Hancock Avenue, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (photograph courtesy Gettysburg National Military Park, National Park Service)

## War Historian

No one can muster the record of war except  
In the flourish of the word by Whom word is given.  
See the battle flag in a case. It lifts riven  
In the furious devastation of fire here kept  
For canister, wavering, and we see it, yclept  
In tattered terms as guidon for leaven  
In the mana of memory. Startling a haven  
Of glory, the standard will redeem. It slept  
The long years of repose, but an art will retain  
The force of the field of relativity as surplice  
Of eternal dedication, responding. Years splice  
The years again, exquisitely in place. Chamberlain  
Stands on Little Round Top with his regiment and holds it.  
Designs for such years are not improvident.  
They are on the wheel of galaxies, when time is bent  
In space extending round and round the integer.  
Quickly, its glimmering in the claret tanager!  
Here. Take the bayonet as Longstreet's men caught  
Rising against your barricade, nearly evident,  
Surprise you very near. A stare, as in a sacrifice,  
Reminds you of Calvary. Accept it as the price  
God paid to fail before you, slumping anent  
The ultimate. You cannot say what must happen  
In this atonement will not happen soon to dampen  
A blade in claret. Which is the now, suffice  
God to say, rendering history as salvation?  
And time in history glimmers like a station  
On the way to the immortal cause of Gettysburg.

## A Memorial to Ulysses S. Grant

The bright rail, and down the field another,  
Twisted into the candor of an acrobat askew,  
Were the rails of his supply. A solemn clue,  
A relic of a battle, graces some mother  
Church of pines nearby. Flickering at still  
And windrow, revenants proclaim the rue  
Of substance, the green of war, and strew  
The rain of Vicksburg into the muddy rill  
That whispers to the river. The soft trill  
Of a birdcall is a sanctity, like a wavering  
At end of day. The general falters, savoring  
His breath, and slips against a barricade,  
Breathless now. The maneuvers that dreamed  
On maps soften into mist as if they were braid  
And epaulets. What is that funereal box  
They put him in? This odd soul, who locks  
The memory in, will brace at dawn again  
And strap the webbing on that holds steel  
Of will serried in his countenance. He must feel  
The sun of war across the line again in fen  
Or field against the restless charge when  
Daylight is the darkest dayspring sunning him.

# Sacrifice of the Innocents

The disciples murmur in the conference rooms  
And pass beyond the end of argument;  
Beyond the stainless steel facades resumes

The day of the cormorant who glides, his height  
Dazzling in the sun like the Word that is gone.  
Everything had been said: all else is sleight

Or rhetoric: for He is dead and is raised  
Only to His catafalque; the generations  
Follow in the clear air the whispering

Wings. All else is the dying resolution  
Of the state; the march from the city's square  
Into the geometric streets, the green convolution

Of the final mind. Abroad, the race  
Awakens; the light of the streets wanders  
With the day; the professional face

Is a mask aware of the darkened reaches  
Of death: the Word plays while they wheel  
In the sinking fire of doctrine that teaches

Awe. Before the rounded stone they lift their shields;  
The catafalque enters the square in the shadow  
Of wings, and the blue lady of the white fields

Descends from the dim pavilions of lore  
Murmuring of lost law and the black land;  
Fire erupts from her fingers before

The long column; she touches the bier  
And dissolves in light; utterly pale,  
They cry, "Archangel, we ask thee, peer

Into the chapels where we spoke,  
For we felt the eruption of light  
And now await His stroke. . . . "

These children press near, touching the sheathing  
Flag, and rise, enflamed, in a sheet  
Of sky: the day widens there, wreathing

And turning in light. . . .

## Sepulchre

In that quiet room, where years elapse,  
    The sun dwells through curtains, molten  
Yellow at three as a sparrow taps  
    At the window, and at evening golden.  
Shadows transpire in that room quiet  
    And ensepulchred apart from reaches  
Beyond the door where a glimmering diet  
    Of mayflies teems over snowy beaches  
That receive the sea, shoreward swirling  
    To greenery and calm. And, beyond,  
They swarm down into shallows, pearling  
    Waters with gloss where they dawnd,  
With sun at morning, like a mist  
    Or wind's dust on a dusky hill—  
Such light debris within the lists  
    Of day, where they turned against a mill  
Of leaves shattering and intervening  
    Into dust, and twinkling. In that room  
Beyond the sea, a shade is keening  
    As memory dies in the silvering tomb  
Of day.

## Twinkling Sun

The twilight assails the depths of evening,  
Turns grey into darkness, to fail  
The jasmine and the rise of the pale  
Stars in their magic and their nonchalance.  
How may I read them in this dale  
Of leaves as in sorrow I glance  
At them, but see your face, though unavailing,  
Away? And as I see you, now beside the railing  
You ease against, Uranus rises like a harvest  
Moon, near a nearby crescent, to invest  
Our sorrow as with our world we mist away.

## The Leaf: A Benediction

A leaf may fall across the light,  
Tip and rock as a vision might  
In a bay, and dipping like a sprite  
Find my outstretched hand white

In the sun. It was green transpiring  
Into gold. It came from transcending  
Blue, the regency of sky, desiring  
Fall and heaps of flame wending

Far up to abeles of cloud and light  
That slowly stray into afternoon.  
It is a dream that one should plight  
As a science of the skiey rune

Of superscription. One leaf must fall,  
Alight, and burn through eternal Fall.

To gain a credibility in it,  
Settle low into a palm.  
One leaf is of word and will  
And seeks a blue and deathless calm.