

The Civil War Poems

Clinton F. Larson

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

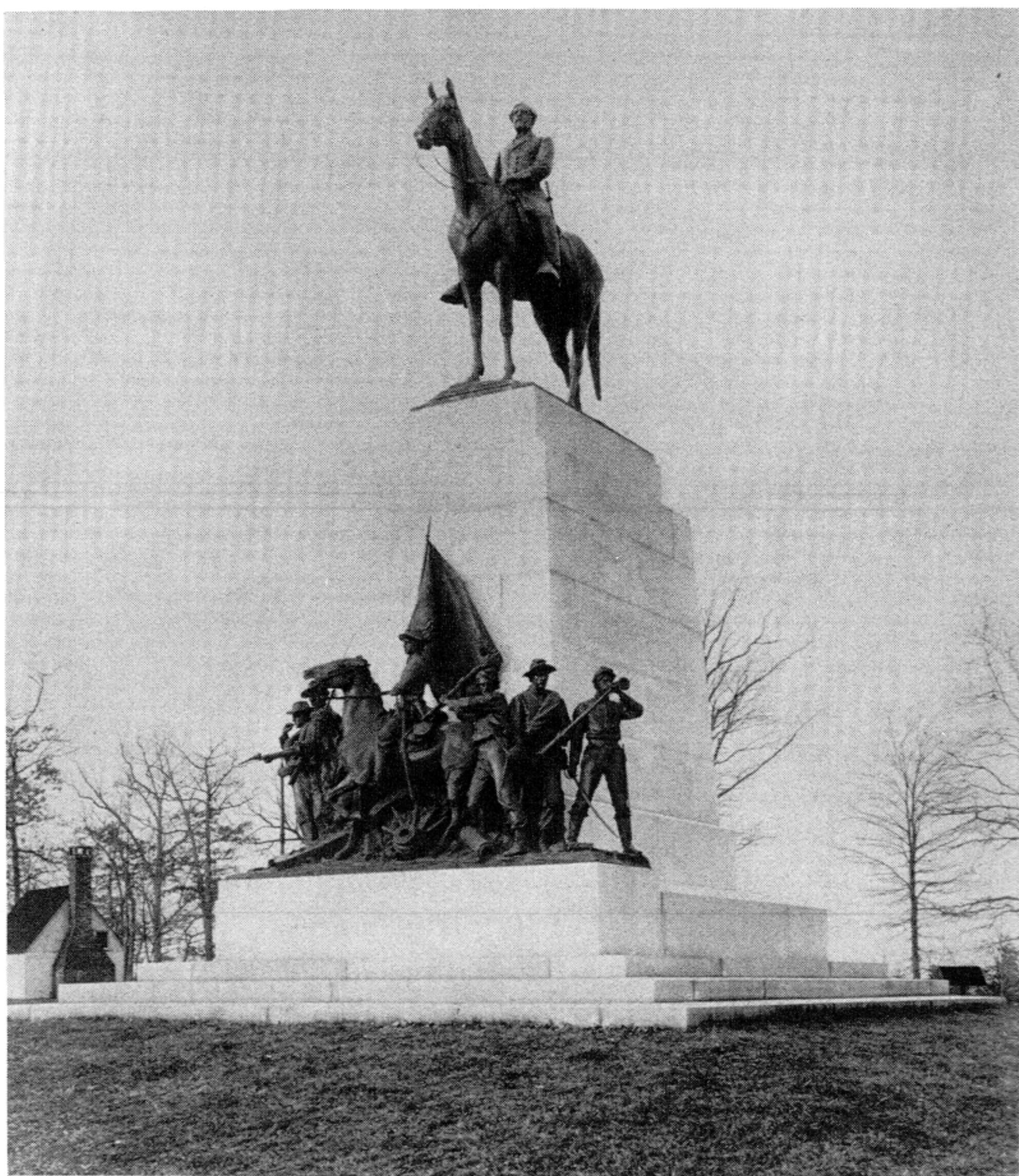
Blue array. Stonewall coursed near the ground
Of war, forested vales and meadows, his campaign
Gathering, waiting. Then instinct, like champagne,
Gleamed, heady and clear: now. And the sound

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, unresponding
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 consum-
mate,
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!

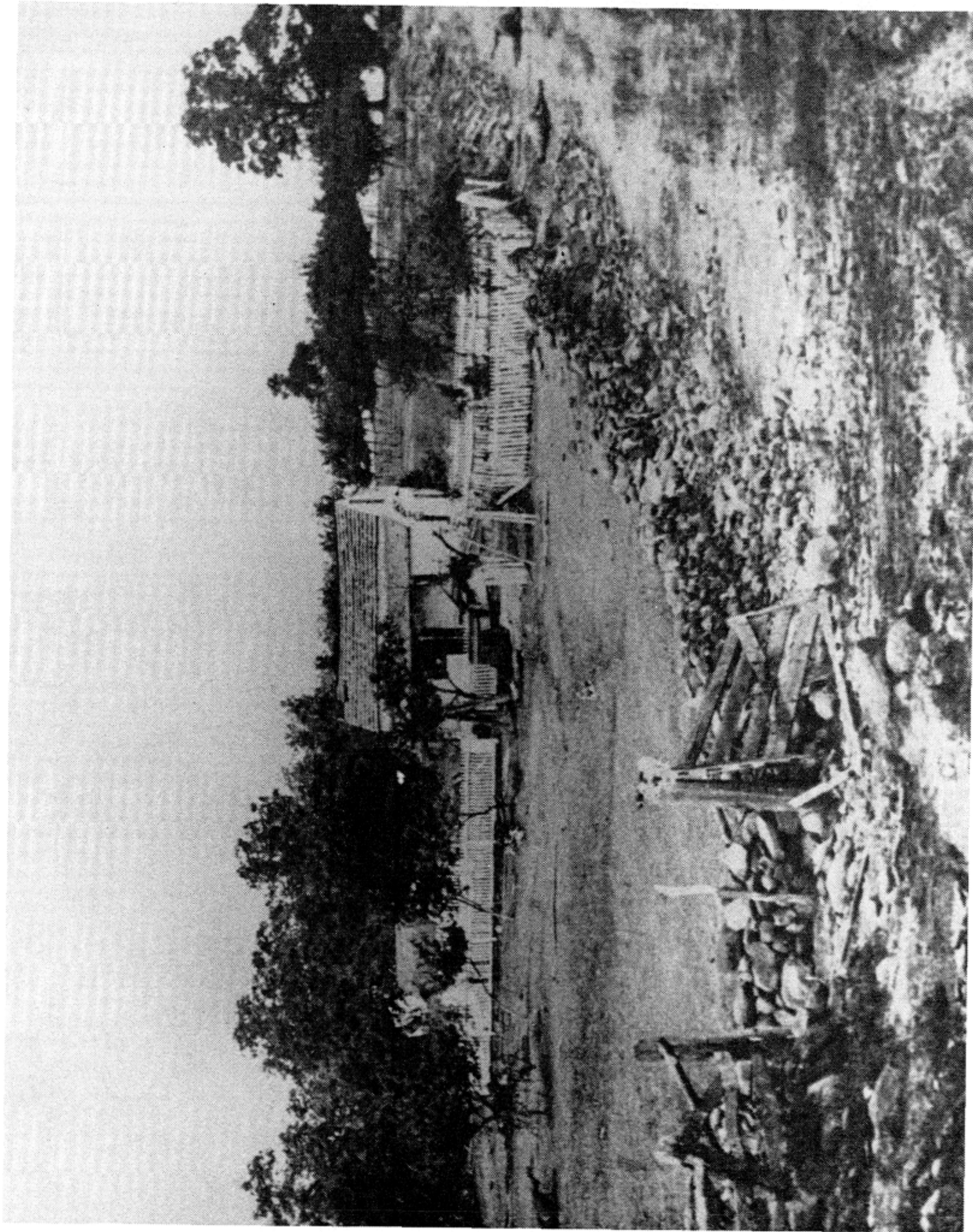
Lee: Armistead? Longstreet, his position swarms
With the hunched infantry of the North! You were
right
In the cold measure of their strength!
This is a strength I cannot know! Meade,
It is not in you; the fury of hell is in them
Out of a tall righteousness I cannot fathom.
They take us down and down,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

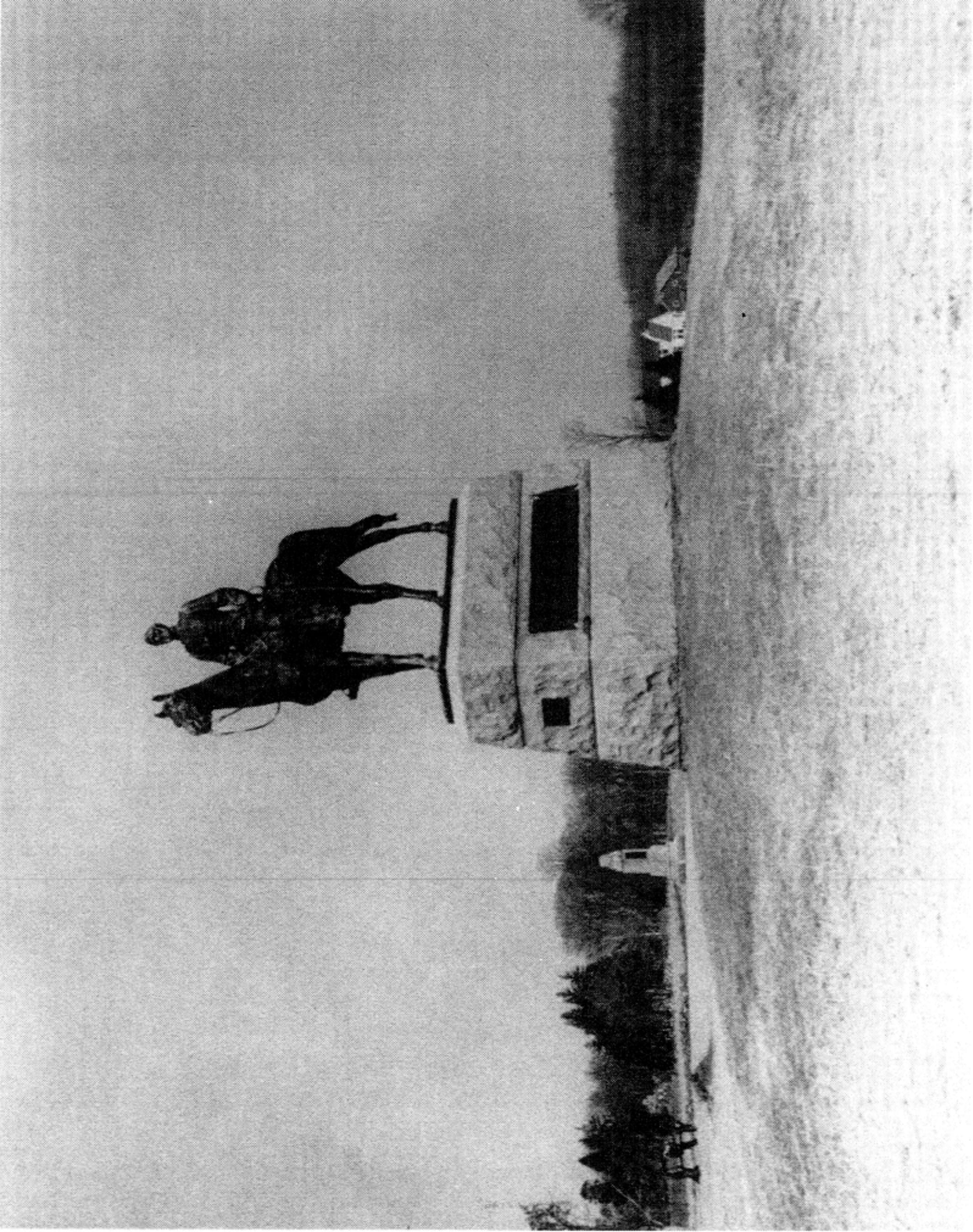
Lee: Lincoln! I never knew him! I am sorry!
I never knew him. He eludes maneuver
And defeat, and moulders our destiny.

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!



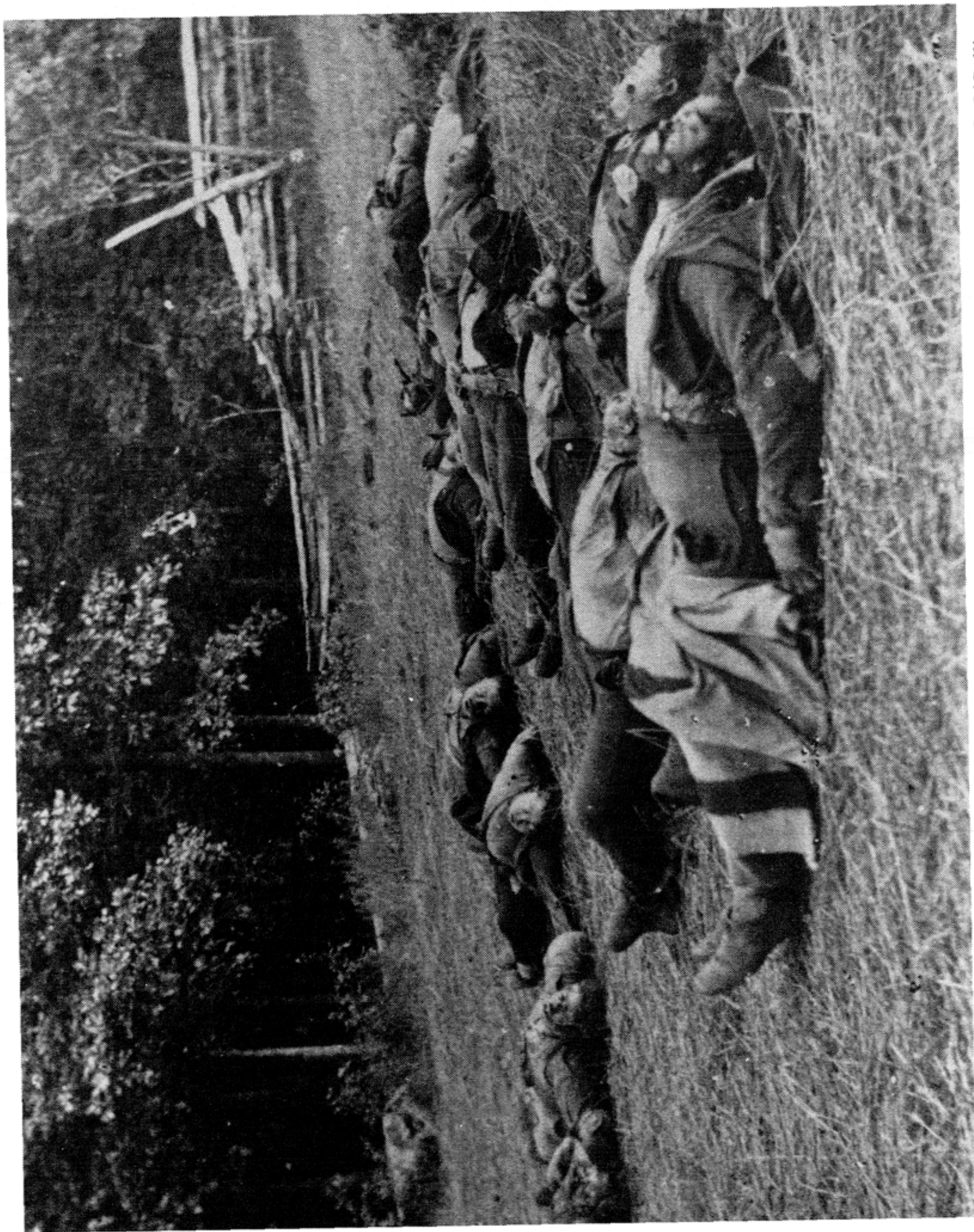
General George Gordon Meade's headquarters at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (photograph courtesy Gettysburg National Military Park, National Park Service)



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. Soldierly 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

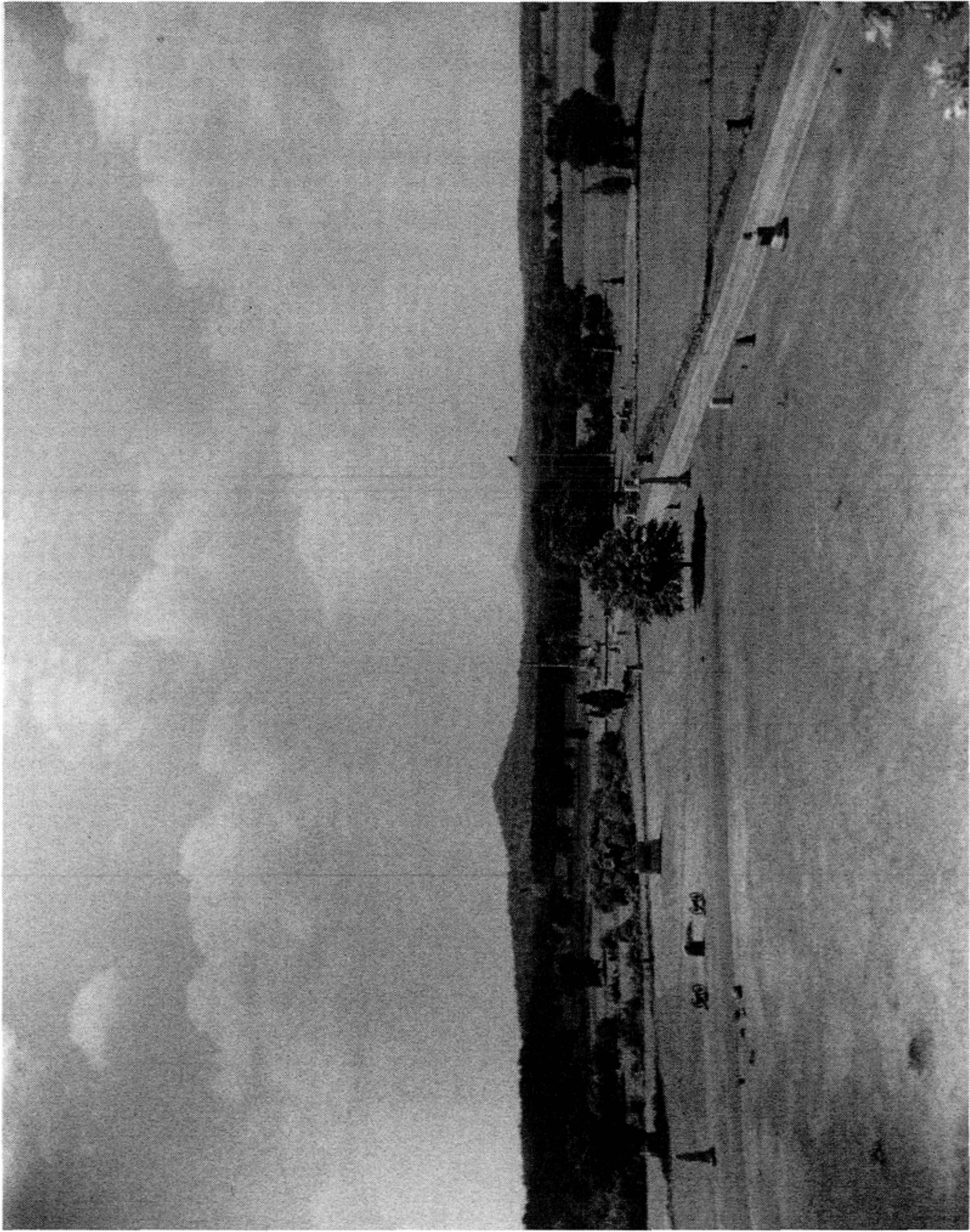
Of pain and bleat a sacrament of hissing
Over those who, slumping under, blue
From asphyxiation, die. Stannard, pressing

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 sils 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 momentarily 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, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, c. 1896-1900, devastation still apparent (photograph courtesy Gettysburg National Military Park, National Park Service)

The Rebel Cause

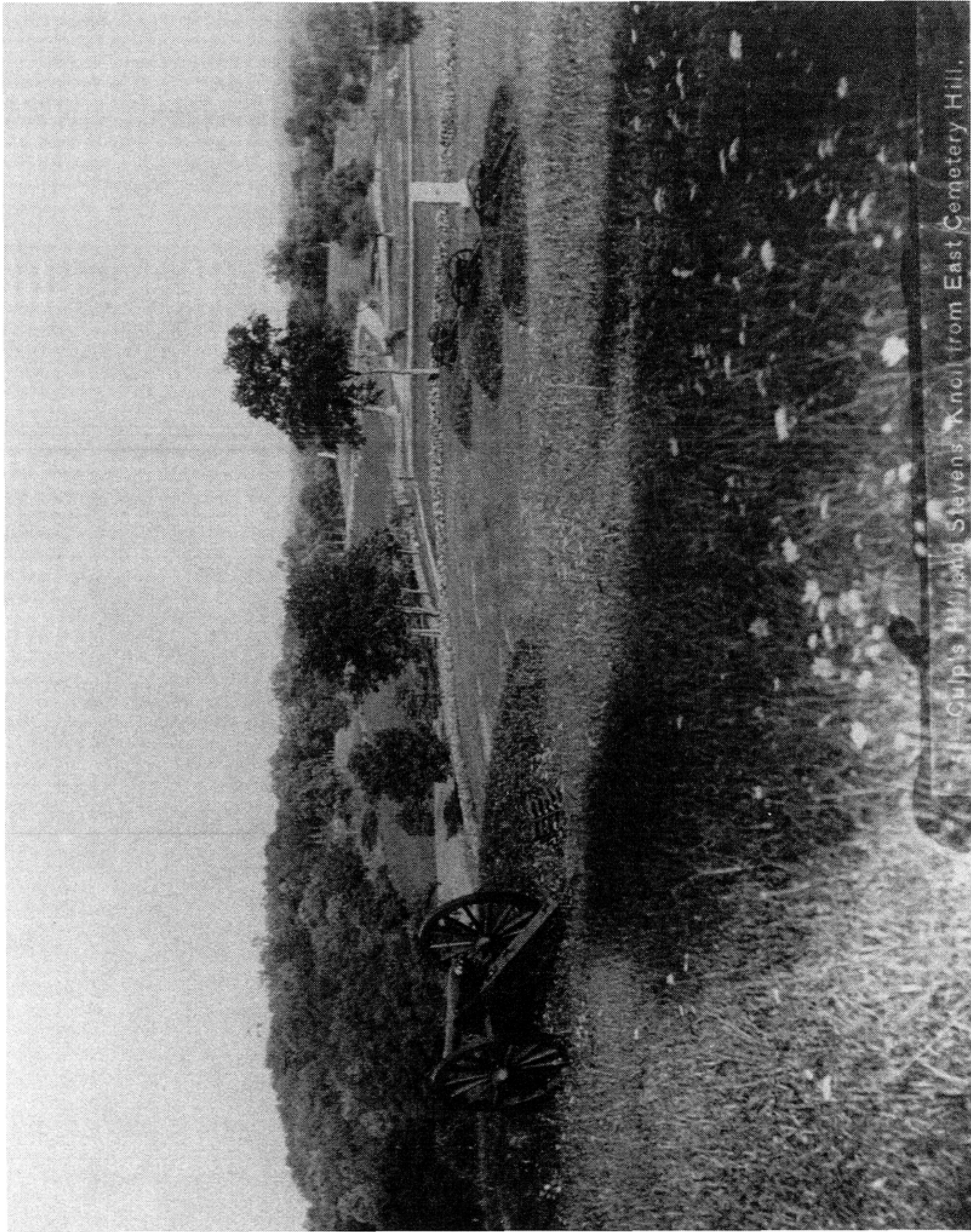
Moss in the bayou,
The air still as a web,
Vines hanging like caught
Sound, the evening still
Beyond recollection,
Still as a boat unwavering
In water. Now the ghost of Jackson
Maneuvers for the vision of the field,
The wilderness.
Whether the prince of generals
Seeks the intrigue of the blue deployment
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 sallow 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, 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

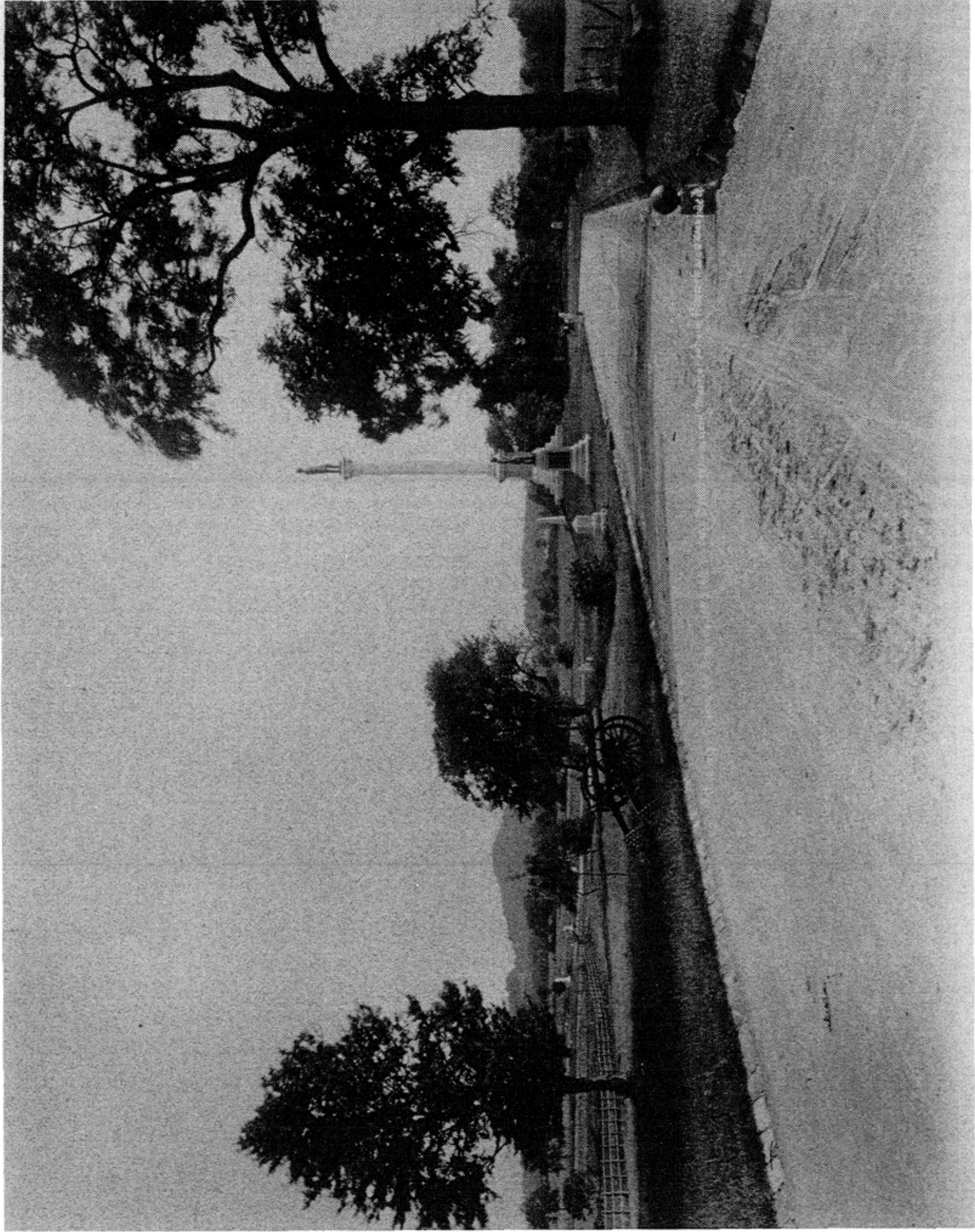
Feeling for a quiet rest in peace.
The name's illegible. A register inside
The chapel contains pages that abide
In dust, where a golden-glowing fleece

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 dawned,
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.