

Selected Major Battles of the Civil War

February 1861 -- The South Seizes Federal Forts.

When President Buchanan -- Lincoln's predecessor -- refused to surrender southern federal forts to the seceding states, southern state troops seized them. At Fort Sumter, South Carolina troops repulsed a supply ship trying to reach federal forces based in the fort. The ship was forced to return to New York, its supplies undelivered.

March 1861 -- Lincoln's Inauguration.

At Lincoln's inauguration on March 4, the new president said he had no plans to end slavery in those states where it already existed, but he also said he would not accept secession. He hoped to resolve the national crisis without warfare.

April 1861 -- Attack on Fort Sumter.

When President Lincoln planned to send supplies to Fort Sumter, he alerted the state in advance, in an attempt to avoid hostilities. South Carolina, however, feared a trick; the commander of the fort, Robert Anderson, was asked to surrender immediately. Anderson offered to surrender, but only after he had exhausted his supplies. His offer was rejected, and on April 12, the Civil War began with shots fired on the fort. Fort Sumter eventually was surrendered to South Carolina.

July 1861 -- The First Battle of Bull Run

Public demand pushed General-in-Chief Winfield Scott to advance on the South before adequately training his untried troops. Scott ordered General Irvin McDowell to advance on Confederate troops stationed at Manassas Junction, Virginia. McDowell attacked on July 21, and was initially successful, but the introduction of Confederate reinforcements resulted in a Southern victory and a chaotic retreat toward Washington by federal troops.

April 1862 -- The Battle of Shiloh.

On April 6, Confederate forces attacked Union forces under General Ulysses S. Grant at Shiloh, Tennessee. By the end of the day, the federal troops were almost defeated. Yet, during the night, reinforcements arrived, and by the next morning the Union commanded the field. When Confederate forces retreated, the exhausted federal forces did not follow. Casualties were heavy -- 13,000 out of 63,000 Union soldiers died, and 11,000 of 40,000 Confederate troops were killed.

April 1862 -- The Peninsular Campaign.

In April, General McClellan's troops left northern Virginia to begin the Peninsular Campaign. By May 4, they occupied Yorktown, Virginia. At Williamsburg, Confederate forces prevented McClellan from meeting the main part of the Confederate army, and McClellan halted his troops, awaiting reinforcements.

September 1862 -- Antietam.

On September 17, Confederate forces under General Lee were caught by General McClellan near Sharpsburg, Maryland. This battle proved to be the bloodiest day of the war; 2,108 Union soldiers were killed and 9,549 wounded -- 2,700 Confederates were killed and 9,029 wounded. The battle had no clear winner, but because General Lee withdrew to Virginia, McClellan was considered the victor. The battle convinced the British and French -- who were contemplating official recognition of the Confederacy -- to reserve action, and gave Lincoln the opportunity to announce his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation (September 22), which would free all slaves in areas rebelling against the United States, effective January 1, 1863.

December 1862 -- The Battle of Fredericksburg.

General McClellan's slow movements, combined with General Lee's escape, and continued raiding by Confederate cavalry, dismayed many in the North. On November 7, Lincoln replaced McClellan with Major-General Ambrose E. Burnside. Burnside's forces were defeated in a series of attacks against entrenched Confederate forces at Fredericksburg, Virginia, and Burnside was replaced with General Joseph Hooker.

January 1863 -- Emancipation Proclamation.

In an effort to placate the slave-holding border states, Lincoln resisted the demands of radical Republicans for complete abolition. Yet some Union generals, such as General B. F. Butler, declared slaves escaping to their lines "contraband of war," not to be returned to their masters. Other generals decreed that the slaves of men rebelling against the Union were to be considered free. Congress, too, had been moving toward abolition. In 1861, Congress had passed an act stating that all slaves employed against the Union were to be considered free. In 1862, another act stated that all slaves of men who supported the Confederacy were to be considered free. Lincoln, aware of the public's growing support of abolition, issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, declaring that all slaves in areas still in rebellion were, in the eyes of the federal government, free.

May 1863 -- The Battle of Chancellorsville.

On April 27, Union General Hooker crossed the Rappahannock River to attack General Lee's forces. Lee split his army, attacking a surprised Union army in three places and almost completely defeating them. Hooker withdrew across the Rappahannock River, giving the South a victory, but it was the Confederates' most costly victory in terms of casualties.

May 1863 -- The Vicksburg Campaign.

Union General Grant won several victories around Vicksburg, Mississippi, the fortified city considered essential to the Union's plans to regain control of the Mississippi River. On May 22, Grant began a siege of the city. After six weeks, Confederate General John Pemberton surrendered, giving up the city and 30,000 men. The capture of Port Hudson, Louisiana, shortly thereafter placed the entire Mississippi River in Union hands. The Confederacy was split in two.

June-July 1863 -- The Gettysburg Campaign

Confederate General Lee decided to take the war to the enemy. On June 13, he defeated Union forces at Winchester, Virginia, and continued north to Pennsylvania. General Hooker, who had been planning to attack Richmond, was instead forced to follow Lee. Hooker, never comfortable with his commander, General Halleck, resigned on June 28, and General George Meade replaced him as commander of the Army of the Potomac.

On July 1, a chance encounter between Union and Confederate forces began the Battle of Gettysburg. In the fighting that followed, Meade had greater numbers and better defensive positions. He won the battle, but failed to follow Lee as he retreated back to Virginia. Militarily, the Battle of Gettysburg was the high-water mark of the Confederacy; it is also significant because it ended Confederate hopes of formal recognition by foreign governments. On November 19, President Lincoln dedicated a portion of the Gettysburg battlefield as a national cemetery, and delivered his memorable "Gettysburg Address."

May 1864 -- Grant's Wilderness Campaign.

General Grant, promoted to commander of the Union armies, planned to engage Lee's forces in Virginia until they were destroyed. North and South met and fought in an inconclusive three-day battle in the Wilderness. Lee inflicted more casualties on the Union forces than his own army incurred, but unlike Grant, he had no replacements.

June 1864 -- The Battle of Cold Harbor.

Grant again attacked Confederate forces at Cold Harbor, losing over 7,000 men in twenty minutes. Although Lee suffered fewer casualties, his army never recovered from Grant's continual attacks. This was Lee's last clear victory of the war.

August 1864 -- General William T. Sherman's Atlanta Campaign.

Union General Sherman departed Chattanooga, and was soon met by Confederate General Joseph Johnston. Skillful strategy enabled Johnston to hold off Sherman's force -- almost twice the size of Johnston's. However, Johnston's tactics caused his superiors to replace him with General John Bell Hood, who was soon defeated. Hood surrendered Atlanta, Georgia, on September 1; Sherman occupied the city the next day. The fall of Atlanta greatly boosted Northern morale.

November 1864 -- General William T. Sherman's March to the Sea.

General Sherman continued his march through Georgia to the sea. In the course of the march, he cut himself off from his source of supplies, planning for his troops to live off the land. His men cut a path 300 miles in length and 60 miles wide as they passed through Georgia, destroying factories, bridges, railroads, and public buildings.

January 1865 -- The Fall of the Confederacy.

Transportation problems and successful blockades caused severe shortages of food and supplies in the South. Starving soldiers began to desert Lee's forces, and although President Jefferson Davis approved the arming of slaves as a means of augmenting the shrinking army, the measure was never put into effect.

February 1865 -- Sherman Marches through North and South Carolina.

Union General Sherman moved from Georgia through South Carolina, destroying almost everything in his path.

April 1865 -- Surrender at Appomattox Courthouse.

General Lee's troops were soon surrounded, and on April 7, Grant called upon Lee to surrender. On April 9, the two commanders met at Appomattox Courthouse, and agreed on the terms of surrender. Lee's men were sent home on parole -- soldiers with their horses, and officers with their side arms. All other equipment was surrendered.

April 1865 -- The Assassination of President Lincoln.

On April 14, as President Lincoln was watching a performance of "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C., he was shot by John Wilkes Booth, an actor from Maryland obsessed with avenging the Confederate defeat. Lincoln died the next morning. Booth escaped to Virginia. Eleven days later, cornered in a burning barn, Booth was fatally shot by a Union soldier. Nine other people were involved in the assassination; four were hanged, four imprisoned, and one acquitted.

April-May 1865 -- Final Surrenders among Remaining Confederate Troops.

Remaining Confederate troops were defeated between the end of April and the end of May. Jefferson Davis was captured in Georgia on May 10.