

## Introduction

The trail system at Gaines' Mill consists of three inter-connected loops. The shortest of them, the Federal Defense Trail, is half a mile long; it begins and ends at the parking lot. The Wilcox Spur Trail branches off to the west. It adds half a mile to the route. The Confederate Attack Trail breaks off to the north from the Wilcox Spur Trail and carries pedestrians across Boatswain's Creek.

It adds a further 1.7 miles. This brochure is geared directly to the Confederate Attack Trail. Numbered posts along the way conform to the text here.

## Tour Stops

**1** Users of this circular trail should be aware that because of its configuration, the stops cannot be visited in an order that perfectly fits the chronology of the battle. Permanent preservation of all this ground dates to the 21st century. The Richmond Battlefields Association bought these woods; the national non-profit Civil War Trust (now the American Battlefield Trust) purchased for preservation a further 285 acres. Every foot of the trail on this side of the creek is on ground saved for posterity by those organizations. The land belongs now to Richmond National Battlefield Park. It is a nearly pristine landscape, one that veterans of the epic battle here surely would recognize if they could return to the scene.

**2** A tall manmade berm slicing through a battlefield usually represents a soldier-built breastwork. But the one visible here was built in the 20th century for the short-lived and extremely unsuccessful Richmond & Rappahannock River Railway. That line ran from the eastern edge of Richmond out toward the York River. Its stated purpose was to carry passengers to the battlefields, and also on "gunning and fishing"



Richmond & Rappahannock River Railway Train

expeditions. The railroad opened in 1914 and closed in 1917, so for that brief period railroad cars puffed through this remote spot. The construction of the line scarred the entire length of the Gaines' Mill battlefield. Station stops existed a few hundred yards from here in both directions.

**3** The charge of Gen. John B. Hood's "Texas Brigade," specifically the 4th Texas and 18th Georgia regiments, has become the best-known event of the entire battle. Hood led the two regiments in a desperate advance through these fields, down the slope toward Boatswain's Creek, and ultimately across the stream and into the Federal lines. The small slope you just ascended was a fallow field in 1862; the woods were not present. A visitor who walked this ground on the morning after the battle remembered how "The slope from the summit to the brook was literally strewn with the dead."

There was no preserved land along the path of Hood's advance until 2011. The Richmond Battlefields Association purchased this spot and razed a modern home. The following year the Texas State Historical Association and a group of individuals descended from men who served in Hood's brigade united to erect this monument. Its appearance is in keeping with other stones that commemorate the participation of Texas regiments at nearly every Civil War battlefield across the country.

**4** This is one of the best modern views on the entire battlefield. As you face back toward the creek, look to the left. Watt House Road is visible in the far distance. Casualties filled the fields between here and there, the consequence of an afternoon of failed attacks. At the battle's climax, every part of that ground felt the feet of Confederate infantry advancing in a final furious charge.

Approximately one hour before total darkness, R. E. Lee told his division commander A. P. Hill "to advance my whole line and to communicate this order as far as I could to all commanders..." Hill spread the word; the result was an all-out attack across nearly two miles of front.

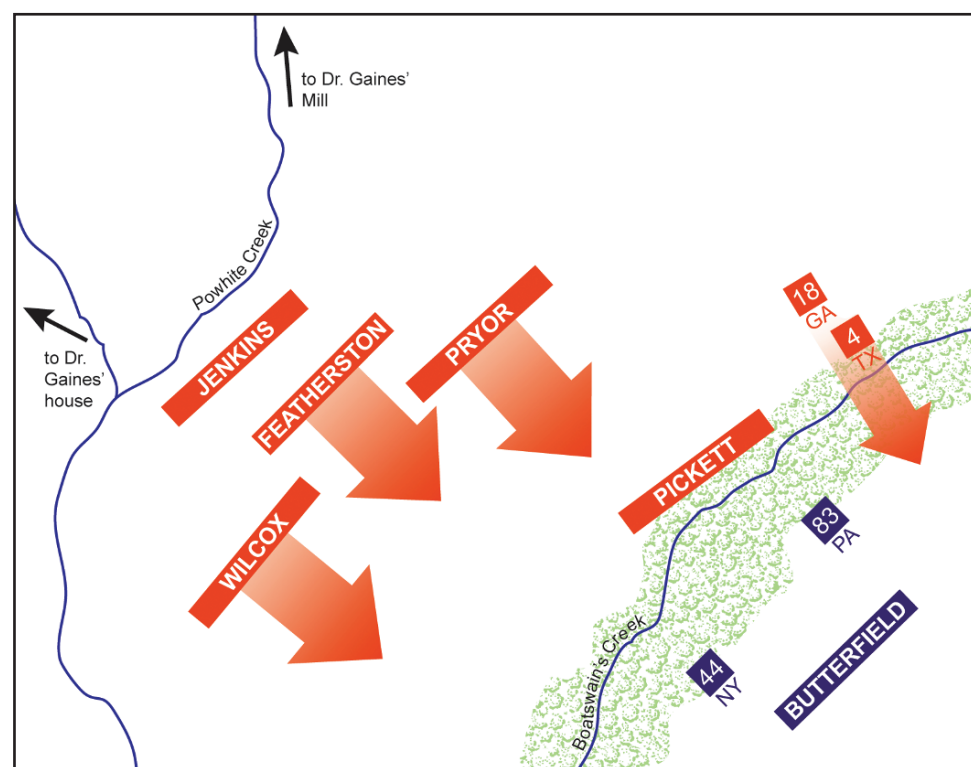
Excited eyewitnesses watched the daring charge and marveled at "the silent majesty of that slow-moving line." It was "a sight to set the blood a-tingling," thought one Confederate, and another considered it "the grandest sight I ever saw." Those awaiting the collision were less enthusiastic. A Michigan soldier peered through the open woods on his side of the creek and to him "the long straight lines of advancing bayonets looked terrible."

Behind you to the north and west is the valley of Powhite Creek. In response to Lee's directive, five brigades of Gen. James Longstreet's division climbed out of that low ground and charged across this elevated ridge on their way toward the Federal position behind Boatswain's Creek. The next two stops will look at specific pieces of that dramatic charge.

**5** The five Virginia regiments of George E. Pickett's brigade became the first of Longstreet's formations to advance. Cadmus M. Wilcox's Alabamians were forming to the right; the brigades of Roger A. Pryor and Winfield S. Featherston gathered immediately behind, as a second wave.

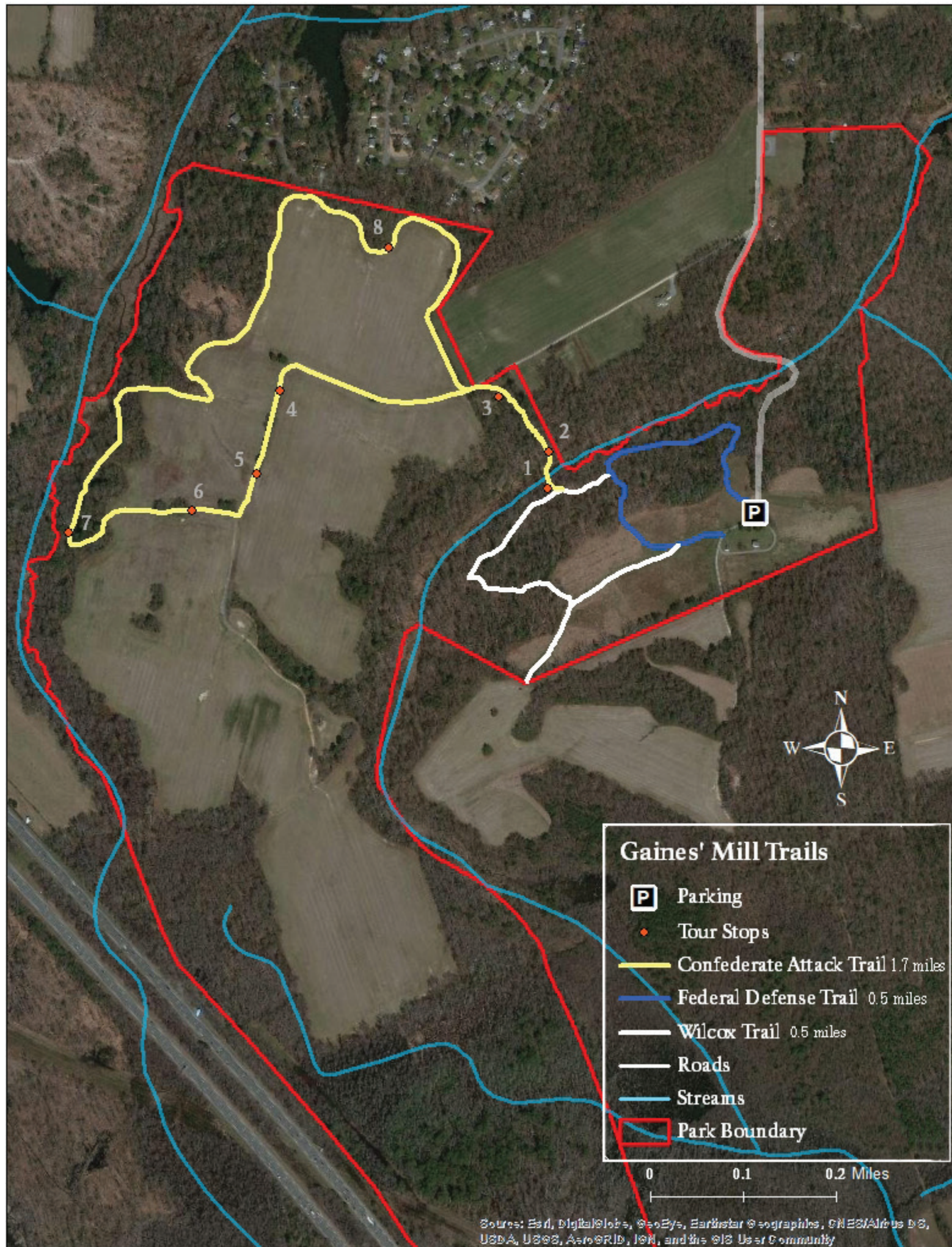
Pickett's men had little idea of the ordeal that awaited them. Union artillery dominated the ridges and swales of this field, but the infantry lines remained invisible in the sparse woods beyond Boatswain's Creek. Pickett threw out a long line of battle and advanced across this open field, planted that summer in some sort of grain.

The line reached the final slope beside the creek—350 yards east of here—before halting under a tremendous blast of small arms fire. A Federal rifleman shot Gen. Pickett. His surgeon recounted the painful details: "A minie ball had penetrated the upper part of his right chest near the neck, breaking the collar-bone and lodging in the back under the border of the shoulder blade." Pickett's senior colonel, Robert E. Withers of the 18th Virginia, stayed atop a horse and with nothing more than raw courage and personal example tried to restart the charge. A Federal bullet literally knocked him off his mount, but the brigade resumed its advance across the creek after a considerable delay, probably benefitting from the hole in the Union line punched by Hood's men just minutes earlier.



Map of the Battle of Gaines' Mill, showing the far Confederate right and the far Union left.

# Following the Trail



**6** This elevation offers a wide view of a diverse geography. Down the hill to the south Powhite Creek flows into the Chickahominy River. Before the Seven Days Battles Union engineers built a military road in the low ground. It led south toward what was known as Duane's Bridge—one of nearly a dozen such bridges constructed by the Army of the Potomac to connect the two wings of the army then separated by the river.

In the final attacks on June 27, Wilcox's brigade advanced across this knob of ground. This was the right-most piece of the entire Confederate army that afternoon, the western tip of a line that stretched for almost exactly two contiguous miles. The four Alabama regiments were exposed to the long-distance shelling from rifled Union cannon across the Chickahominy River. That enfilading fire swept along Wilcox's line from right to left. In tandem with rifle fire from nearly invisible Union infantry across Boatswain's Creek, it made for one of the deadliest crossfires on the entire battlefield.

The attackers here hesitated in the face of such destructive power. A man in the ranks of the 9th Alabama described the advance from the Powhite Creek valley and his subsequent experiences:

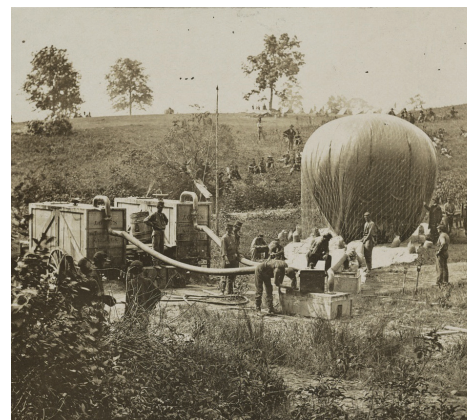
Immediately in front of us was a high hill, and until we reached the crest of it we were pretty well protected. ...Up to the crest of the hill we went at a double quick, but when we came into view on the top of the ridge we met such a perfect storm of lead right in our faces that the whole brigade literally staggered backward several paces as though pushed by a tornado. The dead lay in heaps, and two minutes in that position would have been utter annihilation. Just for one moment we faltered, then...we swept forward with wild cheers over the crest and down the slope, and though at every step some brave one fell, we did not falter.

**7** A short distance in front is Powhite Creek. Directly across from here Dr. William F. Gaines operated one of the largest farms in Hanover County. His mill - which gave its name to the battle - stood less than a mile upstream.



1930s Photograph of "Powhite," Dr. Gaines' House

For five weeks preceding the battle, this area lay within the lines of the Union 5th Corps. Gaines and his family stayed in their home for most



Balloon Camp at Dr. Gaines'

of that period. He was an ardent Confederate who frequently traded barbs and bitter political banter with various officers who occupied the place.

The Federal balloon corps, led by the self-styled "aeronaut" Thaddeus S. C. Lowe, set up a camp on Dr. Gaines' farm somewhere close to the valley of Powhite Creek. From there Professor Lowe launched observation balloons with great frequency in the days preceding the start of the Seven Days Campaign. It is only 7 1/2 miles on a direct line to the capitol building in downtown Richmond, and Lowe had no trouble seeing Confederate dispositions outside the city. But he did have difficulty evaluating the significance of what he

saw, and in conveying that intelligence to army commander George B. McClellan in a timely manner.

Around midday on June 27, Longstreet's division marched through Dr. Gaines' yard. Confederate artillery deployed around the house. The infantry pushed ahead into this creek valley for shelter. As they arrived, Longstreet's men noticed the site of Professor Lowe's balloon camp. The debris even included some abandoned material connected with the hydrogen gas Lowe used to inflate his craft.

**8** In this vicinity Gen. Hood assembled his two regiments in the moments before the start of their famous charge. He addressed the 4th Texas Infantry, his sword in one hand and his hat in the other. The talk was brief, intense, and stirring. Hood told his listeners that they were to charge all the way to Boatswain's Creek without stopping. There was to be no firing at all. Speed and momentum were the keys to potential success.

Only 50 yards behind the Texans, the 18th Georgia Infantry prepared to join the advance. Lieutenant Colonel Solon Z. Ruff made no formal speech, but he did shout to his men: "Don't stop & when you come upon them feed them the steel!"—a reference to the bayonets they affixed onto their muskets. When his men heard that "A great scream went up from every throat," and the Georgians moved into the attack.

Occasional wrinkles in the terrain provided the only shelter here. This ground was entirely open in 1862, and the attackers remained vulnerable for a long distance. A sharpshooter killed Col. John Marshall of the 4th Texas, a native Virginian, reportedly at a distance of 555 yards. This precise spot where you stand is 550 yards north of the creek.

Together the Georgians and Texans numbered slightly more than 1000 men. As you walk back to the Texas monument, you will be following their route across the very ground they made historic.