

A BGES Civil War Field University Program:  
**The Overland Campaign Part 1:  
The Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Yellow  
Tavern**

Presented by Gordon Rhea  
April 10-15, 2023, from Fredericksburg, VA

U.S. Grant was brought to the East to confront and defeat the Confederates' legendary leader, Robert E. Lee. For nearly two years, Lee had out marched, out thought, and out fought five commanders, having only been checked at Gettysburg in July 1863. Conversely, Grant had captured two Confederate armies and pushed the Confederates out of Mississippi and Tennessee. Elevated to the command of all the Union armies with the rank of Lieutenant General, his mission was to win the war before the next presidential election. Commencing at the start of May 1864, Grant would batter and be battered by the aggressive Confederate commander. Six weeks later, Grant would find himself facing a considerably weakened Lee in front of Petersburg—mission not quite accomplished but pretty impressive.

Gordon Rhea is the nation's foremost authority on the decisive "Grant versus Lee" campaign. His immersion started with his Wilderness narrative more than 25 years ago. Each of the five volumes is an award winner—lucid, dynamic, and extremely readable. His field style is the same. He has private property access made available during his precise and comprehensive years of field research. Gordon is a practicing attorney and he does few tours, Now that the series is complete, he is going to do an incomparable "start to finish" 10-day study for BGES over two years.

PLEASE NOTE: YOU MUST BE PREPARED FOR EXTENSIVE WALKING, AS MANY SITES ARE AWAY FROM PAVED ROADS. IF YOU WALK IN, YOU MUST BE PREPARED TO WALK OUT.

**Monday, April 10, 2023**

6:30 PM: Check in at our headquarters hotel for meet, greet, and to pick up your reading books. Gordon's opening lecture will talk about the status of the armies. We will have a variety of pizzas, snacks, and beverages starting at 6:45 PM. Gordon will speak at 7:15.

**Tuesday, April 11, 2023**

8:15 AM. We have a lot to cover as we head out for Lee's winter encampment near Orange, Virginia. From nearby Clark Mountain, Lee could see the entire Federal encampment near Culpeper. Army of the Potomac commander George G. Meade would have to start with a lengthy supply line and would need to move rapidly to reposition it.

We will join the Battle of the Wilderness with the Federal march to Germanna and Ely's Fords.

After lunch, we will head to Grant's Field Headquarters along the Germanna Road and then move to Federal V Corps Commander, Gouverneur K. Warren's headquarters at the Lacy House. The Federal deployment was not as rapid as Grant wished, and with Lee's aggressive move to contact, we will open the fighting on May 5, 1864, at Saunders Field with Warren's attack. The day finishes with us walking to VI Commander John Sedgwick's defensive positions on Warren's right, where they beat off the attacks of Richard S. Ewell's II Corps. We then will return to the hotel. Lunch is included, and dinner will be on your own.

### **Wednesday, April 12, 2023**

8:15 AM. We now move to Warren's left at the Higginson Farm, where troops under Federal Colonel Stone and General Rice attacked Georgia and North Carolina troops, only to be beaten back as the dry fields caught fire threatening to roast wounded soldiers. As Lee's men under the command of A.P. Hill arrive on Lee's right, they go into attack off the Orange Plank Road west of the Widow Tapp farm and move against Federal II Corps Commander Winfield Hancock's troops along the Ni River.

With the fighting finishing on May 5, Grant determined to focus on battering Hill's Corps who he thought was fought out and to press Ewell's men on the right. We stay at the Widow Tapp farm to fight out the 6th and to examine both Lee's battlefield management and the timely arrival and use of Lieutenant General James Longstreet's I Corps. Of particular interest will be our examination of Longstreet's destructive flank attack under the command of Moxley Sorrell that rolls up Hancock's left. This came at a price, and we will visit and discuss the wounding of Longstreet—a misfortune that would deprive Lee of his most experienced officer during the unfolding campaign. The Wilderness was indeed hellish, and again we will talk about the fields catching fire.

We will finish our treatment of the Wilderness by returning to Saunders Field to examine the fighting on Warren's front on May 5 and consider the brilliant turning movement by Confederate general John Gordon. Our day and the two days of the Wilderness are done as we return to our hotel. Again, lunch is provided but dinner on your own.

### **Thursday, April 13, 2023**

Grant was different. Every other time Lee had faced the Union forces fighting—such as the Wilderness with nearly 29,000 casualties—the Federals were compelled to fall back and regroup. Grant would regroup, but not in the rear, and as orders were passed to move along the Brock Road to the southeast, the Federals realized that it was a new year and a new commander. Conversely, Lee's new I Corps commander, Richard Anderson, had to pioneer a parallel road to intercept the Federal advance. We will move with the Federals and engage J.E.B. Stuart's rebel cavalry around Todd's Tavern—a key intersection along

the road to Spotsylvania Court House. Spotsylvania was key, because it would allow Grant to reset his supply lines through Fredericksburg.

The cavalry actions were effective in gaining time for Anderson, and we will arrive at Laurel Hill with Anderson literally minutes before the advance guard of Warren's V Corps arrive. We will spend some time examining Warren's leadership and the issues it creates for both Meade and Grant. We will then launch an attack with Warren and build Anderson's defensive line as the rest of his Corps arrives. While here, we will jump ahead to the fighting across Spindle Field on May 10—again, Warren finds himself embroiled in controversy. We will finish the day with Lee's attempt to use Jubal Early to drive Hancock back across the Po River. Lunch is included, but dinner is on your own.

### **Friday, April 14, 2023**

The fighting around Spotsylvania is often overlooked, but the time spent in trenches along the lines produced some of the war's most intense and dramatic fighting. With both armies entrenched, Grant determines to find a way to crack Lee's lines. Of particular note is that the Confederates, in their haste, have followed the terrain and created a vulnerable salient. We will spend the day looking at the two primary efforts to break the line. The first under Emory Upton shows what might happen with a determined assault made with enough force to lodge within the rupture; and what happens when opportunity is not taken advantage of. Grant sees the potential of the tactic and orders a corps level reattack before dawn about 32 hours later.

The attack against Lee's Mule Shoe gives us an opportunity to examine Lee's tactical management and leadership in the wake of mistakes of his own doing. The fighting on May 12 was brutally fought over 21 hours in the rain as Lee's men worked desperately to consolidate the Confederate position behind a new and stronger line. We even will extend the fighting to take in Burnside's overlooked attack on the Confederate far right. Lunch is included, but dinner is on your own.

### **Saturday, April 15, 2023**

The bloodletting is not done, and Lee's new defensive line occupied during the early morning of May 13 is soon to be tested. As the bloody fields are cleansed by several days of rain, Meade begins to shift to the left. Grant believes the Confederates will have weakened the line Lee has just constructed—he is wrong. A Corps of Confederate infantry and strong artillery fire end the May 18 effort. We will walk Meade's attack trail before concluding this is not a place the Federal army wants to be. Lee has built a strong line. The next day, as Grant pushes away from Spotsylvania, Lee seeks to find the flank of the Federal forces. Ewell finds them at Harris Farm, which is manned by new arrivals to the Federal army—a group of heavy artillerymen from the Washington fortifications. A poorly executed attack loses Lee 900 men, and Spotsylvania is finally over—some 32,000 men have become casualties.

We finish our tour by picking up Phil Sheridan's cavalry raid against Richmond. After Todd's Tavern, Meade and Sheridan had a falling out, and the diminutive Little Phil had set out on a raid toward Richmond—which ends for J.E.B. Stuart at Yellow Tavern, where a bullet to the stomach will deprive Lee of his "eyes."

The armies are now on the march. Lunch is included. We will release you by 5 PM to catch late flights or start home.

### **About the Faculty:**

**Gordon Rhea** is a practicing attorney from Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina. He has completed seven books related to the Overland Campaign that pitted U. S. Grant against R. E. Lee. The award-winning series published by LSU Press has now been completed with the release of *On to Petersburg, Grant and Lee June 4-15, 1864*. Rhea brings the same analytic skills so essential for good trial work to the analysis of military campaigns—exhaustive research, the lessons of precedent, and the logical outcomes from well-thought-out plans and the reaction to unexpected curveballs that are known in the military as friction. Personalities count in law and in leadership—Rhea recognizes both, bringing a delightful summary that both clients and juries appreciate and respect.

### **Hotel Information:**

This program will be based in Fredericksburg, Virginia. We will announce the hotel on this site. We expect to set up a room block before the end of July 2022.

### **Transportation:**

The servicing airport is Richmond International (RIC), with Washington Reagan National (DCA) in play also. Both airports are about an hour's drive from Fredericksburg, so if you fly in, you likely will find a rental car the most convenient; although you can get ground transportation at a cost. Amtrak services Fredericksburg in both directions with a stop at the Washington National Airport. With Fredericksburg located on Interstate 95 between Washington, D.C. and Richmond, the program also is easily accessible by automobile.

### **Recommended Reading:**

You will be provided with maps upon arrival. The following books are suggested to enhance your readiness for the program. Amazon.com has a program to support non-profits IF YOU SIGN UP to support Blue and Gray Education Society (EIN 54-1720582) at [AmazonSmile](#). When you sign up there rather than the normal Amazon site, one-half of one percent of your purchase price will be provided to BGES as a donation from Amazon. Bring your books along with you and have Gordon sign them.

Gordon Rhea: [\*The Battle of the Wilderness: May 5-6, 1864\*](#)

Gordon Rhea: [\*The Battles for Spotsylvania Court House and the Road to Yellow Tavern: May 7-12, 1864\*](#)

Gordon Rhea: [\*To the North Anna River: Grant and Lee, May 13-25, 1864\*](#)

Chris E. Heisey and Gordon Rhea: [\*In the Footsteps of Grant and Lee: the Wilderness to Cold Harbor\*](#) (A photographic essay of key and remote sites from the Overland Campaign—you will visit many of them.)

Gordon Rhea Ed.: [\*Carrying the Flag: The Story of Private Charles Whilden, the Confederacy's Most Unlikely Hero\*](#)

## Registration Form

### **The Overland Campaign, Part I The Wilderness, Spotsylvania and Yellow Tavern**

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April 10-15, 2023, from Fredericksburg, Virginia

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Registration includes five lunches, an opening reception, a reading book with maps, the academic program, support of a professional historian, a tour director, and transportation appropriate to the registration. We also will provide snacks, bottled water, and a limited selection of sodas.

\_\_\_\_\_ Registration \$1475

\_\_\_\_\_ Current BGES member \$1350

\_\_\_\_\_ I am not a member but would like to join so that I can get the member's rate or I am a member who is past due to renew. Please accept my donation of \$\_\_\_\_\_ (must be \$75 or more, which is tax deductible).

\_\_\_\_\_ I am sending a deposit of \$300 plus full payment for any memberships. Total enclosed is \$\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_ I will pay the balance due before the event.

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Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Mail to BGES Seminars, P.O. Box 1176, Chatham, VA 24531; or fax credit cards to 434-432-0596. You may also register online at [www.blueandgrayeducation.org](http://www.blueandgrayeducation.org).