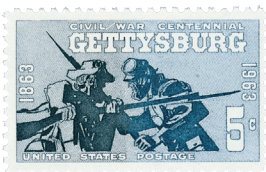


This Day in History... August 8, 1863

Robert E. Lee Attempts to Resign

On August 8, 1863, General Robert E. Lee wrote to Confederate President Jefferson Davis and asked to be replaced after the defeat at Gettysburg. In the private letter, Lee admitted that his health and strength were failing and questioned whether he could still command the Army of Northern Virginia effectively.

The first half of 1863 had brought Lee both military success and serious losses. In May, his army defeated a larger Union force at Chancellorsville. However, Lieutenant General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson was accidentally shot by Confederate troops during the battle. He died on May 10. Lee had also been in poor health since the spring, when he may have suffered a heart attack.



This stamp was created by the Post Office's first nationwide contest to design a US postage stamp.

Soon after Chancellorsville, Lee received permission to invade the North. His campaign had several purposes. It would move the fighting away from war-damaged Virginia and allow his army to collect food, horses, and other supplies in Pennsylvania. Lee also hoped to defeat the Union Army of the Potomac on Northern soil. Such a victory might weaken Northern support for continuing the war.

Instead, the armies met unexpectedly at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on July 1. Confederate forces drove Union troops through town during the first day. The Union army then formed a strong defensive line on the hills and ridges south of Gettysburg. Lee attacked both ends of that line on July 2 but failed to break it. On July 3, he ordered about 12,000 soldiers to advance across open fields against the Union center. The assault, commonly called Pickett's Charge, was repulsed with severe losses. Lee's army began retreating toward Virginia on July 4.

Gettysburg cost the Confederates an estimated 28,000 killed, wounded, captured, or missing. Union losses numbered about 23,000, although casualty totals vary among sources. The losses were especially difficult for the Confederacy to replace. Lee had failed to destroy the Army of the Potomac, and the invasion had not produced the decisive Northern victory he had sought.



Confederate Stamp picturing Jefferson Davis

The retreat also occurred as another major Confederate position fell. On July 4, Vicksburg, Mississippi, surrendered to Union General Ulysses S. Grant. Its capture gave the United States control of the Mississippi River and divided the Confederacy geographically. The two events raised Northern morale and placed the Confederacy under greater military pressure.

Lee did not blame the defeat entirely on his subordinates. In his August 8 letter from Camp Orange, Virginia, he acknowledged seeing criticism of the campaign in public newspapers. He worried that the army might lose confidence in him. He also wrote that he had not recovered from his illness and could no longer inspect the battlefield or personally supervise operations as closely as he believed necessary.

"No one is more aware than myself of my inability for the duties of my position," Lee told Davis. He then asked the Confederate president "to take measures to supply my place." Lee presented the request as an effort to protect the army from the consequences of his declining health and possible loss of public confidence.

Pressure to replace commanders was common on both sides. Union General Grant faced demands for his removal after the heavy casualties at Shiloh in 1862, but President Abraham Lincoln kept him in command. The Army of the Potomac went through several leaders before George G. Meade took command only three days before Gettysburg. Even after winning the battle, Meade was criticized for failing to trap Lee before the Confederates crossed the Potomac River.

Davis rejected Lee's request on August 11. He said finding another commander who was more qualified or had greater confidence from the army was "an impossibility." Lee therefore remained in command through the campaigns of 1864 and the siege of Petersburg. On April 9, 1865, he surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Grant at Appomattox Court House.



Lee stamp from the Liberty Series



Stamp pictures Lee in his field uniform with his horse, Traveller.



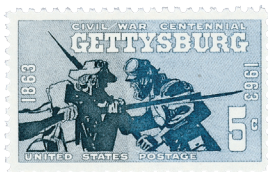
In response to calls for Grant's removal, President Lincoln said, "I can't spare this man; he fights."

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