



## GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY ACTIVITY 13 (Continued)

# Gettysburg: The Struggle for Little Round Top

### The Physical Geography of Gettysburg

In 1863 Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, was a small town surrounded by orchards, fields, woodlands, valleys, and hills. The location of the hills, ridges, boulders, woods, and open areas influenced how the Battle of Gettysburg was fought and its eventual outcome.

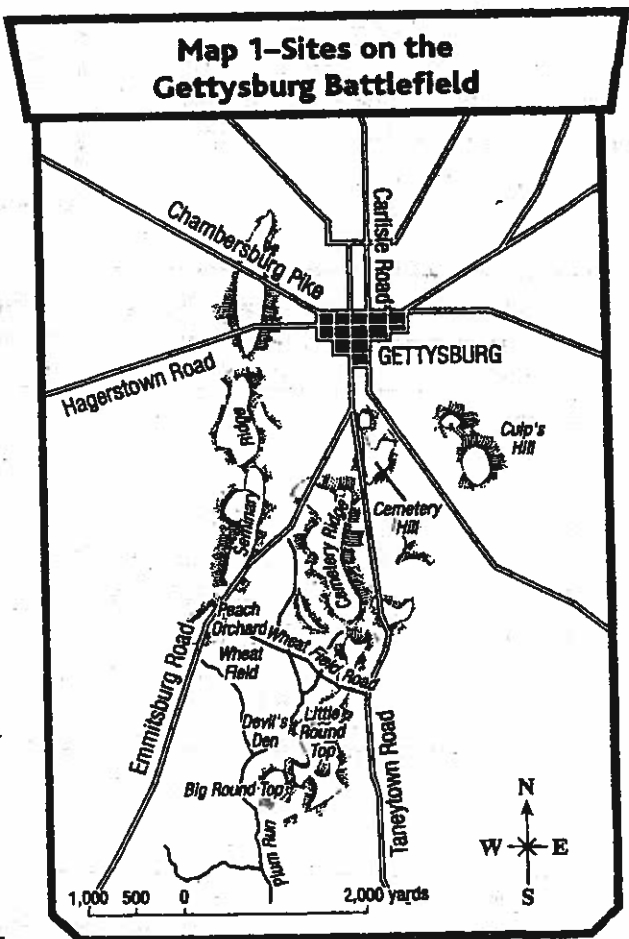
The Union forces, led by Major General George Meade, were positioned just south of Gettysburg in an upside-down fishhook pattern. The "hook" began at Culp's Hill, and from there ran south along Cemetery Ridge to a hill called Little Round Top. Another hill—Big Round Top—was situated just south of Little Round Top.

The Confederate forces were under the command of General Robert E. Lee. They had taken the town of Gettysburg and held a position along Seminary Ridge, an upland area about a mile west of Cemetery Ridge. (See Map 1.)

### The Significance of Little Round Top

On the second day of the battle, Union officer Brigadier General Gouverneur Warren went to investigate a smattering of gunfire on Little Round Top. This was the extreme left flank, or side, of the Union troop line. When Warren arrived at the hill, he found that only a few Union signalmen occupied the boulder-strewn bluff at the north crest of Little Round Top.

Warren immediately realized the importance of Little Round Top. Standing on its highest point, one could almost see the entire battlefield. In addition, because of its position at the far southern end of Cemetery Ridge, it was the key to the battle. If the Confederates took the hill, they could move around behind the Union lines and attack from the rear, or they could sweep Cemetery Ridge with gunfire and cause the Union army to retreat. Much to Warren's dismay, he saw that Confederate troops were already near the undefended hill and had the opportunity to seize it. Warren raced down the hill and intercepted Union soldiers moving north to Cemetery Ridge. He urged that troops were needed to immediately occupy Little Round Top.



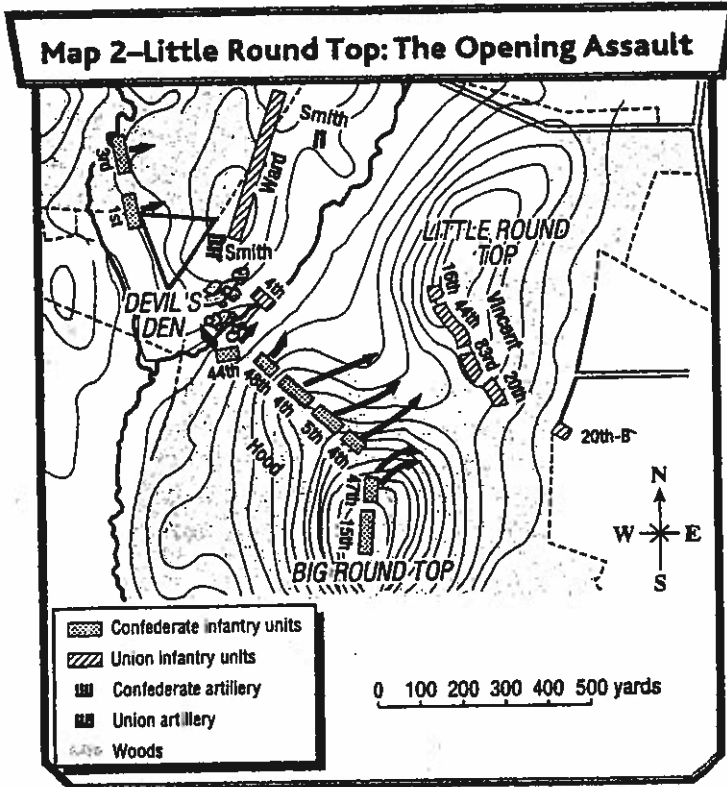
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**Union Troops Rush to Little Round Top**

Colonel Strong Vincent answered the call for Union troops with his brigade. When Vincent received word of the undefended hill, his brigade was nearest to the northwest corner of Little Round Top. Thinking that the northwestern slope was too steep for the horses to climb, he went to the southeastern slope. From this point, his brigade ascended to the crest of the hill at the south end. (See Map 2 for the positions of Vincent's regiments.)

Vincent positioned the 16th Michigan regiment, which formed the right of his brigade's line, on a shelf high above the slope of the hill. A frontal attack was nearly impossible because boulders



**Table 1—Important Places on the Gettysburg Battlefield**

Place	Location	Topography
Culp's Hill	East of Cemetery Hill	Hill with an elevation 180 feet above Gettysburg; strewn with boulders and covered with thick woods
Cemetery Hill	One-half mile south of Gettysburg	Hill with an elevation 80 feet above the town of Gettysburg
Cemetery Ridge	Stretches from Cemetery Hill two miles to the south	Ridge overlooking the fields to the west; uneven and dips nearly to ground level in some places
Little Round Top	At the southern end of Cemetery Ridge	Hill cresting at approximately 150 feet above the fields; has steep, rocky slopes and a rocky terrain with few trees
Big Round Top	Nearly three miles south of Cemetery Hill	Hill with a summit 305 feet above the fields; heavily wooded on the lower slopes, becoming rockier at higher elevations but still has trees

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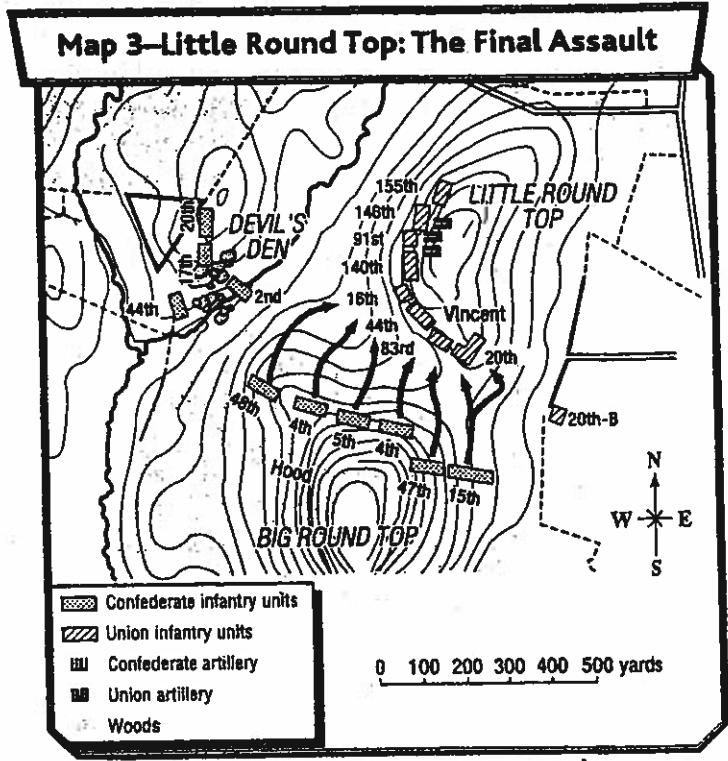
protected the shelf, but a Confederate attack from the west was still possible. Vincent then placed the 20th Maine regiment near a small ridge that connected Little Round Top to Big Round Top. The 20th Maine held the fate of the entire Union army in its hands.

**The Battle for Little Round Top**

Earlier, the far right Confederate line, formed by the 47th and 15th regiments from Alabama, had moved up heavily wooded Big Round Top. When the regiments reached the summit, 305 feet above the plain, they were situated on the highest spot for miles. Colonel William Oates of the 15th regiment felt this position was the most important one on the battlefield. From where he stood, he could look through trees to the north and see down the line of Cemetery Ridge all the way to Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill. In front of and below him, he could see the signalmen on Little Round Top.

Just as Oates was speculating about how to move Confederate artillery to the summit of Big Round Top, he received orders to abandon his position and seize Little Round Top. The two regiments moved as ordered and found no resistance as they crossed the area between the hills. But as they moved up the rugged southeastern slope of Little Round Top, they were assaulted by the Union's 20th Maine, which had been positioned behind a natural barricade of rocks only 10 minutes earlier. The Union troops pushed the Confederates back in a hard-fought, bloody battle, holding the left side of the Union line secure.

On the western slope of Little Round Top, a different story was unfolding for the Union soldiers. The 16th Michigan regiment was crumbling from attacks by the Confederate's 4th and 5th Texas regiments. Colonel Vincent was mortally wounded while trying to rally the 16th regiment. Only the arrival of reinforcements held the hill against the Confederate soldiers. (See Map 3.) The first to arrive was the 140th New York regiment. The 140th raced up the eastern



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slope of the hill and took a position to the right of the 16th. Eventually, three more Union regiments arrived, but by that time the fighting was nearly over. Union troops had successfully held Little Round Top.

**Directions:** Answer the following questions in the spaces provided.

1. Why was Little Round Top strategically important?

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2. Review the information in Table 1 and refer to Map 1. The Union troop line extended from Culp's Hill to Cemetery Hill and then south down Cemetery Ridge to Little Round Top. What was the advantage of having this position?

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3. Referring to Map 3, what did the Union soldiers move into position on Little Round Top other than men?

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4. When speaking with his officers, Colonel Vincent specifically said to one colonel, "You are to hold this ground at all costs." Which regiment do you think Colonel Vincent was addressing? Why?

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5. **Drawing Conclusions** Why do you think Little Round Top was strategically more important than Big Round Top?

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