



Chancellorsville's Forgotten Front: The Battles of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church, May 3, 1863

Chris Mackowski, Kristopher White

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By May of 1863, the Stone Wall at the base of Marye's Heights above Fredericksburg loomed large over the Army of the Potomac, haunting its men with memories of slaughter from their crushing defeat there the previous December. They would assault it again with a very different result the following spring when General Joe Hooker, bogged down in bloody battle with the Army of Northern Virginia around the crossroads of Chancellorsville, ordered John Sedgwick's Sixth Corps to assault the heights and move to his assistance. This time the Union troops wrested the wall and high ground from the Confederates and drove west into the enemy's rear. The inland drive stalled in heavy fighting at Salem Church. Chancellorsville's Forgotten Front: The Battles of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church, May 3, 1863 is the first book-length study of these overlooked engagements and the central roles they played in the final Southern victory.

Once Hooker opened the campaign with a brilliant march around General Lee's left flank, the Confederate commander violated military principles by dividing his under-strength army in the face of superior numbers. He shuttled most of his men west from around Fredericksburg under Stonewall Jackson to meet Hooker in the tangles of the Wilderness, leaving behind a small portion to watch Sedgwick's Sixth Corps. Jackson's devastating attack against Hooker's exposed right flank on May 2, however, convinced the Union army commander to order Sedgwick's large, unused corps to break through and march against Lee's rear. From that point on, Chancellorsville's Forgotten Front tightens the lens for a thorough examination of the decision-making, movements, and fighting that led to the breakthrough, inland thrust, and ultimate bloody stalemate at Salem Church.

Authors Chris Mackowski and Kristopher D. White have long appreciated the pivotal roles Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church played in the campaign, and just how close the Southern army came to grief—and the Union army to stunning success. Together they seamlessly weave their extensive newspaper, archival, and firsthand research into a compelling narrative to better understand these combats, which usually garner little more than a footnote to the larger story of Jackson's march and tragic fatal wounding.

The success at Second Fredericksburg was one of the Union army's few bright spots in the campaign, while the setback at Salem Church stands as its most devastating lost opportunity. Instead of being trapped between the Sixth Corps' hammer and "Fighting Joe" Hooker's anvil, Lee overcame long odds to achieve what is widely recognized as his greatest victory. But Lee's triumph played out as it did because of the pivotal events at Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church—Chancellorsville's forgotten front—where Union soldiers once more faced the horror of an indomitable wall of stone, and an undersized Confederate division stood up to a Union juggernaut.

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