As early as June 21, three days after the first Union effort to take Petersburg ended in bloody failure, Lt. Col. Henry Pleasants of the 48th Pennsylvania believed that he could dig a mine under the Confederate position and blow it up. The thought came to him when Lt. Robert F. McKibbin, a member of Brig. Gen. James Ledlie’s 1st Division staff, gave Pleasants a tour of the Union line opposite Pegram’s Salient, which also was known as Elliott’s Salient. Only 125 yards of bare, sandy soil separated the armies at this point, the narrowest width of no-man’s-land along the lines outside Petersburg.¹

Pleasants “hinted” his idea to Capt. George W. Gowen of Company C, and to Capt. Francis U. Farquhar, chief engineer of the 18th Corps. Both men were prewar acquaintances, and they encouraged Pleasants to take his suggestion up the chain of command. Before he did that, Pleasants asked his regimental officers to compile a list of the “practical miners in each company,” which also prompted the rank and file of the 48th Pennsylvania to discuss the prospect of digging their way to the Confederate line.²

Pleasants was acting as temporary commander of a brigade in Brig. Gen. Robert B. Potter’s 2nd Division of the 9th Corps. Months later Potter contended that he and several others had already thought of mining at Pegram’s Salient before Pleasants brought it to his attention. This may well have been true, for Potter had already concluded that it was impractical to attack above ground at the salient. On the bare hillside, the only place to form the troops was in the two covered ways then being constructed. These were sunken roadways leading back from the Union line toward the rear areas, not “a very promising way” of staging an attack.³

Pleasants convinced his superiors that an underground approach was better than an attack above ground. On June 24 Potter informed Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside at 9th Corps headquarters that his brigade leader was “a
mining engineer and has charge of some of the principal mining works of Schuylkill County, Pa.” Moreover the 48th Pennsylvania had four officers, fourteen noncommissioned officers, and eighty-five enlisted men who were professional miners. Potter relayed Pleasants’s proposal in detail, noting that he planned to dig two tunnels, one to serve as ventilation for the other, and to connect them laterally at short distances. Pleasants thought the elaborate ventilation design was needed because the soil was “full of mephitic vapors.” The brigade leader, however, underestimated the length of the proposed mine at one hundred yards; he thought his men could dig twenty-five to fifty feet per day. Pleasants wanted special mining picks; if not available, he was certain they could be converted from ordinary picks. He also required certain mathematical instruments as well as wheelbarrows and other equipment. Potter endorsed the proposal heartily. “The men themselves are quite desirous, seemingly, of trying it,” he assured headquarters. “I think, perhaps, we might do something, and in no event could we lose more men than we do every time we feel the enemy.”

Burnside was energized by the plan when Potter and Pleasants joined him for a conference on the night of June 24. He gave immediate approval to start
work and promised to approach Maj. Gen. George G. Meade, commander of the Army of the Potomac, for authorization.\textsuperscript{5}

The next day at noon, Pleasants began work on the project that would make his name in Civil War history. At 2:45 that afternoon, Burnside wrote a note to Meade informing him of the plan. “I think we can break the line of the enemy in due time if we can have the necessary facilities,” he predicted. Meade did not hesitate to reply. “I am delighted to hear you can do anything against the enemy’s line,” he wrote at 3 p.m., “and will furnish you everything you want, and earnest wishes for your success besides.” Meade later temporized his hasty endorsement after examining the topography around Pegram’s Salient, but initially he hoped the mine “would at some time result in forming an important part in our operations.”\textsuperscript{6}

The man who shouldered the responsibility for digging the mine had been born thirty-one years before in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the son of a Latin American mother and a Philadelphia man visiting the country on business. “His impetuous nature, and quick, fiery temper, but withal generous, good-heartedness, comes of this America-Spanish blood,” wrote Oliver Christian Bosbyshell, another officer in the 48th Pennsylvania. Pleasants came to Philadelphia at age thirteen and graduated from high school, later earning a bachelor of arts and a master of arts degree. He worked as a civil engineer on Pennsylvania railroads, where he had charge of digging the Sand Patch Tunnel. It was a difficult
project, forty-two hundred feet long, but Pleasants dug four shafts two hundred feet deep from the surface to provide ventilation for the slowly progressing tunnelers.  

Pleasants left the railroad industry as a protest over the firing of his friend, the president of the Pittsburgh and Connellsville Railroad, and entered the anthracite coal business as an engineer at Pottsville, Pennsylvania, in 1857. The start of the Civil War found him a widower; Pleasants served in a three-months unit and later accepted a commission in the 48th Pennsylvania. This regiment was organized in Schuylkill County, a coal-mining district, and many of its original members were miners. Although most of them were gone by 1864, the regiment retained its reputation as a coal miner’s outfit. The 48th fought at Second Bull Run, South Mountain, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. With two divisions of Burnside’s 9th Corps, it participated in the occupation of East Tennessee and the defense of Knoxville. Burnside’s men shifted back to Virginia to take part in the Overland campaign of May 1864, with Pleasants leading the 48th after its colonel, Joshua K. Sigfried, was placed in command of a brigade in the all-black 4th Division of the 9th Corps. Pleasants was “a soldier of true grit,” commented the admiring Bosbyshell, “possessed of more than ordinary ability as an engineer.”

But Burnside had developed a bad reputation in the Army of the Potomac. From the Wilderness campaign on, he seemed to not move fast enough or fight hard enough to satisfy his critics. “Burnside somehow is never up to the mark when the tug comes,” concluded 5th Corps artillery chief Charles S. Wainwright. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., a member of the 6th Corps staff, criticized Burnside’s weak attacks on the Mule Shoe Salient at Spotsylvania by writing, “he is a d’d humbug.”

These criticisms were not justified, for the 9th Corps fought as hard as the other three corps in Meade’s army during the Overland campaign and in the first round of fighting at Petersburg. It had the losses to prove it. Five of seven brigades had different commanders by the time the armies settled down at Petersburg, and captains led some regiments. On June 16–18 Burnside’s corps suffered the second-highest number of casualties in the army while advancing closer to the Rebel line than any other troops.

The Battlefield to Come

The Union approach to Pegram’s Salient, often referred to as the “mined fort,” was not easy. The modest valley of Poor Creek, also known as Taylor’s Creek, separated the Confederate line from most of the Union position. The forward Federal line bulged westward across the valley and approached as close as 125 yards from the salient; the Federals often called this section of their trenches the horseshoe. The house of William Byrd Taylor, burned on June 18, stood
five hundred yards east of Pegram’s Salient on the eastern side of Poor Creek, where the main Union position was located.¹¹

Unlike most salients, Pegram’s did not project forward from the Confederate line. It was a reentrant angle formed by bending the line back as it continued south of Pegram’s position. The angle was very shallow, making the salient a poor target because Confederate troops north and south could fire on the flanks of advancing Union troops. Pleasants was mining here only because of the proximity of the opposing lines, not because the terrain suited a Federal attack.¹²

Even from the Confederate perspective, the shallow angle posed problems. Brig. Gen. Edward Porter Alexander, chief of artillery in the 1st Corps, Army of Northern Virginia, assumed responsibility for the guns in this sector. He bluntly termed Pegram’s Salient “the weakest part of our whole line, a piece of bad location with a great dead space in front.” Alexander referred to the valley of Poor Creek, which the Confederates could not see into because the parapet of the forward Union line blocked their view. This parapet was tall and adorned with loopholes and head logs to protect Federal sharpshooters who “maintained from it a close & accurate fire on all parts of our line near them.”
Alexander thought Pegram’s Salient was a worse position than the Mule Shoe Salient at Spotsylvania, the scene of a gruesome battle on May 12 that forced the Confederates to evacuate the pronounced bulge and retire to a better line at its base.\textsuperscript{13}

Ironically the Confederates never intended to have a salient at this place along the Petersburg line. It was formed because of a mistake by Capt. Richard G. Pegram during the first major battle for possession of Petersburg. The Federals crossed the James River from their trenches at Cold Harbor and struck for the city in mid-June, inaugurating a new phase in Grant’s offensive against Lee. Petersburg was protected by a ring of earthworks, designed and built by Charles H. Dimmock in 1862–63, which were thinly held by the over-stretched resources of Gen. P. G. T. Beauregard, commander of the Department of North Carolina and Southern Virginia. Initial Union attacks on June 15 cracked the Dimmock Line east of the city, but the Confederates were able that night to patch together a new position to contain them. Called the Hagood Line, because Brig. Gen. Johnson Hagood had hastily laid it out, the line held against hard but uncoordinated attacks on June 16–17.\textsuperscript{14}

At the same time, Beauregard’s chief engineer, Col. David B. Harris, and his chief of artillery, Col. Hilary P. Jones, staked out a new line to the rear of Hagood’s position. It stretched from the river down to Battery No. 25 on the Dimmock Line. Beauregard evacuated the Hagood Line on the night of June 17, pulling his troops back to this new position, where they were told to dig in before dawn. Harris had laid out the line with white stakes to be more visible in the dark, but Pegram somehow missed them. He chose a place for his Virginia battery and told his men to dig gun emplacements. After they were

well under way, Harris arrived and pointed out the stakes he had placed many yards to the rear, but Pegram refused to order his tired gunners to abandon their work and start anew.\textsuperscript{15}

Pegram later regretted this decision. His men managed to throw up no more than “slight earth-works,” and several Federal shells went through the traverses that protected the flank of each gun crew. Moreover the emplacements were not connected to each other or to the infantry line north and south.\textsuperscript{16}

As a result, June 18 was a trying day. The 9th Corps, responsible for this sector, did some of its best fighting of the campaign. It had to cross a cut of the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad that was up to twenty feet deep and which was enfiladed by Confederate artillery. The troops literally clawed their way up the bank of this cut to continue the attack. Then they crossed the valley of Poor Creek, driving out Confederate skirmishers by late afternoon. About one thousand men of Brig. Gen. Orlando B. Willcox’s 3rd Division managed to advance farther and establish the curved horseshoe line on the west slope of the valley.\textsuperscript{17}

The first struggle for Petersburg ended that evening as Grant instructed Meade to rest his exhausted army while he pondered what to do next. The Confederates all along the Harris Line began to improve their defenses. An infantry regiment arrived at Pegram’s battery and provided the labor to connect its gun emplacements and shore up the traverses and parapets. The line
would hold, but it was not properly located. Alexander noted that there was a long, open slope behind Pegram’s Salient up to the ridgelike high ground that carried the Jerusalem Plank Road southward out of Blandford, the eastern part of Petersburg. This slope was clearly visible to the Federals, forcing the Rebels to dig a covered way from the road down a ravine that lay just north of Pegram’s position in order to connect the line with the rear areas. A spring two hundred yards up slope from the trench fed a small rivulet that flowed in this ravine. Bushes and trees filled the widened, swampy area where the ravine drained into Poor Creek, obstructing Federal view in this sector. Another, smaller ravine lay to the south of Pegram’s position, which offered fewer opportunities for men to move back and forth to the line.18

The Confederate Defenders

The defense of this ill-placed sector of trenches rested on the infantry and artillerymen that held it. Pegram’s battery consisted of four twelve-pounder Napoleons and was part of Maj. James C. Coit’s artillery battalion of Beauregard’s command. Coit had another unit, Capt. Samuel T. Wright’s Virginia battery, posted in the sector, but the rest of his battalion was either on detached duty in South Carolina or positioned north of the Appomattox River. Pegram’s battery had been recruited from the 12th Virginia, a regiment raised mostly in the Petersburg area. Lt. W. P. Robinson’s men of the Ringgold (Virginia) Battery relieved Pegram’s gunners for three weeks while the crews went to the rear for rest. During those three weeks, Robinson directed his gunners in
strengthening the works, for they were so meager that his men had to kneel or sit during the day. Any time they raised a hat on a stick above the parapet it was perforated by a Yankee bullet.19

The infantry manning this sector of the Confederate line belonged to Maj. Gen. Bushrod R. Johnson’s division of Beauregard’s command. An Ohio-born West Point graduate, Johnson resigned from the U.S. Army in 1847 and lived in the South. He sided with the Confederacy and fought in the western theater, having been captured at Fort Donelson and wounded at Shiloh. Johnson commanded a hard-fighting brigade of Tennessee regiments at Perryville and Stones River, and a division at Chickamauga. His command was detached to help Lt. Gen. James Longstreet try to capture Knoxville, Tennessee, in late 1863, and went with Longstreet when the latter rejoined Lee’s army just before the opening of the Overland campaign. Johnson and all the western troops that came east were given to Beauregard. His division consisted of four brigades, a mixture of eastern and western regiments.20

One of Johnson’s units, Brig. Gen. Stephen Elliott’s South Carolina brigade, held the line on both sides of Pegram’s battery. A son of the plantation elite, Elliott had been a successful cotton planter and militia officer before the war and had participated in the defense of the South Carolina coast during the first half of the conflict. He commanded Fort Sumter when its garrison repelled an attempted landing by the U.S. Navy in September 1863. After promotion to brigadier general, Elliott took command of Brig. Gen. Nathan G. Evans’s South Carolina brigade, often called the Tramp Brigade for its wanderings from one assignment to another. Evans had been a hero in the early part of the war but had since fallen into disrepute for a drinking problem and an irascible temper. His replacement, Brig. Gen. William Stephen Walker, had been wounded and captured on May 20 at Bermuda Hundred shortly before Elliott assumed command.21

Another unit of Johnson’s division, Brig. Gen. Henry A. Wise’s Virginia brigade, was positioned south of Elliott’s men. Wise was put in charge of the 1st Military District of Beauregard’s command on June 1, so Col. Thomas Goode of the 34th Virginia took command of the brigade. He had graduated from the Virginia Military Institute and had been an officer in the U.S. Army before the war, with service in Kansas and Utah. Ransom’s North Carolina brigade held the line north of Elliott’s position. Originally led by Brig. Gen. Robert Ransom, it distinguished itself from the Seven Days to Fredericksburg and then saw service in its native state. Ransom’s brother, Brig. Gen. Matt W. Ransom, led the unit to further distinction in the capture of Plymouth on April 20, 1864, and in the May 16 battle of Drewry’s Bluff, where Beauregard’s outnumbered command saved Richmond by driving back the Army of the James and confining it to the Bermuda Hundred peninsula, the wedge of land at the
junction of the James River and the Appomattox River. Col. Lee M. McAfee now commanded this hard-fighting Tar Heel unit.22

The Confederates were unaware that their opponents had developed a plan to breach their line at what many considered a weak spot. Likewise, Pleasants and his superiors assumed they were undermining a stronghold in the Rebel works. The narrow no-man’s-land that separated Pegram’s Salient from the Union horseshoe was wide enough to hide some of the truth from both sides.