

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DENVER SERVICE CENTER
BRANCH OF MICROGRAPHICS
LIBRARY COPY

D-21

A REPORT

IN
STORAGE

ON

THE PHYSICAL HISTORY OF THE CRATER

Petersburg National Military Park
Petersburg, Virginia

Joseph P. Cullen
August 1975

SCANNED

8/3/00

In June 1864 the Union armies attacked Petersburg. Failing to capture it, they then laid siege to it. By June 18 General Burnside's IX Corps had "gained an advanced position . . . within 130 yards of the enemy's main line and confronting . . . Elliott's Salient"1

This area, just southeast of the city, had been open farmland before the war,² and the Confederate line here was on the farm of William H. Griffith, as was the advanced Union picket line.³ The main Union line, however, was in a cornfield on the farm of William B. Taylor.⁴

Elliott's Salient, on a ridge known as Cemetery Hill, was a strong point on the Confederate line. It was called a re-entrant salient, rather than a projecting one, as it curved inward so enfilading fire could come from either side to the front in case of attack. "A high interior line, called a trench cavalier, had been built across the gorge of the salient enclosing a triangular space"5 In front was a deep ditch with abatis and chevaux-de-frise and a line of rifle pits. A covered way gave entrance to it from the rear. The salient housed Peagram's battery of four guns and supporting troops from Elliott's brigade.⁶

Opposite the salient in the Union line the 48th Pennsylvania Volunteer Regiment, commanded by Lt. Col. Pleasants, was stationed. Many of the men in this regiment had been coal miners and they now conceived the idea of running a mine shaft under the salient and blowing it up. Work was begun June 25 behind the advanced Union picket line.

"The excavation was commenced in the side of the hill where our exterior line of works runs."⁷ After advancing about 50 feet Pleasants reported: "From this point I had to excavate a stratum of marl, the consistency of putty, which caused our progress to be very slow. To avoid this, I started an inclined plane, and, in about one hundred feet, raised thirteen and one-half feet perpendicular. On the 17th July, the main gallery was completed, being five hundred and ten and eight-tenths feet in length."⁸

The next step in Pleasants' plan was to burrow out into lateral tunnels at the end of the long shaft which now extended under the Confederate line. Accordingly, on July 18 work began on two branches extending to the right and left, paralleling the fortifications above, and about 20 feet below them. Pleasants stated that he "started the right lateral gallery, but, as the enemy could be plainly heard working over us in the Fort, I caused this gallery to be excavated a little beyond and to the rear of their works, and gave it a curved line of direction. The left gallery being thirty-seven feet long . . . the right gallery being thirty-eight feet long" This was completed by July 23 and then the charge, consisting of "three hundred and twenty kegs of powder, each containing twenty-five pounds--four tons," was placed in "eight magazines connected by wooden tubes, half filled with powder."⁹

Early in the morning of July 30 the charge was set off. The earth erupted with a terrifying roar. "It was a magnificent spectacle," a Union officer reported, "and as the mass of earth went into the air,

carrying with it men, guns, carriages, and limbers, and spread out like an immense cloud as it reached its altitude, so close were the Union lines that the mass appeared as if it would descend immediately upon the troops waiting to make the charge." The fall-out from the explosion "covered up the abatis and chevaux-de-frise in front of the enemy's works."¹⁰

When the charging Union troops reached the point of explosion, they saw "an enormous hole in the ground . . . filled with dust, great blocks of clay, guns, broken carriages, projecting timbers, and men buried in various ways--some up to their necks, other to their waists, and some with only their feet and legs protruding from the earth."¹¹

The explosion killed, wounded, or buried about 278 Confederates and completely destroyed two guns of the battery. The gaping Union soldiers milled in and around the crater, but none moved forward; brigades and regiments soon became inextricably mixed in the confusion. When some did try to go forward out of the crater, they found that due to the "precipitous walls" they "could find no footing except by facing inward, digging their heels into the earth, and throwing their backs against the side of the crater."¹²

These delays proved fatal. In a short time the Confederates recovered from their shock and counterattacked. Soon "shot, shell and musket balls came from every point of the compass and the mortar shells rained down from above" on the troops in and around the crater.¹³

"It was a sickening sight," a Union officer recalled, "men were dead

and dying all around; blood was streaming down the sides of the crater to the bottom, where it gathered in pools for a time before being absorbed by the hard red clay."¹⁴ Some Union soldiers tried to run the gauntlet from the crater back to their own line, but few made it. Then, "By direction of officers in the crater the men began a deep trench toward our lines. Another, by direction of General Burnside, had been started from our lines to meet it."¹⁵ Neither was completed, however, before the Confederates recaptured the position.

General Burnside reported that the crater had a crest around it 12 feet high with "sides of loose pulverized sand piled up precipitately from which projected huge blocks of clay."¹⁶ Confederate General Alexander reported that "This formed a high embankment, as it were, all around the crater, with one enormous clod, the size of a small cabin, perched about the middle of the rim, which remained a landmark for weeks The parapets were partially destroyed and largely buried by the falling earth."¹⁷ Another Confederate officer reported that "The fort was blown into two compartments."¹⁸

The Confederates quickly began to repair the damage. "After dark tools were brought, with which we reconstructed the wrecked fort. In doing this, we buried the dead down in the fort by covering them with the earth."¹⁹ Another officer reported that "In the gray light of morning I went into the crater and there I saw the burying parties in this place still at work."²⁰

There was no agreement, apparently, on the size of the crater.

Pleasants claimed that "The size of the crater formed by the explosion was at least 200 feet long, 50 feet wide, and 25 feet deep."²¹

Burnside stated it was 150 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet deep.²²

Confederate General B. R. Johnson reported "The crater measures 135 feet in length, 97 feet in breadth, and 30 feet deep."²³ Another officer declared the explosion left "a hole in the ground about 30 feet deep, 60 feet wide, and 170 feet long."²⁴ In 1962 the park staff measured the crater and reported it to be 120 feet in length, 80 feet wide, and 18 feet deep.²⁵

No further major action occurred at the crater, and the following April the two armies moved off to Appomattox and the end of the war. Later most of the bodies buried in and around the crater were exhumed and reburied in the nearby national cemetery. As the years passed many of the physical signs of the siege gradually disappeared, either from farming or heavy vegetative growth. Mr. Griffith resumed the cultivation of his fields but he did not disturb the crater or the tunnel area, and within a year after the end of the war tourists began to come from all over the country to see the battlefield and particularly the crater area. Indeed, as early as the summer of 1865, a northern reporter visited the area and wrote that he "found in the midst of weedy fields, the famous 'crater'. It was a huge, irregular, oblong pit, perhaps a hundred feet in length and twenty in depth." He also observed the tunnel and tunnel entrance. "There was a deep ravine in front, up in the side of which the mine had been worked. The mouth was

still visible, half hidden by rank weeds. In spots the surface earth had caved, leaving chasms opening into the mine along its course And all around were graves."²⁶

By the following year (1866) visitors became so numerous that a local hotel published A Guide to the Fortifications and Battlefields Around Petersburg, and Mr. Griffith began to charge 25¢ to see the Crater. A visitor in 1867 reported: "Several hundred yards across the field, on the brow of the hill, yawned the Crater, looking black and uninviting About a year since, being in needy circumstances, Mr. Griffith, encouraged by the number of visitors, conceived the idea of preserving the Crater intact, as the war had left it . . . and with that view he enclosed it, and added some conveniences and attractions. Walks were laid out, and steps planted by which the mouth of the crater is reached."²⁷

A year later (1868) another visitor wrote that "There is still a vast hollow in the earth, though the look of the place has changed . . . in consequence of the falling in of the sides. Human bones were still lying about, and shreds of uniform and cartridge-pouches and bayonet scabbards, some of them scorched and curled up as with fire."²⁸

Mr. Griffith and his heirs continued to preserve the Crater and tunnel area and continued farm operations until the heirs sold the land in 1918. The new owner continued the same practices for the next eight years. Then in 1926 the property was conveyed to the Crater Battlefield

Association, which continued to preserve and maintain the Crater, while constructing a golf course on the surrounding grounds. The Crater and tunnel area were fenced in to separate them from the golf course. A section of the tunnel was opened by the Association for public viewing about 1928, but it had collapsed by 1930. In 1934 the Association went bankrupt and the golf course was closed. Then in 1936 the area was purchased by the United States.²⁹

Thus it can be seen that the Crater has remained basically as it was a short time after the war, with the exception of the slight changes due to natural elements and the feet and actions of visitors. There is no evidence of any major man-made alterations or additions. Undisturbed as it was, trees quickly grew in the area, probably adding an element of protection from the elements. Artist sketches made in 1886 clearly show tree growth in and around the Crater and along the tunnel path.³⁰ Photographs over the past fifty years show that tree growth continued, with no major changes in the Crater (attached).

There is no evidence that any archeological work was ever undertaken in the Crater. However, in 1937 when it was proposed to restore the tunnel, Park Service engineers did a plan and profile of the tunnel and the Crater (copy attached).³¹ An archeological dig on part of the tunnel was conducted in 1937 in an attempt to verify the tunnel entrance. Another survey and dig was made in 1958 and again in 1962.³² The conclusions reached from these explorations were that the tunnel entrance was approximately where it had been marked by a small stone marker

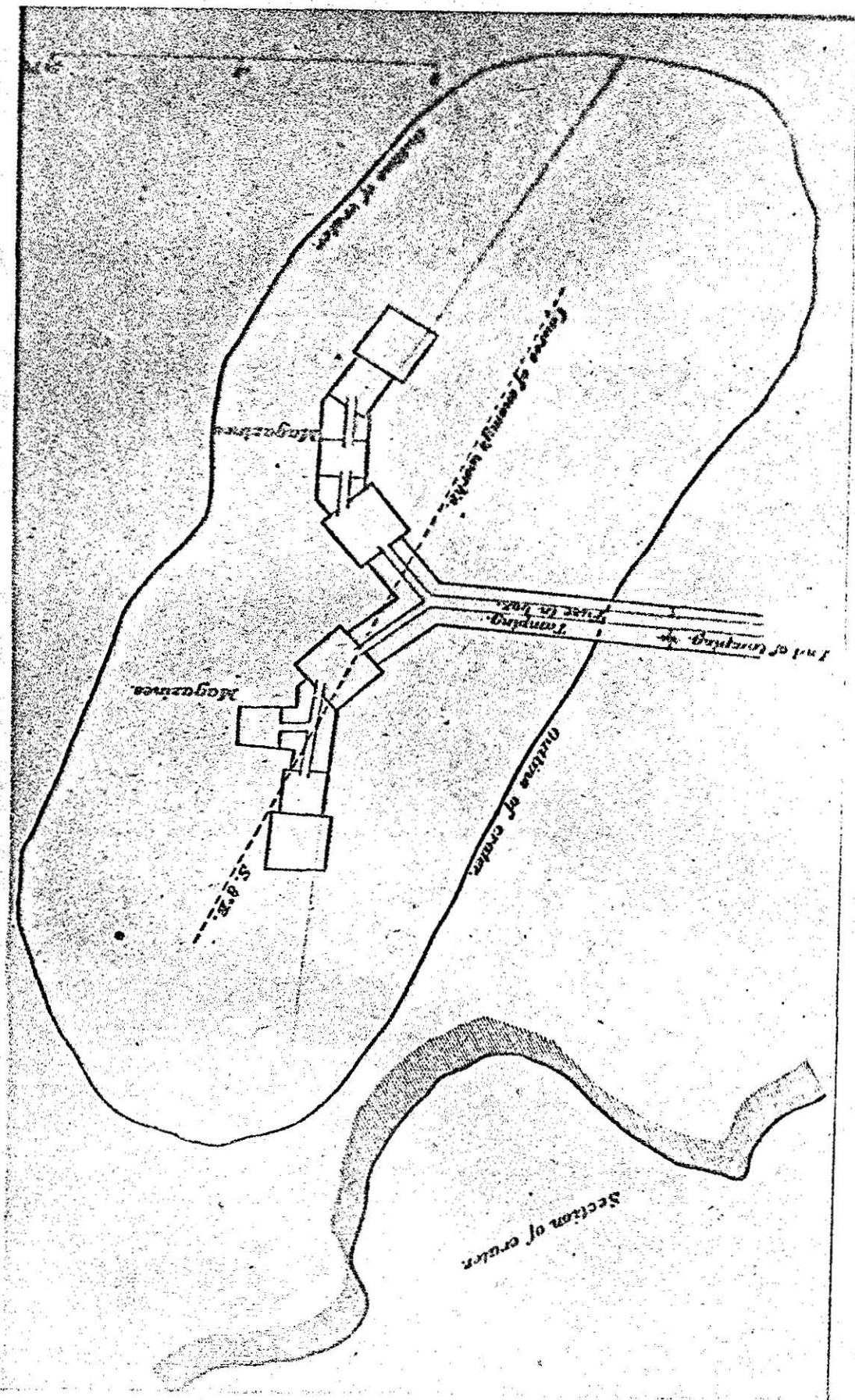
placed by Union veterans in 1909,³³ and that is where the Park Service has reconstructed the entrance.

NOTES

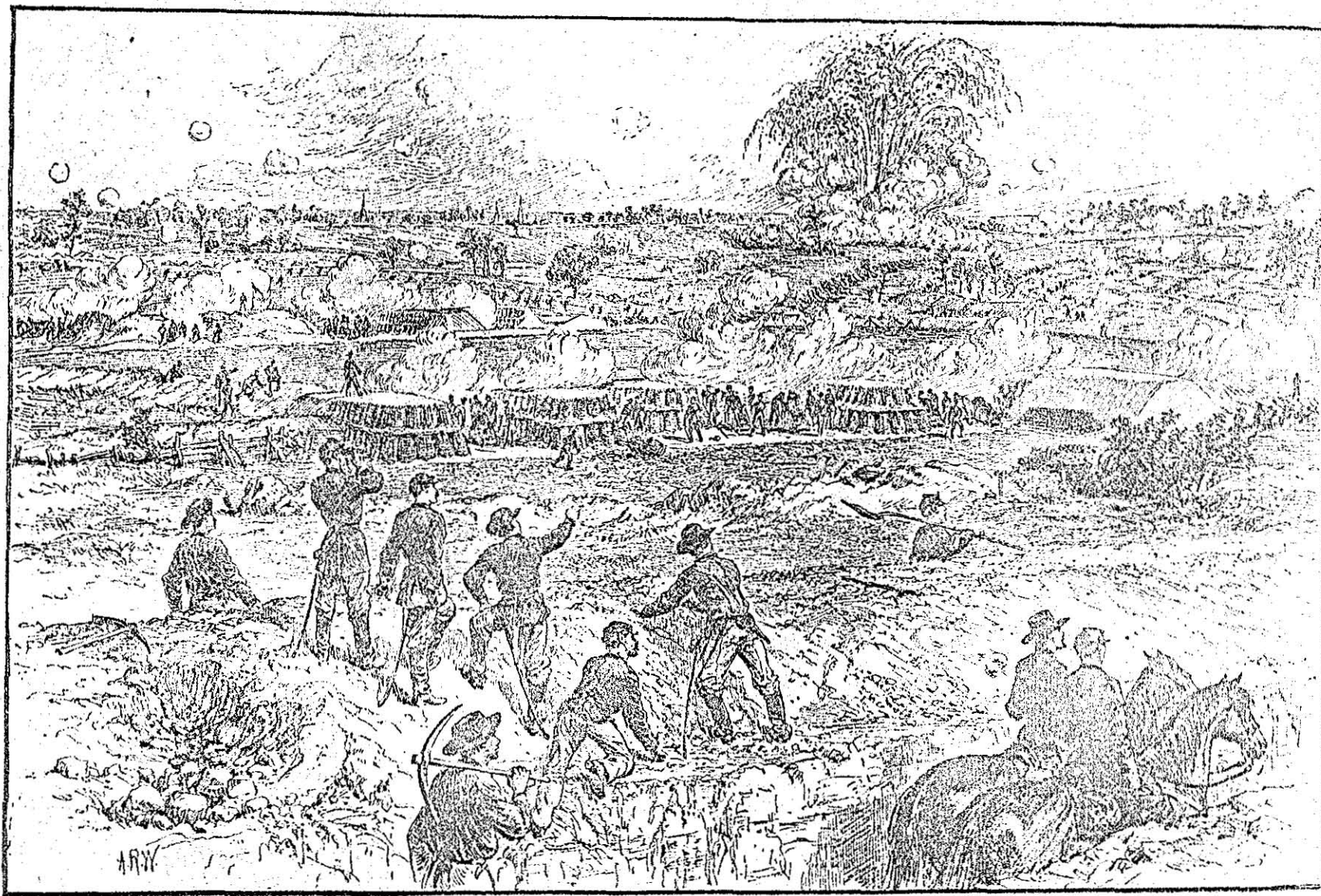
1. Robert M. Johnson & Clarence C. Buel, eds., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, New York, 1884-87, vol. 4., p. 545.
2. Official Atlas of the Civil War, Thomas Yoseloff, New York, 1958, Plate LXXVIII #5 and Plate LXIV #1; Official Records, Series I, vol. 40, part 1, p. 229.
3. T. J. Harrison & C. B. Lanford, "Crater Area Historical Report," PNMP, 1962, p. 15.
4. Official Records, Series I, vol. 40, part 1, p. 229.
5. E. P. Alexander, Memoirs of a Confederate, New York, 1907, p. 569; Official Records, Series I, vol. 40, part 1, p. 788.
6. Battles & Leaders, vol. 4, p. 551; Joseph Gould, The Story of the Forty-Eighth, Philadelphia, 1908, p. 170.
7. Gould, The Story of the Forty-Eighth, p. 222.
8. Pleasants' report and drawings are in Official Records, Series I, vol. 40, part 1, pp. 556-563.
9. Ibid.
10. Battles and Leaders, vol. 4, p. 551.
11. Ibid.
12. Quoted in Joseph P. Cullen, "The Siege of Petersburg," Civil War Times Illustrated, Aug. 1970.
13. Gould, The Story of the Forty-Eighth, p. 253.
14. Battles & Leaders, vol. 4, p. 562.
15. Ibid., p. 567.
16. Harrison & Lanford, "Crater Area Historical Report," p. 11.
17. Alexander, Military Memoirs of a Confederate, p. 569.
18. Gould, The Story of the Forty-Eighth, p. 252.
19. Ibid., p. 253.

20. George S. Bernard, War Talks of Confederate Veterans, Petersburg, Virginia, 1892, p. 164.
21. Official Records, Series I, vol. 40, part 1, p. 558.
22. Ibid., p. 72.
23. Ibid., p. 788.
24. Battles & Leaders, vol. 4, p. 552.
25. Harrison & Lanford, "Crater Area Historical Report," p. 20.
26. John T. Trowbridge, The Desolate South, N. Y., 1956, p. 115.
27. Quoted in Lee A. Wallace, Jr., "A History of Petersburg National Military Park," p. 18, 1957, in PNMP files.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., pp. 19, 55; The Progress-Index, Petersburg, Virginia, April 30, 1937.
30. Battles & Leaders, vol. 4, pp. 545, 546.
31. "Preliminary Engineering Report," 1937, PNMP files.
32. Harrison & Lanford, "Crater Area Historical Report," Appendix A. The Griffin archeological report of 1962 is produced almost verbatim in this appendix.
33. Wallace, "A History of Petersburg National Military Park," p. 21.

Official Records, Series I, vol. 40, part 1



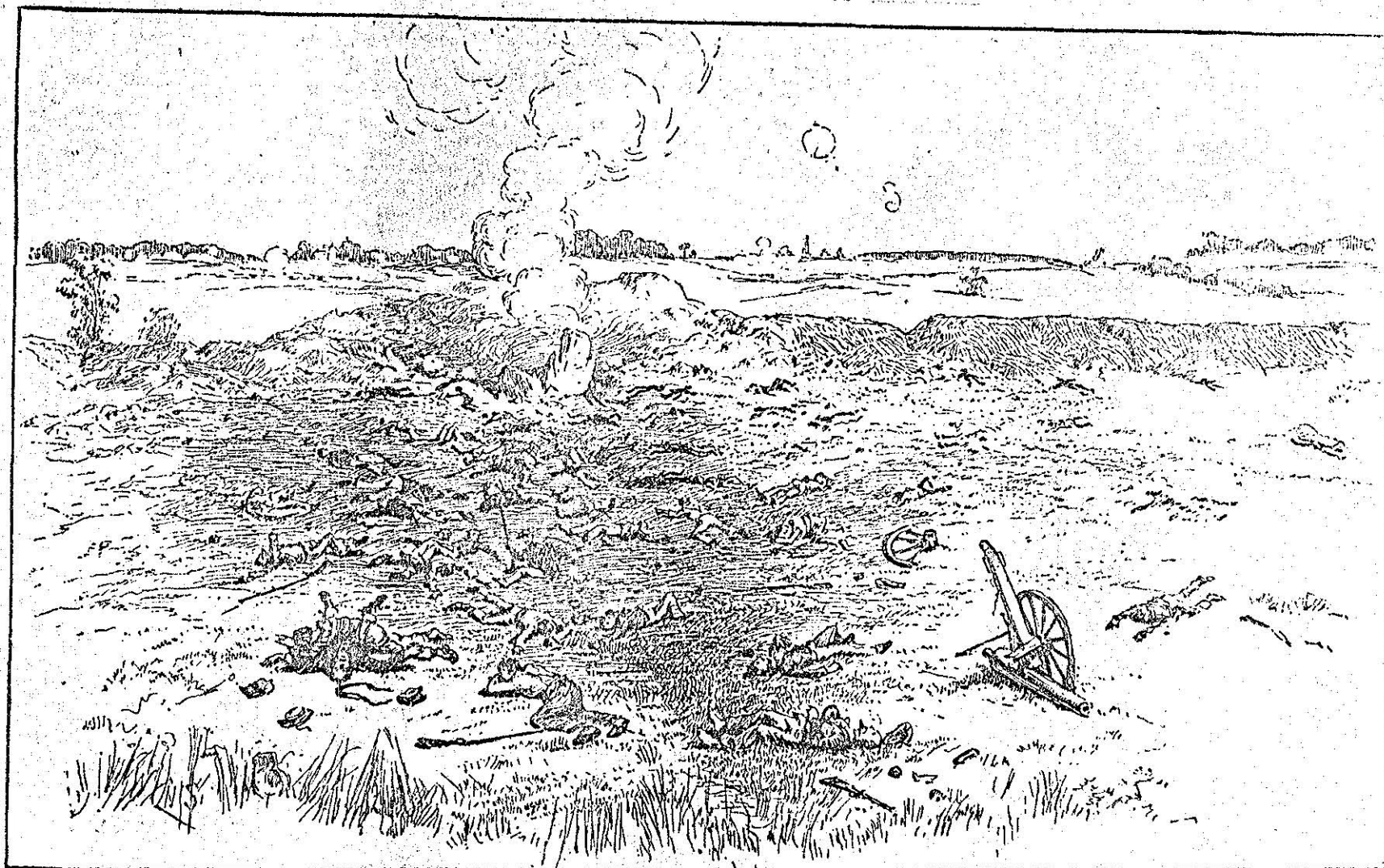
Battles and Leaders



EXPLOSION OF THE MINE. FROM A SKETCH MADE AT THE TIME.

IN THE CENTER.

Battles and Leaders

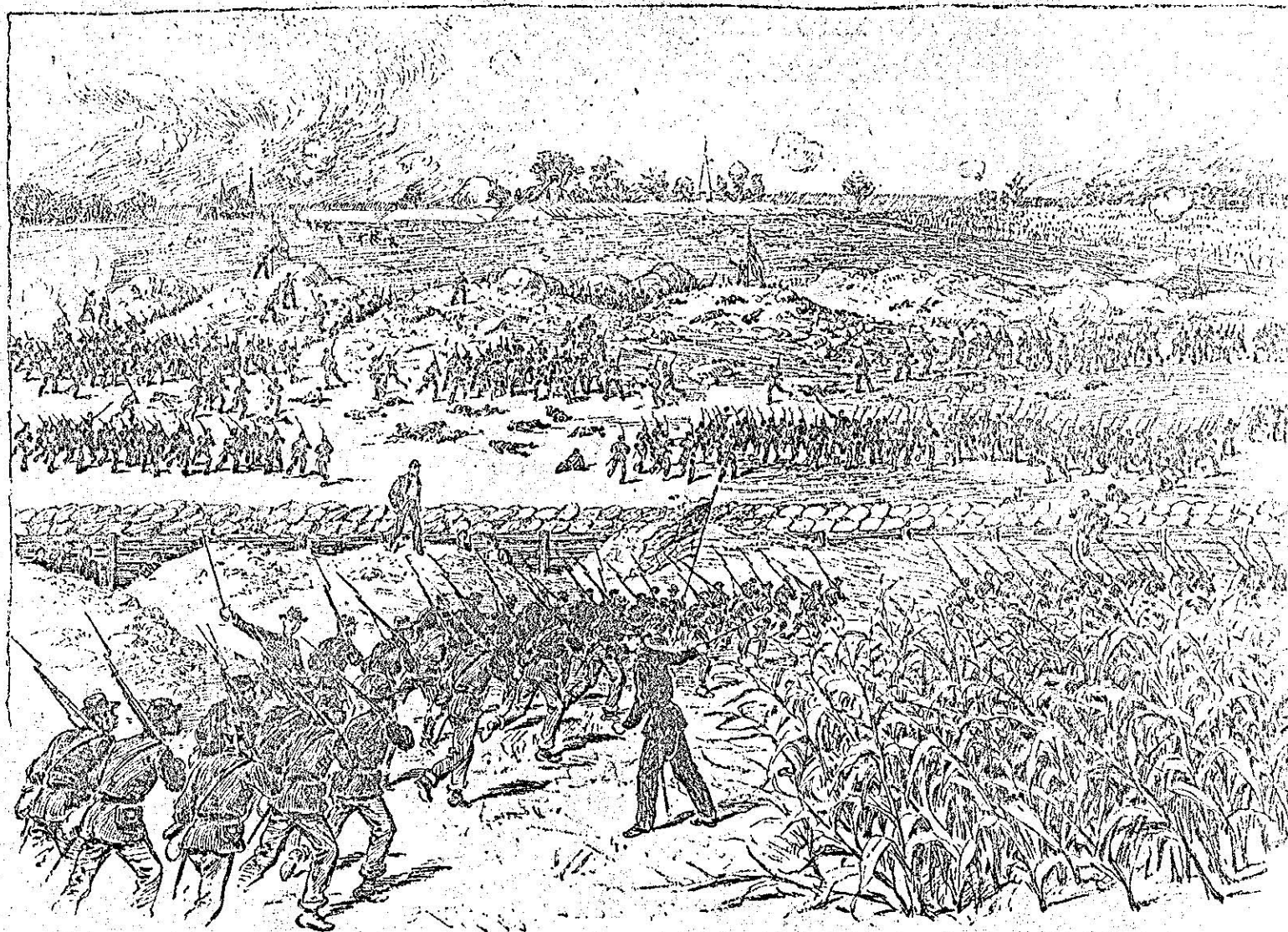


THE CRATER, AS SEEN FROM THE UNION SIDE. FROM A SKETCH MADE AT THE TIME.

In October, 1887, Major James C. Coit, of Cheraw, South Carolina, wrote as follows with regard to this picture, and the Confederate battery, under his command, bear-

on the day of the explosion. This battery [Wright's], where I was during the engagement, was just across the ravine to our left of the crater and just in rear of our infantry line, about

Battles and Leaders



THE CHARGE TO THE CRATER. FROM A SKETCH MADE AT THE TIME.

dismounted guns of the battery in position on the enemy's side of the crest of
 a crater [page 569] a portion of the [page 569] brigade passed over the crest

Battles and Leaders

Battles and Leaders

THE BATTLE OF THE PETERSBURG CRATER.

CRATER.



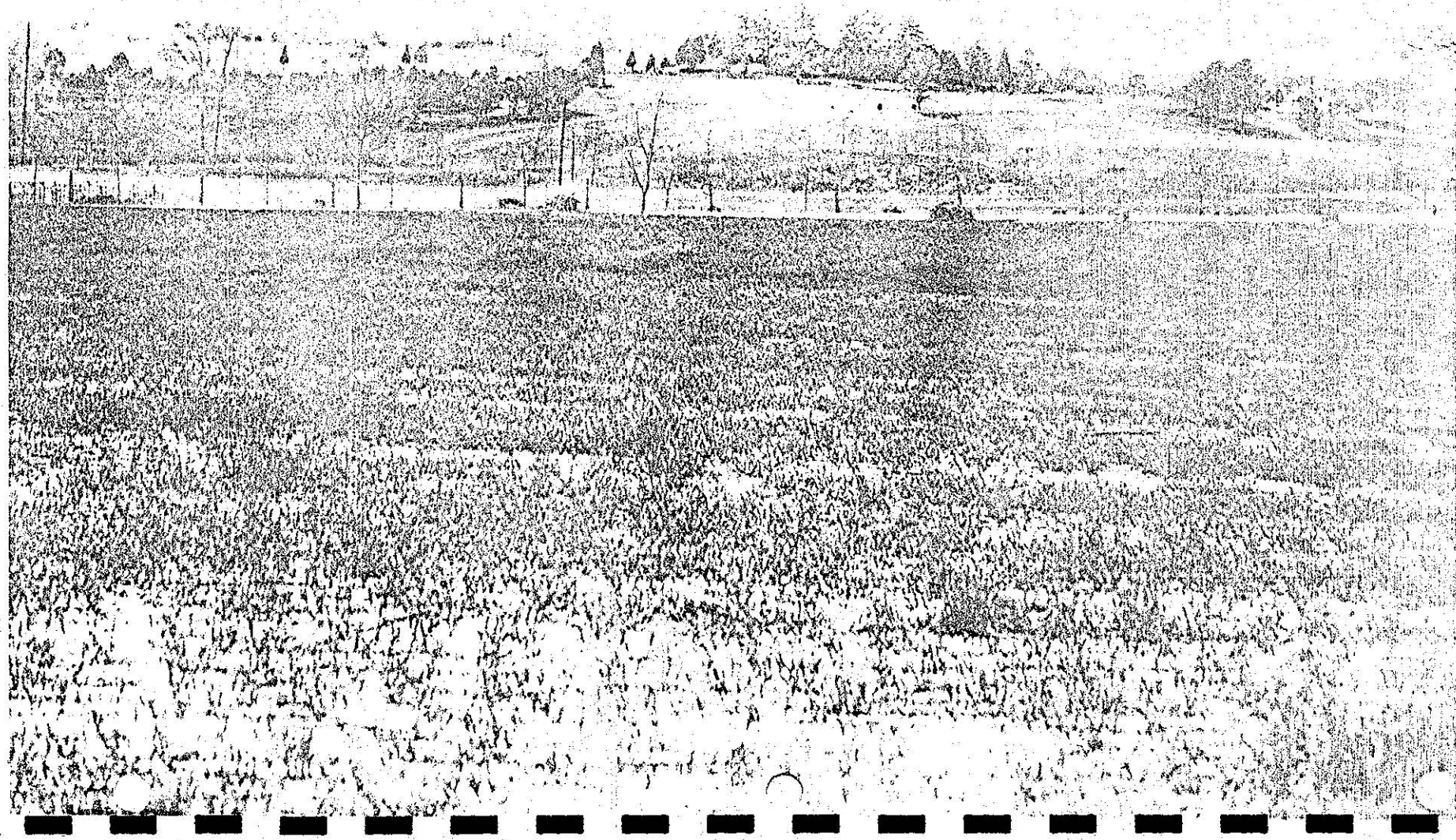
I. PROFILE OF THE GROUND BETWEEN THE CRATER AND THE MOUTH OF THE MINE.

picks furnished me, but had to take common army picks and have them straightened for my mining picks. . . . The only officers of high rank, so far as I learned, that favored the enterprise were General Burnside, the corps commander, and General Potter, the division commander."

On the 23d of July Colonel Pleasants had the whole mine ready for the placing of the powder. With proper tools and instruments it could have been done in one-third or one-fourth of the time. The greatest delay was occasioned by taking out the material.

Park Files

About 1938



Park Files

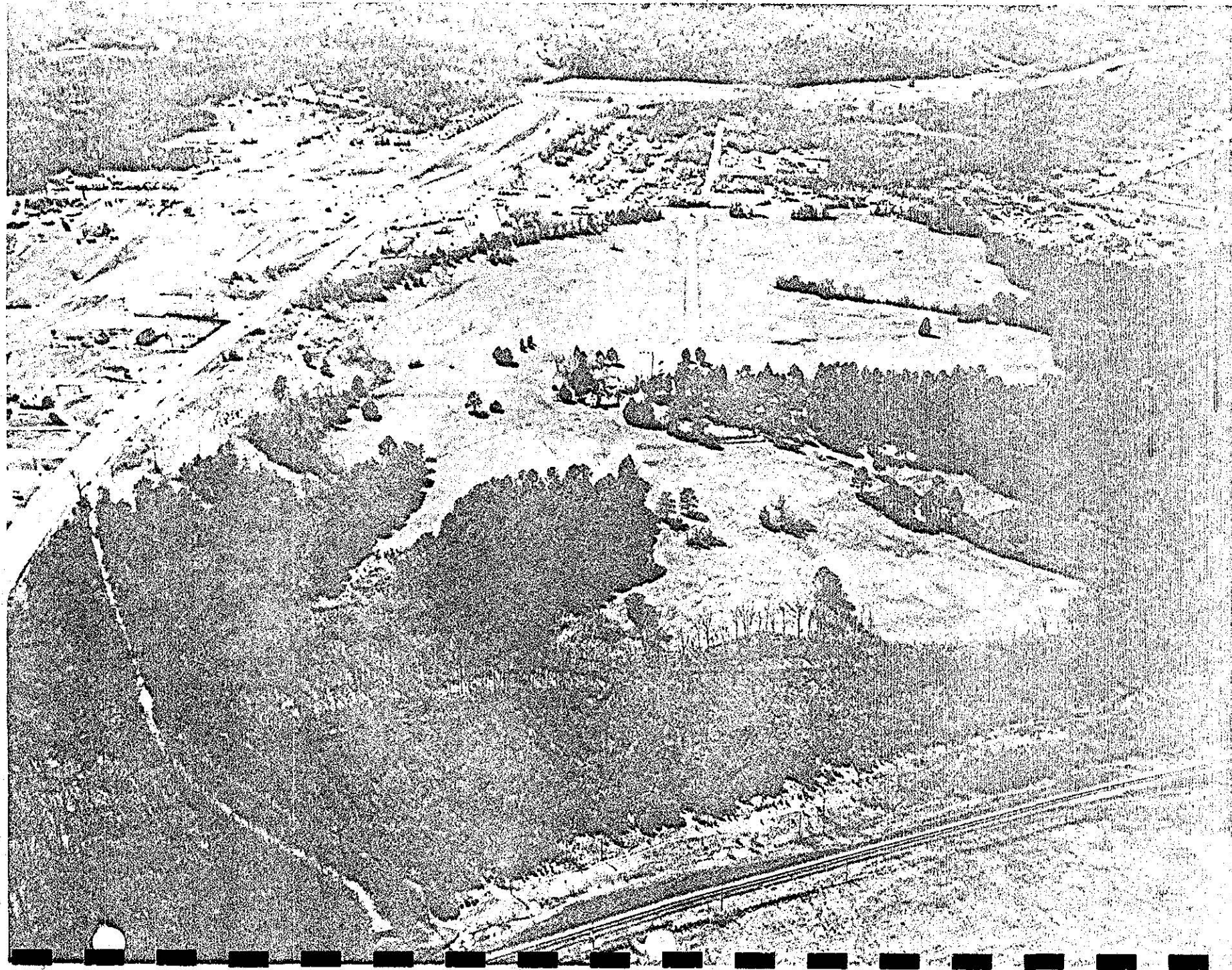
Inside Crater

About 1938



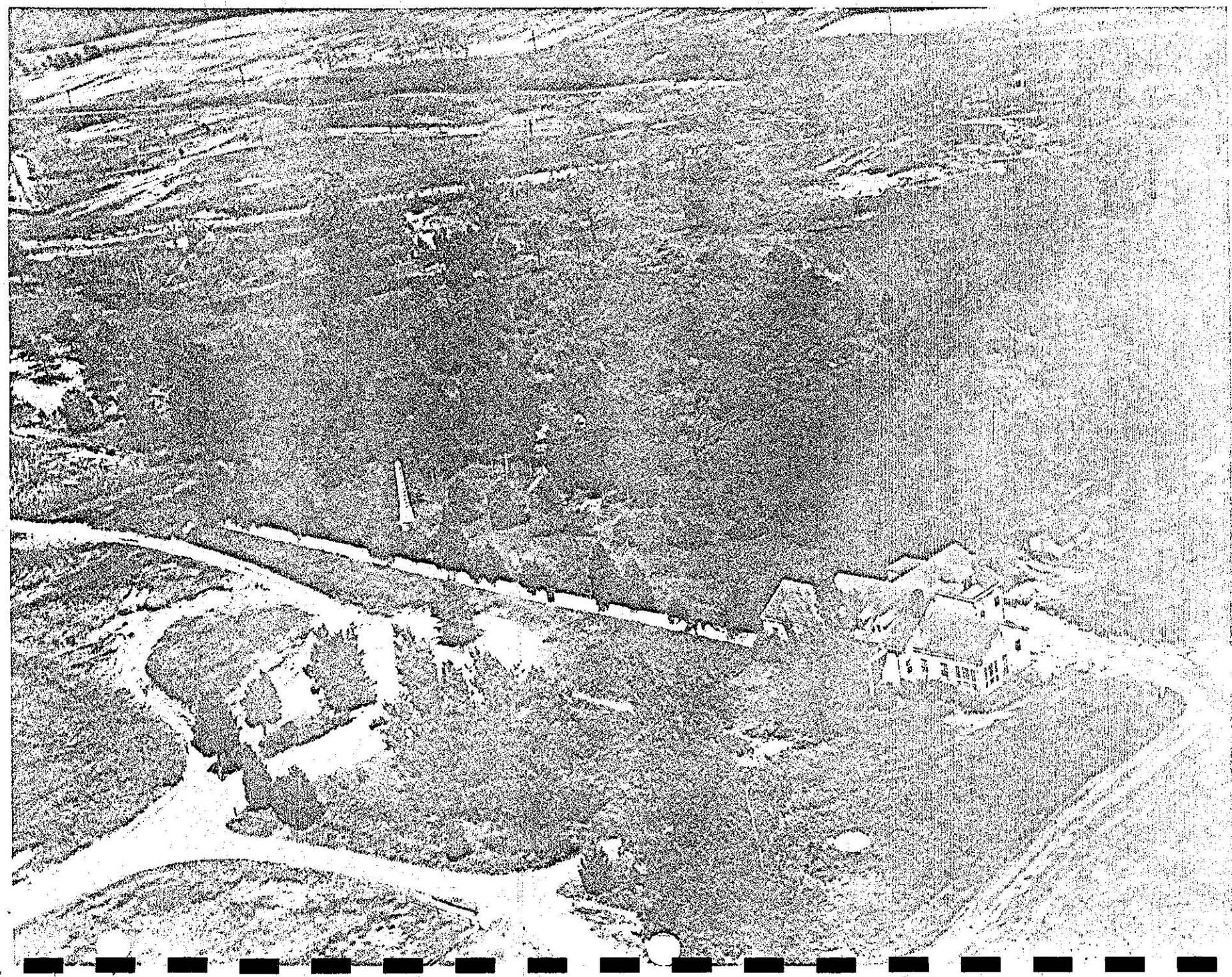
Park Files

1940's



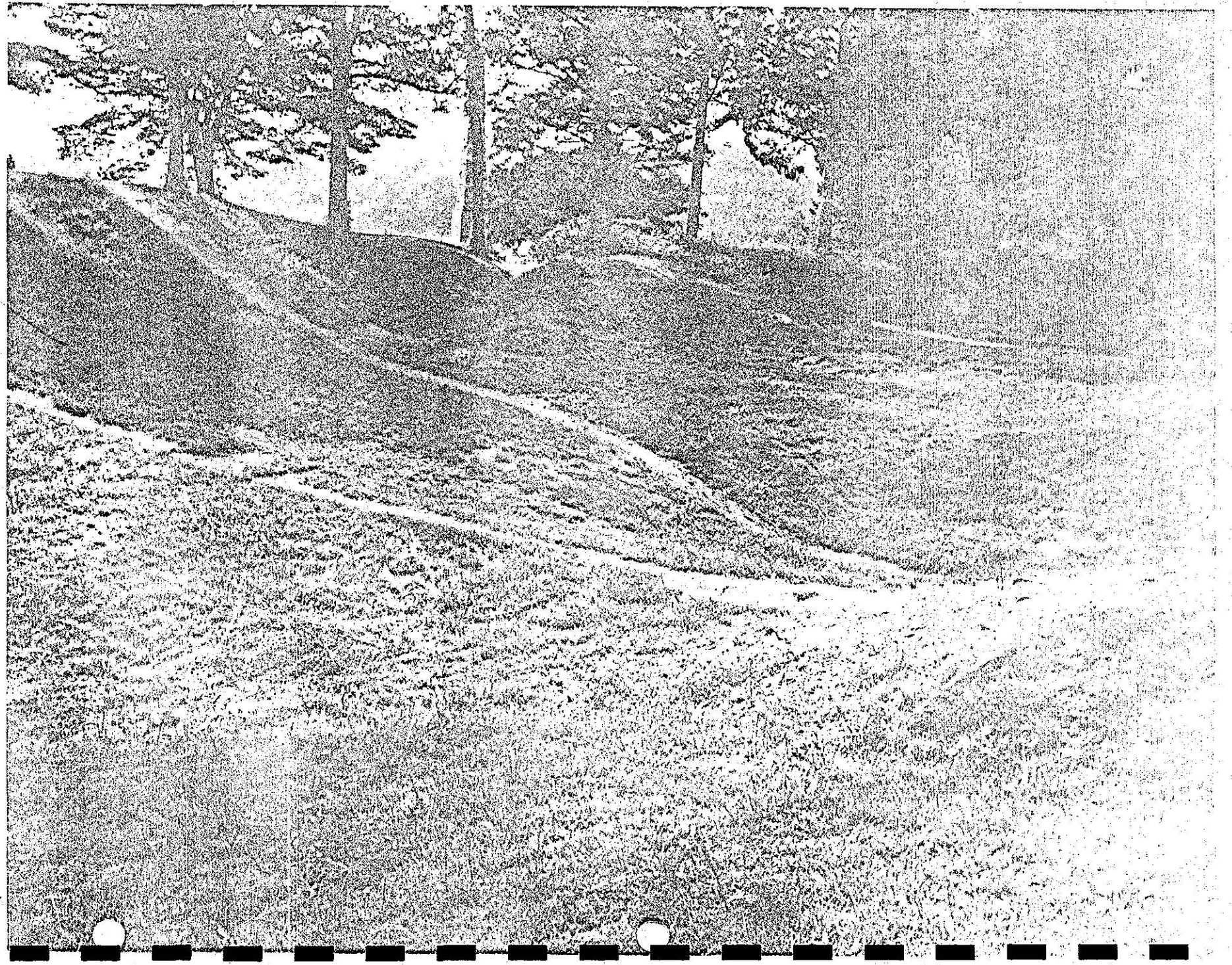
Park Files

1950's



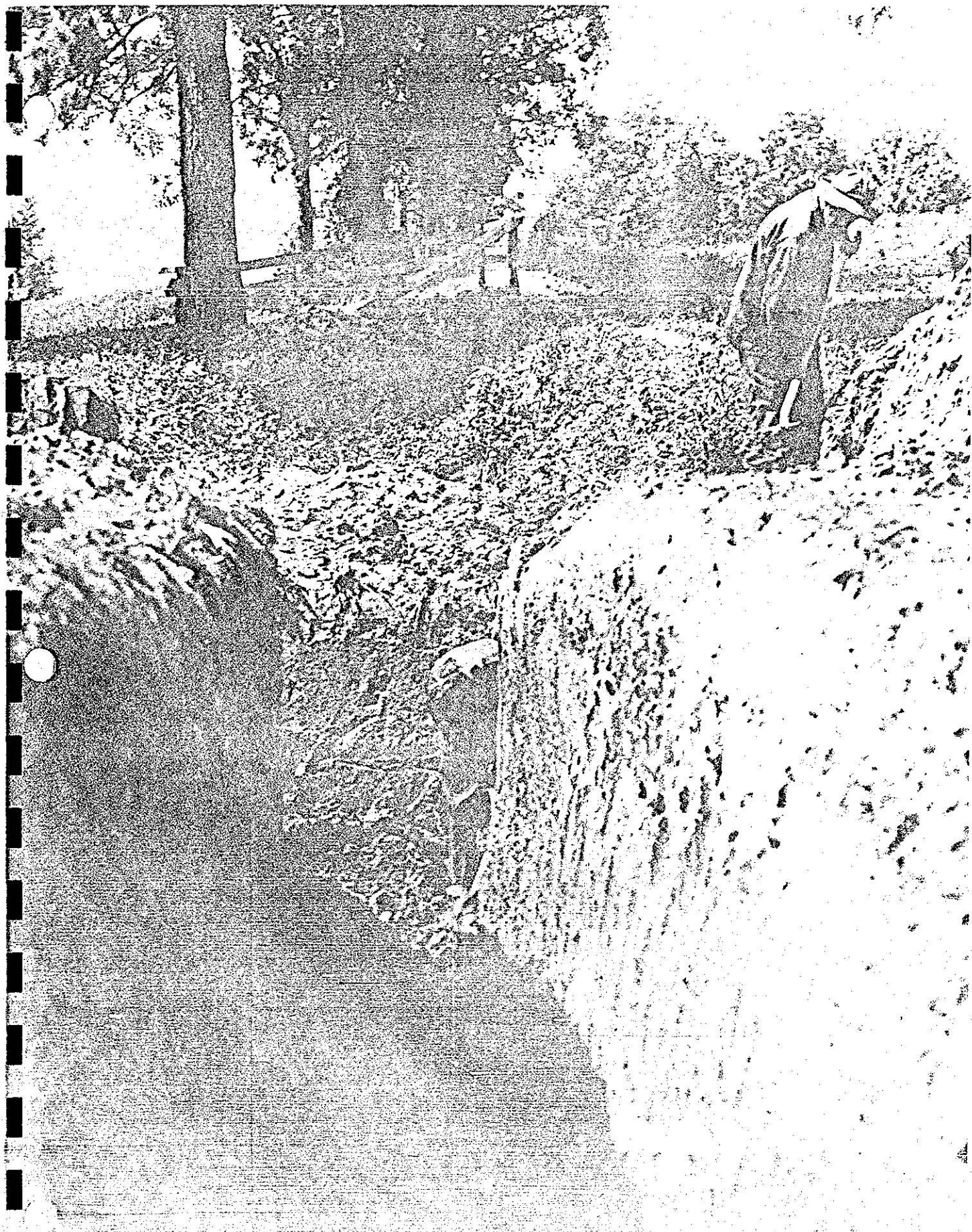
Park Files

1940's



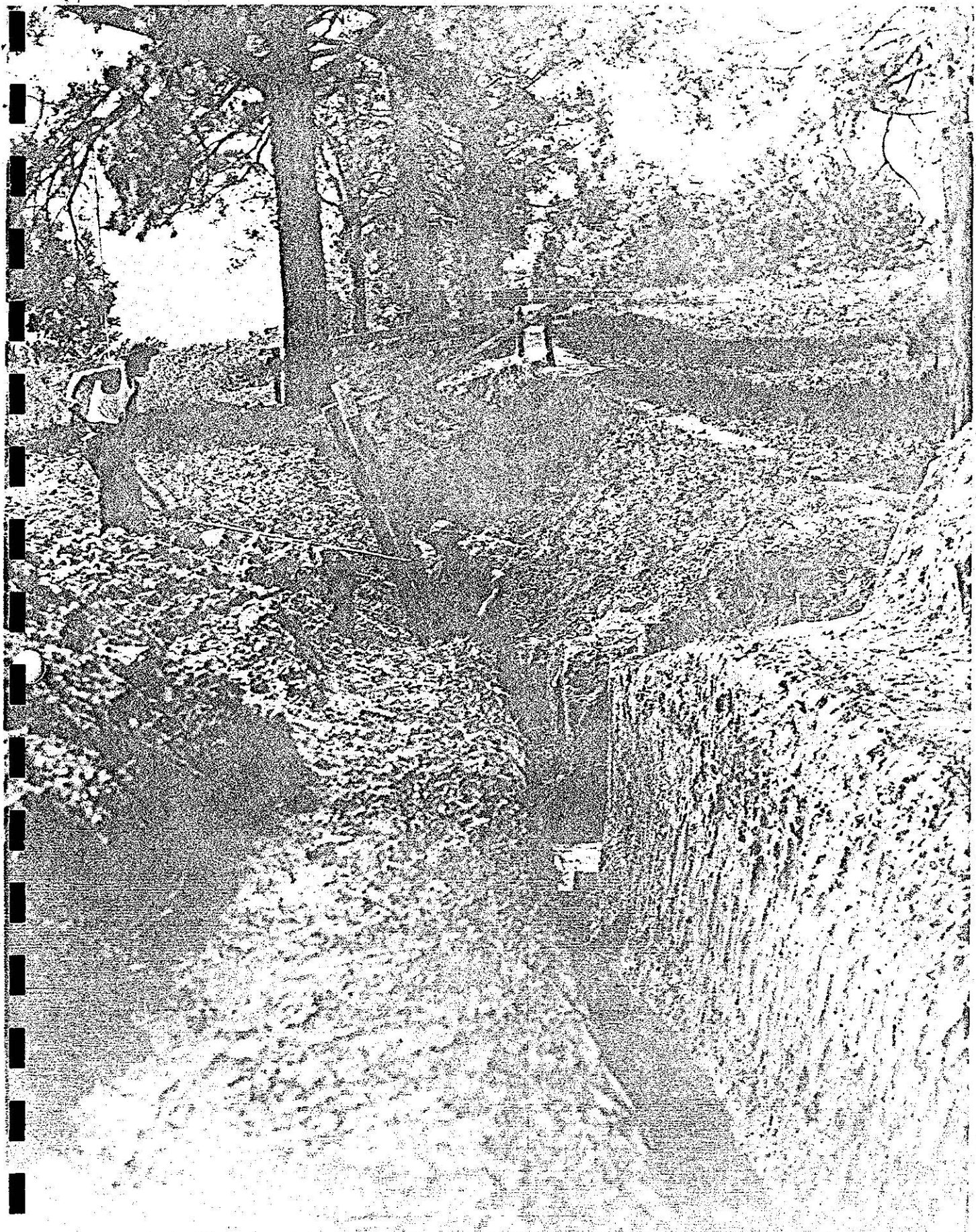
Park Files

Tunnel Entrance Dig 1937

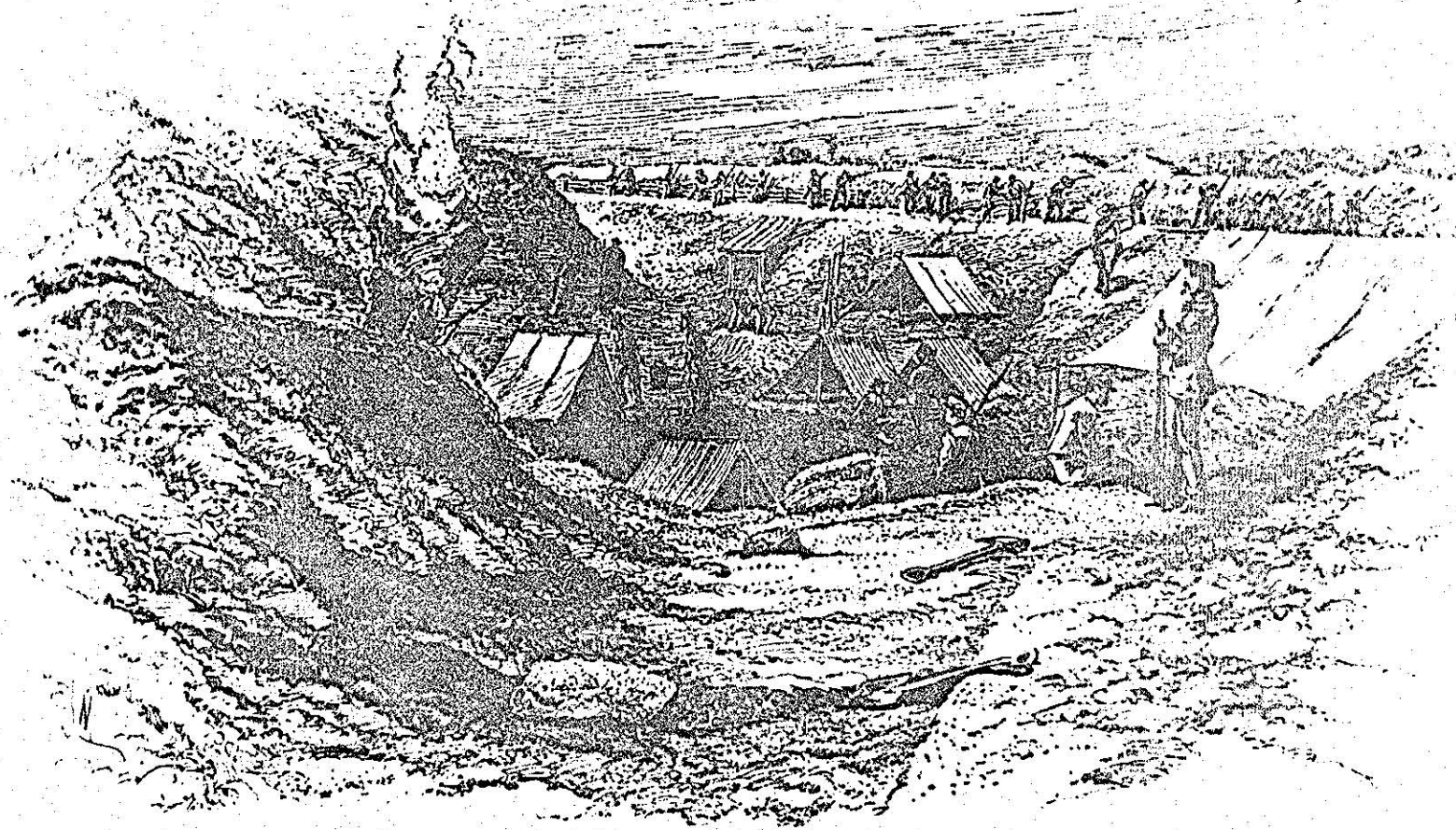


Park Files

Tunnel Entrance Dig 1937

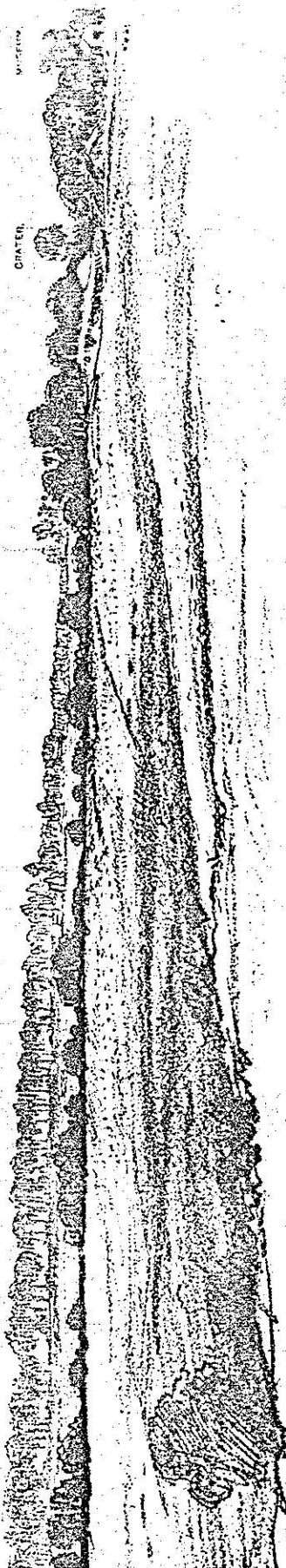


THE BATTLE OF THE PETERSBURG CRATER.



THE CONFEDERATE LINE AS RECONSTRUCTED AT THE CRATER. FROM A DRAWING MADE
BY LIEUTENANT HENDERSON AFTER THE BATTLE.

Battles and Leaders



CONFEDERATE SIDE OF THE CRATER, LOOKING TOWARD THE UNION LINES. FROM A SKETCH MADE IN 1886, TAKEN FROM THE ROAD BACK OF THE CRATER, AND NEARLY HALF-WAY TO THE CEMETERY CREST. ON THE LEFT IS THE SWALE WHERE MAHONE'S TROOPS FORMED FOR THE COUNTER-CHARGE.

almost perpendicular sides. At the crest he fell and rolled to the

From the actions of the time, as could be seen by his front, he was not exactly certain of the Union commander's intentions. He thought that possibly the mine was a feint and that the main attack would come from some other quarter. However, he kept his troops in a hollow in front and held them in that position.

Meantime General Potter, with the Union line of intrenchments, saw that something ought to be done to dislodge the enemy's position and distract the enemy's attention. At that point, ordered Colonel Zenas Leonard to send his First Brigade, to send to support General Griffin, and to make an attack on the right. It was arranged that the two regiments in the support of General Griffin, after passing the crater, turn to the right, and attack the enemy's lines. Colonel Bliss was successful, and obtained possession of a portion of the line, and one of the regiments advanced to within 20 or 30 yards of the line, and one of whose fire was so severe on the enemy that they could make no further headway. The progress being impossible, while an unceasing fire poured into the men. They then turned to the enemy's traverses and intrenchments.

At the time of ordering forward the command General Potter wrote General Burnside, stating that it was from what he had seen, and from what he had received from subordinate officers, that many men were being forced into the crater, and that the troops there were in a desperate situation. It was absolutely necessary that a new position be made from some other point, and that the enemy's attention be diverted. He straightened out our line. To that end he received an answer. Orders were