

of the most striking episodes of the war. This area of the battlefield had become a maze of deep trenches and tangles of branches and sharpened sticks used as defensive emplacements, known as abatis. In places the lines were extremely close, so men could not let down their guard even for an instant. Rebel sharpshooters were deadly accurate. The armies, hunkered down in their trenches, stood at a stalemate. But a group of fighting coal miners from Schuylkill County in Pennsylvania proposed a preposterous plan to their commanders: They would tunnel under Confederate lines and pack the shaft with four tons of gunpowder. "We could blow that damned fort out of existence if we could run a mine shaft under it," proclaimed a miner in the unit of Lt. Col. Henry Pleasants. "That God-damned fort is the only thing between us and Petersburg, and I have an idea we can blow it up." Plans were drawn, tools sent for. Well-rested black soldiers from the United States Bureau of Colored Troops began training to lead the infantry assault against the hapless Confederates after the explosion.

The Crater can be reached on foot via two routes. While the upper is more direct, the lower includes the mouth of the tunnel the miners constructed to burrow under the Rebel defensive lines. Colonel Pleasants wrote to his Uncle James on July 23 that he had "completed a gigantic work; and have accomplished one of the great things of this war. I have excavated a mine gallery from our line to and under the enemy's works." Pleasants's letter is a reminder that Civil War correspondence was uncensored, for Confederate interception of his short letter would surely have thwarted the plan.

"As soon as the 'high authorities' are ready . . . will blow fort, cannon and rebels to the clouds," Pleasants predicted. "The chief engineer of the Army and the rest of the regular army wiseacres said it was not feasible . . . Old Burnside stood by me. Told me to go ahead and I have succeeded," he wrote, referring to Gen. Ambrose Burnside. But this task weighed on the Pennsylvanian's conscience: "It is terrible to hurl men with my own hand at one blow into eternity, but I believe I am doing right." And he knew the danger of his words: "Be sure not to speak of this matter outside of Uncle James and Aunt Emily, until the thing is done."

Men worked around the clock, digging with bayonets until proper tools arrived. Each received a dram of whiskey after his shift. When Pleasants had to make precise calculations that took him perilously close to