Long before war cemented the fame of the tangled Wilderness region, generations of immigration, farming, and industry shaped the landscape. Tobacco farming depleted the soil’s nutrients, and subsequent mining and iron furnaces consumed remaining forests. Once these industries lapsed, a thicket of woods blanketed the rolling piedmont. Courage and determination were required to farm here in the years before the Civil War, and few threads of roads connected small farms easily lost in “The Wilderness.” Begin your walk at Ellwood Manor, one of the few large plantations in the area. The clash of armies in 1863 and 1864 devastated this home, the surrounding valley, and the daily rituals of its quiet inhabitants.

1. Ellwood Driveway

Standing in the historic driveway you tread a road network that was Ellwood’s lifeline to the outside world. Prior to the Civil War, Ellwood was a bustling plantation, home to the Lacy family and 30-100 slaves. To the south, the drive linked into the Parker’s Store Road and several small farms. Walking north, you pass the site of several outbuildings crucial to plantation functions—a kitchen, smokehouse, dairy, well, storehouse, and the home sites of the many slaves who lived and worked here.

This road brought important visitors and news, carried goods, and guided soldiers who would forever alter the landscape and the lives of those who called Ellwood home.

2. Road to Parker’s Store

The Road to Parker’s Store intersected here with the now-abandoned Orange Turnpike. On the morning of May 5, 1864, soldiers of G. K. Warren’s Fifth Union Corps wound southward on the narrow Parker’s Store Road, hoping to clear the Wilderness, but a quick Confederate response provoked battle instead. Warren’s men engaged in the first combat of the Battle of the Wilderness, which overran this valley, as depicted by Union officer Morris Schaff:

“All up and down Wilderness Run, all over the once tilled fields of the Lacy farm...little fires are blinking as they burn low. Some are those of batteries, some of trains, and some, at the top of the ridge, those of the hospitals of the Fifth Corps, where the surgeons, with rolled-up sleeves, are at their humane tasks in the operating tents.”

From the Wilderness Tavern ridge ahead, Sergeant Henry Tisdale described the unfolding battle and its aftermath:

“To see brigades and regiments form in battle line, march to the woods to be mostly met with sheets of smoke and flame....Temporary hospitals all about us filled with maimed and wounded, trains of ambulances constantly filing by us, the blood trickling from some of them...It was with willing hands we mustered to help those we could bringing them food and water, and wet[ting]ing their wounds with cool water.”