Units of the Union and the Confederate armies met near Gettysburg on June 30, 1863, and each quickly requested reinforcements. The main battle opened on July 1, with early morning attacks by the Confederates on Union troops on McPherson Ridge, west of the town. Though outnumbered, the Union forces held their position. The fighting escalated throughout the day as more soldiers from each army reached the battle area. By 4 p.m., the Union troops were overpowered, and they retreated through the town, where many were quickly captured. The remnants of the Union force fell back to Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill, south of town. The Southerners failed to pursue their advantage, however, and the Northerners labored long into the night regrouping their men.

Throughout the night, both armies moved their men to Gettysburg and took up positions in preparation for the next day. By the morning of July 2, the main strength of both armies had arrived on the field. Battle lines were drawn up in sweeping arcs similar to a "J," or fishhook shape. The main portions of both armies were nearly a mile apart on parallel ridges: Union forces on Cemetery Ridge, Confederate forces on Seminary Ridge, to the west. General Robert E. Lee, commanding the Confederate troops, ordered attacks against the Union left and right flanks (ends of the lines). Starting in late afternoon, Confederate General James Longstreet's attacks on the Union left made progress, but they were checked by Union reinforcements brought to the fighting from the Culp's Hill area and other uncontested parts of the Union battle line. To the north, at the bend and barb of the fishhook (the other flank), Confederate General Richard Ewell launched his attack in the evening as the fighting at the other end of the fishhook was subsiding. Ewell's men seized part of Culp's Hill, but elsewhere they were repulsed. The day's results were indecisive for both armies.

In the very early morning of July 3, the Union army forced out the Confederates who had successfully taken Culp's Hill the previous evening. Then General Lee, having attacked the ends of the Union line the previous day, decided to assault the Union. The attack was preceded by a two hour artillery bombardment of Cemetery Hill and Ridge. For a time, the massed guns of both armies were engaged in a thunderous duel for supremacy. The Union defensive position held. In a final attempt to gain the initiative and win the battle, Lee sent approximately 12,000 soldiers across the one mile of open fields that separated the two armies near the Union center. General George Meade, commander of the Union forces, anticipated such a move and had readied his army. The Union lines did not break. Only every other Southerner who participated in this action retired to safety. Despite great courage, the attack (sometimes called Pickett's Charge or Longstreet's assault) was repulsed with heavy losses. Crippled by extremely heavy casualties in the three days at Gettysburg, the Confederates could no longer continue the battle, and on July 4 they began to withdraw from Gettysburg.