

Kennesaw Mountain

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Kennesaw Mountain
National Battlefield Park



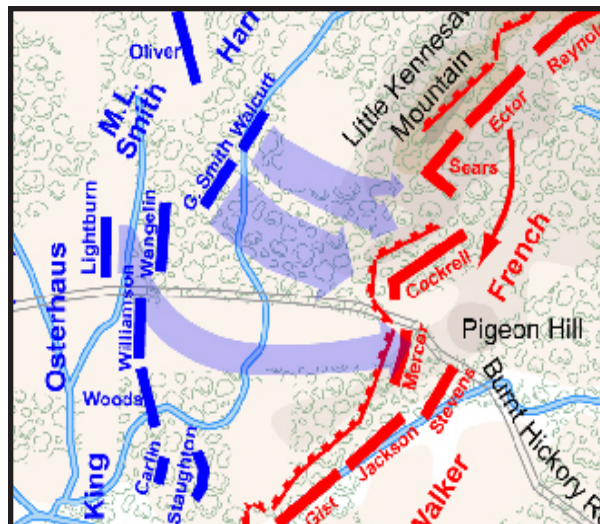
The Federal Attack on Pigeon Hill, June 27, 1864



At 8:00 a.m. on June 27, 1864, Major General William T. Sherman launched a simultaneous, two-pronged attack on the center of General Joseph E. Johnson's Kennesaw line. Two feint attacks, one on each of Johnston's flanks, also took place that morning as Sherman attempted to force Johnston to pull troops from his center and redistribute them to his right and left. If Johnston's line was weakened in the middle, a concentrated attack by Union troops might split the Confederate Army in two. Next to the fighting at Cheatham Hill, the assault on Pigeon Hill resulted in the highest number of casualties of any other incident of the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain.

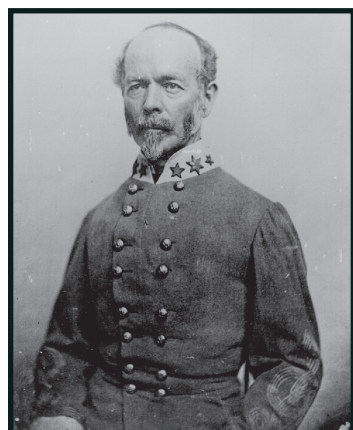
Pigeon Hill and Little Kennesaw

Pigeon Hill is a prominence standing north of the Burnt Hickory Road, about 1300 feet above sea level. Its steep slope, like that of adjacent Little Kennesaw (1600 feet above sea level), is mottled with large boulders and rocky outcroppings. Dense woods and thick, tangled underbrush cover both hills on all sides. Johnston's army took full advantage of the terrain as they entrenched themselves across the high ground. Confederates created additional obstacles by felling trees directly in front of their positions. They also fortified their earthen trenches with two-foot high stone walls which could be used as shields and as rifle supports for steadier aim.



Federal Assault on Pigeon Hill, June 27, 1864

Battle Preparations



Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston

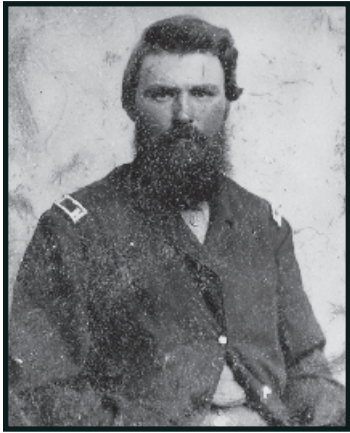
Major General Samuel G. French's division of Major General William W. Loring's Corps defended the high ground north of the Burnt Hickory Road. Missouri troops under Brigadier General Francis Marion Cockrell, supported by two Alabama artillery units commanded by Captains Richard Bellamy and Charles Lumsden, respectively, along with Captain James Hoskins' Mississippi Battery, held the heights of Pigeon Hill. To Cockrell's right, Mississippi men under Brigadier General Claudius Sears, and Texas and North Carolina regiments under Brigadier General Matthew Ector stood on the rocky top of Little Kennesaw, supported by Ward's Alabama Battery and Captain Henry Guibor's Missouri Battery.

The commander of the Federal Army of the Tennessee, Major General James B. McPherson, planned the details of the assault on Pigeon Hill. McPherson chose battle-tested brigades from Major General John A. Logan's Fifteenth Corps to strike eastward along the Burnt Hickory Road. Two brigades from Brigadier General Morgan L. Smith's division, one

under Brigadier General Giles Smith (Morgan Smith's brother) and another led by Brigadier General Joseph Lightburn, along with a brigade commanded by Colonel Charles C. Walcutt of Brigadier General William Harrow's division, carried out the attack.

Lightburn's Brigade was ordered to penetrate a line held by Brigadier General Hugh Mercer's Georgia Brigade south of the Burnt Hickory Road, opposite the Cass House Site. Giles Smith would attack north of the Burnt Hickory Road, striking Pigeon Hill at its western base, while Walcutt would advance to Smith's left, targeting the gorge between Pigeon Hill and Little Kennesaw. In total, about 5,500 Union troops assaulted a position defended by 11,000 Confederate soldiers.

Lightburn's Attack on Mercer's Brigade



Captain William F. Gilliland, 83rd Indiana Infantry, participated in Lightburn's Charge. Image courtesy of Michael Reither.

At 8:00 a.m. on June 27, from the crest of Little Kennesaw, General French listened as a 50-gun Federal artillery bombardment swelled in volume, signaling an imminent attack. "Presently and as if by magic," he later wrote, "there sprang from the earth a host of men, and in one long, waving line of blue, the infantry advanced, and the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain began."

The six regiments of Lightburn's brigade, deployed in two long lines, moved southward across the Burnt Hickory road and then eastward through an open field at a double quick-step. At the end of the field, a thicket with dense and tangled underbrush undermined the line's integrity. Troops regrouped on the other side before pressing onward to Nose's Creek in their front. The creek, which had overflowed its banks due to recent heavy rains, hindered the line's momentum, and again the columns regrouped. All the while, Confederate pickets in the woods to the right of the Union line kept up a continual and harassing fire.

Advancing two hundred yards into another open field (in the vicinity of the Hardage House Site), Lightburn's men suddenly realized they stood 20 paces in front of a skirmish line held by Georgia soldiers under Mercer. Charging into the rifle pits, Federals gained possession after fierce hand-to-hand combat. "We held our pits until they got in some places and clubbed the men with their guns," wrote Private W. O. Norrell of the 63rd Georgia. "Our company went off it seemed to me like a flock of sheep."

Lightburn's men pushed forward until crossfire finally halted their advance. Mercer's infantry in the woods to their front and right fired volley after volley while the batteries on the hill to their left shelled the Union line mercilessly. An order to lie down was given, and within ten minutes, the Federals retreated to the thicket in their rear. There they remained all day, finally withdrawing after dark.

Smith and Walcutt Attack Pigeon Hill and Little Kennesaw



Major General William T. Sherman

At 8:15 a.m., a bugle sounded "Forward," and to Lightburn's right, Giles Smith's and Walcutt's brigades moved simultaneously to capture the heights in their front. Starting from a cleared field north of the York House, Smith's six regiments, deployed in two lines, advanced toward the western slope of Pigeon Hill. Passing through thick woods where swollen Nose's Creek lay, troops became disorganized as they crossed waist-high water and tripped over tangled brush, vines, and thorn-bushes. Officers called a temporary halt so lines could be reformed before pushing onward.

A Confederate skirmish line held by the consolidated Second/Sixth Missouri Regiment lay in the woods about 150 yards west of Pigeon Hill. As a soldier in the 55th Illinois Regiment later recalled, "We soon encountered the fire of the surprised rebel pickets, but...dashed over them – killing those who opposed [and] sending some as prisoners to the rear." Smith's line finally emerged from the woods into a clearing at the base of the hill. Breaking into a double-quick step, the line immediately charged the rocky ledges in front of them. The natural fortress proved impenetrable. Steep slopes, giant boulders, fallen trees, and piles of twisted and sharpened limbs frustrated the attack, and the heavy resistance of Cockrell's Brigade discouraged the Union soldiers. "The troops upon our left...fell back without any attempt," the Illinois veteran remembered, "[while] those on the right soon gave way, enabling the enemy to concentrate

their fire upon us."

Lieutenant Warren of the Missouri Brigade recalled that "a solid line of blue emerg[ed]...a hundred yards below us. We gave them a volley that checked them. ... [Our] fire was so...accurate that they could not be induced to advance, though their officers could be plainly seen trying to urge them up the hill." (It is interesting to note that since Giles Smith's brigade also included a Missouri regiment, Missourians in blue and gray battled each other on the slope of Pigeon Hill that day.)

General Giles Smith reported that the Confederate works "were very formidable, and filled with men, completely commanding the whole slope of the hill." A few soldiers, he said, "nearly gained the works, only to be shot down as they arrived. Our loss...was very heavy." Around 8:45 a.m., the assault was called off.

Walcutt's charge on the gorge between Pigeon Hill and Little Kennesaw suffered a similar fate. With the 46th Ohio leading the way as skirmishers, the brigade advanced in two lines of two regiments each. Shot and shell from the heights in their front rained down on the troops as they crossed an open field. Confederate rifle pits 200 yards in front of Little Kennesaw, manned by soldiers in the 46th Mississippi Regiment, suffered heavy casualties as oncoming men in blue easily overran their position. But Walcutt's line would meet no more success that day. As John T. Hunt of the 40th Illinois wrote, "[N]earing the base of the mountain, we met a terrible withering fire. ... [W]e found it would be a moral impossibility to scale it in the face of an active, vigilant and relentless foe. Some...tried the ascent, and left their lifeless remains as testimonials to...futility." On the crest of Little Kennesaw, Sears helped stem Federal penetration of the gorge by directing his men to fire downward on the men in blue. Now caught in crossfire between the brigades of Sears and Cockrell, Walcutt's troops were compelled to entrench and hunker down until nightfall covered their withdrawal.

Confederate Entrenchments on the Western Slope of Pigeon Hill, 1864



Aftermath

Considering that Sherman's feint attacks on Johnston's flanks had not worked as planned, Federal troops that morning had flung themselves against the strongest point in Johnston's line, his center, with tragic results. McPherson's attack on Pigeon Hill lasted only 45 minutes, but during that time, the Union Army's Fifteenth Corps suffered 850 casualties compared with a Confederate loss of less than 300.

Although the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain merely delayed Sherman's march into Atlanta, Federals were denied a view from its heights until Johnston, reacting to a flanking movement by Sherman, voluntarily evacuated his works on the night of July 2.

Bulletin created by Angela Tooley, Kennesaw State University history student, in cooperation with Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park.