



The Road Past Kennesaw: The 1864 Atlanta Campaign

The Battle of Kennesaw Mountain, by Thure de Thulstrup, depicts Sherman's fight against Confederates on Big Kennesaw on the

morning of June 27, 1864. The original painting is on display in the Kennesaw Mountain visitor center.

When Ulysses S. Grant assumed command of all Federal armies in March 1864, he ordered a coordinated offensive to destroy Confederate resistance and end the war. The major efforts focused on eastern Virginia and northwest Georgia. Grant accompanied Maj. Gen. George G. Meade's Army of the Potomac in Virginia and aimed to finally defeat Gen. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman, in charge of the Georgia offensive, commanded 100,000 soldiers, divided among three armies concentrated near Chattanooga, TN. Opposing them was the 53,000-man Army of Tennessee under Gen. Joseph E. Johnston entrenched at Dalton, GA, along Rocky Face Ridge. Grant ordered Sherman to "move against Johnston's army, to break it up, and to get into the interior of the enemy's country as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can against their war resources."

The war-making capacity of the Confederacy remained formidable after three years of fighting. By spring 1864 the Federals controlled the Mississippi River and the Confederates had been expelled from most of Tennessee and much of Mississippi. Still, the heartland of the Confederacy, stretching from Alabama through Georgia to the Carolinas, was virtually untouched by the war. Atlanta, 125 miles southeast of Chattanooga, was a significant manufacturing city, the center of a belt of manufacturing communities extending from Augusta, GA, to Selma, AL.

Even more importantly, Atlanta was a vital Confederate rail junction. Four railroads met here, linking the southern Atlantic seaboard states with the western Confederacy. The Western & Atlantic, upon which both sides depended for supplies, ran

You cannot qualify war in harsher terms than I will. War is cruelty and you cannot refine it . . .

—William T. Sherman, General, US Army

northwest to Chattanooga and was the axis along which the Atlanta Campaign was fought. The Georgia Railroad ran east to Augusta, where it connected with lines to Charleston, Raleigh, and Richmond, the Confederate capital. The Macon & Western ran southeast, with connections to Savannah. Just south of Atlanta, at East Point, the Atlanta & West Point extended west into Alabama.

From May to September 1864, Federal and Confederate forces fought across north Georgia from Dalton to Atlanta, with almost daily skirmishing and frequent maneuvering for position punctuated by fierce battles. During the final siege of Atlanta Sherman's troops cut the city's rail links. Confederate troops evacuated the city on September 1; Sherman entered the following day. Atlanta had fallen.

The Civil War in the Western Theater, 1861–1864

Southern states secede; Fort Sumter bombarded; war begins. Dec. 1860–April 1861	Kentucky ends neutrality, comes under Union control. September 1861	Union takes Forts Henry & Donelson, gains control of Tennessee R. February 1862	Union takes Island No. 10, then Memphis on Mississippi R. February, June 1862	Union victory at Battle of Pea Ridge establishes control of Missouri. March 1862	Union victory at Shiloh opens way into northern Mississippi. April 1862	Union navy takes New Orleans; gains access to Mississippi R. April 1862	Battle of Stones River secures middle Tennessee for Union. January 1863	Grant takes Vicksburg, opening Mississippi R. & splitting Confederacy. January–July 1863	At Chickamauga, South gains greatest victory in western theater. September 1863	Union victory in Chattanooga Campaign opens way to lower South. November 1863	Atlanta Campaign; Sherman takes Atlanta, begins March to the Sea. May–November 1864
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The Campaign Begins

Sherman began his march on Atlanta on May 7. Two days later he approached General Johnston's position on a steep ridge called Rocky Face. Sherman sent a column through Snake Creek Gap to threaten the Western & Atlantic Railroad, Johnston's supply connection with Atlanta. After an engagement at Rocky Face, Johnston moved south and dug in at Resaca, where on May 13–15 he repulsed Sherman's attacks.

When a Union column swung west to cross the Oostanaula River and again threaten the railroad, Johnston retreated to Adairsville, where the two forces skirmished on the 17th. They halted only with the approach of darkness, when Johnston fell back.

Time and again during Sherman's advance to Atlanta this situation was repeated as the generals engaged in a tactical chess match. When Sherman found the Confederates entrenched, he tried to hold them with part of his force while sending another column around their flank—always trying to cut the Western & Atlantic. Johnston repeatedly withdrew to intercept the threats.

By late May he had pulled back to a position in the Allatoona Mountains. Sherman swung wide to the southwest, but Johnston, ever alert to Union movements, side-stepped to slow him with stubborn fighting May 25–28 at New Hope Church, Pickett's Mill, and Dallas. When Sherman resumed his advance on June 10, he was forced to swing back east, following a bend in the railroad so he would not stray too far from his own supply line.

Battle for Kennesaw

By June 19, although hampered by weeks of continual rain, Sherman's troops forced Johnston to withdraw again, this time to a prepared defensive position anchored by Kennesaw Mountain, a lofty humped ridge with rocky slopes rising above the surrounding plain. Confederate engineers using slave labor had laid out a formidable line of entrenchments covering every approaching ravine or hollow with cannon and rifle fire.

Again Sherman extended his lines to the south to get around the Confederate flank. Again Johnston countered, shifting 11,000 men under Gen. John Bell Hood to meet the threat. At Kolb's Farm on June 22 Hood struck savagely but unsuccessfully, his attack failing to repel the Northerners.

Stalemated and immobilized by muddy roads, Sherman suspected that Johnston's defenses, though strong, might be thinly manned and that one sharp thrust might break through. His plan called for diversionary moves against Kennesaw and the Confederate left while a two-pronged assault hit Johnston's center.

The attacking brigades moved into position before dawn on June 27. At 8 am, after an artillery bombardment, they surged forward. Both attacks were brief, bloody failures. Astride Burnt Hickory Road three Union brigades totaling 5,500 men crossed swampy, heavily wooded terrain. Before they could reach their objective—a mountain spur today named Pigeon Hill—sheets

The Atlanta Campaign



of fire drove them under cover. From Little Kennesaw and Pigeon Hill Confederates rolled rocks down on them. As soon as it was obvious the attack could not succeed, Sherman recalled it.

Meanwhile, south of Dallas Road (now Dallas Highway), 8,000 Union infantrymen attacked two divisions of Johnston's army. Many of those in the assaulting waves were shot down. Some advanced to close quarters, and for a few minutes there was brutal hand-to-hand fighting on top of the defenders' earthworks. Both sides grimly nicknamed this place the "Dead Angle."

Sherman resumed his flanking strategy, forcing Johnston to abandon his Kennesaw lines during the night of July 2. The Confederates had lost 800 men, the Northerners 1,800, but the Union diversionary movement on the Confederate left had an unforeseen benefit, placing Sherman closer to Chattahoochee River crossings. He surprised Johnston by sending a small force across the river upstream from where Confederates guarded the railroad bridge. Outflanked again, Johnston had to retreat across the Chattahoochee.

The Fall of Atlanta

The rest of Sherman's army crossed the Chattahoochee on July 9 and Johnston withdrew to the fortifications of Atlanta. For Confederate President Jefferson Davis, already exasperated by Johnston's fallbacks and lack of aggressiveness, this was the last straw. He relieved Johnston of command

and replaced him with General Hood. Meanwhile, Sherman was closing on Atlanta from the north and east. Hood tried unsuccessfully to destroy the army of Gen. George H. Thomas as it crossed Peachtree Creek on July 20.

Two days later at the Battle of Atlanta Hood struck at Gen. James B. McPherson's army and was repulsed with heavy losses. When Sherman tried to outflank Atlanta's outnumbered defenders by maneuvering west of the city, Hood lashed out with another attack at Ezra Church on July 28. Again Hood was defeated.

In August Sherman placed Atlanta under siege, continually shifting troops to cut the railroads that linked Atlanta with the rest of the South. On August 31 he seized the last one, the Macon & Western. Hood, after losing a two-day battle near Jonesboro, ordered all public property destroyed and the city evacuated. Sherman entered on September 2 and triumphantly telegraphed the news to Washington: "Atlanta is ours, and fairly won."

The fall of Atlanta was a crippling blow to the Confederacy's capacity and will to make war. Coupled with Union victories elsewhere, the war's end was now in sight. In the North there was rejoicing, and on November 8 voters reelected President Abraham Lincoln, endorsing a fight to the finish. A week later Sherman left Atlanta in ruins and began his soon-to-be-famous "March to the Sea."



Left: View from behind Confederate earthworks on Pigeon Hill. This was part of the formidable line of entrenchments erected by Confederate engineers to defend against Union attacks.

Bottom right: In this picture of Little Kennesaw, Pigeon Hill is the knob rising to the right in the middle distance. Big Kennesaw is barely visible at the left, beyond Little Kennesaw.

Union and Confederate Leadership

Gen. William T. Sherman's repeated attempts to maneuver around Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's army were frustrated by Johnston's skillful retreat toward Atlanta. Johnston's failure to stop the Federals, however, caused Jefferson Davis to replace him with Gen. John Bell Hood. Hood fought hard to save Atlanta, but supply and morale problems forced him to abandon the city.



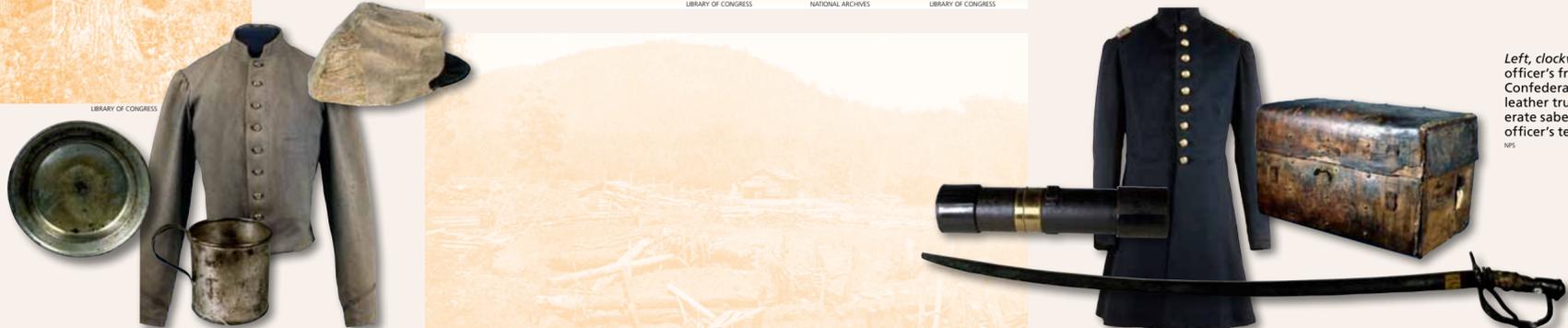
William T. Sherman (Library of Congress), Joseph E. Johnston (National Archives), John Bell Hood (Library of Congress)



The Western & Atlantic Railroad depot (above) was the terminus for a supply line crucial to both sides during the campaign. Upon leaving Atlanta,



Sherman ordered the destruction of all military and government buildings. The depot was among the casualties (above).



Right, clockwise: Confederate officer's shell jacket; Confederate field cap; tin drinking cup and plate.

Left, clockwise: Federal officer's frock coat; Confederate officer's leather trunk; Confederate officer's sword; Federal officer's telescope.