The Road Past Kennesaw: The 1864 Atlanta Campaign

When Union Gen. William T. Sherman 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 western Virginia and northwest Georgia. Gen. Grant occupied Macon, Ga., the enemy’s country as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can against their war resources.

Opposing them was the 53,000-man Army of Tennessee under Gen. Joseph Johnston 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 Missouri. 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, Ala.

Even more importantly, Atlanta was a vital Confederate rail junction. Four railroads met here, linking the south and southwest to the western Confederacy. The Western & Atlantic, upon which both sides depended for supplies, ran north 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 phase 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 Campaign Begins

Gen. Sherman began his march on Atlanta on May 7. Two days later he approached Gen. Johnston’s positions on a ridgeline called Rocky Face. Sherman sent a column through Breaks Gap to threaten the Western & Atlantic Railroad. Johnston’s supply connection with Atlanta. After engaging at Rocky Face, Johnston moved south and dug in at Resaca, where on May 13–15 he repelled Sherman’s attacks.

When a Union column moved west to cross the Oostanaula River and again threatened the town, Johnston fell back. Time and again during Sherman’s advance to Atlanta his forces retreated or were captured in the general’s engagements 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 flanks—skipping to cut the Western & Atlantic. Johnston repeatedly withdrew to repel the threat.

By late May Johnston had pulled back to a position in the Allatoona Mountains. Sherman swung wide to the southeast, but Johnston, ever alert to Union movements, sidestepped to stop him with stubborn fighting May 25–28 at New Hope Church. Picketts Mill, and Dallas. When Sherman resumed his advance on June 10, he was forced to swing back west, following a bend in the railroad as he could not stay too far from his own supply line.

The Atlanta Campaign

Battle for Kennesaw

By June 10, 1864, having seen weeks of continuous 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 erected on top of knolls and rocks, with rocky slopes rising above the surrounding plain. Confederate engineers using slave labor had laid out a formidable line of entrenchments erected on top of knolls and rocks.

Again Sherman extended his lines to the south to get around the Kennesaw flank. He approached on June 26 with Gen. John Bell Hood to meet the threat. At Allatoona Pass on June 27 both sides struck savagely but unsuccessfully, his attack failing to repel the Northern invaders. Stymied 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 Confederates left while a two-pronged assault hit Johnston’s center.

The attacking brigades moved into position before dawn on June 27. At 8 a.m., after an artillery bombardment, they surged forward. Both attacks were brief, bloody failures. Astirle Burnt Hickory Road Three Union brigades totaling 5,500 men crossed ravines, heavily forested terrain. Before they could reach their objectives—a mountain spur today named Pigeon Hill—events of the day drew 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 within 100 yards of the Confederate lines during the night of July 2. The Confederates had 800 men, the Northerners 1,800, but the Union diversionary move failed. Federates had lost 800 men, the Northerners 1,800, but the Union diversionary move failed.

Confederate President Jefferson Davis, already exasperated by Johnston’s fallbacks, drew to the fortifications of Atlanta. For the rest of Sherman’s army crossed the Chattahoochee River crossings. He surprised Johnston by sending a small force across the river upstream from where Johnston had been nicked this place the “Dead Angle.” Sherman resumed his flanking strategy, forcing Johnston to abandon his defenses.

Outflanked again, Johnston had to retreat west of the city, Hood lashed out with outnumbered defenders by maneuvering and fairly won.”

Union and Confederate Leadership

Gen. William T. Sherman’s repeated attempts to approach Atlanta came under Johnston’s army. Johnston’s army retreated from Dalton to Atlanta. Sherman tried to stop the Federals, however, by pulling Johnston back with Gen. John Bell Hood. Hood fought back to save Atlanta, but the city evacuated. Sherman entered on September 2, the city evacuated. Sherman entered on September 2, Johnston had to retreat west of the city, Hood lashed out with outnumbered defenders by maneuvering and fairly won.”

The Fall of Atlanta

The rest of Sherman’s army crossed the Chattahoochee on July 9 and Johnston with- drew to the fortifications of Atlanta. For Confederate President Jefferson Davis, already exasperated by Johnston’s setbacks 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 repelled with heavy losses. Hood was then ordered to outflank Atlanta’s outmanned defenses by maneuvering west of the city. Hood led out with 12,000 men 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 Confederacy. On September 31 he seized the last one, the Macon & Western. Hood, after losing a ten-day battle near Jonesboro, ordered all public property destroyed and the city evacuated. Sherman sent a desperate September 7 and 10 hastily telegraphed the news to Washington: “Atlanta is our, and Early’s, victory.”

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

The Atlanta Campaign

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

—William T. Sherman, General, US Army

Right: Johnston’s Confederate officer’s steel jacket. Confederate field coat and socks. 1864 pattern helmet.
The rolling countryside around the Kennesaw Mountain battlefield was settled by whites in the 1830s on land taken from the Cherokee after the 1828 Indian Removal Act. By the time of the Civil War, Cobb County had become one of the most populous and wealthy counties in northeastern Georgia—at the time still called “Cherokee Georgia.” Much of the county’s prosperity derived from the Western & Atlantic (now CSX) Railroad.

The Kennesaw Mountain region was the home of large and small planters and yeoman farmers. Most of the rural population lived in log cabins, or in later small frame houses or frame homes as semisubts. The South lost many soldiers. The Sherman’s army passed through Kennesaw on its way north toward Atlanta. The Union army was repulsed by Confederate Maj. Gen. Joseph E. Johnston’s army in May 1864. This Union Army motorized line was then destroyed by Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman’s forces. The battle raged for three days, and 30,000 soldiers were killed or wounded on both sides. The battle is remembered in part because of the enormous destruction of property.

Touring Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park

This self-guiding auto tour (see map at right) takes you to the major points of interest. Each tour stop has parking and wayside exhibits. Short interpretive talks are located on the mountainside, at Fig. Pin, and at Chatham Hill.

Begin your visit at the visitor center. Here you will find information, a short orientation film, exhibits, and a bookstore. Park staff can answer questions and help plan your visit. The visitor center is open daily, except Christmas Day, December 25, and January 1. Hours vary seasonally. Call 770-427-4686 or visit www.nps.gov for specific times.

This is a dry-use only park. All pets must be on a leash no longer than 6 feet and under physical control at all times. Please note that pets are NOT allowed in the visitor center, restrooms, or shuttle bus. Do not climb on the cannons, monuments, or buildings. The earthen features are fragile and climbing them causes irreparable damage.

All buildings, historic objects, geologic specimens, and artifacts are protected by federal law. It is illegal to tamper with, remove, or deface any building. All wildlife, plants, and poisonous plants. Bicycles are prohibited on hiking trails. Park only in designated areas. Pets must be on a leash no longer than 6 feet and under physical control at all times. Please note that pets are NOT allowed in the visitor center, restrooms, or shuttle bus.

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