ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Atlanta in the Civil War

By Marc Wortman PhD

In February 1844, William Tecumseh Sherman, a twenty-four-year-old lieutenant, detailed to the army's inspector general, arrived in the Upcountry Georgia town of Marietta. He would spend the next six weeks there looking into compensation claims from local militiamen dating to the recently concluded Second Seminole War. In his first posting after graduating West Point in 1840, Sherman had spent the better part of a year in the Florida glades himself in that frustrating, bloody and multi-year war to quell the native insurgency. With time on his hands, Sherman enjoyed riding "repeatedly" over nearby Kennesaw Mountain. From its 800-foot summit, he could spy the railroad survey and construction teams at work on the new Western & Atlantic Railroad line.

Work on the W&A was moving out from its southern Zero Mile Post terminus in a rude settlement known until two months earlier as just "Terminus." The village sat a few miles beyond the wide Chattahoochee River and about twenty miles southeast of Kennesaw Mountain. The single W&A track would soon snake nearly 140 miles northwest to the banks of the Tennessee River opposite Chattanooga. Other lines were expected to connect with the W&A at the Zero Mile Post to Atlantic and Gulf ports. The future railroad junction wasn't yet on any map, but its ambitions were already telling. A move was afoot to rename it "Atlanta," a coined word emblematic of its reach towards an oceanic future. Those railroads would one day make Atlanta a great city - and by spring 1864, place it squarely in the crosshairs of the Union army's Western campaign led by the same Sherman. The brutal fight for Atlanta would develop into the worst city siege in American history and prove crucial to the outcome of the Confederate Rebellion.

During his Georgia sojourn, the young Sherman made an extended horseback trip through that northwestern corner of Georgia. Riding along the W&A grade, he employed some of his time pursuing his military engineer's passion for geography, making a "topographical sketch of the ground" around the rugged Allatoona Pass. He could not yet know it, but his visit to the region would prove of "infinite use" when he returned twenty years later. According to Sherman in his *Memoirs*, the insights he gained studying the local terrain as a young officer would come to seem "providential,...every bit of knowledge then acquired returned tenfold."¹

When complete, the W&A quickly drew new residents, new businesses, railroad car makers and track foundries, warehouse and distribution centers, and housing and commercial construction, to Atlanta. Long trains arrived each day loaded with agricultural products and raw materials for transshipment, as well as people moving to town. The town also became the regional foodstuffs market as yeoman farmers from the surrounding countryside rolled in with their wagonloads. With its barking traders, smoking and whistling trains, transients, and influx of newcomers, a visiting newspaper reporter found the young town was "wonderfully New Yorkish in its notions."²

Few elsewhere in the South would have welcomed the comparison; to Atlanta's "Georgia Yankees," it was a flattery of sorts. However, they were Yankee only in their business-first outlook. Although a portion of the town's leading businessmen and property owners came from the North, Southern-born natives comprised more than 90 percent of the city's populace. By 1860, Atlanta's population had ballooned to 7,751 whites, 1,917 slaves and 23 freemen, an urban area smaller only than Savannah and Augusta in Georgia.

Atlanta varied in another significant way from more established cities; slaves were a luxury that comparatively few Atlantans owned. Georgia had more slaves and slaveholders than any other state in the Lower South, second only to Virginia in the South as a whole, with a slave population by 1860 of more than 462,000, or 44 percent of the state's total residents. Things differed markedly in Atlanta, where the black portion of the population, slave and free, never amounted to more than twenty-five percent of residents. Less than one in twenty white Atlantans, 373 in all, owned slaves, and just fifteen owned 20 or more.

In 1860's pivotal election, Atlanta continued its contrarian ways by choosing the Unionist Democratic candidate John Bell over the secessionist's candidate John C. Breckinridge by almost precisely the reverse of statewide polling. Combining the votes for Bell with those for the Northern Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, Atlanta voters demonstrated a decided preference for union.

With secession, though, Atlanta took up the cause of Confederate nation-building with the same fervor it brought to its own rise. Atlanta citizens quickly rallied to the new Confederate cause. The two standing Atlanta militia companies, the Gate City Guards

 ¹ Letter to Ellen Ewing Sherman, January 5, 1865, Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, eds., *Sherman's Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860–1865.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999, p. 792.
² James Russell, *Atlanta 1847–1890: City Building in the Old South and the New.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988, p. 72.

and Atlanta Grays, were the first to muster for the Confederate and State armies. Numerous new regiments followed swiftly. Fulton County had resisted the cry for freedom from Washington's Federal government; now with Atlanta at its center, the county provided the largest number of volunteer companies of any in the state at the first call to arms. By October 1861, more than a thousand Atlanta men had left for the battlefields. Before the war ended, Fulton County provided the Confederacy with 2,660 soldiers.

The editors of the town's *Southern Confederacy* daily newspaper admitted "that many of our best citizens were opposed to secession..." Now, the newspaper averred, "we do think it is the *bounden duty* of every good citizen to defend his country in every measure she may adopt, or leave it at once." Indeed, open dissent for loyalists who remained quickly proved dangerous. Harassed and threatened, a group of Unionists numbering perhaps just 20 men and some women, but including several of Atlanta's leading citizens, met in secret. A few Atlanta Unionists spied for the Federal army and aided wounded prisoners, even helping some to escape. Occasional sweeps by the provost marshal force under Colonel George Washington Lee rounded up suspected disloyal citizens. At least one died of injuries incurred while held. In a letter to the Secretary of War in Richmond, Lee warned that the city had become "a point of rendezvous for traitors-swindlers-extortioners-and counterfeiters." Trying to contain the city's lawlessness and dissenters, Lee briefly declared martial law. After a rebuke from Richmond, though, local officials regained their powers.³

Part of Lee's challenge was that war transformed the quiet town into an urban hub nearly overnight. Atlanta became the Confederacy's southern turntable. The Rebellious states had fewer than half the miles of railroad track lacing the North, but a third of all lines traversing the Lower South met up in the town's center. For thousands of soldiers, soon to be tens of thousands, riding the rails to practically any front - Virginia, Tennessee, the Mississippi Valley and beyond, the Gulf or Atlantic coasts - took them through Atlanta.

The war also set the town's factories and industrial workshops to humming. The South had less than 20 percent of the North's industrial capacity. Atlanta's industrial base, created to service prewar railroad needs, now offered a ready foundation for Southern military manufacturing. Georgia State and Confederate army contracts kept trackside factory forges blazing and machinery in motion. Atlanta's many big and small factories and mills produced desperately needed freight cars and railroad equipment,

And

³ Southern Confederacy, March 28, 1861, p. 1.

G. W. Lee to George W. Randolph, October 18, 1862, quoted in Mark E. Neely, *Southern Rights: Political Prisoners and the Myth of Confederate Constitutionalism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999, p. 33.

along with bolts and plating for armoring ships; hardtack troops came to curse; matches, liquor, vinegar, and spirits of nitre; boots, uniforms, buttons, and knapsacks; gun barrels, swords, and 10,000 ten-foot-long medieval pikes should guns run short; and "C.S.A." belt buckles, spurs, and horse tack. Second only to the Tredegar Works in Richmond, Atlanta's Confederate rolling mill produced cannons, rails, and armor plate including iron sheathing used on the CSS *Virginia* and other ironclads.

The Confederate Army, too, set up operations in Atlanta. General Braxton Bragg moved his quartermaster headquarters there and, in February 1862, transferred the threatened Nashville arsenal to Atlanta. Nearly 5,500 arsenal men and women - more than the entire town's population less than a decade earlier - hunched over benches packing percussion caps and artillery and small arms ammunition, as many as 25,000 rounds and 150 artillery shells per day by August 1862, eventually churning out 23 million musket and pistol caps and 4.1 million rounds of small arms ammunition. The quartermaster department employed a small army of some 3,000 "needle women," seamstresses to darn into jackets, pants, and shirts.

Where other Georgia towns withered as most white males left for the fight, Atlanta's population more than doubled after a year at war. In addition, thousands of soldiers and refugees on the move passed through its streets. All carried money with them. The shopkeepers of Whitehall, Alabama, and Peachtree Streets expanded their businesses to serve the new clientele.

Seemingly far from the war fronts, Atlanta offered a secure locale not just for manufacturing and refugees but also for wounded and sick soldiers. In winter 1862 the first five hundred convalescing soldiers arrived. Within less than six months, Atlanta became the "hospital city of the South." The army took over hotels, schools and warehouses in town, to house and care for the sick and wounded. Soon even those facilities were full. Tent hospitals and a 200-bed "wayside" hospital went up near the tracks to distribute the wounded and to handle overflow from the more permanent facilities. Specialized hospitals were also erected, including multiple barracks devoted to contagious diseases.

As long trains of cattle cars returned from the Tennessee front with sick and wounded soldiers - up to ten thousand wounded men after the September 1863 Battle of Chickamauga alone - the passenger depot and neighboring City Park became a scene of crowded stretchers, open wounds, blood, odors, flies, moans and death. The sick and wounded soldiers and the crowds of refugees, many exhausted from their long journeys, carried contagious illness with them. Without enough housing and sanitation facilities, typhus spread through the population. Scarlet fever and smallpox epidemics swept the city starting in the fall of 1862 and on into winter, with new outbreaks as the war continued.

Despite the chaos, illness, and crime, Atlanta flourished through the first years of the war. Few people in the North had heard of Atlanta before the outbreak of the Rebellion, but most soon recognized that "the Citadel of the Confederacy" lay nestled beyond the fastness of the far southern Appalachian ridges and hills. By the end of the second year of fighting, the *New York Times* acknowledged a new center of gravity in the rebellious states: "Atlanta is really the heart of the Southern States," reported the newspaper, "and therefore the most vital point in the so-called Confederate States. [The region's towns] manufacture one-third of the horseshoes, guns and munitions of war made in the South. The machinery for the production of small arms has been taken to Atlanta, which place has extensive foundries.... Besides it is a flourishing city, an important railway centre, and extensive depot for Confederate commissary stores. Atlanta to the South is Chicago to the Northwest, and its occupation by the soldiers of the Union would be virtually snapping the backbone of the Rebellion."⁴

Situated far from the front, Atlanta appeared immune to the war's violence. The possibility of attack, however, became apparent in spring 1862 when Federal soldiers dressed as civilians captured a W&A train, the General, at Big Shanty (today's Kennesaw) and steamed back toward Union lines near Chattanooga. The train thieves hoped to sever the main supply line to Confederate forces in Chattanooga by destroying the single-track railroad behind them. Thanks to a sharp eyed conductor who chased down the train while alerting soldiers, the raid failed. (The incident would inspire at least two motion pictures, most famously Buster Keaton's "The General.") All of the men were captured, some held until tried as spies and hanged in Atlanta.

With the Union army advancing steadily into eastern Tennessee, the need to erect city defenses began to press upon Atlanta. Construction began in earnest in the spring 1863. Thousands of slaves were brought in to dig and construct a ten-mile ring of fortifications around the city. The earthworks formed a raised C around the city. About two miles from the center of town, the perimeter included high, reinforced palisades and redoubts, each holding five artillery pieces. Laborers chopped down thousands of trees and shaved and bound them into spiked barriers in front of the earthworks where, for up to half a mile, they opened up killing fields pocked with skirmish holes. A second line of defense behind this primary line was begun and yet another line was eventually built along the banks of the Chattahoochee River. When and if a Yankee force came to storm the city, they would encounter manmade walls as impregnable as any titanic storm-tossed ocean wave ever broke upon.

In mid-October 1863, after his successes in the West culminating in the decisive July 4 capture of Vicksburg, Major General Ulysses S. Grant took command of the Military Division of Mississippi. He personally came to Chattanooga to revive the battered and partially besieged Union army there. At the same time he promoted his friend and protégé Major General William Tecumseh Sherman to command of the Army of the Tennessee.

⁴ New York Times, November 15, 1863, n.p.

At the battles for Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge, November 24-25, 1863, Grant's forces routed the Confederates who fell back to the rugged ridgelines that sliced through the northwestern Georgia corner. Two battered armies hunkered down for the winter; the Confederate Army of Tennessee withdrew to Dalton, Georgia, Grant's armies Chattanooga.

In late November, Confederate Army of Tennessee General Braxton Bragg resigned his command, becoming military advisor to President Jefferson Davis. In Bragg's place, Davis appointed General Joseph Eggleston Johnston. Soon 57 years old, the gentlemanly, soft-spoken West Pointer worked swiftly to resurrect his new command. He rid camp of Bragg's rigid roll call, drill, and harsh discipline; he granted extensive furloughs and released food, clothing, shoes, and other stored supplies to the ill-clad, hungry, homesick men. Desertions, which had been taking place by the hundreds nightly, virtually stopped. The revived Rebel army rebuilt and dug in for the coming spring's campaign.

Soon after New Year's Day President Abraham Lincoln elevated Grant to overall command of the Federal armed forces. The 42-year-old Grant understood that he faced two great opposing armies acting principally in defense of two vital urban centers: the Army of Northern Virginia commanded by Robert E. Lee defending Richmond and the Army of Tennessee keeping Atlanta secure. To date, Northern military leaders had focused more on conquering and maintaining their hold on rebellious territory than on crushing those two principle forces of resistance to Federal authority. In doing so, the Federal armies ceded opportunities for aggressiveness to their foes and gave away their massive size and force advantages.

Grant took personal charge in the more politically sensitive Virginia. He entrusted the Western campaign's leadership to Sherman, Grant's 44-year-old self-described "second self." Sherman understood from the frustrating Seminole War the challenge of conquering an enemy defending its homeland, and he knew the Southerners' fighting spirit well from his long sojourns in the South. The two planned coordinated and simultaneous attacks. Grant's orders to Sherman in planning for the Atlanta Campaign left him free "to move against Johnston's army, to break it up, and to get into the interior of the country as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can against their war resources."⁵

Sherman had long insisted that the Southern Rebellion extended throughout the population and only harsh and sustained punishment of the entire population would put the Rebellion down. A concept was born, later termed "total war," in which the civilian population, its infrastructure (communications as it was then called), foodstuffs, and all productive resources necessary to sustain an army came under relentless, destructive attack. Sherman brought total war to Georgia, eventually declaring he would "make

⁵*Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*. New York: Da Capo Press, edition, 1984, Volume II, p. 26.

Georgia howl." He had already shown himself willing to carry out such a campaign against a general population previously in Mississippi. His marauding, rapacious "bummers" had swept plantations clean - leaving the chimneys of burnt out houses, "Sherman's sentinels," standing and destroyed railroad tracks beyond repair by twisting heated rails into knots - forever after known as "Sherman's neckties" - as reminders of his army's passage.⁶

In preparing for invasion, the Union commander enjoyed a singular and ironic advantage over the Confederate defenders. Sherman recalled the terrain his men would move on from his tour through a land "to which I took such a fancy" twenty years earlier. His forces would move in a southeasterly direction, heading through a heavily forested region netted underfoot with jungle-like tangles of vines and cut diagonally by tall, steep ridges, the southwestern-most fingers of the Appalachian Mountains. They would need to cross four broad, mountain-fed rivers, culminating in the Chattahoochee before Atlanta. Those ridges and rivers provided the Confederates with natural palisades, barriers, shelters, and fields of fire. Johnston need not advance, merely establish an unbreakable defensive position, to emerge victorious. In Dalton, Johnston's men spent the winter constructing dense fortifications and artillery emplacements. They even dammed up streams to flood out the valley before Dalton. Slave laborers added additional lines into which defenders might fall back.

The Yankee invasion would follow the route of the Western & Atlantic Railroad and any bluecoat advance would depend on holding that rail supply line. Army supplies would need to roll down into Rebel Georgia. Sherman would be invading enemy territory, fighting along a broad front and leaving, as his army advanced, an ever more extended and tenuous lifeline behind, requiring guards stationed along its difficult-todefend length.

General Johnston may have won his army's loyalty, but his immediate subordinates were more fractious, particularly Major General John Bell Hood, one of the Army of Tennessee's three corps commanders. Also a West Pointer, but 24 years younger than Johnston, Hood was brash and combative. He grew impatient for a fight even while Johnston worked to restore his wintering army and dug in to face the coming invasion. In March, he went behind his commander's back. In a series of letters sent directly to Richmond, he urged a "march to the front as soon as possible, so as not to allow the enemy to concentrate and advance upon us." All Confederate president Davis could do was warn Johnston against even considering retreat, which "would be so detrimental both from military and political considerations."⁷

⁶ W.T. Sherman to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, October 9, 1864, reproduced in *Sherman's Civil War*, p. 731.

⁷ Johnston to Jefferson Davis, March 7, 1864, quoted in Castel, *Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864.* Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1992, p. 76.

By the end of April, Sherman had gathered 110,000 troops, 99,000 available for the fight, and stockpiled supplies for the campaign. Not counting officers' slaves and thousands of others impressed to build fortifications or serve as teamsters and camp hands, the Army of Tennessee started the defense of its Georgia bastion with almost 55,000 men, most of them battle hardened (except for 6,500 additional Georgia militiamen pressed into service) and not easily cowed by a charging enemy's force advantage.

Soon after dawn of May 7, the first shots of the spring campaign rang out.

The Confederate defenses started northeast of the 840-foot rise known as Tunnel Hill, a pine-covered granite ridge ten miles north of Dalton. Starting in the valley north of there, which Johnston had flooded by damming up Mill Creek, his men fought from dugout emplacements and behind breastworks and boulders along the tops and cliffs of the parallel ridges that raked like scars across the face of North Georgia. Chief among these, the sheer Rocky Face Ridge stretched from above Dalton south for nearly twenty-three miles to its southern end near a loop in the Oostanaula River.

Sherman was aware of three possible doors through Rocky Face Ridge. Closest to the Federals' main force moving down on the Rebels and also closest to Dalton was Mill Creek Gap (known to locals as Buzzard's Roost), about three miles south of Tunnel Hill. The tracks between Chattanooga and Atlanta that served as an opposite-running lifeline for the two armies passed through the gap. That railroad provided a ready shuttle behind the ridgeline for moving Rebels and their supplies in response to Sherman's attacks. Another three miles south of Mill Creek Gap was Dug Gap, a pass notched into the ridge. Thirteen miles southwest of Dalton, the Snake Creek Gap opened into Sugar Valley, extending five miles to the banks of the Oostanaula at the village of Resaca. Sherman sent three-fourths of his entire force, combining the Army of the Cumberland under Major General George Henry Thomas, the famed "Rock of Chickamauga," and the Army of the Ohio led by Major General John McAllister Schofield, against the Mill Creek and Dug gaps.

Sherman's own former command, the Army of the Tennessee, now commanded by his favored general, fellow Ohioan Major General James Birdseye McPherson, age 36, marched south and through Snake Creek Gap. Preparing for the spring campaign, Johnston had paid scant attention to his southern flank. He may not have even been aware of the gaping hole he'd left. If McPherson could surge through Snake Creek Gap into the weakly defended valley, while the rest of the Federals held Johnston's army in check, his army could cut the railroad line at Resaca. That severing of Johnston's jugular would force him to fall back or risk logistical strangulation and even utter destruction.

On May 9, while fighting raged to the northeast, McPherson's men moved warily through the gap into Sugar Valley. They approached within a couple miles of Resaca. McPherson sent Sherman word at his headquarters about their advance. Reading McPherson's message, the excitable commander pounded on the table, sending dishes and cups flying. "I've got Joe Johnston dead!" he exclaimed.

At the moment of the Union army's potential triumph, though, McPherson proved timid. Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk, the corpulent prewar Episcopal "Fighting Bishop" of Louisiana, commanded a 15,000-man corps, the Army of Mississippi. With the invasion of Georgia under way, he raced from defending Alabama to reinforce Johnston's army. In Resaca, 3,000 advance men joined the small guard already in place just as McPherson's army of 23,000 neared. The Yankees encountered fire from hastily dug-in defenders. McPherson did not know that he outnumbered the Confederates nearly six or more to one. Instead, shocked by the sudden show of resistance, McPherson reconsidered his position, seeing that the roads he marched on through the valley were dangerously exposed. He feared Johnston may have even prepared a trap for his army. Cut loose from the main body and supplies of the bluecoats and charged by Sherman's somewhat contradictory orders to cut the railroad at Resaca, then withdraw back into the fortifiable approaches to the gap, he pulled back within Snake Creek Gap.

The rest of Polk's corps flooded into Resaca. Johnston soon learned about the movement on his rear and realized the potentially lethal threat he faced. He started disengaging from Dalton to reinforce Resaca and defend along the northern banks of the Oostanaula River. Realizing the enemy was slipping away, Sherman ordered nearly his entire army on a parallel march south to Snake Creek Gap. But it was too late. Had McPherson been bolder, Sherman would very likely have demolished any significant further resistance to his advance on Atlanta. The war in Virginia and elsewhere would have continued, but with no chance of organized reinforcement or further food and supplies reaching other fronts from Georgia, the Civil War might effectively have been over.

Instead, the Army of Tennessee now had nearly 70,000 well-positioned men in and around Resaca ready to defend their lines against a force not that much larger than itself. The first attempt at flanking Johnston had driven him to retreat, but the retreat had left him stronger than before. A set-piece battle was in the offing along the Oostanaula with the odds no longer heavily in the Union army's favor.

Sherman hoped to pin the Army of Tennessee against the river banks and destroy it there. Starting with skirmishing and probing by the Union forces on May 13, the first major battle of the campaign began. After a day of fierce fighting, in the night of May 13, Johnston learned that an entire Union division had crossed the Oostanaula several miles to the south of Resaca. That deeper flanking move threatened to cut off the W&A again. This time the entire Rebel army would have to withdraw from its lines and fall back across the river. Working through the night, the butternut troops evacuated their positions and, after crossing the river, burned the railroad bridge behind them.

Thus began a series of running fights and occasional major battles - known collectively as the 100 Days' Battle. The clashes followed a pattern: Johnston kept

hoping to find a position that would give him the advantages he wanted to concentrate his forces against part of the Yankee army, and Sherman marched his men and cavalry around the Confederate lines to flank and pinch off the Rebel army. They danced their way south, across the red clay and pine forests. By day the men fought and by night they pulled back and built breastworks for their new lines. "I am well nigh worn out," admitted artillery captain A. J. Neal, whose family lived in Atlanta, "fighting all day and running or working all night." He was sure, though, if the Yankees would "only give us a fair fight we could sweep them from the face of the earth." The Confederates never lost a fight yet they steadily retreated.⁸

In the last days of May for the first time sharp-eared Atlantans, recorded shopkeeper Samuel Richards, heard "the report of the artillery at *the front*," about 25 miles to the north and west of Atlanta. The booming cannons seemed daily to draw closer. At the advancing front, the war and the armies' movements coupled with the flight of the refugee civilian population left a burnt over and devastated countryside. Even Sherman was stunned by what he saw. "All the people retire before us, and desolation is behind," he confided to his wife. "To realize what war is one should follow in our tracks."⁹

The fighting continued almost incessantly. Johnston's strategy was not Marshal Kutuzov's in Russia; rather, explained his chief of staff, he intended "to keep close up to the enemy," to probe for an opening where his forces could break through. But Johnston's was much the smaller army, and with the two sides grappling, the nimble Sherman kept his army in motion.¹⁰

Sometimes fighting proved hot and sustained. The two armies collided in a series of interconnected battles at the "slaughter-pen" of Pickett's Mill and the "hell hole" of New Hope Church and Dallas. In the thickets and forests, both sides suffered terribly, though the Union army lost many more men. At Pickett's Mill 1,500 Northerners fell. Entire regiments all but disappeared.

By the end of the first week of June, the entire Army of Tennessee formed a defensive wedge that covered a range of fields and three low mountains, the Kennesaw Ridge Line including Kennesaw Mountain, above Marietta. On the morning of June 10,

⁸ Dear Ma, May 20, 1864, in the field, Etowah River, GA. *Andrew Jackson Neal papers 1856-1881*. Emory University Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

⁹ Entry for May 29, 1864 *Richards Diary*. Atlanta History Center, Kenan Research Center, p. 231.

And

Sherman To Ellen Ewing Sherman, in the field near Marietta, Ga., June 26, 1864, in Simpson and Berlin, *Sherman's Civil* War, p. 657.

¹⁰ Albert Castel, *Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992, p. 247.

Sherman began his advance. He expected once again that it would not take long before the enemy evacuated. Instead, a heavy rain broke loose. At great cost, the Yankees slogged forward only three miles over the next two weeks.

Four days into the drive, the sun broke through the clouds. In the late morning, Sherman peered through his glass up at a group of Confederates standing on the top of Pine Mountain. He told an officer in the battery nearest him to make the party jump. He did not know the gathering included Generals Johnston, William Hardee, and Leonidas Polk. The Union battery sent three successive shots screaming a third of a mile up toward the men. The proud Polk refused to take cover. The third shot hit him directly. Somebody shouted in horror, "General Polk is killed!"¹¹

Despite the loss of the foe's Fighting Bishop, Sherman's expectations for a quick sweep of the Confederates from the Kennesaw line proved wildly optimistic. After a week and a half of steady fighting, Johnston drew in his eastern and western flanks and finally concentrated on Kennesaw Mountain.

Sherman determined to challenge the heights of Johnston's Kennesaw stronghold. The Union attack began at dawn on June 27. For the Union army, the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain proved disastrous. The worst fighting took place at the Dead Angle salient on Cheatham's Hill, as it was known forever after because of the stand made there by General Benjamin Franklin Cheatham's division.

The price Sherman paid at Kennesaw was terrible to behold and perhaps unnecessary. The Northerners suffered 3,000 casualties in the June 27 battles; Johnston counted only 750 men killed, wounded, or captured. General Thomas warned Sherman that "one or two more such assaults would use up this army."¹²

Finally, though, a brigade in Schofield's Army of the Ohio broke through the left fringes of the Rebel line. They swept around Johnston's flank and to the south, where they secured a position closer to the Chattahoochee River than the drawn-in left side of Johnston's army. With his rail line and back door threatened once more, the Confederate general again had no choice. By July 2, the Army of Tennessee had withdrawn back toward and then crossed over the Chattahoochee into its defenses.

Behind the Confederate defenders, the scramble in Atlanta to get out was now on. The city, recorded shopkeeper Richards on July 10, had become "a complete swarm." The streets, reported a newspaper correspondent, were "crowded with wagons piled high

Essential Civil War Curriculum | Copyright 2012 Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech

¹¹ Castel, *Decision in the West*, pp. 275–76, and William M. Polk, *Leonidas Polk: Bishop and General*. London: Longman, Green and Co., 1893, Volume 2 p. 349. ¹² Castel, *Decision in the West*, p. 315

with household effects, and every train of cars, freight or otherwise, was loaded to capacity with refugees struggling to leave the city."¹³

Although a party of Sherman's men had crossed the river 15 miles above the Confederate Chattahoochee line near the town of Roswell and a raiding party was on its way to cut the rail line southwest of Atlanta at the Alabama border, for now the Union commander decided not to push further against the main body of the 44,000 or so hardened Rebel soldiers plus another 6,000-some militiamen on the opposite bank of the river. He surveyed the works he'd need to assault - and that after fording the river, which ran anywhere from 50 to 300 yards wide - and judged them "the best line of field intrenchments I have ever seen."¹⁴

After the debacle at Kennesaw Mountain, he preferred a return to his effective, if inglorious, flanking operations. Despite the terrible casualties - already more than 15,000 men to date - and multiple failed assaults on Rebel defenses, he had tangible successes to show. He was 98 miles from his starting point in Dalton; for every man he had lost, he had taken one in return from an army far less able to sustain such attrition; also important, he had kept the Confederates opposite him pinned down and unable to send reinforcements to Virginia where Grant's army was suffering even more horrendous casualties with little ground gained to show for the losses. But Atlanta was still "a hard nut to handle," he admitted. "These fellows fight like Devils & Indians combined," he wrote his wife in grudging admiration, "and it calls for all my cunning & strength."¹⁵

Johnston's retreat and lost territory, though, weighed heavily on Richmond. On the night of July 17, the general received a telegram from Confederate President Davis in which he condemned his failure "to arrest the advance of the enemy to the vicinity of Atlanta" and declared his lack of "confidence that you can defeat or repel him." A short while later, General Hood, just 33 years old, a veteran field officer but little experienced in handling a large army, learned that Davis had chosen him to replace Johnston as commander of Atlanta's defending army. Reviewing the implications of Hood's replacement of Johnston, a reporter in town wrote: "If it means anything it must mean this: Atlanta will not be given up without a fight."¹⁶

¹³Entry for July 10, 1864 *Richards Diary*. pp. 2-3.

And

B. G. Ellis, *The Moving Appeal: Mr. McClanahan, Mrs. Dill, and the Civil War's Great Newspaper Run.* Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003, p. 309.

¹⁴ Richard M. McMurry, *Atlanta 1864: Last Chance for the Confederacy*.Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000, p. 115.

¹⁵ Letter to Ellen Ewing Sherman, July 26, 1864, *Sherman's Civil War: Selected Correspondence* p. 671.

¹⁶ Castel, *Decision in the West*, p. 361. And. Grape, "Letters from the Front, July 17th and 19th, 1864," (Augusta) *Daily Constitutionalist*, July 22 and 20, 1864, p. 1.

Sherman finally started another flanking operation. The day prior to Hood's appointment, he started his army wheeling to his left around Atlanta. General McPherson had crossed most of his Army of the Tennessee over the Chattahoochee at Roswell and set off eastward to strike the Georgia Railroad between Decatur and the distant granite hump of Stone Mountain. Hood would shortly learn the distressing news that a Union raiding party far to the southwest of Atlanta had already torn up the Montgomery & West Point Railroad at Opelika, cutting off hope for reinforcement from Alabama. With that, three of the four rail links that made Atlanta the transportation hub of the Lower South and the citadel of the Confederacy were broken. The Macon & Western remained the last iron link between Atlanta and the rest of the Rebel world.

Mostly cutoff, Atlanta was now more an object of Confederate prayers than the living heart of the nation, but that symbolism mattered immensely to its survival. So, too, did halting Sherman's army from tearing beyond Atlanta and further through Georgia. If unimpeded, his horde of 100,000 plus could slice apart the Lower South, devastating its agricultural heartland and depriving the Confederacy of its few remaining industrial resources.

Despite Sherman's numeric advantage, Hood had to attack swiftly. The fighting general was one to deliver slashing blows, and the stretched Yankee army, if struck in a vulnerable place, could bleed out its strength within the hostile Rebel territory. A bold and effective attack could turn all those apparent Federal victories into a historic, devastating defeat. An unexpected stroke of luck opened up the very opportunity Hood sought.

Scouts reported that in sending his forces sweeping out around the city's eastern flanks on July 18 and 19, Sherman had inadvertently allowed a gap to spread between his lines. The vanguard of McPherson's army swung far to the east toward Decatur, with Schofield's Army of the Ohio following inside it to the east, while General Thomas crossed his Army of the Cumberland over the Chattahoochee at Paces Ferry and then marched in a more direct southern line via Buckhead toward Atlanta. Sherman had intended for his armies to move in concentric circles, their flanks overlapping and remaining in contact, leaving their wings protected and ready to move quickly to reinforce their neighboring armies if attacked. However, Atlanta's landscape deceived. Where its approaches appeared level except for a few small humps on the plateau, the country all around it was rolling, thickly forested, and cut deeply by creeks that ran crooked. Roads were few, narrow, and enclosed by woods and dense undergrowth that could shelter an attacker. And now the scouts informed Hood that a gaping hole had opened between Thomas's left and Schofield's right wings, leaving the Army of the Cumberland especially vulnerable as it felt its way south through the field. This was a tactical blunder which Hood had to try to exploit.

With his far smaller numbers, Hood needed to surprise the Yankees. He intended to strike Thomas's nearly 60,000 men immediately after they crossed the east-west-running Peachtree Creek, just three miles from Atlanta. Hood wanted to drive the Federals back into the angle formed by the creek and the Chattahoochee, and then smash them in place with enough violence to rout a major wing of Sherman's army. The attack was set to begin at 1:00 p.m. on July 20.

McPherson was the fly in the ointment. Unknown to Hood, his swift-traveling 25,000-man army had reached Decatur early that morning, where it met minimal resistance from a small cavalry force. A cautious McPherson began feeling his way tentatively west along the Georgia Railroad and the Decatur Road, soon threatening the approaches to Atlanta itself. Hood learned of the crisis at his Peachtree Road headquarters in mid-morning and ordered part of his army to shift to his right to hold McPherson back. The clumsily executed maneuver confused the Confederate ranks. The resulting three-hour delay in assembling the line of attack along Peachtree Creek allowed parts of the thinly spread Yankees time to dig in. The fierce fighting beneath a broiling sun raged into the evening. But ultimately, the wavering Union ranks held and then gave back much worse than they received. Some 1,800 Union fighters were lost to nearly 4,800 Confederates.

The relentless noise of battle masked something extraordinary taking place on the other side of Atlanta. Moving down the Decatur Road, one of McPherson's batteries arrived within two-and-a-half miles of Five Points, Atlanta's central crossroads, in the early afternoon. The battery commander stopped, raised his cannons, and fired off three quick rounds of exploding shells into the city, "the first ones of the war," the officer proudly reported.¹⁷

Undaunted by his losses at Peachtree Creek, Hood was determined to strike again at the Federals. He drew in his forces from their outer defenses to the northern and eastern inner ramparts of Atlanta. Thinking he had more than sufficient force in place, Sherman detached the cavalry regiment protecting the Army of the Tennessee's left wing to tear up the Georgia Railroad to ensure it could not be used again to resupply Confederate Atlanta. Hood's scouts and spies informed him about the cavalry's departure on their railroad-breaking mission. Without cavalry, McPherson's left flank and rear now appeared vulnerable to attack. Hood saw a chance to flank the flanker.

While skirmishing continued all day on July 21, he dispatched an entire corps under Lieutenant General William Joseph Hardee, as well as a major cavalry force, that night. They were to move south across the city and then swing back around to the east. The following morning, they would strike McPherson's exposed flank by surprise, perhaps even getting on his rear.

Essential Civil War Curriculum | Copyright 2012 Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech

¹⁷ Stephen Davis, "How Many Civilians Died in Sherman's Bombardment of Atlanta?" *Atlanta History* 45, no. 4 (2003), p. 5–6.

Hood's men, exhausted by their all-night march and what Tennessee private Watkins called "one of the hottest days I ever felt," once again stumbled in coordinating their lines. Not until nearly 1 P.M. did the first of Hood's uneven lines charge. They met up with McPherson's protected, not exposed, flank. Hood shifted the attack more toward gaps at the center of McPherson's lines. The battle was close enough to the city that shells and even minié balls cracked into houses.¹⁸

Through the afternoon, the Rebels advanced several times against Yankees entrenched on and around a treeless knoll known as Bald Hill. Watkins was in a line that rushed forward into "seething fire from ten thousand muskets and small arms, and forty pieces of cannon hurled right into our faces, scorching and burning our clothes, and hands, and faces from their rapid discharges, and piling the ground with our dead and wounded almost in heaps." The first charge was repulsed. Another charge followed, with "one long, loud cheer." Soon, Confederate and Union officers and men were tangled in hand-to-hand combat.

Seeking to inspect his battle lines, General McPherson blundered out of a forest tangle onto a road he thought safe. He encountered Confederate skirmishers who called for him to halt. He turned and started to ride away. The Rebels fired. The commander of the Army of the Tennessee continued in the saddle a few feet and then slumped dead to the ground.

The close-in fighting continued all afternoon and into the evening. Finally, at 7:00 p.m., the Confederates abandoned the attack.

In the fog of war, the Confederates claimed victory. They declared the bloodiest single day's combat in and around any American city in history, known ever after as the Battle of Atlanta, "redemption" for the Southern cause. (The Atlanta Cyclorama memorializes this battle.) Hood telegraphed Richmond that his forces had "routed the enemy in the neighborhood of Decatur." McPherson's stunning death, the only Union commanding general killed in the field in the entire war, capped the triumphant announcement. In fact, Hood lost an estimated 7,500 men or more that day, while Union casualties totaled a little over 3,700, including 1,700 prisoners. In four days Hood's offensive had already cost more men than Johnston had lost in the course of his entire command.¹⁹

In his headquarters, Sherman was distraught over the death of his protégé general. He ignored his even graver failure to make good McPherson's accomplishments that day. The Army of the Tennessee had held off an attack that sent the bulk of Hood's own army out beyond the protection of his impregnable earthworks. Rather than counterattack the

¹⁸Sam Watkins, M. Thomas Inge ed., *Company Aytch, or a Side Show of the Big Show*, 1882, rpt. New York: Plume, 1999, pp. 154–57.

¹⁹ Castel, *Decision in the West*, p. 410.

army while it was exposed in the field, the ever-cautious Sherman had held back some 50,000 men held in reserve. Had he sent them in, they very likely would have obliterated Hood's army.

Sherman now hoped to cut the Macon & Western, Atlanta's last lifeline. Starting on July 26, he sent out his favored Army of the Tennessee, still flush and stinging from the fight four days earlier and the loss of their commander. They swept back around Atlanta, aiming to move to the west and then down to the southern outskirts of town, where they would break the railroad. Aware of Sherman's maneuver, Hood sent two corps out to meet the Yankee army. At around noon on July 28, the opposing forces encountered each other near a meetinghouse known as Ezra Church, about two and a half miles west of Atlanta. But once again, Hood's bold moves cut his own army to the bone. Confederate losses totaled around 3,000 or more men; the Federals' about 630.

Sherman moved his line around further in an attempt to reach the railroad, but Hood simply extended his entrenchments until Sherman dared not stretch his lines any further from his base at the W&A's rebuilt Chattahoochee River bridge. He was too deep in enemy territory, he presently believed, to move further around and away from the city, which would require him "to cut loose from our base, which is rather a risky business in a country devoid of all manner of supplies."²⁰

Then, he considered the Confederates' high ridge of fortifications encircling Atlanta and concluded: "To assault their position would cost more lives than we can spare." One of his generals stated that fortress Atlanta looked "like a hill city defended by encircling well-fortified hills." Unable to get around the city and unable to attack its defenses, Sherman decided to besiege Atlanta. He intended, he wrote, to "make the inside of Atlanta too hot to be endured. One thing is certain, whether we get inside of Atlanta or not, it will be a used-up community by the time we are done with it."²¹

On August 1, he issued orders to commence sustained artillery fire from gun batteries, totaling more than one hundred rifled cannons, concentrated north and west of downtown: "You may fire from ten to fifteen shots from every gun you have in position into Atlanta that will reach any of its houses. Fire slowly and with deliberation between 4 p.m. and dark." More than 1,000 shells and shot fell into the city each day. On August 7,

²⁰ Sherman to Ellen Ewing Sherman, in the field near Atlanta, August 9, 1864, in Simpson and Berlin, *Sherman's Civil War*, p. 685.

²¹ Oliver Otis Howard, *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard*. Vol. 2, New York: Baker & Taylor Co., 1908, p. 3.

And

Stephen Davis, "'A Very Barbarous Mode of Carrying on War': Sherman's Artillery Bombardment of Atlanta, July 20–August 24, 1864," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (spring 1995), p. 68.

the impatient general ordered four heavy naval guns freighted down from Chattanooga. Those guns fired more than 4,500 rounds into the city - at least 75 tons of iron and gunpowder. On August 9, Sherman ordered all his cannon to open fire with 50 rounds each. A flurry of Union shells "burst immediately over all parts of town," some 5,000 solid shots and exploding artillery shells that day alone. "Let us destroy Atlanta and make it a desolation," Sherman declared.²²

A siege, however, was not Sherman's style of war. "I am too impatient for a siege," he confessed. He worried, too, that the longer his men remained in the trenches, the greater the risk his forces faced, particularly for attacks on his hard-to-defend rail line down from Chattanooga. He also worried that enlistment terms would soon run out on several thousand of his soldiers, siphoning away his strength. "We must act," he decided. "We cannot sit down and do nothing because it involves risk."²³

National politics, too, weighed on the armies. The Democratic Party was set to hold its nominating convention, postponed from the spring, starting on August 29 in Chicago. Peace Democrats hoped to capture the party there and, with the former Union army head Major General George Brinton McClellan as their nominee, take the presidency from Abraham Lincoln in November. Two stalemated battlefronts poisoned national political sentiment, already appalled by the costs of the war. Many voters believed the war remained unwinnable.

Then, on Friday, August 26, Atlanta woke up believing it might in fact have won the war. Residents, refugees and soldiers listened intently to something they had not heard in months: silence. No gunfire. Not a single cannon report. Gray-coated scouts felt their way forward, expecting shots to ring out at any instant, until they scrambled into the empty Union lines.

Hood kept part of his forces on alert, leery of a trick. On the evening after the Union men disappeared, though, he telegraphed the Confederate Secretary of War in Richmond that the Northerners had indeed withdrawn from his eastern and northern fronts. "Last night," he conveyed, "the enemy abandoned the Augusta railroad and all the country between that and the Dalton railroad." The sense of vindication and, indeed, rebirth for the cause could be felt throughout the Confederacy. The prospect of Sherman's "speedy destruction" infected Hood and his staff with "high glee," reported an officer at headquarters. Military bands played in Atlanta's streets, while jubilant residents danced in step behind them.²⁴

It would be another day before they knew they danced at their city's graveside. Unable to crack the hard nut of Atlanta, Sherman was once again in motion. He devised a

²²Ibid, 68

²³ Castel, *Decision in the West*, p. 467.

²⁴ Henry Stone, "The Siege and Capture of Atlanta, July 9 to September 8, 1864," *The Atlanta Papers*, comp. Sydney C. Kerkis. Dayton, OH: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1980, p. 123.

risky plan to disengage his force from its headlock on Atlanta - and feint away from the secessionists' counterpunches - along the entire siege line. The plan called for a complex grand wheel left by three entire armies who then marched counterclockwise around Atlanta. And the entire evacuation would need to be accomplished in just a few hours in the blackness of two nights—and in silence. Beginning after sunset on August 25 and continuing through the night, the Yankees crept out of their trenches and abandoned their camps north and east of the city. After sunset on August 26, a second Union movement began. A corps left in the trenches at East Point screened the 60,000 men and supporting wagons and artillery in movement. The Federal ruse worked as well as Sherman might have hoped. "The prevailing impression" in Hood's headquarters, recorded a staff officer, "is that Sherman is "falling back across the Chattahoochee River."²⁵

By noon on Sunday, August 28, the unmolested Army of the Tennessee struck the Atlanta & West Point Railroad about sixteen miles southwest of the city, and the Army of the Cumberland fell upon the same line several miles northeast of there, closer to East Point. The troops had a two-day-long Sherman necktie party. Sherman wanted the tracks thoroughly destroyed, "so we may rest perfectly satisfied as regards the use of this railroad during the remainder of the campaign."²⁶

Sherman was thinking well beyond the war-making capacity of the South. Inflicting desolation upon the wellspring of the Rebellion was as important as the destruction of the Army of Tennessee. He believed, he told Washington as he cut a swath of desolation through Georgia, "we cannot change the hearts and minds of those people of the South, but we can make war so terrible [and] make them so sick of war [that they will] sue for peace." Destruction of the railroad was another psychological weapon in his nation's war against those who would otherwise continue to resist the will of the United States.²⁷

Sherman's insistence on the utter destruction of the railroad gave Hood's scouts the chance to alert him before the full Yankee movement struck out on its last leg toward the Macon railroad. Not until August 29, forty-eight hours after the grand Federal wheel began circling Atlanta, did Hood grasp Sherman's objective; to cut his last rail and allimportant line in and out of town.

By the afternoon of August 30, Sherman's leading divisions had reached within a mile and easy cannon range of the station town of Jonesboro. Skirmishing soon began there and five miles north near the junction village of Rough and Ready. Only as the sun

²⁵ Castel, *Decision in the West*, p. 486.

²⁶ Ibid, 489.

²⁷ Many works analyze Sherman's total war strategy. For a succinct presentation of it in the Atlanta Campaign context, see James M. McPherson, "Two Strategies of Victory: William T. Sherman in the Civil War," *Atlanta History* 33, no. 4 (winter 1989–1990), pp. 5–17. Quote from p. 16.

began to set did Hood understand the dire threat against his communications. Unlike Johnston, who would almost certainly have withdrawn at this point to a more defensible position after a successful flanking movement by the enemy, Hood attacked.

Without enough cars to move his soldiers to the field by rail, he marched the remaining men from Lieutenant General Stephen Dill Lee's and Hardee's corps, about 20,000 troops, through the night out of Atlanta to head off the 60,000 Federal soldiers. Hood kept a corps in Atlanta, still unsure where Sherman was going.

Not surprisingly, when the two worn out Southern corps, depressed to be facing the bulk of Sherman's armies after thinking for days they had won, advanced starting at 3:00 P.M. on August 31, their lines were badly disorganized, more like an "infuriated mob," remarked one Confederate participant, than a veteran army. They charged into well-entrenched positions thick with artillery. Some companies simply refused to advance. The battle was a "killing time" for the Yankees. When it was done, at least 2,000 Rebels lay dead or wounded against a loss of just 172 Union soldiers.²⁸

Still not sure where Sherman's next move might go, Hood ordered Lee's corps above Jonesboro back into the city in the early morning hours of September 1. It was his final error and should have been a fatal one for the Army of Tennessee. Sherman's 60,000-man army interposed itself between General Hardee's heavily damaged corps dug in to the west and north of Jonesboro and Lee's weak and exhausted force slinking toward Atlanta. The Northerners attacked Hardee's remaining forces at Jonesboro that afternoon. Sherman personally commanded the battle, attempting to use his superior numbers to hold Hardee's front while getting on his rear. However, he still insisted on keeping a large portion of his force well above the battlefield at work destroying the railroad. That left otherwise easily cut off routes of retreat open for Hardee and Lee's corps moving largely unmolested back toward Atlanta.

Hardee's men slipped away as the jaws snapped down. The Northerners captured nearly an entire brigade, more than six hundred prisoners, but the Rebels held off the attackers until nightfall. Hardee lost another 1,000 men in total; Sherman just as many. Under the cover of darkness the Confederates fell back away from Atlanta seven miles to Lovejoy's Station. The Yankees advanced on them the next day but encountered strong earthworks with swamps and thick tangles of vines protecting the defenders' flanks. Sherman decided to leave the Rebel remnant there.

At this juncture, the Northern general had the opportunity to crush and destroy at least one, and probably both, of the badly demoralized, exposed, and truncated components of the Georgia defense by driving on Atlanta or encircling Hardee's remaining men at Lovejoy's. Sherman's army commanders asked permission to do just that. Sherman ordered his vast army to stop once again and concentrate on destroying the railroad. He gave instructions to wreck the railroad between Jonesboro and Rough and

Essential Civil War Curriculum | Copyright 2012 Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech

²⁸ Watkins, *Company Aytch*, pp. 178–79.

Ready, declaring to General Thomas, "I don't believe anybody recognizes how important it is now to destroy the railroad." Sherman's strategic convictions once again overruled his ability to see that the enemy had made a potentially fatal tactical blunder.²⁹

That allowed Hood the time he needed to reorganize. This time, though, it was not for another attack. Hood had bled the fight out of his army. By noon on September 1, Hood's forces were pulling out of the lines and assembling along the Atlanta roads.

Before then, on August 31, he sent word to empty out the army's remaining stores in the city before the Macon railroad was cut off. He still had plenty of munitions and other materiel on hand for the fighting to come. Five locomotives and eighty-one boxcars stood lined up in a double row on the Georgia Railroad tracks running out along the eastern edge of the city. Most cars were loaded with food and medical supplies, but hundreds of gunpowder kegs, hand grenades and shells by the thousands, 13 pieces of heavy artillery, 5,000 rifles, and 3 million cartridges filled 28 cars. The trains idled next to many of the industrial shops and factories that had propelled Atlanta in its dizzying ascent to becoming the citadel of the Confederacy. Warehouses packed with cotton bales fronted the yard.

The chief quartermaster officer assigned to send the trains out of Atlanta failed to act, too drunk according to Hood to carry out his orders. The troops began their outbound march the following night. At that point, the precious military cargo sat stranded on the tracks, prevented from rolling out of town by the severing of the rail line. The munitions could not fall into Yankee hands. Staff officers torched the boxcars and hurried off to join their departing troops. A sleeping sixteen-year-old Mary Rawson was startled awake around midnight by "a most beautiful spectacle." The sky was "in a perfect glow," as "flaming rockets" burst overhead and "sparks filled the air with innumerable spangles." In another direction she saw "bright light" come from stores of cotton that went up in flames. (This spectacle would be immortalized in the Burning of Atlanta scene in "Gone With the Wind.")³⁰

The exploding trains leveled every structure for hundreds of yards in all directions almost instantly. Only a few chimneys and the wheels of the obliterated rolling stock hinted at what once existed there. Days later, nobody dared approach too close as hot shells strewn far and wide continued to explode.

Essential Civil War Curriculum | Copyright 2012 Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech

²⁹Stone, "The Siege and Capture of Atlanta," p. 127.

³⁰ Copy (typescript) of diary of Mary Rawson, Wife of Capt. John D. Ray, Capt. of 1st Ga. Vols. and daughter of E. E. Rawon of Atlanta, August 31, 1864, p. 1, Rawson-Collier-Harris Families, MSS 36, Atlanta History Center. Reed, *History of Atlanta*, p. 194.

By the following morning September 2, only a rearguard contingent remained. A party of civilians led by Atlanta's mayor, James M. Calhoun, rode out under white flag and surrendered the city.

Soon Union forces reached City Hall, where regimental flags from Pennsylvania and New York were hoisted atop its cupola. Not long after that, James Dunning, a Unionist from Atlanta once arrested by Colonel George Washington Lee's provost marshal force, ran the Stars and Stripes up a pole on Alabama Street, the first United States flag to fly over the city since late 1860.

Finally, early the next morning, a dispatch from the Union army commander in town confirmed to Sherman in the field that Atlanta had fallen. From his headquarters half a day's ride south of the city, he wrote a message to Washington. "So," he telegraphed, "Atlanta is ours & fairly won." Those few words would be repeated and hailed again and again in reports about the fall of the Gate City throughout the North. Wild celebrations broke out in northern places far and wide. In Richmond, a deep despair fell over the fate of the Confederacy.³¹

In Washington, President Abraham Lincoln breathed a sigh of relief when word reached him. For the first time, he knew that the war had not been fought in vain. He wrote to Sherman in gratitude, "The marches, battles, sieges, and other military operations that have signalized the campaign, must render it famous in the annals of war."³²

In Chicago, too, a hundred-gun salute went off over the city on September 3. The delegates to the Democratic National Convention in their final evening of deliberations nominated McClellan as the party's candidate for president and ratified their peace platform. A few days after leaving Chicago to start his campaign, McClellan owned up to the implications of Atlanta's fall. The Democrats' candidate repudiated his own party's platform. Peace would come only, he now declared, on the "one condition" of Union.³³

The price paid for Atlanta had indeed been appalling. Union forces had suffered 31,687 men killed, wounded, or missing during the campaign, the Confederates, 30,976. More than two-thirds of the Rebel losses came after Hood took command from General Joseph Johnston. After the greatest city siege in the nation's history, the surrender of Atlanta erased any doubt that the terrible war would be fought to a battlefield conclusion.

³¹ Sherman to Henry W. Halleck, September 3, 1864, in the field near Lovejoy's Station, in *Sherman's Civil War: Selected Correspondence* pp. 695–96.

³² From Abraham Lincoln, September 3, 1864, quoted in Sherman, *Memoirs*, Volume 2, p. 110.

³³ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 776.

Less than two weeks after occupying Atlanta, Sherman shocked its residents when he determined on expelling all of them. He would make it a garrison city. No American city had ever had its entire civilian population exiled. Mayor Calhoun protested. Sherman famously replied, "You cannot qualify war in harsher terms than I will," he wrote. "War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it." He, though, was not the culprit. He pointed at "those who brought war into our country [who] deserve all the curses and maledictions a people can pour out." Should the United States accept "division now, it will not stop, but will go on until we reap the fate of Mexico, which is eternal war." In his view, the alternative to constitutional union for all Americans was endless chaos. He wanted order, and once order was restored, its blessings would shine down on the southern people.³⁴

Until the coming time when "the mad passions of men cool down, and allow the Union and peace once more to settle over your old homes at Atlanta," he was implacable: "Now you must go."³⁵

With the expulsion of Atlanta's people, Sherman and the Union army took up residency, for a period of nearly two months' rest. Then the time came for the occupiers to move on. On November 14, Union engineers began systematically pulling down the major buildings of Atlanta. On the night of November 15, bluecoats set fire to the downtown. Controversy still rages over the extent of the resulting destruction of civilian homes and other structures to this day. By the following morning, their grim work was complete. Sherman himself marched forth with his army out the Decatur Road to launch what would become his infamous March to the Sea. "On the morning of the 16th," one of the very last Union officers to leave the city witnessed, "nothing was left of Atlanta except its churches, the City Hall and private dwellings. You could hardly find a vestige of the splendid railroad depots, warehouses, etc. It was melancholy, but it was war prosecuted in deadly earnest."³⁶

³⁴ All of the letters regarding exile of remaining Atlanta civilians exchanged among Sherman, Hood, and Calhoun, September 7–14, 1864, appear in Sherman, *Memoirs*, Volume 2, pp. 118-28.

³⁵ Ibid., 127.

³⁶ Charles Fessenden Morse, *Letters Written During the Civil War*, *1861–1865*. Boston: T. R. Marvin & Sons, Printers, 1898, pp. 201-2.