

G E O R G I A

BATTLEFIELDS

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Atlanta Campaign: 140 years ago – August 1864

August begins with survivors of the disastrous Federal cavalry raids trudging back to the rear areas on foot and horseback, reinforcing Federal commanding general William T. Sherman's perception that cavalry cannot sufficiently damage the rail lines sustaining Atlanta. Still, he must find a way to destroy the Rebel army or capture the city, in part because 10,000 of his men will complete their enlistments this month. So, he pushes his infantry southward on the western side of Atlanta, hoping to get around the Confederate earthworks that extend to protect the railroad.

Convinced that the Confederate lines must be stretching thin, Sherman orders an attack in the Utoy Creek area, but he finds a corps commander (John Palmer) unwilling to take orders from an army commander (John Schofield). After the dithering over command arrangements, the Federal attack finally occurs on 6 August, but the Confederates are alert to the assault and repulse it easily with almost no loss. The pattern seems to be that attacks on earthworks—Federal or Confederate—fail. So, a digging competition begins with both sides extending the trench lines southwest from the city. Also, Sherman orders an intensified shelling of Atlanta.

The people in Atlanta—both troops and civilians—are buoyed by news of General Joe Wheeler's success in breaking up the Federal cavalry. Still, with the increased bombardment, more citizens and soldiers are leaving the city. The soldiers are deserting, exacerbating the loss from the battles of late July. After receiving the casualty figures from those battles, President Davis telegraphs General Hood to avoid attacks unless success is assured.

With his success, Wheeler persuades Hood that a cavalry raid can so damage the Federal supply line that Sherman will be compelled to abandon the campaign. On 10 August, Wheeler and 4500 troopers cross the Chattahoochee to operate against the railroad in northwest Georgia. That same day, Confederate division commander William Bate is wounded during the daily shelling and skirmishing. Nine days later, the Federals lose commanders of a corps (Dodge) and a brigade (Lightburn) to similarly inflicted wounds.

Despite the previous failures of Federal cavalry, Sherman is persuaded by Judson Kilpatrick, recently recuperated from a May wound, that he should have a chance to cut Atlanta's railroads. Kilpatrick and 4700 troopers head south on 17 August. Although little Confederate cavalry remains to resist, enough remains to keep track of the Federal raid, and Hood sends Cleburne's infantry division by rail to Lovejoy's station to combat the Yankee horsemen. Kilpatrick escapes the trap and returns to Decatur on 22 August, claiming he has put the railroad out of use for weeks. That same afternoon, Federal scouts see a Confederate train pull into Atlanta.

Convinced beyond any argument that cavalry will never cut the Rebels' supply line, Sherman orders his infantry—save one corps that will guard the railroad bridge over the Chattahoochee—towards Jonesboro on 25 August. Discovering that the Federals have pulled away from Atlanta, some people in the city assume the invader has given up in frustration, and they celebrate. Hood is more cautious, though he has little cavalry left to find the Federals. When he finally receives reports that the blue infantry has cut the railroad to West Point and is approaching the only remaining rail line at Jonesboro, he dispatches General Hardee and two of the army's three corps by rail to repel what he thinks to be a fragment of the Federal force. When Hardee attacks on the afternoon of 31 August, he finds more than an advance unit of Yankees: his men encounter almost all of the Federal Army of the Tennessee. Bloodily repulsed, Hardee then receives an order to send one corps back towards Atlanta to protect the railroad against another Federal force—the Army of the Ohio—approaching Rough and Ready.

At the end of August, no one in the North knows that Sherman is on the verge of a signal victory. Believing that the stalemate and slaughter both east and west make his reelection unlikely, President Lincoln has his cabinet members sign a letter promising to support his successor. Also, the Democratic Party concludes its national convention in Chicago by nominating George McClellan for president and adopting a platform calling for peace, even without victory.

Savannah's Fort Jackson receives important protection

The Coastal Heritage Society (www.chsgeorgia.org) has worked hard to preserve Fort Jackson, which guarded the port of Savannah. Passing ships, dredging, and tides have endangered both the fort's foundations and the wreck of *CSS Georgia*, which lies at the bottom of the river not far from the fort. After long effort by Coastal Heritage Society, the Army Corps of Engineers spent \$2.8 million this spring to place over 6,000 tons of rocks to protect the fort's walls. Kudos to our sister organization for continuing its work to preserve historic sites along Georgia's coast.

More land saved at Ringgold Gap

Catoosa County used Greenspace funds that had to be spent by the end of the state fiscal year (30 June 2004) to buy land made significant by the 27 November 1863 Battle of Ringgold Gap. Federal forces advanced across this land and were repulsed Cleburne's Confederates.

In 1997, a formal study by Keith Bohannon identified 960 acres of battlefield; so advocates of the purchase had a good idea of what to buy. With the available \$129,000, Catoosa County bought 27 acres in three parcels on the western slope of White Oak Mountain. With \$34,000 more "use or lose" funds from Fort Oglethorpe, the county bought another 12 acres. 35 historically significant acres north of the site remain to be purchased when funding is available.

Former legislator and Ringgold Gap Preservation Project chair Bill Clark orchestrated the purchase. Clark and other preservationists had hoped for a continuous trail of properties rather than four unconnected parcels, and they'll continue to pursue that goal.

River Line update: Earthworks saved and lost

The remains of Confederate and Federal earthworks in southeastern Cobb County are under considerable development pressure (see March newsletter). In a victory for preservation, Cobb County recently acquired land containing the remains of Federal trenches that were occupied in early July 1864, most likely by the 3rd brigade (Oliver), 4th division (Harrow), XV Corps (Logan). The trenches cross a stream near the site of a former mill, and they connect two well-preserved artillery positions, both still on private property. An artillery position just south of this site was lost to a shopping center development earlier this year (see October 2003 newsletter).

For the opposing Confederate works (Johnston's River Line), a new development will destroy some earthworks but save others along what is currently Turner Road. The earthworks on the site are in advance of the main Confederate line along Oakdale Road. The position was occupied by Brown's Division of Hood's Corps from late on 4 July until late on 9 July 1864.

Developer PCH LLC paid for an archaeological study that revealed 12 rifle pits, 4 probable trenches, and 3 possible angled earthworks. PCH also invited Smyrna City Council members, neighboring residents, and preservation organizations to inspect the site on 7 July. GBA and others provided written comments after the inspection, and PCH's revised site plan now protects an additional 3 rifle pits, though 8 rifle pits, two possible trench lines, and one of the angled earthworks will be lost when the site is graded.

By paying for the archaeological study, inviting an inspection of the site, and revising the site plan, PCH has done more than most developers. Still, their rezoning application was granted by the Smyrna City Council on 19 July, and yet another piece of the River Line will be lost forever.

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