

GEORGIA

BATTLEFIELDS

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Decisions of the Atlanta Campaign – part 6

GBA member Larry Peterson, author of the 2019 book [Decisions of the Atlanta Campaign](#), continues his series. The most recent installment was in the [September 2023 newsletter](#).

McPherson fails to capture Resaca

Article by Larry Peterson

Situation

Sherman had ordered McPherson and his Army of the Tennessee to advance through Snake Creek Gap and then turn east and disable the railroad at or near Resaca. McPherson was an extremely likeable officer who had graduated first in his class from the United States Military Academy in 1853. Grant and Sherman mentored and protected McPherson and considered him already competent, reliable, and very promising. Sherman envisioned a successful turning movement burnishing McPherson's reputation.

Johnston's chief of cavalry, Maj. Gen. Joseph Wheeler, was more interested in fighting U.S. cavalry than performing reconnaissance. He had not provided Johnston with enough information about the movements of Sherman's forces. Eerily ignorant of the unguarded Snake Creek Gap, Johnston had finally become aware of a possible threat to his left flank and rear. On the morning of May 9, Johnston ordered Wheeler to reconnoiter the Snake Creek Gap area. Col. Warren Grigsby's brigade of Wheeler's Cavalry arrived there just ahead of McPherson's advance.

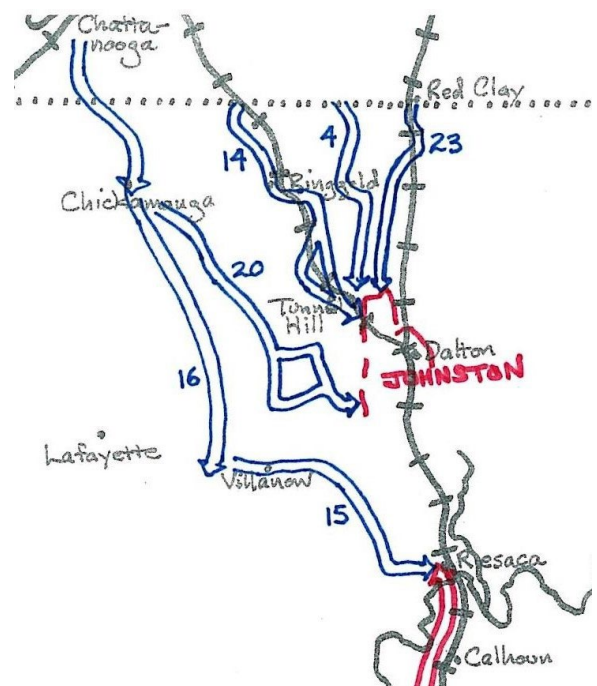
Brigadier General James Cantey's brigade was the first unit of Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk's Army of Mississippi to arrive in northern Georgia. On May 6, Johnston ordered Cantey to proceed to Resaca and guard the town and the vital railroad. On May 9, Cantey signaled to Johnston that U.S. troops were west of Resaca. Around 4 p.m., McPherson ordered Veatch's division of Major General Dodge's Sixteenth Corps forward to Resaca. A volley was fired at Veatch's troops by a detachment of Georgia Military Institute cadets and State Line troops Johnston had stationed there in February. This minor engagement precipitated the next critical decision of the campaign.

Options

McPherson's orders gave him two options: He could advance to the Western & Atlantic Railroad and sever it, virtually cutting off Johnston's army from its Atlanta supply depot; but the orders also allowed for McPherson to retreat at his discretion if he felt sufficiently threatened by any of Johnston's forces.

Decision

After the Rebels fired on his advance and some preliminary reconnaissance farther north, McPherson decided that the enemy force at Resaca was too strong for him to overrun. Although some of his men cut the railroad north of the town, the Confederates quickly repaired it. He decided to withdraw several miles back to Snake Creek Gap. He was very concerned by the approaching darkness and by some of his men's lack of provisions. McPherson also worried that Johnston, who was nearer to him than was Sherman, might rapidly move south and assault him.



McPherson's Army of the Tennessee contingent included the 15th & 16th Corps.

Results/Impact

McPherson's withdrawal spared the Confederacy and Joseph Johnston from a potentially spectacular defeat. Johnston quickly ordered additional reinforcements from Polk to halt at Resaca. At the same time, he began sending troops south from the Dalton area to Resaca. His men got there ahead of Sherman's, and they quickly fortified the area, protecting the critical railroad and road bridges crossing the Oostanaula River at the south end of town.

Alternate Scenario

If McPherson had successfully cut Johnston's line of supply at Resaca, Johnston, like any commander, would have had four possible options: attack, defend, retreat, or surrender. It is important for the reader to note that this alternate scenario would have forced Johnston to go on the offensive. In the actual Battle of Resaca, he remained largely on the defensive, protecting his supply line – a situation more to his liking.

To see the list of all 18 books in the Command Decisions in America's Civil War series, go to <https://utpress.org/command-decisions/>. Larry has written five books in the series so far, and his Decisions of the Vicksburg Campaign is scheduled for publication in summer 2024.

GBA annual tour, 18-21 April 2024: Chattanooga & Ringgold

Focus for the 2024 tour is the October and November 1863 fighting for Chattanooga.

Guide: Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park (CCNMP) historian Jim Ogden.

Price: Unlike our usual two-and-a-half-day tours, this will be a three-and-a-half-day tour: All day Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, plus Sunday morning. The **price of \$580** includes bus transportation, handouts, three lunches and three dinners (Thursday through Saturday). If you can't join us for whole tour, send an e-mail (be sure to include your phone number) to info@georgiabattlefields.org, and we will correspond with you about a reduced price.

Hotel: TownePlace Suites, 6801 Ringgold Rd, East Ridge TN 37412, 844 202 9351. Hotel is just on the Tennessee side of the boundary with Georgia. Take I-75 exit 1 and go east on Ringgold Road (US 41) a little over a half mile. Hotel is on the north (left) side of the road. Hotel price includes breakfast. GBA rate for a king room is \$115 (\$135 if you include the unavoidable tax) per night. Queen double is \$125 (\$147) per night. To book online, use [this link](#). Note that online booking will be unavailable after 17 March 2024 (one month before the tour begins).

Schedule

Wednesday (17 April): GBA representatives will be in the hotel lobby Wednesday evening to hand out maps and answer questions. Dinner on your own.

Thursday (18 April): The situation in mid-October 1863. Lookout Mountain, Bridgeport, Sequatchie Valley, Walden's Ridge, Brown's Ferry, Wauhatchie. Reception dinner at hotel.

Friday (19 April): Lookout Mountain, Cravens House. Dinner at [Sugar's Ribs](#).

Saturday (20 April): Orchard Knob, Missionary Ridge (several stops). Dinner venue is the Coolidge National [Medal of Honor Heritage Center](#).

Sunday (21 April): Ringgold.

For more details on the significance of the sites, see [October newsletter](#).

Registration: See our web site [tours page](#) and click the link to register. Use PayPal or a credit card to complete registration online, or you can mail a check payable to Georgia Battlefields Association to **PO Box 669953, Marietta GA 30066**.

If you have any trouble registering or paying online, contact us at info@georgiabattlefields.org.

Come join us for a comprehensive tour led by Jim Ogden, an unmatched guide.

Georgia Battlefields Association
PO Box 669953
Marietta GA 30066

www.georgiabattlefields.org

December 2023