



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

The Battles for Dalton

Robert D. Jenkins, Sr., February 15, 2021
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Union fort in Whitfield County, Georgia, occupied by Sherman's Atlanta Campaign in 1864 | Georgia Archives, Office of Secretary of State

Nestled behind the Rocky Face and Dug Gap mountain ranges, Dalton was home to the Confederate Army of Tennessee for six months following the Confederate defeats at Missionary Ridge and Chattanooga in November 1863. Here, some 40,000 to 50,000 Southern soldiers camped all around Dalton much in the way that her neighborhoods encircle the city today. Led by Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, the rebel army prepared for the defense of Georgia and the invasion by Gen. William T. Sherman's forces that were preparing for their offensive in Chattanooga.

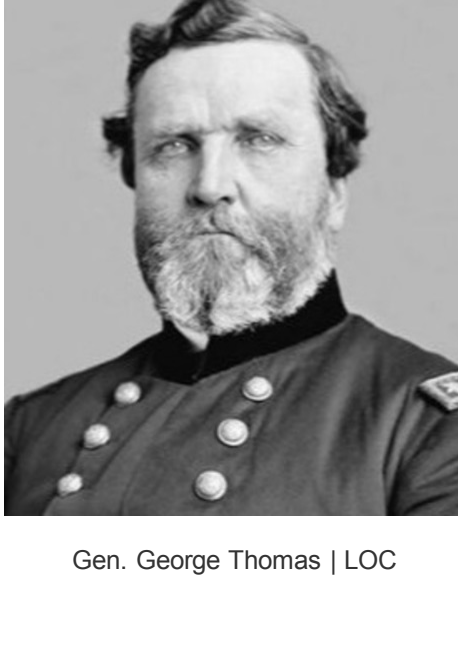
When he arrived in Dalton just after Christmas 1863, newly appointed Confederate Commander General Johnston took over a demoralized army of half-starved, poorly shod veterans. Johnston quickly set about improving the condition of his men. Soon, trains laden with food, clothing, shoes, supplies, guns, and all the things needed for an army began arriving from Atlanta. The morale of the men dramatically improved.

The first test of Dalton's defenses came earlier than expected. While General Sherman was still in Mississippi with one of the Federal armies, Gen. George Thomas marched from Chattanooga with a "reconnaissance in force" of about 25,000 soldiers during the last week of February 1864, probing for any weaknesses in the Confederate defenses. Johnston utilized the heights and created a ring of trenches, gun emplacements, and fortifications in a "fish-hook" shape around Dalton.

First Battle of Dalton: February 24-26, 1864



Gen. Joseph E. Johnston | National Archives



Gen. George Thomas | LOC

On February 24 and 25, Thomas' Federals attacked along various points in Crow Valley and Mill Creek Gap. At the same time, the 38th Indiana Mounted Infantry from Col. Benjamin Scribner's brigade found that Dug Gap had been left unguarded by the Confederates, and on the evening of February 25, the Yankees seized it. The next morning, the alarmed rebels mounted a counter-attack as Gen. Hiram B. Granbury's Texas Brigade drove off the Indianans and Dug Gap was reclaimed.

Having determined the nature of Johnston's defensive positions, Thomas' forces withdrew and returned to Chattanooga with the following critical information: First, a direct assault on Dalton was impractical as the mountains and narrow passes made Dalton a veritable fortress. Second, there was a passageway around Dalton via the little village of Villanow and Snake Creek Gap which led to Resaca, 13 miles south of Dalton and on the vital Western & Atlantic Railroad. The rail line provided the lifeblood of food and materials necessary to keep Johnston's army supplied. Should Resaca be taken, Johnston would be cut off from his supply line to Atlanta and from his communications with the rest of the South, and Johnston would have to come out of his defenses and attack against a larger Federal force or risk headlong retreat.

Johnson learned a couple of things, too, from the February action. First, his forces had failed to take advantage of the best heights in Crow Valley. Consequently, his men erected additional earthworks farther north on Rocky Face Ridge to the west and up Hamilton Mountain to the east to incorporate Potato Hill, which was also called Picket Top by the men. This provided for an interlocking field of fire across Crow Valley from both heights and secured for the Southerners the best and highest ground. Second, Johnston's engineers under Gen. A. P. Stewart's Division found that the railroad running through Mill Creek Gap, which was built on higher ground to keep the rail line on a more level grade, made a perfect dam. All the engineers had to do was to block the culverts or bridges over the branches of Mill Creek that passed under the railroad in two or three places, and the entire gap would be flooded. This would prevent the larger Federal army from simply assaulting through the gap (at today's Rocky Face exit, off I-75 exit 336) and allow Johnston to use fewer men to defend it.

Sherman then came to Chattanooga to take over the Federal armies, including his Army of the Tennessee (25,000 men) that followed him from Mississippi, Thomas' Army of the Cumberland (60,000), and a third, smaller force called the Army of the Ohio (13,000) under Gen. John M. Schofield. Sherman also had over 5,000 cavalry on hand. Soon, Sherman had amassed a force of some 108,000 infantry, cavalry, and artillery to launch his campaign into Georgia. His objective was simple: Go after Johnston and destroy his army while removing the Confederacy's will to fight as his force drove deeper into Georgia. Both Sherman and Grant were to launch attacks at the same time to prevent the South from reinforcing one army or the other beginning by the first week of May 1864.

Thomas explained the situation at Dalton informing Sherman about Snake Creek Gap, and Thomas offered to take his army through it to Resaca. Sherman, at the same time, used the remainder of his force to occupy Johnston's attention at Crow Valley, Rocky Face Ridge, and Mill Creek Gap. Sherman agreed with Thomas, but he elected to send the Army of Tennessee, now led by Gen. James B. McPherson, through Snake Creek Gap while he used Thomas to "demonstrate" or probe the Confederate defenses at Mill Creek Gap, Rocky Face Ridge to the north and Dug Gap to the south. Sherman also used Schofield's Army of the Ohio to probe Crow Valley.

The Battles for Dalton, The Opening Chapter of the Atlanta Campaign: May 7-12, 1864



Battle of Dug Gap, drawn May 8, 1864 | LOC

Arriving at Tunnel Hill on May 7, Sherman's forces took up positions around Blue Mountain on May 8, down the railroad toward Dalton. There Sherman placed artillery and set up his field headquarters. From Blue Mountain, Sherman could see the rebel positions from atop a signal tower that was erected by the Federals. During the next week, while the two forces opposed each other at Dalton, Sherman retired each evening to the Clisby-Austin House at Tunnel Hill to repose and to send telegraphs to Washington, D.C., to inform his superiors of his progress.

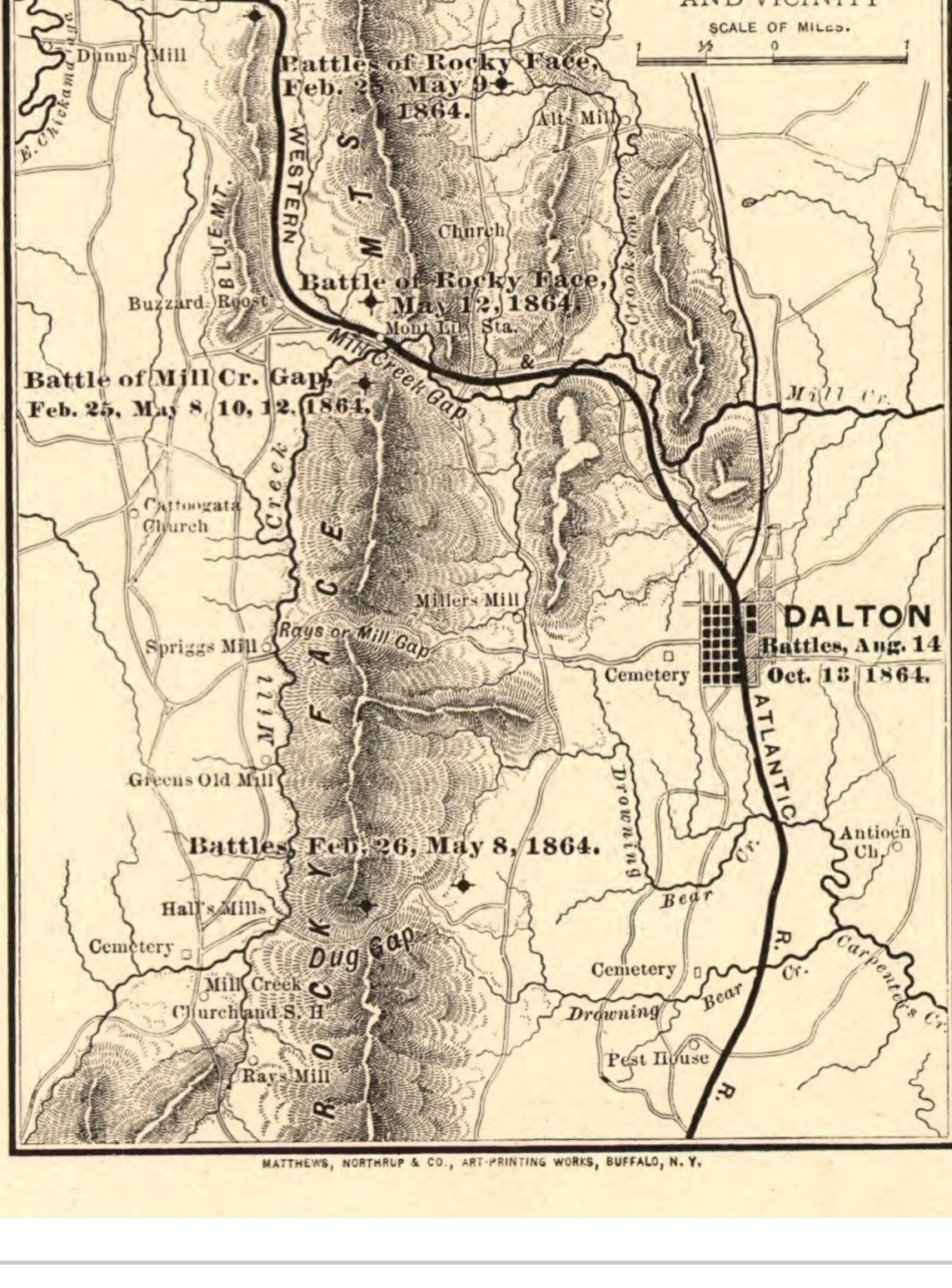
On May 8, a portion of Thomas's forces stormed Dug Gap under Gen. John W. Geary. It proved to be a slaughter as two brigades of his division, about 6,000 attackers, were thrown back under heavy fire by the outnumbered, but fortified, Confederates, numbering just 1,200 men. Geary's men, however, occupied Johnston's attention sufficiently to allow McPherson's army to slip through Snake Creek Gap undetected. Fortunately for Johnston, however, McPherson became cautious, and his force of some 25,000 men remained at Snake Creek Gap instead of advancing on Resaca after a brief skirmish with a small force of Rebels posted there. Thus, some 4,000 Confederates just arrived from Alabama under Gen. James Cantey held off the Federal threat with a bit of bluff and a greater portion of luck.

Also on May 8, Sherman began a series of attacks on rebel defenders at Mill Creek Gap, Rocky Face Ridge, and Crow Valley. The most determined Federal attacks occurred on May 9 when portions of Gen. Richard Johnson's and Jefferson C. Davis' divisions crossed over the flooded lakes of Mill Creek by using pontoon bridges. Serious fighting continued through May 11, when Sherman pulled out most of his army and headed south to take Resaca and outflank Johnston.

On the morning of May 12, General Johnston probed Crow Valley with portions of Hood's Corps to discover that the Federals had vanished and that only a portion of Sherman's armies remained at Mill Creek Gap. That evening, realizing that Sherman was attempting to get his army to Resaca and cut him off from Atlanta and his supply line, Johnston pulled his forces out of Dalton and raced south to defend Resaca. Early on the morning of May 13, the remaining Union forces marched through Mill Creek Gap and into Dalton unopposed, heading south in pursuit of Johnston's army. Dalton was now in enemy hands for the first time in the war.

The battles for Dalton ended in a Confederate tactical victory, meaning that the Federal forces were unable to drive any rebel force away from their defensive works by assault. But these series of battles resulted in a Federal strategic victory, meaning that Sherman was able to take Dalton without force by maneuvering Johnston out of the city and its strong defensive lines by using the undefended Snake Creek Gap, a Confederate mistake that has been debated by military historians for decades. Similarly, while McPherson's army slipped through Snake Creek Gap unopposed, the Northerners failed to cut off Johnston's line of retreat at Resaca, a Federal mistake that has also been debated by historians ever since. If either side had better utilized the opportunities afforded each side by Snake Creek Gap—for the Confederates a chance to strike a divided portion of Sherman's army detached and isolated from the rest of the Federal forces (like Lee and Jackson did at Chancellorsville); or, for the Federals a chance to cut off Johnston's army at Resaca (Sherman failed to allow Thomas to lead and carry out Thomas' intended plan of action—the Atlanta Campaign could have ended by the second week of May in the hills and ridges of Whitfield County between Dalton and Resaca. Instead, each side would continue to maneuver and parry each other from Dalton to Atlanta over the balance of the summer of 1864 in what author Shelby Foote described as the "Red Clay Minuet."

The fighting that shook the hills and valleys of Whitfield County from May 7 to 12 would cost some 1,300 to 1,500 casualties to the Federal armies and about 400 to 500 losses for the defending Confederate forces. Each side learned some valuable lessons, and each side's leaders made critical mistakes that could have proven fatal. For the North, Sherman learned that sending his forces against prepared defenses was futile (a lesson he would forget at Kennesaw Mountain a month later). For the South, being outnumbered two to one would mean that their forces were constantly at risk of being flanked, or turned, and being cut off from their supply line. Retreat, in their commander's view, thus became their only option. Had Johnston adequately defended and blocked Snake Creek Gap, then perhaps the battles around Dalton would have become more heated as Sherman struggled to find another way into Georgia. Johnston's mistake could have caused him to be cut off at Resaca and thus risk his capitulation early in the campaign. On the other hand, McPherson's Army of Tennessee failed to seize its opportunity to take Resaca on May 8 when there were only a few Southerners defending the little village.



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