



# The Battle of Mill Creek Gap and How to Visit Today

Robert Jenkins, February 26, 2021  
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"The Battle of Mill Creek Gap" by Brandon Fletcher | LOC

Mill Creek Gap Civil War Battlefield Park, located on U.S. Hwy. 41 in Rocky Face next to the Georgia State Patrol Barracks, recently was dedicated and opened by Save the Dalton Battlefields and Whitfield County, with the assistance of the Georgia Battlefields Association and the Community Foundation of Northwest Georgia.

Fighting occurred here on two occasions in 1864 as the principal Western armies of both sides clashed in the hills and valleys surrounding Dalton. The Atlanta Campaign started here in Dalton, and the action was centered at Mill Creek Gap.

In February 1864 Gen. George Thomas and the Army of the Cumberland probed the Confederate defenses at Dalton by striking at Dug Gap, Mill Creek Gap, and Crow Valley. While Gen. Joseph Johnston's Confederate force was able to deflect the raids which came on February 24–26, 1864, Thomas' men came close to breaching the rebel lines. Thomas also learned that a way around Dalton was open through Snake Creek Gap—valuable information that would later offer him a chance to cut Johnston's Atlanta supply line on the Western & Atlantic Railroad at Resaca.

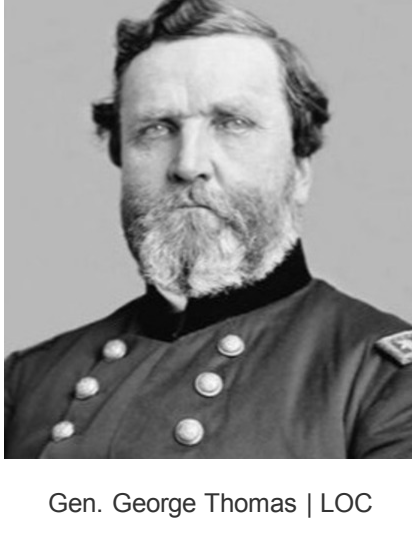
In May 1864, Federal Gen. William T. Sherman launched his offensive into Georgia, with three armies, the Army of the Tennessee (25,000 men) led by Gen. James B. McPherson, Thomas' Army of the Cumberland (60,000), and a third, smaller force called the Army of the Ohio (13,000) under Gen. John M. Schofield. Sherman also had about 5,000 cavalry on hand for a total force of some 108,000 infantry, cavalry, and artillery.

Schofield's army would probe Crow Valley to the north, and Thomas' army would strike the rebel positions at Mill Creek Gap and along Rocky Face Ridge and Buzzard's Roost. As they kept Johnston's Confederates busy, McPherson's army would secretly slip through Snake Creek Gap to the south and move toward Resaca.

On May 9, the Federal divisions of Brig. Gens. Jefferson C. Davis and Richard W. Johnson of Maj. Gen. John Palmer's XIV Corps were ordered to advance on Mill Creek Gap—Johnson toward Buzzard's Roost (and today's Disney Trail) to the south side and Davis toward the south end of Rocky Face Ridge on the north side of the gap (across today's I-75). Their orders were especially challenging since the Confederates had dammed Mill Creek and flooded the gap to create a large lake.



Brig. Gen. Richard Johnson | LOC



Gen. George Thomas | LOC



Brig. Gen. William P. Carlin | LOC

The brigades of Brig. Gen. William P. Carlin and Col. Benjamin Scribner of Johnson's division probed the slope of Buzzard's Roost (behind today's Lyle Industries) until they reached the Confederate skirmishers (behind today's Church of the Nazarene Family Life Center and along the spur trail from the Disney Trail). Heavy firing broke out along the slope of the ridge between the two sides while two rebel batteries opened up on the Federals who became pinned down in the crossfire.

Meanwhile, on the north side of the gap, Davis' men were not faring any better. After reaching a couple of low round-shaped hills (between I-75 and the foot of Rocky Face Ridge on its southwest side), Davis' division also became pinned down under both musketry and artillery fire. For the next three days, Davis' men would continue to engage the Southern defenses from their exposed position, all the while suffering heavy losses.

Federal Lt. Chesley A. Mosman of the 59th Illinois in Brig. Gen. Thomas J. Wood's Division of the IV Corps, which was located just north of the gap near Blue Mountain, recorded in his diary on May 9 that some of the men from the 22nd Indiana Inf. were warning Maj. James M. Steerky of the 80th Illinois "to be careful or he would catch a buzzard if he showed himself," referring to the rebels on Buzzard's Roost. That night, amid heavy firing after dark, he added: "The rebel musketry lit up the mountain like fireflies in a summer night, flitting all over the west end and the north side of Buzzard's Roost Range ... Lookout Mountain ain't nothing compared with it. In most places it is perpendicular and the top is accessible only in a few places. May God preserve one from a charge up that slope ... our Army has run up against it."

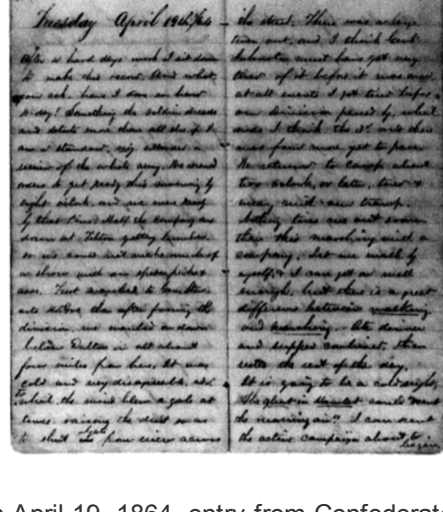
Confederate Brig. Gen. Randall L. Gibson, commanding a Louisiana brigade, defended Mill Creek Gap. He was assisted by a couple of Confederate artillery batteries, Capt. McDonald Oliver's Eufaula (Alabama) Battery, and Capt. Charles E. Fenner's Louisiana Battery. General Gibson explained: "While in position on the left in Mill Creek Gap, my right resting at Redoubt Fisk, very near the railroad, and my left on Redoubt Winans, in which was posted Fenner's battery ... the enemy attacked us with strong lines of skirmishers, and shelled the line tree or four times [between May 9 and 12], but accomplished nothing."

Confederate Hiram Smith Williams of the 40th Alabama in Brig. Gen. Alpheus Baker's Brigade of Maj. Gen. Alexander P. Stewart's Division, recorded in his diary the following entries:

"May 9th – The battle is still raging fiercely. The enemy making repeated charges on our works, their endeavor being to get possession of Rocky Face Mountain.

"May 10th – The fighting today has not been as heavy as yesterday, but the cannonading has been more regular, and I judge by the ambulances passing out to the hospitals that there has been more wounded and killed.

"May 11th – The clouds, rising in inky masses over the Western mountains, warned us to look out for a terrible storm, while the thunder vied with the roar of our artillery during the day... About ½ past 5 this evening, the firing shots of cannon and musketry was heavier than at any time during the battle."



An April 19, 1864, entry from Confederate Hiram Smith Williams' diary

After a week of fighting around Mill Creek Gap and Dalton, Sherman, leaving only the IV Corps at Mill Creek Gap, withdrew the rest of his forces during the evening of May 11 and elected to by-pass Dalton and follow McPherson's army to Resaca via Snake Creek Gap, thus ending the fighting around Dalton.

Realizing that Sherman was on the move with the balance of his force toward his rear, Confederate General Johnston quickly evacuated Dalton during the evening of May 12 and, having a shorter distance and better roads to travel, reached Resaca in time to block Sherman from cutting his supply line.

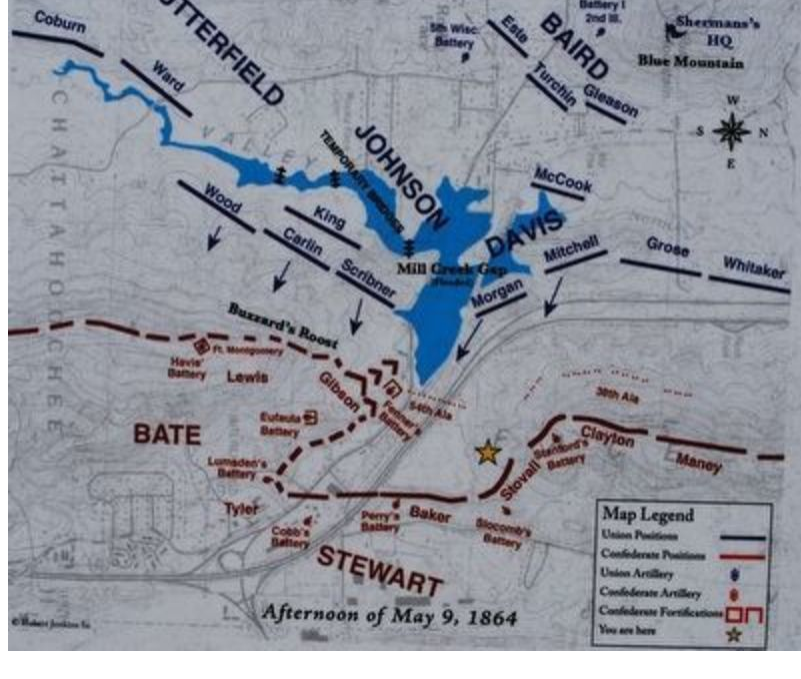
The Federal forces engaged at Mill Creek Gap had lost about 300 men in Davis' and Johnson's divisions and in their supporting columns, while, in contrast, Gibson's brigade which defended the south side of the gap (at today's Mill Creek Gap Civil War Battlefield Park) lost just 29 men.

## Visiting the Park

Located at Mill Creek Gap, Civil War Battlefield Park is a Confederate fort, or redoubt, known as Fort Fisk, which contained a four-gun battery that defended the gap. To see the fort and learn more about the fighting which occurred here, take the two-minute walk up the trail to the fort. If needed, there is a handicap accessible trail from the top at the Nazarene Church parking lot. Across the highway a trail leads to Mill Creek and the Western & Atlantic Railroad bridge. Here remains the old stone culvert that was dammed by the Confederates to flood the gap.

This culvert contains the original stones that were cut and placed by John Hamilton, an engineer hired by the Western & Atlantic Railroad to oversee the construction of the railroad through the tunnel at Tunnel Hill, as well as the bridges over Mill Creek between it and Dalton. The Hamilton house in Dalton was home to John and his wife Rachel and their family. Nearby Mount Rachel is named for his wife and daughter. To see the flooded gap site, carefully pull off the road on the east side of the highway and take the short trail to the stone bridge.

Mill Creek Gap Civil War Battlefield Park is owned and operated by Whitfield County and is open to the public free of charge during daylight hours.



Map of the Battle of Mill Creek Gap

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