



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

Point Blank Business: the Battle of Wauhatchie

Anthony Hodges, May 17, 2021
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Brown's Tavern, originally associated with the nearby Brown's Ferry, was a private residence at the time of the Brown's Ferry/Wauhatchie operation in 1863. | courtesy of the author

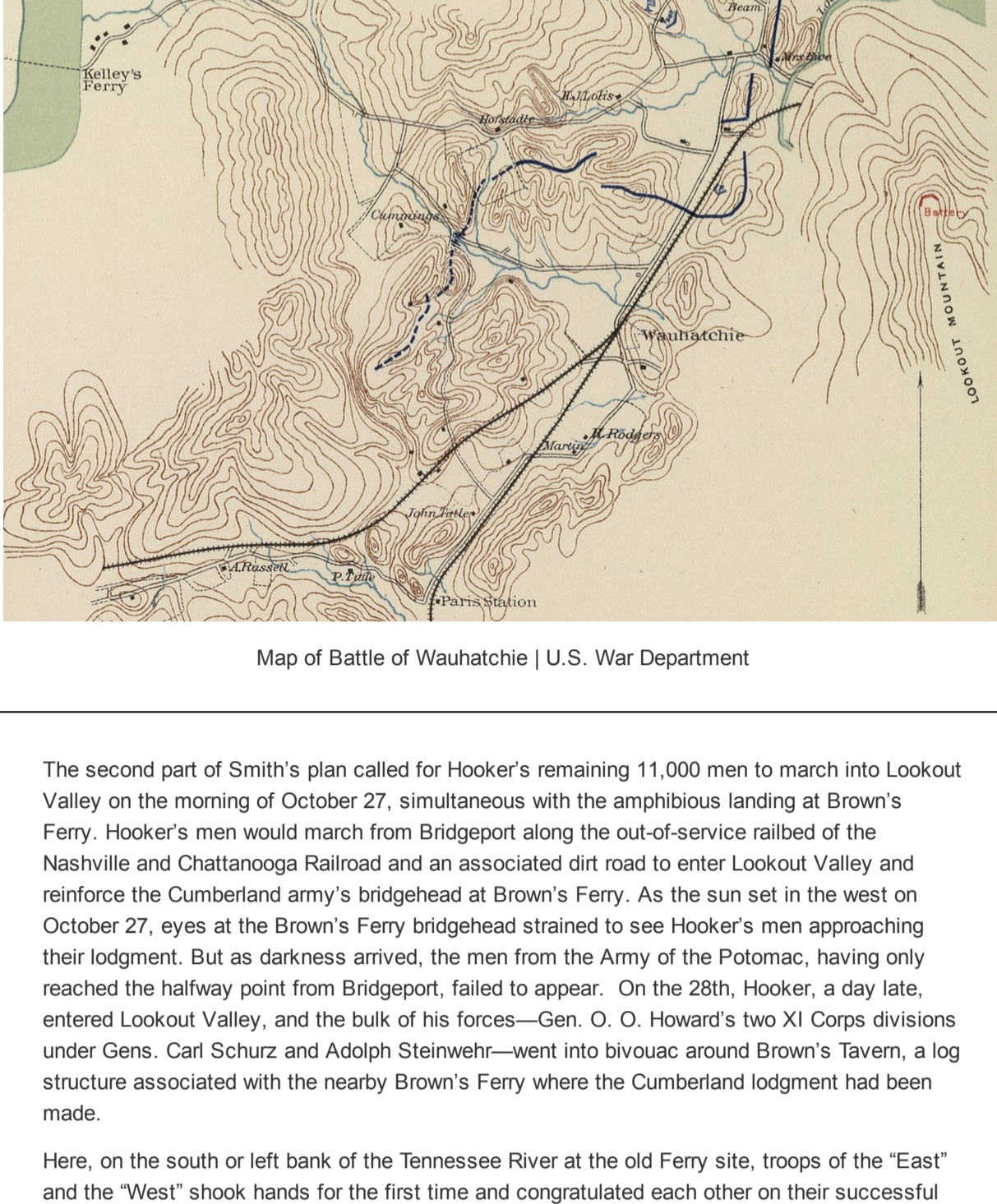
A month after the Battle of Chickamauga in 1863, Gen. James Longstreet launched a night attack on a small Union force at Wauhatchie, Tennessee. Here's how the bloody exchange unfolded.

As the sun rose on the morning of October 27, 1863, roughly 4,000 soldiers of the Army of the Cumberland held a lodgment at Brown's Ferry, west of Chattanooga on the Tennessee River in Lookout Valley. A pontoon bridge, connecting the bridgehead with the main army in Chattanooga, was completed. The Cumberland army had been trapped in Chattanooga since their defeat at Chickamauga in late September, and with the Confederates occupying Lookout and Raccoon mountains, the best available Union supply route was a 60-plus-mile roundabout route that could take a week or more to complete. This arduous route resulted in the death of thousands of mules and horses, further weakening the ability to get supplies to the beleaguered army. As a result, William Rosecrans's army was reduced to quarter rations and faced starvation by mid-October. Before being relieved of command, Rosecrans tasked the army's chief engineer, William F. "Baldy" Smith, with developing a plan to open the short route to Bridgeport, or, as the soldiers termed it, Smith was to open the "cracker line."

When Ulysses Grant replaced Rosecrans in late October, he gave Smith the go-ahead to execute the plan, stating that Smith "had been so instrumental in preparing for the move and so clear in his judgment about the manner of making it, that I deemed it but just to him that he should have command of the troops detailed to execute the design."

With the successful nocturnal amphibious assault of October 27 at Brown's Ferry, the first part of "Baldy" Smith's plan to open the cracker line had been executed perfectly.

Two Union Army Corps, the XI and XII, from the Army of the Potomac under the command of Gen. Joseph Hooker, had been transported via railroad from the front in Virginia to Bridgeport, Alabama, as reinforcements for the besieged Army of the Cumberland. Due to the necessity of maintaining guards along the railroad, several thousand of Hooker's men, mainly from the XII Corps, remained strung out behind between Nashville and Bridgeport in guard detachments along the railroad.

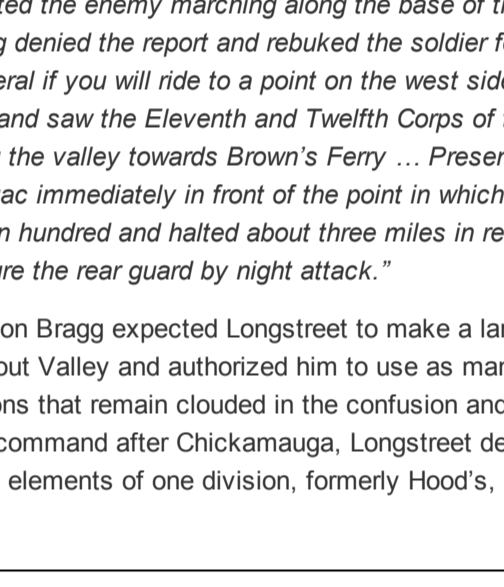


Map of Battle of Wauhatchie | U.S. War Department

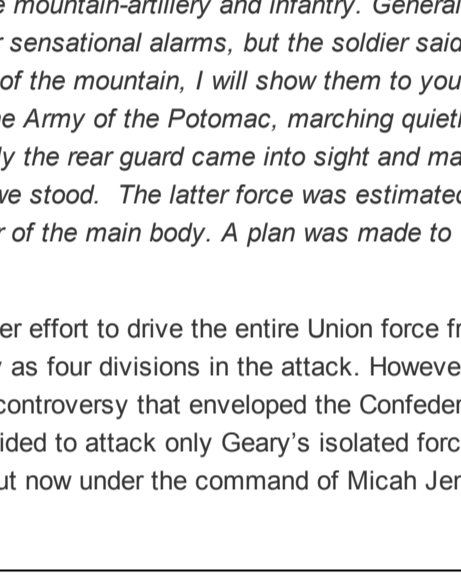
The second part of Smith's plan called for Hooker's remaining 11,000 men to march into Lookout Valley on the morning of October 27, simultaneous with the amphibious landing at Brown's Ferry. Hooker's men would march from Bridgeport along the out-of-service railbed of the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad and an associated dirt road to enter Lookout Valley and reinforce the Cumberland army's bridgehead at Brown's Ferry. As the sun set in the west on October 27, eyes at the Brown's Ferry bridgehead strained to see Hooker's men approaching their lodgment. But as darkness arrived, the men from the Army of the Potomac, having only reached the halfway point from Bridgeport, failed to appear. On the 28th, Hooker, a day late, entered Lookout Valley, and the bulk of his forces—Gen. O. O. Howard's two XI Corps divisions under Gens. Carl Schurz and Adolph Steinwehr—went into bivouac around Brown's Tavern, a log structure associated with the nearby Brown's Ferry where the Cumberland lodgment had been made.

Here, on the south or left bank of the Tennessee River at the old Ferry site, troops of the "East" and the "West" shook hands for the first time and congratulated each other on their successful combined operation. The cracker line was open.

Hooker's remaining XII Corps division under Gen. John Geary, the rear guard, did not follow the XI Corps units to the bivouac around the Tavern and Ferry. Hooker directed Geary's men to remain at Wauhatchie, a rail and road junction 3 miles from the main body of the Union troops at Brown's Ferry and Tavern. Geary's position, Hooker thought, would protect Hooker's rear as well as the rail and road junction. Geary's men went into camp around a knoll on which the farmhouse of a family named Rowden was located. A large stubble field of harvested corn surrounded much of the Rowden homestead. Although he commanded a division, Geary had only a brigade-sized unit present, roughly 1,500 men, due to the previously mentioned railroad guard details. A six-foot-four-inch, 44-year-old native of Pennsylvania, a Mexican War veteran, first mayor of San Francisco, and territorial governor of Kansas, Geary was a political general with a record better than most men of that genre. Among the units present with Geary at Wauhatchie was Knapp's Pennsylvania Battery, which numbered among its officers, General Geary's son, 18-year-old Lt. Edward Geary.



Union Gen. John White Geary | LOC



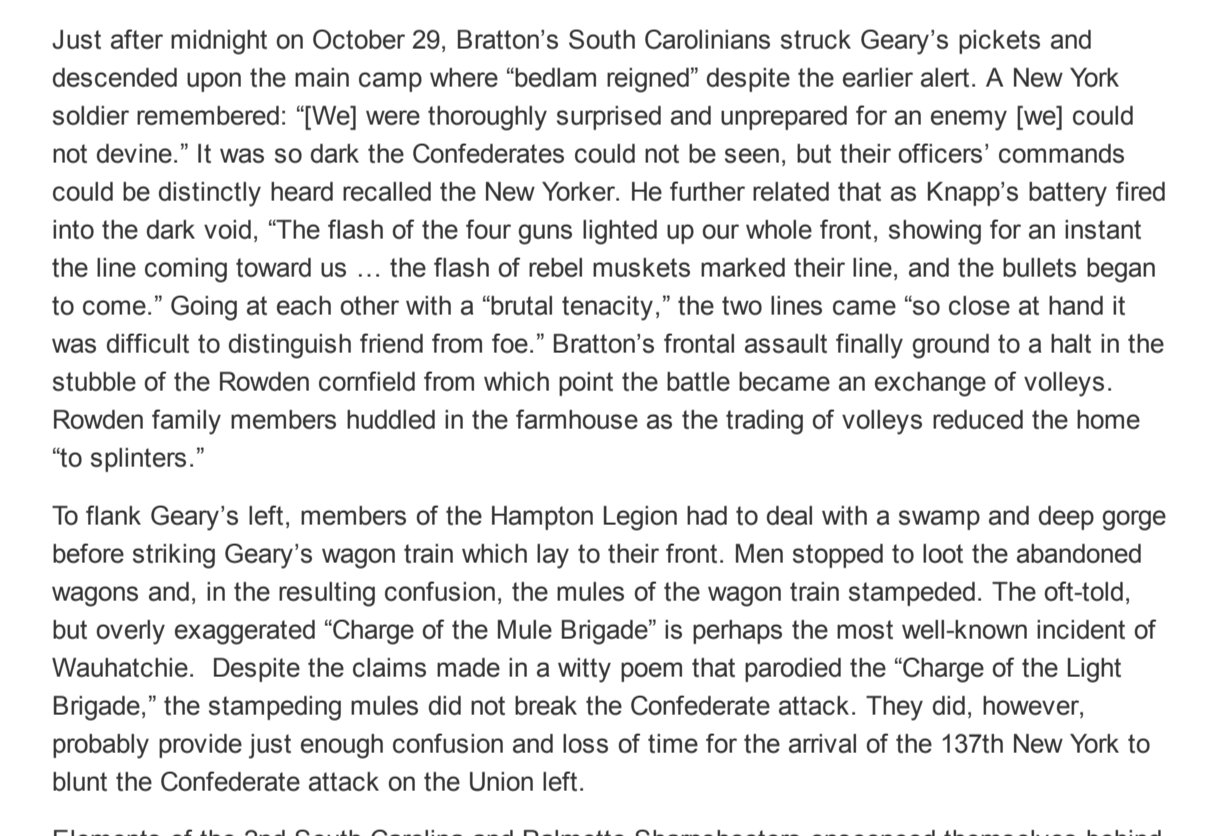
Lt. Edward R. Geary | LOC

Geary realized that his position was "distinctly visible to the enemy's signal station on the table of Lookout Mountain ... I ordered my command to bivouac upon their arms with cartridge boxes on, and placed my guns in a knoll about 30 yards to the left of the railroad and immediately to the left of Rowden's house..."

Indeed, Confederate pickets had seen the entrance of Hooker's column into Lookout Valley, and Gen. James Longstreet, who was present on Lookout Mountain along with General Braxton Bragg, related:

"A messenger came bursting through the brushwood, asking for General Longstreet, and reported the enemy marching along the base of the mountain-artillery and infantry. General Bragg denied the report and rebuked the soldier for sensational alarms, but the soldier said, 'General if you will ride to a point on the west side of the mountain, I will show them to you.' We rode and saw the Eleventh and Twelfth Corps of the Army of the Potomac, marching quietly along the valley towards Brown's Ferry ... Presently the rear guard came into sight and made its bivouac immediately in front of the point in which we stood. The latter force was estimated at fifteen hundred and halted about three miles in rear of the main body. A plan was made to capture the rear guard by night attack."

Braxton Bragg expected Longstreet to make a larger effort to drive the entire Union force from Lookout Valley and authorized him to use as many as four divisions in the attack. However, for reasons that remain clouded in the confusion and controversy that enveloped the Confederate high command after Chickamauga, Longstreet decided to attack only Geary's isolated force using elements of one division, formerly Hood's, but now under the command of Micah Jenkins.



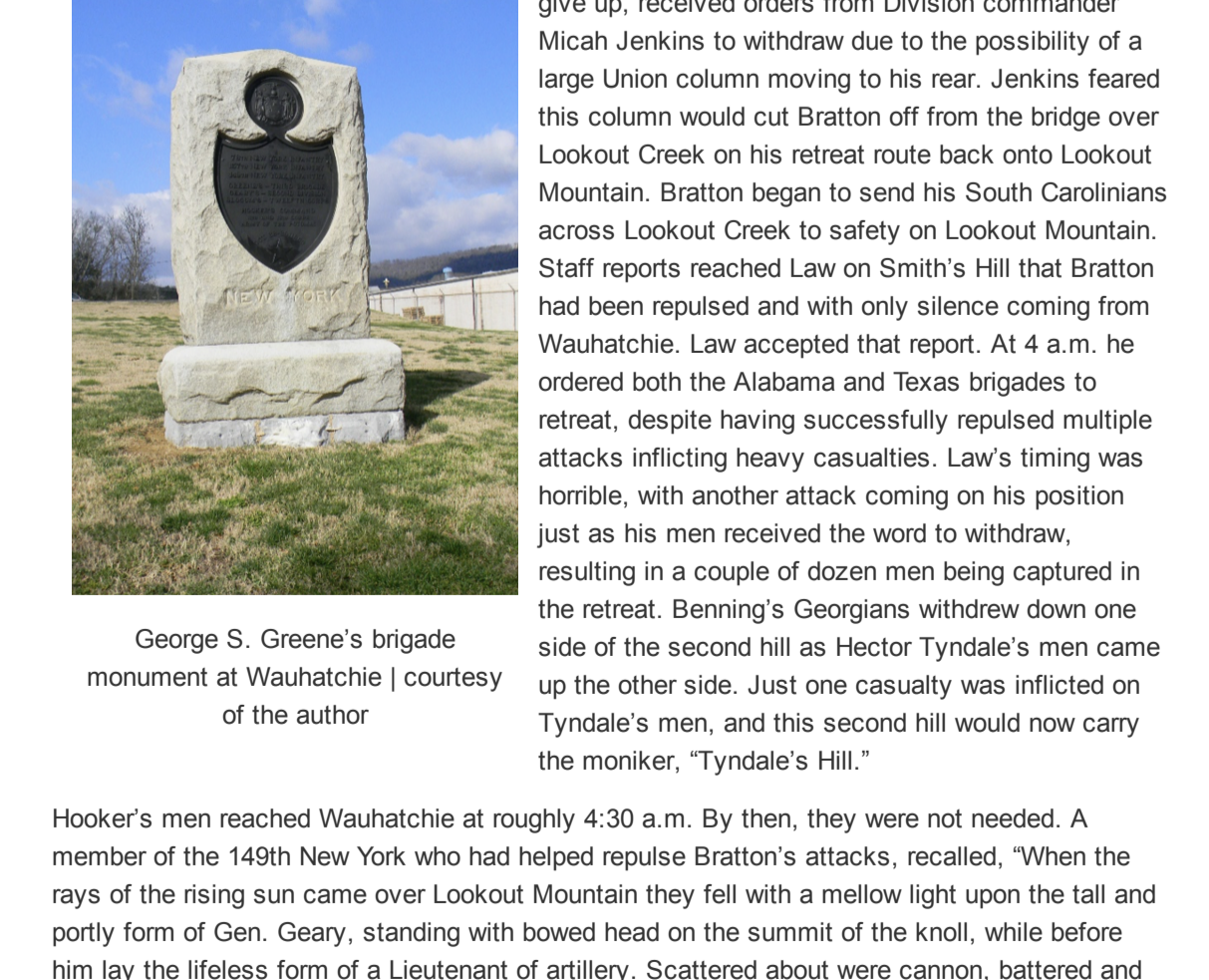
Modern view of the site of the Rowden farmhouse and knoll, around which Geary's men constructed their defensive position. The brown building (center) occupies the approximate position of Knapp's Pennsylvania Battery. The Rowden farmhouse was at the bottom of the knoll and much of the "stubble cornfield" is industrial development. | courtesy of the author

Bratton's brigade of South Carolinians would make the main Confederate attack down the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad against Geary's position. Law's Alabama (now Sheffield's) and Robertson's Texas brigades would be positioned astride a hill adjacent to the Brown's Ferry Road to act as a blocking force to prevent Union reinforcements from Hooker's main body at the Tavern/Ferry from reaching Geary or blocking the Confederate retreat route across Lookout Creek. Another blocking force, "Rock" Benning's Georgia brigade, would be positioned atop a second hill on the Brown's Ferry Road roughly a quarter-mile east of Law's men. At approximately 10:30 p.m. on the 28th, a picket force from Geary's encampment stumbled into some of Law's men along Brown's Ferry Road, and the first shots of the battle of Wauhatchie rang out. The sound of the firing put Geary's men and the main body at the Tavern/Ferry on alert, but shortly after, silence again filled the cloudy but moonlit night.

Just after midnight on October 29, Bratton's South Carolinians struck Geary's pickets and descended upon the main camp where "bedlam reigned" despite the earlier alert. A New York soldier remembered: "[We] were thoroughly surprised and unprepared for an enemy [we] could not divine." It was so dark the Confederates could not be seen, but their officers' commands could be distinctly heard recalled the New Yorker. He further related that as Knapp's battery fired into the dark void, "The flash of the four guns lighted up our whole front, showing for an instant the line coming toward us ... the flash of rebel muskets marked their line, and the bullets began to come." Going at each other with a "brutal tenacity," the two lines came "so close at hand it was difficult to distinguish friend from foe." Bratton's frontal assault finally ground to a halt in the stubble of the Rowden cornfield from which point the battle became an exchange of volleys. Rowden family members huddled in the farmhouse as the trading of volleys reduced the home "to splinters."

To flank Geary's left, members of the Hampton Legion had to deal with a swamp and deep gorge before striking Geary's wagon train which lay to their front. Men stopped to loot the abandoned wagons and, in the resulting confusion, the mules of the wagon train stampeded. The oft-told, but overly exaggerated "Charge of the Mule Brigade" is perhaps the most well-known incident of Wauhatchie. Despite the claims made in a witty poem that parodied the "Charge of the Light Brigade," the stampeding mules did not break the Confederate attack. They did, however, probably provide just enough confusion and loss of time for the arrival of the 137th New York to blunt the Confederate attack on the Union left.

Elements of the 2nd South Carolina and Palmetto Sharpshooters ensconced themselves behind the railroad embankment on Geary's right flank, firing into Knapp's battery as the cannon blasts illuminated the night. One Union officer recalled: "We could hear the devils shout, 'Shoot the gunners! Shoot the gunners! It was point-blank business.'" As he stood up from aiming a cannon and yelled, "Fire!" Lt. Edward Geary was struck dead by a minie ball between the eyes. His father hurried the 149th New York to support the beleaguered battery, and they took position behind the railroad embankment, firing at the South Carolinians on the other side. Only the width of the railroad embankment separated the combatants in places. With Knapp's battery down to two guns due to the loss of battery horses, men, and a lack of ammunition, a gun was man-handled across the railroad track and positioned to fire down the Confederate side of the embankment. Two to three blasts of canister persuaded the South Carolinians to abandon the railroad embankment.

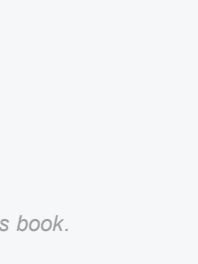


George S. Greene's brigade monument at Wauhatchie | courtesy of the author

Not long after 3 a.m., Bratton, who was not ready to give up, received orders from Division commander Micah Jenkins to withdraw due to the possibility of a large Union column moving to his rear. Jenkins feared this column would cut Bratton off from the bridge over Lookout Creek on his retreat route back onto Lookout Mountain. Bratton began to send his South Carolinians across Lookout Creek to safety on Lookout Mountain. Staff reports reached Law on Smith's Hill that Bratton had been repulsed and with only silence coming from Wauhatchie. Law accepted that report. At 4 a.m. he ordered both the Alabama and Texas brigades to retreat, despite having successfully repulsed multiple attacks inflicting heavy casualties. Law's timing was horrible, with another attack coming on his position just as his men received the word to withdraw, resulting in a couple of dozen men being captured in the retreat. Benning's Georgians withdrew down one side of the second hill as Hector Tyndale's men came up the other side. Just one casualty was inflicted on Tyndale's men, and this second hill would now carry the moniker, "Tyndale's Hill."

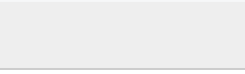
Hooker's men reached Wauhatchie at roughly 4:30 a.m. By then, they were not needed. A member of the 149th New York who had helped repulse Bratton's attacks, recalled, "When the rays of the rising sun came over Lookout Mountain they fell with a mellow light upon the tall and portly form of Gen. Geary, standing with bowed head on the summit of the knoll, while before him lay the lifeless form of a Lieutenant of artillery. Scattered about were cannon, battered and bullet-marked caissons and limbers, and many teams of horses dead in harness. And there were many other dead, but none attracted his attention, save this one, for it was his grief. The men respecting his sorrow stood at a distance in silence as he communed with his priest." Geary suffered 215 additional casualties in addition to his son, while his opponents lost 356 men.

Brown's Ferry on October 27th had opened the "cracker line." The battle of Wauhatchie, on October 28–29, insured it would stay open. Over the next month, thousands of men and tons of munitions and supplies flowed into Chattanooga through Lookout Valley, making "inevitable" the Federal victories at Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge of late November.



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