



# BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

## Spring Hill in the *National Tribune*

By Steve Davis, August 18, 2020  
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The front page of the March 2, 1911, *National Tribune* depicting the article in question

Joseph B. Cumming, of Augusta, Ga., was piqued by an article he had read in the *National Tribune*, the weekly newspaper published in Washington primarily for Union veterans. (Cumming, though, had served as major on the staff of Confederate Gen. John B. Hood.)

Someone had lent Cumming the issue of March 2, 1911; on its front page was an article by John McElroy: “Franklin and Nashville.” McElroy, a Union veteran himself, was owner and editor of *National Tribune*, as well as something of a historian on the war. “Franklin and Nashville” was actually a series of articles he was writing about Hood’s Tennessee Campaign of 1864. The one in the issue of March 2 was the seventh chapter, treating events at Spring Hill, November 29.

In it, McElroy quotes long passages from Hood’s *Advance and Retreat* (1880), in which Hood criticized Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Cheatham, one of his army’s three corps leaders, for the Confederates’ failure to attack Union Maj. Gen. John M. Schofield’s forces at Spring Hill as they rapidly retreated back toward Franklin. McElroy also reprinted parts of Cheatham’s rebuttal that had appeared in *Southern Bivouac* and *Battles & Leaders*.



Lt. Gen. John Bell Hood | LOC



Gen. Benjamin Franklin Cheatham | LOC

Along the way McElroy referred to “Maj. J. F. Cummings of Georgia.” This caught Cumming’s eye, and spurred him to send a clarification to the *Tribune*. “My name is Joseph B. Cumming, without the final ‘s,’” he explained; he had served as A. A. G. on Hood’s staff. In this capacity he was with the commanding general at Spring Hill. He added that McElroy’s writing had jogged his memory about the evening of November 29, when Hood’s plan was falling apart.

*I remember, as if it were yesterday, the flank movement of Gen. Hood from Columbia across Duck River and Rutherford’s Creek, and the head of his column coming close up to the turnpike between Columbia and Franklin late in the afternoon of Nov. 29. I was one of the staff officers to whom Gen. Hood refers. Indeed, I took personally the order to Gen. Cheatham to attack the enemy on the pike at once. Having ridden as rapidly as the nature of the country would permit from Gen. Hood’s field headquarters to deliver his order, I rode back slowly by a somewhat different route, and stopped en route to have a little talk with Gen. Edward Johnson, commanding a division of Hood’s army. When I arrived at Hood’s headquarters I was astonished to find that Gen. Cheatham, to whom I had recently delivered the order to attack, was there ahead of me and in conversation with Gen. Hood. I knew at the time that there was great dissatisfaction on the part of Gen. Hood, and, while I do not know the fact personally, it was generally stated that Gen. Cheatham represented to Gen. Hood that he was unwilling to make what was practically a night attack, for by this time it was about dark.*

So wrote Major Cumming in the *National Tribune* in 1911, nearly a half-century after the war. But here’s the rub. When historians have written about Major Cumming’s role at Spring Hill, they always quote from Cumming’s unpublished *War Recollections 1861-1865* in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina (Wilson Library, #2650-Z). An example is Stephen M. Hood, *John Bell Hood: The Rise, Fall and Resurrection of a Confederate General* (2103), pp. 122-23.

It’s only recently, while perusing the *National Tribune* online, that I came upon Major Cumming’s article (too late for me to cite it in my forthcoming *Into Tennessee and Failure: John Bell Hood*). So I offer fellow Civil War researchers a bit of advice, paraphrasing Sgt. Phil Esterhaus (Michael Conrad) in *Hill Street Blues* (1981-87): “Hey, let’s use the *National Tribune* out there!”



A spread from the March 2, 1911, *National Tribune* recounting Cheatham’s side of the story



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