

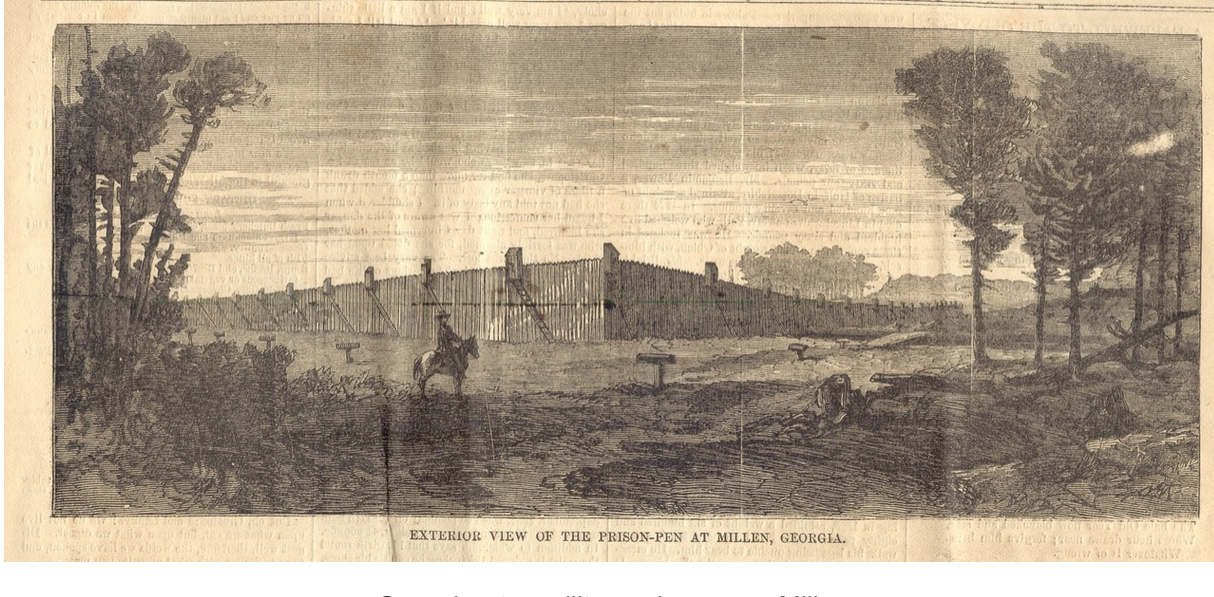


# BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

## The Small, Big Millen, Georgia

By Dr. John K. Derden, June 29, 2020

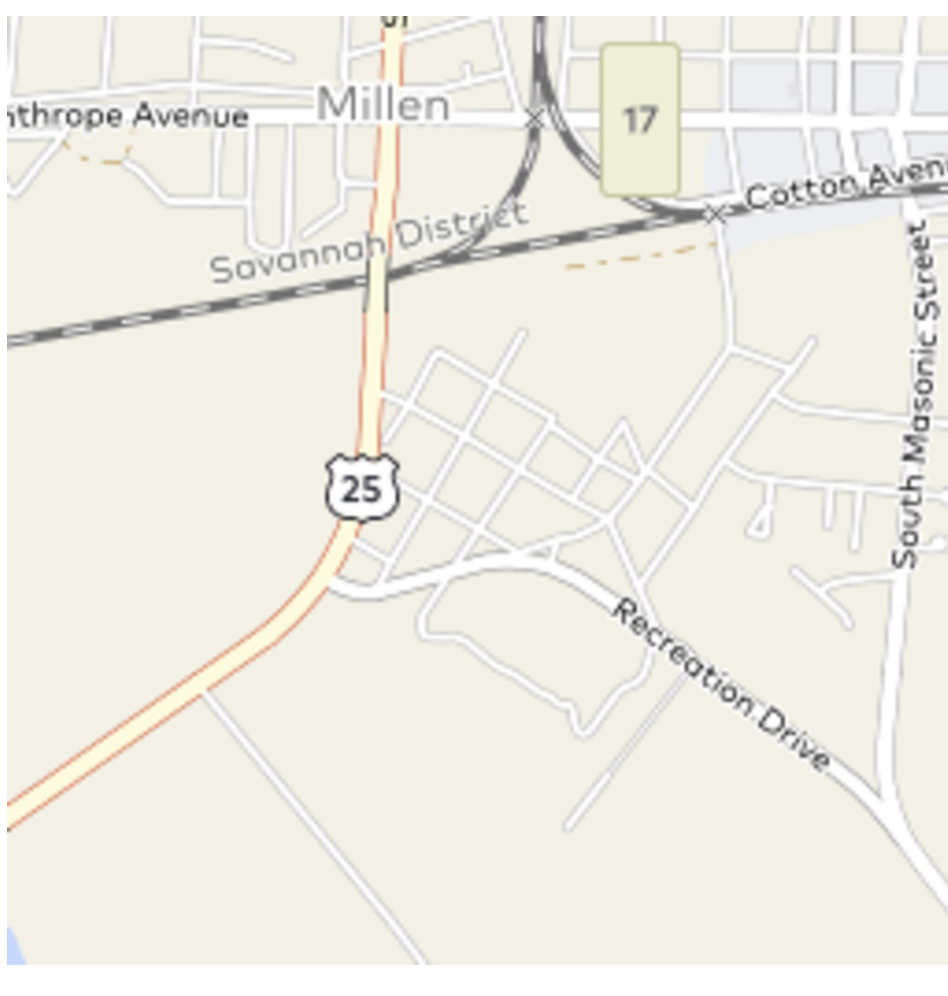
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Camp Lawton military prison, near Millen

Travelers passing through Millen in Jenkins County on U.S. 25 might come away with the impression that the small town hasn't much to offer of historical significance. Driving past the ubiquitous fast-food eateries, motels, and convenience stores lining the highway, little appears to separate this east-central Georgia burg from many other small county-seat towns. But dig a little deeper and surprises abound. Millen has a significant Civil War heritage, and the evidence is still there. U.S. 25 misses the center of town, and unless a visitor turns east onto Georgia 17 (Winthrop Avenue), he or she will pass by unaware of why Millen was well known before the Civil War and why it became an important military objective during the conflict.

Nineteenth-century travelers knew Millen very well because it was a way station on what was then called the Central Railroad of Georgia. Anyone traveling by train from Savannah into the interior of the state, or the reverse, passed through Millen. Eminent personages such as President James K. Polk (1849) and Henry Clay (1844), as well as thousands of lesser lights, transited through the junction. Travelers also were familiar with the fare at Gray's Inn (1835), a two-story wood-frame building with numerous rooms for lodging and a large dining hall.



Millen's "Y"

What made Millen unique among other stations along the antebellum railroad from Savannah to Macon was its famous "Y," which allowed rail traffic to connect with Augusta as well as with Savannah and Macon. As insignificant as Millen might have seemed because of its diminutive size, in both an economic and strategic sense it was far from unimportant.

During the Civil War, this railroad junction, tied into the broader rail network across the state and beyond, became an essential link in the Confederate web of railroads. In fact, as the war progressed, the vast agricultural hinterlands of Alabama and Georgia increasingly served as the larder for the Confederate armies, and many of their supply trains rumbled through the junction. The rails also carried military supplies, as well as the human cargo of war. To Confederate soldiers riding the rails to and from Millen during the conflict, the town was well known for something else: the hospitality of its "Wayside Home" staffed by local women who provided food and nursing care to the "boys in gray."



Holland House

Millen was a small town when the war began in 1861, and it was not yet a county seat, as Jenkins County was not created until 1905. In fact, until then, the town of Millen straddled the boundary between Burke and Screven Counties. To the north and west of the imaginary line lay Burke County; to the south and east was Screven County. A local tale tells of a house (the Holland House) in town bisected by the county line. The house still stands, and it was said that the owner slept in one county at night, went downstairs in the morning and ate breakfast in the next county, all in the same house. Before Millen became Millen, it was referred to as Millen Junction or "Old 79" (for the number of railroad miles from Savannah). The small railroad town's colloquial name did not become its official name until 1881, when Millen officially was incorporated as such by the Georgia Legislature.

However, Millen was not just a quaint village; it also was strategically important. When Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman and his 60,000-man army left Atlanta on November 15, 1864, to begin his notorious March to the Sea, he had three geographic objectives—Milledgeville, Millen, and Savannah, in turn. One can easily understand why the first named—the state capital—and the last—Georgia's largest port—were on the list, but why Millen? It made Sherman's list because of the railroad junction there. To destroy Millen Junction meant that a vital connection in the Confederate railroad network that reached as far as west as the Mississippi River and as far east as Richmond, Virginia, would be broken. Furthermore, at that point in the war, a significant amount of foodstuffs reaching Gen. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was transported through Millen from their origins in the Alabama and Georgia hinterlands.

In addition, in the fall of 1864, from early October through late November, the Confederacy operated its largest prison just 5 miles to the north along the road to Waynesboro. Officially named Camp Lawton (although Union POWs almost always referred to it as "Millen"), it featured a log stockade enclosing 42 acres, which gave it the distinction of being the largest Confederate military prison. Trains carrying Union POWs typically passed through Millen Junction on their way to and from the prison stockade in the piney woods to the north. For six weeks it held as many as 10,000 Union POWs before being evacuated in advance of Sherman's arrival.



Museum at Magnolia Springs

Driving north on U.S. 25, the visitor will find Magnolia Springs State Park 5 miles up the road, the location of Camp Lawton. Recent excavations and a book-length monograph have highlighted the history of this little-known but important Confederate military prison, and a recently refurbished and expanded museum at the park houses an interactive display and a selection of recovered artifacts.

When General Sherman reached Millen on December 3, 1864, he ordered Maj. Gen. Frank Blair, 17th Corps commander, "to make the most complete and possible break of the railroad about Millen. Let it be more devilish than can be dreamed of." Accordingly, the town was destroyed and Camp Lawton burned. Gray's Inn was torched as was the Wayside Inn. The railroad depot was set aflame and the rails pulled up and given the "Sherman necktie" treatment.

Millen was rebuilt but has remained a small town. The railroad and the Y were reconstructed, and trains continue to rumble through the town. As obscure as the town is today, Millen remains a bucket list destination for many Civil War enthusiasts.

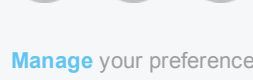
**Dr. John Derden will be leading the BGES tour, "The March," following in the footsteps of Sherman's infamous March to the Sea, currently scheduled for January 27-31, 2021; find more info [here](#).**

*Photos courtesy of the author.*



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