

Wartime Importance of Chattanooga and East Tennessee

IN AND AROUND STRATEGICALLY IMPORTANT Chattanooga, Tenn., in the autumn of 1863, there occurred some of the most complex maneuvers and hard fighting of the Civil War. The Confederate victory at Chickamauga (September 19-20) gave new hope to the South after the defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in July of that year. At Chattanooga (November 23-25) Union forces under Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant blasted this hope and prepared the way for the capture of Atlanta and Sherman's "March to the Sea." Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park, oldest and largest of the national military parks, commemorates the heroic soldiers of both North and South in the battles for the control of Chattanooga.

The year 1863 proved to be one of victory for the Union forces. Three great campaigns took place which shaped the destiny of the war. The first, a decisive blow at Gettysburg, forced a Confederate army under Gen. Robert E. Lee to abandon its attempt to invade Northern soil. Lee began an orderly retreat to Virginia on July 4.

On the same day, but far removed from the fields of Gettysburg, Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton surrendered his army and the City of Vicksburg, Miss., to General Grant. The fall of Vicksburg, simultaneous with the victory at Gettysburg, gave heart and strength to the North, while Confederate morale dropped.

The third campaign, Murfreesboro to Chattanooga, slow and uncertain in its first phases, and including later the great Confederate victory at Chickamauga, culminated nearly 5 months after the other two in ultimate victory for the North in the Battle of Chattanooga.

Chattanooga had only 2,545 inhabitants in 1860, but its importance was out of all proportion to its size. Situated where the Tennessee River passes through the Cumberland Mountains, forming gaps, it was called the "Key to East Tennessee" and "Gateway to the deep South." The possession of Chattanooga was vital to the Confederacy, and a coveted goal of the Northern armies.

Chattanooga's principal importance during the Civil War was its position as a railroad center. Four lines radiated in the four principal directions—to the North and Middle West via Nashville, to the western States via Memphis, to the South and southern seaboard via Atlanta, and to Richmond and the North Atlantic States via Knoxville.

By 1863 both sides were aware of the great advantages of strategic railroad lines. Lt. Gen. Braxton Bragg had made skillful use of the railroads in 1862, when he suddenly shifted his army from Mississippi to Chattanooga to begin his drive across Tennessee and into Kentucky. President Lincoln had long recognized the importance of railroads in this area. In the same year Lincoln said, "To take and hold the railroad at or east of Cleveland, in East Tennessee, I think fully as important as the taking and holding of Richmond." And in 1863 Lincoln wrote Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans, "If we can hold Chattanooga and East Tennessee, I think the rebellion must dwindle and die. I think you and [General] Burnside can do this, and hence doing so is your main object."

The armies that traversed this region found it a fertile farming area. East Tennessee's rich grain fields supplied not only wheat, corn, and hay, but beef, pork, bacon, horses, and mules. It was a vital region for the armies of the Confederacy. It not only supported the troops that occupied that region, but large quantities of provisions were shipped to other armies.

In addition to the military and economic reasons, a political factor had to be considered in the struggle for control of East Tennessee. The people there, living in a mountainous area unlike the rest of the State, wished to adhere to the Union. The people maintained their allegiance to the Old Whig party, and there was an attitude of suspicion and distrust toward the Democrats. They were mostly small farmers with little cash income, who had a dislike for the wealthy plantation- and slave-owning class.

After fighting broke out at Fort Sumter, neighbors began to take sides. An uneasy truce prevailed until November 1861 when small groups of Union men struck blows at widely dispersed railroad bridges. The cancellation of a projected northern campaign into East Tennessee left the Unionists there without support, and the Confederates took retaliatory measures. Many of the Unionists in East Tennessee fled to Kentucky to enlist in the Union Army; others hid in the mountains. While relief to this section of Tennessee by the Union Army was not to come until 1863, it was not forgotten by President Lincoln.

Chickamauga and Chattanooga Battlefields

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